

## ANALYSIS

### *Humboldt's Gift* (1975)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“The saga of Charlie Citrine begins with him as a bright, bookish, ambitious young man from the Midwest intent on literary success, coming, by way of Chicago, to Greenwich Village. There he becomes the friend and disciple of the visionary poet Von Humboldt Fleisher, obviously modeled on Delmore Schwartz. In time the vexatious Humboldt dies alone, poor and mad, but he continues to affect the life of the middle-aged Charlie, who recapitulates some of the dead poet’s folly while also striving for his wisdom. Worldly success comes to Citrine with the winning of two Pulitzer Prizes, respectively for a play and a biography, and an honorary award from the French government.

But financial problems plague him and bring a variety of serio-comic difficulties in personal relations with his greedy divorced wife and his voluptuous girlfriend. Most troublesome of all is Ronald (Rinaldo) Cantabile, a minor hoodlum to whom Charlie owes money and whose wife, oddly enough, is writing a dissertation on Fleisher, about whom she seeks information as she pursues Citrine through Chicago and even across the Atlantic. From these difficulties Citrine is saved by money from the tremendously popular film whose fantastic script, written many years ago by Humboldt and Charlie, is a comedy of sorts about cannibalism, a recurrent metaphor in Bellow’s novel.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 354-55

“While Bellow can make a superb entertainment in *Humboldt's Gift* of the foiled love affair, the novel’s richness comes finally only from Bellow’s capacity for extended intellectual argument. Bellow is making arguments, not novels. Relations between the sexes are his subject but not his forte. Citrine revives himself more through Humboldt’s posthumous gift of a manuscript than through his fulsome mistress who leaves him for a man who will marry her, managing to leave this lovable victim in the lurch. It is the gifts of the past that mean most to Citrine and that Bellow himself is blessed with. Bellow is easily our finest elegiac and nostalgic writer. If his heroes use suffering coercively, aggressively, Bellow nevertheless celebrates their unhappiness as the mark of their nobility.”

Josephine Hendin

*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*  
(Oxford 1978) 110

“Bellow’s tone is sometimes self-mocking and sometimes grandiose—as it can be in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), the story of a man trying to balance a fast-paced, ambitious life with a ‘listening soul that can hear the essence of things and comes to understand the marvelous.’ In most of his fiction Bellow seems determined to discover moral, creative, even noble possibilities among the unpromising displacements that characterize the urban, secular world he so vividly depicts.”

David Minter

*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1889

“One of the side-show amusements of *Saul Bellow: Letters* is to read him writing intimate things to people whom I have heard him verbally maim in conversation or later crush in his novels. In early letters to a Chicago attorney named Sam Freifield, with whom he grew up, he describes their relationship as that of blood brothers; in *Humboldt's Gift*, he describes this same Freifield as a flasher....

In the novel, Hilton [Kramer] is a character named Magnasco—no first name is given—whom Von Humboldt Fleisher, the Delmore Schwartz character, in his paranoia, believes is having a love affair with

his wife. (This paranoiac episode happened, if you'll pardon the expression, in real life.) When Humboldt/Delmore turns up at Magnasco/Hilton's hotel—called the Earle but in fact the Chelsea—certain in his paranoia that his wife is with Magnasco/Hilton, the latter calls the deskman who in turn calls the police. Later Magnasco/Hilton hires a detective, which eventually results in Humboldt/Schwartz being sent off to the looney bin at Bellevue.

The sin here, in a bohemian culture, is calling the police on a poet, no matter how mad he might be. The Bellow character, Charley Citrine, had earlier advised Magnasco to 'leave town for awhile.' But Magnasco/Hilton had, Citrine reports, 'long prepared for his career,' and was about to get a tryout as a reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, so, rather than put off his plans, he calls the cops. 'When I met Magnasco,' Bellow has his narrator Citrine write, 'he proved to be overweight, round-faced, young in calendar years only, steady, unflappable, born to make progress in cultural New York.' In other words, Hilton is portrayed as another heartless hustler on the make, ready to do anything to stoke his career.

Hilton was, naturally enough, hurt by this portrayal, especially since it was a lie. He had called Bellow when Delmore Schwartz threatened him; in fact, at one point Schwartz told Hilton he was in the lobby of the Chelsea awaiting him and that he had a gun; and it was Bellow, thirteen years older than Hilton, who told him not to be a fool but to call the police straightaway. But there was little Hilton could do about Bellow's fake account—as bad as calling the police on a poet is suing a novelist—which made him look so bad. The only people who would know that the Magnasco character was supposed to be him were a small handful of intellectuals in and around New York. Still, it was a mean act: another instance of Bellow doing someone in, first because of the needs of his wobbly plot, and, second, because, in denying the truth of the matter, he made himself look good. Bellow was always playing with fire in drawing withering portraits of friends, acquaintances, ex-friends, and especially ex-wives."

Joseph Epstein  
"The Long, Unhappy Life of Saul Bellow"  
*The New Criterion* 29.4  
(December 2010) 6, 11

Michael Hollister (2015)