

Introduction

by Martin Amis

This piece is a book review – with a couple of differences. It was read out loud by me in Haifa, Israel, and in the presence of the book’s author. The occasion was a Saul Bellow Conference organised, or spearheaded, by the distinguished Israeli novelist A.B. (‘Bully’) Yehoshua. At this convocation of Bellovians most of the papers were delivered by American academics. Jolted awake on my first morning by a call from the foyer telling me that ‘the Conference miniboose’ was revving in the forecourt, about to begin its journey to the Conference Centre, I then sat breakfastless through two or three lectures called things like ‘The Caged Cash-Register: Tensions between Existentialism and Materialism in Dangling Man.’ During the first session Bellow was overheard to say: ‘If I have to listen to another word of this I think I’m going to die.’ Thereafter he was not often to be found at the Conference Centre. He was in stalwart attendance, however, on the day I gave my paper alongside Amos Oz and Alan Lelchuk.

*The ‘wallet’ referred to in the first sentence was a leatherette lecture-pouch presented to each delegate on arrival with the compliments of Bank Hapoalim. My assignment was the novel *More Die of Heartbreak*, published later the same year (1987).*

I am delighted to be here, for all sorts of reasons: the sun, the sea breezes, this new wallet, the convulsive coughing fits that will punctuate my discourse. And I have further grounds for self-satisfaction. We are all familiar with our Herzogs and Humboldts and Hendersons, we all know our Augies and our Arturs; but nobody here has read the new one. Perhaps you have heard tell of it, you are acquainted

with its lovely title: *More Die of Heartbreak*. But only I have read it. That is to say I have reread it; and I become more and more convinced that you cannot read writers like Saul Bellow; you can only reread them. I have read the new one – and you haven't. Not even Saul Bellow has read it. Oh, he has peered at the typescript, he has agonised over the proofs. He has written it. But he has not *read* it, as I have.

Once the first days of creation are over (once life has been assigned to various hunches and inklings), writing is decision-making. After the big decisions, the medium-sized decisions; then the little decisions, lots of little decisions, two or three hundred a page. When Bellow reads *More Die of Heartbreak* he isn't reading; he is squirming and smarting, feeling the pulls and shoves and aftershocks of a million decisions. For him the book is a million clues to a million skirmishes – scars, craters, bullet-holes. For me, it is a seamless *fait accompli*. And I am here to tell you – I am literally here to tell you – that it is as dense, as funny, as thought-crammed, as richly associational and as cruelly contemporary as anything he has written. He's over seventy. What's the matter with him?

Here are further grounds for extreme complacency on my part: Bellow has been reading Philip Larkin. Now the narrator of *More Die of Heartbreak* grew up in Paris at the feet of heavy thinkers like Boris Souvarine and Alexandre Kojève who talked about geopolitics and Hegel and Man at the End of History and wrote books called things like *Existenz* (note the powerful z on the end, rather than the more modest *ce*). I grew up in Swansea, Wales, and Philip Larkin was a good deal around. He didn't talk about posthistorical man. He talked about the psychodrama of early baldness. Bellow quotes Larkin as follows: "In everyone there sleeps a sense of life according to love." "He also says that people dream "of all they might have done had they been loved. Nothing cures that." And nothing – i.e., death – did cure that. Love was not a possibility for Larkin. Because to him death overarched love and rendered it derisory. He died in 1985; by Bellow's age, incidentally, he had been dead for years. For him, death crowded love out. With Bellow, it seems to be the other way around. More die of heartbreak, says the title. Well, Larkin never had any

heartbreak, not in that sense.* Perhaps one of the many, many things the new novel has to say is that you *need* heartbreak, to keep you human. You need it to keep America off your back. (The book is sometimes like a rumour of war against America.) The right kind of heartbreak, mind you. Anyway, whether you need it or not, you are certainly going to get it.

I have a third and, I think, final reason for impregnable self-satisfaction – though more may yet occur to me. Whereas other speakers at this conference are addressing themselves to themes and structures, to literary correspondences and genealogies, existentialism, authenticity, percussive nouns and whatnot, all I've got to do is tell a story.

It is a love story, but a modern one. 'Modern': what has Bellow *done* to that word? In Bellow, *modern* now comes with its own special static, its own humiliating helplessness, its own unbearable agitation . . . We begin with a conversation between the book's two main actors, Kenneth Trachtenberg, the narrator, an Assistant Professor of Russian Literature, and his colleague and uncle, Benno, Benn Crader, the distinguished botanist, who specialises in the anatomy and morphology of plants (a plant 'clairvoyant', 'mystic', and 'telepathic' as he is variously styled). The two men love two women but they also love each other: it is a 'devouring' friendship; they are central to each other's lives. As the novel opens Benn is in crisis. We see how things are going to be on the first page, when Benn draws Kenneth's attention to a Charles Addams cartoon which has come to obsess him:

* In *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* Andrew Motion says of the title of Larkin's first mature collection, *The Less Deceived*: "The phrase stands on its head Ophelia's remark in *Hamlet* that she is "more deceived" than the Prince.' I think this is wrong. Ophelia doesn't mean that she is more deceived than Hamlet ('I was the more deceived'). She means that she is more deceived than she was formerly – or more deceived than she thought she was. The poem in which the title phrase occurs, 'Deceptions,' makes a comparison ('you were less deceived . . . Than he was'), but the title itself refers to comparison *and* degree ('very much undeceived' as well as 'less deceived than most'). In any case it suggests a turning away from Ophelia's world of love and risk – and rawness, raggedness, insanity, dissolution. Larkin wasn't going to have any of that.

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A pair of lovers was its subject – the usual depraved-desolate couple in a typical setting of tombstones and yews. The man was brutal-looking and the long-haired woman (I think the fans call her Morticia) wore a witch's gown. The two sat on a cemetery bench holding hands. The caption was simple:

'Are you unhappy, darling?'

'Oh yes, yes! Completely.'

Kenneth is the younger by a couple of decades but he is by far the more worldly, with his Parisian, UNESCO, Euroculture background. On the other hand, *everyone* is more worldly than Benn. Kenneth has long hair, a 'Jesusy' look, like 'a figure in a sketch, somewhere between Cruikshank and Rembrandt – skinny, long-faced, sallow and greenish (reflections from a Dutch canal). Modern life, if you take it to heart, wears you out . . .' Benn, for his part, has 'cobalt-blue' eyes and 'a face like the moon before we landed on it.' For Kenneth, Benn has 'the magics' a charismatic soul, purity, innocence; and it is these qualities that Kenneth has come to America to protect, 'to preserve Benn in his invaluable oddity.' He has also come to America because America is 'where the action is', the real modern action; it is where modernity is.

This is Benn's trouble. After fifteen years as a widower-bachelor he has remarried. The second wife is 'more beautiful, more difficult, more of a torment.' What was he after? 'Two human beings bound together in love and kindness' – a universal human aim, as Kenneth concedes: 'In the West, anyway, people are still trying to do it, rounding off the multitude of benefits they enjoy.' Benn's attitude is of course not so brisk. He is, or was, *infatuated*, 'carried away by unreasoning passion' (that is the second dictionary definition of infatuation, the first being 'made foolish'). Kenneth is doubly sceptical. Benn got married on the sly, while Kenneth was away; he hadn't cleared it with Kenneth, and he damn well should have done. Benn 'had the magics, but as a mainstream manager he was nowhere.' Kenneth has always aspired to be Benn's mainstream manager, his modernity intermediary. And he has always felt that Benn had the love potential, 'he actually could fall in love,' he was a strong candidate for love in 'a

classic form.’ To put it at its lowest (which is still pretty high these days), ‘he was a man who really did have something to do – other than trouble others, which seems to be what so many of us are here for, exclusively.’

As the veteran Bellow-reader would by now expect, the full picture takes some time to emerge; it is a case of one step forward two steps back, with each sortie into the present demanding elaborate legitimisation from the past. While omens gather, we first review Benn’s erotic career, and the usual modern spectacle: ‘the best people are always knee-deep in the garbage of “personal life” to the gratification of the vulgar.’ Or again: ‘the private life is almost always a bouquet of sores with a garnish of trivialities or downright trash.’ And here is Benn, ‘dredged in floury relationships by ladies who could fry him like a fish if they had a mind to.’ There was Caroline Bunge, the department-store heiress, the Valium queen, who, when Benn rushes to meet her at the airport, walks straight past him without blinking: ‘Being on mood pills was 100 per cent contemporary. If you aren’t up-to-the-moment you aren’t altogether real. But crazies are always contemporary, as sandpipers always run ahead of the foam line on the beaches.’ There was Della Bedell, another contemporary personage. Having learnt from TV and the magazines that it’s okay for the lady to take the initiative, she comes down from the apartment above and submits Benn to a matter-of-fact seduction. She practically debags him. Thereafter she haunts his front door crying, ‘What am I supposed to do with my sexuality?’ Benn slides into these things out of politeness (and ‘politeness gets funnier the more the rules of order disintegrate’). He gets out of them less decorously: he does a runner, or a flyer, jetting off to Brazil, Japan, Antarctica, anywhere. ‘He flies around, but his thought lag is such – I refer to the gap between his personal interests and the passions of contemporary life – that he might as well be circling the Dead Sea on a donkey.’ Benn is not an old-fashioned figure, he is an eternal figure; he has innocence, and we all know what modernity will do with that. Innocence is a claim to immunity, and there is no immunity any more; modernity makes no exceptions. ‘Towards the end of your life,’ says Benn (and this is a very Bellovian strophe),

you have something like a pain schedule to fill out – a long schedule like a federal document, only it's your pain schedule. Endless categories. First, physical causes – like arthritis, gallstones, menstrual cramps. Next category, injured vanity, betrayal, swindle, injustice. But the hardest items of all have to do with love. The question then is: So why does everybody persist? If love cuts them up so much, and you see the ravages everywhere, why not be sensible and sign off early?

'Because of immortal longings,' says Kenneth. 'Or just hoping for a lucky break.' Meanwhile, a Miss Matilda Layamon, modernity's erotic nemesis, patiently looms.

Kenneth is immersed, or rather stalled, in his own parallel difficulties: unrequited love for a girl called Treckie, the mother of his infant daughter. Early on Kenneth remarks that the nature of his own preoccupations marks him out as 'a genuinely modern individual. (Can you say worse of anybody?)' Compared to Treckie, Kenneth is positively Hanoverian, or Pushkinian. There is a lovely phrase later on in the book, when Benn is being extravagantly lunched by his appalling, his unforgivable, his inadmissible father-in-law; Benn is trying to be cheerful, but he can't 'get the note of TV brightness into his responses.' TV brightness: Treckie has plenty of that. I have a name for girls like Treckie; I call them *Jackanory*-artists, *Blue Peter*-merchants. Radiant with non-specific vivacity, they come on like kiddie-show hostesses ('And right after the break we'll be doing it again with me on top'). 'What kind of a name is Treckie?' asks Dita Schwartz, the other contestant for Kenneth's affections. A good question: what kind of a name is Treckie? Here, I think, we have a bit of subliminal inspiration on Bellow's part. In TV parlance a 'Trekkie' is a devotee of the space-opera TV series *Star Trek*. Trekkies model themselves on the cast of the show, would-be Captain Kirks and Lieutenant Uhuras who boldly go out into the universe, to pester alien life forms with the American Constitution . . .

Treckie is a person with goals, a 'life-plan.' She is 'either very clever or playing by clever rules': the latter, definitely the latter. Treckie believes in growth, in change, in full self-realisation. 'The way to change for the better,' summarises Kenneth,

is to begin by telling everybody about it. You make an announcement. You repeat your intentions until others begin to repeat them to you. When you hear them from others you can say, 'Yes, that's what I think too.' The more often your intention is repeated, the truer it becomes. The key is fluency. It's fluency of formulation that matters most.

This is no kind of fluency, no kind of conversation, no kind of girlfriend for a Bellow hero. How can you discuss life with somebody who lives a 'life-style' according to a 'life-plan'? When Kenneth talks to Benn about Treckie he uses 'skinny Gallic gestures to enlarge the horizon.' The horizon needs all the enlarging it can get.

I have no clue to what Treckie is waiting for. We don't talk about me. These last few days we talked mostly about her. She wanted to tell me about her progress in self-realization, the mistakes she's correcting, her new insights into her former insights and the decisions she's taken as a result.

And yet Kenneth is crazy for Treckie, crazy about Treckie: she has the franchise on his libido, whereas he can't begin to get a line on hers. Diminutive Treckie's sexual life-choice is masochism. She's a masochist and a pushy one, too: '. . . her legs were disfigured by bruises. Her shins were all black and blue. No, blue and green circles like the markings of peacock feathers . . . When she saw me staring at her she shrugged her bare shoulders, she laid her head to one side, and her underlip swelled softly towards me. There being a challenge in this, a "What are you going to do about it?" She seemed to take pride in these injuries.' Treckie likes rough men; Kenneth is a kind man, a delicate man. And that would appear to be that. There is nothing much that Kenneth, or indeed the novel, can do about Treckie. She must, she says, have her 'multiple acculturation,' her 'multiple choices': i.e., she must have her multiple boyfriends. With Treckie, says Kenneth, 'it was just me versus contemporary circumstances, and against those I never had a chance.'

Kenneth's 'private life' is a mess but a static one. With Benn, contemporary circumstances assume more dynamic form. Matilda Layamon has been ominously hovering over the first third of the book

(bad news, but what kind of bad news?); now she descends. She is rich, clever, beautiful, high-gloss, 'glittering, nervous': what does she see in Benn (and *seeing* is a good deal of what this novel is about: you are what you see, not what you eat, 'as that literalist German maniac Feuerbach insisted')? Look at the men Matilda might have had in Benn's stead! 'A national network anchorman, then a fellow who was now on the federal appeals bench, plus a tax genius consulted by Richard Nixon.' Why, her father plays golf with the likes of Bob Hope and President Ford. Yet she alights on Benn, with his awkward figure, the Russian 'bulge of his back like a wing-case,' the infinity-symbol figure-eight spectacles, and his paltry sixty grand a year. This isn't going to be good. And why can't Benn see it? What, in fact, does Benn *see* in her?

When we read, we read with pencils in our hands. When we read something particularly significant or apposite, we draw a vertical line in the margin. The fit reader of the perfect book could thus run his pencil down the length of every last page. And in a way he is still none the wiser – it gets him no further forward. *More Die of Heartbreak* is a bit like that: read it twice, and all you've got is parallel tracks, right the way through. In its allusiveness, its density, its vigour, the novel comes at you like the snowstorm that Kenneth sees: a storm, but with each snowflake doing everything that is acrobatically possible. Yet these allusions, while sending their specific messages, also acquire an emotional aspect. Plants, Eden, a Tree of Life with which botanist Benn cannot commune, a reclining nude, tigers of desire, 'impulses from the fallen world surrounding this green seclusion' – 'twentieth-century instability.' And against this a different setting, the Antarctic, the setting of Benn's rambles and of Admiral Byrd's memoirs entitled *Alone*: out there, on the border of borders, the time quickly comes 'when one has nothing to reveal to the other, when even his unformed thoughts can be anticipated, his pet ideas become a meaningless drool,' when 'people find each other *out*.' Hand in hand, modernity and Matilda have something in mind for Uncle Benn. It won't be anything obvious. It won't be secret drinking, infidelity, slobby habits – none of that old stuff. The takeover will have a contemporary subtlety. And it will require Benn's collusion.

As we said earlier, Benn is a strong candidate for love in 'a classic

form.’ Well, classic form is what Matilda seems at first to embody. Benn speaks of his bride as if she were a ‘beloved’ in a poem by Edgar Allan Poe: ‘thy beauty is to me/Like those Nicean barks of yore . . .’ ‘Even a four-star general,’ Kenneth reasons indulgently, ‘will sing a Bing Crosby “Booboobooboo” refrain in a moment of softening or weakness about love.’ But Benn? ‘Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,’ ‘those Nicean barks of yore’ – whatever *they* might have looked like. Seeing Benn and hearing the terrible poem, Kenneth decides, ‘I would as lief have had Bing Crosby.’ Still, when a *botanist* starts talking about hyacinth hair, maybe he is on to something. As another observer puts it later on, when Benn married Matilda ‘he followed the esthetics of botany on to the human plane.’ This is a risky enterprise, for obvious and numerous reasons. Plants, for instance, don’t mind living in caves, or wasting their sweetness on the desert air. Plants are innocently beautiful: they don’t know that they *have* an esthetic. Plants don’t have plans of their own. Plants don’t bite back.

Matilda is the only child of rich parents. As a goodwill gesture (this is rich-people etiquette), Benn moves into the family’s pent-house duplex:

. . . and there was Uncle in this fantasia of opulence, every morning wandering in the long rooms of Persian rugs and decorator drapes, lighted cabinets of Baccarat and Wedgwood, and schlock paintings from the 18th century of unidentified (and I’d say uncircumcised) personages from Austria or Italy. Were *they* ever out of place! And Uncle perhaps was even more of a misfit than the portrait subjects, acquired by purchase.

Benn’s awkward figure is itself soon draped in an \$800 tweed suit. The plant observatory of his head is similarly encased in a costly haircut. Benn’s transplantation has begun.

Matilda’s mother Jo is deliberately pale and shadowy but Matilda’s father, Dr Layamon, is one of the most memorable characters in all Bellow. He is, in fact, a boiling nightmare of sly candour, frank cunning, corruption, complacency and ‘TV brightness.’ A modern entrepreneur, picking up 1 percent of everything from his patients and pals, not so much a doctor as a health concessionaire, Layamon

is locally known as Motormouth. What Sammler called ‘the mad agility of compound deceit’ is here elevated to ‘conspiratorial inspiration.’ When he sits next to Benn his face is so close that it ‘is hard to tell whose breath was whose.’ Horrible in itself, this TV intimacy has its ulterior aspect.

He was very physical with people. He dropped a hand on your knee, he caught you by the cheek, he worked your shoulder. He played every emotional instrument in the band. You couldn’t, however, depend on the music. Suddenly a wild bray would break up the tune. He complimented Benn on his eminence in botany. Then he’d say, ‘too bad those overlapping front teeth weren’t corrected’; or else: ‘Either you’re wearing a tight shirt or your *pectoralis major* is overdeveloped – big tits, in other words.’ At dinner, when Doctor passed behind Benn’s chair, taking his time about it, Uncle couldn’t doubt that his bald spot was being inspected. And when they were using old-fashioned urinals at the club, Doctor set his chin on the high partition and looked down through crooked goggles to see how Uncle was hung. His comment was: ‘Fire-fighting equipment seems adequate, anyway.’

Matilda is not only Layamon’s daughter: she is one of his prime investments. And what does a modern person do with an investment? He protects it, as best he can. ‘Don’t be annoyed,’ he tells Benn, ‘but we ran a little check on you, purely private and absolutely discreet. You can’t blame us. These are kinky times . . . If there was anything bad we wouldn’t be sitting here together. Also, if there was serious stuff in the fellow’s report, he would have gone to you and tried to sell it to you first. That’s the customary blackmail. One expects it.’

Meanwhile the Matilda omens build. Very ominously indeed, Layamon has said of his daughter: ‘She didn’t have to futz around in Paris with all that postwar sleaze. This girl had brains enough to be chief executive of a blue-chip corporation. With her mentality [mentality!] you could manage NASA . . . She’s always watching from her satellite. She’s never been too absorbed in the French junk to lose track of economics.’ The French junk that failed to keep Matilda’s mind off economics is sufficiently sinister in itself. She was researching cultural activities under the Nazi occupation: Ernst Junger, Céline.

... she won the confidence of the hysterical persons she interviewed, crooks, most of them, whose strange idea was to reconcile the atrocities of the war period with the highest goals of France as a civilization. For instance, to get information for the Resistance you slept with a collaborator, or after a double-dealer was shot you might discover that you truly loved him after all – that way you could have it all: pornography, heartfelt *douleur*, corrupt love, patriotism, and a fine literary style, so that the purity of French culture was preserved.

‘Rotten through and through,’ Kenneth decides. ‘No reasonable person would pursue such a subject.’

Here is another early sign that there is something seriously wrong with Matilda: she sleeps late in the morning. Now, in most auditoria around the world that sentence might cause some puzzlement. Not here, though. Oh yes, we all know that this means something pretty major is up. Remember Henderson and ‘the spirit’s sleep.’ Remember Citrine, ‘out cold’ for most of his manhood and his prime. History is a nightmare from which we are trying to awake. For Charlie, history is a nightmare during which he is trying to get a good night’s sleep. Remember Corde, in deep spiritual trouble in Bucharest – going to bed straight after breakfast! ‘As he did this, he sometimes felt how long he had lived and how many, many times the naked creature had crept into its bedding.’ I trust that my fellow delegates, here in Haifa, are doing the right thing by their shut-eye. No lie-ins or siestas or prudent early nights. Sometimes I imagine the Nobel Laureate checking on the lights-out schedules here at the university, or grilling the early-call telephone operators at the hotels, or even prowling the corridors at night, examining the breakfast dockets on the doorhandles. Sleep: my wife and I, as the fugitive parents of two infant boys, came to Israel with thoughts of little else. But we haven’t had a wink. Saul wouldn’t like it. Perhaps this explains a good deal. If I were the envious or competitive type, given to brooding about the superior energies of certain rivals, I might simply conclude that the enemy never sleeps. All I’ve got to do is give it up entirely: then I’ll write *The Adventures of Augie March*.

Is Matilda the enemy? ‘She hated waking – *hated* it,’ ‘silently

warring against bright day and full consciousness.’ As Kenneth observes, ‘The lesson she taught was that you don’t often have beauty which doesn’t carry some affliction for the observer.’ Her plans for Benn – the uses she will find for him – start to edge into visibility when she takes him to view their prospective home, a place of macabre size and grandeur in an old apartment block called the Roanoke. ‘The chairman of the Physics Department is overhead, and the woman whose father invented artificial sweeteners is underneath us.’ More American eclecticism. What are they to do in this palazzo? Cower in the pantry? Benn is given to understand that a certain amount of entertaining will be done here. Is this what Matilda sees in him? ‘An absentminded professor isn’t so bad,’ says another appraiser of the match, ‘if he has the prestige and isn’t *too* absentminded, so you don’t actually have to check his fly before letting him out of the house.’ Whom will they entertain? People like Pavarotti, Kissinger, people like Bob Hope, the great Schwarzenegger, the woman whose father invented artificial sweeteners? Who cares? Matilda shows Benn the nice view of the sycamores that line the building. It is a marvellous passage:

The thick sycamores he gazed into were pale and brown. The root systems, like hairy mammoths, spread under pavements, around the sewer system and other installations, working underground and drawn towards the core of the earth . . . As he stared at them he thought he heard a moan coming from behind, from the pasture-sized room at his back. What would it be moaning about? (It was not a human sound.) The only responsible interpretation was that it was a projection, pure and simple, inspired by the bare sycamores . . . He himself would have made such a sound if he hadn’t been on his best behaviour . . . This vast place put up in 1910 by dry-goods merchant princes – its rooms, he said, made him think of cisterns of self-love that had dried out . . .

And who will pay for all this? Will Benn, on his salary of \$60,000 (‘just about what it costs to keep two convicts down in Stateville’)? How can he? Yet Benn will pay, in more senses than one. Benn will pay.

Each morning, in the penthouse duplex, while Matilda scowls,

swears at the maid, and drinks her pints of *caffè espresso*, Benn sits in the breakfast nook, obscurely waiting.

. . . all he could do was look out at the city, which fills so many miles. All those abandoned industries awaiting electronic resurrection, the colossal body of the Rustbelt, the stems of the tall chimneys nowadays bearing no blossoms of smoke. One of your privileges if you were very rich was to command a vast view of this devastation.

About now, one realises that the city, 'the great Rustbelt metropolis,' is unnamed. I read *More Die of Heartbreak* in two slightly different versions, in British galleys and in an American bound proof (for when the books of great men go forth into the world they spawn and mutate, geometrically multiplying like a beneficent virus). In the earlier version it was possible to suppose that the city was an unnamed Chicago, nudged a little towards the north-east. In the later version Bellow has headed off this supposition. It is not an unnamed Chicago; it is not an unnamed city; it is a nameless city, and the more resonant for that, like a nameless dread.

From the window, 'dominating those miles of rubble,' Benn sees the Ecliptic Circle Electronic Tower, a high-tech, 'Jap-built' colossus. Bellow's spectral city is structured round that Tower. And so is his novel. Like all Bellow's most powerful symbols (though it is a symbol made concrete – massively concretised), the Tower steals up on you with meaning, looming into significance, casting a lengthening shadow. 'My old life is lying under it,' says Benn (and he is not speaking metaphorically), '– my mother's kitchen, my father's bookshelves, the mulberry trees.' Matilda dislikes reminiscence about the humble past (she thinks it betrays a 'steerage mentality'), but Benn Crader's musings about the Electronic Tower are quietly indulged. For the Tower is built on the site of the Crader Home for Invalids. The usual nervous dinner at the Layamons':

'We used to live on that spot. We moved there from Jefferson Street when I was about twelve . . . It came with a nice yard. There were two big mulberry trees and they attracted lots of grackles in June.' Little notice was

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taken of this natural history. 'Very fine trees, the kind with the white fruit. The purple mulberries have a better flavor.' Expressive looks passed among the Layamons. Uncle was aware of these but interpreted them as signs of boredom. There he was definitely wrong, as we shall see.

Benn and his parents once 'owned' the Electronic Tower, or its foundations. Thereby hangs a tale, i.e., a deal, i.e., a swindle.

It is time now to gather Harold Vilitzer into the story: Vilitzer, *Uncle's* uncle. Here would seem to be a vastly contemporary phenomenon, a man formidably equipped with goals, a life-plan, a dream: 'His main objective was to pile up a huge personal fortune, and the hell with everything else.' Enter into a disagreement with Harold and he will put your head in a vice; either you change your mind or he will change your head. In the early days,

. . . he went on the street, right here in town, taking bets, paying off the police. As a bookie, he was such a success out in the fresh air that when he had a big loss the cops collected 50,000 bucks among themselves to keep him in business. It was worth it to them. Next thing we knew, he was in politics.

Where else? Political office, in this novel, is seen as a knife-edge between farcical elevation and federal indictment. In the Electronic Tower deal, Vilitzer routinely screwed his family out of several million dollars. Benn, always intoxicated by consanguinity (and Jewish consanguinity is a special phenomenon, we remember, an anachronism of which the Jews were about to divest themselves, until the present century intervened), Benn still loves his uncle and bears no grudge about the fraud. Vilitzer, over eighty and not well, has no regrets either, naturally: Benn is only a 'collateral relative' and the money rule, besides, is *mercilessness*. Kenneth understands: 'Death is merciless, and therefore the ground rules of conduct have to include an equal and opposite hardness. From this it follows that kinship is bullshit.' All very modern, and, compared to Benn, Vilitzer looks unpierceably contemporary. Compared to the Layamons, though, Vilitzer is a dinosaur.

Benn had come 'haunting around the edges of the Layamon world, drawn by his longings.' And they received him, for much

simpler – or much clearer – reasons of their own. As these become clear to him (and he will not quite face their clarity, clinging to that semi-spurious absentmindedness, the immunity claim, simultaneous innocence and guilt) something goes wrong with Matilda's beauty. As beauty, as polish, as gloss, it remains the same, but Benn's 'prophetic soul' (My prophetic soul! My uncle!) has been sending him messages from the other side. These are dreadful pages, full of high and harrowing comedy: an onslaught of mutinous impulses, 'associational anarchy,' thought murders, sexual goblins that nip giggling past the bedroom door. Surveying the Electronic Tower one night, Mrs Layamon, with full TV suavity, dubs it 'an important piece of modern beauty.' Benn has to resist the temptation to reply: 'That's what your *daughter* is.' A thing of beauty is a joy for ever, sang the poet. A thing, or a piece, of *modern* beauty is a joy for about ten minutes, if that. It is more like an eternal torment. This is Kenneth:

Why shouldn't a man want a beautiful wife? If he's going to renounce all others, he might as well get a beauty. Only the present happens to be an all-time world climax, a peak of genius for external perfection and high finish . . . Heartless beauty has never been so wonderful. But with men and women, human warmth is poured into the invention. When there's light and heat in the eyes and cheeks of a woman, you can't possibly tell if it's genuine. Does your beauty yearn for love, for a husband, or is she after a front man, a suitable cover for her beauty operations?

These beauty operations Benn cannot penetrate. 'The higher the range of vision, the more your control is weakened': the only clues he gets are images of fear and repulsion. And by now, at night, 'the Electronic Tower floats close till it's right on top of him, every single window lighted and on a dead course for the penthouse.'

Just as reason 'doesn't seem to have the social base it once had,' so 'the natures that could love have become too unstable to do it.' Looking at his uncle's face Kenneth decides that 'a head as round as that was born to roll.' Self-betrayed (the vision failed him), Benn falls in with what Dr Layamon calls 'the overall game-plan' ('You're entitled to live in style, a rich scientist and not just a research rat').

He agrees to confront Vilitzer; and this act involves him in a further sexual ordeal, itself a savage contrivance in this vigorously intricate novel. On the edge of indictment, only a few feet from the slammer, Vilitzer wheels himself up from Florida, from the sunbelt to the Rustbelt, to attend a parole-board hearing – not as defendant but as supervisor. A rape case, a forensic spectacular, lab analysis, spermatozoa experts, a man with a ten-foot pointer identifying two images on a lit screen: a blow-up of the girl's underpants ('all those spatter marks, and ragged circles like spacecraft photographs of the moons of Uranus'), and one of her belly, on which the letters LOV have been scrawled with a broken Budweiser bottle. What makes this such a shrill image of modern sexuality? Not the rape, not the violence and the (thematically resonant) possibility of self-injury, not even the three gory letters, illiterate or merely forgetful. No, it is the display, the slides, the glare, the patient television cameras that comprise the gladiatorial blood-sport of contemporary Eros.

The meeting with Vilitzer, like so many significant meetings in this book, takes place in the middle air, fifty floors up, in a tinted cloudscape presided over by the Electronic Tower.

The scattering light of the morning spectrum all over the glassy conference room surrounded this conversation with a contemporary equivalent of church illumination. The sun itself, without the usual obstruction of nature prevailing at ground level, transmitted directly a message about our human origins. Signals from our earth's star circled us in radiant threads. It was our option to take note of them or not. Nobody is forced to, of course.

And what a conversation ensues, equally eloquent about our human origins and our human destinations. Enraged, 'proud of having dedicated himself to the high service of money,' Vilitzer asks Benn: 'What do you need two million dollars for?' The answer is, of course: to make atonement to the Layamons – to pay for their wasted time. 'You see!' says Vilitzer in triumph. 'He doesn't understand even the first basic principle.' And this is how it goes, just before Vilitzer attempts to strike:

'You won't answer this, Uncle Harold,' said Benn. 'But what did you make on the sale of that property?'

'You think I'm going to go into that with a man like you?'

'Why not with me?'

'Because you don't *know* anything!'

I shall foreclose the narrative here, on this great epiphany: the illiterate half-dead hoodlum rejects, excludes, dismisses the world-famous pure scientist – because he doesn't *know* anything. And Vilitzer is right, he is dead right. Benn's world is entirely other; he has no business here. It is the Layamons, the new villains or the new utensils of villainy, the truly modern, who proclaim that there is no other, who bring everything in and use whatever is there to be used, including innocence, including beauty, including love.

I said that *More Die of Heartbreak* is like a rumour of war against America. Here in three widely separated quotes is how it is going, and how it will continue to go: America, and the war against her.

Doctor Layamon then said to him, . . . 'Glad to see you stand up for yourself.'

Down from the sublime regions, where you had no access to him. Now, owing to self-interest, you could get a grip on Uncle. The Layamons had set themselves to bring Benn in, that is, to bring him back to the one great thing that America has, which is the *American*. You can't have a son-in-law by your American hearth who has another habitat – extraterrestrial or some such goddam thing.

People like ourselves weren't part of the main enterprise. The main enterprise was America itself, and the increase of its powers.

I could feel the perturbation widening and widening as I lay there and became aware that I had come to depend on his spirit. Without its support, the buoyancy went out of me, the city itself became a drag. The USA, too, that terrific posthistorical enterprise carrying our destinies, lost momentum, sagged, softened. There threaded itself through me the dreadful suspicion that the costs of its dynamism were bigger than I had

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reckoned . . . The price was infinitely greater than the easy suppositions of the open society led you to expect . . . There seems to be a huge force that advances, propels, and this propellant increases its power by drawing value away from the personal life and fitting us for its colossal purpose. It demands the abolition of such things as love and art . . . of gifts like Uncle's, which it can tolerate intermittently if they don't get in its way.

In *To Jerusalem and Back* Bellow wrote: 'for the first time in history, the human species as a whole has gone into politics. What is going on will not leave us alone. Neither the facts nor the deformations.' Not only politics. Also economics. Also the military, since we are all in the army now, we are all on the front line. And, counter-vailingly, we have all entered the love race, the 'sexual marathon,' whether we have the talent for it or not. Thus everyone seeks the sexual remedy, or as Kenneth more gently puts it: 'they do the act by which love would be transmitted if there *were* any.' Interviewed on TV about Chernobyl, Benn says that, bad as radiation is, he is sure that more die of heartbreak. 'And isn't that a crazy remark?' Kenneth is asked. 'Maybe not. If people were clear about it, more aware of their feelings, then you'd see a real march on Washington. The capital could never hold all that sorrow.'

I know that *More Die of Heartbreak* is a work of inspiration, another great efflorescence. How? Because it changes the way you see everything. It harrows and it enhances. In the age of science, in the modern age, the arts might become 'the nursery games of humankind, which had to be left behind when the age of science began. The humanities would be called upon to choose a wallpaper for the crypt, as the end drew near.' If I were feeling despondent, rather than exalted, I would tell Mr Bellow that he could pick my wallpaper any time he liked. But I will go the other way, with Kenneth, who demands that we make a turning point, that we make *ourselves* a turning point – I, we, you. 'No use for existing unless your life is a turning point. No use joining the general march . . .' It sounds like a tall order. It is a tall order. But *he's* done it. Thank you. And thank you, Mr Bellow.

More Die of Heartbreak

Last year while he was passing through a crisis in his life my Uncle Benn (B. Crader, the well-known botanist) showed me a cartoon by Charles Addams. It was an ordinary cartoon, good for a smile, but Uncle was hung up on it and wanted to discuss it elaborately. I didn't feel like analyzing a cartoon. He insisted. He mentioned it in so many connections that I became irritated and considered having the damn thing framed for his birthday. Hang it on the wall and be rid of it, I thought. Benn could get on my nerves now and then as only a person holding a special place in your life can. He did hold a special place, definitely. I loved my uncle.

What was curious and deserves to be noted is that he didn't much care for the rest of Addams's work. To leaf through the big collection, *Monster Rally*, in the end depressed him. The sameness of it, black humor for the sake of blackness, was boring. It was only the one cartoon that struck him. A pair of lovers was its subject – the usual depraved-desolate couple in a typical setting of tombstone and yews. The man was brutal-looking and the long-haired woman (I think the fans call her Morticia) wore a witch's gown. The two sat on a cemetery bench holding hands. The caption was simple:

'Are you unhappy, darling?'

'Oh yes, *yes!* Completely.'

'Why should this get me?' said Uncle.

'Yes, I wonder too.'

He apologized. 'You're tired of having it dragged into the conversation five times a day. I'm sorry, Kenneth.'

‘Taking your situation into account, I can sympathize. Other people’s obsessions don’t turn me on. I can weather this one for a while – but if it’s satire or caricature you want, why not Daumier or Goya, one of the masters?’

‘You don’t always have a choice. And I haven’t got your culture. In the Midwest, minds are slower. I can see that Addams isn’t in a class with the greats, but he makes a contemporary statement, and I like his meshugah approach to love. He isn’t manipulating anybody. Unlike Alfred Hitchcock.’ Uncle had taken a strong dislike to Hitchcock. ‘From Hitchcock you get a product. Addams works from his own troubled nature.’

‘For centuries love has made suckers of us, so it isn’t just *his* troubled nature.’

Uncle bent his heavy shoulders in silence. He didn’t accept my remark, and this was his way of refusing delivery. He said, ‘I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to Hitchcock even for two minutes, whereas with Addams I think I could have a significant conversation.’

‘I doubt it. He wouldn’t respond.’

‘In spite of being my junior by decades, you’ve seen more of life than I have,’ said Uncle. ‘I grant you that.’ What he meant was that I had been born and brought up in France. He would introduce me as ‘my Parisian nephew.’ He himself liked to disclaim worldliness altogether. Of course he had seen a great deal, but maybe he hadn’t looked hard enough. Or not with practical intent.

I said, ‘You’d have to admit to Addams that it was only this one cartoon that you admired.’

‘One, yes. But it goes to the fundamentals.’

And then Benn began to tell me, as a person in crisis will, about the fundamentals as he saw them. Disoriented by his troubles (his unhappy attempt at marriage), he wasn’t altogether clear.

‘Every life has its basic, characteristic difficulty,’ he said. ‘One theme developed in thousands of variations. Variations, variations, until you wish you were dead. I don’t think obsession is quite the word you want. I don’t like repetition compulsion either, with all respect for Freud. Even *idée fixe* isn’t right. An *idée fixe* can also be a cover-up or feint for something too disgraceful to disclose. Sometimes I wonder

whether my theme has any connection with plant morphology. But the occupation is probably irrelevant. If I had been a florist or, as my mother hoped, a pharmacist, I'd still hear the same deadly *Bong bong bong!* . . . Towards the end of your life you have something like a pain schedule to fill out – a long schedule like a federal document, only it's your pain schedule. Endless categories. First, physical causes – like arthritis, gallstones, menstrual cramps. Next category, injured vanity, betrayal, swindle, injustice. But the hardest items of all have to do with love. The question then is: So why does everybody persist? If love cuts them up so much, and you see the ravages everywhere, why not be sensible and sign off early?

'Because of immortal longings,' I said. 'Or just hoping for a lucky break.'

Uncle was forever proposing to hold heavyweight conversations, and you had to be careful with him. He would only increase his unhappiness by confused speculations. I had to be vigilant with myself too, for I have a similar weakness for setting things straight and I know how futile it is to work at it continually. But during his last crisis, Uncle's attempts at self-examination had to be tolerated. My job – my plain duty – was to hold his head. Where he had gone wrong was so clear that I was able to spell it out to him. Doing this increased my conceit. In ticking off his palpable errors, I saw how greatly I resembled my father – the gestures, the tones, the amiable superiority, the assurance capable of closing all gaps, of filling all of planetary space, for that matter. To discover whom I sounded like shook me up. My father is an excellent man, in his way, but I was determined to go beyond him. Made of finer clay, as they used to put it; smarter; in a different league. Where he outclassed me he outclassed me – tennis, war record (I had no such thing), in sex, in conversation, in looks. But there were spheres (and by this I mean higher spheres) where he had no standing, and I was way ahead of him. And then, in dealing with my uncle, to hear my father's accents, down to the French words he would use in setting you straight (where English wasn't subtle enough), was a deadly setback to my life plan. I had better have another look at the spheres to make sure that they *were* spheres and not bubbles. Anyway, when Uncle fell, I

fell with him. It was inevitable that I should go down too. I thought I should be continually on hand. And so I was, in unforeseen ways.

Benn specialized in the anatomy and morphology of plants. The standard position of the specialist is that he knows all there is to know in his own line, without further accountability. Like: 'I fix oil gauges, don't bother me with odometers.' Or as the wisecrack used to go, 'I don't shave people, I only lather. You get shaved across the street.' Understandably, some specialties are more exacting and remove you from the world; they carry with them the right to hold aloof. Through Benn I became acquainted with some exact-science types whose eccentricities had the color of prerogatives. Benn never claimed this privilege of human distance. If he had canceled his 'outside connections,' he wouldn't have had so much grief from the ladies.

I can give an instance of this cancellation phenomenon: We are having lunch at the faculty club with a top scientist. The waiter, who is a student waiter, comes up to take our orders. Benn's colleague says to the young man, 'Bring me the chicken à la king.' The boy says, 'You've eaten chicken à la king for three days running, Dad. Why not try the chili con carne?'

After a lifetime of it, the son took this in stride. The other lunchers smiled. I laughed somewhat. It was one of those sudden-glory moments. And as I was laughing I had a vision of myself in profile as a man-sized monkey wrench, the lower jaw opening. I am subject to such involuntary pictures. This unflattering one may have been suggested by the metallic company I was keeping.

His extreme absentmindedness did the scientist friend no harm with his colleagues. It meant that he was far away, doing his duty on the frontiers of his discipline, so goodbye kith and kin. Top scientists are a princely caste. After all, they are the inmost, foremost intelligences of the two superpowers. The Russians have theirs as we have ours. It's really a pretty high privilege.

Well, the absentmindedness is really not such a big deal. Everybody understands that while mastering nature, you have a clear right to leave humdrum humanity, which isn't going anywhere on its own. We are looking at a posthistorical elite, and so forth. But in this

respect as in others, Uncle was different. He didn't ask to be excused from the trials of creaturely existence. He *conspicuously* didn't. In this he might have been considered retarded by fellow specialists. Even I sometimes thought him retarded, humanly more confused than many persons of normal gifts. Nobody ever accused him of being dumb. In his specialty, his brilliance was conceded. Besides which he was observant and he read a lot – looking, as Caesar said of Cassius, 'quite through the deeds of men.' If I were playing Caesar I would speak these lines sarcastically. To Caesar in his greatness the accomplishments on which ordinary people pride themselves are beneath contempt. Caesar was by far the smarter man. But one thing is certain – Uncle didn't look through the deeds of women. Otherwise, if he applied himself, his judgment wasn't too bad.

So when he began to talk about the complexities of existence it was better (for his own sake) not to encourage him. Genius though he might be in the vegetable kingdom, his high-level seriousness could be harrowing. He 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. Yet when he stopped being 'analytical' and the thought-bosh ended, he could surprise you. He had an uncommon gift of direct self-description. On the simplest level he could tell you in detail what he felt – what effects an aspirin had on him, what it did to the back of his neck or the inside of his mouth. I was curious about this, because for the life of them most people can't describe what goes on inside. Alcoholics or druggies are too confused, hypochondriacs are their own terrorists, and most of us are aware only of a metabolic uproar within. Well, matter is being disintegrated within, in the cyclotron of the organism. But if Uncle took a beta-blocker for his blood pressure, he could give a minute account of the physical reactions and the emotional ones as well – his descent into despondency. And if you bided your time discreetly he would eventually tell you his most secret impressions. It's true that I often had to help him locate them, but once he had grasped them he was only too glad to talk.

Physically he was on the large side. The job nature had done with him was easy to make fun of. My father, who didn't have the

gift for humor he thought he had, liked to say that his brother-in-law was built like a Russian church – bulb-domed. Uncle was one of those Russian Jews (by origin) who have the classic Russian face, short-nosed, blue-eyed, with light thinning hair. If his hands had been bigger he might have been a ringer for Sviatoslav Richter, the pianist. The weight of *those* hands, when Richter advances on the piano, drags the arms from the sleeves of his tailcoat so that they hang well below the knees. In Uncle's case it wasn't the hands but the eyes that were conspicuous. Their color was hard to fix; they were blue – marine blue, ultramarine (the pigment is made with powdered lapis lazuli). More striking than the color was his gaze, when he looked at you in earnest. There were times when you felt the power of *looking* turned on you. The eye sockets resembled a figure eight lying on its side and this occasionally had the effect of turning you topsy-turvy and put strange thoughts into your head – like: This is the faculty of seeing; of seeing *itself*; what eyes actually are for. Or: The light pries these organs out of us creatures for purposes of its own. You certainly don't expect a power like the power of light to let you alone. So that when Benn sounded off about the complexities of existence and talked about 'social determinants,' you didn't take him seriously, since what you saw when he was bearing down on you was not the gaze of a man formed by 'social determinants.' However, he didn't often bear down. He preferred to come on innocent – innocent and perplexed, and even dumb-looking. That was better for all concerned. This business of deliberate or elected 'innocence' is damn curious, but I'm not about to go into it here.

It's clear that I watched him closely. I guarded and monitored him, studied his needs; I fended off threats. As a prodigy, he required special care. Odd persons have their odd necessities, and my assignment was to preserve him in his valuable oddity. I had come all the way from Europe to do this, to be near him. We were doubly, multiply, interlinked. Neither of us by now had other real friends, and I couldn't afford to lose him. He didn't act the prodigy, he disliked the high manner and avoided it, being singularly independent. Not even the 'laws' of physics or biology were permitted to inhibit him. The

guy never spoke of 'the scientific worldview.' I never once heard him refer to any such thing. He avoided any show of the 'valuable oddity' I attributed to him, and he didn't care for monitoring or supervision, either. He'd say, 'I'm not a fugitive freak from a sideshow.' A remark like that dated him. Carnival sideshows with their geeks, their bearded ladies and Ubangis with platter lips, disappeared long ago. Sometimes I suspect that they went underground and that they turn up again in private life as 'psychological types.'

According to one of his colleagues, and colleagues are generally the last to say such things, Benn was a botanist of a 'high level of distinction.' I don't suppose that this will cut much ice with most people. Why should they care about the histogenesis of the leaf, or adventitious roots? I wouldn't myself, if it hadn't been for Uncle Scientists? Unless they do cancer research or guide you through the universe on television, like Carl Sagan, what is there to them? The public wants heart transplants, it wants a cure for AIDS, reversals of senility. It doesn't care a hoot for plant structures, and why should it? Sure it can tolerate the people who study them. A powerful society can always afford a few such types. They're relatively inexpensive too. It costs more to keep two convicts in Stateville than one botanist in his chair. But convicts offer much more in the way of excitement – riot and arson in the prisons, garroting a guard, driving a stake through the warden's head.

Being an American academic is quite a thing. You can take my word for this because I'm an academic myself. I don't say that I'm sold on being one, only that I am one – for the time being, marginally – an assistant professor of Russian literature. Exciting to me, but how many are worked up over such studies – compared, say, to Bruce Springsteen or Colonel Qaddafi or the majority leader of the US Senate? I teach at the same university as Uncle Benn. Yes, he did use his influence to get me appointed. But I am not a genuine university type. In the conventional, traditional 'ivory tower' sense, there is no such thing now. Yes, there are learned scholars, but they're not very conspicuous. Part of the university is in the 'consciousness-raising' business. 'Consciousness-raising' implies inertias which it is necessary to dispel. As the old inertias come to an end, people are eligible

for a life of fuller consciousness. For instance, the long inertia of the Negroes ended in the civil rights movement and they were drawn into the consciousness community, where it was imperative to develop an 'idea language.' Without concepts it is impossible to advance or publicize your interests, and the universities have become a major source of the indispensable jargons that flow into public life through such channels as the courts, the pulpit, family counseling, criminology, the television networks, et cetera. This is only part of the picture. Vast powers stream from the universities into government – the Defense Department, the State Department, the Treasury, the Fed, the intelligence services, the White House. Your modern university also is a power base in biotechnology, energy production, electronics. Academics polarize light for copying machines, they get venture capital from Honeywell, General Mills, GT&E, they are corporate entrepreneurs on the grand scale – consultants, big-time pundits, technical witnesses before congressional committees on arms control or foreign policy. Even I, as a Russian expert, occasionally get into the act.

Well, my uncle was remote from all this, one of the learned scholars, almost unaware of the activities of the power players and high rollers, the engineers and the business school types. He represented (*seemed* to represent) the *old* innocence of the days before so many inertias were overcome. Here I need to say no more than that he was devoted to plant studies. To this plant-based fulfillment he wanted to add certain human satisfactions – normal, ordinary satisfactions. So he did. And then items for the pain schedule began to appear. A few simple facts will make it all very plain. After fifteen years as a widower-bachelor he got married again. His second wife was very different; she was more beautiful than the first, more difficult, more of a torment. Naturally *she* never saw herself in such a light, but there you are. She was a beauty. The beauty and the charm were up front. Nobody was invited to go behind them to get a different perspective. Uncle was perfectly willing to see her as she preferred to be seen. All he wanted was to live peacefully. Two human beings bound together in love and kindness, a universal human aim which shouldn't be so hard to accomplish. In the West,

anyway, people are still trying to do it, rounding off the multitude of benefits they enjoy. I can't speak here of the rest of mankind, convulsed with its struggles at a lower stage of development.

Carried away by 'unreasoning passion or attraction' – the second dictionary definition of 'infatuation,' the first being 'made foolish' – Benn spoke of his bride as if she were a 'beloved' in a poem by Edgar Allan Poe: 'Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face.' First hearing this from him, I lost my bearings altogether. My response was dead silence. I had been away, visiting my parents abroad, and he had taken advantage of my absence to marry this lady without prior consultation. He damn well knew that he should have discussed it with me. We had that kind of relationship. I never dreamed that he might be so irresponsible, downright flaky. Breaking the news to me, which was like a slap in the face, he moved immediately to disarm me by declaring his love in highfalutin terms – 'hyacinth hair' and 'classic face'! Christ, what was I supposed to say! I can't bear to have this kind of stuff laid on me, and I was sore as hell. I never hinder people from expressing their emotions. *Let them!* He understood that it was a principle with me to defer to their feelings and make allowances for the awkwardness or vulgarity into which even well-developed people can fall when one of the more powerful sentiments descends on them. Even a four-star general, a man highly respected by his NATO colleagues, will sing a Bing Crosby 'Booboobooboo' refrain in a moment of softening or weakness about love. The best term for this gap between high achievement and personal ineptitude is 'barbarism'! My uncle offered me Poe's Helen: 'thy beauty is to me/Like those Nicaean barks of yore . . .' Trying to appease me. I would as lief have had Bing Crosby. I couldn't have been more depressed and angry. I happened to know the bride. She was Matilda Layamon. I suppose you would have to concede the classic face, and as a student of plants he would naturally go for hyacinth hair. At this point I remembered Wordsworth's coldhearted scientist who would botanize upon his mother's grave and I thought, Is this what happens when these guys stop botanizing on the grave, and their hearts return to *normal!*

It wasn't exactly fair to put Uncle into this category. He *was* a man of feeling. To keep track in this day and age of the original feelings,

the feelings referred to by some Chinese sage as ‘the first heart,’ is no easy matter, as any experienced adult can tell you. If the ‘first heart’ hasn’t been distorted out of recognition, it’s been thrown into the ego furnace to keep your pragmatic necessities warm. But Uncle *was* a man of feeling, especially family feeling, and pious about his parents. On a pretext once, he got me out to the cemetery and he cried a bit at the graveside. He himself had chosen the plant that bordered the two plots: a thumb-shaped dark-green succulent – of no special scientific interest, he said. This was an aside, but it was also a mention. Any plant would draw a comment from him. I even thought that these succulents acted as intermediaries, conveying something or other to him from his dead.

I was forced to wonder whether *I* would ever shed a tear at the graves of my parents, assuming I outlived them. I don’t have a robust constitution, whereas my father is biologically very successful, a man of cast-iron good looks who still attracts women in his late sixties. Kidding himself about this, he remarked a couple of years ago that the sentimental old ballad ‘Will you love me in December as you did in May?’ in his case should go: ‘Will you love me in December as you did in November?’ He hasn’t got much ironic distance on himself, but he does make a funny remark now and again. As for my mother, she looks her age, and more. Physically, she has lost ground. Not at all robust. About ten years her brother’s senior, she doesn’t resemble him at all.

Now I have to tell you up front that I approach my uncle with the thought that what everybody today requires is a fresh mode of experience. This is demanded as a right, virtually in the human rights category. ‘Give me a new mode of experience, or else get lost.’ This is no minor item of individual psychology . . . And please don’t get me wrong. I take very little pleasure in theories and I’m not going to dump ideas on you. I used to be sold on them, but I discovered that they were nothing but trouble if you entertained them indiscriminately. We are looking at matters for which theorizing brings no remedy. Still, you don’t want to miss what’s happening under your very eyes, failing to recognize how disappointing the familiar forms of experience have become.