Humboldt’s Gift: A Panorama of Modern American Society

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Abstract. 1975 saw the publication of Bellow’s novel, Humboldt’s Gift. Chicago and New York, which, with their gigantesque outer life contained the whole problem of poetry and the inner life in America, are, for the most part, the scenes of the novel’s action. Starting with his realistic attitude, humanistic care and metaphysical outlook, theming on the thoughts and destinies of two generations’ intellectuals (Von Humboldt Fleisher and Charlie Citrine) living in the cities of New York and Chicago, and using the broad canvas of life as its backdrop, Bellow gives a truthful portrayal of the spiritual crisis of modern society, as well as a vivid description of the oppression and destruction of the spiritual culture by American social environment. Although Humboldt’s Gift involves less contemporary political issues and less unobtrusive historical events than his other works composed in the 1960s, yet the novel is still a panorama of modern American society in depicting the oppression of the spiritual culture by materialism and the various contradictions among the contemporary writers under such oppression.

1. Introduction

In the early 1960s, along with the death of Hemingway and Faulkner, the literary critics let out a sign over their successive death, as few modern writers could match them in expressing human artistic thought and passion. However, in the meantime, Saul Bellow published Herzog (1964), Mr. Sammler’s Planet (1970), Humboldt’s Gift (1975), etc., in which the combination of his dramatic mockery and serious thought were expressed. Bellow exposed the deep crisis of the modern American civilization and emphasized the anguish and ambivalence of the American intellectuals. As a result, Bellow’s works, especially Humboldt’s Gift, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize, brought significant ideological recognition to modern American literature, and thus his position as a leading figure in the American literary field has been established. Little wonder that some critics said proudly that “Saul Bellow’s status as a postwar American novelist can only be compared to that of James, Hemingway, and Faulkner in the preceding periods. As a Nobel Laureate, winner of several fiction awards, and the subject of over three thousand articles, Bellow’s reputation seems assured.”\textsuperscript{[1]} Indeed, “he had arrived at the pinnacle of American letters, and he knew it.”\textsuperscript{[2]}

2. Crisis of Modern American Civilization and Crisis of American Intellectuals

Humboldt’s Gift caused a stir when it was published in 1975, and later Bellow received Pulitzer Prize for it. “This is the novel that most rivals Herzog as Bellow’s masterpiece; its panorama of Chicago life, both high and low, creates a melting pot in which writers, criminals, lawyers and businessmen are brought together in a brilliantly leveling manner.”\textsuperscript{[3]} The novel is realistic, as it is
on the basis of Bellow’s autobiography. *Humboldt’s Gift* took more than eight years to complete and it is the first time Bellow has blended his own life experiences into the major character Charlie Citrine, the narrator-protagonist of *Humboldt’s Gift*, and the other major character Von Humboldt Fleisher, Citrine’s mentor, is actually based on the memories of his best friend Delmore Schwartz, a famous writer in the thirties and forties, who died of a heart attack in 1966. Therefor *Humboldt’s Gift* tends to be nothing less than a realistic work, “in which Bellow deals directly for the first time with the writer’s life in America, including, implicitly, his own.”[4]

Postwar American novels were rife with the themes that involve self-seeking, self-discovery and self-inquiry, which are inevitably determined by the objective reality of postwar America. As a social historian, Bellow starts with an realistic attitude, taking the ideas and destinies of two generations’ intellectuals as the main theme in *Humboldt’s Gift* and using the broad picture of life as its backdrop, and gives an honest portrayal of the spiritual crisis of modern society and a real description of the oppression and destruction of the spiritual culture as a result of the repressed social environment of the United States. In the meantime, Bellow displays the intellectual anguish and pessimistic mood, which shows a strong sense of historical responsibility and high artistic sensibility. This is Bellow’s continuation and development of consistent thoughts in *Humboldt’s Gift*, and is the keynote in most of his works. Earlier in his famous works, such as *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), some critic argued that “the heroes face the problem of how to create a unique self within a mechanical money-oriented mass society which exerts a leveling influence on an individual, and where the individual undergoes his personal effacement and consequent degradation.”[5] The works’ thematic ideology is heralded as a blueprint for the publishing of *Humboldt’s Gift*, in which Bellow extends the thematic ideology. In *Humboldt’s Gift* Bellow does not only point out the crisis of civilization in modern American society on the part of the historical and social problems, but he also raises a closely related question—the crisis of the intellectuals themselves. In *Humboldt’s Gift*, Bellow’s detailed analysis of the images of contemporary American Jewish writers reflects a complex contradiction presented by themselves within a distorted and deformed society, albeit, it shows from the side the true cause of withered social civilization. And also *Humboldt’s Gift* truthfully presents a series of profound contradictions in front of American poets and writers. These contradictions are characterized by the relations between success and failure, spirit and matter, preservation and disintegration of personality, personal and social awareness, which gradually become a huge crisis for intellectuals. The theme of the novel *Humboldt’s Gift* is a discussion with profound philosophical insight, namely, in an ever-changing world, how mankind should deal with relations between the times, circumstances and surroundings of him or herself.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the rapid economic development, rapid advancements of science and technology with strong materialization in America were the inducements for the advent of a human spiritual wasteland. In these circumstances, the interpersonal relationships and relations between man and nature, and man and society, as well as man and himself led to the emergence of new contradictions: the fickleness of the world and the solitary life; the disharmony between man and nature; the loss of minimum trust and understanding; the increase in the prevalence of material and money along with loss of human nature and beliefs; the occupation of people’s minds by hopelessness, chaos, pessimism and nihilism. As the result of these, life got drowned, livelihood degraded and society disrupted, with humanity becoming depraved. All of these suggest a philosophical view expressed by Saul Bellow through the development of the continuity of history.
on the part of two main characters in *Humboldt’s Gift*. In Bellow’s opinion, contemporary writers, serving as mentors for American spiritual culture, have a deep-seated aversion to reality, but are unable to get rid of its affect. It is because of this understanding, in *Humboldt’s Gift* where Bellow presents to readers such society which is full of money, coziness, sensuality, business sense and violence, while on the other hand, Bellow points out he himself is also a victim who cannot be avoided of affection by such spiritual and cultural erosion. Charlie Citrine, who “faces a familiar spiritual crisis in Bellow’s fiction”[6], and the other major character Von Humboldt Fleisher, are all in the grip of this restricted atmosphere, facing all kinds of contradictions between success and failure, material and morality, flesh and spirit, as well as individual and society.

3. Combination of Realism Tradition and Modernist Artistic Quality

Benefitting from the tradition of European literature and the effects of American literature, Bellow took a deep interest in the works by Theodore Dreiser, Walt Whitman, Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and William Butler Yeats, as well as Russian writers of the 19th century, such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Thus it can be seen that among the most respected writers praised highly by Bellow, there are some great masters of realism, and also some modernists. We might surmise that Bellow has the greatest esteem for the realist writers for their courage to face the social reality and reflect the essence of existential life. Bellow utters remarks of unceasing admiration for the modernists and their innovations in artistic techniques. When interviewed, Bellow made the following comments about modern literature:

Modern literature was dominated by a tone of elegy from the twenties to the fifties, the atmosphere of Eliot in “The Waste Land” and that of Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Sensibility absorbed this sadness, this view of the artist as the only contemporary link with an age of gold, forced to watch the sewage flowing in the Thames, every aspect of modern civilization doing violence to his (artist-patrician) feelings.[7]

Similar to all influential writers, Saul Bellow’s depiction of reality gives him a unique style. Among the post-war writers, Bellow has the most obvious intellectual characteristics. He read extensively and is knowledgeable about philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology. His cultivation in these areas laid the groundwork for his future ideas and opinions as a novelist. Since late 20th century, he has laid emphasis on the cognitive value of literature in his own style, and has begun to explore and reproduce American history contexts and other real life circumstances as deeply as possible. His works have a kind of historical depth with some specific social content, while expressing social experiences and the feeling of life on the part of modern men. Bellow has always advocated realism and emphasized the importance of realism countless times. *Humboldt’s Gift* is like a panorama that truly reflects modern American ever-changing scenes and modern American complicated and confusing mental attitudes. Bellow’s works are always set amidst Chicago and New York that are sufficient enough in representing American life, and describe such a variety of characters from president, senators, poets, scholars to rascals, swindlers, villains and scoundrels that money’s power, sexual indulgence, boredom with life and fear of death, etc., are exposed incisively and vividly; as a result readers can see Chicago and New York either as material paradise, or as spiritual wasteland.

Modernism is a philosophical movement that arose from wide-scale and far-reaching transformations in Western society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the field of literature,
modernism is based on the philosophy of Freudian psychology and Sartre’s existentialism, advocates rebelling against old traditions, and undertakes bold explorations of thoughts and literary practice. There is no denying that it is the philosophy of Sartre’s existentialism which makes it popular with the European continent after the second world war that made a profound impact on Bellow’s literary creation, so that Bellow devotes himself to the description of the loss of humanity and the absurdity of the world, trying hard to fight for the dignity of man, and in the meantime, Bellow accepted part of Freudian psychoanalysis, which is mainly reflected in Bellow’s stream-of-consciousness technique full of sexual innuendo and subtle psychoanalysis of characters. On the other hand, the change of social life, especially ideological change requires corresponding innovation in literary creation. Bellow saw the needs for the presenting of the complex and changing modern life and human sense of crisis, so in Humboldt’s Gift he employs the method of reversing the time order and changing scenarios, which is the usual approach the modernists often adopt. The story of Humboldt’s Gift, which draws from Citrine’s first visit to his mentor Humboldt in 1938, develops with the rise of Citrine and the fall of Humboldt and ends with the moving Humboldt’s graveyard to another place by Citrine in 1970s, and the time span of the novel is almost 30 years, but in fact the novel is written in present continuous tense, and the time span of the novel’s actual story is not more than two months. “It is often alleged that the novels of Saul Bellow have odd patterns and loose associations.”[8] Humboldt’s Gift uses the first person and its plot unfolds as Citrine begins to reminisce. Citrine’s reminiscences fall into two parts: one part refers to the story taking place not so long ago; the other refers to him recalling occurrences long ago. Thus the novel has three major threads: present line, past line and the past from the past. In the novel such intertwined multiple threads and this spatio-temporal jump not only constitutes a dazzling array of events occurring within several decades, but also shows the protagonists’ inner world that is complex and changing, elusive and erratic. As Clayton rightly remarks, “On the one hand is the experience of distraction, on the other hand is Charlie’s experience of an inner light, in the one world the poet is fool, in the other he is at moments in touch with sacred reality.”[9]

4. Integration of Humanitarianism and Mysticism

Humboldt’s Gift is set in Chicago and New York, which is different from Bellow’s previous traditional writing style. Bellow didn’t employ the technique of taking pictures in order to pursue the external verisimilitude of the novel, but through the subjective feelings of the characters he was trying to capture something characteristic and continued in depicting them, so that he could make the external environment and the inner world of the characters an integral whole. “Bellow admits that the rotting inner cities are the rotting heart of America or even the cancer in its brain that produces madness.”[10] Furthermore, Bellow paid special attention to placing what occurred to the characters along a specific period of the year. For example, Humboldt died of a heart attack in a flophouse “on a rotten hot night”[11] and “carbon monoxide was thick. Throbbing air conditioners dripped on you in the street.”(7) Here Bellow makes use of weather to intensify his work’s atmosphere so that the good artistic effect could be achieved.

Saul Bellow is heavily influenced by humanism. He firmly believes that man has a strong desire for the pursuit of good qualities, and also believes that there is always something good in the world. What’s more, he believes that human experiences are nothing less than love. Since embarking on the road of creation, Bellow’s pursuing of human nature has always been strong and persistent, which is the key to understanding Bellow and his works. If we carry out comprehensive analysis of
Bellow’s 30 years of writing novels, we can see the humanistic undertone to his work, which is actually the solid foundation of a secure life for the intellectuals like Bellow and the symbol of civilization. Albeit the modern society stamps on humanism apathetically, and such deplorable conditions make Bellow and his protagonists show a complex set of emotions. On the one hand, Bellow and his protagonists are at a loss when confronted with such conditions, and all that they can do is express their condolences to humanity through imagination which is in effect to find excuses to console themselves with a pathos. On the other hand, by lamenting the disaster caused by the humanitarian crisis, Bellow and his protagonists express growing concern about western civilization. Bellow’s ideas resonate with other intellectuals, and his meditating on the fate of western civilization and the complexity represented by western civilization is focused in the novel *Humboldt’s Gift*. Bellow firmly believes in the man’s ability to offer a spirited resistance to the forces of our time. *Humboldt’s Gift* is in effect affirmatively humanistic. As he reveals in the novel, contemporary people have lived through insecurity and dissatisfaction, tried their best to wrestle with destructive historical pressures, struggled for certain durable human goods—truth, freedom, and wisdom. Saul Bellow writes with conviction that he is acting the culture figure, making clear the implied thoughts of the people, and getting across their common needs and preoccupations. *Humboldt’s Gift* ends on an affirmative note. It is not a happy ending, but it is an ending which calls for hope more than despair. Citrine’s ordeal helps him to bring out his humanity and alleviate his suffering. All in all, Bellow’s basic themes in the novel *Humboldt’s Gift* are essentially three-fold: First, in Bellow’s opinion, modern society is threatening to the richness of human life and contributive to the corruption of human integrity. Modern civilization dehumanizes man. By amassing material possessions, man is not really living, he is digging his own grave. Then, living in such an environment, people are inclined to become distrustful, nervous, powerless, and so they begin to lose their mind. Both Humboldt and Citrine suffer from a kind of psychosis. Both of them once lived a life of luxury but later both fell a victim to mental depression as a result of their sudden loss of fortune. Finally, there is the quest for motif, a quest for truth and values. At the end of the novel Humboldt’s Gift, “the crocuses that announce nature’s annual rebirth become sings of man’s spiritual rebirth.” Indeed, Saul Bellow is a very human writer.

In addition, *Humboldt’s Gift* deals with the existence of a soul after a man died. Bellow believes that man has a soul, that the living and dead can communicate with each other though the soul. Therefore, there is an obvious tendency of mysticism in Bellow’s literary creation, and the characteristic of such mysticism in *Humboldt’s Gift* has become an obvious literary phenomenon. Citrine, the protagonist of the novel, expressed his admiration for German anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1816-1925). According to Bellow’s explanation of anthroposophy, it is “the belief that a gulf existed between the private, inward-dwelling experience of human consciousness and the privacy of science in the modern world. It was Steiner’s ambition to bridge this gulf, to transcend the limits of empirical human knowledge and attain another, higher form of consciousness, a higher spiritual reality.” As Citrine once said to himself, “I was just a beginner, in theosophical kindergarten”(356), and Renata, his lover, warned him, “you don’t spend years trying to dope your way out of the human condition.”(430) But Citrine still insisted that “she was right, of course. In taking up with her I had asked for trouble. Why? Maybe the purpose of such trouble was to turn me deeper into realms of peculiar but necessary though.”(433) Citrine was filled with death anxiety, and always hoped that there was something behind when death befell him, that a man could have a soul. Such descriptions in the novel make the readers and critics feel amazed, that they are not sure about Bellow’s intention which is to satirize or to celebrate.
5. Conclusion

On the one hand, Bellow firmly believes that the development of realism in the nineteenth century is still the important event in modern literature; on the other hand, Bellow was also powerfully influenced by Sartre’s Existentialism and Freudian psychoanalysis, so his works are full of longing for and pursuing the real state of existence, but in the meanwhile, his works suggest an air of pessimism and despair in the face of the insurmountable contradiction between reality and ideals. As a result, in his works Bellow not only remains silent about and takes care of the metaphysical reality, but he also has to choose to stand on the side of existentialism and accept the current situation. We must realize that such complex meanings of cross hierarchy is the result of the influence of realistic and modernist writing methods on Bellow, which in a way reflects the author’s own contradictions, especially in Humboldt's Gift. For example, although Bellow laments the disaster caused by a crisis, yet after Citrine got into trouble and was wild on the metaphysics of mysticism, Citrine did a specious performance; for another related example, Bellow depicts the horror of reality, but on the other hand, he suggests to the readers that there is a life path to reconciling with reality and maintaining personal dignity through his exploration of the relationship between protagonists and reality. Thus it can be seen that in Humboldt’s Gift, “Humboldt’s gift wiped out many immediate problems”(110), and it not only helped Citrine out of a lot of challenges, but it also made Citrine’s inner world and outer world join together. Such attitude of both disgust and acceptance toward reality also showed in Bellow’s other novels, to some extent mirroring Bellow’s relation with reality that has a tendency from alienation to harmony. Bellow’s ideological contradiction not only has personal characteristics, but it also reflects the difficulty of finding a way out in the complex era.

Acknowledgement

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