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## *More Die of Heartbreak:* The Logic of Disintegration\*

Nobuhisa Katafuchi

Since its publication, *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) has faced complicated critical reactions. Early critics have taken conflicting views of the novel. For Paul Gray there exists much optimism in the novel, and Gray mostly sees that Saul Bellow "can live up to his own standards. . . ."<sup>1)</sup> Unlike Gray, Galen Strawson makes less favorable comments on the novel, saying, "The elements are good, the composition falters."<sup>2)</sup> In this respect Strawson regards the novel partly as well wrought and partly as unequal to Bellow's previous achievement.

It is true that the critical consideration is indefinite for now, but it should also be observed that both of the conflicting remarks tend to a facile generalization. Certainly critics have read the novel closely and elaborated on their observations, but so far they have only generalized the novel in terms of and sometimes in opposition to Bellow's other works. So this paper singles out the novel and aims to read it closely so as to understand its own proper narrative structure.

*More Die of Heartbreak* employs a first-person narrator—Kenneth Trachtenberg, thirty-five-year-old assistant professor of Russian literature at the university where his maternal uncle, Benn Crader, the famous botanist, teaches. The narrator retrospectively recounts his uncle's story based on the notes he takes on every occasion.<sup>3)</sup> Kenneth records his uncle's deeds, to put the other hero rather than himself at the center of his perspective.

So in *More Die of Heartbreak* the person who is mainly narrated is Benn, and the fact that the narrator places special dependence on and has great trust in his uncle has special significance in the narrative. Brought up in Paris, Kenneth has moved to the Midwest, to "Rustbelt metropolis," where Benn makes his residence. "I had come to America," remarks Kenneth, "to complete my education, to absorb certain powers

from Uncle" (92).<sup>4</sup>) It is clear that Kenneth's immigration was precipitated by Benn's influence. Having a "soul in the making," he believes that his uncle will help him achieve "a Romantic notion of the ego . . . the development of one's soul."<sup>5</sup>) Looking for integrity of his life, Kenneth comes closer to Benn and attempts to construct an integrated story of his uncle, a story for him to live by.

In fact, the narrator inclines to embody his own perspective in certain recurring phrases. First of all, attempting to put the world in order, Kenneth continuously refers to Benn as "a Citizen of Eternity" which "we think about and, if possible, make our souls by" (69).<sup>6</sup>) Identifying Uncle with "a Citizen" is surely "Kenneth's primary goal,"<sup>7</sup>) which means to place Benn at the peak of the hierarchy he assumes in his mind.

Kenneth also pronounces another essential phrase: "Two human beings bound together in love and kindness, a universal human aim which shouldn't be so hard to accomplish"(17).<sup>8</sup>) "Love and kindness" seems to represent an indispensable concept which finally integrates the narrator's view of the contemporary world and the "meaning of human love" (292). "An exchange," he describes, "occurs between man and woman. Love and thought complete each other in the human pair, and something like an exchange of souls takes place, according to the divine plan" (50). What should be noted here is that Kenneth strives hard to attribute this ideal form of "the human pair," which is tied with "love and kindness," to Benn. The perfect kind of love is to be practiced by his uncle's attainment of it.

Believing his uncle to be "a Citizen" and trusting his "love and kindness," Kenneth thinks that his "only aim was to protect his [Benn's] goddam life" (32). Keeping Benn against any force corresponds with the narrator's intention to centralize and concentrate his view on every aspect of his uncle. The centralization of his perspective is directed at another phrase concerning "Project Turning Point":

Particularly in this day and age, you have no reason to exist unless you believe you can make your life a turning point. A turning point for everybody—for humankind. This takes a certain amount of gall. (68)<sup>9</sup>)

Kenneth is exclusively pursuing his project in terms of fulfilled life, and that he assigns Benn for a "role model"<sup>10)</sup> and follows him as "an appropriate guide"<sup>11)</sup> of his life. The narrator's "turning point," or "the quest for a revelation" (315) is related to his uncle's existence itself.

The fact that Kenneth repeats the same phrases several times in the narrative is concerned with the degree to which he cherishes the hope that his uncle will be "a Citizen of Eternity" and will achieve "love and kindness." Kenneth intends to live a life, making a model of his uncle as centering on his vision. To put it differently, talking about Benn as being the model is the narrator's first aim, and in so doing he makes sure that his uncle is equal to his standards, as the result of which those phrases appear recurrently in the novel.

However, stressing the nature of recurrence Kenneth's phrases have only leads to reconfirmation of Strawson's first complaint quoted above. Strawson probably refers to the repeatedness in Kenneth's discourse but does not focus on the reason the narrator reiterates the same phrases. Yet in most critics' comments, the structural consideration of the novel has not been done properly enough to make clear the source of the problem. It is appropriate that Robert F. Kiernan suggests that the novel is occupied with "understanding of a human complexity beyond understanding,"<sup>12)</sup> but Kiernan does not sufficiently state how such a complexity is expressed in the novel. What is important here is that the complexity in Kenneth's narrative stems from the way that the story he tells develops.<sup>13)</sup>

At the literal center of *More Die of Heartbreak* are the incidents succeeding to Benn's marriage to Matilda Layamon, the daughter of a big shot, which causes a serious problem. The Laymons require Benn to refile the case of suspicious exploitation by his uncle, Harold Vilitzer, over the real estate the Craders formerly owned. Aware of Uncle Vilitzer's cheating him out of a great deal of money and the Layamons' worldly ambition, Benn reluctantly accepts the abusive task. Kenneth is not only annoyed with Benn's sudden remarriage without any advance announcement but embarrassed by his uncle's conspiring with the Layamons and afraid of his coming crisis.

It is important to note that after Benn's crisis is introduced in Chapter 4 and 5, he is mostly absent in the following chapter from the narrator's perspective. The same can be said of Chapter 7 and 8.<sup>14)</sup> More significant, Kenneth never pronounces the repeated phrases in those chapters, and Benn's disappearance from the scene entails that of the phrases representing him.

The fact that Benn is not equal to the narrator's criterion is manifested in Chapter 7, where Kenneth, although he does not hate Benn, is nevertheless confused with his uncle's proclamation, "Respect and love. Through love you penetrate to the essence of a being" (225), which is a statement totally unbelievable for Kenneth now. Then the narrator confesses as follows:

I was used to his irrelevant way of darting out, but the leap he took in this last statement was a considerable surprise to me. He seemed to be talking through his hat. He certainly was not himself, and he made me feel that he was like the Pick-Up-Stix game, where a sheaf of skinny spindles drops in all directions helter-skelter to start the play. This, I thought, was about to happen. (225)

Kenneth feels that some inevitable crisis—a crisis caused by his uncle's remarriage and subsequent involvement with worldly affairs—is drawing near. Benn emerges different, especially after the sixth chapter, from the one who has been the narrator's most trusted person. He is now the one for whom Kenneth cannot reach his hands. Admitting, "Lost my hearings" (300), Benn does not live up to the supreme "Citizen" because he lends his aid to the Layamons seeing him only as a pawn. Nor does his rash remarriage, Kenneth is aware, get along with the concept of "love and kindness." The moment the two phrases, which was going to symbolize his uncle's centrality in the narrator's mind, prove false, the third, "turning point," which points to the life to be fulfilled, correspondingly fails to be true.

Therefore, Kenneth's narrative shows, in spite of his intention, that Benn is gradually conceived as inadequate to the recurring phrases oriented toward him. It should be remarked at this point how the narrative describes the way in which Benn loses his influence on the narrator's

discourse. Having been tied with "devouring friendship," the two of then now begin to reduce their physical confrontation. From Chapter 9 onward, their conversation is limited to telephone call, which is very emblematic of the distance lying between them. It is obvious that Benn evades his nephew. Kenneth tries to approach his uncle to learn valuable things from him. However, as the narrator approaches the narrated object for the sake of his project and attempts to sketch the outline of the object, it evades from him, and the outline is obscured.

So it can be assumed that two conflicting vectors function in the novel. The fact that the change from one to the other is clear in Benn's statement in the final chapter. When Kenneth utters on the phone, "You've had a slip—a *glitch*, as astronomers say" (326), Benn answers as follows:

You mean well, and I thank you for that. Everybody is entitled to a mistake. There is no perfect gift. But *when you go against your deeper instinct you set off a train of cause and effect spreading in all directions.* (326, emphasis added)

Benn is aware of his own fear of Matilda's big shoulders which enormously represent the grotesque image of a Hitchcock movie and seeks mental safety in flight from her. Kenneth likes him to do so, but his uncle's flight also entails his absence from the narrator's perspective. Here Benn sees himself against the human complexity which forces him to feel totally disappointed; but interestingly enough he also alludes to a certain logic in the novel.

What Benn is going to convey to Kenneth here is the very element constituting a subject matter: the logic of disintegration. It is revealed by the fact that what Kenneth is afraid of finally takes place in the closing chapter, where Benn decides to go to the North Pole for the botanical expedition. It is important to note at this point that he symbolically leaves the world which the narrator attempts to integrate. Actually, something in the end prevents Kenneth from synthesizing his swarming ideas, and the informations he has collected are left as a heap of fragments. The nature of his narrating consists in his own idea of the world and mankind, which he justifies through "interpretations on Benn's

story."<sup>15</sup>) But the narrative delineates the process in which the narrator's concepts become inconsistent with the reality before his eyes.

Moreover, Benn's retreat and Kenneth's despair produce a conspicuous effect on the closing scene of the novel. It is interesting that Kenneth's voice in the final page brings the narrative the sense of open-endedness. It is, however, already introduced in the preceding chapters.

In Chapter 9, for example, both of the central characters endure hardships: Benn loses his Uncle Vilitzer, and Kenneth his unmarried wife. The final chapter is the subsequent description of them. Despite Kenneth's desperate feeling, Benn is leaving for Brazil to spend his honeymoon holidays with Matilda. However, the loss of Uncle Vilitzer who dies of aortic explosion, prevents him from going out on the trip. He secretly plans to participate in the expedition tour of the international scientists, and it is only at the last moment he leaves for the North Pole that Kenneth knows his uncle's secret project.

Almost all the passages in Chapter 10 report the whole conversations on the telephone between Benn and Kenneth. Uncle confesses how the funeral ceremony of Vilitzer was, and Kenneth interprets his statements, speculating how things were there. Both Benn and Kenneth are so beaten as to fumble for words:

“A black box, Kenneth, no bigger than my binocular case.”

“The ashes?”

“In there, he was,” Uncle said. “I had been preparing to have my last look at him on this earth.” (323)

His mind full of regret, Benn has nothing else to do but to leave the sad world. He confides to Kenneth a strange feeling toward Vilitzer: “He made a surprising statement which stayed with me, upset as I was. He said that places where personnel who see an opportunity there to give play to their nihilistic motives” (324). It is those motives that drive him finally out into the isolated land of the North Pole.

Benn's decision is firmly described in the final chapter, but Kenneth does not clearly state the reaction toward it, only confessing as follows:

Possibly I could transmit the perfected insight—*when I perfected*

it—to Uncle Benn too. After all, when I came over from Paris to be with Uncle, I had already reduced the number of my significant relationships to two. For two, the ideal is to become one. That's what love is supposed to be about. Trying to transpose his magical powers from botany to love, my uncle had experimented (ignorantly, without illumination) with this fusion of two into one. I must remember to tell Uncle that. (330)

Dreaming that he and his uncle will be one, the narrator cannot forsake him in his present condition. Kenneth cannot say goodbye to him, nor can he insistently keep him from going.

It is evidently this ambiguous attitude Kenneth takes that gives rise to the open-endedness of the novel. In the last paragraph, where Kenneth finds out the envelope in which Benn enclosed his new address, he mentions:

The envelope contained, neatly printed in his scientific hands, the unfamiliar name of the research group and the addresses of a Finnish prof in Helsinki (home and office), plus the box number of an incomprehensible location in reindeer country, far out on the tundra. Probably near Novaya Zemlya. Even that was not remote enough. (335)

Uncle has given only minimum information on his new residence, no other message left, which Kenneth would have wanted more than anything else. Now even the communication on the phone is canceled. Such condition drives the narrator to despair, and, as a result, he gives up narrating in spite of his urge to know more and talk more about his most fascinating friend. Benn is now beyond his nephew's vision. The last passage in a sense represents the blank notes of the narrator, which will not be filled in until his uncle returns.

In addition, the closing statement, "Even that was not remote enough," allows levels of interpretation. It explains, on the one hand, that Benn's escape into the North Pole seems successful on his part, but that even living somewhere near Novaya Zemlya is not distant enough to be detached from such worldly state of affairs as the Layamons suggest. Benn should have gone farther, Kenneth thinks, judging from "what his uncle must accomplish."<sup>16</sup>)

Another possible interpretation is that Benn is not only physically but mentally separated from his nephew. In other words, Kenneth feels greater distance between him and his uncle than the name of the town printed in the letter shows. Everyone can go there if only he wants to, but no one can reach Uncle Benn, Kenneth is aware, spiritually for a while.

In either case, Benn's embarking for the north country ultimately supplies a proper sense of open-ending, since he, "a phoenix who runs with arsonists," departs from the world inhabited by the worldly human beings in order to "see what can be done, whether I can rise from these ashes" (334-35). "The long polar night

offers a sharp image for this or indeed any well-wrought novel in its claim as art, isolating people in small groups hemmed in on every side by their inadequacies where they are bound to find one another out, which is fundamentally what the task of the novel is.<sup>17)</sup>

Although the ending of *More Die of Heartbreak* does not entirely confirm the comment that "Bellow's new idea of writing a novel was to go on until his hero attains something like holy readiness for order,"<sup>18)</sup> it is nevertheless appropriate to see that Benn achieves a kind of spiritual redemption by leaving for the North Pole. But Kenneth, who is left behind, may not necessarily be able to gain such redemption as his uncle does. For he has lost his "turning point" in its literal sense, which suggests no doubt Uncle Benn's existence itself.

Kenneth's loss of his uncle finally determines the end of the progress of the novel. Especially the separation of Benn from Kenneth described in the final few pages functions to each of them differently. In fact, the former seems to be satisfied to leave the material world, because he can at least get rid of nuisances and instead obtain a kind of moratorium in the North Pole—the place, interestingly enough, where the actual "turning point" of the earth is, whereas the latter is reluctantly obliged to accept the empty life without its object—its own "turning point."

So the interpretation of the last paragraph emphasizes the specific construction of the novel. After all, nothing urgent for the central characters is completely solved at the end of the narrative; Benn's strife with

the Vilitzers and the Layamons, nor Kenneth's troubles with Treckie, Tanya, and Dita. Nor is even the result of the narrator's project clear in the end. All of these incidents essentially support the open-endedness of the novel. Kenneth makes every effort to explain away every incident concerning his uncle and himself, but once he encounters what cannot be explained with "metaphysical aid" (331), his sense of the world accordingly collapses.

*More Die of Heartbreak* is based on the mixing of the integration and disintegration. The ideas actualized by the narrator's language can never possess the invariable form and meaning in the end. In order to convey this most effectively, Bellow creates such a talkative and erratic first-person narrator as Kenneth, leaving the development of the narrative to his voice and speculation. The novel keeps the tenacious complexity in both its structure and theme. It is not entirely the novel of the "concern about the fate of love in an American culture,"<sup>19)</sup> nor that of "the futility of trying to hold to a humanist ideology in contemporary times."<sup>20)</sup> What is most important is the narrator's existence and his strategy expressed in the narrative. At the end of the novel, Kenneth concurs:

The secret of our being still asks to be unfolded. Only now we understand that worrying at it and ragging it is no use. The first step is to stop these oscillations of consciousness that are keeping me awake. Only, before you command the oscillations to stop, before you check out, you must maneuver yourself into a position in which metaphysical aid can approach. (330-31)

It is this "metaphysical aid," as quoted before, that finally makes him gain "understanding of a human complexity beyond understanding." Such a kind of understanding underlies the narrative, and it is equally true that Kenneth's understanding itself can never be perfected on account of his own continuous oscillations. Bellow asserts that the imperfect understanding is the basis of the perception of the human condition.

The whole structural and thematic principle of the novel lies, therefore, in the mixing of the logic of integration, which the narrator attempts to adopt, and the intervening and gradually dominating aspect of dis-

integration, which the narrative itself manifests in its processing the central issue. It is true that merging of the two gives a kind of imbalance to the whole story. Although *More Die of Heartbreak* has not been received entirely well so far, the most important point is that Bellow intends to confirm and to highlight this complexity as the essential identity of the novel. The relationship between the form and theme is paradoxically integrated in the dominance of the logic.

## NOTES

\* This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Monthly Meeting of the Kansai American Literature Society held at Kwansei Gakuin University on June 16, 1990.

- 1) Paul Gray, "Victims of Contemporary Life," *Time* 15 June 1987: 71.
- 2) Galen Strawson, "Professor Crader's Satellite," *TLS* 23-29 Oct. 1987: 1158.
- 3) On Kenneth's "taking notes," the same expressions are also found on pages 161, 244, and 330.
- 4) Saul Bellow, *More Die of Heartbreak* (New York: Morrow, 1987). Hereafter page references are cited in parenthesis in the text.
- 5) Robert F. Kiernan, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Continuum, 1989) 221.
- 6) "A Citizen of Eternity" is also emphasized on pages 85, 97, 141, and 198.
- 7) Ethan Fishman, *Likely Stories: Essays on Political Philosophy and Contemporary American Literature* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1989) 12.
- 8) The narrator gives the same expression also on pages 82, 120, and 194.
- 9) "Project Turning Point" is described on pages 70, 98, 188, and 247 as well.
- 10) Michael K. Glenday, *Saul Bellow and the Decline of Humanism* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 176.
- 11) Gray 71.
- 12) Kiernan 232.
- 13) Glenday attributes the damage of the novel to the narrator's unreliability. He is in a sense right, but he does not properly comment on wherefore such unreliability permeates the novel. See, for further information, Glenday 172.
- 14) Here, Kenneth mainly recounts the story of Treckie, his wife, although not married yet, Mrs. Tanya Sterling, Treckie's mother, and Dita Schwartz, his

student in Russian literature course and his current girl friend as well.

- 15) Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, Rev. of *More Die of Heartbreak* *The New York Times* 21 May 1987: C29.
- 16) Ellen Pifer, *Saul Bellow: Against the Grain* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990) 162.
- 17) William Gaddis, "An Instinct for the Dangerous Wife," *New York Times Book Review* 24 May 1987: 16.
- 18) Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Middle Progress Novel: Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 130.
- 19) Fishman 17.
- 20) Glenday 177.