Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*: A Companion Piece to *Humboldt's Gift*

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I

Three decades after *Harlequine Ballads* achieved a brilliant success, Von Humboldt Fleisher, the prodigiously gifted American poet in Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), died of heart failure in obscurity in the Bowery. With his poetic imagination and reputation declining, he virtually died of heartbreak as a dismal failure, ravaged by sorrow common to American poets. Like Edgar Allan Poe, Hart Crane, and John Berryman, he ended up doing "what poets in crass America are supposed to do."[1] Overwhelmed by colossal American reality, which is too much for a helpless poet to handle, Humboldt—a modern Orpheus—was heartbroken to death, having exhausted his miraculous powers to move stones and trees. To be more specific, unwritten poems had steadily undermined his life.

Like Bellow's other novels, *Humboldt's Gift* centers on a close relationship between two men: Humboldt and Charlie, who narrates the tragic history of the dead poet he mourns. He spends a good deal of time lying on a green sofa or standing on his head to be lost in Steiner meditation through his contemplation of plants. As his half comical "upside-down" posture implies, Charlie's deep sympathy and enthusiastic preoccupation with the dead are, to be sure, against the grain of the business-oriented contemporary urban society. By the same token, it certainly makes him appear even more ridiculous,

anachronistic, and quixotic that Charlie Citrine, a successful middle-aged writer, devotes himself to communing with his dead old friend, while in real life he is in a predicament, manipulated by cannibalistic Machiavellians. More noteworthy, however, is Charlie's consistent attempt to come to grips with "heartbreak," although it may strike us as an old-fashioned literary theme in postmodern milieu where humanity is at stake. In other words, despite its comical and ironical undertone, *Humboldt's Gift* echoed to some extent Bellow's own romantic convictions and religious values, which would have sounded more at odds with the prevailing mode of American ethos if the author had voiced them explicitly.

Twelve years later, with the appearance of his tenth novel, *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), Bellow displays a striking affinity for the theme and structural patterns he formulated in *Humboldt's Gift*; he seems to have picked up his recurring motif once again and remodeled it in accordance with his latest observation on humanity. In an interview with Alvin P. Sanoff, Bellow comments on *More Die of Heartbreak*, deploring the current trend of dehumanization: "The book began to come into focus when it struck me all at once that certain subjects, which in the past were treated very seriously, are now the subject of teasing and parody."[2] He argues that with the coming of this century, such human subjects as death, love, friendship, and family feeling have been emptied of their original meanings and reduced to the subject of jeering. In his judgement, these sings of significant shift of human nature can be detected, for example, in what he calls a camp movie, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which makes Bellow wonder "what has happened to human beings to make them accept this as entertainment."[3] It may be ture that the West has already

overcome "the old death," but we are facing "the ordeal of modern consciousness,"[4] that is, the ordeal of "a *new* death." *More Die of Heartbreak* came into being out of this serious sense of crisis concerning human nature, with a view to shedding light on "what happens to the soul in the free world" (101).

Thus, no matter how quirky and sentimental it may sound to the postmodern reader, the aphoristic title of this novel is instrumental in nicely summing up the author's conservative outlook on humanity. This title comes from a remark made by the hero, Professor Benn Crader, who is a world-famous botanist. In the aftermath of the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl accident, a newspaper reporter asked for a statement on the disaster's effect on plant life. Ironically enough, Benn replied: "It's terribly serious, of course, but I think more people die of heartbreak than of radiation" (87). To those acquainted with the family of Bellow's protagonists, this comment may sound as though it were dedicated to heartbroken people like Humboldt, whose death could serve as one of the typical examples of what Benn Crader was trying to refer to.

Apart from this, it is not far-fetched to point out some hidden congeniality between Benn and Humboldt; essential qualities of the two heroes overlap each other. Notwithstanding their seeming differences, both of them are exceptionally endowed with the same kind of gift—visionary power, which enables them to seek a higher life in this turbulent world. Just as Humboldt is an unusually talented poet with high vision who intends to "find the common ground of poetry and science" (HG 119) by virtue of his imagination, so Benn is a visionary botanist who contemplates plants, with "imaginative powers that let him see things others don't see" (85). Given his

magical vision, Benn is not a mere professor of plant morphology but "a plant artist" (301), "a plant clairvoyant" (234), and "a plant mystic" (52) who can see into the mysteries of nature. It is not to be wondered that a top scientist like Benn shares a lot of things in common with a genuine humanist like Humboldt, because they both could see through the fundamentals of the universe and come up with some new project on behalf of the whole of mankind. However, the analogy between the two heroes does not stop here, but it becomes even greater when their penetrating sight is blurred one way or another, and in the last analysis their high project in progress suffers a serious setback.

Among Bellow's total body of works so far published, *Humboldt's Gift* can be considered to stand as a companion piece to *More Die of Heartbreak* for several reasons. Ellen Pifer makes a suggestive observation on some thematic and structural affinities between the two novels,[5] but for some reason or other she refrains from going into details to develop her argument. In my view, it is worth while clarifying the organic relationship between them in a systematic manner. First of all, their thematic contrast is too striking to neglect. The earlier novel is the portrait of a distinguished artist who dies having consumed his imagination along with his sanity and integrity; the latter, the portrait of an eminent scientist who flees from a beautiful woman, with his visionary power jeopardized as the result of marrying her. The recurrent motif of the earlier work is obsession with death and immortality, whereas that of the latter is preoccupation with burning desire and its freezing. In addition to the thematic contrast between the tragicomedy of Thanatos and that of Eros, what is more relevant to my discussion is a common design of

dynamics that really causes the protean relationship between the central character and the narrator. In this relation, three important phases of the hero's movement are worth illustrating. The first half of this essay will delineate the parallel development of the two novels' basic plots with particular attention given to structural analogies. And then, with this schema in perspective, the latter half will elucidate what differentiates *More Die of Heartbreak* from *Humboldt's Gift*, in other words, the kind of differences that can be discerned between the companion pieces, especially in terms of their endings. Before discussing these points, however, it is useful to focus on how the narrator gets involved in the hero's project and his following downfall.

II

It is one of the most peculiar features about Bellovian development of plots that the protagonist struggles to grope for insight by forming a profound spiritual bond with another male character. The archetype of this distinctive comradeship can be traced back to the ambivalent victim/victimizer relationship between Kirby Allbee and Asa Leventhal in *The Victim*. This male partnership has taken various forms of relation: conman and prey as in *Seize the Day* (Dr. Tamkin and Wilhelm); mentor and novice as in *Henderson the Rain King* (King Dahfu and Henderson); adulterer and cuckold as in *Herzog* (Gersbach and Herzog); nephew and uncle as in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (Elya and Sammler); patron and protégé as in *Humboldt's Gift* (Humboldt and Citrine). *More Die of Heartbreak*, likewise, pivots on an intimate friendship between Uncle Benn and his nephew-confidant Kenneth Trachtenberg who narrates Benn's story of sexual distress—a grave crisis in his life.

When this novel came out, not a few reviewers, dismayed by Kenneth's giddy mentality and gibberish manner of talk, made somewhat unfavorable responses to it. Although the novel may be looked upon as "the classic Bellovian panorama,"[6] its loose structure and Kenneth's annoying narrative voice have been considered good grounds for its neglect by some critics. Galen Strawson candidly remarks in *Times Literary Supplement*: "The elements are good, the composition falters... Benn is perfect in blueprint but he doesn't quite come off in speech and action. It would help to hear more about him from inside; but this is ruled out by Kenneth's plashy custody of the narrative voice."[7] Michael K. Glenday complains even more directly about the unreliability of the narrator: This is "the author's weakest novel since *Henderson the Rain King* and nowhere are its weakness more acutely exposed than in this area of narrative stance."[8]

On the other hand, Stephen L. Tanner defends this comic narrator, by insisting that "the narration of this novel is a remarkable achievement. It is garrulous, irrepressible, intelligent, witty, candid, tolerant, and idiosyncratically opinionated . . . Bellow ingeniously merges the voices and perspectives of many characters into one rich and engaging narration."[9] Leslie Field maintains that "Bellow's theme is not insignificant, and his plot and style are well geared to convey it."[10] The novelist William Gaddis acclaims the novel, as he is often quoted as saying at the conclusion of his review: "One turns the last pages of *More Die of Heartbreak* feeling that no image has been left unexplored by a mind not only at constant work but standing outside itself, mercilessly examining the workings, tracking the leading issues of our times and the composite man in an age of hybrids."[11] These divided opinions on the same work seem to preserve some

validity in their own way. Kenneth has such a passionate concern for Benn and his project that his elaborate narration embellished with aside-like comments sounds fussy and unsteady to some, while it strikes others as rich and fascinating. To be sure, Kenneth is a confusing theorizer who has an obsessive weakness for the big issues he seriously tackled, but it is this gap that the comical effect of the novel stems from. More important, however, is the fact that the key to this novel lies not in his quirky intellectual talk itself but in the Benn-Kenneth relationship.

Raised in Paris by expatriate parents, Kenneth has come back to the American Midwestern metropolis—anonymous but presumably Bellow's own Chicago-like city—to serve as an assistant professor of Russian Studies at a university where his beloved uncle teaches botany. His return from France to the Midwest's rustbelt chiefly derives from his longing to live closer to his widowed uncle he has respected. With his "soul in the making" (37), Kenneth in his mid-thirties feels he ought to take a look at America where the action is. Like young Charlie who has left Madison, Wisconsin for Greenwich Village to knock on Humboldt's door, Kenneth has turned to Uncle Benn, counting on his "masterly guidance" (139). He is articulate about his motive: "I had to come to America to complete my education, to absorb certain essential powers from Uncle" (92).

Kenneth is convinced that his mentor, "Professor Chlorophyll" (26), as he calls him, has charismatic "magics" (23) when he is engaged in his pursuit "in the vegetable kingdom" (13). In Ken's estimation, there is something visionary and esoteric about Benn's meditative communion with flora, because it entails spiritual awareness: "He saw into or looked through plants. He took them as his arcana.

An arcanum is more than a mere secret; it's what you have to know in order to be fertile in a creative pursuit, to make discoveries, to prepare for the communication of a spiritual mystery" (27). With his special gift of vision and transcendental strain, this "Citizen of Eternity" (69)—another epithet for him—has the remarkable Emersonian eyeballs which are "prototypes of the original faculty of vision, of the power of seeing itself, created by the light itself" (234). He devotes himself to seeing into plants until "plants came before him" (105), and furthermore, seeing itself begins to function as a metaphor through which he might find some clue to the solution of the mystery of our existence in the world. On the part of Kenneth, who has cultivated a special interest in Russian mysticism, nothing is more ideal for him than to seek metaphysical guidance from Benn "with large mental gifts" (40) which he cannot find out in his own father, Rudi. Unable to identify himself with his father, a highly sophisticated "Parisian" who has achieved great success with women in post-war Paris, Kenneth naturally comes to be on more familiar terms with Uncle Benn, regarding him as his spiritual father.

Before long, their kinship has developed into "a devouring friendship" (26) which allows them to form spiritual bonds between them. Kenneth dares to refer to Benn as his "closest friend, none closer, virtually the only one" (26) and even his "most intimate companion, coinhabitant of [his] bosom" (27). In response to the nephew's enthusiastic attachment, Benn obviously shows paternal affection toward him, but their "father/son" relationship is to be easily reversible. Kenneth is not merely under Benn's protection but also under obligation to "guard" and "monitor" him, because "as a prodigy, he required special care" (15) in worldly experience. Kenneth expresses

Benn's inaptitude for secular affairs by making a metaphorical reference to his terrible manner of parking a car, which reminds us of Humboldt, another poor driver who "didn't know how to park" (HG 20): "He [Benn] sometimes had the effect on me of a bad driver failing to back into a parking space—ten tries and no luck; you wanted to grab the wheel from him" (13). For this reason, Kenneth believes that he "should be continually on hand" (12) or keep in touch with him, so that Uncle can consult him at any time he likes about any problem he faces. On the other hand, Benn has such a rare gift of self-description that, seeking practical advice, he is willing to confide in great detail in Kenneth who acts as "a good priest" (75). As it were, they are secret sharers who are heavily interdependent for their reciprocal benefit. Kenneth comments on the symbiotic relation they tacitly established in pursuit of their sublime project: "We were doubly, multiply, interlinked" (15), and "when Uncle fell, I fell with him" (12).

Then, what kind of high project are they engaged in? In his explanation, with Benn he shares his "Project Turning Point," that is "the quest for a revelation, a massive reversal, an inspired universal change, a new direction, a desperately needed human turning point" (315). He claims that it totally depends on the outcome of this project whether or not human beings can revitalize themselves by taking drastic measures to enrich their spirituality. Once "a fresh mode of experience" (19) is presented by them, it is sure to become a historical landmark for mankind. With a blueprint for the new enterprise on his mind, Kenneth believes that Benn's profound knowledge of fertile inner life he has obtained through his close contact with plant life is vitally necessary; only Benn, "a communicant in a green universal

church" (305), can decipher spiritual mystery and promote inner communion with human realities. In the age of "oscillation of modern consciousness" (51), in which the humanities represented by art are looked down on as "the nursery games of humankind" (247), it is a risky but worthwhile experiment to "bring to the human world what Uncle brought to plant life" (33). After all, their ongoing project is a touchstone to see if Benn's spiritual exploration in the botanical realm can maintain its validity in the worldly sphere of contemporary America.

America itself used to serve as the most promising and grand-scale project man has ever envisioned on earth; it was the future-oriented historical turning point for the whole of humankind. To put it differently, "America was God's experiment" (HG 162). The New World with boundless virgin landscape was seen as a brand-new Edenic Garden that enables anyone to make a fresh start in order to pursue a freer, more natural way of life full of good possibilities of felicity and material abundance. This is why "the modern project—enlightenment, science, democracy—had found its main expression and success in the U. S. A." (256). Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that this terrific enterprise has rapidly lost its original momentum and there arises an urgent necessity for a new breakthrough—another vital project to trigger a new inner awakening in the nation's collective consciousness.

Kenneth can rely on Benn in pursuing his "Project Turning Point" designed to take the place of the abortive project "America." Charlie in *Humboldt's Gift*, in like manner, forms a firm alliance in initiating a new enterprise with Humboldt who is brave enough to "stand up to the unpoetic power of the USA" (HG 133). The poet wants "to prove that the imagination was just as potent as machinery, to free

and to bless humankind" (HG 119). Charlie has made his literary debut under the patronage of Humboldt, the long-awaited hero of the age, who started his brilliant career as an American poet in the depression-ridden thirties. Enchanted by his artistic inspiration, wide-raging philosophical knowledge, and glamorous eloquence, Charlie collaborates with him in establishing a new world, where poetry, art, and thought—"sensitive plants in Business America" (HG 309)—are gloriously flourishing by virtue of artists' fertile imagination. The crux of their project is the redemption of sensibility by art, the recovery of an original freshness by poetry. They view poetry "as the merciful Ellis Island" (HG 24), into which a host of "alienated" American are allowed to flood again to recover their lost "home-world," just as their forefathers did to discover the New World. Poetry is expected to be helpful in retrieving "an inner world of satin" (299) we had intact in our innocent childhood—an original world which is featured by its rich colors and different dimensions. With his exquisite poems of great wit and beauty, "Humboldt wanted to drape the world in radiance, but he didn't have enough material" (HG 107).

In carrying their project forward, Humboldt and Charlie enter into a sacred covenant by exchanging a blank check as evidence of their mutual reliance and fidelity. This means their basic relationship between a patron and a protégé has been consolidated into more inseparable "blood-brotherhood" (HG 131), which stands in an obvious analogy with the symbiotic friendship based on kinship beteen Benn and Kenneth. At this time, however, they do not acknowledge that this secular ritual of symbolic blood-brotherhood involves a sign of corruption of the ideal project, which leads to the disastrous disruption

of their alliance. Hence their relationship comes into the second stage, in which one misfortune after another besets Humboldt until his life is ruined.

In the first place, Eisenhower's landslide victory in the 1952 presidential election causes an ominous political setback Humboldt personally suffers, because he has placed a great hope on the rival candidate, Adlai Stevenson, who he believed would read his ballads and defend the cause of literature he has claimed. No matter how capable Ike was as General in the military campaign, as Kenneth criticizes in *More Die of Heartbreak*, "he had no inner theater corresponding to the European theater of war" (20). To Humboldt who wishes to act as Stevenson's cultural adviser, Ike's political success definitely means a bitter defeat of literature in pragmatic "Business America" where no "inner theater" is required. This thwarts his ardent expectation of having an access to the power of Washington to promote his ambitious project to present an epoch-making Turning Point in the intellectual history of America. The next step he tries to take is to secure a tenured prefessorship at a prestigious Ivy League university. His eclipse of literary fame makes him plot with Charlie to create a chair in poetry at Princeton University, but this scheme does not work out due to financial difficulties. It is not long before the frustrated Humboldt begins to lose confidence in his own talent and degenerates into heavy manic depression tinged with madness that is aggravated by his hard drinking, pill-taking, and insomnia. After all, it is self-evident that "the noble idea of being an American poet" (HG 5) has ended up with "the Agony of the American Artist" (HG 156).

Along with a series of adversities, the decisive blow to Humboldt's

pride is Charlie's great success as a writer. Charlie's increasing fame and popularity present a sharp contrast with Humboldt's dwindling reputation and ability. This reversal of position makes Humboldt bear such a personal grudge against him that when Charlie, a Pulitzer Prize winner, makes a fortune thanks to his big hit, *Von Treck* on Broadway, the jealous poet pickets the Belasco Theater and makes a big scene, protesting that his former protégé has stolen his personality to adapt it into the hero of the hit drama. Much of the irony in this episode comes from the fact that despite his sacred crusade as an artist against the philistinism of "Business America," Humboldt was caught in the very trap he endeavors to circumvent. He fails to get rid of his obsession of money and success which are his favorite topics in his private discourse. Imbued with the American dream, he "passionately lived out the theme of Success" (HG 6). Consequently, he gets stuck in the middle of the project without coming up with a new direction. Nothing epitomizes "the agony of the American Poet" more dramatically than his arrest by the police and subsequent custody in Bellevue on a charge of his repeated threat to a young critic he suspects of having relations with his wife, Kathleen. The poet strapped into a strait jacket and handcuffed is a vivid reminder of the harsh doom of misfitted artists, who have failed to do miracles and have no other choice but to behave like wretched clowns. Charlie muses on Humboldt, thinking of him as a martyr to art lost in the midst of the jungle of brutal business-minded America:

> Was this art versus America? To me Bellevue was like the Bowery: it gave negative testimony. Brutal Wall Street stood for power, and the Bowery, so near it, was the accusing symbol

> of weakness. And so with Bellevue, where the poor and busted went.... And poets like drunkards and misfits or psychopaths, like the wretched, poor or rich, sank into weakness....He threw himself into weakness and became a hero of wretchedness. He consented to the monopoly of power and interest held by money, politics, law, rationality, technology because he couldn't find the next thing, the new thing, the necessary thing for poets to do. Instead he did a former thing (HG 155).

In due course of time, the "blood-brotherhood" between Humboldt and Charlie breaks up when Humboldt unilaterally clears the blood-brother check and draws several thousand dollars from Charlie's account as a penalty for his alleged betrayal. After this fatal disruption, Humboldt temporarily disappears from Charlie's mind, and even when he happens to witness the ruined poet prowling on Forty-sixth Street eating pretzels, Charlie cannot but avert his eyes from him and hide himself behind a parked car. It is not until five or six years have passed since he saw Humboldt's obituary that their long-suspended relationship indicates some signs of restoration promoted by Charlie's hearty meditation on the late poet. This point will be discussed more in detail later in chapter 4.

Ⅲ

In *More Die of Heartbreak,* Uncle Benn's unexpected marriage to Matilda Layamon, a beauty twenty years younger than he, poses a bitter threat to the symbiotic relationship between Benn and Kenneth. Unlike Humboldt and Charlie, they do not let their friendship decisively break up, but it shifts into the second phase when the third party

comes into the picture. Kenneth asserts that taking advantage of his stay abroad, Benn has married her without any prior consultation with him. Their marital liaison strikes him as a traumatic blow to his devouring faith in his uncle. He complains pretty straightforwardly: "He [Benn] had betrayed me, welshed on an agreement which was the very foundation of our relationship" (115); "Somewhere, I'm still sore because he cheated on me—broke the rules of our relationship" (113). Their discord reflects the fact that Benn's sexual obsession is not necessarily compatible with their ongoing project that heavily depends on his prodigious gift of vision. While Humboldt is vulnerable to money and his own success, Benn is subject to sexuality and his own libido. For him, "botany was the big thing. Yet it had a rival, which was female sexuality" (198). This is why Benn has married Matilda without letting his confidant know about it beforehand, just as Humboldt has cleared the blood-brother check without Charlie's permission.

In Kenneth's eyes, Benn the widower-bachelor in his fifties is "a famous middle-aged botanist in the kindergarten" (55), who is described as "a sex-abused man" (54) because of his confused relationship with women and the tormented sexual life he has led for fifteen years since the death of his first wife, Lena. In spite of his clairvoyant vision, Benn's sexual restlessness and clumsiness about handling women are in contrast with Rudi's triumphant sexual exploits. Unlike him, Benn is a victimized dangling man, moving back and forth between America and primitive boundaries. He is an obsessive "globe-trotter" (57) who makes frequent trips to the remotest regions of the world, as if he took refuge from his complicated entanglement with women, including Caroline Bunge and Della Bedell who chase after him. Being "a full-

scale example of the ordeal by desire" (110), he attempts to put an end to this sort of turbulent life once and for all, by settling down to married life with Matilda. Nevertheless, he does not fully recognize that his magic may be harmed when he, like an alchemist, tries to "transpose his magical powers from botany to love" (330).

Benn's vocation of botany and his second marriage to Matilda are just like the two sides of one coin, for he has instinctively selected his work and wife among many other things. In his boyhood he incidentally picked up botany as a life-long profession the moment he bought a book on plants, *Great Mother Forest* from a junkman for a nickel. He reflects that what might be called "a second person" or "inner spirit" lurking inside him seems to have sprung out to seize an opportunity when it happened to come before him. By the same token, when Matilda made her dazzling appearance before him, that second person inside him, this time acting like a "daemon," leaped forward and encouraged him to pick her as his life partner. Given the facts, botany and Matilda, sharing equivalent significance to Benn, look like inseparable twins begot by the same inner spirit who plays a very positive role in guiding him at critical moments in his life. Therefore, without hesitation he lets his insatiable desire draw him back from the lofty meditative realm into the prevailing mode of worldly experience richly flavored with sexuality: "Benn had *wanted* to *come down*, he had a special wish to enter into prevailing states of mind and even, perhaps, into the peculiar sexuality associated with such states" (166, latter italics mine). With this purpose in his mind, he takes a reckless plunge into the vortex of ferocious American desire and greed, descending from the top of his unworldly plant kingdom to the Layamons' luxurious duplex penthouse.

Yet, his marital connection with the Layamon family not only works against his will to pursue a peaceful married life but makes "the gap between his personal interests and the passions of contemporary life" (31) all the more conspicuous. The Layamons endeavor to "bring Benn in, that is, to bring him back to the one great thing America has, which is the *American*" (166). Before long, Benn realizes what "Business America" is all about when he finds himself involuntarily getting involved in Dr. Layamon's shrewd plot against Benn's uncle, Harold Vilitzer. Years earlier, as the executor of Gradma Crader's estate, Vilitzer had cheated Benn's family into selling their large downtown property to him for a modest price and then taken the lion's share by reselling it for a staggering sum as the prospective site of the Electronic Tower—the tallest skyscraper soaring in the city. But lately, Vilitzer's political power on the basis of the Democratic machine connection has rapidly weakened. Taking advantage of this, Dr. Layamon, a rich medical big shot who fixes his eyes on great expectations Benn may recover from Vilitzer, strongly persuades his son-in-law into reopening a lawsuit against his own uncle for embezzlement. What is more, Matilda, at first idealized by Benn as an exquisite beauty like the romantic heroine in Poe's "To Helen," turns out to be no less adroit a manipulator of Benn than her father is, with her smart brain filled with plenty of profitable information and ambitious schemes: "She knew what she wanted and she got it" (155) whenever she wanted it.

Maneuvered by these Machiavellians, Benn is haunted by "the persistent sense of being in a false position" (125), which makes him feel out of place like an alien from a different planet: "Uncle wasn't altogether himself. He was under alien influences" (131). There is

no common ground between him and the Layamons whose "language" sounds unfamiliar to Benn, who has not subscribed to *Wall Street Journal* nor knows how to read a balance sheet. Moreover, Benn's vision along with his self-sufficiency is increasingly impaired by his entry into the Layamons' penthouse, where he is thrown off poise with his constant contact with plant hindered. At their pompous wedding ceremony performed near the Layamons' Christmas tree, he manages to go through with it by absorbing imaginary sap from the little tree. No sooner has he been affiliated with them than he is forced to wear a fancy tailor-made suit, although "the whole vegetable kingdom was his garment—his robe, his coat" (119). Feeling awkward in livery in their magnificent Parrish Place, Benn has nothing to do but lounge around one room after another in quest of plant contact —his last stronghold. The only source of his spiritual diversion is a wonderful red azalea he can catch a glimpse of as he passes Mrs. Layamon's private sanctum. Every time he feels disoriented or suffocated in his new residence, despite his gorgeous new wife, he makes a point of brooding over that azalea with a view to obtaining some inspiration. He feels as if plant essence emanating from it was the only element that could keep him alive. Besides, in their future residence at the Roanoke which Matilda has inherited from her aunt, Benn wishes to take a close look at sycamores planted outside the apartment, but all he can sense is a sad moan from the bare trees.

These facts are revealed to the reader through Benn's talk with Kenneth who tries hard to keep a narrow line of communication with his uncle still open. The more closely Benn relates himself with the Layamons, the more damage is inflicted upon the project they have been pursuing and the less priority is given to the role Kenneth plays

in terms of Benn's collateral relationship with his nephew and wife. Yet there is nobody but his nephew to whom the distressed uncle can appeal for help in moments of great crisis. Then, Kenneth comes into the picture once again. On these occasions, as Robert F. Kiernan points out, "an uncle/nephew relationship" is "transformed into a parent/child relationship that reverses the parent/child roles."[12] This is chiefly because Benn is too passive and defenseless like an abused child to undo the harsh treatment done to him. Patronizing his helpless uncle, Kenneth sometimes seems to act like "a psychotherapist who demands absolute candor"[13] to the client and concludes their "session" by saying: "You were brave to tell me what's going on. Couldn't have been easy"; "I can't figure how to help you, but I'm always available" (242).

Several sessions of their meeting in Benn's old apartment and confidential midnight talks over their "hot line"—a pay phone installed in the penthouse—clarifies the process of gradual disintegration of Benn's vision. The very sign of his shift in vision is indicated by the way Matilda's ideal image suffers uncomfortable disfigurement in his eyes. Benn earlier has "noticed how sharp her teeth were" (143), but later when he unwillingly goes with her to see the movie *Psycho*, his ominous premonition is confirmed; abruptly he identifies the psychotic killer acted by Tony Perkins with Matilda, because of the unnaturally wide and elevated shoulders. And then this ugly transvestic transformation of Matilda's figure goes further in Benn's mind as he associates her shoulders with her father's "kind of two-dimensional" (223) shoulders. Once Benn perceives Matilda's latent grotesqueness, it is not long before he fears that he might strangle her in his sleep, troubled by his nightmarish repulsion of

her. By the time he discovers Matilda's breasts are too far apart, her perfect figure has been irreversibly fragmented, but it is nothing but Benn's beclouded vision that has produced a variety of distorted images of Matilda.[14]

In combination with the disintegration of Matilda's image, the fatal blow is awaiting him, the idealized image of that gorgeous azalea he has secretly counted on, all of a sudden, falls apart one night, when he is too agitated to sleep and strays into Mrs. Layamon's den seeking closer plant contact. To his shock and embarrassment, what he regarded as an exquisite real plant turns out to be a fake. At this moment, it comes to light that the "plant clairvoyant" has been blinded in his speciality through his phony communion with an artificial plant. Bewildered in the dead of night by this nauseating discovery, he hurries to make an emergency call to his nephew from the laundry room of the penthouse:

> "A stooge azalea—a stand-in, a ringer, an impostor, a dummy, a shill! I was drawing support for weeks and weeks from this manufactured product. Every time I needed a fix, a contact, a flow, I turned to it. Me, Kenneth! After all these years of unbroken rapport, to be taken in" He cried this out—I could see it—among all those washers and dryers. "The only thing I could always count on. My occupation, my instinct, my connection... broken off" (300).

All of the episodes that have suggested the eclipse of Benn's visionary power seem to converge on this crucial moment of truth, which serves as the focal point in the novel. It is not until this negative epiphany

shakes him up that he really understands what a high price he has to pay as a compensation for his descent from the plant kingdom. Looking into his inner kingdom with all his connection with flora cut off, he stands aghast to find an abysmal void gaping up at him.

The collapse of his plant kingdom stems from the predominance of literalness over imagination in the prevailing states of modern consciousness to which he wishes to accustom himself. Good examples to show how literalness coupled with coarse desire has upset him and blurred his vision are: the crudest strip-tease he saw in Kyoto, Dr. Layamon's too clinical view of patients Benn observes during his visit to Doctor's hospital, and the disgustingly detailed evidences of a rape case he watches in the courtroom. They combine to undermine the growth of "the Tree of Life," as opposed to "the Tree of Knowledge" (56), whose symbol is the frequently mentioned Electronic Tower—omnipresent "pillars of fire" (126)—visible from every part of the city. Benn intended to unite the old Tree of Life with the modern Tree of Knowledge to make a harmonized consummation, but he ends up with getting stuck in the middle of the daring experiment, under the harmful influence of literalness.

The only choice left to Benn is to retreat into "the end of the earth, the boundary of boundaries" (82) in attempts to recuperate from a serious damage to his vision. Lost in the labyrinth of the worldly sphere, he has to go back to his sublime region from which he came down—the cold lichen world where a totally different cycle of time flows according to the growth rate of the lichens: "Those Arctic lichens are frozen through and through. Ninety-five percent of their existence is solid ice. But at the slightest warming they revive and even grow a bit. This can go on for thousands of years" (315).

In order to retrieve his equilibrium in his own fashion, Benn makes up his mind to chasten his desire by freezing it for the time being in the nocturnal darkness of the Pole. Identifying himself with the lichens, he appears as though he wished to metamorphose himself from a tantalized "phoenix who runs after arsonists" (198) into calm Arctic lichens that patiently wait to "perk up, millennium after millennium" (253).

At the end of the novel, he narrowly escapes from Matilda and her family for good. After going down to Miami in vain to see his beloved uncle Harold on his deathbed, for the first time Benn outwits Matilda who expects him to come to meet her in Brazil, where they were planning to stay for some months. At the last moment, he phones Kenneth from a Miami airport and confides to him that he has been scheming to leave for the North Pole to join an international team of researchers up there, instead of making a flight down to Rio to join his wife in the passionate tropical land full of azaleas. As he explains to Kenneth, he has come to this decision for the sake of his own survival, believing in the healing powers attributed to the Arctic:

> And nothing but night and ice will help me now. Night so that I can't see myself. Ice as a corrective. Ice for the rigor. And also because there'll be no plants to see, except the lichens. Because if there's no rapport, if the rapport is dead, I'm better off in plant-free surroundings. This has been carefully felt through. Rather than thought out. It's a survival measure. I'm applying global masses of ice and hyperborean darkness (334).

The ending of *More Die of Heartbreak*, like those of *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Dean's December*, finds the hero "in arctic circumstances"[15] where he takes refuge in the cold. *Henderson* ends with Henderson's joyful dance at the Newfoundland airport "over the frozen ground of almost eternal winter,"[16] and the climax of *The Dean's December* is Corde's awakening at the sight of the celestial sphere viewed from awfully cold Mount Palomar Observatory. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether Benn's flight to the North Pole signifies such a good possibility of the hero's spiritual resurrection as we can detect in the two earlier works. Henderson is on his way back to New York in high spirits to meet his wife Lily, after he has gone through his bizarre education in Africa. Corde, likewise, goes back to the worldly terrene after experiencing an awakening, descending from the top of the lift to the ground. On the contrary, Benn's disappearance from the novel does not mean some sort of positive achievement but a passive retreat into the death-like serenity in prospect of recovery from his heartbreak. It looks like he has taken an emergency exit to evacuate from the hot mundane world to the frozen inner world to which he used to belong—the unworldly realm flavored with "a foretaste of eternity" (163). The novel ends with Ken's enigmatic statement about his own speculation upon Benn's whereabouts: "an incomprehensible location in reindeer country, far out on the tundra. Probably near Novaya Zemlya. *Even that was not remote enough*" (335, italics mine). Gazing at an obscure address Benn has left him, Kenneth is despondent about the fact that he has practically lost track of his uncle, who has slipped out of his hands indefinitely, if not forever, and retreated into the remote eternity hardly accessible to him.

IV

In this final chapter, let me resume a brief discussion on *Humboldt's Gift* to clarify the idiosyncrasy of *More Die of Heartbreak* in the light of structural differences as well as similarities between the two works. So far as the decline of the gifted hero's visionary power and its adverse effect upon his project are concerned, as we have seen in detail, the companion pieces share a common schema. After all, with his "Project Turning Point" given up, Benn has sought refuge in the unworldly Arctic, just as Humboldt has retreated into the other world in despair at the failure of his ambitious project. However, their parallelism is not likely to go further; it is worth noting that each novel's plot development presents a remarkable contrast as to the final destination the plot is heading for. The latter half of *More Die of Heartbreak* precisely delineates the dismantling process of the abortive project resulting from the *disintegration* of the hero's vision, whereas that of *Humboldt's Gift* gives a detailed description of the posthumous restoration of the broken friendship. The once forsaken project is to be restored through the *integration* of Humboldt's imagination with the aid of his disciple, Charlie.

The integral part of *Humbold't Gift* lies in the communication taking place posthumously between Humboldt and Charlie, which appears to invite the actual advent of Humboldt's gift to him. In accordance with his earnest meditation on Humboldt, Charlie's communion with the late poet at last bears fruit when he comes by his last will. As it turns out, in a long letter addressed to Charlie, Humboldt has not merely reflected upon the long history of their ambivalent relationship "with end-of-the-line lucidity" (HG 339), but also cordially expressed his everlasting attachment and support to

Charlie. What is more, in deep remorse for his misbehavior during lifetime, Humboldt has bequeathed Charlie an outline of his plot for a film which he believed would be worth a good fortune. That scenario is an ironic parable of Charlie' life—the tale of a successful American writer ruined by his pursuit of success. Just as Charlie created a hero of his hit drama *Treck* out of Humboldt's personality, so Humboldt in his turn has produced a hero based on Charlie's life in expectation of the film's future success. Then, Humboldt concludes his will with a remarkable statement to his confidant: "Last of all —remember: we are not natural beings but supernatural beings" (HG 347). This sounds like an echo of the reincarnated Humboldt's voice, carrying an unmistakable message he has sent from beyond the grave. He has also left him another movie scenario on cannibalism and survival in the Arctic that they wrote at Princeton as a joke. In addition to the spiritual value Charlie has put on Humboldt's legacy, both of the scenarios later turn out to be lucrative enough to actually rescue him from financial difficulties he has been in since he was forsaken by his beautiful mistress, Renata. As the story comes to an end, we see Charlie take a sad pleasure in performing a ritual of reburying Humboldt in a new grave on a warm spring day, as a token of gratitude for his long-standing favor.

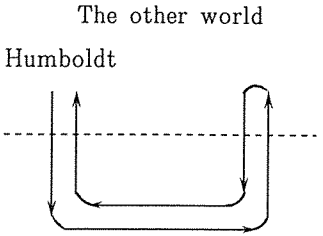
With Charlie coming into Humboldt's legacy and Humboldt returning to his new grave, *Humboldt's Gift* has a definite, closed ending. On the other hand, *More Die of Heartbreak* keeps its ending loosely open, since there seems to be no specific gift available that Kenneth could possibly inherit from Benn, who has sneaked out of the novel leaving the bewildered nephew behind. In spite of this glaring contrast with respect to the conlcusion, the two novels surely have a

basic skeleton in common when it comes to the way the heroes metaphysically move between two different realms. Their movement in the novel is made up of three stages: first of all, the hero endowed with a prodigious gift comes across a border into the secular world to fulfill a sublime mission; secondly, staying in that sphere, he forms an intimate alliance with his protégé in order to present a new landmark for mankind, but for some reason or other, he jeopardizes his vision along with his project; in the last stage, he parts with his ally and retreats into his own territory where he stays at peace.

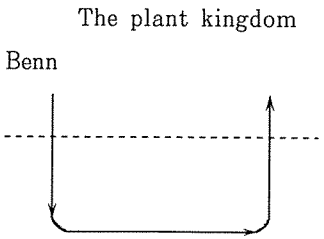
To be more concrete, Benn has come down from the plant kingdom to the worldly sphere, where he tries to carry out his project to make a human turning point in cooperation with Kenneth, but with his visionary power nearly lost due to his desire, he is forced to give up his undertaking and retire into the Arctic. Humboldt repeats this course of movement twice; however, for the second time he moves in reverse order and manages to obtain the opposite result by attaining his goal. After his appearance in the world as a prominent poet with visionary imagination, Humboldt pursues a project with Charlie to renew the world with his terrific poems, but on account of his excessive preoccupation with success, he fails to achieve his aim and disappears into the other world until he passes away in obscurity. Thanks to Charlie's contemplation, however, it looks as though Humboldt had made his second appearance in the mundane world and teamed up with Charlie to take up the project again. In the end, Humboldt, having bequeathed his precious gift to Charlie and restored their friendship, goes back to his final rest in the grave. The basic structure of the two novels can be explained by the following diagram of the hero's movement:

Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*

Humboldt's Gift



More Die of Heartbreak



As is evident from this, *More Die of Heartbreak* which is based on its peer novel in structure, reveals a significant deviation from its original mold, because Benn's story completely lacks the counterpart corresponding to the second pattern of Humboldt's movement towards the realization of his aim. In consequence, the role Kenneth plays in assisting Benn's project is much smaller than that Charlie plays in taking over the late Humboldt's project. This is reflected to some degree in each novel's side plot. It is not difficult to demonstrate some similarities between the two side plots: Kenneth is, in fact, forsaken by his mistress, Treckie who would rather marry Ronald, a macho ski instructor, while Charlie is finally ditched by Renata who runs away from him to marry Flonzaley, a rich undertaker; neither Treckie nor Renata can understand her lover's greater devotion to the hero;[17] Treckie's mother Tanya is the counterpart of Renata's mother Señora. However, there are differences between the two side plots in relation to their master plots. To sum it up, Kenneth's breach with Treckie is no more than a parallel to Benn's flight from Matilda, but Charlie's breakup with Renata followed by his stay in

a dismal pensión in Madrid is a kind of ordeal he has to go through before he can fully appreciate Humboldt's message. Charlie's positive commitment to the master plot, especially after Humboldt's death, stands in contrast with Kenneth's passive involvement and the onlooking detachment he keeps during his phone sessions with Benn.

In the last analysis, *More Die of Heartbreak* can be viewed as a contrastive, if not contradictory, variant of *Humboldt's Gift*, in that this companion piece published twelve years later, indicates what *Humboldt* could be like if it were to be revised by the same author from a slightly varied perspective. Despite its basic affinities with the earlier work, it undeniably reflects some sort of "reserve" on the part of the author with regard to his optimistic vision of humanity. In writing the companion piece, Bellow dares to break his structural formula and leave its conclusion unsettled, instead of devising a closed ending that would complete a circular structure of the novel. What this novel is all about is not the integration but the disintegration of the hero's rare gift amid worldly Machiavellians. This is not because Bellow's faith in humanity has irrevocably melted away as time has passed, but because the increasing opposing powers against his belief have made it even more difficult for him to hold to it unshaken. It must be true that the more precisely Bellow observes the world around him as it is, as Benn puts it, the more people he finds who die of heartbreak with their humanity smothered. Nevertheless, *More Die of Heartbreak* is not the story of Benn's total surrender to the prevailing mode of philistinism; no matter how long it will take, the frozen possibility of his resurrection is designed to "perk up" someday like the Arctic lichens.

Notes

1. Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 117. Hereafter the abbreviation HG cited parenthetically in the text followed by page numbers will refer to this novel.
2. Alvin P. Sanoff, "The Reigning King of Literature," *U. S. News & World Report*, 7 September 1987, 52.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Saul Bellow, *More Die of Heartbreak* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 101. Further parenthetical page references in the text are to this edition.
5. See Ellen Pifer, *Saul Bellow Against the Grain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 152.
6. Galen Strawson, "Professor Crader's Satellite," *Times Literary Supplement*, 23-29 October 1987, 1158.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Michael K. Glenday, *Saul Bellow and the Decline of Humanism* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 171.
9. Stephen L. Tanner, "The Religious Vision of *More Die of Heartbreak*," *Saul Bellow in the 1980s: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gloria L. Cronin and L. H. Goldman (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1989), p. 293.
10. Leslie Field, "Book Review," *Saul Bellow Journal* 6. 2 (1987), 72.
11. William Gaddis, "An Instinct for the Dangerous Wife," *New York Times Book Review*, 24 May 1987, 16.
12. Robert F. Kiernan, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 227.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

14. In this connection Karl F. Kight makes an interesting remark: "Bellow connects those darkened eyes symbolically with failed automobile headlights." Karl F. Kight, "Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*: Point of View and Irony," *Saul Bellow Journal* 9. 1 (1990) 13. On their way back to the summer house in the Berkshires after seeing *Psycho*, ironically enough, Benn is arrested by a drunk for his blind driving only with the emergency flashers due to failed headlights.
15. See August Franza, "Saul Bellow: A Turning Point," *Saul Bellow Journal* 9. 1 (1990), 47.
16. Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Viking, 1959), p. 340.
17. For example, Treckie makes an ironic remark to Kenneth about his obsession with Benn: "Being so close to your uncle Benn, you won't miss us all that much" (68). Renata, likewise, accuses Charlie of his devotion to Humboldt in a letter she has sent to him, explaining why she dared to forsake him: "Your passion for Von Humboldt Fleisher speeded the deterioration of our relationship" (HG 432).