



More Die of Heartbreak

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For thirty pages or so, Saul Bellow's new novel is exhilarating. Sentences that no one else could have written follow one another in rapid-fire bursts: "What you have to consider is a Jew who moves into the vegetable kingdom, studying leaves, bark, roots, heartwood, sapwood, flowers, for their own sake." They come to the reader via the narrator, thirty-five-year-old Kenneth Trachtenberg, a professor of Russian literature at a midwestern university. While it is abundantly clear that the self-deprecating Kenneth is not to be confused with his creator, he voices many of Bellow's concerns (and is given many good lines). Thus, the novel's opening pages report on America's (and the modern world's) spiritual malaise, updating the diagnosis offered in *HUMBOLDT'S GIFT* and *THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*.

All this, the reader assumes, is a prologue to the unfolding of the action--which, as Kenneth outlines it, centers on his relationship with his widowed uncle, Benn Crader, an eminent botanist and a good man, and Benn's disastrous marriage to a much younger woman, Matilda Layamon, not long after having escaped at the last minute from what would have been an equally unsatisfactory union. As Kenneth's narrative proceeds, however, the reader gradually comes to realize that the "prologue" is of a piece with the rest: This is a story in which virtually all the action takes place offstage or in the past, to be recounted in Kenneth's summary or in his reconstruction of conversations with Benn.

Clearly Bellow was aware of the risks: that his readers, deprived of suspense, would quickly weary of Kenneth's digressive ways; that the novel's diagnosis and obliquely proposed cure would remain at the level of commentary. The result is an exasperating book--one that frustrates as much as it enlightens and delights.

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