

Immortality in *Ravelstein*

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This essay takes up the issue of “return” in Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein*, a theme related to the alternatives of faith and philosophy or Jerusalem and Athens. Although the “return” is usually associated with faith, Bellow portrays Abe Ravelstein as initiating a return to the great texts of philosophy. Thus, the great question at the end of the novel which Bellow asks us is, Which provides a path towards immortality: faith or philosophy, Jerusalem or Athens?

In the novel, Chick, who is the narrator, provides an absurd picture of Ravelstein as a Moses-like lawgiver creating a religion for his students and friends based on the Platonic dialogues. On Ravelstein’s account, modernity has perverted the human soul, making it neither faithful nor philosophic. And yet this same critique undercuts the idea that the question of philosophy or faith is a permanent question, as on his account moderns evade these alternatives. Ravelstein’s return to the ancients is thus paradoxical: it accepts the impermanence of the question of philosophy or faith, such that a call to return to these alternatives cannot be understood as philosophic. While *Ravelstein* is certainly about the relationship between faith and reason, it is also about whether we should understand human choices *either* as modern versus ancient *or* as philosophy versus faith. It is Chick’s less critical stance towards modern life that preserves Athens and Jerusalem as fundamentally human alternatives. Chick’s, and ultimately Bellow’s, manner of “seeing” and writing is aimed at showing the persistence and continuance of the old in the new, of the ancient in the modern, and thus of the persistence of the alternatives between faith and philosophy.

The first word of *Ravelstein* is “odd.” When dealing with a character as unconventional as Abe Ravelstein, it seems appropriate to address what is odd. Ravelstein himself is oddest in his near obsession with the oddities of his companions. His insatiable passion for gossip and stories about the scandalous deeds, the “minor crimes”¹ and “venial sin[s]” of his associates fills the novel. Much of the conversation between Chick and Ravelstein is devoted to the discovery and discussion of Chick’s “paradoxical oddities” (109), “absurdities,” and his “unaccountable” tastes, whether these are his strange marriages (to both Rosamund and Vela), his proprietary interest in his solitary vacation home, or his “weaknesses, [his] corrupt shameful secrets” and “thought-murders” (95).

Ravelstein’s preoccupation with irregular behavior, Chick tells us, is associated with his belief that such behavior is a manifestation of human longing (23). Longing for wholeness as Ravelstein sees it is incompatible with politics and the conventions of the community. To devote oneself to longing, one cannot be limited by the community and its opinions: one needs to forget about them or perhaps even rebel against and destroy them. As Ravelstein understands it, “the great passions are antinomian” (52).

Self-understanding for Ravelstein is therefore an understanding of one's ugly and mutilated nature desiring its original wholeness. In Ravelstein's mind "self-knowledge called for severity," and for this reason the friendship of Chick and Ravelstein consists in a back and forth mocking of each other and the noting of each other's faults. Chick even compares Ravelstein to a doctor needing to strip his patients naked to make his diagnosis (115). The truth of human nature cannot be understood through its surface, through the conventions and appearances. His understanding of the esoteric significance of the great texts, which in Ravelstein's mind consist of surface political or conventional teachings and deeper serious, but "dangerous," teachings, underscores Ravelstein's approach.

But Ravelstein is no simple debunker: his incessant curiosity for the personal and private secrets of others is only half of what makes him so odd a character. Although Ravelstein loves secrets, Chick also notes that "[Ravelstein] didn't care a damn about secrets," and his teaching consists in an almost opposite move in his continual doing away with the private and particular and seemingly resolving and explaining (rationalizing) the "paradoxical oddities" of his associates. As much as Ravelstein loves discovering secret perversities or eccentricities, he loves revealing these secrets even more. His discovery of the esoteric teachings of the "Great Texts" is accompanied by the publication, the "popularization," of these secrets in his education of the youths and even more so in his very public book. Even as Ravelstein presents longing as a private and anti-political phenomenon, the privacy needed for longing to flourish is also something Ravelstein disdains. According to Chick, Ravelstein thought "idiosyncrasies were in the public domain, to be enjoyed like the air and other free commodities" (65). Ravelstein turns what is inward outward; the private is publicized by Ravelstein.

Ravelstein's distaste for the private, for inwardness, is manifested not only in this failure to keep secrets and to respect confidences, but also in his continual attempts to turn people away from romantic solitude in nature. Indeed, he commissions Chick to write his memoir because "he thought [Chick] was stuck in privacy and should be restored to community" (9) and should "go more public" (4). We find, furthermore, that he admires the spirited men and women who love their cities and willingly sacrifice their lives for them. To the spirited, he contrasts the bourgeois personalities like his neighbors, who are wholly devoted to themselves and their privacy and who complain that Ravelstein invades their privacy by blasting Rossini through the apartment walls. He respects the willingness to understand oneself as part of a whole, and Ravelstein objects both to bourgeois and romantic life for its lack of public-spiritedness.²

Ravelstein's relations to those he cares about, with whom he practices his teaching, reflect a specific understanding of the human condition, one derived from the Aristophanic teaching on *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue central to the novel's plot and meaning. Although longing for the other half of oneself is the highest human desire in Ravelstein's mind, he sets out to divert his friends and students from this longing. In Aristophanes' *Symposium* account, the longing for wholeness drives the mutilated half-beings to cling to each other with the hope of growing back together and becoming complete again, and they end up starving to death as a result of this longing. To prevent their extinction and preserve his honors and sacrifices, Zeus gives them sex,

which allows for “temporary self-forgetting” (24) of the painful knowledge of one’s permanent incompleteness and allows them to attend to the rest of life and to politics. Erotic longing undermines life and is destructive of the necessary.

The cynicism of Ravelstein and Aristophanes is made clear not only by the fact that longing is wholly painful but also that this desire is totally insatiable, as the wholeness of the original is “lost forever.” Even as Aristophanes points to the possibility of being sewn together by Hephaestus into a happy unity, it is also clear that this is not the state of original freedom and wholeness. It provides more permanence to the sexual embrace, but it is no more the original whole than is the self-forgetting of the sexual embrace. Ravelstein’s own attempts at marriage-making, at “the binding of souls,” are revealed as such to be artificial creations for the sake of life. Ravelstein was “continually on watch for [longing], and with such a preoccupation he was only a step away from arranging matches [...] A good palliative for the not-always-conscious pain of longing had a significant importance of its own. We have to keep life going, one way or another. Marriages must be made” (82–83).

The opposite movements in his art of teaching – his continual turning of others to their failings and limits and then to models of perfection – highlight the ultimate tension of human life that Ravelstein makes the “foundational assumptions of his teacher’s vocation”: the choice between Athens and Jerusalem, between reason and faith. Ravelstein thus becomes a somewhat divine figure in the eyes of his students. They copy him and become his “clones,” quite funnily, in all his quirks and oddities, in the way he dresses, the way he spends his money, his chain-smoking. In an ironic twist, his students copy his luxurious style, just as some of Socrates’ fanatical followers copied his ascetic habits, his shoeless-ness and penury; and just as there is a nearly religious atmosphere around Socrates, there is a religious atmosphere surrounding Ravelstein as well.

The theme of return is associated more with faith than with philosophy, but Ravelstein’s concern with the great texts, and with Plato in particular, concerns the issue of return. As Chick says of the *Symposium*, “I was sent back to it. Not literally sent. But if you were continually in [Ravelstein’s] company you had to go back to the *Symposium* repeatedly” (24). Ravelstein returns those around him back to the origins, to the perfect wholes that the great texts provide, just as Aristophanes points back to the perfection of the self-sufficient wholeness of our “ancient nature.” Even as he alienates them from their own times and places, he gives them new, or rather old, horizons within which to live. His students were “more familiar with Nicias and Alcibiades than with the milk train or the ten-cent store” (25). Even Chick himself, who attempts to resist Ravelstein’s authority and refuses to become Ravelstein’s pupil, claims that, because of his friendship with Ravelstein, he was “as much at home with Plato as with Elmore Leonard” (117). Philosophy as the subversion of the conventional to reveal the ugly nature of the self and its alienation is accompanied by putting back together, however artificially, what he has taken apart.

Ravelstein’s turn to Jerusalem at the end of his life, therefore, is not presented as a turn to the faith. According to Chick, he was thinking through the problems of Judaism, not for himself, but

“for the people under his care, for his pupils” (180). Chick even characterizes Ravelstein’s command to Chick to take Rosamund to synagogue in this manner: “Not every problem could be solved. And what could Ravelstein do? But anyway he wouldn’t be here to do it. In that case what was the most significant suggestion he could make to his friends? He began to talk to me about the high holidays and directed me to take Rosamund to the synagogue” (179). Traditional religion is a second-best substitute for Ravelstein himself and his “divine” powers to know and explain others, to teach, and to provide diversions from their longings.

Chick of course reveals the limits of Ravelstein’s attempts to make things whole and complete. Ravelstein’s accounts miss integral parts and phenomena in order to explain and account for the whole, and his “popular book” (4) is the clearest and funniest example of this. On the deepest level, the “absurdity” of Ravelstein’s luxurious celebration in Paris at the opening of the novel is the popular approval of his “most serious ideas” contained in his book. Although Chick claims that Ravelstein “explained modernity in all its complexity,” the phenomenon of his own “popular book” does not fit into his explanation at all; it seems to undermine it. We find later that “‘Souls Without Longing’ had been the working title of his famous book” (83). That millions buy his book and make him a millionaire demonstrates that this judgment about modern life is far too sweeping; the *demos*, which Ravelstein denigrates for their lack of longing, must be longing for something if they buy his book and make him the popular, democratic hero he becomes. His account of the whole of modern life fails to explain the phenomenon of his own celebrity.

As important as Ravelstein is to the novel, and in spite of the title, he is not quite the novel’s protagonist. He is neither the narrator nor is the central conflict with himself. Ultimately, it is the difficulty Chick encounters in writing about Ravelstein that is the problem, and Ravelstein’s way of life is not the only one presented by Bellow. On one level Chick and Ravelstein are opposite: Ravelstein is a man consumed by ideas, thoughts, and opinions, while Chick is concerned with the appearances and the particulars – the “phenomena.” Ravelstein “lived by his ideas,” and Chick attempts to avoid ideas altogether in order to preserve the unmediated relation of human beings to the visible world. Ravelstein digs underneath the visible surface to debunk the surface, while Chick holds, in contrast, that “in the surface of things you saw the heart of things” (156). The visible world of experience has an importance and truthfulness for Chick that Ravelstein does not fully accept.

Chick, however, does not present his art and his approach to life in general as that of an especially serious person, and the unserious nature of Chick’s art gets to the heart of why he claims to be presenting Ravelstein without his ideas. Chick’s repeated claims not to understand Ravelstein’s ideas and the texts that he takes so seriously is derived, not from a lack of intelligence, but from his attempts to remain child-like and playful. Bringing up Davarr, Ravelstein’s teacher, whose followers claim is a philosopher in the classical sense, he states, “Philosophy is hard work. My interests lie in a different direction” (101). It is in fact Chick’s unwillingness to throw off his “childish impressions” and “take up trades and tasks,” i.e., to be

serious and work, that Ravelstein attempts to cure Chick of by trying to make him a student and by making Chick his biographer. On the surface, Chick's self-presentation is more play than work, more that of a child than a man. In concentrating only on Ravelstein's often-times ridiculous surface and ignoring his "most serious ideas," Chick points to the levity and childishness in his approach to Ravelstein and to his playfulness.

Chick is nevertheless unable to avoid the great texts and Ravelstein's interpretations of them, but even in these accounts he *seems* to reveal just how unserious a student of Plato and Ravelstein he is – that he "didn't study [the] great texts closely" (117). His accounts of the texts are filled with errors, especially with the Platonic dialogues. He misquotes, misremembers, and misrepresents so much about the speeches, teachings, and deeds of Plato and his characters that it begins to approach absurdity.³ He almost rewrites Plato's dialogues in the process.

Chick's self-presentation, however, indicates an awareness of his errors and that his art consists in making errors, in reordering the facts, in changing and transforming the original accounts. With his first practice sketch with Keynes that he discusses with Ravelstein, for example, he critiques himself on the grounds that "too much emphasis on the literal facts narrowed the wider interest of the enterprise" (6). Later in the novel, his looseness with the facts is made explicit when he shows himself transforming a text by rewriting of Frost's poem, "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening," a rewriting he calls a "joke" on himself (114). Chick is aware of his "mistakes." His relationship with Plato and with Ravelstein's ideas may go deeper than simple forgetting, lack of understanding, or laziness.

The centrality of Plato's *Symposium* in the novel is clear: not only does Ravelstein's teaching on love come directly from Aristophanes' speech on *eros*, but *Ravelstein* begins, in a way, where the *Symposium* ends. The *Symposium* is set at a drinking-party put on by the tragedian Agathon, who is celebrating his popular success in winning his first tragedy contest. The dialogue ends with a conversation between Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon on the relation between tragedy and comedy. *Ravelstein* begins with a discussion of jokes and the first scene in the novel is in Paris, the morning-after after the "symposium – dining, drinking, conversation Athenian-style" (40) that Ravelstein himself puts on to celebrate the popular success of his book. *Ravelstein* replays the *Symposium*, but it also continues where the dialogue ends.

Chick provides several sketches of Aristophanes' speech for his readers. In his first sketch, Chick tells us that its speaker "was not Aristophanes at all, but Plato in a speech attributed to Aristophanes." On the next page, however, Chick tells us that Aristophanes' speech was "attributed by Socrates to Aristophanes" (25). This is not true to Plato's text, however, as Socrates is not the narrator of the dialogue, nor is he in the complicated line of narration that Plato makes for the dialogue. The only speech Socrates attributes to another person in this dialogue is his own, which he says he learned from the prophetess Diotima. Insofar as this is a recounting of the Plato's *Symposium*, Chick makes Plato say things he does not say by making Socrates say things he does not say – that the speech was Aristophanes'. Chick's question of the authorship and attribution of Aristophanes' speech makes evident a resemblance between Chick and Plato. Plato provides new speeches for old characters, and Chick provides new speeches for

Plato, an old author – an author who becomes a character in Chick’s writing. Chick makes the historical author a character in his poetry.

The *Symposium* is not the only Platonic dialogue that makes an appearance in the novel. Like the replaying of the *Symposium* in the first part of the novel, there is a replaying of the *Phaedrus* in the second part with Chick’s recounting of Ravelstein’s trip to visit him in the country. Just as Phaedrus does of Socrates in that dialogue, Chick notes the oddity of Ravelstein’s departure from the city and his strange presence in the country. It is here, moreover, that Chick tells us, “[Ravelstein] was repeating the opinion of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, that a tree, so beautiful to look at, never spoke a word and that conversation was only possible in the city, between men” (100). But just as he mischaracterizes the speeches of the *Symposium*, Chick mischaracterizes Socrates’ opinion from the *Phaedrus*. Socrates’ critique of the country is: “I am a lover of learning. Now then, the country places and the trees aren’t willing to teach me anything, but human beings in town are.”⁴ Socrates does not mention anything about speeches, as important as they are to Socratic philosophizing. He thus leaves open the possibility that he learns from the deeds of human beings as well as speeches and their relation to one another, but Ravelstein’s restatement drops the visible world and the deeds completely. He collapses all of what is human into speeches.

What Chick presents as Socrates’ criticism of the concern with the natural world sounds oddly similar to Socrates’ criticism of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus*. Socrates’ criticism of writing is that it, like the tree in Ravelstein’s “repetition” of Socrates’ opinion, cannot engage in conversation. Socrates says:

Indeed writing, Phaedrus, doubtless has this feature that is terribly clever, and truly resembles painting. For the offspring of that art stand there as living beings, but if you ask them about something, they altogether keep a *solemn silence*. [...] For you would think that they speak with some understanding, but if you ask something about the things said, wishing to learn, it indicates the same one thing only, and always the same. And when it’s been once written, every speech rolls around everywhere, alike by those who understand as in the same way by those for whom it is in no way fitting, and it does not know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not. And when it suffers offense and is reviled without justice it always needs its father’s assistance. For it cannot defend or assist itself.⁵

Writings repeat themselves to everyone, and this static form suggests that the writer who takes his writings seriously does not understand that individual souls need different speeches appropriate to them. It also suggests that the writer does not know his arguments and ideas will have to be corrected or defended in different ways for different people in order to continue their existence. A writer fools himself into believing he is self-sufficient and forgets the limits of his knowledge.⁶

For Chick to put in the mouth of Ravelstein a critique of privacy that is in fact also a critique of writing points to the problem with Ravelstein's approach to teaching. His returning others to the old forms, the conventions, the books, suggests that the old can simply be repeated. In so doing, he not only fails to recognize his own limitations, he also does not recognize that the old books and writers had limits and may have left their accounts incomplete and in need of being continued, just as Plato leaves the final conversation in the *Symposium* unfinished. Plato might be leaving things for the young who will come after him, like Chick, who begins *Ravelstein* where Plato leaves off.

Although Ravelstein loves conversation and despises romantic "returns to nature" because they limit conversations, his own teaching does the same. His "conversational" teaching resembles writing as Socrates presented it. His doing away with "due process" in making his "hard-edged judgments" makes the mistakes of writing as Socrates critiqued it. He fits individuals into speeches rather than speeches to individuals. Chick has Ravelstein ironically "repeating" the argument in favor of conversation that criticizes repetition further underscores this problem with Ravelstein's conversations. It is Chick's irony to make Ravelstein's repetition no repetition at all, and Chick's playfulness prevents Ravelstein from simply repeating Socrates.

Chick's allusions to Socrates' views on love and writing both concern the issue of death and immortality, the issue that divides Ravelstein and Chick. Bellow shows Chick's art, and his own art by consequence, doing for writings, the products of the great writers and Plato in particular, what Socrates says writings cannot do for themselves – generate new versions of them to complement and continue the old versions. What Chick provides for the old texts imitates the deeds of Rosamund, who provides him, an old man, with a different kind of rebirth and redemption. Chick tells us at the beginning of the third part of the novel that "with Rosamund's help, [he] kept [his] promise to Ravelstein" (160). The fact that Chick is still writing about this after the completion of the memoir and that he needed Rosamund's help is significant given the problem he tells us he had with beginning the memoir. It is death, his own death, that Chick tells Rosamund is the obstacle preventing him from beginning. He says, "If I were to write this memoir there would be no barrier between death and me" (163). As Chick understood it, Ravelstein thought of himself as "the subject of subjects" and suggested that "[Chick] may have nothing left to do in this life than to commemorate him" (164). The obstacle to beginning is that it would destroy the obstacle to his own end, and Chick expands this notion to call the promise to Ravelstein his "protection" from the grave, and that, when in the midst of dying, he thought he would survive because it was unfulfilled.

At the end of the novel Chick says:

I am a great believer in the power of unfinished work to keep you alive. But your survival can't be explained by this simple one-to-one abstract equivalence. Rosamund kept me from dying. I can't represent this without taking it on frontally and I can't take it on frontally while my interests remain centered on Ravelstein. Rosamund studied love

– Rousseauan romantic love and the Platonic Eros as well, with Ravelstein – but she knew far more about it than either her teacher or her husband. (231)

Rosamund must remain on the margins, which means Chick's work is unfinished. He cannot give a complete account of her and cannot, given that she knows more about love than he, fully account for the love that Chick credits with saving his life and saving the memoir. There is something outside of the "one-to-one" relation of artist and his work. While this limits the artist and makes it necessary to rely on others, it also provides for his continuance because his work can never be finished. The fact that Rosamund keeps him from dying and makes it possible for him to begin also keeps him from dying by making it impossible for him to completely end. Rosamund's love and devotion to him connects him to eternity, but in such a way as to make him aware of his own ignorance of this love. In order to begin, he has to understand that he is leaving something undone to be continued by someone else. His writing responds to the limits of Plato by providing him with new forms and new manifestations through a playfulness that uses Plato to reflect on Ravelstein and responds to his own limits by leaving his work undone.

What *Ravelstein* is ultimately about is the question of immortality, of how to see the permanence of things amidst the constant change of human life, of how the human is related to the divine. Chick thus explicitly compares Ravelstein to Socrates only once in the novel, where he contrasts the conversations of their last days. Socrates engaged in "solemn" discussions on immortality, while Ravelstein tells dirty jokes with his friends (151).⁷ Thus, for Ravelstein, the question of immortality and which path to adopt, faith or philosophy, is neither an immortal nor serious one for a philosopher. But for Chick and Bellow, the question is a viable one, as demonstrated in their account in the novel of showing the persistence and continuance of the old in the new, of the ancient in the modern, and the alternatives between faith and philosophy.

Notes

1. Bellow 2000, 23. All subsequent in-text citations will be from this reference.
2. On the issue of spiritedness and *eros* in the novel, see Nichols 2003, 17. I would only add to Nichols's observations that in Ravelstein's thought, there is a conflation of love and spiritedness, whether it is his attributing Chick's "risky marriages" (116–117) to his spiritedness rather than his eroticism or Ravelstein's view that "spirited men and women [...] are devoted to the pursuit of love" (25).
3. Chick's misremembering is not limited to Plato, as he also confuses his account of the tragic hero in Aristotle's *Poetics* with the physical bigness that Aristotle attributes to the magnanimous man of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For this point, see also Davis 2003.
4. Plato 1998, 230d.
5. *Ibid.*, 275d–e.

6. For a more thorough analysis of Socrates' argument against writing in the *Phaedrus*, see Nichols 2009.
7. Allan Bloom's characterization of Socrates' last day is quite different from Chick's. Bloom writes of the relation between Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and the death of Socrates: "Socrates' death and Aristophanes' possible contribution to it trouble many who care little for Socrates but think serious matters are not laughing matters. But Socrates was probably not of their persuasion. He laughed and joked on the day of his death. He and Aristophanes share a certain levity" (1987, 268).

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