

Value Rationality and Instrumental Rationality in *Humboldt's Gift*

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Abstract—Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* delineates Citrine's internal spiritual space and external space. These two spaces reflect instrumental rationality and value rationality. Citrine's external world is dominated by instrumental rationality with people idolizing technology, practicality and the commercialization of people-to-people relationship. In Citrine's internal space, value rationality takes the predominant position, which demonstrates Citrine's pursuit of goodness, art and imagination. Inspired by *Humboldt's Gift* and spirit, Citrine comes to realize that he should stick to his pursuit of goodness, love and art. He realizes that only by integrating instrumental rationality with value rationality can people regain the long-lost spiritual home, get rid of many worries, regain human values and dignity and return to the perfect platonic life.

Keywords—internal spiritual space; external space; instrumental rationality; value rationality; *Humboldt's Gift*

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Humboldt's Gift* published in 1975 is a representative work of Saul Bellow, a Nobel Prize winner in literature. When Kiernan, a critic of Bellow's works, commented this novel, he remarked, "Few students of contemporary American fiction would disagree that *Humboldt's Gift* is Bellow's most important novel." (Kiernan, 1989: 155) In this novel, Bellow follows his consistent theme, which is the conflict between people's pursuit of noble soul and the material-oriented reality. Citrine, the protagonist of the novel, has a clear understanding of his internal world and external world all along. The internal world is his child-like soul which corresponds to value rationality while his external world is an experience world which corresponds to instrumental rationality. Citrine casts a cold eye on both of the two worlds. Bellow juxtaposes Citrine's internal spiritual space with external space and by doing so portrays two pictures, one being people's pursuit of materials and money, the other being artists' pursuit of aspiration, imagination and love. The juxtaposition of those two pictures makes readers feel the erosion and oppression of idealism by materialism in American society. At last, *Humboldt's Gift* urges Citrine to realize his mission and the real desire of his heart, which is the pursuit and defense of art and the effort to return to his childlike soul.

Citrine's internal world and external world reflect the value rationality and instrumental rationality defined by Marx Weber. Weber argues that instrumental rationality means the fulfilling of one's purpose by making use of external circumstances and other people's expectations (Weber, 1997: 56). Those who believe in instrumental rationality pay much attention to the fulfillment of their purposes. They do not consider the value of the behavior. This kind of people always views others as the tool to realize their purposes. Value rationality is the pure faith in a specific behavior's innate values, be it an ethical behavior, aesthetic behavior, religious behavior or other forms of behavior (Weber, 1997: 56). In terms of value rationality, the value of the behavior, rather than the outcome of the behavior, is of great importance. Instrumental rationality is targeted at truth and tells what kind of relationship between humans and the world is actually is. Value rationality is targeted for goodness and it tells what kind of relationship between humans and the world should be (Zhang Yongqing, 2008: 39). In today's world, science and technology are based on instrumental rationality while value rationality highlights humans' pursuit of the meaning and value of human survival.

II. CITRINE'S EXTERNAL WORLD

In Citrine's external world, instrumental rationality takes the predominant position. First of all, people worship technology, usefulness, wealth but ignore art. Artists seem out of place since "Orpheus moved stones and trees. But a poet can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system. Miracle and power no longer belongs to him" (Bellow, 2008: 119). Humboldt who cannot send spaceship into the outer space is doomed for devastation and death like other artists such as Edgar Allan Poe, Hart Crane, Jarrell and John Berryman. When Humboldt is young, he believes that he can change other people's lives with art and imagination, but later he finds that to most people, his poems are useless. The sense of powerless finally devastates Humboldt.

Secondly, people-to-people relationship is also characterized by "instrumentalization". They view other people as the tools to realize their own purposes. The relationship between Citrine and people around him is also featured by instrumentalization. Some people treat Citrine as a tool while Citrine views other people as tools as well.

Citrine's ex-wife claims 200 thousand dollars upon their divorce and considers Citrine as a means to get money. Citrine's lover Renata lives an extravagant life when living with Citrine; when Citrine goes bankrupt, she leaves Citrine and marries Flonzaley, a person of fortune. In addition, Ulick, Citrine's wealthy brother, is also such a person. When Citrine pays a visit with brotherly emotions to Ulick before Ulick's heart surgery, Ulick's response is cold and suspicious. "The brotherly emotions I brought with me mystified and embarrassed him, flattered him and filled him with suspicion. Was I a nice fellow? Was I really innocent? And was I really any good?" (Bellow, 2008: 386) The businessman Ulick treats his own brother only by the measurement of whether he is useful or not. On the ward bed, Ulick suggests Citrine marry his wife once he dies in surgery. He thinks so just because he hopes his wealth can stay in his family. He ignores Citrine's feelings, treating him as a tool to fulfill his purpose.

In addition, those lawyers and partners also try to take advantage of Citrine, treating him as an object. It can be seen that in *Humboldt's Gift*, "others" who have rich implications are singularized. That means "others" are just objects and the tool on one's personal life path which will be cast away once they are used (Che Fengcheng, 2010: 238-239). As to Citrine, he also uses Humboldt to a certain degree. When Humboldt enjoys high reputation, he approaches Humboldt and receives tremendous help from Humboldt. Citrine's play, *Von Trenck*, which is based on Humboldt's personality, becomes an instant success. But when Humboldt fails, Citrine evades him. During the long time when Humboldt is kept in Bellevue, Citrine does not visit him. On New York Street, when successful Citrine sees devastated Humboldt, Citrine hides behind a car instead of going to greet Humboldt. It is obvious that Citrine makes use of Humboldt's fame and personality.

III. CITRINE'S INTERNAL WORLD

Citrine's internal world is dominated by value rationality which is filled with the pursuit of goodness and art, lament over the loss of one's home — world, the expression of the true feelings for his mentor and the contemplation of humans' ultimate fate. Citrine's clear understanding of success exemplifies his adherence to goodness and truth. Although from the worldly perspective, Citrine has achieved success. His play gains fame in Broadway. He also receives many honors. But Citrine is clear-minded about his success. As to his play, Citrine claims that "I had only provided a bolt of material from which the director had cut shaped basted and sewn his own *Von Trenck*" (Bellow, 2008: 51). Citrine knows that the director changed his play for commercial benefits, but he consents. His consent makes him feel guilty and ashamed. He even equals successful people with nuisance and greed. It can be said that in Citrine's heart, he does not consider himself as a success. This idea is in agreement with Bellow's idea. Once, when a person told Bellow that Citrine is a successful writer, the Nobel Prize winner refuted this view by saying that "Charlie is not really successful. Charlie is a man who has excused himself from success by having success," (Pifer, 1996: 129). Both Citrine

and Bellow think that material success is not real success. Real success should be the adherence to idealism and romanticism, and the effort to redeem people's souls with art.

Although Citrine pursues worldly and material success, in his heart, he keeps contemplating humans' survival conditions, criticizing the fact that people pay too much attention to instrumental rationality. Although Humboldt is devastated, Citrine values Humboldt's works in his youngster. He thinks that "one of Humboldt's themes was the perennial human feelings that was an original world, a home — world, which was lost" (Bellow, 2008: 24). As an on-looker, Citrine has a deeper insight into the loss of human good feelings in contemporary world, into the erosion of romanticism by pragmatism and technology. He laments that "they (ideas) are used up. Social ideas, political, philosophical theories, literary ideas (poor Humboldt!) sexual ones, and I suspect, even scientific ones" (Bellow, 2008: 252). Citrine equals Humboldt's youngster with the period when the value rationality and instrumental rationality were combined and inseparable in human early history. In that period, people were the end of production, and the main objective of production was utility value, not wealth (Marx, 1979: 486). Under that social norm, material production and people's development were in conformity with each other. In that stage, instrumental rationality and value rationality were not separated from each other, but were combined into a whole (Song Jianli, 2005: 97). This kind of state is the Platonic state which Humboldt aspired in his poems created in his youngster. Later, the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries opened the door for modern rationality. This rationality promoted the development of science and technology tremendously and improved human productivity in an unprecedented way. The problem is that usefulness became the only measure for everything. Driven by the instrumental rationality, many people only worship usefulness and ignore care and brotherhood. People take calculation and deals for granted and are enslaved by material stuff. Humboldt does not stick to the dream and state he had in his youngster. At last he becomes incompatible with the state, the church and the law.

Citrine's pursuit of goodness, truth and good feelings also is reflected in his deep feelings for Humboldt. Although Citrine behaves badly when Humboldt is devastated, in Citrine's inner heart, he harbors deep feelings for Humboldt. He says, "One infallible sign of love was that I dreamed of Humboldt so often. Every time I saw him I was terribly moved, and cried in my sleep" (Bellow, 2008: 9). To many people, Humboldt fails and falls, but Citrine thinks the reason why Humboldt fails is that Humboldt cannot find the things that a poet can do. Citrine does not talk about Humboldt's fall contemptuously like other people. On the contrary, he admires Humboldt and sees Humboldt as a saint who tries to save humanity. "But good old peculiar Humboldt, I thought (and I was peculiar enough in my own right), now has taken on the challenge of challenges. You needed the confidence of genius to commute between this patch, Nowhere, New Jersey, and the home-world of our glorious origin." (Bellow, 2008: 24) When he receives the news of Humboldt's death, he cries and feels guilty often. He

thinks he behaves badly when he sees Humboldt for the last time. He thinks he should have greeted Humboldt and kissed him on his cheek. At the end of the novel, Citrine receives *Humboldt's Gift* — a film script. This gift not only saves Citrine from bankruptcy, it binds their souls closely. Citrine responds to Humboldt's call. He is determined to practice the series of thoughts on art and imagination expressed in Humboldt's letter. He makes up his mind to become a “supernatural being” which will pursue spiritual and artistic life.

IV. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CITRINE'S INTERNAL WORLD AND EXTERNAL WORLD AND THE SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT

The conflict between the value rationality in Citrine's inner heart and the instrumental rationality in Citrine's external world is mainly reflected in the two following aspects, Humboldt's fall and Citrine's boredom. Finally, called by *Humboldt's Gift*, Citrine comes to realize that integrating value rationality and instrumental rationality is the solution to the conflict.

First of all, Humboldt's tragedy reflects the oppression of value rationality by instrumental rationality in contemporary western advanced industrial society. When Humboldt is young, he is ambitious and energetic, hoping to become the greatest poet in America. At that time, “the ballads were pure, musical, witty, radiant, and humane. I think they were Platonic. By Platonic I refer to an original perfection to which all human beings long to return” (Bellow, 2008: 10). However, the ideal combination of value rationality and instrumental rationality completely disappeared in today's world. In the industrial world which is dominated by instrumental rationality, people use figure, wealth and usefulness to measure everything. Humboldt's goodness in youngster is out of date. “The radiance he dealt in was the old radiance and it was in short supply. What we needed was a new radiance altogether.” (Bellow, 2008: 108)

In the face of another new radiance, Humboldt falls. He yields to the brand new radiance and begins to pursue fame, status and money. But he fails and finally he breaks down mentally and dies in a filthy motel. In a society where values, faith and imagination are ignored and sneered, poets seem to lose jobs. Another reason which leads to Humboldt's fall is that Humboldt goes from one extreme to another extreme. When Humboldt is young, he becomes famous because of his poems and is surrounded by many celebrities. Later, when he feels that his poems do not exert much influence on people, a sense of powerlessness and helplessness strikes him. “It is Humboldt's feeling of social insignificance and powerlessness that results in his doing exactly what society expects and encourages him to do — to become ‘a hero of wretchedness’ and to enact the ‘Agony of the American Artist.’” (Chavkin, 1996: 18) Driven by the sense of uselessness, Humboldt begins to seek the worldly and material stuff madly, and is devastated at last.

The fact that a person who has written Platonic poems is devastated shows fully the loss of the value rationality in the advanced industrial society and the devastation of humanity.

In Citrine's eyes, Humboldt himself also should bear some responsibility for his fall. He thinks Humboldt does not strike a balance between value rationality and instrumental rationality. The young Humboldt is too ambitious and ideal, hoping to become the greatest poet in America and pinning too high expectations on the importance of value rationality. This kind of expectation and illusion make him get away from the reality and go from one extreme to another extreme.

Apart from Humboldt's fall, Citrine's boredom also is the result of the conflict between value rationality and instrumental rationality. Citrine points out that the increase of rationality, the reinforcement of bureaucracy, and people's sense of not fully using their talents is the revelations of boredom. Those aspects can also be viewed as the erosion of value rationality by instrumental rationality. That erosion contributes to alienation. Karl Marx has proposed the theory of “three models” of human development. The second model is characterized by the reliance on materials. Within the model, market or capital plays a predominant role. “Production is the purpose of man while wealth is the purpose of production.” (Marx, 1979: 486) People seek wealth too much and are enslaved by materials, feel estranged and alienated from nature, society, others and themselves. The relationship between people and the outside world is “I — It”, not “I — You” relationship advocated by Buber. People's interactions are meant for actual benefits. Citrine, a so-called successful person, feels distressed and bored rather than happy and content.

V. CONCLUSION

In such an era in which value rationality and instrumental rationality split, Citrine realizes that he should listen to his heart, fulfill Humboldt's wish and do what a true artist is supposed to do. Bellow once said, “we live in a technology era which seems hostile to artists, so artists should struggle for life, for freedom and for justice and peace like other individuals.” (Bellow, 1987: 439). To Citrine, the way for an artist to struggle for life is to affirm and uphold value rationality and to combine value rationality and instrumental rationality soundly. When materialist Ulick asks Citrine to buy a seascape devoid of landmarks, Citrine feels happy for him because Ulick's demand shows he begins to learn to appreciate art and imagination. Citrine also feels that “the period of pleasant hard-working exuberance and of practical arts and technics strictly in the service of material life was also ending” (Bellow, 2008: 428). This world needs not only technology and materials, but more importantly, ideals, imagination and true feelings. Only when value rationality and instrumental rationality are well combined, can human beings return to the lost home-world and “an original perfection to which all human beings long to return” (Bellow, 2008:10).

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