MAN IN THE CITY: A STUDY OF SAUL BELLOW'S URBAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation aims to study the role of the city, the city-country dialogue, and the man-city dialogue in Saul Bellow's eight urban novels. Bellow's urban hero has to come to grips with the city in order to assert his selfhood and to create order out of chaos. The city is more than the arena for the Bellovian human drama: it mirrors the hero's inner life, sets the mood and tone for the novel, becomes a metaphor for modern society, and is a character in its own right.

The Bellow hero refuses to be defined by his environment. His ambivalence toward the city is due to its simultaneous desolation and vitality. Oppressed by the city, the Bellow hero occasionally entertains idyllic dreams. However, country life never provides a viable alternative to the urban-oriented Bellow hero, who remains in the city or returns to the city after brief excursions away. Despite a tendency to withdraw out of fear of losing his individuality, he realizes the dangers of excessive subjectivity and is always drawn back to human conditions. Through human interactions, he comes to accept the city as reality and embraces brotherhood.

Through a chronological study of Bellow's novels, the evolution of Bellow's heroes and cities can be observed. My conclusion is that the city is one of Bellow's best creations. Greatly concerned about the plight of modern man's inner and outer cities, Bellow believes that only poetry and the imagination can rescue the city from decay. Bellow

expresses his faith in that possibility by locating flowers at unlikely places in the dreary cityscape.

TO MY PARENTS, MY WIFE, AND MY DAUGHTERS

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INTRODUCTION

> Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass.[1]

I

The most relevant, the most gifted, and the most sustainedly creative of contemporary American novelists, Saul Bellow (1915-) has to date published nine novels, two collections of short fictions, a non-fiction book, some plays, and many uncollected short stories and essays which form a consistent, carefully nurtured *oeuvre*, brimming with beauty, dignity, profundity, and humanity. Having won almost all the literary honors and prizes an American writer can aspire to, he was awarded the most coveted, the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1976, for "the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work."

Varied as they are in the narrative techniques employed, in the human experience explored, and in the central characters portrayed, all Bellow's novels, from *Dangling Man* (1944) to *The Dean's December* (1982), have one feature in common: each centers upon a character who, caught up in the chaos of modern civilization, is in quest of order, love, equilibrium, and the meaning of human existence. These central characters share so many common preoccupations that they have become a recognizable character type, the Bellow hero.

All Bellow's heroes, Henderson excepted, live in the modern urban environment and they are all concerned with the following questions: What does it mean to be a man, a good man, in the modern city, which is characterized by chaos, clutter, craziness, commercialism, and cultural nihilism? How can one keep intact one's individuality in an anomic, massive, dehumanized, contemporary society? By what means can one remain one's Sovereign Self in the technological, totalitarian, topsy-turvy modern world?[2]

Indeed, the Bellow hero, as Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* does, laments, "Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more. There are mostly people who feel that they occupy the place that belongs to another by rights. There are displaced persons everywhere" (32). Feeling displaced in the modern world, the Bellow hero, like Moses Herzog in *Herzog*, asks:

> Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multipled power of numbness which made the self negligible. . . . (247-48)

Acutely conscious though he is of the integrity of his self in the massive, dehumanized modern world, the Bellow hero realizes, however, that he is "a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest" (*H* 248). Mysteriously, he feels that he is "always, and so powerfully, so persuasively, drawn back to human conditions" (*MSP* 118). That is to say, even though his selfhood is endangered by the city *en masse*, the Bellow hero is at the same time greatly concerned with moral responsibility and the brotherhood of humankind, because he believes that only

in society, despite its faults, can he become truly human, and he takes society for granted as the ground of his humanity. Joseph in *Dangling Man* recognizes that escape into one's self yields neither peace nor definition: "I had not done well alone. I doubted whether anyone could. To be pushed into oneself entirely put the very facts of existence in doubt" (*DM* 190); he discovers that "any goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love" (*DM* 61). To him, as to other Bellow heroes, "the highest 'ideal construction' is the one that unlocks the imprisoning self" (*DM* 102).

Thus, the self and society are engaged in an on-going dialogue, the Bellow protagonist oscillating between individuality and community or, in Marcus Klein's terms, "between alienation and accommodation" (34).[3] Whereas he zealously guards his own individuality lest it be engulfed by the mass, the Bellow hero also dismisses the vogue of alienation and isolation, which, to his mind, are almost tantamount to selfishness and irresponsibility. On the one hand, the Bellow hero fears the oppression of modern society (as symbolized by the modern city); on the other, he embraces humanity as a whole because they are "his brothers and his sisters" (*SD* 92).

Daniel Fuchs (3-27) and Gloria Cronin have noted that Bellow has been going against the grain of Modernism ever since he published his first novel in 1944. Although in his youth he was strongly influenced by such Modernists as Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, and Hemingway, as early as the 1940s Bellow began to question the validity of the Modernists' estimates of Man and Society.

Underlying Bellow's rejection of Modernism is his strong disagreement with the Modernists' attack on the Self. Bellow does not believe in the extinction or bankruptcy or disintegration of the Self in the

modern world, even though he realizes the lurking danger of the Self. That is why he cannot agree with Rimbaud when the French poet says, "*Car l'Homme a fini! L'Homme a joue tous les rolles.* [Man is finished! Man has played all the roles.]" ("Skepticism" 24). Nor can he accept Bertrand Russell's logical positivist or Sartre's existentialist view of the Self: according to the former, "I" is a grammatical expression; according to the latter, "There are no essences, and therefore no human nature" (see Fuchs 158).

Bellow celebrates the Emersonian Sovereign Self, especially its virtues of independence, self-reliance, freedom, and sanctity. Like Emerson and other Transcendentalists, he is convinced that each individual contains within himself the means to truth: for his high school class oration, Herzog quotes Emerson: "*The main enterprise of the world, for splendor . . . is the upbuilding of a man. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy . . . than any kingdom in history. . . . [E]very man should be open to ecstasy or a divine illumination*" (*H* 198-99).

Despite his celebration of an independent, self-reliant Romantic Self, however, Bellow does not blindly accept all the tenets of Romanticism. He is able to perceive the errors of Romanticism when it goes to extremes. For instance, Herzog agrees with T. E. Hulme's rejection of Romanticism because of its "dampness" (as Hulme called it) and sympathizes with Hulme's demands that things should be "clear, dry, spare, pure, cool and hard" (*H* 160). Bellow also sees the possible dangers when the Sovereign Self turns into the "Imperial Self" (to use Quentin Anderson's term), with its vices of over-sentimentality, self-indulgence, aloof narcissism, misused freedom, moral cowardice, irresponsible selfishness, and wanton sexuality.[4] In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

we see a degraded Romanticism ("dark romanticism" [*MSP* 33]) running rampant among the youth of the sixties to whom the world was made not for *man*, but for *me* and *me* only. In Mr. Sammler's opinion, they embody the very vices mentioned above.

Thus, through his heroes, Bellow expresses his dualistic view of the Self. Whereas Bellow/Herzog is repelled by "the swamping of Romantic feelings" (*H* 161) and considers the French philosopher Rousseau a villain, he does not see what we can answer when Rousseau says, "*Je sens mon coeur et je connais les hommes*" (*H* 161). On the one hand, Bellow realizes the importance of possessing a Sovereign Self; on the other, he takes issue with the Romantics about the dangers inherent in over-emphasizing the uniqueness of the Self. That is why Herzog aims to show how life can be lived by "reviewing universal connections; overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self; revising the old Western Faustian ideology" (*H* 53).

For all his concern with the Self, Bellow never forgets to ground his Self in the modern condition. He does not place his hero in a narcissistic, isolated, exclusive, elitist world walled off from the "outside" world. In fact, he tries to deal, as the Spanish filmmaker Luis Bunuel does, with "the fundamental problems of today's man, taken not as a particular case, but in relation to other men" (Bellow, "Bunuel's" 112).

In fine, all Bellow's heroes, like their author, try to explore what it means to be human. In increasingly baffling circumstances, they try to grapple with the key questions of human existence with a view to discovering liberating, ennobling truths. In their quest for humanity and truth, in the self-society dialogue, the city plays a very significant role.

II

This dissertation deals with the theme of man in the city in Bellow's eight urban novels, with focus on the role of the city. Ever since his first short story, "Two Morning Monologues," was published in 1941, the motif of the city has always been present in Bellow's fiction. In fact, except for *Henderson the Rain King* and some short stories, all Bellow's works are set against the backdrop of the city environment, and in each work the image of the city prevails, even though its physical constructs may not be immediately present. The city *is* the society in the dialogue between the self and society Bellow's heroes engage in.

From the beginning, Bellow's theme of man in the city has never escaped from the critics' attention. Be it in a brief book review or in a book-length study, Bellow critics, from Alfred Kazin to Daniel Fuchs, have singled out the importance of the city in Bellow's fiction. Almost all of them agree that Bellow is one of the greatest city novelists of this century and that his cities are among his most impressive creations.

Among early Bellow critics, Marcus Klein, devotes many pages to Bellow's "city imagination" and concludes that Bellow, "unlike the past masters, Hemingway and Faulkner, is entirely a city writer" (47). Chester Eisinger points out that Bellow's characters "struggle in the iron-bound landscape of urban America" (341). Keith Opdahl says that Bellow uses "the city the way earlier American writers used the forest or sea: the city symbolizes the world's destructive power. Bellow shifts to an urban primitivism in which the city represents reality itself" (63). Edward Schwartz likens Bellow to James Joyce--"a chronicler of the city" (20)--in that both portray modern man questing

for his identity in a city. Robert Joseph Nadon maintains that Bellow is "unquestionably the most city-conscious of American writers" (60). Alfred Kazin comments that "this air of having lived, of experiencing the big city in every pore, of being on the spot, is the great thing about Bellow's fiction" (129) and that "he is a key to something that would emerge in all the American writings of this period about cities, the 'mass,' the common life" (129-30).

Calling Bellow a "novelist of the city," Robert Dutton compares him with other city novelists such as John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, James Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Nathaniel West. According to Dutton, although they all "see the city as oppressive and stultifying, as a force of alienation and distraction, and as a setting in which man is caught up in a confusing jungle of distorted aims and values" (191-92), there is an important distinction:

> The distinction is that, while these writers see that environment as central to and definitive of man's ignominy, Bellow sees it as only a peripheral factor to man's fate. This is a key distinction: for Bellow's protagonists, through their experience, learn that they need not be defined by the grey ugliness of the city, by its stolid indifference and powerful drives toward corruption and greed. They manage to escape such a definition when they learn the meaning of self. (192)

Sanford Pinsker claims that "Saul Bellow has been our most articulate geographer of the urban landscape, charting its assets and liabilities against the cunning that is History and those continuing needs which comprise the human spirit" (25). Joyce Carol Oates writes, "Bellow's masterful novels all address themselves to 'the lessons and theories of power' in a great American city. Bellow is obsessed with the riddle of what it means to be an urban man in a secular, mass-market culture that appears to be vertiginously extraverted, without a

coherent sense of history or tradition--in which, in fact, 'all the ages of history' can be experienced as simultaneous" (12). Steven Marcus comments, "In the work of Saul Bellow, urban experience is rendered consistently in extraordinarily self-aware terms. From the outset Bellow seems certain that urban experience is modern experience --that the two define each other" (228).

However, most studies of Bellow's connections with the city are either cursory or not comprehensive enough: some of them focus on the city in a particular work or in a number of works, while others, on a particular city in certain works. Three dissertations have dealt directly with the function of the city in Bellow's works. These dissertations, however, do not deal with Bellow's cities alone: they study Bellow along with other writers for comparison and/or contrast. Moreover, they fall short of comprehensiveness: Nadon (1969) ends his study at *Herzog*, Dickstein (1973) and Durham (1974) at *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

With the publication of *The Dean's December* (1982)--a great city novel in Bellow's canon--and several recent essays on his connections with various cities, the motif of the city in Bellow's novels deserves a more systematic and comprehensive study than has been attempted. This dissertation is an attempt at it. I will study in detail Bellow's eight urban novels, from *Dangling Man* to *The Dean's December*. Since *Henderson the Rain King* is not a city "novel" but a "romance" about adventures in a fantasyland-like Africa (see Chase 25), I have excluded it. However, it should be noted that even deep in the heart of the African continent Henderson the Yankee farmer is unable to shuck off the urban influence: he constantly thinks in city terms, and the whole African episode is sprinkled with urban imagery from New York City

scenes. Although this dissertation does not deal in detail with the city in Bellow's non-fiction, short stories, and plays, I will refer to them whenever pertinent.

III

The first purpose of this dissertation is to study the function of the city in Bellow's eight urban novels by examining its relation to theme, tone, plot, form, and characterization. As a masterful realist, Bellow has brought the city alive by evoking sounds, sights, and impressions; the reader seems to be able to see, hear, smell, and even feel the texture of the city described. It is the fitting setting in which the plot unfolds and the characters develop.

However, the city does not function merely as a physical setting, a locale, or an arena for human drama to be enacted in. It helps express the theme and personify the central character. The facets of environment--the complexity and chaos inherent in contemporary urban society--obsess and objectify the Bellow hero.

Marcus Klein has noted the symbolic importance of clutter in Bellow's novels from *Dangling Man* to *Herzog* (39-70). Molly S. Wieting, in her unpublished dissertation, has commented that Bellow's congested urban milieu, in all its multiplicity, functions as the concretion of an external harshness with which the Bellow hero must come to terms (158). As she writes:

> Regardless of the specific social condition, each [Bellow hero] is bombarded by a clutter of things, people, and events which are indicative of what he considers to be a hopelessly fragmented world. This bombardment assumes a position of psychological importance which is out of proportion to the actual situation. (158)

Ralph Freedman (50-56) and Marcus Klein (33-70) have also noted that

Bellow has used the urban environment as an external projection of a repressed aspect of the Bellow hero's character. The Bellow hero has internalized the environment: Bellow uses place as a metaphoric reflection of the hero's consciousness.

Although most of Bellow's heroes are Jewish and although he deals extensively with Jewish immigrant childhood experiences in the ghetto, the Jewish family circle, and Jewish intellectuals, radicals, dreamers, and explorers of lowlife, his work is not parochical or partisan. His characters achieve universality. His city is not Jewish but American; it is a metaphor for the modern world.

By orchestrating the physical constructs, weather changes, and human interactions, by juxtapositing the feelings of desolation and excitement, ridiculousness and sublimity, Bellow, in a Dostoevskian way, invests his city with metaphorical import. Kazin's phrase "what desolation amidst wonders" is a fit description of Bellow's urban world (129). It is a symbol of modern society with which the Bellow hero has to come to grips in order to achieve his identity, sanity, tranquillity, and humanity. The urban experience as represented in his novels is emblematic of modern human experience or, more specifically, twentieth-cenutry American experience.

IV

The second purpose of this dissertation is to deal with the city-country dialogue in Bellow's novels.[5] Weighed down by an oppressive urban environment and haunted by a nightmarish city life, the Bellow hero occasionally entertains idyllic dreams or has pastoral impulses. Wieting has pointed out that the pastoral is a cohesive motif in Bellow's fiction: "in each of the novels one finds a corresponding pastoral element, an excursion, either physical or mental, to an

environment that is free from the clutter and chaos of the protagonist's urban existence" ("Symbolic" 359). On the other hand, David Galloway writes that Bellow's heroes "must work out their destinies against the brutalized cityscape; they have no recourse to the fishing trips, the rural idylls, or the pastoral dreams of the Anglo-Saxon imagination" (21).

As I will argue in this study, despite his ambivalence toward the city, the Bellow hero never seriously considers the country an ideal place to live in, because he never finds genuine refuge or gains complete recuperation in the countryside. To him, escape from the city into a rural environment is never a viable alternative. Even *Henderson the Rain King*--the only novel that is not set against the backdrop of the muddled, chaotic modern city--does not speak eloquently for the country in the city-country dialogue, in spite of its rural settings. In fact, its first part, set in the New England countryside, reads like a parody of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal.

In general, the Bellow hero either remains in the city or eventually returns to the city after brief excursions out of the city. It is in the urban setting that the Bellow hero acts and reacts to other human beings and it is through all these human interactions that he strives to find a sense of order, maintain his sanity, or achieve equanimity.

The Bellow hero's attitude toward the city and the country reflects the author's own attitude. Bellow himself is both attracted to and repelled by the city. He does not like the city's chaos, madness, crime, ugliness, and philistinism, and he thinks it is good to go to the countryside to get fresher air. However, he does not believe that escape from the city can solve modern man's problems.[6] He accepts the

city as a "neutral space" in modern America where "people might discover or create themselves" ("A Writer" 186).

Despite the constant threat the deteriorating urban milieu poses to his integrity and his personal safety, Bellow remains in the city and even feels at home in it. This has much to do with Bellow's own urban background. Bellow admits that his life cannot be separated from the city: "I don't know how I could possibly separate my knowledge of life, such as it is, from the city" (Harper 358). A child of Russian Jewish immigrant parents, Bellow was born in Lachine, Quebec, and lived in Montreal until he was nine years old. In 1924 his family moved to Chicago where he grew up and received his education through college. Although not born in Chicago, he, like Augie, considers himself a Chicagoan, out and out (Kunitz 73). After living in New York, Minneapolis, Paris, and other places for more than ten years, he came back to Chicago in 1963 to teach at the University of Chicago.

Bellow told an interviewer that he has lived in more than two hundred places (Howard 58). Wherever he is, be it Chicago or New York, Paris or Bucharest, Jerusalem or Montreal, Bellow has made minute and sharp observations of the city and many of his discernments and comments have found artistic expression in his works. As a result, in addition to his non-fiction *To Jerusalem and Back*, we have such wondrous city novels as *The Victim*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Seize the Day*, *Herzog*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and *The Dean's December*.

Bellow's view of the city is also related to his view of life and reality. Bellow is an essentialist. This is derived from his Jewish cultural heritage, as critics such as Fuchs and Goldman have pointed out. Kazin has noted, "In scripture this world is God's world; Jews

must be grateful and obedient for being allowed to share it. In Jewish fiction this world is always someone else's world, though it is one in which Jews call themselves Jews and remain Jews" (133). To Bellow, life is a miracle, no matter how intense is the suffering on earth. As Schlossberg in *The Victim* exclaims, "If a human life is a great thing to me, it *is* a great thing" (*V* 122). Life is worth living notwithstanding many woes and tragedies in human life. That is why Bellow believes in the here-and-now and tries to live his life fully in a big city cluttered with confusion and ugliness, sordidness and madness. As he writes in the Introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories*, "We are all such accidents. We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it--the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it" (519). He does not complain about the city *per se* as he knows that it is created by and made up of people. While criticizing the city as an entity, he places the final responsibility on the individual human being: it is human beings who create or corrupt the city.

In his works Bellow has time and again expressed his deep and nearly sentimental feelings toward Montreal and Chicago, two cities having particular significance for him. In these cities are reminders of his boyhood, his family, his old neighborhoods, his relatives, and his friends.[7] However, he has not deliberately tried to sentimentalize or sweeten the ghetto. He has recorded faithfully the life in such places of exile and suffering, the harsh and sweet, the ordinary and extraordinary.

Even though he has on several occasions criticized his own city Chicago incisively, that does not mean that he does not love his city.[8]

When he complains about the lack of culture in Chicago and calls it a cultural desert, he also criticizes other cities as well. As he writes, "Let me first try to make clear what that question really is--and when I speak of Chicago and its Culture Bus, of its industries, skyscrapers, neighborhoods, its slums, its crimes, its courts, I am also speaking of New York, and Philadelphia, or of St. Louis or L.A.: of America, in a word. I am referring in some sense even to London, Rome, and Paris" ("A Writer" 178). It is under the sway of his deep feelings for his city that he has written his great Chicago novels *Augie March*, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and *The Dean's December*, as well as the minor classic, "Looking for Mr. Green."

Bellow's attitude toward the city is clearly manifested in the city-country dichotomy/dialogue in his works. His deep connection with the city produces in him an ambivalence toward the city and, even though he occasionally treats the city quite negatively, he has not treated the country in wholly favorable terms. In his view, the country in its present-day version is not a place for the pastoral ideal and is not a symbol for Nature. He thinks that "America is now all city" ("A Writer" 183); under the influence of modern technology, the countryside of the present has become almost as modernized and mechanized as any city and it has been invaded by many problems which used to be located in cities only. In other words, Bellow does not believe in a popular theory in American intellectual history, the dichotomy between the natural world of God in the countryside and the artificial world of man in the city. He does not resolve the city-country dialogue in favor of the country.

V

Bellow's works are in the realist tradition. However, as

Kulshrestha points out, his realism is not a social or a naturalistic realism but what George Woodcock calls "true realism" (54), which is a comprehensive and inclusive realism, aiming to take stock of the totality of reality and the entirety of human experience.

Bellow says, "But how realistic can an American writer be? He is inevitably a solitary who is by origin one of the great mass. He is distinguished from that mass when he practices his trade. When he does this, writing or painting, he must necessarily believe that it is possible to send in the forces of style to subdue its chaos" ("A Writer" 177). Believing in "the forces of style" which can subdue the city's chaos, Bellow persistently uses his imagination to create artistic works which are the best proof against the fragmentation, depersonalization, and pollution of the city.

In many of his essays, Bellow emphasizes that the writer should look at life steadfastly and try to write as authentically and faithfully as possible.[9] As an artist living in the city, Bellow always looks at the facts of the city without recoil and tries to redeem the ugliness and chaos of the city with his art. His aesthetic view is similar to that expressed in Keats' famous epigram, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." He believes that truth in its intensest moment can become beauty. That is why he has never avoided looking at the evil and seamy side of modern society, nor has he easily succumbed to the wasteland outlook.

Despite the degradation, clutter, dismalness, and annoyances he sees in the modern city, Bellow knows that only by the transcending power of poetry, art, or imagination, can man save himself, the city, and the whole civilization from decay or destruction. Here he is very Blakean. In *Dangling Man*, John Pearl, Joseph's artist friend,

contends that "the real world is the world of art and of thought. There is only one worthwhile sort of work, that of the imagination" (*DM* 90-91). Like Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow admits that he is "sentimental about urban ugliness" (*HG* 72), but he, like Citrine, decides to ransom "the commonplace, all this junk and wretchedness, through art and poetry, by the superior power of the soul" (*HG* 72).

VI

Bellow loves to repeat a joke about a novice tenor who made his debut at La Scala, Italy's most prestigious opera house. The audience kept applauding and asking him to sing the opening aria over and over again. After singing it a number of times, this singer, greatly touched, asked when he could proceed to sing the main part. The audience replied, "Until you get it right." Like every other American writer who aspires to write the great American novel, Bellow has been trying to write the great American novel all his life. Bellow's attempt to "get it right" can be clearly seen in the strenuous efforts he puts forth in his numerous manuscripts.[10] If in Bellow's canon there is no single novel which itself can be duly called the Great American Novel, his works as a whole deserve that title.

Although he may be, consciously or unconsciously, telling a story about the Bellow hero in the modern city all his life, Bellow the ever-conscious artist tries hard to surpass himself each time. Accordingly, he has created better and better novels which employ different narrative techniques, adopt different perspectives, and portray myriad faces of humanity. As Siegel notes, "In each novel he not only records meticulously his evolving responses to setting and culture, but he also ventures beyond his previous imaginative perimeters to make playful use of shifting narrative styles and forms. His

realism often shades into romanticism and the absurd, into social comedy and black humor, into psychology and the picaresque, into philosophy and satire" (159). Despite their common concern with human existence in modern society, Bellow's urban novels differ in their portrayal of central characters, in their literary techniques, and in their use of city settings. He has come a long way from Joseph's weak attempt to break out of his "imprisoning self" in *Dangling Man* to Dean Corde's courageously provoking his fellow city dwellers and thus jeopardizing his academic career by writing muckraking essays about the city's ills in *The Dean's December*.

The third purpose of this dissertation, then, is to study the development of the man-city dialogue in Bellow's fiction. I will study Bellow's eight urban novels according to the order of their publication dates, with the view to seeing how he portrays his characters in their relations to the cities and to mapping out the transformations, modulations, and variances therein. To me, reading Bellow's novels chronologically has one advantage over other approaches: it will not only yield the recurrent motifs but also reveal the way Bellow tries to outdo himself each time by changing the style, form, setting, and character-type from one novel to another.

It is my contention that Bellow's use of the city is not static. Just as Bellow's central characters change from the early victim-type heroes to the later wise-observer heroes, the city in Bellow's *oeuvre* also undergoes transmutations. It changes from the early indifferent, anomie-ridden, unaccountable, and hostile environment for such protagonists as Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm to the epitomization of modern society such wise observers as Sammler and Corde perceive, its enormous evil forces and vicious social problems threatening not only

the protagonists but the whole civilization. Such changes can be traced to Bellow's own views of various cities: the later Bellow does not hold the same views toward such cities as New York, Chicago, Paris, and London as the early Bellow.

I will contrast and/or compare the cities in different novels as the discussion goes on so that I can show the differences between Bellow's earlier and later works. For instance, how does Joseph's Chicago differ from Augie March's or Dean Corde's? How differently does the New York affect the protagonists of *The Victim*, *Seize the Day*, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*?

Notes

[1] Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; New York: Fawcett, 1969) 247; further parenthetical page references will be preceded by *H*. References from other Bellow works and their respective abbreviations will be from the following editions:

DM: *Dangling Man* (1944; New York: Avon, 1975);
V: *The Victim* (1947; New York: Signet, 1965);
AM: *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1953);
SD: *Seize the Day* (1956; New York: Avon, 1977);
HRK: *Henderson the Rain King* (1959; New York: Fawcett, 1965);
MSP: *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970);
HG: *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking, 1975);
DD: *The Dean's December* (1982; New York: Pocket, 1983).

[2] The term "totalitarian" is used here in the sense described by Norman Mailer in his book *The Idol and the Octopus*, 199-200. By "totalitarianism" Mailer means more than merely the political system of an authoritarian government. "Totalitarianism" includes any means which, physically or mentally, dominate or manipulate an individual's life style.

[3] I have adopted R. W. B. Lewis's notion of dialogue as the basis for my discussion of the self-society and the city-country dialogue. In *The American Adam*, Lewis writes:

> Every culture seems, as it advances toward maturity, to produce its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it. . . . The debate, indeed, may be said to *be* the culture, at least on its loftiest levels; for a culture achieves identity . . . through the emergence of its peculiar and distinctive dialogue . . . the [intellectual] historian is likely to discover that the development of the culture in question resembles a protracted and broading ranging conversation: at best, a dialogue--a dialogue which at times moves very close to drama. (1-2)

[4] For a discussion of Bellow and the Romantics, see Daniel Fuchs, 155-78; Allan Chavkin, "Bellow's Alternative to the Wasteland: Romantic Theme and Form in *Herzog*," and "Bellow and English Romanticism." See also Gilbert Porter and R. Michael Gold for Bellow and the American Transcendentalists.

[5] The city-country dialogue is a complicated issue in American intellectual history. The terms "city" and "country" get drained of denotative function and serve instead as poles around which are gathered clusters of meanings associated with civilization and a primitive or a traditional earthbound culture (Stout 11). In American intellectual history, the assumption of an anti-urban consensus persists, which views the city as the creation of man and places the city in the emblematic locus of evil in the moral landscape. On the

other hand, "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagnation" (Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* 3). Yet, the claim made by Morton and Lucia White in *The Intellectual Versus the City*--the unvarying current of anti-urbanism in American thought--has been challenged by several later critics such as Stout, Spears, Pike, Marx ("Puzzle"), and Susman (237-51). They counterargue that nineteenth century American writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and even Cooper can be more accurately described as ambivalent than as anti-urban. The dream of Arcadia dies hard in American thought (Miller 25), however, and most American intellectuals and writers are prone to express their anti-urbanism in their works. Bellow seems to be among the minority of American writers who feel much at home in the city, despite his ambivalence toward the city.

As early as 1967 Rovit points out that Bellow's heroes are "urban-bred and urban-oriented. Their native habitat is the modern metropolis. . . . In the city the Bellow hero is almost at home; he can take the city for granted because he knows its ways. . . . His heroes feel a great sensuous joy in nature, but nature fails to become for them a dictionary or a bible for life. Nature remains always *outside*--a spectacle--for the Bellow protagonist" (23-25). Later Robert Nadon (1969) and Joyce Dickstein (1973) continue this argument in their studies of Bellow's fiction.

[6] In an interview with Boyers Bellow says:

> I think the evils can reach people everywhere very easily now. They aren't restricted to the city--people can have them out in the country. They can annihilate their minds and souls just as well out in the sticks as they can in New York. As a matter of fact, the characteristic life of the city today, as drawn by Joyce in *Ulysses* at the latest, is not really visible in America at this moment. People are not out in the streets as Leopold Bloom was in 1904, they're in the suburbs. The inner city is blighted, the scene of violence, crime and horror. . . . All the same, I think these bucolic dreams are rather touching and I think that it's nice to go where the air is fresher. Destroying your brain with dope out in the quiet countryside is probably more agreeable than doing it in the city. (Boyers 15)

[7] For Bellow's ties to Lachine and Montreal, see Hammer and Weinstein. For his attachment to Chicago, see, for example, his essays, "Starting Out in Chicago," "A Matter of the Soul," and "A Writer from Chicago," as well as interviews with Boyers, Illig, Medwick, and Roudane.

[8] Bellow's relationship to Chicago is best reflected in the following passage from his latest essay, "Chicago: The City That Was, the City That Is": "You can't be neutral about a place where you have lived so long. You come to recognize at last how much feeling you have invested in. It's futile to think, like Miniver Cheevy, that you might have done better in another time, in a more civilized city. You were assigned to this one, as were your parents, brothers, cousins, classmates, your friends--most of them gone into death's dateless night"

(23).

[9] See, for example, "The Writer as Moralist," "The Thinking Man's Wasteland," "Skepticism and the Depth of Life," "Machine and Story Books: Literature in the Age of Technology," and "A Writer from Chicago."

[10] Fuchs, Chavkin, Nault, and Keith Cushman, among others, have studied Bellow's various manuscripts located in the libraries of the University of Chicago and of the University of Texas, Austin.

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CHAPTER I

Dangling Man: Joseph's Winter in Chicago

> Any goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love.[1]

I

Before the appearance of *Dangling Man* in 1944, Bellow had published two short stories, the earliest of which "Two Morning Monologues" (1941) anticipates *Dangling Man* in many essential aspects. In fact, the brief story contains many ideas germane to Bellow's later works.[2] For instance, it sets up the monologue as a major form in Bellow's canon.[3] And it treats subtly one of the most salient themes in Bellow's works: the theme of man in the city.

The protagonist in the first monologue entitled "Without Work" is an embryonic Dangling Man. Called by his neighbors "Mandelbaum's boy," the introspective and brooding protagonist lives in an alienated society, feeling that he is "nearly sunk": "Total it any way, top to bottom, reverse the order, it makes no difference, the sum is always *sunk*."[4]

His monologue is mainly about his relationships with his parents and his city-cum-society. Suspended between college and work during the Depression, he is "driven" out to the street to look for a job because he feels uncomfortable staying at home. His parents, espe-

cially his money-concerned father, are "pushy"; they cannot understand why he, unlike others, cannot locate a job.

If under the strong pressure of his parents he finds it hard to breathe at home, he faces an even more menacing environment--the city--once he is out of the house. Set against the dreary urban environment of Chicago, the story gives us glimpses of the city in the late thirties. Taking the Cottage Grove car every morning, the first monologist observes the city on his way to the Loop:

> It's a long ride. Often, when there's no special hurry, I get off and walk. In this way I have covered the whole distance on foot. I know every part of it--garages, laundries, re-sale stores, house foundations, autoparts, weeds--all in two colors, sand and gray. There are no others; seasonal colors, I mean. (*TMM* 232)

The *sand* and *gray* emphasized here also color the city picture in *Dangling Man*.

Approaching the Loop, the protagonist stops his reading once in a while to look at the cityscape and watch the sun, if it shows up:

> Near Twenty-second Street there are several new factories with slick fronts and neon piping in the office windows. And then, when the line turns down Wabash, past the movie distribution houses, you see huge tableaux of kiss and thrill and murder. But usually I read a book and pay little attention, while the car wobbles toward the Loop, except to see what the sun is doing. I watch it occasionally. Just before we creep under the elevated lines it appears for a moment. Not much hope for it, I remark to myself. If it outlives me it won't be for long. (*TMM* 232)

To the protagonist, the city is both a familiar turf and a vast jungle, full of concrete buildings and slick billboards. His familiarity with the city is reflected in his almost nonchalant attitude toward the sexuality, crime, murder, vulgarity, and cheap commercialism suggested by those huge tableaux and commonly associated with Chicago. He

seems to accept the modern city and its concomitants as part of reality. Like his later counterparts--Joseph, Herzog, Citrine, Sammler, and Corde--he tries to forget his external environment by losing himself in his own consciousness or burying himself in his books. Only occasionally does he raise his head to look at the city and *the sun*. The image of the sun is important in Bellow's fiction; it will appear again and again later in other works. Although in this first short story his looking for the sun here does not carry the same moral weight as, say, George Grebe's looking for Mr. Green in the desolate wintry urbanscape of Chicago ("Looking for Mr. Green"), the gesture is unmistakably Bellovian.

II

Like the jobless, alienated young man in "Two Morning Monologues," the protagonist in *Dangling Man* is also suspended in time and place, not through choice but through circumstance. Waiting for the draft call into the U.S. Army, he finds himself in limbo. He is in a situation of painful waiting, of ambiguous dangling, and of an airy suspension between two worlds.

Written in the journal form with entries from December 15, 1942 to April 9, 1943, the novel is the record of 27-year-old Joseph who, bereft of all political and social certainties, tries to come to terms with his own self and with the world around him. Seven months of waiting have gone by before the first entry of the diary. The diary comprises not only the day-to-day accounts of his experience and reflections, but the recollections of incidents which, preceding the keeping of the diary, tell us much about Joseph's "older self" and help explain his present plight.

Though mainly about Joseph's existential problem before his giving

up his civilian life at the end, the novel also shows the collective psyche affected by the distant battles and reflects the contemporary political and social atmosphere, which is why it has been considered a novel about the Second World War despite the absence of combat. Edmund Wilson praised it as "one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the war" (78). And Delmore Schwartz thought Joseph remarkable in that "he has the strength (and it is his only strength) to keep his eyes open and his mind awake to the quality of his experience" (3) at a time when

> every conceivable temptation not to be honest, not to look directly at experience, not to remember the essential vows of allegiance to the intelligence and to human possibility and dignity--every conceivable temptation and every plea of convenience, safety and casuistry has presented itself. (3)

In other words, although the novel, like all Bellow's novels, centers upon the consciousness of a single individual, the gloomy environment as represented by war-time Chicago is a haunting force in his life. The theme of self versus society in this novel is chiefly the dialogue between Joseph and his city, Chicago.

III

In the very first entry of his journal Joseph relates his connection with his city: "In a city where one has lived nearly all his life, it is not likely that he will ever be solitary; and yet, in a very real sense, I am just that. I am ten hours a day in a single room" (7-8).[5] The room where Joseph spends most of his time is the first and most important image related to the city motif in this novel. So claustrophobic is Joseph's single room, which he calls his "six-sided box" (61), that he feels himself imprisoned: "I, in this room, separate, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but

a closed, hopeless jail. My perspectives end in the walls. One room holds me" (61).

Joseph's alienation is mostly self-willed. Having resigned his job at a travel agency to be ready for military induction, he, supported by his wife, really has nothing to do but wait. Most often he stays in his single room in a South Side rooming house near the University of Chicago. He finds he has more free time than he can handle. As he admits, he does not know what to do with his freedom, because he has "no resources--in a word, no character" (9). He talks to himself, listens to music, reads the newspaper, and keeps his journal, but he cannot concentrate on anything more serious or meaningful. He has given up his project of writing biographical essays on the Enlightenment philosophers, a project he initiated a year ago. He has even stopped reading books, which until this time "had stood as guarantors of an extended life, far more precious and necessary than the one [he] was forced to lead daily" (8).

Examining his present life Joseph finds himself suffering from a "narcotic dullness" (13); life is a "loathsome burden" (13) to him. As he confides, "There is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited" (9). His dangling existence leads him to think of himself as a "moral casualty of the war" (13) and "a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn" (98). Compared with his older self, he is "deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will" (9). The nullity of his life makes him feel that his mind is "as vacant as the street" (11).

The dominant mood of "narcotic dullness" from which Joseph suffers can be explained by a passage from Goethe's *Poetry and Life*:

> This loathing of life has both physical and moral causes. . . . All comfort in life is based upon a regular occurrence of external phenomena. The changes of the day and night, of the seasons, of flowers and fruits, and all other recurring pleasures that come to us, that we may and should enjoy them --these are the mainsprings of our earthly life. (13)

Later in the entry for December 28, 1942, with Goethe's passage in mind, Joseph looks out of his window at the city. He asks, "What would Goethe say to the view from this window, the wintry, ill-lit street, he with his recurring pleasures, fruits, and flowers?" (52-53). The mainsprings of Joseph's life, as viewed from his window, are not Goethe's natural fruits and flowers. There are, instead, "the street, the yards, the masses of snow like dirty subs" (104).

One night, after a quarrel with his wife over a missing book--*Dubliners*--Joseph leaves the room in anger.[6] Once out on the street he immediately detects the sharp contrast between their warm and comfortable room and the dark and wintry street: "Our windows, with their glowing shades, set two orange rectangles, trade-marks of warmth and comfort, against the downpour and the dark, the glitter of the trees, the armor of the ice on the street" (63). There is a correspondence between Joseph's inner weather and the outer weather; the city street scene effectively mirrors Joseph's mood at the moment.

On such a foggy, rainy night, Joseph's subjective view of his city leads him to envision Chicago as a jungle: "It was not hard to imagine that there was no city here at all, and not even a lake but, instead, a swamp and that despairing bawl crossing it; wasting trees instead of dwellings, and runners of vine instead of telephone wires" (64). Chicago is imaged as an ugly, wind-swept wasteland, one of the dark places of the earth: "The clouds were sheared back from a mass of stars

chattering in the hemispheric blackness--the universe, this windy midnight, out on its eternal business" (71).

IV

Despite his reluctance to go out, Joseph does leave his "six-sided box" when necessary, though he rarely takes long walks and his "average radius" is three blocks. During his occasional excursions in the city, he has to come to face the aspects of the urban complex.

On their wedding anniversary, for instance, Joseph goes downtown in order to celebrate with his wife. As he descends from the El at the Randolph and Wabash station, in a smoky alley alongside the library, he witnesses a man suddenly collapse in front of him. Such an incident, fraught with a mythic quality, gives Joseph a "prevision" of urban man's fate, the blackness of death which strikes suddenly without warning.[7]

When his father-in-law is ill, he goes to help his mother-in-law in their apartment on the Northwest Side of Chicago. From their third-story apartment, Joseph looks out of the window at the city before him:

> The sun has been covered up; snow was beginning to fall. It was sprinkled over the black pores of the gravel and was lying in thin slips on the slanting roofs. I could see a long way from this third-floor height. Not far off there were chimneys, their smoke a lighter gray than the gray of the sky; and, straight before me, ranges of poor dwellings, warehouses, billboards, culverts, electric signs blankly burning, parked cars and moving cars, and the occasional bare pale of a tree. (17)

Viewing the ugliness of the city, Joseph tries to explore the relation of "billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind" to the "interior life." He resists the idea that the interior life is wholly shaped by or directly related to the city, even though he concedes that there may be some connection:

> Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man's favor. There could be no doubt that these billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind, were related to interior life. And yet, I told myself, there had to be a doubt. There were human lives organized around these ways and houses, and that, they, the houses, say, were the analogue, that what men created they also were, through some transcendent means, I could not bring myself to concede. There must be a difference, a quality that eluded me, somehow, a difference between things and persons and even between acts and persons. Otherwise the people who lived here were actually a reflection of the things they lived among. (17)[8]

Joseph believes in man's transcending power over his environment, however sordid the environment is; yet, at this point he cannot rightly name it.[9]

Notwithstanding the evasion of the naming or understanding the transcending power at this point, Joseph does come to an illumination that he is connected to "common humanity" (18). Behind his fellow Chicagoans' business and politics, their taverns, movies, assaults, divorces, and murders, as the above quote shows, Joseph tries to "find clear signs of their common humanity" (18).

Reflecting on the city scene leads him to admit that he is closely tied to his fellow citizens:

> because I was involved with them; because, whether I liked it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together. I was aware, also, that their existence, just as it was, made me possible. (18)

This sudden moment of illumination and discernment shows that he is time-bound and history-ridden; he cannot escape the society in which he is born and the challenge it poses. His declaration of a shared humanity with others, however temporary or fanciful, is unmistakable.

As an essentialist, he believes that "In all principal ways the

human spirit must have been the same" (18) and that all men are drawn into the "same craters of the spirit" (26). Thus arises one of his "ideal constructions": his longing to build "a 'colony of the spirit,' or a group whose convenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty" (27), because "the world was crude and it was dangerous and, if no measures were taken, existence could indeed become--in Hobbes's phrase, which had long lodged in Joseph's mind--'nasty, brutish, and short'" (27). As Gilbert Porter points out, "What he [Joseph] wants is a form of utopian Brook Farm to set over against the harsh realities of World War II, which threaten both his personal identity and his private vision" ("Is" 23). However, he discovers that the colony of the spirit is impossible because "his associations in formal categories of love, with his wife, with his mistress, with his family, with friends and with neighbors, those whom he might make colonists of the spirit, are steeped in real spite, spite in which Joseph shares, and so he is shunted back again and again into the imprisoning self" (Klein 35).

His ruminations on the cityscape convince him that if "the giants of the last century" had "their Liverpools and Londons, their Lilles and Hamburgs to contend against" (18), he and his contemporaries have "our Chicagos and Detroits" (18). In order to keep the integrity of his self, Joseph has to contend with a formidable antagonist--Chicago.

V

However, in *Dangling Man* Chicago is not the only city to contend with. To Joseph's friend John Pearl, New York City is a formidable antagonist.[10] Going from Chicago to New York to pursue his artistic career, Pearl works at an advertising company for a living. In the fifty-three-story office building, nobody except Pearl seems to care about the drabness and meaninglessness of working there. As he writes

to Joseph, it is

> the adult, commonsense, wise world. I am exhilarated by the tremendous unimportance of my work. It is nonsense. My employers are non- sensical. . . . I am the only one in this fifty-three-story building who knows how childish it is. Everybody else takes it seriously. Because it is a fifty-three-story building, they think it must be serious. 'This is life!' I say, this is pish, nonsense, nothing! *The real world is the world of art and of thought. There is only one worthwhile sort of work, that of the imagination.* (61; italics mine)

Joseph envies Pearl who, through the sustaining power of art, "can keep a measure of cleanliness and freedom" in spite of "the calamity, the lies and moral buggery, the odium, the detritus of wrong and sorrow dropped on every heart" (61). Through art and the imagination, "he is connected with the best part of mankind. . . . He has a community" (61). Joseph is not an artist; his talent, if he has one at all, is "for being a citizen, or what is today called, most apologetically, a good man" (61).

Pearl's second letter reveals his repugnance for New York City and his nostalgia for his home city. Living in South Brooklyn and surrounded by a "peeling environment," he is distraught with "the treelessness" and the "natural, too-human deadness" (101) of the city. Though feeling sorry for Pearl's difficult situation, Joseph is buoyed up by the letter because it shows Pearl's common recognition of the dread and sorrow in the environment that others see as "merely neutral" (102).

Pearl's nostalgia for his home city is a longing shared by almost all Bellow's heroes. As Joseph points out, what Pearl actually misses is not the present Chicago, which is no less inhuman than New York, but the familiar neighborhood around his father's house.[11]

Joseph, like Pearl, misses his childhood neighborhood in Montreal. One day while polishing shoes in his room, he suddenly falls into a Proustian-like memory of his days on St. Dominique Street.

> In Montreal, on such afternoons as this, I often asked permission to spread a paper on the sitting-room floor and shine all the shoes in the house. . . . The brown fog lay in St. Dominique Street; in the sitting room, however, the stove shone on the davenport and on the oilcloth and on my forehead, drawing the skin pleasantly. I did not clean shoes because I was praised for it, but because of the work and the sensations of the room, closed off from the wet and fog of the street, with its locked shutters and the faint green of the metal pipes along the copings of its houses. *Nothing could have tempted me out of the house.*
>
> *I had never found another street that resembled St. Dominique.* (57; italics mine)

St. Dominique Street, located in a dingy slum area between a market and a hospital, was "the only place where [he] was allowed to encounter reality" (57). This first city in Joseph's life taught him much about the harsh reality of life, such as sexuality, misogyny, cruelty, poverty, sordidness, alienation, and deformity. With such "city-bred memory" (114), he is bound to find the atmosphere of the city "natural."

This typically Bellovian kind of memory is important to the Bellow hero, be it Augie, Herzog, or Citrine, in that it often provides an emotional anchor or brings spiritual revitalization to the troubled hero. In *Herzog*, the Napolean Street episode, an amplified version of the St. Dominique Street experience, is one of the most memorable episodes in Bellow's *oeuvre*.

John Pearl's second letter also introduces an important theme in the novel, the dialogue between the city and the country. Though sympathizing with Pearl's suffering "the kind of terror, and the danger he sees of the lack of the human in the too-human" (102) and though

recognizing the time-honored "bolt for 'Nature'" (102), Joseph nonetheless concludes that cities are "natural," too. Escape from the city to a rural environment is never a viable alternative in Bellow's novels. Man must come to terms with modern life, with the city itself that is a "natural" part of modern life.

VI

Toward the end of Joseph's long winter in Chicago, he witnesses a seasonal change at work. Aware of nature's processes, Joseph, like every Bellow hero, responds eagerly to the arrival of Spring: ". . . spring begins on Sunday. I always experience a rush of feeling on the twenty-first of March" (113).

When spring does come, Joseph is out of his "six-sided box," in the street, walking the neighborhood: "It was warm in earnest at one o'clock, with a tide of summer odors from the stockyards and the sewers (odors so old in the city-bred memory they are no longer repugnant)" (114). Joseph's sensibility, formed out of the "city-bred memory," accepts that which has traditionally been found repugnant.

With the coming of spring nature asserts itself and struggles to transform the winter-ravaged city:

> In the upper light there were small fair heads of cloud turning. The streets, in contrast, looked burnt out; the chimneys pointed heavenward in openmouthed exhaustion. The turf, intersected by sidewalk, was bedraggled with the whole winter's deposit of deadwood, match cards, cigarettes, dog-mire, rubble. The grass behind the palings and wrought-iron was still yellow, although in many places the sun had already succeeded in shaking it into livelier green. And the houses, their doors and windows open, drawing in the freshness, were like old drunkards or consumptives taking a cure. (114)

However, this is, as Joseph says, "an impossible hope, the hope of an impossible rejuvenation" (114). It seems to find an objective

correlative in the appearance of "an untimely butterfly, out of place both in the season and the heart of the city, and somehow alien to the whole condition of the century" (114). As Robert Nadon oberves,

> This butterfly image, the butterfly in the heart of the city, crystalizes Bellow's attitude toward the dominant personal force of the nineteenth century, nature, and the dominant social force of the twentieth, the urban complex. Beautiful, delicate, ephemeral, the butterfly is a nostalgic reminder of a world that was but can never be again. It can not contend with the "brick passageway" of the urban landscape. (79)

Yet, as Porter points out,

> Like the untimely butterfly he saw in a brick passage, Joseph is capable of harboring an impossible hope . . . to come to terms with the actual world and its war and still retain a sense of his personal identity, a plan that will allow him to reconcile the ideal world with the real world." (*Whence* 24)

Joseph finally comes to choose his own destiny, which means the breakup of his isolation, release from the imprisoning freedom, and return to community, however imperfect it is. As he says, "The war can destroy me physically. . . . But so can bacteria. But as long as I am alive, I must follow my destiny in spite of them" (112).

On the penultimate day of his civilian life Joseph visits his father and goes up to his old room. There he experiences an epiphanic moment:

> It was suddenly given me to experience one of those consummating glimpses that come to all of us periodically. The room, delusively, dwindled and became a tiny square, swiftly drawn back, myself and all the objects in it growing smaller. This was not a mere visual trick. I understood it to be a revelation of the ephemeral agreements by which we live and pace ourselves. I looked around at the restored walls. This place which I avoided ordinarily had great personal significance for me. (125-26)

Thus through his rediscovery of his valuable past, his reattachment to the old place which has "great personal significance," his understanding of the dangers of self-estrangement, and his realization of the transitoriness (hence preciousness) of the life-span, Joseph is going to accept life as it is and forsake the freedom of self-determination.

Though Joseph at first appears to be a victim of his dangling existence and his ugly urban milieu, he tries to maintain a sense of himself and refuses to be corrupted by the war-time situation and defined by the deterministic environment. He is a man with weaknesses which keep him from applying his insights to his actions, but he is also a man constantly thinking in terms of ethical imperatives. The novel charts how an honest young man, caught between two worlds (the ideal and the actual) and two lives (the military and the civilian), gradually becomes a prisoner of his own isolation while he tries to keep his autonomous self. At the end of the novel, his final move to return to community through enlisting in the regimentation, though not without irony, manifests his realization of the dangers or ineffectiveness of alienation or isolation and his decison "to stop living so exclusively and vainly for our own sake" (102).[12]

In this short first novel Bellow introduces many of his major concerns. While treating the theme of man in the city, he employes much urban imagery which constitutes in large part the sense of reality. The city, in such various forms as buildings, streets, weather, people, history, and other psychological entities, is both the background and an active force in the novel. Though acknowledging the time-honored "bolt for 'nature'," Joseph does not consider escape into the country a viable option. He remains in his city, which to him is

"natural" too.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1944; New York: Avon, 1975) 61. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] As Malin points out, "Perhaps the best introduction to Bellow's world--to its themes, characters, and images--is his first piece of fiction, 'Two Morning Monologues'" (3).

[3] Tanner has commented that all Bellow's fiction illustrates the movement from monologue to dialogue. See "Saul Bellow: the Flight from Monologue."

[4] Bellow, "Two Morning Monologues," *Partisan Review* 8 (1941): 232. Further references will be cited in the text after the abbreviation *TMM*.

[5] Durham comments that "Bellow dramatizes here what Desmond Morris has acknowledged, that the loneliness of city life is a well-known hazard in . . . contemporary American culture" (52). Morris writes:

> It is easy to become lost in the great impersonal crowd. It is easy for natural family groupings and personal tribal relationships to become distorted, crushed or fragmented. . . . In a large city many people do not even know the names of their neighbors. (Qtd. in Durham 52)

[6] In *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision*, Fuchs writes, "Full of modern disgust and self-pity, [Joseph] is cast as a victim in a landscape out of Flaubert or *Dubliners*" (11). Unfortunately, Fuchs does not elaborate the connection between *Dangling Man* and Joyce's novel. In a sense, Bellow in this novel is also describing the "moral paralysis" of his Chicago in much the same style (that of "scrupulous meanness") as Joyce does in his book.

[7] See Porter, *Whence* 21-23, for the Dantesque and Eliotian allusions therein.

[8] Steven Marcus comments that "what the character is wrestling with is the fear of a simplified classical view, in which men and objects will be reduced to one another, or in which human efforts will be reified in a vision of the world of objects. Yet the power and integrity of the classical vision was such that it could make out the analogy between city and people without diminishing or reducing one into the other" (229).

[9] Throughout Bellow's canon, the Bellow hero has invariably been groping for such an understanding and even going further to assert such a power. Although in this novel Joseph has come close to naming it when he receives John Pearl's letter and reflects upon the possible force of art or imagination, it has to wait until his later heroes such as Herzog, Citrine, Sammler, and Corde to pin it down and to assert it.

[10] For an interesting discussion of Pearl the artist, see Jonathan Wilson 45-46. For a discussion of the limits of imagination, see Dutton 16-17.

[11] It is important to note that in the early decades of the century, the neighborhoods in the American big city, especially those ethnic districts, used to form sort of "islands" to the residents, who, through the sense of togetherness and through their racial bound, felt that they could somehow resist the encroachment from the evil big city which are beyond their "islands". Unfortunately those closely-bound neighborhoods have broken down nowadays and become the terribly isolated inner cities of the inner city. This social problem is explored time and again in Bellow's fiction. See Bellow's essays on Chicago and his novels, such as *Augie March*, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift* and *The Dean's December*.

[12] Ever since the publication of this novel, critics have been proposing different interpretations of its ending. Klein and Clayton, for instance, see it as a surrender. Klein writes, "Joseph must given himself to idiopathic freedeom, and that way is madness, or subject to the community's ordinary, violent reality. He hurried his draft call. He surrenders" (35-36). Tanner claims it is a defeat (*Saul Bellow* 23). Scheer-Schazler, among others, thinks it ambiguous, making readers suspended. Porter sees it as a kind of affirmation (*Whence* 26), Goldman reads it as a responsible and positive gesture (5), and Galloway maintains that it is "a profoundly religous need to reaffirm the values of community" (29).

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CHAPTER II

The Victim: Leventhal's Summer in New York

> "If a human life is a great thing to me, it *is* a great thing. Have dignity, you understand me. Choose dignity."[1]

I

In *The Victim*, Bellow shifts the locale from the gloomy, wintry Chicago of *Dangling Man* to hot, sultry New York in which myriads of faces moves around as if in the opium-induced trance depicted by Thomas De Quincey, whose description Bellow chooses as the novel's epigraph.

> Be that as it may, now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to reveal itself; the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing; faces that surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations. . . . *The Pains of Opium*

The novel opens with an arresting description of New York's summer. Not only does it specify the novel's locus but it creates a right mood for the story.

> On some nights, New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of the sky. (11)

With two fitting epigraphs and this carefully-wrought opening paragraph, Bellow prepares the reader to enter Asa Leventhal's urban world, which is permeated with a bizarre, eerie atmosphere. This urban world is no less claustrophobic and threatening than Joseph's Chicago or later Corde's Bucharest. It is against this background that Bellow's story of "[i]llness, madness and death" (142) unfolds.

From the outset, Leventhal is presented as a victim of his urban environment. The first scene in which he squeezes through the shutting door of a moving bus is a fit index to his position in that densely-packed metropolis, to his efforts to find a foothold in that tottering, topsy-turvy urban world. The city of New York, with its huge crowds of people, oppressive high-rise buildings, and lurking, unnameable forces, has always been an ominous, suffocating threat to him. This summer, however, his feelings of loneliness, alienation, and insecurity are intensified by the enervating heat, the constant noise, and the cluttered, unrelated density of New York. He has the feeling that "he really did not know what went on about him, what strange things, savage things" (89). His feeling of "overwhelming human closeness and thickness" brought about by the crushing presence of Allbee and the "too-humanness" of the city makes him feel that "there was not a single part of him on which the whole world did not press with full weight on his body, on his soul" (226).

To show Leventhal's struggle to safeguard his selfhood or simply to eke out a living among the huge crowds of New Yorkers, Bellow takes great pains to depict the city not merely as a setting for the novel but as an active actor. Metaphorically, it is representative of the modern world with which Leventhal, the modern Everyman, must come to terms if he is to achieve his equanimity and humanity.

II

The plot of the novel is simple. Asa Leventhal, a middle-aged Jew, is an editor of a small trade magazine in lower Manhattan. While his wife is away helping her recently widowed mother, Leventhal spends his summer in New York alone. A few days after his wife leaves, two events occur which complicate his normal life. One of his nephews falls seriously ill and, at the request of his sister-in-law, he goes to Staten Island to help look after him. Also, a man named Allbee suddenly comes into his life, charging Leventhal with deliberately ruining his career. Down and out now, he wants Leventhal to help him out of his trouble.

On the surface, this is no more than a story about an ordinary man bothered by his brother's family troubles and harassed by an anti-Semite's crazy accusation and disagreeable intrusion. Yet, by portraying Leventhal's fears, hopes, dreams, desires, and hallucinations, and by depicting complicated human relationships which involve love, hate, mishap, ignorance, infidelity, misunderstanding, victimization, prejudice, and family ties, Bellow renders Leventhal's story a tale of a modern Everyman who tries to break out of his alienation into an acceptance of others.

The two disconcerting events force the hitherto complacent protagonist to reflect upon his past, present, and future and to become seriously engaged in a dialogue with his self and with the world at large in the process of which he comes to recognize that he is closely connected to others and bears responsibility for them. As Tony Tanner puts it, "In this novel Bellow is again probing down into the problem of what the self owes the self and what the self owes the rest of the world; to what extent should a man permit himself to be limited by the

claims of other people; where does the privilege of individuality run up against the responsibilities of inter-relatedness?" (27).

III

Leventhal had a difficult relationship with his father, who was "harsh and selfish toward his sons" (20). Like the first monologist's father in "Two Morning Monologues" and Joseph's father in *Dangling Man*, Leventhal's father is also practical-minded and money-worshipping: "his father had lived poor and died poor, that stern, proud old fool with his savage looks, to whom nothing mattered save his advantage and to be freed by money from the power of his enemies. And who were the enemies? The world, everyone" (102). Leventhal is haunted by the "abstracted look" of his mother, who, according to his father, died in an insane asylum. Leventhal's fear that his mother's insanity might be hereditary has greatly affected his composure as well as his relations with others.

Without adequate schooling for a professional career, Leventhal tried many jobs in New York city before landing his present position as a magazine editor. For a time he was so "stony broke" (67) that he lived "in a dirty hall bedroom on the East Side, starved and thin" (21). He has witnessed how people who are down and out try to live in the shadow of the city, a picture he cannot blot out:

> There rose immediately to Leventhal's mind the most horrible images of men wearily sitting on mission benches waiting for their coffee in a smeared and bleary winter sun; of flophouse sheets and filthy pillows; hideous cardboard cubicles painted to resemble wood, even the tungsten in the bulb like little burning worms that seemed to eat up rather than give light. (68)

Leventhal's memories of those miserable people haunt him no less often than those of his insane mother. Just as he fears some day he

might crack up as his mother did, he dreads that he might be black-listed, and that he might be cast into that part of humanity that "did not get away with it--the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (26).

These fears, symptoms of his hypochondria, guilt complex, and paranoia, so gnaw at him that they affect his external appearance, which is "rather unaccommodating, impassive" (20). Although he accuses his father of suffering from a persecution complex, he himself feels constantly threatened and spied on, constantly beset by misgivings and apprehensions.

Leventhal's fears can be seen as peculiarly Jewish, the result of centuries of suffering from all sorts of bitter experiences--the diaspora, the ghettos, religious persecutions, pogroms, and the Holocaust. Yet Leventhal's fears are also not atypical of modern man's, of his fearful, hostile urban environment. Tanner has insightfully pointed out:

> His [Leventhal's] deeper fear comes from an uncertainty about his position and stability in the cruel, indifferent chaos of the modern city. He puts it to himself this way: if his friends believe Allbee rather than him "then the turn he always feared had come and all good luck was cancelled and all favors melted away. . . . The currents had taken a new twist, and he was being hurried, hurried." This sort of fear is endemic to life in the modern city. The securities of traditional status, identity, and position no longer obtain; all the old definitions are being washed away leaving only two categories--the successful, those get away from it; and the failures, those who go under. (28-29)

IV

Allbee's insistence that Leventhal give him his "due" plunges Leventhal into a penetrating exploration of intricate human relationships. The interrelations between Leventhal and Allbee, which form the focus of the novel, are those of victim and victimizer, the Jew and the

gentile, or, simply, man and man.

For Allbee's first clandestine appearance in the novel, Bellow so orchestrates the atmosphere, tone, style, and imagery that it has the same effect as the appearance of Old Hamlet's ghost or the forest scene in "Young Goodman Brown." The time is a hot summer night, the setting the packed, noisy park near Leventhal's flat, a small, dark forest in the midst of the large-scale moral landscape of the modern city:

> The park was even more crowded than before, and noisy. There was another revivalist band on the corner, the blare of the two joined confusingly above the other sounds. The lamps were yellowed, covered with flies and moths. . . . The fountain ran with a green, leaden glint. Children in their underclothing waded and rolled in the spray, the parents looking on. Eyes seemed softer than by day, and larger, and gazed at one longer, as though in the dark heat some inter-space of reserve had been crossed and strangers might approach one another with a kind of recognition. You looked and thought, at least, that you knew whom you had seen. (31)

It is in such an atmosphere that Allbee suddenly appears before Leventhal to blame him for his downfall. It is against such a backdrop that Leventhal, amidst the crowds, is singled out for the responsibility of another man's fall.

Allbee's sudden entrance into his life takes Leventhal by utter surprise and fills him with unaccountable fear: "Leventhal suddenly felt that he had been singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process, and for an instant he was filled with dread" (36). He tells Allbee, "I haven't thought about you in years, frankly, and I don't know why you think I care whether you exist or not. What, are we related?" (34). Asa and Allbee are not related by blood, but Allbee does function as a double (doppelganger) of Leventhal.[2] He is what Leventhal might end up if he is not lucky enough to "get away with it":

"Until now he had not noticed how seedy he looked, like one of those men you saw sleeping off their whiskey on Third Avenue, lying in the doorways or on the cellar hatches, dead to the cold or the racket or the straight blaze of the sun in their faces" (33).

At first Leventhal refuses to accept any responsibility for the ruin of Allbee's career, the breakup of his marriage, and the reverse of his fortune. He thinks Allbee's accusations preposterous and believes Allbee has only himself to blame. However, after many encounters with Allbee, after talking with his friends, and after his own self-reflection, Leventhal begins to accept some of the responsibility and even to suspect that he might unconsciously have tried to get even with Allbee for his anti-Semitic remarks.

Leventhal first met Allbee at his benefactor Williston's parties. One night, an obviously drunk Allbee makes detestable anti-Semitic remarks against Harkavy and his girl friend at Williston's house. Leventhal is very angry, but since--he believes--he is not a man to carry a grudge, he does not take it to heart for long. Desperately looking for a job, Leventhal, on Williston's suggestion, asks Allbee to introduce him to Rudiger, Allbee's boss at *Dill's Weekly*. At the interview Leventhal blows up when Rudiger, a man notorious for his nastiness, treats him savagely. There is a cross-fire of harsh words.

Leventhal is at fault for losing his head on this occasion: his unsuccessful job-hunting has worn him out and made him hot-tempered and helpless. Yet, from another angle, his losing his temper in Rudiger's office is, in effect, no more than a desperate attempt to keep the few remaining shreds of his dignity. At that juncture he is terribly afraid that "the lowest price he put on himself was too high and he could scarcely understand why anyone should want to pay for his

services" (110).

In any case, even though he does not intend to take revenge on Allbee for his anti-Semitic remarks at Williston's, his disastrous interview does produce unforeseeably bad conseqences: Allbee is fired by Rudiger. Allbee blames Leventhal because he thinks Leventhal plotted to get even with him.

After losing his job, Allbee loses his wife, who later is killed in an auto accident. In great despair Allbee drinks even more. Having spent the money left by his wife, Allbee, down and out, is on the bottom of society. At the end of his rope, he comes to seek Leventhal's help, which he thinks Leventhal owes him. Thus the victim and the victimizer meet. The victim becomes the victimizer and vice versa. But who is the victim?

V

The most particular form of victimization in the novel is anti-Semitism.[3] It is not coincidental that Bellow sets the novel in New York, a city with numerous immigrants from different countries, and a particularly large population of Jewish immigrants. The theme of anti-Semitism is introduced even before Allbee appears in the first chapter. Leventhal overhears his boss Mr. Beard criticize him in an anti-Semitic remark: "Take unfair advantage. . . . Like the rest of his brethren. I've never found one who wouldn't. Always please themselves first" (13).

But the theme of anti-Semitism is fully embodied in the person of Kirby Allbee, a descendant of a New England aristocratic family who counts Governor Winthrop as one of his ancestors. His decline can be seen as related to Leventhal's--the ordinary Jew's--rise socially, economically, and spiritually. Governor Winthrop wished America to

become a model country as a city upon a hill so that people all over the world could see: ". . . for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. . . ." The cities built by Winthrop and his Pilgrim followers on the new continent did catch the eyes of all people so that numerous immigrants from all nations came to America's cities in quest of freedom, equality, prosperity, and happiness. However, Winthrop could not have imagined that more than three hundred years later his own descendants would not be able to find jobs in the modern American city.

Allbee complains that New York has become "a very Jewish city":

> I've lived in New York for a long time. It's a very Jewish city, and a person would have to be a pretty sloppy observer not to learn a lot about Jews here. You know yourself how many Jewish dishes there are in the cafeterias, how much of the stage--how many Jewish comedians and jokes, and stores, and so on, and Jews in public life, and so on. (70)

Living in New York, he sometimes feels as if he were living "in a sort of Egyptian darkness" (131). As a New Englander who "thought it would be daylight forever" (131), he cannot accept the differences and changes in American society. His prejudice makes him unable to believe that a man with the name of Lipschitz could write a book about Thoreau and Emerson. His bitterness at the dominance (or what he would consider conspiracy) of the Jews makes him say that, since "the old breeds are out," New York is now run by "the children of Caliban" (131).

Allbee's strong bias against Jews reflects his own narrow-mindedness, impracticality, and decadence. His anti-Semitism, as Tanner points out, is "only a more exaggerated paranoid vision of reality than Leventhal's conviction that there was a 'black-list' which operated against him while he was unemployed" (30).

Imagining that he is victimized by Jews in the city, Allbee adopts a Calvinist, deterministic view of life: "We do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing, and there's no denying that evil is as real as sunshine" (132). He is convinced that the world is a place where the individual has little or no control over his own destiny. Vociferously he tells Leventhal, "I feel it's bunk, this self-made business. . . . Now it's all blind movement, vast movement, and the individual is shuttled back and forth" (68). His paranoia is just a reverse of the historical pattern in which Jews were victims rather than victimizers: Leventhal has to remind him of the horror of the Holocaust--"Millions of us have been killed" (133).

Although he perceives the world as hostile, Leventhal does not agree with Allbee's deterministic point of view. Although he refuses to shoulder the whole responsibility for Allbee's ruin, he does take Allbee, his antagonist, into his home when he learns that Allbee is so down and out that he has been evicted. Playing the role of a good Samaritan, Leventhal takes a decisive step toward integration into the society of man.

After taking Allbee in for the night and treating him as a friend (or, at least, as a fellow human being), Leventhal has a dream. At the end of the dream, he has "a sense of marvelous relief" (151). This is a quintessentially Emersonian moment: "He was, it seems to him, in a state of great lucidity, and he experienced a rare, pure feeling of happiness. He was convinced that he knew the truth, and he said to himself with satisfaction, 'Yes, I do know it, positively. Will I know it tomorrow? I do now'" (151).[4]

It does not matter whether he will know it tomorrow; Leventhal knows it is not common to get to the truth. He gets it only after he

kind-heartedly receives his adversary into his apartment and treats him as a man with dignity. It is his good deed done under the dictates of his good conscience that elevates him into an Emersonian illumination: "But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception, took place as if within a single soul or person" (151).

Bellow the skeptic knows that distractions in our daily life often prevent man from knowing the truth which should be plain to everyone. Thus the moment of reaching the truth is rare and the Emersonian "crystal ball-eye" state is nearly "untenable" (151) to ordinary people. It is Leventhal's emphatic vision that makes him see in Allbee's eyes "the double of something in his own" (151).

In the last analysis, through the combined illumination (dream plus recognition) Leventhal comes to realize that "the truth must be something we understand at once, without an introduction or explanation, but so common and familiar that we don't always realize it's around us" (151). This view is Bellovian, which, in turn, is also transcendental and Jewish.

However, Allbee the Jew-hater is too degenerate even to strive to redeem himself. He abuses Leventhal's hospitality by bringing in disorder and dirtiness, by reading Leventhal's private mail, and finally by bringing a whore into Leventhal's marriage bed. The "kind-hearted" Leventhal tells himself that he can no longer tolerate his nuisance and victimization. He does not kill him as Odysseus killed those suitors who abused Penelope's hospitality in Odysseus' court: our modern hero (or anti-hero) only drives his enemy out of his flat. The denouement comes when Allbee tries to gas himself (and Leventhal) in Leventhal's kitchen. Despite his sympathy for Allbee as a fellow human being, Leventhal feels he has done his duty and will not accept

victimization any longer.

In the modern city, human relationships have become so intricate that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish who is the victim and who is the victimizer. Though Leventhal did not intend to ruin Allbee's career, he has to pay for the damage he indirectly caused him. As Bellow's first epigraph suggests, this moral is obviously plain. In the novel he does pay his dues, finally meets the demands of retribution for the past mistake he made in Rudiger's office by being pursued by Allbee's crushing presence, by entertaining his antagonist in his own home, and by trying his best to help him, until Allbee himself outwears Leventhal's hospitality.

Allbee, however, is evidently victimized by his own weaknesses as well as his social and urban environment. He is a pathetic figure in the novel because he believes the deterministic view too much to take up the challenge of fate. His becoming a parasite on both his wife and later on Leventhal is a strong example of the abuse of social responsibility. He is the victim turned victimizer par excellence.

VI

Leventhal is also involved in his brother's family troubles. His first trip to Staten Island shows his moral seriousness: he wants to help his relatives, although he realizes that leaving his work in the middle violates his sense of conscientiousness and may result in his losing his job. He is greatly disturbed by his sister-in-law Elena's hysterical phone call during his office hours and immediately puts down his work and sets out to Staten Island, only to learn that the baby is not as seriously ill as Elena thought.

When the ferry boat takes Leventhal to Staten Island, he faces another cluttered, sordid cityscape not unlike the one in Manhattan.

His brother's stuffy flat is even shabbier than his own and Leventhal finds it hard to breathe: the windows have been tightly shut, presumably for the baby's health.

If Leventhal is greatly disturbed by Elena's hysterical phone call, he is even more upset by his face-to-face confrontation with her, his incompetent, ignorant, over-emotional Italian in-law. Leventhal's relation to her is marred not only by his prejudice but by his doubts about Elena's mental health. He is afraid that she might crack up. In many respects she reminds him of his own insane mother.

Although Mickey is not as seriously ill as Elena thought, Leventhal feels sorry for the baby because of his mother's suffocating and foolish "love" and his father's irresponsible and neglectful absence. What further disheartens him is the estranged family relationships. His older nephew Philip does not even know him, his own uncle. His sister-in-law does not know his wife's name. Later, after several visits, he still remains a visitor to, rather than a relative of, the family.

The recognition makes him resolve to commit himself more to his brother's family. Consequently, despite his complaints about his brother's irresponsibility as a father and about Elena's incompetence as a mother, Leventhal decides to do his best to help his brother's family and to make amends to his nephews for his past neglectfulness.

Leventhal's family feelings awakened by the visit trigger him to make his trips to Staten Island almost a routine in the following weeks. He even tries to make amends by taking Philip for an outing in Times Square and in the city park and zoo.

His involvement with his brother's family also forces him to ponder the parent-child relationship. Just as Tommy Wilhelm laments

that "the fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons . . ." (*SD* 91), Leventhal is saddened to know that while some children are not doing what they should do (e.g., Schlossberg's sons and daughters who, in their thirties, still depend on their father for their living), other children, much less fortunate, are not well taken care of by their parents. Mickey is an example of the latter.

His trips between Manhattan and Staten Island thus mark his deep moral commitment to his brother's family and his genuine love for his nephews. Although owing to his difficult relationships with his in-laws, he is reluctant to meet Elena and her mother in their flat, on many occasions he spends two hours getting to Staten Island just to be with his dying nephew for a few minutes in the hospital. His deep feelings for his kindred manifest themselves most eloquently when he learns of Mickey's death. Unable to control himself, he cries bitterly for some time in the lavatory of the office.

Leventhal's last trip to Staten Island is on the occasion of Mickey's funeral, where he mourns the child's early death and re-unites with his long-absent brother. The city scene then adopts a mourning, elegiac mood for the occasion:

> The sun had come round to a clearer portion of the sky and its glare was overpowering. Leventhal took off his jacket. The heat of the pavement penetrated his soles and he felt it in the very bones of his feet. . . . *He had a momentary impression of being in a foreign city* when he saw the church . . . --the ponderousness, the gorgeousness, the decay of it, the fenced parish house, the garden, and the small fountain thick with white lead and flimsily curtained with water. (160; italics mine)

In addition to showing Leventhal's moral commitment, the ferry trips to Staten Island are also mythical. In "an almost Dantesque" manner (Tanner, 30), Bellow describes the ferry crossings: "The ferry

crawled in the heat and blackness of the harbor. The mass of passengers on the open deck was still, like a crowd of souls, each concentrating on its destination" (63).

The scenes depicted on the ferry trips fittingly reflect Leventhal's mood. For instance, the last trip back from Staten Island after Mickey's funeral occurs after sunset and is suffused with an elegiac pathos. The whole harbor is enshrouded in darkness:

> The boat went slowly over the sluggish harbor. The splash of a larger vessel reached it and Leventhal caught a glimpse of the murky orange of a hull, like the apparition of a furnace on the water. The searchlight on the bridge passed over it and it was lost in a moment, put out. But its giant wading was still audible seaward in the hot, black air. (163)

Most important, these trips provide Leventhal with opportunities to observe more closely the people, the harbor, and the city surrounding him and to reflect upon human life in general and his own life in particular. Waiting at the ferry station or on board the ferry boat, he experiences sudden illuminations which not only contribute to his recognition of his role in life and his duty as a man but to our understanding of the themes of the novel.

Take one of his trips to Staten Island, for instance. On board the ferry boat, Leventhal watches the water, the gulls, the trafficking boats and tankers on the harbor, and the towers on the shore which "rose up in huge blocks, scorched, smoky, gray, and bare white where the sun was direct upon them" (52). Suddenly he has an awe-inspiring, almost naturalistic epiphany:

> The notion brushed Leventhal's mind that the light over [the towers] and over the water was akin to the yellow revealed in the slit of the eye of a wild animal, say a lion, something inhuman that didn't care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it, and

> formed a part of him that responded to the heat and the glare, exhausting as these were, or even to freezing, salty things, harsh things, all things difficult to stand. (52-53)

Descriptions such as this have led critics to comment on the naturalistic element in this novel. What I want to point out here is that the sun motif, important in Bellow's canon, is used in this novel to give lights of illumination or to emit unbearable, tropic-like heat. Here the sun, which is "no hotter in any Singapore or Surabaya" (52), is both "something inhuman that didn't care about anything human" and the source of light that dawns upon Leventhal's mind. However, as revealed in the above quote, Leventhal has only a vague notion of a common humanity and a mysterious relation to nature. He will see things more clearly only when his involvements with his brother's family and with Allbee deepen.

Another of Leventhal's illuminations occurs while he is waiting for his nephew in a square near the South Ferry gates. There he ruminates about his own character and about life in general. He discovers that, after his several encounters with Allbee and his involvement in Mickey's illness, he has changed. The changes are reflected in his susceptibility to feelings whereas in the past he was inclined to be "short and neutral" (92) to everyone except his wife. Now he recognizes that he has been neglectful of his nephews and others.

It is during his waiting there that Leventhal is engaged in a self-society dialogue: it is impossible to identify with others and to be liked by everyone, but it is also impossible to shut oneself up and to love oneself narcissistically. How to keep a balance between the two extremes--that is, without incurring an imperial self and without

losing a sovereign self--is a real issue for Leventhal and, indeed, for every Bellow hero to ponder.

After this self-society dialogue Leventhal begins to compare life to an egg race: "We were all the time taking care of ourselves, laying up, storing up, watching out on this side and on that side, and at the same time running, running desperately, running as if in an egg race with the egg in a spoon" (93). Life is precarious, man is fragile, subject to all sorts of influences, personal and environmental.

VII

Throughout the novel the hot, sultry, stultifying city exacerbates Leventhal's intensely strained, overstrung nerves. The whole urban environment is imprisoning in its effect. Yet, unlike Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Leventhal does not express a strong urge to leave the city. When he tries to cool his body off and to soothe his disturbed psyche he goes to the parks in the city.

The parks, however, with their green suggestive of a country-like scene, fail to give the solace and coolness Leventhal needs, because they are usually as densely packed with humanity and as full of hustle and bustle as the city streets. Furthermore, his visits to the parks are often thwarted or affected by Allbee's ubiquitous apparition-like intrusion.

Instead of giving Leventhal the soothing effect normally associated with the countryside, the parks, like other physical constructs of the city, oppress Leventhal. Allbee first appears to Leventhal in the small park near his apartment. After Mickey's funeral, Leventhal stops there before going home. There he is surrounded by "an overwhelming human closeness and thickness" (163) and is "penetrated by a sense not merely of the crowd in this park but of innumerable millions,

crossing, touching, pressing" (163). To Leventhal, this scene of his fellow New Yorkers at play brings to mind a soul-chilling image of the Dantesque hell: "Hell cracking open . . . and all the souls, crammed together, looking out" (163-64).

The country, in the form of the American West, appeals more to Allbee than to Leventhal. The New Englander Allbee, who feels New York has been usurped by Jews, compares himself to "an Indian who sees a train running over the prairie where the buffalo used to roam" (203). (Cf. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*). Now that the buffalo on the prairie has become an endangered species, he wants to get off the pony and be a conductor on that train (203).

To the displaced Allbee, the myth of the West, of the frontier, then, is not linked to Nature but to racial struggle, which is valid historically with reference to that between the Indians and the white immigrants. In the last scene, some years after the denouement, Allbee meets Leventhal in the theater. He says to Leventhal, "I've gotten off the pony. . . . I'm on the train" (255). Still believing that the new world has changed hands, he tells Leventhal he is just a passenger on the train, not even in first class. In other words, he is not among those who run things. Leventhal tries to ask him who does run things but fails to.

Perhaps his job as a trade magazine editor confines him to the city and offers him no alternative. Perhaps his urban Jewish background has educated him to be at home in the city. (Allbee once jests that the Jews are "right at home in this [modern city], like those what-do-you-call-'em that live in the flames--salamanders" [128].) In any case, Leventhal never entertains the dream of leaving the city for the country. However oppressive the city appears to him, Leventhal

remains in the urban complex, doing what he has to do. He works in his office, helps take care of his brother's family troubles, and tries to deal with the anti-Semite Allbee's pestering. It is through such human interaction in the city that he comes to the recognition of human commonality and human responsibility. During this long hot summer in the city, he has tried to take to heart Schlossberg's advice not to try to be more than human or to allow himself to become less than human. By accepting human limitations and life's hardships he has discovered the meaning in life and learned to come to terms with himself and with the world at large.

Through two unusual events, Leventhal's life in the city in this particular summer transforms him into a different person, which is visible at the end of the novel. Tanner points this out:

> The most important thing that happens to Leventhal is that he is stirred out of his "indifference" and "recalcitrance" into a sense of general injustice and suffering, and thence to an awareness and confession of specific blame and responsibility. Instead of timidly wrapping himself up in his too-simple concept of "good luck" he must emerge and be exposed to the problems of environmental pressure, cruel chance, mixed deservings; he must move beyond his paranoid sense of himself as simple victim and realise that there are more complex and subtler forms of "victimisation." (31)

This novel is remarkable in its depiction of modern man's relationship with victimizing urban and social forces. Perhaps what makes Leventhal's New York stand out in Bellow's canon is that it has been invested with an atmosphere that is primordial and infernal. Jonathan Wilson has commented that "symbolically, Leventhal's journeys in the novel, on foot, by subway, or on the Staten Island ferry, seem to take him back in time, or down into a Dantesque nether world or into a jungle" (59).

Compared with *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* provides a more vivid example of man as a victim of social and urban environment. The city of New York in *The Victim* exerts a more formidable influence on Leventhal than Chicago does on Joseph in *Dangling Man*. Joseph's Chicago and Leventhal's New York, however, contrast markedly with Augie March's Chicago in Bellow's next novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *The Victim* (1947; New York: Signet, 1965) 122. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] For discussions of the parallels between Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband* and *The Victim*, see Klein, Clayton, Opdahl, Tanner, and Wilson. For the latest reading of Leventhal and Allbee as doubles see Wilson, Chapter 3.

[3] For discussions of anti-Semitism in this novel, see Kremer, Goldman, and Aharoni.

[4] This moment of gaining the truth, however temporary, can be compared with Tommy Wilhelm's in the subway epiphany section. See *Seize the Day*, pp. 91-92.

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CHAPTER III

The Adventures of Augie March: Augie, Chicago's Native Son

> "I have a feeling . . . about the axial lines of life. . . . Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony!"[1]

I

"I am an American, Chicago born--Chicago, that somber city--and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way . . ." (3); thus speaks the hero of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Recalling Santayana's statement--"To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, and a career"--Augie's announcement not only reveals his larky and independent character but pinpoints his tie to his native city--"Chicago, that somber city."

The novel--Augie's memoir written during his travel abroad--in large part recounts his fond memories of his city and its people. Combining the forms of the picaresque and the *Bildungsroman* (or the *Entwicklungsroman*, to use Scheer-Schazler's term [57]), *Augie March* presents Augie both as the narrator and experiencer, the protagonist and commentator. Structurally, the novel is divided in two, the first half set in Chicago, the second in Mexico and elsewhere. It starts with his recollections of his childhood and adolescence in Chicago, proceeds to his exotic adventures in Mexico, and ends with his sojourn

in European cities. The time span is the 1920's to the late 40's and early 50's.[2]

As a native son of Chicago, Augie, from his boyhood on, has been open to all varieties of people and experiences: "I was and have always been ready to venture as far as possible" (76). His picaresque adventures take him to almost every corner of the city and he experiences the different walks of life, from the well-to-do to the down-and-out. In employment alone, he is a movie house handbill distributer, newspaper deliverer, street vendor, railroad station concession attendant, burglar, department store helper, real estate agent's handyman, coal yard manager, dog valet, luxury store agent, WPA worker, immigrant smuggler, rubber-paint salesman, book thief, student-house helper, ghost-writer, and CIO organizer.

He is acquainted with a wide variety of urban personalities, from intellectuals to criminals, "an immense sampling of a tremendous host" (125). He is quite at home anywhere and everywhere in his city and seems to belong everywhere and nowhere. As he describes his own character, "I touched all sides, and nobody knew where I belonged. I had no idea of that myself" (113).

Most importantly Chicago provides Augie with an invaluable democratic education. The theme of *Augie* indeed echos back that of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."[3]

Augie's Chicago is full of opportunity, "America's yet unfulfilled maturity, a maturity that insists that around the next corner, beyond the next hill, in the next block lies the realization of the promise" (Anderson 2). With its sprawling backdrop and variegated people, the city, rather than being a bleak, smothering, naturalistic environment,

turns out to be an open sphere for Augie's adventures. Throughout much of the novel, Augie remains youthful, innocent, optimistic, dynamic, and adventurous and is able to accept his city as it is, including its squalor, vice, and shortcomings.

Augie's strong attachment to his city is evidenced by the fact that, wherever he goes, the city is always on his mind. In places far away from his home city-- Mexico, New York, or Europe--he thinks about his city and frequently runs into fellow Chicagoans with whom he reminisces about their city. Even adrift on a boat in the African Sea, Augie finds a fellow Chicagoan (Basteshaw). So much does the city haunt him that in his dream he gladly returns to his old neighborhood; as he says to himself in his dream, "Among other things it is good to see the West Side of Chicago again" (506).

As a child of the city, the near-orphan Augie is inevitably susceptible to all kinds of urban influences. Early in the novel, Augie says, "All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself" (43). These influences all try to convince Augie of the authenticity of their particular visions. The novel, however, is not about how Augie is formed by these influences but rather about how the "adoptable" Augie, like his literary predecessor Huck Finn, tries to evade the effects of all these influences. His ultimate aim being to seek a worthwhile, higher, and independent fate, he does not want to be determined by his environment or to become what other people (those "reality instructors," to borrow a phrase from *Herzog*) want to make of him. Among the dominant "influences" are Grandma Lausch, William Einhorn, and Mrs. Renlings, who, together with people clustering around them, represent forces coming from, respectively, the lower,

the middle, and the upper-middle class in Chicago. In addition to these three influences, his brother Simon also tries to exert his will on him.

II

The story begins with the 9-year-old Augie living with his mother, brothers (Simon and George), and Grandma Lausch, on the Northwest Side of Chicago in the 1920's. Augie's Chicago is that of immigrants and neighborhoods. The neighborhood Augie grows up is predominantly Polish. Surrounded by Catholic Poles, Augie, like the urbanite Asa Leventhal, suffers anti-Semitism: "And sometimes we were chased, stoned, bitten, and beat up for Christ-killers, all of us, even Georgie, articled, whether we liked it or not, to this mysterious trade" (12). However, unlike Leventhal, Augie is "by and large too larky and boisterous to take it to heart" (12).

Grandma Lausch, "one of those Machiavellis of small street and neighborhood" (4), is only a boarder, "not a relation at all" (4). It is under Grandma's command and dominance that the Marches survive Prohibition and the Depression without a patriarch in the household. The grotesque and scheming Grandma enjoys making the Marches "take a long swig of her mixture of reality" (51). She tries to give Simon and Augie the "best" education she can; for instance, she teaches Augie to lie convincingly at the public health clinic. She preaches cynicism and calculation as the only means of survival. Meanwhile, she debunks Augie's innocence and optimism.

Through Grandma Lausch's networking Augie comes to know many other common Chicagoans, such as the soldierly Kreindl, Lulov the retouch artist from Division Street, Lubin the welfare caseworker, Dr. Wernick the dentist, Mr. Anticol the old junky and atheist, and Sylvester the

cinema house owner turned communist. These unforgettable Chicagoans, together with many others later introduced, impress the reader with their unique qualities, their idiosyncracies, and their zest for life; it is these people who speak for the exuberance and vitality of the city.

To improve the financial condition of the March family, Grandma Lausch sends both Simon and Augie out to work when they are still very young. Augie's first summer job away from home is with the Coblins on the North Side. In the Coblin household, Anna Coblin (Mama's cousin) and her brother, Five Properties, still retain strong Jewish immigrant traits, whereas Hyman Coblin, Anna's husband, is a typical man of the city in the thirties. He knows his Chicago very well and is always "ready for any conversation with up-to-the-minute gang news of the bloody nights of the beer barons and the last curb quotations" (26-27). Bellow describes how he prepares himself for a trip downtown:

> In his snap-brim detective's felt and large-toed shoes, carrying accounts and a copy of the *Tribune* for the Gumps, the sports results, and the stock quotations--he was speculating --and also for the gangwar news, keeping up with what was happening around Colossimo and Capone in Cicero and the North Side O'Bannions, that being about the time when O'Bannion was knocked off among his flowers by somebody who kept his gun-hand in a friendly grip--with this, Coblin got on the Ashland car. For lunch he went to a good restaurant. . . . Then to the [carriers'] meeting. . . . Afterward, pie a la mode and coffee at the south end of the Loop, followed by a burlesque show at the Hay-market or Rialto, or one of the cheaper places where farm or Negro girls did the grinds, the more single-purposed, less-playful houses. (22)

Later when Augie plays truant and goes to the Loop with Jimmy Klein on various errands, they frequent shows "to hear Sophie Tucker whack herself on the behind and sing 'Red Hot Mama,' or see Rose La Rose swagger and strip in the indolent rhythm that made Coblin her

admirer" (38). Many times he runs into Coblin standing in theater lines.

With his buddy Jimmy Klein, Augie rides the elevator at City Hall and observes a cross-section of his fellow Chicagoans:

> In the cage we rose and dropped, rubbing elbows with bigshots and operators, commissioners, grabbers, heelers, tipsters, hoodlums, wolves, fixers, plaintiffs, flatfeet, men in Western hats and women in lizard shoes and fur coats, hot-house and arctic drafts mixed up, brute things and airs of sex, evidence of heavy feeding and systematic shaving, of calculations, grief, not-caring, and hopes of tremendous millions in concrete to be poured or whole Mississippi of bootleg whisky and beer. (39)

By use of Whitmanesque cataloguing such as the above, Bellow effectively renders the city in all its multitudinous variety.

Being larky and footloose, Augie, like Huck Finn, refuses to be "civilized" by Grandma Lausch. In fact, the tender-minded Augie (to use William James's term) often finds it hard to agree with Grandma's decisions or maneuverings. For instance, while he can follow her instructions to con free glasses for his mother, he cannot agree with her realistic but cold-hearted way of arranging the institutionalizing of his idiot brother George. Despite their disagreements, however, Augie still has a deep affection for the old lady. When he hears of the news of her death, he feels terribly lost.

Next to Grandma's influence comes that of Augie's crippled employer William Einhorn, a superbly drawn character. As a junior factotom to Einhorn, Augie has a chance to come into contact with the tough, masculine world of Chicago. It is in Einhorn's pool room that he meets all sorts of tough city guys:

> Along with the blood-smelling swaggeroos, recruits for mobs, automobile thieves, stick-up men, sluggers and bouncers,

> punks with ambition to become torpedoes, neighborhood cowboys with Jack Holt sideburns down to the jawbone, collegiates, tinhorns and small-time racketeers and pugs, ex-servicemen, home-evading husbands, hackies, truckers and bush-league athletes. (81)

The indomitable Einhorn leaves deep imprints on the adolescent Augie. As Augie writes:

> William Einhorn was the first superior man I knew. He had a brain and many enterprises, real directing power, philosophical capacity, and if I were methodical enough to take thought before an important and practical decision and also (*N.B.*) if I were really his disciple and not what I am, I'd ask myself, "What would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advise or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think?" (60)

To many people, Einhorn is a genius, a wizard, or a guru. By his wits, he accumulates a considerable fortune before the Depression. He compares the American businessman to "the organizer coming after the conqueror, the poet and philosopher succeeding the organizer" (67). To Einhorn, the "typically American" system of free enterprise is "the work of intelligence and strength in an open field, a world of possibilities" (67). The atmosphere of hope and accomplishment in the Einhorn household reinforces Augie's inherent optimism.

Yet, as Augie observes, Einhorn, for all his superior qualities, is also a petty con man who indulges in numerous small swindles. He and his wife are selfish. Like Grandma Lausch, he knows how to use large institutions. He sends away for everything that is free, from samples of food, soaps, medicine, and the literature of all causes, to reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology and publications of the Smithsonian Institution.

And Einhorn has a craving for every woman he meets. It is the lecherous William Einhorn who first initiates Augie into love in the

manner of a city business transaction. For a high school graduation present, Einhorn takes Augie to a brothel. After the visit, Augie reflects on this city experience, "Paying didn't matter. Nor using what other people used. That's what city life is. And so it *didn't* have the luster it should have had, and there *wasn't* any epithalamium of gentle lovers" (124). It is the kind of initiation the city offers to Augie: a paid-for and second-hand love.

After the funeral of the Old Commissioner, Einhorn's Russian Jewish immigrant father, Einhorn pens an obituary to eulogize him. This cliche-ridden article sums up a man's history in concert with the city's:

> The return of the hearse from the newly covered grave leaves a man to pass through the last changes of nature who found Chicago a swamp and left it a great city. He came after the Great fire, said to be caused by Mrs. O'Leary's cow, in flight from the conscription of the Hapsburg tyrant, and in his life as a builder proved that great places do not have to be founded on the bones of slaves, like the pyramids of Pharaohs or the capital of Peter the Great on the banks of the Neva, where thousands were trampled in the Russian marshes. The lesson of an American life like my father's . . . is that achievements are compatible with decency. (104)

When the Depression comes, it hits everybody. The bank failures and the collapse of Insull's watered investing schemes give rise to "the suicides by skyscraper leaps" (106) which take place in La Salle Street. William Einhorn loses most of his properties and becomes "a stinking Jew cripple" to tenants evicted from his apartments, but he is not destroyed.

Augie is greatly touched when Einhorn tells this truth about his character: "You've got *opposition* in you. You don't slide through everything. You just make it look so" (117). With such opposition in him Augie simultaneously admires and rejects Einhorn.

When Einhorn cannot afford to hire Augie, Augie attends the city college in order to prepare for the civil-service exams. The college is a meeting ground for various students from all parts of the city:

> The students were children of immigrants from all parts, coming up from Hell's Kitchen, Little Sicily, the Black Belt, the mass of Polonia, the Jewish streets of Humboldt Park, put through the coarse sifters of curriculum, and also bringing wisdom of their own. They filled the factory-length corridors and giant classrooms with every human character and germ, to undergo consolidation and become, the idea was, American. In the mixture there was beauty--a good proportion--and pimple-insolence, and parricide faces, gum-chew innocence, labor fodder and secretarial forces, Danish stability, Dago inspiration, catarrh-hampered mathematical genius; there were waxed-eared shovelers' children, sex-promising businessmen's daughters--an immense sampling of a tremendous host, the multitudes of holy writ, begotten by West-moving, factor-shoved parents. Or me, the by-blow of a travelling man. (125)

This passage graphically illustrates the democratic idea of bountiful America as a melting pot.

Augie works as a shoe-dog in a clothes shop for a while before he is employed by the Renlings as a salesman of luxury goods in Evanston. The job takes him to the wealthy districts of the Chicago area: he is "on a peculiar circuit, for a while, of the millionaire suburbs--Highland Park, Kenilworth, and Winnetka--selling things, a specialized salesman in luxury lines and dealing with aristocrats" (129).

Mrs. Renling is the only "influence" who openly wants to adopt Augie. As her protege, Augie does pick up some pointers as to dressing and manners. However, when Mrs. Renling wishes to adopt him as her heir, he declines the offer, because, as he says, it is not "a fate good enough for me" (151).

After leaving the Renlings and bidding farewell to his prospective upper-class life, Augie begins his wandering among the lower classes

again. He tries several jobs before he runs into Padilla and becomes a book thief. Selling stolen books to college students, Augie lives in a South Side student house near the University of Chicago, where Augie comes to know many other characters who leave distinct impressions on him. In the meanwhile he reads books voraciously.

Augie's elder brother, Simon, is an ambitious young man whose single goal is to make good in America. Unlike Augie, he is seriously intent on his pursuit of success, wealth, and power. Partly through marriage to a wealthy woman but mainly through his own shrewdness, he becomes a business tycoon in Chicago. In his portrayal of this acquisitive and exploitive character, Bellow, though not completely condemning him, does highlight the suicidal and almost insane aspect of his pursuit. In an American city like Chicago, Bellow implies, it is possible for an illegitimate son of immigrants such as Simon to achieve the American Dream, but the price he has to pay may be killingly high.

After Simon's marriage to Charlotte Magnus, Augie goes to various luxurious hotels, restaurants, barber shops, and clubs in Chicago. Mainly through Simon's encouragement, Augie also pays attention to Lucy, a rich heiress in the Magnus family. During his engagement to Lucy, Augie is exposed to the elite of Chicago, but despite the lure of women, wealth, and luxury, he refuses the way of his hard-hearted and practical brother.

While simultaneously working for Simon in the coal yard and courting Lucy, Augie moves between the two worlds of Chicago, the wealthy and the impoverished, and is keenly aware of their co-existence:

> All that opulence, the strength of cars in the great rout of cars in the cold-lit darkness of the North Side Drive, and that mobile heraldry on soft tires rushing toward the floating balls and moons of the Drake Hotel and the towers around it; the thick meat, solid eating, excitement of dancing. Following the lake shore, you left the dry wood and grayed brick of thick-built, jammed, labor-and-poverty Chicago standing apart, speedily passed to the side. Ah no! but the two halves of the prophecy were there together, the Chaldee beauties and the wild beasts and doleful creatures shared the same houses together. (245-46)

Augie does not become Lucy's husband, despite Simon's expectations. (Out of kind-heartedness, Augie accompanies his friend Mimi to an abortionist and there he is mistaken for Mimi's lover.) After his breakup with Lucy and Simon, Augie becomes a labor organizer.

When he is slugged by the enemy union men, Augie's disillusionment with Chicago crystallizes: with "the dry snot of fear in [his] blood-clotted nose," he is "hallowed by [his] hate for it [the dull hot brute shit of a street], as well as for the creeping of the trolley" (308). He flees to Thea Fenchel, whom he met in the summer resort of St. Joe, and his passionate love for Thea results in their exotic journey to Mexico. Thus concludes the Chicago section of the novel.

III

By and large, the Chicago section, the first and best part of the novel, is essentially a celebration of Chicago and its people. Nonetheless, despite its openness and exuberance, the city is not all brightness and opportunity. Neither is Augie, for all his larkiness and innocence, blind to the gloom of the city, which persists throughout the novel as much as the lingering smell from the stockyards.

Augie notices the gloominess of his city even in his early years. When he goes to the free dispensary on Harrison Street to get glasses for his mother, he immediately detects:

> a thundery gloom in Harrison of limestone county buildings and cumbersome red streetcars with metal grillwork on their windows and monarchical iron whiskers of cowcatchers front and rear. They lumbered and clanged, and their brake tanks panted in the slushy brown of a winter afternoon or the bare stone brown of a summer's, salted with ash, smoke, and prairie dust, with long stops at the clinics to let off clumpers, cripples, hunchbacks, brace-legs, crutch-wielders, tooth and eye sufferers, and all the rest. (7-8)

Much later in the novel, when Augie has his hernia operated on in the County Hospital on the same Harrison Street, he finds the same "thundery gloom, bare stone brown, while the red cars lumbered and clanged" (458). Between these two passages, "gloom" is mentioned frequently. Often, the city's darkness mirrors Augie's mood, especially when he confronts the dismal aspects of his life. The marriage of the inner and outer weather is seen when he and Mimi are caught out by Weintraub in the abortion clinic and Augie feels "general darkness and fear, like the unlighted cloud that hung outside" (273).

Growing up in a poor immigrant neighborhood during the twenties, Augie is, of course, not a stranger to the grim reality of city life. He understands that he was "forced early into deep city aims" (84) in an environment that can turn against him at any time. Later Augie observes the down-and-out side of Chicago.

As a CIO organizer hunting for the union members to organize, Augie goes to their moldy rooms, where he reflects, "No use assuming that I had reversed all and was now entering these flophouse doors from the side of light, formerly from that of darkness" (292).

While working in Simon's coal yard, Augie descends into the despicably dark and sordid places when he tries to recruit hands for the yard and takes the coal-and-ice deals into taverns in order to get business:

> in those sleepy and dark with heat joints where the very flies crept rather than flew, seeming doped by the urinal camphors and malt sourness, and from the heated emptiness and woodblock-knocking of the baseball broadcast that gave only more constriction to the unlocatable, undiagnosed wrong. . . . But in such places the slow hairy fly-crawl from drop to drop and star to star, you could pray the non-human universe was not entered from here, and this was no sack-end of it that happened to touch Cook County and Northern Illinois. (227-28)

While working on the WPA program as a housing surveyer, Augie goes to lower-class areas and into houses in the slums, which, as he admits, are "terrra incognita" to him.[4]

> I was with a housing survey, checking on rooms and plumbing back-of-the-yards. . . . Also, the going into houses satisfied my curiosity. It was finding ten people to a room and the toilets in excavations under the street, or the rat-bitten kids. That was what I didn't like too much. The stockyard reek clung to me worse than the smell of the dogs at Guillaume's. And even to me, as accustomed to slums as Indians are to elephants, it was terra incognita. The different smells of flesh in all degrees from desire to sickness followed me. (286-87)

This is an unmasked and relentless picture of the poor during the Depression.

The darkness crystallizes into a significant symbol in the novel when, as Simon's assistant, he goes to the police station:[5]

> But the dark of this West Side station! It was very dark. It was spoiled, diseased, sore and running. And as the misminted and wrong-struck figures and faces stooped, shambled, strode, gazed, dreaded, surrendered, didn't care--unfailing, the surplus and superabundance of human material--you wondered that all was stuff that was born human and shaped human, and over the indiscriminateness and lack of choice. And don't forget the dirt-hardness, the dough fats and raw meats, of those on the official side. And this wasn't even the big Newgate of headquarters downtown but merely a neighborhood tributary. (229)

It is the harsh reality Augie has to face on his way to seeking a good

enough fate.

In addition to the gloom and darkness, the dehumanizing materialism of the city is also dreadful to Augie. As he observes in the hotel reserved for Simon's wedding:

> But in this modern power of luxury, with its battalions of service workers and engineers, it's the things themselves, the products that are distinguished, and the individual man isn't nearly equal to their great sum. Finally they are what becomes great--the multitude of baths with never-failing hot water, the enormous air-conditioning units and the elaborate machinery. No opposing greatness is allowed. . . . (238)

After leaving the Renlings and working as a rubber paint salesman, Augie goes around the city on the streetcars and El in winter. The uniform "thingness" of the city seen from his car rides sickens him: "there was something fuddling . . . in the mass piled up of uniform things, the likeness of small parts, the type of newspaper columns and the bricks of buildings" (159). Augie fears that he may be reduced into insignificance:

> To sit and be trundled, while you see: there's a danger in that of being a bobbin for endless thread or bolt for yard goods; if there's not much purpose anyway in the ride. And if there's some amount of sun in the dusty weep marks of the window, it can be even worse for the brain than those iron-deep clouds, just plain brutal and not mitigated. *There have been civilizations without cities. But what about cities without civilizations?* An inhuman thing, if possible, to have so many people who beget nothing on one another. No, but it is not possible, and the dreary begets its own fire, and so this never happens. (159; italics mine)

Augie's disillusionment with his city grows even more acute in the second half of the novel. After returning from Mexico, he observes his city from the window of a high building:

> this gray snarled city with the hard black straps of rails, enormous industry cooking and its vapor shuddering to the

> air, the climb and fall of its stages in construction or demolition like mesas, and on these the different powers and sub-powers, crouched and watched like sphinxes. Terrible dumbness covered it, like a judgment that would never find its word. (425)

The images of the above passage, as Clayton notes, evoke a sense of inhuman terror oppressing the individual (111).

Staying in County Hospital before he goes to war, Augie goes up to the roof to look at his city. Chicago's urban sprawl, with its massive details and units, gives rise to his feeling of *nada*:

> Around was Chicago. In its repetition it exhausted your imagination of details and units, more units than the cells of the brain and bricks of Babel. The Ezekiel caldron of wrath, stoked with bones. In time the caldron too could melt. A mysterious tremor, dust, vapor, emanation of stupendous effort traveled with the air, over me on top of the great establishment, so full as it was, and over the clinics, clinks, factories, flophouses, morgue, skid row. As before the work of Egypt and Assyria, as before a sea, you're nothing here. Nothing. (458-59)

The gloomy atmosphere and the repetition of details and units here represent the inhuman forces of urban circumstances.

A novel that celebrates Chicago as an American city is pervaded with such somber pictures! The reader hears two voices simultaneously --yea and nay. While most of the time Augie celebrates the city's vitality and exuberance, he also notes its desolation, squalor, and darkness. His attitude toward his city changes from early acceptance to later disappointment and even disillusionment.

The change of Augie's attitude toward his city is not surprising if we remember that Bellow is essentially a realist and that the novel is an honest record of Augie's ties to his city. In his youth Augie, in his innocence and exuberance, is able to accept his city in its totality, including its vice and squalor. As he matures and experi-

ences vicissitudes in life, however, it is inevitable that he starts to feel disappointed with his city, especially when his luck goes sour.

Moreover, as the novel is Augie's memoir, the narrator and commentator Augie tends to brood and qualify whereas the protagonist and experiencer Augie enjoys his adventures in his city. Augie's qualification of his city as "that somber city" at the very outset of the novel is deliberate, preparing the reader for the somber picture of the city in the pages to follow.

From the viewpoint of what E. M. Forster calls "fiction-technicalities" (Cowley 25), Bellow establishes the basic contradiction inherent in the novel by combining the forms of *bildungsroman* and picaresque in the novel and by having his picaro protagonist roam in an urban environment traditionally associated with naturalism. This accounts for the dialectics (and tension) between self and society, optimism and pessimism, freedom and boundary, celebration and condemnation, brightness and darkness, as well as energy and ennui in the novel.

Augie's attitudes toward his city more or less reflect Bellow's own. Like his author, who claims himself "a Chicagoan out and out" (Kunitz 73), Augie, a native son, of course knows that Chicago is a rough place: there are "heathen, stupes, and bruteheads" (81), muscle-minded apes, gangsters, corrupt politicians, tough policemen, and swindling businessmen. There are sensational news stories of gangsters killing each other, and Augie himself sometimes yields to the temptation of stealing.

He is taught well by his surrogate father Einhorn:

> The city is one place where a person who goes out for a peaceful walk is liable to come home with a shiner or bloody nose, and he's almost as likely to get it from a cop's nightstick as from a couple of squareheads. . . . Because

> you know it's not the city salary the cops live on now, not with all the syndicate money there is to pick up. (82)

This picture of the brutish reality of the city reflects Einhorn's (and Bellow's) unsentimental attitude toward Chicago and cities in general.[6] Bellow has Einhorn tell Augie that perhaps the greatest advantage of living in that brutish and somber city of Chicago is that one does not embrace any illusion about the city or about life: "But there is some kind of advantage in the roughness of a place like Chicago, of not having any illusions either. Whereas in all the great capitals of the world there's some reason to think humanity is very different" (82).

Bellow believes all cities are alike. He does not believe that in Rome, London, Paris, or Athens life is less dangerous than in Chicago.[7] While the New York City in *The Victim* is compared to Bangkok and Singapore, Chicago and other cities in *Augie* are also associated with London, Messina, Rome, and Calcutta. The implication is clear: all cities are alike and all human beings share the same condition. The satellite cities of Chicago (Gary and Hammond) invite comparisons with London and Alpine Torino: "If you've seen a winter London open thundering mouth in its awful last minutes of river light or have come with cold clanks from the Alps into Torino in December white steam then you've known like greatness of place" (90). And one night in a Detroit police station cell, Augie reflects on man's fate: "However, as I felt on entering Erie, Pennsylvania, *there is a darkness*. *It is for everyone*" (175; italics mine). Thinking back about some ancient Greeks, who thought they were in the light but were in fact in darkness too, Augie reflects, that compared with modern man, they are still "the admiration of the rest of the mud-sprung, famine-knifed, street-pounding, war-rattled, difficult, painstaking, kicked in the belly,

grief and cartilage mankind, the multitude, some under a coal-sucking Vesuvius of chaos smoke, some inside a heaving Calcutta midnight, who very well know where they are" (175).

Bellow's descriptions of Chicago's "thundery gloom" and its alienating reification paint a realistic rather than a romantic picture of Augie's city, but *Augie March* is not a naturalistic novel emphasizing the conditioning forces of the city. Chicago is characterized by both vitality and despondence, optimism and darkness, fluidity and restraint, the former always overriding the latter.

That is why Augie, though a down-and-out rubber paint salesman at the moment, remarks, "And once I was under way, streetcars weren't sufficient, nor Chicago large enough to hold me" (160). Augie will not, as the novel shows, succumb to the confining forces of the city, no matter how formidable they are.

IV

Inasmuch as Augie does not embrace a romantic idea about his city, he is not easily disillusioned by his city. If he is not sentimental about the city, neither is he about the pastoral ideal.

Occasionally Augie laments that his life in Chicago has no pastoral elements but only "deep city vexation" and "deep city aims." After asking himself what he wants in life and saying, "I know I longed very much, but I didn't understand for what" (84), he goes on to ruminate:

> Before vice and shortcoming, admitted in the weariness of maturity, common enough and boring to make an extended showing of, there are, or are supposed to be, silken, unconscious, nature-painted times, like the pastoral of Sicilian shepherd lovers, or lions you can chase away with stones and golden snakes who scatter from their knots into the fissures of Eryx. Early scenes of life, I mean; for each separate person too, everyone beginning with Eden and passing through trammels, pains, distortions, and death into the

> darkness out of which, it is hinted, we may hope to enter permanently into the beginning again. There is horror of grayness, of the death-forerunning pinch, of scandalous mouth or of fear-eyes, and of whatever is caused by no recollection of happiness and no expectation of it either. *But there is no shepherd-Sicily, no free-hand nature-painting, but deep city vexation instead, and you are forced early into deep city aims*, not sent in your ephod before Eli to start service in the temple, nor set on a horse by your weeping sisters to go and study Greek in Bogota, but land in a poolroom--*what can that lead to the highest*? And what happiness or misery-antidote can it offer instead of pipes and sheep or musical, milk-drinking innocence, or even merely nature walks with a pasty instructor in goggles, or fiddle lessons? Friends, human pals, men and brethren, there is no brief, digest, or shorthand way to say where it leads. *Crusoe, alone with nature, under heaven, had a busy, complicated time of it with the unhuman itself, and I am in a crowd that yields results with much more difficulty and reluctance and am part of it myself.* (84-85; italics mine)

This is an important passage in our understanding of the city-country dialogue in Bellow's fiction. Though lamenting that his childhood is devoid of pastoral elements, Augie does not embrace the illusion of the pastoral in the midst of the modern world. He would rather be part of humanity and receive everything from it: "I am in a crowd . . . and am part of it myself" (85).

He is able to find tranquillity even in the midst of urban clutter and noise. Even in the very urban Einhorn household, Augie finds some idyllic moments: "Quiet, quiet, quiet afternoon in the back-room study, with an oilcloth on the library table, busts on the wall, invisible cars snoring and trembling toward the park, the sun shining into the yard outside the window barred against house-breakers . . ." (75). On another occasion he wakes up to a "brilliant first morning of the year" (283) after a frantic quest the day before, which happens to be the darkest in the whole year. He observes a rare moment of beauty in a Greek church:

> I passed over the church too and rested only on the great

> profound blue. The days have not changed, though the times have. The sailors who first saw America, that sweet sight, where the belly of the ocean had brought them, didn't see more beautiful color than this (283).

This is an example of how Bellow deftly contrasts futile efforts and bountiful harmony, darkness and brightness.

Before leaving for Mexico, Augie notes how detached city dwellers are from the natural environment. In a typically Bellovian gesture, he looks out of the window at the evening city:

> The trees grew in the little yard, which was covered with white gravel. Some big insect flew in and began walking on the table. I don't know what insect it was, but it was brown, shining, and rich in structures. (313)

The insect, like the untimely butterfly in *Dangling Man*, gives Augie some insight into the world of nature: "In the city the big universal chain of insects gets thin, but where there's a leaf or two it'll be represented" (313).

"Things were too complex," Tommy Wilhelm thinks to himself in *Seize the Day*, "but they might be reduced to simplicity again. Recovery was possible. First he had to get out of the city" (85). Oppressed by the gloom, chaos, clutter, and complexity of the city, Augie, like Wilhelm, does think of escaping from his city, at least for a while. He leaves his city a couple of times but never in deliberate search of the pastoral ideal.

More often than not, the countryside and small towns are no less hellish or sinister than the city. The city is at least his own turf where he feels at home; out of the city, he feels like a fish out of its own water.

During the Depression, Augie, down and out, joins Joe Gorman in the illegal trafficking of immigrants over the border from Canada. One

reason he goes along is because he wants "a change of pressure, and to get out of the city" (162). However, his decision to join Gorman turns out to be nightmarish.

When they arrive at Lackawanna in a stolen car, the countryside, far away from his city, seems hell-like: "This place, for sure, had a demon; it was blue, lump-earthed, oil-rank, and machinery was cooking in the dark, not far back of us, into heaven, from the Lackawanna chimneys" (163). Leaving Gorman, who is caught by the state police, Augie heads back to Chicago. Stranded in Buffalo and waiting for Simon to wire him some money, he makes an excursion to Niagara Falls, where he sees:

> only a few strays beside the crush of the water, like early sparrows in the cathedral square before Notre Dame has opened its doors; and then in the brute sad fog you know that at one time this sulphur coldness didn't paralyze everything, and there's the cathedral to prove it (165).

When he realizes that Simon is not going to send any money, he starts to hitch-hike back to Chicago. An industrial sub-town near Detroit, factory smoke filling in the wind, seems to him war-ravaged: "battlefield, cemetery, garbage crater, violet welding scald, mountains of tires sagging, and ashes spuming like crests in front of a steamer, Hooverville crate camps, plague and war fires like the boiling pinnacle of all sackings and Napoleonic Moscow burnings" (170).

After four days' wandering in the states east of Chicago, Augie finally returns home. He compares his feelings to a Neapolitan sailor's return to Naples and then to a fish's return to its native water: "You enter your native water like a fish. And there sits the great fish god or Dagon. You then bear your soul like a minnow before Dagon, in your familiar water" (176).

The Mexico episode does not speak for the country in the city-country dialogue. As Gerson points out, "Bellow surrounds Augie's trip to Mexico with portents and eventually depicts Mexico as a pseudo-paradise [for Augie as the American Adam] which is actually hellish" (124). It is in Mexico, according to Clayton, that Augie "begins really to touch inhuman energy, to plunge into the Darkness, to find what lies under the [social] sugar" (123).

Augie goes to Mexico, not in search of a possible paradise, but out of love for Thea, who wants to get a divorce there. On their way to Mexico, Augie does experience some moments of union with Nature. For instance, while camping near the Mississippi, which Augie is eager to see, Augie is as "terribly excited" (326) as Huck Finn and he experiences an Emersonian/Whitmanesque moment:

> We lay beside a huge tree. Such a centuries' old trunk still had such small-change of foliage. . . . And soon you distinguished the sound of the leaves, moved by the air, from the insects' sound. First near and loud; then farther and mountainous. And then you realized that wherever it was dark there was this sound of insects, continental and hemispheric, again and again, like surf, and continuous and dense as stars. (326)

Another such moment occurs when they are making love under some pines in the Ozark foothills, while "the clouds, birds, cattle in the water, things, stayed at their distance, and there was no need to herd, account for, hold them in the head, but it was enough to be among them, released on the ground as they were in their brook or in their air" (330).

At moments such as these Augie regrets having grown up in the Chicago of junkyards and El pillars: "And sometimes misery came over me to feel that I myself was the creation of such places" (330). However, such moments as these are few. In fact, the farther south they go, the

more disastrous goes the trip. Mexico does not provide Augie with idyllic escape or arcadian pleasure. As Sarah Cohen writes, "Augie's escape to the Mexican wilderness offers him no asylum from the wilderness of the city" (142).

The Valley of Mexico is a land of darkness and death:

> coaly bubbles of the underworld, dangerous red everywhere from the sun, and then coats of snow on the peak of the cones--gliding like a Satan--. . . . Instead of racks or pyramids of skulls still in their hair and raining down scraps of flesh there are corpses of dogs, rats, horses, asses, by the roads; the bones dug out of the rented graves are thrown on a pile when the lease is up. . . . Beggars in dog voices on the church steps enact the last feebleness for with ancient Church Spanish, and show their old flails of stump and their sores. . . . Which is all to emphasize how openly death is received everywhere, in the beauty of the place, and how it is acknowledged that anyone may be roughly handled--the proudest--pinched, slapped, and set down, thrown down; for death throws even worse in men's faces and makes it horrible and absurd that one never touched should be roughly dumped under, dumped upon. (338)

The town of Acatla is not bucolic. Thea's villa, Casa Descuitada, is not the Carefree House its name suggests. The Mexican scenes--kaleidoscopes of fiestas, bands, cossack chorus, Indian circus, card-playing, and drinking--give Augie neither solace nor comfort. After Thea leaves him, Augie ruminates:

> Suddenly my heart felt ugly, I was sick of myself. I thought that my aim of being simple was just a fraud, that I wasn't a bit goodhearted or affectionate, and I began to wish that Mexico from beyond the walls would come in and kill me and that I would be thrown in the bone dust and twisted, spilky crosses of the cemetery, for the insects and lizards. (401)

Mexico does not provide Augie with an alternative to his city life in Chicago. In that far-away country, Augie still clings to memories of Chicago and its people. He even runs into fellow Chicagoans, Sylvester and Frazer Hooker.

V

When he laments that "the world is too much with us," Augie feels overwhelmed by the immensity of the modern city:

> Anyway, there's too much of everything of this kind, *that's* come home to me, too much history and culture to keep track of, too many details, too much news, too much example, too much influence, too many guys who tell you to be as they are, and all this hugeness, abundance, turbulence, Niagara Falls torrent. Which who is supposed to interpret? Me? I haven't got that much head to master it all. I get carried away. (455)

An excess of information and details deprives modern man of a chance for reflection. Like Wordsworth, Augie makes a plea for feelings. A romantic adventurer, he has an epiphany approximating Laotze's no-action wisdom or Keats' "negative capability" (Scott xiii):

> I have a feeling . . . about the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy. I must have had a feeling since I was a kid about these axial lines which made me want to have my existence on them, and so I have said 'no' like a stubborn fellow to all my persuaders, just on the obstinacy of my memory of these lines, never entirely clear. But lately I have felt these thrilling lines again. *When striving stops, there they are as a gift.* I was lying on the couch here before and they suddenly went quivering right straight through me. *Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony*! And all noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal. And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines . . . if he will be quiet and wait it out. . . . the man himself, finite and taped as he is, can still come where the axial lines are. He will be brought into focus. He will live with true joy. (455-56; italics mine)

It is when the striving stops, the axial lines can be found.

After knocking around for some time, Augie longs to have a place of rest and to be still. He dreams of setting up an academy and foster-home: "I aim to get myself a piece of property and settle down on it. . . . What I'd like most is to get married and set up a kind of

home and teach school. I'll marry . . . and then I'd get my mother out of the blind-home and my brother George up from the South" (456). This dream smacks of the Arcadian myth, the pastoral ideal. He tries to follow the examples of Thoreau and Yeats: "What I had in mind was this private green place like one of those Walden or Innisfree wattle jobs under the kind sun, surrounded by velvet woods and bright gardens and Elysium lawns sown with Lincoln Park grass seed" (515).

Augie's dream remains only a romantic idea, however, never to be realized. First it is postponed by the war; then it is destroyed by his marriage to Stella, who thinks it impractical. Augie knows that Stella envisions his foster-home as:

> a beaten-up frame house of dead-drunk jerry-builders under dusty laborious trees, laundry boiling in the yard, pinched chickens of misfortune, rioting kids, my blind mother wearing my old shoes and George cobblering, me with a crate of bees in the woods. (515)

Thus Augie's plan turns out to be "only one of those bubble-headed dreams of people" (515). As he admits, his foster-home and academy dream is not "a preoccupation but one of those featherhead millenarian notions or summer butterflies. You should never try to cook such butterflies in lard" (516).

The novel ends in the European countryside. On his way to Bruges, Augie gives his maid Jacqueline a ride to Normandy for a Christmas visit. As they are getting close to her destination, the car engine breaks down, and they walk and sing toward the farm across the fields.

In this wasteland-like setting, where battles of the Hundred Years' War had been fought, he hears that the life-battered Jacqueline's life-long dream is to go to Mexico and he begins to laugh. Against such a dismal picture there arises Bellow's wry affirmation.

The last passage of the novel reveals the optimistic undertone of the novel:

> That's the *animal ridens* in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up. What's so laughable, that a Jacqueline, for instance, as hard used as that by rough forces, will still refuse to lead a disappointed life? Or is the laugh at nature--including eternity--that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Nah, nah! I think, it never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both. Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America. (536)

Augie March, a novel in rebellion against the naturalistic and modernist tradition, is about a protagonist who seeks a worthwhile, higher, and independent fate, in spite of his impoverished Jewish immigrant background and his gloomy urban milieu. Augie is a survivor, though unable to live fully according to his ideal "axial lines of life." At the end he is optimistic and exuberant, "a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand," a defiant, laughing creature, still exploring, still adventuring.

If the United States is "essentially the greatest poem" (Whitman 5), then Chicago, a quintessentially American city, is a great novel waiting to be written. *The Adventures of Augie March* is Bellow's attempt to write that novel. As a Chicago novel, *Augie March* is more an exaltation than a condemnation of the city. Though not without gloom and darkness, Augie's Chicago proves to be an open arena for his adventures. The result of the dialectics is that freedom triumphs over constraint, optimism over despair, and the city over the country.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1953) 515. In this chapter further references will be cited in the text.

[2] In "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is," Bellow writes, "A fiction writer by trade, I view myself also as a historian. More than 30 years ago I published *The Adventures of Augie March*, a novel that is in part a record of Chicago in the '20s and '30s. I see by the college catalogues that my book is studied in a considerable number of schools. It is read in Yugoslavia, too, and in Turkey and China, so that throughout the world people are forming a picture of Chicago, the setting of Augie's adventures. But that Chicago no longer exists. It is to be found only in memory and in fiction. Like the Cicero of Al Capone, like Jack London's Klondike, like Fenimore Cooper's forests, like Gauguin's Pacific paradise, like Upton Sinclair's Jungle, it is an imaginary place" (21-22).

[3] Bellow always loves Whitman ("A Writer From Chicago" 200). He writes, "I suppose that I had tried as a young writer to come to terms with Chicago in Whitmanesque terms. 'I hail with joy,' wrote Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, 'The oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States'" ("A Writer" 188).

[4] Some jobs provided by the WPA were very monotonous and purposeless. Bellow likes to repeat a joke related to the program: to get paid, people were asked to pick up the bricks on the sidewalks in the morning and lay them down again in the afternoon. See Bellow, "In the Days of Roosevelt."

[5] The symbolic significance of darkness in Bellow's canon has been much explored by critics. It is often related to death, evil, and misery. In his *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, Clayton has highlighted the role of the fear of death in Bellow's works. He writes, "Death is the core terror and the ultimate cancel stamp on the 'separate Self' that Bellow defends in his address before the Library of Congress and in all his fiction. Death is the ground of all that Bellow calls the 'darkness,' underlying the inhuman in nature and in the social world" (108).

[6] Augie's view of Chicago clearly reflects Bellow's: "I think there's residual feeling of pride in the corruption in Chicago, and the fact that it's Toughville. You have to have the guts and savvy to live there" (Medwick 426).

[7] This idea about the city extends through Bellow's canon. Even in recent interviews and lectures (after the publication of *The Dean's December*) Bellow still voices essentially the same opinion about the city. See, for instance, his Tanner lectures at Cambridge University, "A Writer from Chicago," and his "Chicago: The City That Was and The City That Is." In his interview with Joyce Illig, he explains the

symbolic significance Chicago has in his novels:

> All of civilized mankind is entering the peculiar condition in which we were pioneers. That's why Chicago is significant. We experienced it before the others did. We experienced the contemoporary condition before others were aware of it. . . . Chicago is, I believe, the symbol of it. In Chicago things were done for the first time, which the rest of the world later learned and imitated. Capitalist production was pioneered in the stockyards, in refrigerator cars, in the creation of the Pullman, in the creation of farm machinery, and with it also certain urban political phenomenon, which are associated with the new condition of modern democracy. It all happened here. It happened early. (47)

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CHAPTER IV

Seize the Day: One Day in the City of Babel

> He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters.[1]

I

Seize the Day, a novella published in 1956, was probably not written immediately before its actual publication.[2] It has more affinity to Bellow's first two novels than to its immediate predecessor, *The Adventures Of Augie March* (1953), or to its immediate successor, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). The affinity shows itself in its concise form, its terse style, its abstract title, and, most important, its thematic kernel: man as victim in the modern city-cum-society.

Like the heroes in the first two novels, Tommy Wilhelm, separated from his wife and his two boys, feels very much alienated and displaced in the big city. The novella depicts one day in his troubled life--a day when his luck seems to hit the bottom. All the present actions in the novella, deftly compressed into a time-span of less than twenty-four hours, take place in that "unnatural, too-human" city--New York, which Bellow brings so vividly alive that Alfred Kazin called it "the most living, throbbing character" (483).

Tommy Wilhelm's New York is no less impersonal, oppressive, and menacing than the New York in *The Victim*. However, the specific locale is different: not commercial lower Manhattan but the Upper West Side;

not thronged with strange faces moving as if in a drug-induced trance but with old people:

> Along Broaday in the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties, a great part of New York's vast population of old men and women lives. Unless the weather is too cold or wet they fill the benches about the tiny railed parks and along the subway gratings from Verdi Square to Columbia University, they crowd the shops and cafeterias, the dime stores, the tea-rooms, the bakeries, the beauty parlors, the reading rooms and club rooms. (8)

These old people, with his father Dr. Adler positioned in the most conspicuous place, exert a stifling, authoritarian impact on Wilhelm. The city, with its iron-bound landscape and its unfriendly, indifferent, grotesque, and money-obsessed people, constitutes a great oppressive force upon Wilhelm.

Bellow highlights the theme of displacement by placing Wilhelm at the Hotel Gloriana among those "having-nothing-to-do-but-wait-out-the-day" retirees instead of in his Brooklyn home enjoying family life with his wife and children. As the story opens, the dispirited and worry-ridden Wilhelm has a presentiment that his luck is sinking as swiftly as the down-going elevator. Once in the lobby, he gazes out of the window at a building some blocks away.

As noted previously, the window scene is an important Bellovian motif: it often gives us the Bellow hero's perception of his city and the world at large. Although this window scene, unlike those in Bellow's other novels, does not give us a broad vista of the city or provide the hero with any insight into his own fate or the fate of humankind, the brief description, placed at the beginning of the day and of the novella, does provide an objective correlative to the text and to the protagonist's psyche.

The building Wilhelm gazes at is the Hotel Ansonia, which Bellow mistakenly attributes to Stanford White. The building looks like "a baroque palace from Prague or Munich enlarged a hundred times" (9), but it is not so grandiose: "black television antennae are densely planted on its round summits" (9). The building is like a chameleon, reflecting different images according to changes in the weather and the mood of the beholder: "it looked like the image of itself reflected in deep water, white and cumulous above, with cavernous distortions underneath" (9).

The story begins with this drowning image. The hydrophobiac Wilhelm spends the day trying desperately to hold on to the last few shreds of his self and to the last few hundred dollars he has in the engulfing big city. At the end of the day, he finds himself standing in line before a stranger's coffin in a funeral parlor, crying:

> The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need. (128)

This final touching moment is not accidental. Before reaching it, Wilhelm goes through a "day of reckoning" (92) in which he reviews his past and re-examines his present. It is a day charged with frustration, suffering, disappointment, exasperation, and desolation.

II

Tommy Wilhelm has always been subject to the whims of his own character, the caprice of his fate, and the manipulation of others. He feels he has been a failure all his life. In the eyes of his parents, his sister, his wife, and a talent scout named Maurice Venice, he is a

loser. He is not very intelligent or well-read. Compared with other members of his family, he is poorly educated. Physically he is clumsy, awkward, heavy, and sloppy.

In his sophomore year, he left college and went to the West Coast to become a movie star. He ended up as an extra. His going to Hollywood is an example of his being a victim (Venice's letter inviting him for a screen test was written as a joke) and of his own mistake-prone character.

He returned to New York and became a salesman. He married Margaret, had two children, and seemed to lead a normal life. However, when his marriage collapsed, he left his children with his wife and moved into the same hotel his father lived in. Then, like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, he lost his territory. Unemployed for several months, he is in deep financial difficulty, unable to meet the exorbitant demands of his estranged wife, who wants him to pay for his "freedom."

He tries to solicit his well-to-do father's help but to no avail. His retired physician father refuses to give him anything, not even sympathy. In fact, he feels ashamed of his son "Wilky," mainly because Wilhelm is not a success like him. Sometimes his shame grows into anger when his son behaves like a slob, displaying detestable habits and symptoms of hyphochondria.

Wilhelm's relationship with his father is relentlessly harsh. In Wilhelm's eyes, his father is a man without family feelings. A vain man, Dr. Adler loves himself more than anyone else. He does not even remember in what year his wife died. "A master of social behavior," he is affable toward others but cool to his own son who "could not speak his mind or ease his heart to him" (15). He treats Tommy like one of

his ordinary patients. Dr. Adler's unsympathetic, detached, and rational attitude toward his son leads the desperate Wilhelm to comment bitterly that in New York "the fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons" (91).

And Wilhelm is no son. Whereas he "would never willingly hurt any man's feelings" (34), Wilhelm loses control in conversation with his father. Furthermore, from Dr. Adler's perspective, which is occasionally provided by the omniscient narrator, Wilhelm has been a great disappointment. He disapproved when Wilhelm left college for Hollywood and he hated it when he changed his name from Wilky Adler to Tommy Wilhelm. Stupid, foolish, slovenly, and sloppy, Wilhelm, now in his mid-forties, has never settled down or accomplished anything. A prominent scientist, Dr. Adler cannot bear to see his son a failure. It was lazy of him not to make good in life. It was inexcusable of him not to be able to manage his own money. It was unscrupulous of him to lose his job.

In his eighties Dr. Adler is concerned with his own future. His children (Wilhelm and Catherine) are not people on whom he can depend for a living, not to mention comfort. A self-made man with a brilliant career behind him, he has always valued the virtues of self-reliance and independence--financial and emotional--and does not want to ride on somebody's back; neither does he want someone to ride on his.

However, despite his harsh relationship with his father, Wilhelm does not really hate his father. Dr. Tamkin asks him, "You love your old man?" and Wilhelm replies, "'Of course, of course I love him. My father. My mother--' As he said this there was a great pull at the very center of his soul. When a fish strikes the line you feel the live force in your hand" (101). Without the intellectual abilities of

later Bellow heroes, Wilhelm is unable to identify or articulate this mysterious feeling, although he has arrived at an inner truth.

Despite Wilhelm's expression of his love for his father and his affirmation of family ties, however, the fathers and sons are estranged from or in conflict with each other in *Seize the Day*. Wilhelm admits he is not a good father to his own sons.

According to Bellow one of the themes in *Seize the Day* is "the city dweller's fulfillment of personal needs on strangers" (qtd. in Opdahl 108). Wilhelm's relationship with Dr. Tamkin grows out of this psychological need. Even though he dimly knows that Dr. Tamkin's interest in him is not purely altruistic or even friendly, even though he suspects Tamkin is a fake, a charlatan, he is grateful to him for his personal concern and even entrusts him with his last savings to invest in the commodities market. When his "clean and immaculate" (16) father treats him like a patient, when his father is solely absorbed in his own future, when his father displays no family feelings toward him, Wilhelm looks elsewhere for a man who can at least show sympathy or friendship. In this short novel, Dr. Tamkin, however fraudulent he actually is, plays the role of a father-surrogate and mentor to the perennial son-figure Wilhelm.

For all his fakery, Dr. Tamkin does utter some truths (at least they strike Wilhelm as truths). Wilhelm feels greatly touched when Tamkin talks about the two main souls (the real one and the pretender one) (77) and the importance of seizing the here and now: "That's the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real--the here-and-now. Seize the day" (73).[3] And it is Dr. Tamkin who characterizes life in New York City: "If you only knew one per cent of what goes on in the city of New York!

You see, I understand what it is when the lonely person begins to feel like an animal. When the night comes and he feels like howling from his window like a wolf" (73).[4]

III

In addition to his interactions with his family and Dr. Tamkin, Wilhelm cannot avoid the intrusions of his fellow city dwellers. Joseph the dangling man has the grotesque Mr. Vanaker as his troublesome fellow boarder in the rooming house and Asa Leventhal has the anti-Semite Kirby Allbee move in with him, but Tommy Wilhelm is surrounded by a throng of aged people, many of them characterized by grotesqueness, deformity, greed, predatoriness, shrewdness, dilapidation, callousness, hypocrisy, and even stone-heartedness. Most of them are interested only in clothes, social codes, and money. Those who catch money-fever go on the market "with murder in their hearts" (14). Unlike Wilhelm, they seem to fit in perfectly with the philistine, mercantile society as represented by the New York financial world. They seem to know everything while Wilhelm seems to be always in the dark.

As Fuchs points out, "Mainly a story of how the old prosper and the young wither, *Seize the Day* focuses on the bizarre reality of sartorial splendor in old men" (93). Wilhelm's father is the most telling example. Another instance is Rubin, the newsstand tender, who always dresses exceedingly well even though he is behind the counter most of the time, and who, despite his poor eyesight, seems to know everything.

Other elderly New Yorkers become Wilhelm's acquaintances. Mr. Perls, a fellow hotel boarder, used to be a hosiery wholesaler. In Wilhelm's eyes, he is a "damn frazzle-faced herring with his dyed hair

and his fish teeth and this drippy mustache" (36). He is greatly concerned with social decorum and worldly--monetary--success even though he is dying. Having breakfast with his father and Mr. Perls, Wilhelm reflects, "Uch! How they love money. . . . They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While if you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth" (41).

A helpless Tommy flanked by stifling old men is best conveyed, when, at the branch office of the commodities market, "Wilhelm sat between Mr. Rowland, who was elderly, and Mr. Rappaport, who was very old" (86). The former started to speculate in the market when he was at Harvard in 1908. The latter is one of the nasty old men in Bellow's canon: when Tommy tries to follow Dr. Tamkin to recover some money, Mr. Rappaport insists that Tommy take him to the cigar store across the street; a person who demands that others do something for him but never gives anything in return, he is, in Wilhelm's eyes, selfishness itself.

The most conspicuous grotesque is Dr. Tamkin, who is so physically mis-shapen that he is like a predatory eagle: "What a rare, peculiar bird he was, with those pointed shoulders, that bare head, his loose nails, almost claws, and those brown, soft, deadly, heavy eyes" (89-90). The anthropologically-oriented Bellow describes him in great detail:

> What a creature Tamkin was when he took off his hat! The indirect light showed the many complexities of his bald skull, his gull's nose, his rather handsome eyebrows, his vain mustache, his deceiver's brown eyes. His figure was stocky, rigid, short in the neck, so that the large ball of the occiput touched his collar. . . . He stood pigeon-toed, a sign perhaps that he was devious or had much to hide. The skin of his hands was aging, and his nails were moonless,

> concave, clawlike, and they appeared loose. His eyes were as brown as beaver fur and full of strange lines. (68-69)

Such a flawed character as Wilhelm is an easy prey in the jungle-like city of New York, "with its complexity and machinery, bricks and tubes, wires and stones, holes and heights," not only a city of the old and the grotesque and the "killers" (commodities market speculators and money-makers), but a city of Babel, where communication is almost impossible. Although he is a native of New York, the city seems strange to him because: "I'm not used to New York any more. For a native, that's very peculiar, isn't it? It was never so noisy at night as now, and every little thing is a strain" (38). As Fuchs writes, "Vast, full of different styles, New York's towers are the New Babel where 'every other man spoke a language entirely his own'" (92). Communication in New York has become so difficult that

> you had to translate and translate, explain and explain, back and forth, and it was the punishment of hell itself not to understand or be understood, not to know the crazy from the sane, the wise from the fools, the young from the old or the sick from the well. The fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons. You had to talk with yourself in the daytime and reason with yourself at night. Who else was there to talk to in a city like New York? (91).

Wilhelm repeatedly complains that he cannot bear the city any more: "New York is like a gas. The colors are running. My head feels so tight, I didn't know what I'm doing" (37). Dr. Tamkin envisions New York as "a kind of purgatory. You walk on the bodies. They are all around. I can hear them cry *de profundis* and wring their hands" (78).

IV

It is not surprising, therefore, that Wilhelm has a strong yearning to leave New York. At the beginning of the novel, Wilhelm

watches a pigeon alight and hears "the wings beating strongly" (8), reflecting longing to fly out of the hellish city.

His yearning for a simple, pastoral life becomes especially acute when he recollects his pre-divorce life in Roxbury: "in late spring weather . . . he used to sit expanded in a wicker chair with the sunlight pouring through the weave . . . young hollyhocks . . . small flowers. . . . This peace was gone" (49).[5] In the commodity market office, the heavily pressured Wilhelm recalls the small yard in Roxbury: "He breathed in the sugar of the pure morning. He heard the long phrases of the birds. No enemy wanted his life" (89).

In the midst of chaos and faced with financial troubles, Wilhelm, much more than Joseph and Leventhal, feels the strong urge to leave the city and go to the countryside. On Broadway, he sees a huge crowd, which fills him with an inexplicable oppression:

> And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence--*I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want.* (124-25)

Wilhelm tells himself that recovery of a tranquil life is possible but "first he had to get out of the city" (85).

Yet his pastoral longings are merely romantic. His rationalist father sees this clearly and wants him to give up his stupid romantic notions. His reminiscences of his days in Roxbury are idyllic; he has forgotten that at that time he had his trouble too. Nice gardens are not necessarily antidotes to horrible cities. At one point Wilhelm himself knows that not all things are good and happy in the country-side. When he was a salesman on the road, he passed chicken farms in

the countryside. The scene, as he recollects it, was by no means idyllic: "Those big, rambling, wooden buildings out in the neglected fields; they were like prisons" (93).

The country does not vouchsafe a viable alternative to Wilhelm. At the end of the novella the reader is left in suspense whether Wilhelm will stay in the city or go to the country.

V

Despite the incommunicability among city people, the anomic effect of the big city, and his occasional lapses into idyllic dreams, Wilhelm, like other Bellovian heroes, is essentially urban-centered. It is through the human interactions in the city that he experiences a moment of revelation about his place in the universe. Wilhelm's epiphany of the universality of humankind, an Emersonian illumination that he is part of "a larger body," is gained in the subway station: "There is a larger body, and from this you cannot be separated" (91). At this instant, he suddenly come to realize what it means to have what Dr. Tamkin calls a "real soul." He knows that, despite the differences among human beings, "far beneath such details, what Tamkin would call the real soul says plain and understandable things to everyone. . . . There truth for everybody may be found and confusion is only--only temporary . . ." (91-92).

The famous subway scene is depicted as follows:

> The idea of this larger body has been planted in him a few days ago beneath Times Square. . . . He was going through an underground corridor, a place he had always hated and hated more than ever now. . . . In the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured

> himself, but what difference did that make if he was united with them by this blaze of love? And as he walked he began to say, "Oh my brothers--my brothers and my sisters," blessing them all as well as himself. (92)

Even though Wilhelm is a detestable slob in his father's (or his reader's) eyes, even though he does not know how to manage his life, money, and body, at this moment he shows his genuine feelings as a man, however ephemeral these feelings are. He favorably contrasts with those people around him who, while busy chasing "Holy money! Beautiful Money!" (41), are "feeble-minded about everything except money" (41).

Of course, Bellow does not intend to portray Wilhelm as a moral saint. Nor does he mean that truths can be comprehended at just any time or by just anyone: immediately after the subway revelation, Bellow observes that this "onrush of loving kindness," this brotherly love towards others, is one of the "involuntary feelings. . . . Like having a hard-on at random" (92) However, Bellow does value this spontaneous onrush of genuine feelings and has Wilhelm continue to reflect on it: "I must go back to that. That's the right clue and may do me the most good. Something very big. Truth, like" (93).

This emphasis on brotherly love is a key to an understanding of Bellow's fiction, especially his treatment of the theme of man in the city. Later, in *Herzog*, Bellow will depict a similar subway scene in which Herzog has a similar epiphany. These scenes tell us that, despite the hostile force of the city environment, human beings have to continue to live, and as long as they love one another, men can prevail. The subway experience also prepares us to understand and accept the meaning of "the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (128) in the last scene, the funeral scene.

The funeral scene is the climax of this short novel. It is also

the end or release of Wilhelm's "day of reckoning," his day of suffering. He transcends himself through his suffering and misery and losses. Even though tomorrow may never come or be known, Wilhelm seizes the great moment of his day to reach deeper than his personal sorrow and think about a stranger's death, which may be his father's or his own, and to cry "toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need." Though Bellow does not specify here what his heart's ultimate need is, the reader gathers that it is love, humanity, understanding, sympathy, and bounty. It is similar to Augie's axial lines.

That is what makes Wilhelm a typical Bellovian hero. Even though he is not brilliant in thought, he is a man of feeling: "From his mother he had gotten sensitive feelings, a soft heart, a brooding nature, a tendency to be confused under pressure" (30). As a failure himself, he has great sympathy for Venice who is "the obscure failure of an aggressive and powerful clan" (24). Indeed, compared with other characters in the novella, Wilhelm is a man who has genuine feeling and sensitivity. Even though he is not a highly introspective character, like Joseph or Herzog, he knows his own mistakes and he tries to correct them, although his weak will and error-prone inclinations prevent him from doing so. His self-recognition often brings him bitterness and grains of self-hatred; for instance, he sees himself as resembling a bear and calls himself "Ass! Idiot! Wild boar! Dumb mule! Slave! Lousy, wallowing hippopotamus!" (62). All these, of course, reveal his self-awareness, however weak or frail that self is.

Even though many critics have criticized Wilhelm for his many faults and weaknesses, I think he is pitiable because he keeps trying and trying without the blessing of good luck.[6] Even before his total failure in Hollywood, he can empathize with the needs of the down-and-

out: he is greatly touched when Venice says, "Everywhere there are people trying hard, miserable, in trouble, downcast, tired, trying and trying. They need a break, right? A break through, a help, luck, or sympathy" (26).

As is typical of the Bellow hero, Wilhelm gains a rejuvenating power through examining his own self and his own past. Ultimately he is able to reach the climactic scene in which he fully accepts his own self and merges into the larger body which is common humanity. What makes his pathetic character human and believable and what redeems his tendency to be victimized is, his ability to go deep down into himself and his attempt to find truth or truth-like recognition there. Finally he is a typical Bellow hero because he can love; in the last scene, by crying over the dead he learns to love himself and his fellow beings as well.

Wilhelm is pathetic but has some sense of dignity because, like Bellow's other heroes, he is concerned with self-identity, individuality, and humanity. His life is in chaos and he has lost almost everything he can call his own, but, amid the chaos, craziness, and clutter around him, he is a man genuinely concerned about family ties, love, humanity, and the "real soul." He wants to know how to lead a worthwhile life and become a good man.

That is what makes Wilhelm morally superior to his fellow New Yorkers. Despite his many flaws and weaknesses, Bellow does not cast him completely in a dark light: Wilhelm at least possesses what makes a man human--universal love, a feeling in his heart of love for all humankind because they are related to him in a mystical sense.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *Seize the Day* (1956; New York: Avon, 1977) 92. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] In *Saul Bellow: The Problem of Affirmation*, Kulshrestha makes this surmise, at which Bellow himself agrees. Kulshrestha writes, "A perusal of the Saul Bellow papers deposited with the Joseph Regentstein Library at the University of Chicago led me to surmise that *Seize the Day* may not have been written in the period immediately preceding its publication" (20). See also Kulshrestha's interview with Bellow.

[3] The original title for *Seize the Day* was *Here and Now*.

[4] In "Dora," a short story published in 1949, Bellow has illustrated this phenomenon in more detail. Dora is a woman who feels sympathy or empathy with those who howl like animals at night in New York City, because she herself is such a lonely woman.

[5] The name Roxbury recalls Brook Farm, which was located in West Roxbury, nine miles out from Boston.

[6] Ada Aharoni, for instance, severely criticizes Wilhelm as a son, husband, and father. Admittedly, he is really a flop, a slob, even an unlikable person. Yet, Bellow does not portray him as a completely negative figure. Whilelm does have some traces of humanity.

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CHAPTER V

Herzog: Professor Herzog in the City and Country

> "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. . . . 'Man liveth not by self alone but in his brother's face. . . . Each shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy abound'"[1]

I

As Bellow's sixth novel--*Herzog* (1964)--begins, Moses E. Herzog, protagonist of the novel, is reposing alone in his dilapidated country house in the Berkshires. He has survived a crisis in his life and is now in a state of equilibrium, feeling "confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong" (7), despite his occasional odd behavior. How has he arrived at such a state of rest? What is his kit for survival? Why is he alone in that run-down house in the peak of summer?

Like other Bellow protagonists--Tommy Wilhelm, Eugene Henderson, and later Charlie Citrine--Herzog suddenly finds his middle-aged life in great disorder. Herzog's crisis goes back to the breakup of his second marriage, to Madeleine. At his psychiatrist's suggestion, he takes a tour in Europe. After he returns, he learns from one friend, Asphalter, that Madeleine has been cuckolding him with his "best" friend, Valentine Gersbach. Shattered by this news, he is on the brink of a mental breakdown. He feels an urgent need "to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends"

(8). In a frenzy, he is writing letters, most of them mental and almost all of them unmailed, to all sorts of people, living and dead.

Through his deft use of the epistolary form and Proustian stream of consciousness Bellow presents Herzog's story in great complexity.[2] The novel is mainly a record of his reminiscences of his past, remote and recent, and his reexamination of his self, public and private. Most of the "actions" in the novel occur in Herzog's mind while he retrospects, ruminates, and scribbles.

Herzog's immediate past consists of the five days preceding his retreat to his Ludeyville house. He returns from Europe, spends most of his time alone in his New York apartment, takes a trip to Martha's Vineyard by train and boat, and immediately returns to New York by plane. Two days later he flies to Chicago, and then withdraws to his house in the Berkshires.

During this period of near delirium and chaotic turbulence, Herzog relives his past selves as a father, son, husband, friend, lover, scholar, intellectual, college professor, and citizen. Finally he comes to terms with life and reaches a state of rest. As the novel approaches its end, he has no more letters to write.

During Herzog's quest for order and sanity, the city plays a very significant role. Although the novel begins and ends in a rural setting, it is to the city that Herzog's life, physical and emotional, is intimately attached. The key scenes of the novel--those leading to his direct confrontation with reality and eventually bringing about his recovery--take place in the city.

Three cities figure prominently: the Montreal of his childhood, the Chicago of his extended adolescence and manhood, and the New York of "his creative crises, liberating deliverances and destructive

undergoings and apprehensions" (Marcus 234). In this chapter I will address myself chiefly to Herzog's ties to these three cities, especially how these cities have influenced him in achieving his final recuperation, and to the city-country dialogue in the novel.

II

Five days before he sequesters himself in his Ludeyville house, Herzog is in New York City, where he teaches at an evening college, broods in his apartment sofa, has a medical checkup, goes shopping, prepares a trip to Martha's Vineyard, is entertained by his lady friend Ramona, goes to the courthouse, and then takes a flight to Chicago.

In his Manhattan apartment, Herzog's typical posture is to lie on his couch and meditate, recollect, and compose mental letters. Although Herzog spends most of his time thinking and writing, he is not a complete solipsist in an ivory tower: he is always aware of "the trembling energy of the city" (17).

Herzog's general response to the city is not essentially different from his predecessors'. Like Joseph, Augie, and Wilhelm, he feels threatened by the city's repetitious details: "Moses saw the brick of those walls between these rods caked in asphalt black. Endless repetition threatens sanity" (192). His lonely fellow New Yorkers are no less desperate than those in *Seize the Day*: Dr. Tamkin tells Wilhelm that lonely New Yorkers feel like howling from their windows like wolves at night, and Herzog reads in the newspaper, "Lonely people in New York, shut up in their rooms, had taken to calling the police for relief. 'Send a squad car, for the love of God! Send someone! Put me in the lockup with somebody! Save me. Touch me. Come. Someone--please come!'" (230).

Isolated in his highrise apartment, Herzog observes the city with

detachment: the lunch time crowds, for instance, look like "ants upon smoked glass" (160). Yet on the streets or in public places he is overwhelmed by the city's vastness, populousness, interminability, anonymousness, and terrifying madness. Several scenes depict Herzog as a voyager in the city: his trip to Martha's Vineyard, his visit to Ramona's apartment and her flowershop, and the episode at the Municipal Courthouse.

Herzog's trip to Martha's Vineyard turns out to be a "mistake" (117): he cannot really "get away from all burdens, practical questions, away also from Ramona" (38). Once there, he immediately returns to New York. What intrigues us here, however, is not his brief sojourn in Vineyard Haven but his trip to get there. On his way to Grand Central Station, a taxi takes Herzog through labyrinthine streets. Through the taxi window he watches the sights of New York.

At first, the crowded brownstone buildings on both sides of the streets give him a mixed feeling: "The square shapes were vivid, not inert, they gave him a sense of fateful motion, almost of intimacy. Somehow he felt himself part of it all--in the rooms, in the stores, cellars--and at the same time he sensed the danger of these multiple excitements" (38). On the one hand, he feels a communion with the city; on the other, he fears its distracting commotions. Such an ambivalence toward the city is characteristic of Bellow's heroes.

The cab ride soon becomes a trek through a hellish concrete jungle. In the garment district, where the cab is held up by trucks, Herzog hears a deafening noise from the sweatshops' machines: "Electric madness thundered in the lofts and the whole street quivered," the street is "plunged, drowned in these waves of thunder" (44). This scene is an objective correlative to Herzog's torrential thoughts: as

he later admits, his thoughts are "like those machines in the lofts . . . plunged and thundered with endless--infinite!--hungry, electrical power, stitching fabric with inexhaustible energy" (205).

On Park Avenue, Herzog sees buildings being demolished and erected. The scene is carefully wrought, with vivid images of sights, sounds, and smells:

> The Avenue was filled with concrete-mixing trucks, smells of wet sand and powdery gray cement. Crashing, stamping pile-driving below, and, higher, structural steel, interminably and hungrily going up into the cooler, more delicate blue. Orange beams hung from the cranes like straws. But down in the street where the buses and the cars are crammed together, it was stifling, grinding, the racket of machinery and the desperately purposeful crowds--horrible! (44).

The city's horribleness reinforces Herzog's intent to escape, to go to the seashore to breathe fresh air.

When he finally gets to Grand Central Station, Herzog cannot hold onto his rationality amidst the crowds in the hellish underground. He feels "it all slipping away from him in the subterranean roar of engines, voices, and feet and in the galleries with lights like drops of fat in yellow broth and the strong suffocating fragrance of underground New York" (46).

After the train leaves the platform, it immediately enters the tunnel, plunging Herzog into a temporary darkness which foreshadows death; it is, in his words, "without religion" (56). But, it really is prelude to a terribly dismal picture of the city's slums:

> Then came a long incline and the train rose from underground and rode in sudden light on the enbankment above the slums, upper Park Avenue. In the east Nineties an open hydrant gushed and kids in clinging drawers leaped screaming. Now came Spanish Harlem, heavy, dark, and hot, and Queens far off to the right, a thick document of brick, veiled in atmospheric dirt. (56)

It is at this point that Herzog, thinking about Madeleine and her aunt Zelda's betrayal of him, asks the famous Freudian question, followed by his own bitter comment: "*Will never understand what women want. What do they want? They eat green salad and drink human blood*" (56).

If Madeleine is "his murderess" (312) in spirit, a *femme fatale*, "a frigid, middlebrow, castrating female" (228), his mistress Ramona is quite different. According to Herzog, "Ramona truly was a desirable wife. She was understanding. Educated. Well situated in New York. Money. And sexually, a natural masterpiece" (86). Unlike Madeleine, she has "genuine family feeling" (190) and knows the art of love. She wants to help restore order and sanity to Herzog's life, which Madeleine has devastated.

Ramona has an international background (Spanish, Argentinean, French, Russian, Polish, and Jewish), international tastes in food and music and she owns a flower shop. She embodies both the city's culture, refinement, and internationalism and the country's bounty, freshness, and fertility. She combines for Herzog the city's exoticism and sophistication and the country's pastoralism and nourishment.

Ramona's voice on the telephone often brings Herzog back to reality. In the middle of the novel, for instance, it is her phone call that arouses Herzog from his reverie:

> the cheerful voice of Ramona calling him to a life of pleasure on the thrilling wires of New York. And not simple pleasure but metaphysical, transcendent pleasure--pleasure which answered the riddle of human existence. That was Ramona--no mere sensualist, but a theoretician, almost a priestess. (186)

Going to visit Ramona means another city voyage of discovery which

Herzog welcomes because it gives him a chance to leave his hot and claustrophobic room. He expects Ramona to bring him transcendence and transformation. Herzog's wish for change is mirrored in a scene he witnesses after he comes out of his apartment. The "metamorphoric New York" (206) is being transformed. At the street corner, he pauses to watch the work of the wrecking crew:

> The great metal ball swung at the walls, passed easily through brick, and entered the rooms, the lazy weight browsing on kitchens and parlors. Everything it touched wavered and burst, spilled down. There rose a white tranquil cloud of plaster dust. The afternoon was ending, and in the widening area of demolition was a fire, fed by the wreckage. Moses heard the air, softly pulled toward the flames, felt the heat. The workmen, heaping the bonfire with wood, threw strips of molding like javelins. Paint and varnish smoked like incense. The old flooring burned gratefully--the funeral of exhausted objects. Scaffolds walled with pink, white, green doors quivered as the six-wheeled trucks carried off fallen brick. The sun, now leaving for New Jersey and the west, was surrounded by a dazzling broth of atmospheric gases. Herzog observed that people were spattered with red stains, and that he himself was flecked on the arms and chest. He crossed Seventh Avenue and entered the subway. (217-218)

Herzog's experience in the subway station is not a transcendence but a "trans-descendence" (219). His descent into the subway brings into focus a scene which reinforces the mythical quality of New York as the "City of Destruction":

> Waiting for his uptown express, Herzog made a tour of the platform, looking at the mutilated posters--blacked-out teeth and scribbled whiskers, comical genitals like rockets, ridiculous copulations, slogans and exhortations. *Moslems, the enemy is White. Hell with Goldwater, Jews! Spicks eat* SHIT. *Phone, I will go down on you if I like the sound of your voice.* And by a clever cynic, *If they smite you, turn the other face.* Filth, quarrelsome madness, the prayers and wit of the crowd. Minor works of Death. Trans-descendence--that was the new fashionable term for it. (218-219)

In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm experiences an epiphany of universal

brotherhood in the subway, and Herzog has a similar experience. Despite the hellish suggestion of the underground, Herzog discovers human connectedness in the subway's turnstile:

> He dropped his fare in the slot where he saw a whole series of tokens lighted from within and magnified by the glass. Innumerable millions of passengers had polished the wood of the turnstile with their hips. From this arose a feeling of communion--brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms. This was serious, thought Herzog as he passed through. The more individuals are destroyed . . . the worse their yearning for collectivity. Worse, because they return to the mass agitated, made fervent by their failure. Not as brethren, but as degenerates. Experiencing a raging consumption of potato love. Thus occurs a second distortion of the divine image, already so blurred, wavering, struggling. (218)

Such "a feeling of communion," however, is "brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms" (218); it is a "low-grade universal potato love" (85).[3] Herzog knows much better than Wilhelm that such a weak emotion is not enough. We need "a true concern for humanity and the individual being, including oneself" (Goldman 148).

After the train takes him uptown, he emerges from the subway exit and finds himself among a teeming gallery of senile New Yorkers, reminiscent of those retirees with whom Wilhelm has to mingle in *Seize the Day*: "In midstreet, on the benches, old people: on faces, on heads, the strong marks of decay: the big legs of women and blotted eyes of men, sunken mouths and inky nostrils. . . . The crowd was traipsing over the broad sidewalk" (221). Unlike Wilhelm, who feels himself a victim of such people most of the time, Moses Herzog takes a keen interest in the uptowners: "its theatrical spirit, its performers--the transvestite homosexuals painted with great originality, the wigged women, the lesbians looking so male. . . . Signs in almost every passing face of a deeper comment or interpretation of destiny--eyes

that held metaphysical statements. And even pious old women who trod the path of ancient duty, still, buying kosher meat" (221-22). These actor-like characters will emerge again in Mr. Sammler's New York City. Unlike the detached and unsympathetic Mr. Sammler, however, Herzog expresses interest in these people, which, in a sense, shows his moral vision: as Simone Weil says, belief in the existence of others is love.

On the other hand, upper Broadway also suggests an an "amphi-theater of Hell," and these people are "the inhabitants of this unreal city" (Rodrigues 185):

> A carnival crowd of actors wherein the sexes melt into each other (with the anachronistic, orthodox women on its fringes), these people are frantically defiant, frustrated in their hunger for something real and genuine. . . . The signs on their faces parallel the graffiti Herzog saw on the walls of the subway which are the crazy outpourings of the soul of the masses: "Filth, quarrelsome madness, the prayers and wit of the crowd. Minor works of Death" (219). These are people who are free but do not know to employ their freedom, which has become a "howling emptiness" (53). Ramona suggests that Herzog wash when he enters her apartment, and Herzog remembers that one had to wash when one came back from *Beth Olam*, the dwelling of the Multitude, the cemetery, Herzog has come to Ramona from the necropolis. (Rodrigues 185-186)

In Ramona's large apartment on the West Side, where he is treated like a king, Herzog finds a temporary haven. With a sumptuous supply of gastronomic and sexual pleasures, Ramona makes the trouble-ridden Herzog forget, at least temporarily, his inner turmoil. Her boudoir is Herzog's sanctuary from the alienated, dehumanized, and exciting urban jungle. As Joseph Nassar has pointed out, images which describe Ramona's amplitude and ripeness strongly suggest a fertile field (27). For instance, she is "as florid in her sermons as in her looks" (228). As they make love with only the green lamp on, she becomes an Earth Mother, offering her breast to Herzog.

When he kisses her outside her flower shop on Lexington Avenue in midtown Manhattan, Herzog smells "the fresh odor of soil" amongst the "stinking odor" of the buses:

> On the sidewalk before the window of her shop were daisies, lilacs, small roses, flats with tomato and pepper seedlings for transplanting, all freshly watered. . . . In spite of the buses which glazed the air with stinking gases, he could smell the fresh odor of soil. . . . Within the great open trench of Lexington Avenue, the buses pouring poison but the flowers surviving, garnet roses, pale lilacs, the cleanliness of the white, the luxury of the read, and everything covered by the gold overcast of New York. (253-54)

Although her marriage proposal poses a threaten to Herzog's freedom, Ramona is an Earth Mother figure to him, instrumental to his revitalization and final recuperation. By using Ramona in the midst of New York City, Bellow suggests that even in the city it is still possible to enjoy Nature. In Ramona Herzog finds the harmonious combination of the city and country, which is why Bellow has her, a city's messenger, appear in the rural setting at the end of the novel.

Herzog cannot consider marrying Ramona because he still has unfinished business: he feels he owes himself and his child a justice. In order to get custody of his daughter, he makes an appointment to see his lawyer Simkin, who, like Herzog's Chicago lawyer friend, Himmelstein, is a cruel "Reality-Instructor" (42), who knows his city like his palm: he often takes Herzog to small restaurants, "the most authentic places, Chinese, Greek, Burmese, the darkest cellars in New York" (257).

On his trip to the courthouse and what he encounters when he arrives there, Herzog is exposed to barbarity, brutality, callousness, corruption, shabbiness, vice, vileness, and wanton sexuality: "Young Jews, brought up on moral principles as Victorian ladies were on

pianoforte and needlepoint, thought Herzog. And I have come here today for a look at something different. That evidently is my purpose" (283). This episode is chiefly about sexuality at its most violent and grotesque, perverse and degenerate. As Herzog tells Simkin, "Emancipation result[s] in madness" (265).

The theme of sex gone awry is introduced as Herzog sits in a cab on his way to the courthouse. The cab driver, who saw Herzog kissing Ramona outside the flower shop, tells him,

> "Well, boy, you're all right. When I get old I'm going to be doing just like you. Why stop! And believe you me, I stay away from young chicks already. You waste your time with a broad under twenty-five. I quit on that type. A woman over thirty-five is just beginning to be serious. . . . A broad eighteen don't know even how to shit!" (273-74).

While waiting for Simkin, Herzog witnesses some trials. One case is about a young German intern arrested for indecent conduct in the lavatory of Grand Central. Herzog is surprised at how concerned the magistrate is for the future of the German intern; the magistrate's "human voice" (278) tells the intern's lawyer to consider the serious consequences of pleading guilty. Herzog reflects: "You don't destroy a man's career because he yielded to an impulse in that ponderous stinking cavern below Grand Central, in the cloaca of the city, where no mind can be sure of stability, where police . . . tempt and trap poor souls" (278-79).

Another trial deals with a young male prostitute who, in order to get money to buy narcotics, uses a toy pistol to rob a store and is disarmed by the woman cashier. He unashamedly reveals the sordidness of his life and mindlessly submits to the ridicule and the sentence of the court. His story horrifies Herzog, reminding him of his friend

Sandor's cynical remark: "every living soul was a whore" (281).

After this trial comes a climactical scene in Herzog's New York voyages. A helpless child has been tortured and savagely slain by his mother and her lover. The couple lived at the Montcalme Hotel on 103rd Street, a flophouse Herzog often passed. According to Herzog, "You could smell the misery of it from the street; its black stink flowed out through open windows . . ." (289). During the trial, the judge, lawyers, members of the jury and the accused "all looked utterly unemotional" (290) while a witness from the hotel recounts the almost incredible details of the murder.

It is too much for Herzog. As he stumbles out of the courtroom, he says to himself, "Oh my God!" and suffers "a sick repulsive headache, piercing and ugly" (293). His malady is "existential nausea, Kierkegaard's sickness unto death" (Porter 153). Herzog the moralist and humanist tries to pray or do something for the dead boy. But what can he do? He feels helpless in the face of such horror:

> The child screamed, clung, but with both arms the girl hurled it against the wall. On her legs were ruddy hair. And her lover, too, with longs jaws and zooty sideburns, watching on the bed. Lying down to copulate, and standing up to kill. Some kill, then cry. Others, not even that. (240).[4]

This is the most horrible scene Herzog has ever heard. As Porter notes, "Whirled violently in the void at last, Herzog finds nothing, intellectual or emotional, to sustain him. In the reality of this negation, intellect, justice, and compassion are merely empty words" (153). Instead of crying or praying for the child, Herzog is "wrung, wrung, and wrung again, and wrung again, again" (294).

The child murder scene has personal significance for Herzog. Impulsively he identifies the remorseless child-killers with Valentine

and Madeleine, whom he imagines are abusing his daughter June. This leads to his sudden flight to Chicago to confront the villains.

III

Before he goes to Chicago, Herzog glimpses an old friend in a New York street and remembers Montreal, memories which are vital to his final recovery.[5] His boyhood in Montreal is a golden time in his life.[6] It is the world of his unlucky but king-like father, his loving and sacrificing mother, his ambitious brothers Shura and Willie, his piano-playing sister Helen, his overbearing Aunt Zipporah, his quiet-spoken Uncle Yaffe, his romantic friend Nachman, his *cheder* teacher Reb Shika (Nachman's rabbi father), and the lonely, drunken boarder Ravitch (Nachman's uncle).

In *Dangling Man* Joseph says that he has never found another street that resembles St. Dominique: "It is the only place I was ever allowed to encounter reality" (57). Napoleon Street is to Herzog what St. Dominique is to Joseph:

> My ancient times. Remoter than Egypt. No dawn, the foggy winters. In darkness, the bulb was lit. The stove was cold. Papa shook the grates and raised an ashen dust . . . The chimneys in their helmets sucked in the wind. Then the milkman came in his sleigh. The snow was spoiled and rotten with manure and litter, dead rats, dogs. . . .
>
> The morning light could not free itself from gloom and frost. Up and down the street, the brick-recessed windows were dark, filled with darkness, and schoolgirls by twos in their black skirts marched toward the convent. And wagons, sledges, drays, the horses shuddering; the air drowned in leaden green, the dung-stained ice, trails of ashes. Moses and his brothers put on their caps and prayed together,
>
> > "*Ma tovu ohalena Yaakov*. . . ."
> > "How goodly are thy tents, O Israel."
>
> Napoleon Street, rotten, toylike, crazy and filthy, riddled, flogged with harsh weather--the bootlegger's boys reciting ancient prayers. *To this Moses' heart was attached with great power. Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find.* The children of the

> race, by a never-failing miracle, opened their eyes on one strange world after another, age after age, and suffered the same prayer in each, eagerly loving what they found. *What was wrong with Napoleon Street? thought Herzog. All he ever wanted was there*. (174; italics mine)

At five, Moses learned from Reb Shika to read the Bible in Hebrew. At eight, Moses and Nachman shared a bench in the cellar of the synagogue. He remembers Reb Shika's reprimanding him: "You watch your step, Herzog, Moses. Your mother thinks you'll be a great *lamden*--a rabbi. But I know you, how lazy you are. Mother's hearts are broken by *mamzeirim* like you!" (164).

Herzog did not become a Talmudic scholar as his mother wished. Moses's mother loved her husband and children most dearly and sacrificed herself greatly, with the expectation that her children might be successful and happy. Once a gentle lady in the Old World, she labored hard in the Montreal slum for the sake of the family. She endured all hardships and spoiled her children. Moses remembers clearly his mother pulling him on his sled in the Montreal snow, regardless of her own health. To Herzog, his mother, "a good spirit, a good woman, a good heart," is the very embodiment of love and humanity. Not only did she love her children affectionately, but she was kind and warm to everyone around her. She fed Nachman when he was hungry and she was kind and helpful to their drunken boarder, Ravitch.

Ravitch was a *landtsman* to the Herzogs. Unable to locate his wife and two children in Russia after the Revolution, Ravitch tried to drink his sorrows away. Every payday he returned to the Herzogs' household drunk and disorderly. Moses cannot forget his heart-rending singing on the freezing stairs of the hallway:

> "*Alein, alein, alein, alein*
> *Elend vie a shtein*
> *Mit die tzen finger--alein*" (168)

The Herzogs took pity on him and it was Father Herzog who helped him to bed.

Jonah Herzog, Moses's "unlucky father," had emigrated from Russia to Canada, where he tried various jobs but he did not do well in any of them until he became a bootlegger. Moses fondly recalls how he and his brothers pasted Johnny Walker labels on the bottles to help their father. But Jonah Herzog was not a successful bootlegger, either. Trying to run bootleg whisky to the border, he is "hijacked, beaten up, and left in a ditch" (182). To Moses the incident was incredible: "It was more than I could bear that anyone should lay violent hands on him --a father, a sacred being, a king. Yes, he was a king to us. . . . Whom did I ever love as I loved them?" (183). Although Father Herzog was a failure as a provider, "his '*I*' ha[d] such dignity" (184).

The following vignette is one of the most touching of Herzog's Montreal experiences:

> The whole family took the streetcar to the Grand Trunk Station with a basket . . . of pears, overripe, a bargain bought by Jonah Herzog at the Rachel Street Market, the fruit spotty, ready for wasps, just about to decay, but marvelously fragrant. And inside the train on the worn green bristle of the seats Father Herzog sat peeling the fruit with a Russian pearl-handled knife. . . . Meanwhile, the locomotive cried and the iron-studded cars began to move. Sun and girders divided the soot geometrically. By the factory walls the grimy weeds grew. A smell of malt came from the breweries. (45)

Most unforgettable is his mother moistening her handkerchief with her saliva and rubbing his face clean. Forty years later, Moses still remembers the scene acutely and reflects, "All children have cheeks and

all mothers spittle to wipe them tenderly. These things either matter or they do not matter. It depends upon the universe, what it is" (46).

The Napoleon Street sequence in *Herzog* is as impressive as the Chicago section in *Augie March*: both are intended to celebrate the ordinary people in the city, however somber the city is and however humble the people are. Daniel Fuchs considers the Napoleon Street section "a beautifully modulated narrative voyage along the axial lines" (133) in which "Herzog affirms his own subjectivity through an intuition of the primacy of family ties. These, in way of wonder, transcend any abstraction. They are the essence of the *amor fati*, Jewish style" (Fuchs 135).

It is full of memory, poignancy, and illumination. Forty years later in New York City, Herzog looks back on Montreal as a symbol of love, care, cohesion, and solidarity, as his haven, as his Eden. Herzog's reminiscences of his Montreal childhood is, in Tonny Tanner's words, a "mental regurgitation," a self-therapy, his positive attempt to rediscover his essential self and to seek "some lost reality, some necessary key which will help him to align himself with the norms from which he has wandered and blundered into his personal chaos and separation" (Tanner, *Saul* 93). In the end this memory contributes greatly to his search for stability, order, peace, moral support, and communal feeling.

IV

Herzog's trip to Chicago forces him to remember his past in his home city and to confront reality without recoil. As Cohen points out, Herzog's Chicago is "the locus of many poignant memories, the repository of powerful emotions" (143). Moreover, "his long-standing intimate knowledge of the place gives him a panoramic grasp of the

entire city, almost an encompassing vision of urban civilization. . . . These variegated sections of Chicago, with their myriad forms of activity and non-activity, represent for Herzog the thick texture of life, the dense reality he is struggling to embrace" (Cohen 144).

Herzog's memories of old Chicago are mainly of love, death, friendship, and democracy. Herzog remembers that in 1934, he, as class orator at McKinley High School, addressed "Italian mechanics, Bohemian barrel makers, Jewish tailors" (198), among others, and chose his text from Emerson:

> *The main enterprise of the world, for splendor . . . is the upbuilding of a man. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy . . . than any kingdom in history. Let it be granted that our life, as we lead it, is common and mean. . . . Beautiful and perfect men we are not now. . . . The community in which we live will hardly bear to be told that every man should be open to ecstasy or a divine illumination. (198-99)*

However, unlike the Montreal section which yields mostly memories of his parents' love, Chicago, where Papa and Mama were buried, reminds him time and again of their death. He remembers that his mother started to die in the winter when he was sixteen. The young Herzog chose not read the text of death: "As often as I could, I hugged the laundry girls, down in the tub room" (286). Through those winter nights, he read Spengler's *The Decline of the West* in the kitchen while his mother was gradually dying.

The trip to his father's house, now occupied by his stepmother, reminds of his troubled relationships with his father, who once tried to shoot Moses with his pistol because he thought his son was too wayward, too un-Jewish. He never knew that Moses, the prodigal son, cried most bitterly at his funeral. The memory of his father's funeral

and thoughts of death lead Herzog to ponder the connection between man and the city--heavenly and earthly: "This same emotion, as Herzog the student was aware, was held to the womb of cities, heavenly as well as earthly, mankind being unable to part with its beloved or its dead in this world or the next" (341-42).

Between the airport and his late father's house, Herzog observes the unfamiliar sections of Chicago: "Clumsy, stinking, tender Chicago, dumped on its ancient lake bottom; and this murky orange west, and the hoarseness of factories and trains, spilling gases and soot on the newborn summer" (296). To Herzog, in exile and cut off from family and friends, this is "a most welcome sight" (Cohen 143).

Herzog's trip to his old home is similar to Joseph's prior to his joining the army; they both want to find the roots of their selves. Herzog's discovery of pictures of three generations of Herzogs placed together leads him to reflect upon his ambitious youth as well as his wayward adulthood which angered his orthodox Jewish father. In his early recollections, Herzog confesses that he has "a fatal attraction to the 'City of Destruction'" (13), and he sometimes sees himself as "an unrecognized son of Sodom and Dionysus--an Orphic type" (26).

After getting his father's pistol, Herzog goes to Madeleine's apartment to "protect" his little daughter and to kill Madeleine and Gersbach. On his way he tries to justify his motives for killing the traitors, but when through the bathroom window he sees Gersbach tenderly bathing his daughter, his murder attempt vanishes. After the aborted murder scene, Herzog goes to see Gersbach's wife, Phoebe. He detects the massiveness, clumsiness, and amorphousness of his Chicago on the way:

> He drove directly to Woodlawn Avenue--a dreary part of Hyde Park, but characteristic, *his* Chicago: massive, clumsy, amorphous, smelling of mud and decay, dog turds; sooty facades, slabs of structural *nothing*, senselessly ornamented triple porches with huge cement urns for flowers that contained only rotting cigarette butts and other stained filth; sun parlors under tiled gables, rank areaways, gray backstairs, seamed and ruptured concrete from which sprang grass; ponderous four-by-four fences that sheltered growing weeds. And among those spacious, comfortable, dowdy apartments where liberal, benevolent people lived (this was the university neighborhood) Herzog did in fact feel at home. He was perhaps as midwestern and unfocused as these same streets. (Not so much determinism, he thought, as a lack of determining elements--the absence of a formative power.) (317; Bellow's italics)

Despite all the negative adjectives, Herzog identifies himself with the city and he does "in fact feel at home" (317). He identifies himself with those streets which are "midwestern and unfocused" (137).

He stays that night with his old friend Lucas Asphalter with whom he indulges in recollections of the Chicago of yore. They remember that Lucas' father owned the flophouse on West Madison Street. During the Depression, the Asphalters lived on the top story of the hotel. Herzog used to cut school to watch the "bumps and grinds" (330) at the burlesque house a few doors away. Lucas remembers seeing a fat-assed old auntie saved from death during a fire and the chorus girls from the burlesque house playing softball in the street. Their conversation culminates in Herzog's revelation that "brotherhood is what makes a man human" (333). Quoting from Blake--"Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother's face. . . . Each shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy abound"--Herzog goes on to expound, "The real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us" (333).

The next day Herzog takes his daughter to the Museum of Science in Jackson Park and then to the aquarium. On the way to the aquarium,

Herzog's heightened perceptions lead him to "instill something of his own into his surroundings" (132). He has become identified with the city, as if he has painted the city with "moisture and color taken from his own mouth, his blood, liver, bowels, genitals" (339), an identification of self and place that underscores the relationship between man and the city in all of Bellow's works.

> In this mingled way, therefore, he was aware of Chicago, familiar ground to him for more than thirty years. And out of its elements, by this peculiar art of his own organs, he created his version of it. Where the thick walls and buckled slabs of pavement in the Negro slums exhaled their bad smells. Farther west, the industries; the sluggish South Branch dense with sewage and littering with a crust of golden slime; the Stockyards, deserted; the tall red slaughter-houses in lonely decay; and then a faintly buzzing dullness of bungalows and scrawny parks; and vast shopping centers; and the cemetaries after these--Waldheim, with its graves for Herzogs past and present; the Forest Preserves for riding parties, Croatian picnics, lovers' lanes, horrible murders; airports, quarries; and, last of all cornfields. And with this, infinite forms of activity--Reality. Moses had to see reality. Perhaps he was somewhat spared from it so that he might see it better, not fall asleep in its thick embrace. Awareness was his work; extended consciousness was his line, his business. Vigilance. (339-40)

As Herzog and June leave the aquarium, they have a car accident in which he is injured. The police arrest him because he is carrying a loaded pistol without a permit. As he is being taken to the station, Herzog observes the "yellow ugliness of 22nd Street. He recognized the familiar look of summer damnation. Chicago! He smelled the hot reek of chemicals and inks coming from the Donnelly plant" (351). The car accident gives rise to his bad mood and his bad mood conjures up nasty pictures and sordid memories of the city.

In the dreadful police headquarters Herzog is ushered into another real world where cops, bondsmen, criminals, and whores are hustling and bustling. The day before he was in the New York courthouse as a

spectator, now in a Chicago police station he is to be charged with a crime. This is one of the key scenes in the novel. His direct confrontation with Madeleine in the station breaks the spell of his obsession with her. Her "bitchy" eyes kill his illusion about the possibility of salvaging the broken marriage: her eyes "expressed a total will that he should die. This was infinitely more than ordinary hatred. It was a vote for his nonexistence, he thought" (367). When his brother Will bails him out, he feels "rather free" (368). He decides to leave Chicago immediately and goes to his Ludeyville house.

After five days of frantic movements, compulsive letter-writing, intense reminiscences, and dramatic confrontations in cities Moses Herzog abandons "his version of the world" (Clayton 224) which he has been carrying on his shoulders and retires to his country house in the Berkshires, a place ideal for self-examination and recapitulation. It is in this rural setting that the novel begins and ends. This retreat is different, however, from his previous pastoral attempts. Instead of dreaming about an ideal life in a rural setting, he goes there to rehabilitate and to look things over.

V

The city-bred Herzog has a peculiar craving for the country. He was first attracted by Daisy, his first wife, because she was a country girl: "from her bare neck and shoulders he inhaled the fragrance of summer apples" (157). With her and their child Marco, Herzog tried to live in the country for the first time. They spent an icy winter in the eastern Connecticut woods when he was finishing his book, *Romanticism and Christianity*. Their cottage was in terrible condition. They had to thaw the pipes with candles. Freezing blasts penetrated the walls. Herzog, "a man deeply preoccupied" (9), made life even drearier

for Daisy and Marco. All that winter, he either brooded over his Romantics or played the oboe. Later, Herzog feels guilty that he forced Daisy and Marco to spend that winter in that lonely countryside.

Herzog tries again to live in the country with his second wife, Madeleine. With the twenty thousand dollars he inherits from his father, he buys a big old house in the Berkshires. Giving up his respectable teaching position, he comes with his bride to this remote countryside with an eye to leading a pastoral life and to finishing the second volume of his book on Romanticism.

As Rodrigues points out, in so doing, Herzog gives his best performance as an "intellectual and emotional clown" (178). Herzog's comic pretensions manifest themselves in the reference to Louis XIV and to Blake: "Herzog, mulling over these ideas as he all alone painted his walls in Ludeyville, building Versailles as well as Jerusalem in the green hot Berkshire summers" (154).

In addition to his attempt to please Madeleine and to satisfy his ambitions, his decision to buy the house in Ludeyville is also an attempt to join the mainstream of American society. A son of Jewish immigrants, he dreams of having a piece of land in the new country. A country house in New England is a good symbol of "his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America" (377).

The countryside in the Berkshires is rich in natural beauty. Herzog's well-situated estate commmands a gorgeous view. Occasionally he is able to appreciate its beauty: for instance, while Shapiro and Madeleine engage themselves in intellectual dialogues, Herzog does not join them but, instead, observes his surroundings. A "prisoner of perception" (93), Herzog minutely takes in all of Nature's objects, which, like the repetitious details of the urban scenes, are both

exciting and distracting, giving him no rest:

> The lawn was on an elevation with a view of fields and woods. Formed like a large teardrop of green, it had a gray elm at its small point, and the bark of the huge tree, dying of dutch blight, was purplish gray. Scant leaves for such a vast growth. An oriole's nest, in the shape of a gray heart, hung from twigs. God's veil over things makes them all riddles. If they were not all so particular, detailed, and very rich I might have more rest from them. But I am a prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness. They are too exciting. . . . Meanwhile the cicadas all vibrated a coil in their bellies, a horny posterior band in a special chamber. Those billions of red eyes from the enclosing woods looked out, stared down, and the steep waves of sound drowned the summer afternoon. (92-93)

Massive and distracting as those cicadas are, Herzog admits that he has "seldom heard anything so beautiful as this massed continual harshness" (93).

Such moments are few, however. As it turns out, that country house is a big mistake and his pastoral life is no more than an urbanite's illusion. Bought in "a dream of happiness" (64), the house --"an old ruin of a place" (64)--is almost impossible to live in. Too many repairs need to be made. Even though he invests a large sum of money and a great deal of effort, the house is still, in Madeleine's words, a "crappy old house" (154). As he admits, the house is "one of his biggest mistakes" (64); it is "Herzog's folly! Monument to his sincere and loving idiocy" (377).

Spending most of his time repairing and improving the house, Herzog has no time for his scholarly work. His project--a book which will wrap the whole subject up and pull the carpet from under other scholars' feet--remains unfinished, "eight hundred pages of chaotic argument which had never found its focus" (11). Virtually a slave to the rundown house, Herzog finds no familial happiness, academic fulfillment, or spiritual transcendence in his rural experiences. At

most, he can only mock himself by saying, "I could be Moses, the old Jew-man of Ludeyville, with a white beard, cutting the grass under the washline with my antique reelmower. Eating woodchucks" (64). The last phrase is a poignant parody of Thoreau, whose works Herzog reads but cannot put into practice.

Life in the Berkshires is far from serene, idyllic, or fulfilling for Madeleine, either. To her, being confined in a backwater sans culture or social circle is unbearable. For her, the big old house is not a sanctuary or a retreat; it looks more like slaves' quarters, a prison. That's why she goes to town whenever possible.

Her husband is not as sympathetic and understanding as she thought he would be. Her moody, hysterically nostalgic, depressive, demanding, old-fashioned, narcissistic husband is a burden to her psyche and her body. He never stops talking to her about his Romantics, his preoccupations, and his family, but he has not the slightest interest in her intellectual aspirations.

One year after they move to the Ludeyville house, they decide to quit, because Madeleine considers it a total waste to bury themselves in "this mourning countryside" (13), because she is "too young, too intelligent, too vital, too sociable to be buried in the remote Berkshires" (13). Unaware of Madeleine and Gersbach's adultery then, Herzog busies himself with job-hunting and house-renting in Chicago, not only for his family but for the Gersbachs, for, as Madeleine says, they cannot desert their best friends in that backwater. Thus, kept in the dark about their duplicity and betrayal, Herzog abandons his "backwater" (95) house and his pastoral dream for another life in the city.

In retrospect, Herzog's life in Ludeyville is indeed a disaster.

Not only is he cuckolded there, but, as he tells Dr. Edvig, he is "stoned out of [his] skull" (72). He admits that "life was very bad in Ludeyville--terrible" (53), and several others tell him so, too. Phoebe Gersbach says to him, "What a terrible thing you had done in giving up your respectable university position and how reckless you were, rushing out to the country with Madeleine" (319). Aunt Zelda speaks for Madeleine, "You were a fool to bury yourself and her, a young woman, in the Berkshires, with nobody to talk to" (53). One year after the divorce, when Herzog goes to Chicago in order to avenge himself, he recalls his life in the country, his "exile in Ludeyville" (311) and recognizes that "that property was to have been his madhouse. Finally, his mausoleum" (311).

Bellow does not let the country win an upper hand over the city in *Herzog*. His implication is clear: human relationships and not locales make life either agreeable or not. Living in the country is not necessarily an alternative to living in the city.

Viewed from this perspective, Herzog's retreat at the end of the novel is rather significant. Without dreaming of building a Versailles or a Jerusalem or a Thoreauvian self-sufficient retreat, he withdraws to his Berkshires able to appreciate its beauty: "The house was two miles beyond the village, in the hills. Beautiful, sparkling summer weather in the Berkshires, the air light, the streams quick, the woods dense, the green new" (376).

Alone in his old and dilapidated house, Herzog now feels joyous. Partly because of the country air and mainly because of the absence of Madeleine, his solitude is "simply sweetness and lightness of spirit" (381). Letting go of his previous foolish, hauteurish "social climbing" (377) in the WASP world, he now greets his house and garden

with "Here I am. *Hineni!*" (377).[7]

It is almost a new world to him, like a Paradise Regained: "How marvelously beautiful it is today. He stopped in the overgrown yard, shut his eyes in the sun, against flashes of crimson, and drew in the odors of catalpa-bells, soil, honeysuckle, wild onions, and herbs" (377). But Herzog knows that it is not an Eden: he does not shut his eye to the dangers of the decaying house. Since he comes "only to look things over" (377) without asking too much, he can forget all the repairs. No longer a slave to the house and to Madeleine, he feels in close union with Nature.

In the wake of his past five days of frantic attempts to seek sanity, clarity, order, and meaning in the chaotic city, the place, dilapidated as it is, is far from the maddening crowd and is thus ideal for recuperation, regurgitation, and self-scrutiny. Reliving his past, immediate and remote, and reexamining his self, public and private, he finally reaches a state of equanimity, chanting "*Thou movest me.*" He says to himself and to God: "*I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy*" (414). As the book closes, he has no more messages for anyone.

VI

The city in *Herzog* is not only the main setting but a decisive force in the protagonist's life, forming his sensibility, affecting his psyche, prompting his thought-chains, and presenting naked reality to him. Ambivalent toward the modern city whose masses of things, people, and experiences both threaten and attract him, Herzog bears specially significant relationships with three cities, Montreal of his childhood, Chicago of his youth, and New York of his adulthood.

By using both the city and country as important settings for this

novel, Bellow dramatizes the city-country dialogue much more profoundly than in any of his other novels. A master urban novelist, Bellow, nonetheless, does not deal with the pastoral theme offhandedly; his juxtapositon of Herzog's earlier pastoral attempts and his last retreat exemplifies his subtlety.

As Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* has so well demonstrated, the pastoral moment cannot be extended into a way of life; "what it can do is provide a spiritual refreshment which may strengthen the individual for his renewed encounters with the non-pastoral realities of the city" (Tanner, *City* 303). Despite isolating Moses in the rural setting, Bellow does not advocate pastoralism and underplay the force of the city. Simultaneously, two powerful city messengers--Will from Chicago and Ramona from New York--come to seek him, preparing him for his reentry, because, like Bellow's other heroes, Herzog "really believe[s] that brotherhood is what makes a man human" and that the modern city--humanity in microcosm--is where he feels at home and attached.[8] Herzog accepts his life in nature only as an interim, for he admits, "The bitter cup would come round again, by and by. This rest and well-being were only a momentary difference in the strange lining or variable silk between life and void" (397).

The three who meet in the small village in western Massachusettes represent a commingling of different strands of American society. Ramona (New York, culture, sexuality, marriage, fertility, love, romanticism, internationalism), Will (Chicago, business, brotherhood, Jewish, family ties, rationality, Midwesternism) come to meet Modern Moses (rural-urban, moral vision, prophetic leadership, intellectual-ism, family man, scholar, and sufferer) who survives a humiliating crisis in his life. They meet together with no strife, a little

uncertainty, and a lot of congeniality. It is a great picture of the city meeting the country in Bellow's canon.

This congenial spirit manifests itself best in the final scene when the rural-urban Moses, who used to be a male chauvinist accustomed to ladies' service, is preparing dinner to entertain Ramona. He even picks flowers for her. In spite of, or because of, the setting, the ending depicting the convalescent survivor-hero with flowers in hand and a half-painted green piano nearby (all signs of life, love, and hope) is positive, affirmative, an ending which will find an echo in Bellow's other great Chicago-New York novel, *Humboldt's Gift*.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; New York: Fawcett Crest 1969) 333. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] Fuchs has high praise for Bellow's fictional techniques used in this novel. He writes, "The flexible third-person-I narrator . . . gives us maximum illumination. We view Herzog and view Herzog viewing Herzog. Yet the most brilliant innovation is the renovation of the epistolary technique, allowing as it does a blending of discursiveness and intimacy, the argumentative and the personal, *kulturkamph* and the *cri de coeur*" (16).

[3] Saul Bellow defines potato love thus: "Potato love is a weak emotion that people often have of friendliness and a melting heart toward other people, the real source of which is terror. It's a low-grade emotion, like potato sap" (Qtd. in Pinsker 977).

[4] In *Augie March*, there is a similar story of infanticide. While vacationing with Mrs. Renling in St. Joe, Augie learns that a fellow hotel boarder, Ruth Snyder, "threw a child out of the window and killed it. They [her family] used all their influence and got her free" (*AM* 137).

[5] Bellow says, "Every writer borrows what he needs from himself" (Boroff 38). Among Bellow's works, *Herzog* is most strongly autobiographical, especially the Montreal section. See Howard, Weinstein, and Hassan for accounts of Bellow's ties to Lachine and Montreal.

According to Fuchs (135), Bellow originally wrote a separate piece entitled "Memoirs of a Bootlegger's Son," a sort of *Ur-Herzog*.

[6] In the manuscripts of "Memoirs of a Bootlegger's Son," Bellow has the protagonist Isaac say, "Everybody looks back to his own golden age or his own Garden of Eden. Sometimes I think the golden age is only one's recollection of his youth" (See Fuchs 136).

[7] See Goldman (116-117) for a parallel/comparison between the biblical and the fictive Moses. See also Rodrigues 200-01.

As Rodrigues notes, "The Hebrew utterance, which a Jewish child uses in *cheder*, is the word that Abraham repeated three times, to God, to Isaac, and to his guardian angel. It is also the word the biblical Moses uttered when God called unto him out of the midst of the burning bush" (200).

[8] Bellow says that at the end Herzog has come to a point of rest. After that, "he's going to have to assume roles again, and deal with people again. He's just come to a well-earned interregnum . . ." (Brans 71). See Braham (36-56) for a discussion of the theme of retreat and reentry in American literature in general and in Bellow's novels in particular.

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CHAPTER VI

Mr. Sammler's Planet: Mr. Sammler In New York

> "The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it--that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know."[1]

I

Sammler's centrality sets *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1969) apart from Bellow's previous works. Unlike Bellow's other protagonists who seek sanity, order, meaning, and equanimity in urban America, the septuagenarian Sammler, returned from the dead and the madness of the Holocaust, is mainly a sagacious, perceptive, and critical "foreign" observer of urban America. If he is questing for something, it is moral certitude.

Born in Cracow, Poland, to Jewish parents, Artur Sammler was an Anglophile. During the twenties and thirties he lived in London as a correspondent for Polish newspapers and magazines. He was acquainted with the Bloomsbury Group and had a special connection with H. G. Wells.[2] Just before the Second World War, he, with his wife and daughter Shula, went back to Poland where they were trapped. He and his wife were buried alive in a death ditch. Miraculously, he, alone, crept his way out from the corpses piled on top of him. Then he joined the partisans fighting against the Germans. As the war was ending, he

escaped from a Polish anti-Semitic massacre by hiding himself in a mausoleum for four months. After the war he and his daughter were rescued from a DP camp by his nephew Dr. Elya Gruner and brought to New York.

The immediate action of the novel focuses on three days in Mr. Sammler's life in New York City in the late sixties. The pivotal narrative sequence is Sammler's attempt to see his dying nephew in the hospital, which is repeatedly delayed by different persons and incidents, mostly related to two other major narrative sequences, the story of an elegantly dressed Black pickpocket and the story of Sammler's eccentric daughter Shula's theft of Dr. Lal's manuscript, *The Future of the Moon*. Sammler's relations to the city are closely tied to and borne out by these intertwined narrative sequences. Insofar as the main intent of this chapter is to discuss how Sammler, as a wise observer, relates himself to his city physically and metaphysically, a close examination of the sequences and the minor characters involved will shed light on our understanding of Sammler's observations of and comments on American society in general and New York City in particular.

First, however, it is necessary to note that Mr. Sammler is not merely a mouthpiece through which the author voices his opinions about the turbulent decade of the sixties or about the specific city of New York. Even though Bellow has said, "It's my first thoroughly non-apologetic venture into ideas" (Howard 57), Sammler is not simply a dry and aloof old man, a static character, as critics such as Kazin (134, 136-37), Galloway (23-24) and Clayton (234) have called him. He is a character in his own right, as Ellen Pifer argues well, a man of "divided consciousness." According to Pifer, "Superannuated, world-

weary and aloof as he is, Sammler nonetheless embodies the epitome of the 'passionate, conflicted, modern self.' Through the dynamics of his character's consciousness, forever troubled by and in confrontation with the world, Bellow articulates the divided consciousness which is, in his view, the marked characteristic of contemporary 'intellectual man'" (18).

It is true that in Sammler's psyche there are two modes of consciousness: the analytic and the intuitive (Pifer 18). But there are also two Sammler selves at work or in conflict that constitute the dramatic and interesting story in the novel. The Holocaust experience divides the earlier Sammler from the present Sammler. After the war, he felt that he was "not necessarily human" (117) for quite a long time, and showed almost no interest in others or in himself and never thought of recovering earlier forms of himself. But after having lived for ten years, he is starting to change his attitude. Instead of being "disaffected" (117), he becomes interested and shows his concern: "In the human setting, along with everyone else, among particulars of ordinary life he *was* human--and, in short, creatureliness crept in again" (117). Mysteriously, he feels that he is "always, and so powerfully, so persuasively, drawn back to human conditions" (118).

Because of his interest in humanity and his concern about cultural drift, he cannot remain aloof and withdrawn from current happenings, despite his urge toward seclusion. Sammler admits that when his former self asserts itself, it does so "disagreeably, weakly, disgracefully" (118). But the present Sammler is essentially a person who "awakened not to purpose but to aesthetic consumption of the environment. Even if insulted, pained, somewhere bleeding, not broadly expressing any anger, not crying out with sadness, but translating heartache into

delicate, even piercing observation" (44).

Despite the co-existence of two Sammlers--the earlier Sammler, "the Sammler of London and Cracow" (118), the present Sammler, aged, wise, moral, humane, detached, but powerless--it is the latter who figures more prominently. Like Queen Willatale in *Henderson*, Sammler, though blind in one eye, can see sharply through the puzzling veil. Because of his ability to see with heightened clarity, he is referred to as Mr. "Minutely-Observant Artur Sammler" (12). In addition to his uncanny vision, he also carries a symbolic significance as a man from the Old World and from the grave. To many characters in the novel, he is a "judge and a priest" (91), a sage, and a prophet.[3] Like a Lazarus who "carries the knowledge of the unbearable" (Lamont 251), he says, "Sometimes I wonder whether I have any place here, among other people. I assume I am one of you. But also I am not" (230). As Fuchs points out, "Old, androgynous, half-blind, Sammler is a Tiresias of the Upper West Side. His moral judgments carry the weight of objectivity, his prophecy the integrity of disinterestedness. He has come back to tell us all. But Sammler can not be as ascetic as he may wish to be. . . . He is, after all, a Bellow character" (229-230). Only if we understand the rift in Sammler's psyche, or the co-existence of two Sammlers, can we can appreciate his dialogue with his city.

II

A man of culture, sensibility, and vision, Mr. Sammler has been extremely conscious of the milieu in which he lives. Living on the deteriorating Upper West Side of New York City, he often recalls his days in London and other cities. For instance, he remembers that Cracow, a city where he grew up, was noted for its dark environment and that Poles tried to dispel the gloom by importing Catholicism. And

he loves London, particularly because of its cultural associations. Living in Woburn Square, Bloomsbury, in the twenties and thirties, he and his wife befriended the "cultural best of England" (28), Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and H. G. Wells. They had "the most distinguished intimacy with the finest people in Britain" (28).

His life in the insane landscape of urban America in the sixties contrasts strikingly with the good old days in London. When the novel opens, he and his daughter, Shula-Slawa, have been living in New York for over twenty years, both completely dependent upon Elya Gruner. Sammler remembers that when they first arrived in New York he and Shula were put into an apartment house. Knowing that he, merely "a refugee in Manhattan" (6), had to put up with whatever came his way, he nevertheless found it unbearable living with his loony daughter, who kept a chick in the bathroom and made the apartment messy. Even in fine weather, with the bright sun and the blue sky, Sammler felt that his room was "like a china cabinet into which he was locked" (27). The room, most of all, reminds him of the time when he hid in a tomb during World War II: "the yellow light of Polish summer heat behind the mausoleum door. It was the light also of that china-cabinet in the apartment where he had suffered confinement with Shula-Slawa" (92).

After moving in with his widowed niece Margotte, he gradually feels at home in the city, which, as he says, becomes "his own *turf*" (281). On the other hand, due to his previous experiences, he still feels that he is no more than "a tourist" (281) visiting the city. For all these years, Sammler has done little but live simply, read extensively, and play the role of a curious, detached, observant city philosopher.

Sammler, like other Bellow heroes, looks at his city through the

window: Joseph in *Dangling Man* looks at his Chicago from the third-floor height, Sammler looks out at New York from his cramped room in an Upper West Side apartment. They both look at the typical Bellovian milieu--the sterile landscape of the modern city--and like other Bellow heroes, they refuse to accept it as the last statement of man's spiritual condition.

For example, looking at the urban landscape from his apartment, Sammler observes that, in an age when human beings are flying to the moon, life is still very heavy on earth because people try to hold tight to their houses ("forms of bourgeois solidity" [9]) for a sense of permanence:

> Brownstones, balustrades, bay windows, wrought-iron. Like stamps in an album--the dun rose of buildings canceled by the heavy black of grilles, of corrugated rainspouts. How very heavy human life was here, in forms of bourgeois solidity. Attempted permanence was sad. We were now flying to the moon. (9)

Even though "attempted permanence" is illusory, Sammler thinks that people have no reason to exaggerate "the tragic accents of their condition" (9) and to justify "idleness, silliness, shallowness, distemper, lust--turning former respectability inside out" (9).

With his one good eye, Sammler gazes at his city as if studying paintings:

> Such was Sammler's eastward view, a soft asphalt belly rising, in which lay steaming sewer navels. Spalled sidewalks with clusters of ash cans. Brownstones. The yellow brick of elevator buildings like his own. Little copses of television antennas. Whiplike, graceful thrilling metal dendrites drawing images from the air, bringing brotherhood, communion to immured apartment people. Westward the Hudson came between Sammler and the great Spry industries of New Jersey. These flashed their electric message through intervening night. SPRY. But then he was half blind. (9)

Such a picture of urban life is, of course, disheartening: modern men imprison themselves in their apartments and feel connected to other human beings only through TV antennas and tubes.

A "meditative island on the island of Manhattan" (75) as he is, however, Mr. Sammler is not a hermit, shutting himself up in his own room overlooking his city and brooding all day long. Living in a big city like New York, Sammler knows it is impossible to be "an old-fashioned sitting sage" (74). As he tells himself:

> You must train yourself. You had to be strong enough not to be terrifed by local effects of metamorphosis, to live with disintegration, with crazy streets, filthy nightmares, monstrosities come to life, addicts, drunkards, and perverts celebrating their despair openly in midtown. You had to be able to bear the tangles of the soul, the sight of cruel dissolution. You had to be patient with the stupidities of power, with the fraudulence of business. (74)

Having been mysteriously drawn back "from disinterestedness to creaturely conditions" (118), he is attentive to what is going on around him. He reads diversely. Visitors come to him to confess or converse; he has become a "confidant of New York eccentrics; curate of wild men and progenitor of a wild woman; register of madness" (118). For him, there are also visits to pay which take him out of his claustrophobic room and force him to be in touch with his fellow human beings on the streets.

Thus, despite his reclusive tendency, Mr. Sammler, through these channels, keeps in touch with his city, his country, and his planet. Consequently, although the novel is loaded with heavy intellectual monologues and dialogues, it is also replete with meticulous descriptions of the urban scene which Sammler observes with his physical and mental eye from a bus window, from his strolls on the

street, from the hospital window, or from the window of Elya's Rolls Royce.

The novel opens with Sammler awakening in a state of anxiety. Thinking back on the events of the past few days, he fears that perhaps he has seen too much. Because his "positively claustrophobic" (119) feeling keeps him away from the subway, which always reminds him of his past experience of entombment, Sammler regularly takes buses between the 42nd Street Public Library and his West Side apartment. Recently he has seen a Black pickpocket operate on city buses between Columbus Circle and Verdi Square; the tall Sammler has observed the minutest details of the crime. He tries to call the police to stop the crime, but he cannot find a public phone booth that has not been vandalized. When he goes home, he calls the police but they are not interested. On this particular day, he again sees the pickpocket at work. In fear of reprisal, he tries not to be seen watching, but he is followed home by the pickpocket who corners him against the lobby wall and silently exposes his genitalia to Sammler.

This episode introduces many major themes in the novel: crime, the impotence of law (the police) and science (the telephone), the duality of man, the pervasiveness of madness, violence, the failure of moral fiber, hellish reality, and the ideology of sex, all of which permeate the sick society, epitomized on Mr. Sammler's planet. For Mr. Sammler, the Black pickpocket becomes an analogy for those "dark" forces of limitlessness, lawlessness, madness, and chaos that threaten the modern city dwellers.[4]

The Black pickpocket, as Sammler describes him, possesses qualities of both an "African prince" and a "great black beast" (14). Dressed "with extraordinary elegance" (8), he has a certain majesty

about him, but his face "showed the effrontery of a big animal" (9). Like a puma (48), he never speaks and only acts. He is the embodiment of "the primitiveness and barbaric nature of modern man who, behind the external facade of elegance and regality, is really no more than a beast. In the jungle of New York City, he preys upon the unsuspecting quarry" (Goldman 185). While Sammler abhores the pickpocket's bold, rude criminality and bestiality, he also considers the victim's stupidity inexcusable: "What an idiot! Going around with some kind of stupid mold in her skull. Zero instincts, no grasp of New York" (10).

Both attracted and repelled by the elegantly dressed brute, Mr. Sammler deliberately takes the same bus to watch him committing crimes. The former Sammler manifests himself, when he, like a curious voyeur, "craved a repetition" (11). Unlike his niece Angela and others, he has little attraction to the romance of the outlaw, but he admits that he receives from the crime "the benefit of an enlarged vision" (12).

Bellow's attempt to use a phone booth to report the crime brings forth his deprecation of "civilized" New Yorkers. The stink and filth of urinal-phone booths with smashed phones leads him to draw comparisons: "New York was getting worse than Naples or Salonika. It was like an Asian, an African town, from this standpoint" (7). Convinced that depravity does not know class distinction and squalor and barbarity do not stop on the streets, he sees clearly that behind the doors of luxurious apartments, slinks degeneracy, especially sexually:

> The opulent sections of the city were not immune. You opened a jeweled door into degradation, from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of color erupting from beneath. It might well be barbarous on either side of the jeweled door. Sexually, for example. The thing evidently . . . consisted

> in obtaining the privileges, and the free ways of barbarism, under the protection of civilized order, property rights, refined technological organization, and so on. (7)

From the urinal-phone booths to the degraded luxurious apartments to the helpless police, Sammler does not see America as the city upon a hill envisoned by John Winthrop. With irony and disappointment, he says, "America! . . . Advised throughout the universe as *the* most desirable, most exemplary of all nations" (14).

Sammler's entanglements with the Black pickpocket continue throughout the novel until he stands helplessly watching his crazy son-in-law, Eisen, savagely smash the Black pickpocket's face with his bag of medallions outside Lincoln Center. The confrontation is provoked by Lionel Feffer, Sammler's former student reader, who takes snapshots of the crime committed.

Sammler's connecton with Lionel Feffer brings forth his castigation of the youth and university students of the sixties. Although he is "quite interested in the radical movement" (36), Sammler feels it a shame that the poorly-read student activists have learned to respect no persons, not even their own selves:

> More recent readers were student activists. . . . To judge by their reading ability, the young people had had a meager education. . . . Hairy, dirty, without style, levelers, ignorant. . . . Some of the poor girls had a bad smell. Bohemian protest did them the most harm. . . . These poor kids may have resolved to stink together in defiance of a corrupt tradition built on neurosis and falsehood, but Mr. Sammler thought that an unforeseen result of their way of life was loss of femininity, of self-esteem. In their revulsion from authority they would respect no persons. Not even their own persons. (36)

An "ingenious operator, less student than promoter" (38), Feffer is a "bustling, affectionate, urgent, eruptive, enterprising character" (38) and "a busy seducer, especially . . . of young wives" (39). In

Sammler's view, Feffer embodies "a high-energy American life to the point of anarchy and breakdown" (39). He is an American salesman: boastful, insincere, and enterprising.

It is Feffer who cons Sammler into speaking at a seminar on the British Scene in the Thirties. It is a fiasco. Bellow's picture of youth is severe. Offended by the students' "will to offend," Sammler bemoans that they have "no view of the nobility of being intellectuals and judges of the social order" (45):

> What a pity! old Sammler thought. A human being, valuing himself for the right reasons, has and restores order, authority. . . . But what was it to be arrested in the stage of toilet training! What was it to be entrapped by a psychiatric standard (Sammler blamed the Germans and their psychoanalysis for this)! Who had raised the diaper flag? Who had made shit a sacrament? What literary and psychological movement was that? (45)

Sammler has no use for this "confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveneess, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling" (43). His brief encounter with modern American university life is sickening.[5]

Although Sammler's direct confrontation with university youth is brief, the meddling and untrustworthy Feffer keeps reappearing throughout the novel and finally provokes the confrontation with the Black pickpocket, which brings to Mr. Sammler a sudden recognition of his vulnerability, isolation, and moral weightlessness. Horrified by the dangerous lunacy of Eisen, he is further appalled by the lack of moral courage of the bystanders: "But of course 'some of you' did not exist. No one would do anything, and suddenly Sammler felt extremely foreign--voice, accent, syntax, manner, face, mind, everything, foreign" (287).

Simultaneously, Sammler has been obsessed with the impending death of his nephew, Dr. Elya Gruner, whom Sammler loves and admires. Gruner and Sammler are the two positive characters in the novel, representing the Old System and moral presence in the chaotic New York of the trouble-ridden sixties.[6]

Although Gruner left Poland when he was ten years old, he has always felt closely tied to the "Old World" and to his relatives who remain there. Even though he grew up in a tough neighborhood in New York, he is "elaborately deferential, positively Chinese in observing old forms" (76) and has "a passion for kinships" (82). On impulse, he flies from Kennedy Airport, without a suitcase, to Jerusalem where he does genealogies and engages in family reminiscences with old relatives.

Sammler attributes Gruner's rescuing him from the DP camp after the war to the persistence of Gruner's "Old World family feelings" (11). Sammler's "historical significance for Gruner was considerable" (76), as are his experiences, his suffering, the war, the Holocaust. Sammler represents to Gruner elements of a meaningful past which have not been totally destroyed.

Though not without defects, Dr. Gruner is an accountable person who gives thought to others. Despite his dislike of his profession of surgeon, he had been conscientious and done his duties before his retirement. [To Sammler, "it is the strength to do one's duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes" (93).] Despite his late wife's bossiness, vulgarity, and snobbery, he tolerated her and expressed his love for her. Elya has some kind of "stoical pride" (Brooks 153) in himself and compassion for his fellow men. His generosity reaches beyond his own family--to his chauffeur, to charity

houses. As Sammler whispers when he says *yizkor* for Elya's soul, Elya Gruner is a man who has done "what was required of him" and fulfilled "the terms of his contract" (313). As a man of the Old System and of genuine family feeling, Dr. Gruner really is "a ray of the light in the gloom" and "no one but Sammler seems to care much when this ray is extinguished" (228).

Dr. Gruner's two wayward and dissolute children, Angela and Wallace, do not care. Without ethical values and "absolutely wrapped up in their narcissistic activities" (Brooks 153), they do not believe that "there are things everyone knows, and must know" (307) and refuse to come to terms with their father at the last opportunity because that would be too "old-fashioned."

Angela represents the extreme case of the sexually liberated modern American woman. Presented in the novel as promiscuous, the Great Sinner "who suggested the sexual madness of the Western World," she carries on the theme of ideology of sex introduced by the Black pickpocket: "Millions of civilized people wanted oceanic, boundless, primitive, neckfree nobility, experienced a strange release of galloping impulses, and acquired the peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone" (162).

Bellow's depiction of Angela is totally negative.[7] She is a caricature in which all the sexual vices of the age are parodied. As viewed by Mr. Sammler, Angela is a wealthy *femme fatale* let loose in New York City. She is a rich, beautiful, spoiled nymphomaniac, selfish, self-centered, and insensitive. She is among "millions of corrupt ladies, Sammler saw, [who] had fortunes to live on. Foolish creatures, or worse, squandering the wealth of the land" (178).

She uses Sammler both as a confidant, telling him her sexual

adventures, and as an intermediary to assuage her father's hurt feelings toward her. She does not expect Sammler to comment on her life-style, however, and she is insulted when he does. When Sammler wants her to go to her father's bedside and act nicely, she refuses. She says, "But how could I--It goes against everything. You're talking to the wrong person" (306). Believing that "there are things everyone knows, and must know" (307), Sammler laments that Angela can be amorous, intimate with holiday acquaintances, but will not tell her dying father that she loves him.

Angela is a catalyst to Sammler's denunciation of American cities, especially New York City, and contemporary intellectuals. As her confidant who has to hear her candid, bizarre, grotesque, sexual adventures and experiments, Sammler recalls Saint Augustine's statement, "The Devil hath established his cities in the North." He used to love his Northern cities, especially London--"the blessings of its gloom, of coal smoke, gray rains, and the mental and human opportunities of a dark muffled environment" (32)--but now he thinks St. Augustine's statement needs a new interpretation. To him, the waning of Puritanism has changed "the dark satanic mills" into "light satanic mills," dominated by "children of joy" and "the emancipated masses of New York, Amsterdam, London" (32).

In Angela, a daughter of the vile city, he sees visions of modern Sodom and Gomorrah: "New York makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world" (304). He laments that "dark romanticism now took hold":

> He saw the increasing triumph of Enlightenment--Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Adultery! . . . the struggles of three revolutionary centuries being won while the feudal bonds of Church and Family weakened and the privileges of

> aristocracy (without any duties) spread wide, democratized, especially the libidinous privileges, the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions, tripling, quadrupling, polymorphous, noble in being natural, primitive, combining the leisure and luxurious inventiveness of Versailles with the hibiscus-covered erotic ease of Samoa. Dark romanticism now took hold. (32-33)

Sammler's apocalyptic vision sees the dangers of "dark romanticism" which has led people toward abysses of chaos, anarchy, craziness, self-destruction:[8]

> The dreams of nineteenth-century poets polluted the psychic atmosphere of the great boroughs and suburbs of New York. Add to this the dangerous lunging staggering crazy violence of fanatics, and the trouble was very deep. Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice. He did not agree with refugee friends that this doom was inevitable, but liberal beliefs did not seem capable of self-defense, and you could smell decay. You could see the suicidal impulses of civilization pushing strongly. You wondered whether this Western culture could survive universal dissemination. . . . Or whether the worst enemies of civilization might not prove to be its petted intellectuals who attacked it at its weakest moments--attacked it in the name of proletarian revolution, in the name of reason, and in the name of irrationality, in the name of visceral depth, in the name of sex, in the name of perfect instantaneous freedom. For what it amounted to was limitless demand. . . . Enlightenment? Marvelous! But out of hand, wasn't it?" (33-34)

Angela is promiscuous, but her "high I.Q. moron" brother, Wallace, is almost devoid of any sexual interest. He is "the late sixties writ large" (Fuchs 214); his originality "consists of being a professional youth" (Fuchs 214). He is interested only in flying airplanes, looking for stolen money, sports statistics, and touring Central Asia by horse. He is always a "nearly": nearly a physicist, a mathematician, a lawyer, an engineer, a Ph.D. in behavioral sciences, an alcoholic, a homosexual. Like the child-like Bruch who plays with toys alone in his room, Wallace is a permanent little brother.

Like Angela, Wallace subscribes to the cult of modern youth which does not believe in virtues or roots. As Sammler sees it, "he apparently has no use for priests, judges, or confessors" (93). To him, "roots are not modern. That's a peasant conception, soil and roots" (245). Even at his father's deathbed, he still asks his father for money in order to invest in a crazy scheme. While his father is dying, he is flooding his house and flying an airplane.

Oppressed by the hospital's atmosphere and disheartened by Angela and Wallace's behavior, Mr. Sammler looks out through the window. The scrawls on the windows of an empty building opposite the hospital lead to a sequence of reflections; those "strange figures or nonfigures" (89) suggest something to him:

> Of what? Of future nonbeing. (Elya!) But also of the greatness of eternity which shall lift us from this present shallowness. At this time forces, energies that might carry mankind up carried it down. For finer purposes of life, little was available. Capacities, impressions, visions amassed in human beings . . . were bound up largely with vanities, negations, and revealed only in amorphous hints or ciphers smeared on the windows of condemned shops. . . . And in the meantime there was the excuse of madness. A whole nation, all of civilized society, perhaps, seeking the blameless state of madness. The privileged, the almost aristocratic state of madness. (89)

The loops and curves--suggesting death and nothingness--recall his Holocaust experiences, his hot summer months in war-time Poland hiding in a mausoleum where he began to decipher the metaphysical messages of all sorts of symbols and portents. He was engrossed in a "yellow despair": "In this light, bad news for Sammler, bad news for humankind, bad information. . . . Something hateful, and at times overwhelming" (90). Nearly thirty years after his horrible trauma during the war, Sammler, looking down at the street and at the scrawls on the window,

associates war-time craziness with sixties madness. He asks, "Is our species crazy?" The answer is unequivocal as there is "plenty of evidence" (92). Sammler does not believe that madness will lift one to sainthood. He laments that only a few comprehend a simple truth: "it is the strength to do one's duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes" (93).

The episode that causes most of the complications that prevents Sammler from visiting Elya in the hospital is his daughter's theft of Dr. Govinda Lal's manuscript, *The Future of the Moon*. Sammler's attempts to resolve this touchy problem, on the one hand, and to hasten to Elya's hospital bed, on the other, force him to become an anxious and disconcerted city voyager, shuttling between Elya's New Rochelle suburban house and the hospital at the south end of Manhattan. The trips bring him and the reader close-ups of New York street scenes.

Living in "the riotous city" (105) for more than twenty years, Mr. Sammler of course knows that New York is monstrous. Its automobiles are "foul, reckless, stinking" (123). Its public paths are "invariably dog-fouled" (105). Its slums are hellishly dark. Its public phone booths are vandalized. Its buses and subways are dangerous. Its buildings are somber and oppressive. Its inhabitants are self-imprisoned and divorced from nature.

Yet, in the sixties he particularly detects the deterioration of the city. As noted above, he finds in the examples of Angela and other youths that New York is a mad city, filled with hippies, muggings, mini-skirts, wild business enterprises, obscenities, riots, rallies, and determined sexual circuses. It is a modern Sodom and Gommorah. It is a modern wasteland, for its hold on civilization is extremely tenuous.

This city image is confirmed and magnified during Sammler's city voyages. Walking along Broadway, Sammler observes and reflects on those imitative hippies, those "dark romanticists":

> What one sees on Broadway while bound for the bus. All human types reproduced, the barbarian, redskin, or Fiji, the dandy, the buffalo hunter, the desperado, the queer, the sexual fantasist, the squaw; bluestocking, princess, poet, painter, prospector, troubadour, guerrilla, Che Guevara, the new Thomas à Becket. (147)

This is reminiscent of Augie's Chicago in the cataloguing of multitudinous human types, but the passage above is not a celebration but a fierce condemnation of modern man's imitative slavish mentality: "modern man, perhaps because of collectivization, has a fever of originality" (229).

Sammler's criticism of the radicalism of the Now Generation is reflected in the following passage which portrays bohemian radicals of the sixties crowding Broadway:

> more actors, apes, copycats . . . more fiction, illusion, more fantasy . . . this imitative anarchy of the streets--these Chinese revolutionary tunics, these babes in unisex toyland, these surrealist warchiefs, Western stagecoach drivers--Ph.D.s in philosophy, some of them. . . . They sought originality. They were obviously derivative. And of what--of Paiutes, of Fidel Castro? No, of Hollywood extras. (149)

Coming down from Elya's New Rochelle house, Sammler observes his city from the window of a Rolls Royce. He feels terrified by the brutality of reality and despairs at humanity's "poverty of soul" (230):

> Downtown on Broadway. . . . Tenements, the Puerto Rican squalor. . . . And now . . . he inspected the subculture of the underprivileged . . . its Caribbean fruits, its plucked naked chickens with loose necks and eyelids blue, the wavering fumes of Diesel and hot lard. Then 96th Street,

> tilted at all four corners, the kiosks and movie houses, the ramparts of wire-fastened newspapers bundles, and the colors of panic waving. . . . Broadway . . . always challenged Sammler. He was never up to it. And why should there be any contest? But there was, every time. For something was stated here. By a convergence of all minds and all movements the conviction transmitted by this crowd seemed to be that reality was a terrible thing, and that the final truth about mankind was overwhelming and crushing. This vulgar, cowardly conclusion, rejected by Sammler with all his heart, was the implicit local orthodoxy, the populace itself being metaphysical and living out this interpretation of reality and this view of truth. . . . Broadway at Ninety-sixth Street gave him such a sense of things. Life, when it was like this . . . was really a state of singular dirty misery. . . . This poverty of soul, its abstract state, you could see in faces on the street. And he too had a touch of the same disease. (230)

Sammler's comments on the barbarism and degeneracy of New York City are often expanded into broader, more universal comments. New York City is not the only city that is sinking into madness and barbarism; it is a national and universal phenomenon, a "whole nation, all of civilized society . . . seeking the blameless state of madness. The privileged, almost aristocratic state of madness" (89). At the end of the novel, Sammler wonders if humankind is doomed. As he says to Angela, "New York makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gommorrah, the end of the world" (304).

There are no moments of pastoral retreat for Sammler. When he hears that Angela wants to take a trip to Mexico, a hot and green place, because she is sick of New York and its winter, he cracks a quotable quote: "Hot? Something green? A billiard table in hell would answer the description" (94). As it turns out, Angela's Mexico trip, like Augie's, is far from what D. H. Lawrence envisioned. It is hellish.

Sammler does not "bolt for nature." He left New York once, not for pastoral dreams but for concern about the fate of his fellow Jews

in Israel during the Six-Day War. Under the auspices of Dr. Gruner, he flew to the battlefield as a war correspondent: not idyllic scenery, but corpses and deserts.

Like Leventhal in *The Victim*, Sammler can only find some green (an ersatz pastoral solace) in the city park, but even the park cannot give him any rest. After his meeting with Wallace and his consequent ruminations on the semiotic signification of those scrawls on the window of an abandoned building opposite the hospital, Sammler goes out to rest for a while in a little park. However, the daffodils and tulips are sprinkled with the fallout of soot and the public paths are "invariably dog-fouled" (105). The grass in the park is almost burned by animal excrements and "the sycamores, blemished bark, but very nice, brown and white, getting ready to cough up leaves" (105). Trying to find a bench to sit on, Sammler sees a female bum drunkenly sleeping, a wino urinating, and some "Bombay beggars"-like young hippies (106), who immediately remind him of the Eloi in Wells' prophetic novel, *The Time Machine*: "Lovely young human cattle herded by the cannibalistic Morlocks who lived in a subterranean life and feared light and fire" (106).

Despite the almost impossible urban circumstances, however, Mr. Sammler does have moments of transcendence: "Lilacs and sewage" (117). To him, that is "bliss from his surroundings": "There were as yet no lilacs, but an element of the savage gas was velvety and sweet, reminiscent of blooming lilac" (117). Of course, it is not without irony when Sammler calls it a bliss: "sewer gas edged with opiate lilac sweetness. Bliss from bricks, from the sky! Bliss and mystic joy!" (118). Yet, Sammler is truly "wooed almost comically by momentary and fortuitous sweetness" (117) and now and then he gets "an appreciative

or fanciful pleasure, apparently inconsequent, suggested by the ruddy dun of sandstone, by cool corners of the warmth" (117).

Even though there is no pastoral retreat for Sammler in the novel, there are discussions of Wells' utopianism and moon colonies, another version of the pastoral. This theme is brought forth by Shula's theft of Dr. Lal's manuscripts.

Even though Sammler is no longer interested in the Bloomsbury group, his eccentric daughter Shula is still obsessed with Sammler's plan to write a memoir about H. G. Wells. She steals Dr. Lal's *The Future of the Moon* for the sake of her father's project and thus brings Dr. Lal and Mr. Sammler together for a long dialogue on the Bloomsbury group and their conception of Utopia, the necessity of colonizing the moon, technology, the Will and the Idea, and the problems of the world.

For Dr. Lal, the journey into space is the ultimate adventure:

> As far as the organizers and engineers are concerned, it is a vast opportunity, but that is not of high theoretical value. Still, at the same time something serious happens within. The soul most certainly feels the grandeur of this achievement. Not to go where one can go may be stunting. I believe the soul feels it, and therefore it is a necessity. (217)

Sammler's answer to Lal is, "As an engineering project, colonizing outer space, except for the curiosity, the ingenuity of the thing, is of little interest to me" (237). Sammler wonders: should man concentrate his activities upon improving life on this earth, or is this earth so corrupt that it is unredeemable and that he must seek to start life anew preferably on a new planet?[9]

Sammler does not think man is able to "get out of spatial-temporal prison" (53); however, he also understands the advantage of escaping from the city, the earth, of "getting away from here, building plastic

igloos in the vacuum, dwelling in quiet colonies, necessarily austere, drinking the fossil waters, considering basic questions only. No question of it" (53). To Dr. Lal, who as an Indian is "supersensitive to a surplus of humanity" (219), life on the moon seems to provide a way of dealing with the problem of vast multitudes. To Sammler, however, it is a nihilistic attempt to escape the human condition. He feels that the wish to end it all is mere rhetoric.

Even though "everything was being done to make it intolerable to abide" (135) on it, Sammler still thinks that the earth is "a glorious planet" (135). Sammler is not pessimistic but religious:

> When you know what pain is, you agree that not to have been born is better. But being born one respects the powers of creation, one obeys the will of God--with whatever inner reservations truth imposes. As for duty. . . . The pain of duty makes the creature upright, and this uprightness is no negligible thing. . . . There is also an instinct against leaping into Kingdom Come. (220)

III

In his treatment of the theme of man in the city, Bellow's creation of Mr. Sammler as the protagonist of "a crisis book for a crisis year, 1969" (Bradbury 78) is remarkable. It is of unusual significance that Bellow portrays this soulful, sage-like survivor of the Holocaust as a representative of traditional humanism in an age pervaded by nihilism, dark romanticism, and scientific rationalism. As Gross has commented, Bellow's assertion of humanism--his concern with the realities of the soul--in this novel is almost heroic, considering the harsh ideological rift of the age (75).

Compared with Leventhal, Wilhelm, and Herzog, Sammler is less strident and personal in his relationship to New York City; he is essentially a detached, sagacious, aged, foreign observer of the city. Like other Bellovian heroes, he abhores crazy, chaotic, and cluttered

urban phenomena, but as a man from the grave and the Old World he is less affected personally. His concerns are wider and broader. As Durham points out,

> Unlike prior Bellow heroes whose frames of reference remain locked within their own egos, Sammler rises above his concept of self and views humanity more philosophically, with broader implications of man's role in his society. His concern is not merely for what that particular city is doing to Artur Sammler, but what civilization is doing to the masses he observes in that environment. His thoughts are on a higher plane; his concerns are those of a citizen of the human race, not merely of New York City. As such, his environment is almost mythicized into a condition of the world. (83-84)

In a modern city encroached on by anarchy, madness, waywardness, and decadence, Mr. Sammler, "the most understanding, the most European-worldly-wise-non-provincial-mentally-diversified-intelligent-young-in-heart of old refugees, and really interested in the new phenomena" (69), observes, reflects, laments, fears, and comments. In order to counteract the onrush of new waves of madness, agitation, violence, and waste, he holds fast to religious principles--duty, obligation, benevolence, love, responsibility, deep and abiding feeling for immortality, desire for eternal peace, and lasting hope for salvation.

Like Herzog, Mr. Sammler believes in God. As Rodrigues points out, "The awareness that there is in every human being a splash of God's own spirit allows Mr. Sammler to recognize the psychic unity of mankind, to accept the death of Elya Gruner, and to resist giving in to a sense of imminent apocalypse" (98). That is why at the end of the novel Sammler prays for Elya Gruner, who has fulfilled the terms of his contract with God. Sammler's *yizkor* for Elya's soul is:

> "Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible, as well as he was able . . . was eager . . . to do what was required of him. . . . He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet . . . he did meet the terms of his

> contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it--that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know." (313)

Seriously concerned with the possibility of the collapse of civilization, Bellow has written a very serious novel, asking: Should civilization be salvaged from its sinking? As he says in an interview, "Civilization is standing on a tight rope over an abyss. There are too many crushing and possibly insoluble problems. Now seems a particularly chancy time to rock the boat merely for the sake of *joie de vivre*" (Howard 60).

Mr. Sammler bemoans but does not yield. That is why he refuses to give up and leave, despite the dog-fouled streets and parks, despite the maddening militant students, despite the barbaric vandals and criminals, despite the abominable subways, despite the bragging sham-man, despite the unfilial grandnephew and niece, despite the junk-collecting lunatic daughter, despite the rampant sexuality, despite the traumatic Holocaust horrors, despite the death of his kindly nephew, Dr. Gruner.

As Goldman insightfully points out, "It is a mad world Sammler inhabits, where culture and education seem unrelated to one's way of life. . . . Yet Sammler, as do most of Bellow's protagonists, believes that chaos cannot determine human destiny. Chaos and madness may be all-pervasive, but ultimately each person fulfills his contract, as did Elya, which is a humbling and human experience" ("Saul" 94). What Bellow/Sammler tries to tell us is quite simple: to embrace basic, essential virtues, to search for eternal, unchanging truth, and to build a decent, propriety-respecting, humanistic, healthy society, emphasizing traditional values. Let the future and the moon wait.

Thus amidst the squalor of the city, in the steaming savage gas of the sewage, he sees Whitmanesque lilacs blooming, soft and beautiful, even though it is not the season for lilacs. Lilacs and sewage! What a combination! Flowers--symbolic of hope, rebirth, and beauty--are going to triumph over urban despair, death, and ugliness.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970) 313. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text..

[2] Bellow corresponded with H. G. Wells in the forties when Wells responded enthusiastically to Bellow's first novel.

[3] Lionel Feffer tells his mentor Sammler: "You should denounce New York City. You should speak like a prophet, like from another world" (122). Using Abraham Heschel's definition of the prophet, Goldsmith points out, "In a way Mr. Sammler does play the role of prophet, and in a way he does not" (53), because "he rejects the values of his adopted society, but Mr. Sammler never 'raves' and never shows 'breathless impatience' or 'hysteria'" (53). Goldman maintains that Bellow writes in the manner of "an Old Testament prophet, for Bellow is essentially a religious person and literature for him 'is a way of coming closer to God'" ("Saul" 95).

[4] Bellow's depiction of the Black pickpocket here is stereotypical. While reading Bellow's works, I feel very uncomfortable at his use of racist words, such as "Chinamen" (to describe Chinese engineers who help send men to the moon). In this novel, the derogatory term "sexual niggerhood" used to criticize the sexual chaos of the sixties is racially biased. For a great humanist like Bellow, such a bias is indeed regrettable.

However, it would be unfair to say this represents Bellow's total view of the Black people or other minorities in the United States. I think he is highly critical of everyone, including himself. He portrays most of the women characters quite negatively in his works prior to *The Dean's December*, but we must remember that he also creates many disgusting, sloppy, and narcissistic male fools, and many cold-blooded or greedy lawyers and hypocrites. Take this novel, for instance. Bellow is critical of almost every character. Even Mr. Sammler and Elya Gruner are not without blemishes, because he does not think any one is perfect. If the Black pickpocket is guilty of pickpocketing, other people are not better than he. At least he has some princeliness. (Curiously he never speaks a word throughout the novel.) To Sammler, the crazy Eisen (his son-in-law) from Israel is even more threatening and dangerous than the Black pickpocket.

Bellow's view of the Black people is not all negative. He is discriminating in the sense that he respects good and moral people, black or white. In *Herzog*, Herzog writes a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to express his admiration for him and his disapproval of the Powells and the Muslims:

> *Dear Mr. King, The Negroes of Alabama filled me with admiration. White America is in danger of being depoliticalized. Let us hope this example by Negroes will penetrate the hypnotic trance of the majority. The political question in modern democracies is one of the reality of public questions. Should all of these become matters of*

> *fantasy the old political order is ended. I for one wish to go on record recognizing the moral dignity of your group. Not the Powells, who want to be corrupt as white demagogues, nor the Muslims building on hate.* (*H* 87)

In *The Dean's December*, Bellow depicts sympathetically the plight of the inner city. He deplores such Blacks as Ebry and Mitchell who rape and kill. But he respects highly the Black American ambassador to Rumania and the black director of the County Hospital. In his *Harper's* article, he finds only two men with exemplary moral initiative in Chicago: Ridpath and Winthrop, both black.

[5] Apparently Bellow used an incident that occurred when he lectured at San Francisco State University. In a letter to Mark Harris Bellow wrote: "The thing at S. F. State was very bad. . . . Being denounced by Salas as an old shit to an assembly which seemed to find the whole thing deliciously thrilling. Being told furthermore that 'this is an effete old man--he can't *come*!'" (Harris 716).

[6] The generation gap between father and children is really deep. As Wallace says to Sammler, "I'm a different generation. I never had any dignity to start with. . . . No natural feeling of respect" (241). Like other rebellious children in the sixties, Wallace is doing all kinds of crazy things as "protests against his father's 'valueless' success" (240). It can be read as a metaphor when Sammler meditates: "prosperous families brought forth their anarchistic sons--these boy Bakunins, geniuses of liberty, arsonists, demolishers of prisons, property, palaces" (240). Bellow once wrote a short story titled, "The Old System" (1967).

[7] As Kazin, among others, points out, "He [Sammler] dislikes all the women especially" (137).

[8] In Pinsker's class, Bellow said, "I think the people in Western countries live Romanticism all the time. They don't even know it, but they do. They think of the proper mode of being highly stimulated, ecstatic, a life of infinite possibilities, the individual utterly free, his main responsibility to fulfill himself and to realize his own desires as richly as he can. . . . It becomes a nightmare when you have as many people on junk--of one sort or another--as you do in this country. It's purely a Romantic thing" (Pinsker 975). What Bellow is criticizing is the debased and vulgar form of romanticism. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, it is "the dark romanticism," embraced by Angela, Wallace, Bruch, Feffer, the Black-pickpocket, and many youths. It is a bizarre romantic individualism.

[9] Newman claims that Mr. Sammler's planet refers to the moon of the future, the world of the concentration camp ("another planet") of the past, and the earth of the present (133-34). In this chapter, I interpret Sammler's planet to be the earth only.

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CHAPTER VII

Humboldt's Gift: Citrine in Chicago and New York

> I am . . . sentimental about urban ugliness. In the modern spirit of ransoming the commonplace, all this junk and wretchedness, through art and poetry, by the superior power of the soul.[1]

I

Humboldt's Gift (1975), Bellow's rich, funny, and ebullient eighth novel has a typically Bellovian beginning: Charlie Citrine suddenly finds his life "in great disorder" (43). His successful life in Chicago has taken various turns for the worse. His home is no longer "[his] retreat, [his] sanctuary, [his] Fort Dearborn deep in Indian (Materialistic) Territory" (291). He is harassed by a minor Mafia figure, Rinaldo Cantabile, enchanted by his mistress, Renata, tormented by his litigious ex-wife, Denise, and racked by cannibal lawyers. Citrine is also obsessed with the question of death, particularly that of his poet-friend Von Humboldt Fleisher, who "acts from the grave" (6) to change Citrine's life. Citrine's entanglements with Cantabile, Renata, Denise, and others in Chicago and his reminiscences of his friendship with Humboldt in New York City constitute this great tale of two cities in Bellow's *oeuvre*.

In *Herzog*, Sandor Himmelstein entreats Herzog to settle in Chicago: "Come back to the home town. You're a West Side Jew" (*H* 114);

Herzog, however, does not comply. Citrine, unlike Herzog, makes such a move: he returned to Chicago to settle after his success in New York City. His obstinate desire to live in Chicago greatly angered his ex-wife, Denise. His friend Humboldt was so much irked by Citrine's "perverse" act that he queried, "After making this dough why does he bury himself in the sticks? What's he in Chicago for?" (2). Throughout the novel Citrine asks himself again and again why of all cities he chose Chicago to settle in. At times, he deems it an irony of life for a lover of beauty like him to insist on living in Chicago (284). Didn't he go to New York City in the late thirties because Chicago was too boring?

At one point, Citrine reveals his "secret motive" (108) for returning to Chicago: he wants to write a significant work on boredom, to become "the Malthus of boredom" (114):

> Chicago was the ideal place in which to write my master essay--"Boredom." In raw Chicago you could examine the human spirit under industrialism. If someone were to arise with a new vision of Faith, Love and Hope, he would want to understand to whom he was offering it--he would have to understand the kind of deep suffering we call boredom (108).

All things considered, Citrine's move back to Chicago from New York shows his dissatisfaction with New York City and his allegiance to Chicago. After rising in the literary world in the fifties, Citrine discovered that he did not like New York and its literati that much. His bidding farewell to New York City signifies his disenchantment with New York's ideology-polluted literary circle and his persistence in going against the grain of the modernist/avant-garde tradition.[2] Moreover, as Goldman insightfully comments,

> Charlie seeks confirmation of his essence. Like his fictive ancestor, David Levinksy, he looks back upon his accomplishments and finds them meaningless. Consequently, he returns to his roots and tries, by means of association, to recapture meaning in his life. (218)

As a writer from Chicago, Citrine is fully aware of his city's vulgarity and materialism. He knows that Chicago, at least for the present, cannot completely separate itself from associations with business, industry, stockyards, skyscrapers, slums, gangsters, and philistinism.[3] Yet, for all this, Chicago remains his own turf, however sensitive a plant he is (309) or however peculiar a soul he has (37). By taking Chicago as it is, Citrine is able to tolerate and even savor urban experiences which virtually constitute modern reality. As he admits, "There were beautiful and moving things in Chicago, but culture was not one of them. . . . I had accepted this condition long ago" (66).

To a remembrancer like Citrine, the city means his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Growing up in a closely-knit Jewish immigrant family, he has strong family feelings, which weigh heavily in his choosing to settle in Chicago. As his ex-wife Denise often declares, he moved back to Chicago because his parents were buried there.

Moreover, Citrine cherishes his old-time school chums; to him, they are "a sacred category" (38) and he is noted for his "terrible weakness or dependency on early relationship" (38). Through his Chicago friends, he not only gets to know parts of the city condition normally beyond his realm but also indulges in acts of recall and shares advice, assistance, and friendship.

A writer by profession, Citrine knows he is in an unremitting

paradox--he needs to stand back from, and yet shares in, the struggle of human life itself. He does not believe there is an ideal city or place in the world for a writer, or for anyone. Even though Chicago cannot boast of its culture as New York does, it is, with its charm and problems, as much an American city as New York. Living in Chicago gives him not merely an "at-home" feeling but a vantage point from which to look at the First City--New York--more objectively.

As the author of a Broadway hit play, *Von Trenck*, and biographer of Woodrow Wilson and Harry Hopkins, honored by the French government and the Zig-Zag Club, Citrine hopes that he can contribute to the upgrading of his city and help "prevent the leprosy of soul" (136). His move back to Chicago is an attempt to accept the mission, however impossible or lofty, to bring culture, beauty, love, and poetry to the "brutal Chicago" (297). As he says, he is "sentimental about urban ugliness" and he hopes to ransom "the commonplace, all this junk and wretchedness, through art and poetry, by the superior power of the soul" (72).

Citrine is serious about his role as a poet/artist in the city. His seriousness in the role of the poet-moralist once incurred acerbic criticism from his modernist friend Humoldt. Nonetheless, he is firmly convinced that only poetry, art, and the imagination can prevent the modern city from becoming a cultural wasteland.

Citrine's ties to Chicago go back to the twenties when his family moved from Appleton, Wisconsin, to the city's West Side, where he grew up and received his education. Although the novel's depictions of childhood do not equal in length or in effect the Napoleon Street section in *Herzog* or the first half of *Augie March*, they do contain typically Bellovian reminiscences of early family and urban life.[4]

Like other Bellovian heroes, Citrine is terribly nostalgic and tries to justify his hysteria-like keenness in recollections by arguing that "Love made these things unforgettable" (330) and "Plato links recollection with love" (348). He remembers that he played softball with Polish kids under the El tracks (5), that at eight he spent Christmas in a TB ward, and that he spent a blizzard night with his first sweetheart, Naomi Lutz, in her father's office.

Like Herzog, Citrine was greatly affected by his experience in the TB ward:

> I spent my eighth year in the public ward of a TB sanatorium. Good people donated piles of colored funny papers to the sanatorium. These were stacked high beside each bed. . . . In addition, day and night, I read the Bible. One visit a week was allowed, my parents taking turns. . . . Kids hemmorrhaged in the night and choked on blood and were dead. In the morning the white geometry of made-up beds had to be coped with. (65)

It is in the sanatorium that the young Charlie knew that he had "a TB fever and also a love fever" (74), that he learned the value of being alive and got the first illumination about the light-in-the-being: "Owing to the TB I connected breathing with joy, and owing to the gloom of the ward I connected joy with light, and, owing to my irrationality I related light on the walls to light inside me" (65).[5] Later Citrine says confidently, "I speak as a person who had lately received light" (177).

Four particular occasions in the novel offer forums for Citrine to indulge in remembrances of things past: his trip to his old neighborhood on Division Street; his sentimental get-together with his old sweetheart Naomi Lutz in Chicago; his visit to his brother, Julius, in Texas; and his running into his family's boarder Menasha Klinger in

Coney Island. Stimulated by these representatives of the past, he fondly recalls his Chicago childhood.

Growing up in Polish Chicago in the twenties, Citrine comes from a closely-knit Jewish immigrant family. They were so closely attached to one another that Naomi's father, Dr. Lutz, called the Citrines "a bunch of greenhorns and aliens, too damn emotional" (298). Citrine remembers that they very much cared about one another: "Whether it was a lump on my head, or Julius's geometry, or how Papa could raise the rent, or poor Mama's toothaches, it was the most momentous thing on earth for us all" (299). Whereas his father and brother, like Dr. Lutz, later became "real" Americans and ceased to be emotional, Citrine persists in his "immigrant loving" (299) and he hopes he has not lost "this intense way of caring" (299). As Citrine tells his daughter Mary, "Oh, I loved them [his parents and brother] all terribly, abnormally. I was all torn up with love" (74).

Later, when he goes to Coney Island to retrieve Humboldt's gift, Citrine runs into their boarder, Menasha, whom Citrine loved so much. Menasha remembers that Charlie was the "best-hearted little kid on the whole Northwest Side" (330) and the Citrines, perhaps with the exception of Julius, were very kind people. Especially kind was Charlie's mother who had come to be "a sacred person" (348).

In addition to teaching him astronomy and biology, Menasha imparted to Citrine a reverent love for music. Although he worked at Western Electric as a punch-press operator, Menasha wanted to become a dramatic tenor. He took Charlie downtown with him Saturdays for his music lesson. As Citrine recalls:

> In Chicago fifty years ago, we [Menasha and Charlie] had been passengers on the double-deck open-topped bus down to the

> Loop on Jackson Boulevard, Menasha explaining to me what bel canto was, telling me, radiant, about *Aida*, envisioning himself in brocade robes as a priest or warrior. After his singing lesson he took me to Kranz's for a chocolate-fudge sundae. . . . (330)

It is music that draws Citrine to Menasha. Citrine compares Menasha's desire to be a singer to his quest for the "imaginative soul" (332) and extols the power of music: "By means of music a man affirmed that the logically unanswerable was, in a different form, answerable. Sounds without determinate meaning became more and more pertinent, the greater the music" (332).

II

However, Citrine's memories of his childhood cannot shield him from the invasion of present distractions and anxieties. He has to face reality--the "Chicago condition"--without recoil. Around him are agents of distractions, unremittingly or potentially detrimental to his gift, well-being, sensibility, and equanimity. Because of them, he cannot lead a serene life nor can he concentrate on his essays on boredom and other subjects, just as Herzog feels impotent before his massive notes for his second book.

To a great extent, Citrine's loss of equilibrium is related to his "Chicagoan" background. As Renata tells him pointedly, "Deep down, you're from Chicago after all" (348). Not content with his lofty life as an ivory-tower intellectual, he wants to be in touch and in communion. Despite all his credentials as a scholar, a man of culture and sensibility, and a student of Rudolf Steiner, Citrine is also a "'Chicagoan' with a taste for low pursuits, pneumatic young women, and gangland excitement" (Cronin 272). His affection for big-city low life leads him to be mistaken for a hit man. In the police car, Citrine

reflects on this unusual experience: "As a fanatical reader, walled in by his many books, accustomed to look down from his high windows on police cars, fire engines, ambulances, an involuted man who worked from thousands of private references and texts, I now found relevance in the explanation T. E. Lawrence had given for enlisting in the RAF--'To plunge crudely among crude men and find for my self'" (280).

Citrine knows that urban America is "the great mysterious book" (266). For years, he says, "I was too fastidious and skittish to study it closely--I had used the conditions of life to test my powers of immunity; the sovereign consciousness trained itself to avoid the phenomena and to be immune to their effects" (267). His desire to know more about real Chicago draws him close to his friend, George Swiebel, who keeps him posted about the underworld; it is George's idea that Citrine play poker with some real South Side people at his place.

As a self-proclaimed "urban psychologist" (35), Citrine thinks that with "a deep no-affect belt, a critical mass of indifference" (35), a man can get along in a big American city. However, when he discovers his car pounded all over one December morning, his theoretical "protective magic" breaks. The man who battered his car is Rinaldo Cantabile, an elegantly dressed minor Mafia figure, whom Citrine met at that fateful poker game. Citrine lost $450 to Cantabile and, on George's advice, stopped payment on the check because Cantabile and his cousin were seen cheating during the game. As a result, Citrine's car is mutilated and he is suddenly plunged into "the moronic inferno" (35) of Chicago's underworld.[6]

An extravagantly comic and dazzling creation, Cantabile is a demonic "agent of distraction" (180) from the city, his job being "to make noise and to deflect and misdirect and send [Citrine] foundering

into bogs" (180). He is also a reality instructor. His constant shouted "Wake up!" brings the dreamy and meditative Citrine back to reality, and thus keeps Citrine alive; as Thoreau has exhorted, "To be awake is to be alive" (67). Citrine admits that he has fallen short of full wakefulness: as he tells Naomi, "As I was lying stretched out in America, determined to resist its material interests and hoping for redemption by art, I fell into a deep snooze that lasted for years and decades" (306).

Cantabile takes Citrine to places beyond a bibliophile's normal realm, such as the Russian Bath on Division Street, the Playboy Club, the Hancock Building, and an unfinished sixty-story skyscraper, and he also exposes Citrine to such people as his Radcliffe-educated wife, his gorgeous mistress Polly, a gossip columnist, an old fence dressed as a decent businessman, and a phony investor. The trips allow the "minutely observant" (134) Citrine to walk out of his book-walled sanctuary and become a city voyeur-voyager.

Cantabile wants Citrine to return his money at the Russian Bath on Division Street.[7] Citrine's taxi trip to Division Street brings back memories of old Chicago:

> Division Street where the old Bath stands used to be Polish and now is almost entirely Puerto Rican. In the Polish days, the small brick bungalows were painted fresh red, maroon, and candy green. The glass plots were fenced with iron pipe. . . . Tumbleweed is so melancholy.
>
> In the old days of ice wagons and coal wagons householders used to cut busted boilers in half, set them out on the grass plots, and fill them with flowers. . . . The double rows of rivets stood out like the raised-skin patterns of African tribes. Here the women grew geraniums, sweet William, and other low-grade dusty flowers. (71).

The old neighborhood was Citrine's "Lake District." The young Citrine found the park his "own little Lake Country" (76) where he used to

wander and read "Plato, Wordsworth, Swinburne, and *Un Coeur Simple*" (76). Now he is sad to see his "Lake Country" turned into "a tropical West Indies slum" (77) and its landmarks demolished: "The old boulevard now was a sagging ruin, waiting for the wreckers. Through great holes I could look into apartments where I had slept, eaten, done my lessons, kissed girls" (75).

Heart-rending as it is to see the disappearance of the old neighborhood, the trip does evoke fond memories of his love for his parents and old sweetheart, Naomi. He remembers that when he was a kid, his father used to take him to the Russian Bath, which, almost miraculously, remains as an anachronistic relic among the rubble. Bellow meticulously describes the stinking, old-fashioned Bath, which is still frequented by some Jewish people for the health of their sacred bodies.

The Russian Bath episode contains a burlesque-like scene: Cantabile drags Citrine into the Bath's filthy toilet and pushes him into a stall to hear his rumblings and smell his stink. Cantabile intends to punish him, but as a result of this farcical scene they have become more intimate.

After the Russian Bath scene, Cantabile forces Citrine to go to the Playboy Club to apologize before witnesses. Sitting in the Club on one of the most "glamorous" corners of Chicago, he contemplates the relationship between men and the setting and comes to understand that man has conquered the emptiness of the land but not that of his heart:

> We were on one of the most glamorous corners of Chicago. I dwelt on the setting. The lakeshore view was stupendous. I couldn't see it but I knew it well and felt its effect--the shining road beside the shining gold vacancy of Lake Michigan. Man had overcome the emptiness of this land. But the emptiness had given him a few good licks in return. And

> here we sat amid the flatteries of wealth and power with pretty maidens and booze and tailored suits, and the men wearing jewels and using scent. (93)

Then Cantabile repeats the scene in an apartment owned by a fence in the Hancock Building. In a typically Bellovian gesture, Citrine looks from the window of the skyscraper and reflects, taking no notice of his human companions:

> A ragged western sun spread orange light over the dark shapes of the town, over the branches of the river and the black trusses of bridges. The lake, gilt silver and amethyst, was ready for its winter cover of ice. I happened to be thinking that if Socrates was right, that you could learn nothing from trees, that only the men you met in the street could teach you something about yourself, I must be in a bad way. . . . (97)

Citrine's rational thinking tells him that he should be among street people so that he can learn from them; yet, with Cantabile and other underworld men beside him, he prefers not to be of their company. On the one hand, he marvels at the collaborative efforts of experts in different branches of modern technology to send him up to the sixty-fourth story; on the other, he would rather harbor his Wordsworthian fancy and find himself among trees, flowers, water, and sun.

No matter how reluctant he is to listen to his human companions, Citrine is, nonetheless, gradually excited by "currents of criminality" (99) going on around him. He admits that his "American, Chicagoan (as well as personal) craving for high stimuli, for incongruities and extremes, was aroused" (99). His Chicago education enables him to accept the information about the seedy sides of the city: fancy thieving, police corruption, drug-dealing, and old lechers' scandals.

After leaving the Hancock Building, Cantabile takes Citrine high up on the catwalk of an unfinished sixty-story skyscraper where he

makes origami planes of Citrine's fifty-dollar bills and sails seven of them away. On the fast rising open elevator, Citrine tries to observe his city: "On the east, violently was the water, icy, scratched, like a plateau of solid stone, and the other way was a tremendous effusion of low-lying color, the last glow, the contribution of industrial poisons to the beauty of the Chicago evening" (101-02). However beautful Chicago's evening is, tiptoing high up there in a high wind is a lethal game.

Later, when Cantabile abducts him into his Thunderbird to threaten Stronson, the phony investor, Citrine carefully observes his city along the way. Cantabile's car waiting outside the Art Institute reminds him of Eliot's *Waste Land*, of "the violet hour when the human engine waits like a taxi throbbing, waiting" (253). The vehicles and people on bustling La Salle Street call to mind what and who have helped create a modern spiritual wasteland:

> We turned into La Salle Street where we were held up by taxi cabs and newspaper trucks and the Jaguars and Lincolns and Rolls-Royces of stockbrokers and corporation lawyers--the deeper thieves and the loftier politicians and the spiritual elite of American business, the eagles in the heights far above the daily, hourly, and momentary destinies of men. (259)

Citrine's entanglements with Cantabile read like a movie story. As Citrine's friend George says, Cantabile plays the gangster after the fashion of *The Godfather* and Citrine knows that he is involved in "a dramatization" (89). This is especially true in the Stronson episode, which seems an episode in a comic gangster movie. Bellow's use of cinematic scenes and effects in the Cantabile story foreshadows the later movie scenarios written by Citrine and Humboldt.

Cantabile is an integral part of Citrine's education. As Citrine

notes, "What we had [in Chicago] was a cultureless city pervaded nevertheless by Mind" (66). In present-day Chicago, policemen take psychology courses and are able to appreciate the comedy of urban life. The wife of a mafioso is writing a doctoral thesis on the poet Humboldt. And the mafioso, Cantabile, is not a crass hoodlum-ignoramus; he is "drawn to culture, to thought" (105). He talks about "Robert Ardrey, the territorial imperative, paleontology in the Olduvai Gorge, and the views of Konrad Lorenz" (61), and he drags the highly cultured celebrity-intellectual Citrine around town "to draw him upward, to lead him to higher things" (174). Perhaps, as Citrine comments, Cantabile has been in "the stage reached by bums, con men, freeloaders, and criminals in France in the eighteenth century, the stage of the intellectual creative man and theorist. Maybe he thought he was Rameau's nephew or even Jean Genet" (174).[8]

III

Denise, Citrine's ex-wife, is another fierce "agent of distraction" from the city who brings Citrine's mental work to a standstill. Although both Herzog and Citrine are tormented by divorce, they suffer in different ways. In *Herzog* Madeleine dumps Moses whereas in *Humboldt's Gift*, Citrine drops Denise. However, like Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, he has to pay dearly for his freedom, because Denise is litigious, an "aggressive subtle resourceful plaintiff" (57). After the breakup, they are engaged in endless alimony battles.

In a sense, Denise has taught Citrine an important "American" lesson, for "Real Americans are supposed to suffer with their wives, and wives with their husbands" (42). With the collaboration of cannibal lawyers ("the sharks of Chicago" [173]), Denise squeezes away money from Citrine and forces him out of his seclusion to face the chaotic,

skirmishing urban world. From his dealing with these people, Citrine learns "how universal the desire to injure your fellow man is" (270). Sometimes, not without irony, Citrine feels indebted to Denise, because, as he says, "Well, if Denise weren't suing me, I'd never get out of the house, because of her I have to go downtown. It keeps me in touch with the facts of life. It's been positively enlightening" (270).

Citrine met Denise when his play *Von Trenck* hit Broadway. Ten years later they married and they were once invited to the White House to be guests of President Kennedy. Then, despite Denise's strong opposition, Citrine brought her back to settle in somber Chicago. Although both Denise and Citrine are from the West Side of Chicago, their feelings toward the city are vastly different. Whereas Citrine is "loyal to something" (43)--to his past, his dead parents, his family, his Jewish tradition, and his city--Denise does not have emotions for the past, the dead, or the vulgar city. Coming from a Jewish *nouveau riche* family, the Vassar-educated Denise resents her background and tries to cut herself off from her earlier existence. She cannot bear Charlie's memories of his dead, his attachment to his Jewish past, his association with his school buddies (those "ignorant kikes" [43]), and his affection for his insane poet-friend Humboldt. She often asks Citrine, "Why are you hung up on the past and always lamenting some dead party or other?" (115). She says to Citrine, "At heart you're a kid from the slums. Your heart belongs to the Old West Side gutters" (41).

Unable to appreciate Citrine's ties to his roots, she keeps complaining: "'Why Chicago! We can live wherever we like, can't we? Christ!' She had in mind a house in Georgetown, or in Rome, or in

London SW3" (114). As Goldman comments, "Denise wants to lose herself by becoming part of the Washington social set or at least mingling with the intellectual life of New York . . . while Charlie returns to Chicago, which means to him . . . 'Land where my Jewish father died'" (218-19).

Denise is very displeased when Citrine abruptly returns to Chicago from New York because he sees and dodges his dying friend Humboldt in a Manhattan street that afternoon. Mooning in his room on that hot summer night, Citrine, influenced by the apparition of Humboldt and by the nagging of his wife, reflects upon the city's past and present. His "feeling" the city gradually yields a picture of a hellish wasteland:

> On hot nights Chicagoans feel the city body and soul. The stockyards are gone, Chicago is no longer slaughter-city, but the old smells revive in the night heat. . . . The old stink still haunts the place. It returns at times . . . to remind us all that Chicago had once led the world in butcher-technology and that billions of animals had died here. And that night the windows were open wide and the familiar depressing multilayered stink of meat, tallow, blood-meal, pulverized bones, hides, soap, smoked slabs, and burnt hair came back. Old Chicago breathed again through leaves and screens. I heard fire trucks and the gulp and whoop of ambulances, bowel-deep and hysterical. In the surrounding black slums incendiarism shoots up in summer, an index, some say, of psychopathology. Although the love of flames is also religious. . . . Over the lake, steel mills twinkled. Lamplight showed the soot already fallen on the leaves of the wall ivy. We had an early drought that year. Chicago, this night, was panting, the big urban engines going, tenements blazing in Oakwood with great shawls of flame, the sirens weirdly yelping, the fire engines, ambulances, and police cars--mad-dog, gashing-knife weather, a rape and murder night, thousands of hydrants open, spraying water from both breasts. Engineers were staggered to see the level of Lake Michigan fall as these tons of water poured. Bands of kids prowled with handguns and knives. (114-15)

After his divorce from Denise, Citrine expects to find his "Fate" whenever the elevator door opens. His yearning ceases when he meets

Renata, his mistress, who wishes to take the place of Denise in a May-December marriage.

Renata, like Ramona in *Herzog*, is an exotic woman who fulfills Citrine's erotic needs. Whereas Denise, like Mady in *Herzog*, is a castrating blue-stocking intellectual woman who wants to "knock [Citrine] out of action" (328), Renata is a "carnal artist" who has kept his "sex powers alive" (328). The voluptuous Renata is both a comfort and a distraction to Citrine. She gives him love and life but at the same time keeps reminding him of death (her ex-husband is a grave-site salesman and another suitor is a funeral parlor owner). He is sexually addicted to her but he is reluctant to lose his freedom in marrying her.

It is because of her associations with sexual pursuits, luxurious possesions, prospective confining marriage, and potential unfaithfulness that she is a source of distraction to Citrine. But Renata has her own problems. For one, she does not know who her real father is. Under the arrangements of her scheming mother, Senora, she has taken several European trips with Citrine ostensibly to solve her identity problem. Like Denise, she does not like Chicago that much. She thinks the city is too boring for her or for Citrine. Her couplet for Chicago is, "Without O'Hare, it's sheer despair" (308). When the plane takes off, she has this to say: "So long, Chicago. Charlie, you wanted to do this town some good. Why that bunch of low bastards, they don't deserve a man like you here. They know fuck-all about quality. A lot of ignorant crooks are in the papers. The good guys are ignored. I only hope when you write your essay on boredom that you'll let this city have it right in the teeth" (308).

While Denise and Renata do not like Citrine's friends, Citrine is persistent in his love for his school chums and old-time acquaintances. To him, they are "a sacred category" (37) and he enjoys their company and love. His feeling toward them verges on "family feeling."

Citrine is generous to his friends. He lends money to his lawyer friend Szathmar to buy a condominium. He entrusts money to his journalist friend, Pierre Thaxter, and becomes a sort of patron to his art. Although he suspects that Thaxter is conning him, he is extremely fond of him; as he says, "I love Thaxter, whatever he does" (74). To him friendship is more important than money: "Didn't I, myself, aim at magnanimity, and wasn't friendship a far bigger thing than money?" (242).

Among his Chicago friends, George Swiebel and Richard Durnwald are closest to him. Like Naomi, Szathmar, and Menasha, George is a link to Citrine's good old days in Chicago. Their friendship goes back to the fifth grade. An ex-actor, George has wide connections with varieties of people through his previous experiences in the theatre, Hollywood, radio, TV, and journalism. A contractor now, he is in contact with people from all walks of life. For years he has been Citrine's "self-designated expert on the underworld" (39) and has kept him "informed about criminals, whores, racing, the rackets, narcotics, politics, and syndicate operations" (39). Despite his present occupation as a contractor, George knows "his Ibsen and his Brecht" (46) and in South Chicago he is "identified with Bohemia and the Arts, with creativity, with imagination" (46).

A down-to-earth, practical, warm-hearted, genial, Nature-worshipping, health-conscious, outgoing Chicagoan, George is a true friend Citrine can count on: "George was wonderfully kind. . . .

Although George was in the building-repairs racket, he was utterly honorable. You couldn't find a single cheating fiber in his heart" (313). George shows his genuine friendship when Citrine has to go abroad to escape his Chicago troubles. He says to Citrine: "I'll be standing by you. Cable me from anywhere and I'll arrive. I liked you all right when you were younger, but not the way I love you now" (314). The friendship is mutual; Citrine loves him, too.

George's world-wide travel experiences bring up the theme of universal brotherhood. Wherever he goes, he makes instantaneous human contact and "the natives were always his brothers and were mad about him" (445). He prefers Africa to Chicago because he would rather "meet up with lions than use public transportation [in Chicago]" (447): it is safer in Africa than in Chicago, where twenty-five murders are reported over a weekend (445).

In addition to teaching Citrine how to stand on his head, he also takes Citrine to his home for a poker game so that Citrine can meet real Chicago people. Ranking people from "the putrid to the pure," he places Citrine "well up among the pure" (39).

Citrine's friend Durnwald is another Chicagoan who is "well up among the pure." Although he has been out of the city--at the University of Edinburgh for half a year--he is constantly in Citrine's mind and in other characters' conversations. Denise is staunchly against Citrine's intimate relations with his old acquaintances but she has nothing to say against Durnwald.

Citrine's respect and admiration for him is without irony or ambivalence: "In crude Chicago Durnwald, whom I admired and even adored, was the only man with whom I exchanged ideas" (60). Except Durnwald, none of "the mental beau monde of Chicago" (59) interests

Citrine. As George praises him, "Lots of good this guy Durnwald will do you. He's the professor's professor" (60).

Durnwald's serious, analytical, cool, rational, disciplined character serves as a foil to Citrine's romantic, eccentric, passionate, impulsive, and metaphysical propensities. That is why Citrine does not feel completely comfortable with Durnwald: "Look at my relations with a man like Richard Durnwald. Much as I admired him, I couldn't be mentally comfortable with Durnwald" (288). Despite their different interests and inclinations, they are good friends. Significantly, Durnwald, absent throughout the novel in the present, is unable to extend his rational and sensible advice to Citrine in trouble.

Citrine realizes that "America is an overwhelming phenomenon" (306) and his Chicago is predominantly a city of distractions. He has tried in vain to withdraw from the clutter-ridden city into his own self. He feels that he is unable to grasp the "vivid actuality and symbolic clarity" (260) of the city and to reach a state of equilibrium in which "the listening soul . . . can hear the essence of things and comes to understand the marvelous" (306). Citrine laments, "The more so since society claims more and more and more of your inner self and infects you with its restlessness. It trains you in distraction, colonizes consciousness as fast as consciousness advances" (306).

Fortunately, Citrine's life in Chicago is a little more tolerable because he has received brotherhood, love, sympathy, advice, assistance, and support from his friends there. With them, Citrine has formed a Whitmanesque "new city of Friends" against the attacks of the brutal, impersonal physical city.[9] Though the "new city" built by Citrine and his friends is not as strong as Whitman dreamt it, it at

least drives away part of the craziness, savagery, ugliness, and alienation of the city.

Like other Bellow heroes, Citrine knows that goodness cannot be achieved in isolation and that universal brotherhood should be celebrated. However, like Mr. Sammler, who says, "You do not find David and Jonathan, Roland and Olivier bosom buddies in these days" (*MSP* 30), Citrine regrets that friendship or love in the present is too often distorted into sexual degeneracy or perversity. As he says, "Already the brotherly love [the Angels] put into us has been corrupted into sexual monstrosity" (294).

V

Citrine's celebration of brotherly love culminates in his intricate relationship with his late blood-brother, Von Humboldt Fleisher.[10] In Chicago, he constantly thinks about Humboldt, "a precious friend hid in death's dateless night, a camerado from a former existence (almost), well-beloved but dead" (110).[11] To Citrine, Chicago is a perfect place to remember him: "In Chicago Humboldt was a natural subject for reflection. Lying at the southern end of the Great Lakes . . . Chicago with its gigantesque outer life contained the whole problem of poetry and the inner life in America. Here you could look into such things through a sort of fresh-water transparency" (9). His memory becomes all the more poignant when, engulfed in all sorts of troubles, he is blessed by Humboldt's gift which removes many of his problems.

Athough he grew up in New York City, Humboldt knew Chicago, too. During the boom, Humboldt's real-estate broker father lived in Chicago; in summers Humboldt came from New York to join his father. The Chicago Humboldt knew is different from the one Citrine knows:

> In the days of Hack Wilson and Woody English the Fleishers had a box at Wrigley Field. They drove to the game in a Pierce-Arrow or a Hispano-Suiza (Humboldt was car-crazy). And there were lovely John Held, Jr., girls, beautiful, who wore step-ins. And whisky and gangsters and the pillared doom-dark La Salle Street banks with railroad money and pork and reaper money locked in steel vaults. Of this Chicago I was completely ignorant when I arrived from Appleton. I played Piggie-move-up with Polish kids under the El tracks. Humboldt ate devil's food coconut-marshmallow layer cake at Henrici's. I never saw the inside of Henrici's. (4-5)

Years ago when Humboldt came to Chicago to give a reading for *Poetry* magazine, Citrine took him for a tour of the city. Citrine recalls those memorable moments poetically:

> I took Humboldt on the El to the stockyards. He saw the Loop. We went to the lakeshore and listened to the foghorns. They bawled melancholy over the limp silk fresh lilac drowning water. But Humboldt responded mostly to the old neighborhood. The silvered boiler rivets and the blazing Polish geraniums got him. He listened pale and moved to the buzzing of roller-skate wheels on the brittle cement. (72)

Both Citrine and Humboldt are urban-bred lovers of the good and the beautiful, trying to discover beauty in urban ugliness and to redeem the city by art.

But their relationships began not in Chicago but in New York City. The novel opens with Citrine's elegiac memory of his pilgrimage eastward in the late thirties to see Humboldt in Greenwich Village, then a Mecca for young fledgling writers from all parts of the country.[12] Humboldt was a youthful celebrity in the Village. At the age of twenty-two, Humboldt published his much acclaimed *Harlequin Ballads*, a collection of poems, "pure, musical, witty, radiant, human" (11).[13] Citrine borrowed thirty dollars from his sweetheart, Naomi, and took a Greyhound to New York to be close to his admired poet.

Humboldt invited Citrine to his apartment in Greenwich Village to

discuss literature and ideas. At their first meeting Humboldt found a kindred spirit in Citrine, for both of them loved literature heart and soul. Citrine recalls that they crossed the Hudson on the Christopher Street ferry to eat clams in Hoboken. Centering on the topic of "Success," Humboldt told him that "poets ought to figure out how to get around pragmatic America" (11).

Soon Citrine became Humboldt's protege and intimate friend. Humboldt introduced him to his literary friends in the Village and got him books to review--all these, as Rodrigues points out, show that Humboldt's love and assistance manifest themselves in practical fashion (*Quest* 229).

Citrine was fascinated by the Village's literati, Meyer Schapiro, Sidney Hook, Gumbein, Chiaramonte, Orlando Huggins, Paul Goodman, Lionel Abel, Philip Rhav, and Humboldt. In the daytime, Citrine eagerly peddled Fuller Brushes door to door and patiently listened to hypochondriac Jewish women's stories; in the evening he eagerly went to the Village to listen to the "finest talkers in New York" (13). "Under their eloquence," Citrine recalls, "I sat like a cat in a recital hall" (13).

Among those wonderful talkers Humboldt was the most remarkable: he was "the Mozart of conversation" (13). Though the novel does not record any of his talk verbatim, there are instances illustrating Humboldt as "the brilliant golden master of conversation" (263). None equals Citrine's recall of an "Evening of Conversation with Von Humboldt Fleisher" in Humboldt's New Jersey farmhouse. At first their conversation was "a double concerto," but presently Citrine was "fiddled and trumpeted off the stage" (30):

Reasoning, formulating, debating, making discoveries

> Humboldt's voice rose, choked, rose again, his mouth went wide, dark stains formed under his eyes. . . . he passed from statement to recitative, from recitative he soared into aria, and behind him played an orchestra of intimation, virtues, love of his art, veneration of its great men--but also of suspicion and skulduggery. Before your eyes the man recited and sang himself in and out of madness. (30)

Not only was Humboldt "a wonderful talker, a hectic nonstop monologuist and improvisator, a champion detractor" (4), but he was also an "avant-garde writer, the first of a new generation" (1). His poems are so beautiful and exquisite that Citrine thought he was going to be "the great American poet of the century" (329).

A lover of the beautiful, Humboldt also directed Citrine's attention to landscapes and expressed his disgust with the city. As Citrine reminisces, "Late in the Forties, he and Kathleen, newlyweds, moved from Greenwich Village to rural New Jersey, and when I visited them he was all earth, trees, flowers, oranges, the sun, Paradise, Altantis, Rhadamanthus. He talked about William Blake at Felpham and Milton's Eden, and he ran down the city. The city was lousy" (17).

However, growing up in New York City, Humboldt, like Citrine, was essentially an urbanite. His ideas about the pastoral were mostly derived from books: Plato, Proust, Virgil, Marvell, and Stevens (17). Living in the New Jersey back country did not make a hermit of him; instead, he traveled to New York several times a week on business. To Citrine's mind, it is a great irony and contradiction for Humboldt--"a man of powerful social instincts" (284)--to bury himself in the dreary countryside.

In 1952 when Humboldt headed Princeton's writing program, he recommended Citrine to fill a vacancy. Before his Princeton interview, Citrine was invited to spend one night in Humboldt's New Jersey house. On their way to Humboldt's farmhouse, Citrine was showered by

Humboldt's torrential ideas and illusions. Like his Buick plunging forward at high speed, the highly-charged Humboldt discussed, among others, "machinery, luxury, command, capitalism, technology, Mammon, Orpheus and poetry, the riches of the human heart, America, world civilization" (21), as a prelude to the evening's conversation. As they emerged out of the Holland Tunnel, Citrine noticed the dismal landscape of New Jersey: "Tall stacks, a filth artillery, fired silently into the Sunday sky with beautiful bursts of smoke. The acid smell of gas refineries went into your lungs like a spur. The rushes were as brown as onion soup. There were seagoing tankers stuck in the channels. . . Far out, the massed bungalows had the look of a necropolis-to-be" (22).

Situated "in the Jersey back country, near the Pennsylvania line" (22), the house was beginning to tip, because the crossroads had eaten into the small bluff it sat on. As Citrine observed, "This marginal land was good for nothing but chicken farms. The approaches were paved and we drove in dust. Briars lashed the Roadmaster as we swayed on huge springs through rubbishly fields where white boulders sat" (22). The slummish surroundings were far from being pastoral or idyllic:

> The neighbors raised poultry on this slummy land. Burdocks, thistles, dwarf oaks, cottonweed, chalky holes, and whitish puddles everywhere. It was all pauperized. The very bushes might have been on welfare. Across the way, the chicken were throaty--they sounded like immigrant women--and the small trees, oaks sumacs ailanthus, were underprivileged, dusty, orphaned-looking. (23-24)

To the city-bred Citrine, Humboldt's cottage was "Greenwich Village in the fields" (25): it was "exactly like Bedford Street. . . except that the surrounding slum was rural" (22). Like the houses in Greenwich Village, this house was "furnished from thrift shops, rummage

sales, and church bazaars, and seemed to rest on a foundation of books and papers" (25).

Despite the shabby surroundings, the Chicago-trained Citrine was still able to "make something of such a scant setting" because "in Chicago you became a connoisseur of the near-nothing" (24). Looking around the country, Citrine enjoyed "the red sumac, the white rocks, the rust of the weeds, the wig of green on the bluff over the crossroads" (24). Furthermore, because of the influence of the poet-host, Citrine's feeling for the place turned from appreciation to love: "It was more than appreciation. It was already an attachment. It was even love" (24).

Humboldt lived in the countryside not simply for pastoral beauty: he wouldn't even allow Kathleen to grow flowers around the cottage. His motives were complicated. Like Herzog's buying the Ludeyville house, Humboldt's move to the barren backlands gave him a feeling of entering the American mainstream. Moreover, as Citrine perceives, his keeping Kathleen in the country was dictated by his paranoid and tyrannical desire to keep her away from her "lovers."

Humboldt knew that to be a poet meant he was doomed to be solitary. Yet, when he retreated to the countryside, his craving for active life and social activity killed him. No longer able to produce "poems of great wit and beauty" (25), he felt terrible. Consequently, the place "sometimes looked like Arcadia to him and sometimes looked like hell" (25).

For Humboldt and Kathleen, life in rural New Jersey brought no simplicity, productivity, or contentment. What's even worse, the paranoid Humboldt suffers illusionary anti-Semitism. As a son of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants, Humboldt suffered "keen Jewish terrors in

the country" (27), because, as Citrine reflects, "he was an Oriental, she a Christian maiden, and he was afraid. He expected the KKK to burn a cross in his yard or shoot at him through the window as he lay on the Castro sofa reading Proust or inventing scandal" (27). His fear of his back-country neighbors gave him nightmares: "In his nightmares they buried his house, he shot it out with them, they lynched him and carried off his wife" (121).

As in his other novels, in *Humboldt's Gift* Bellow does not let the country speak more eloquently than the city. Humboldt's country life fares no better than his urban life, as far as its effects upon his emotions, creativity, and marriage are concerned. The year Humboldt and Citrine spend together at Princeton further testifies that Citrine/Bellow does not praise life in rural America.

To Citrine, Princeton is an "academic music box" (128). It is a beautiful college town, but Citrine does not think highly of it: "Between noisy Newark and squalid Trenton it was a sanctuary, a zoo, a spa, with its own choochoo and elms and lovely green cages" (133). Life there is not much different than elsewhere. Vices are the same: professors there play Eskimo wife-swapping games; the crazy poet-in-residence tries to run over his wife with his Buick. Citrine says that he cannot "stand a whole lifetime of this drinking, boredom, small talk, and ass-kissing" there (127-28).

It is during their Princteon days that Humboldt and Citrine became blood brothers. As Humboldt later reveals in his posthumous letter, it is Citrine who stimulated the oath, because Citrine is "one of those people who arouse family emotions . . . a son-and-brother type" (328). After exchanging blank checks [N.B. Money is blood] and shaking hands, Humboldt said to Citrine, "This makes us blood-brothers. We've entered

into a convenant. This is a covenant" (130).

Affected by his manic-depressive tendencies and by great social forces, Humboldt cannot recover his enchantment and write beautiful poetry again. He complains: "But where's my equilibrium? There are too many anxieties. They dry me out. The world keeps interfering. . . . I have to locate myself" (128). In the late fifties, Citrine's fame begins to rise as Humboldt's sinks. When Humboldt's scheme to get himself a chair at Princeton aborts and his wife Kathleen deserts him, he starts to degenerate and never fully recovers. Citrine, on the other hand, wins fame and money when his play *Von Trenck* hits Broadway. At the premiere, Humboldt and his buddies riotously picket outside the theatre.

The unproductive, maniacal Humboldt begins to make scenes in New York. He repeatedly threatens a young literary figure whom he suspects is Kathleen's lover. Consequently, he is arrested and sent to Bellevue. As the police put him into a strait jacket and rush him to Bellevue, he has diarrhea. The event leads Citrine to ponder the fate of the poet/artist in American society. "Was this art versus America?" wonders Citrine, to whom "Bellevue was like the Bowery: it gave negative testimony" (155). If brutal Wall Street stands for power and the nearby Bowery and Bellevue, weakness, should poets, like drunkards and misfits and psychopaths, sink into weakness and find themselves among the wretched and busted?

Discharged from the mental institution, Humboldt begins to visit psychiatrists and lawyers. Meanwhile, he fills in Citrine's blood-brother check and cashes nearly seven thousand dollars when Citrine was mourning his fiancee's death. Years later, he wrote his last letter to Citrine to explain why he did that. He said that he was outraged

because Citrine didn't go to Bellevue to see him: "I was suffering; you didn't draw near, as a loving friend should" (328). The check was used to punish Citrine because he had betrayed him and broken their "sacred covenant" (130). He asked Citrine's forgiveness when he later learned that Demmie, Citrine's fiancee, dissuaded him from going to Bellevue. Both Demmie and Citrine did raise money for Humboldt's medical care and Citrine tried in vain many times to get positions for Humboldt. To acknowledge his indebtedness and to reassure his love for Citrine, he left Citrine a legacy.

With his talent gone and his mind fallen apart, he ends up as a bum living in a flophouse in Manhattan. When Citrine last sees him, he is eating a pretzel for lunch in West Forties. Citrine does not have the courage to walk up and face his buddy, but the scene torments him thereafter. Years later he still feels remorseful: "On that day I made a poor showing. I behaved very badly. I should have gone up to him. I should have taken his hand. I should have kissed his face" (341). Two months later Humboldt dies. The day Citrine learns of Humboldt's demise from the *Times*'s obituary, he is flying from New York to Chicago; he shuts himself in the restroom and cries very sadly.

Despite their differences in literary views and in their fortunes, Citrine has been strongly attached to Humboldt. For they both love poetry and value the imagination. As Citrine says to Kathleen:

> "I've been attached to Humboldt for nearly forty years. It's been an ecstatic connection. The hope of having poetry--the joy of knowing the kind of man that created poetry. You know? There's the most extraordinary, unheard-of poetry buried in America, but none of the conventional means known to culture can even begin to extract it. But know this is true of the world as a whole. The agony is too deep, the disorder too big for art enterprises undertaken in the old way. Now I begin to understand what Tolstoi was getting at when he called on mankind to cease the false and unnecessary comedy of history and begin simply to live. It's become clearer and clearer to

> me in Humboldt's heartbreak and madness. . . . Now we must listen in secret to the sound of the truth that God puts into us." (477)

Humboldt was not a complete failure, however. As he neared his death, he revived his sanity and cast away rational orthodoxy. In its stead, he came to reassert the power of the imaginative soul. He refused to let the imagination be engulfed by the materialistic, pragmatic, and rationalistic world. All this is clearly manifested in his gift to Citrine.

To retrieve Humboldt's bequest, Citrine comes back to New York City again. In his first trip to New York City in 1938, Citrine was "showered by the green, within" because of the *Pastorale*-like scenery on the way, and once he arrived at the city, he discovered that "Manhattan was fine, too" (2). His revisit to New York this time, however, is quite another experience, even though, as he did the first time, he goes there for the sake of Humboldt.

Coming back to New York not as an aspiring, culture-crazed young man but as a celebrated literary figure, Citrine looks at the city scenes with a cool observer's eye. After leaving La Guardia Airport, Citrine and Renata sit in the low seats of "one of New York's dog-catcher taxis" (316-17), which make them feel that they "have bitten someone and are being rushed to the pound, frothing with rabies, to be put down" (317). He finds the subway to Coney Island "awful, the filth, the spray-can graffiti were not to be believed" (326).

Nevertheless, the trip proves to be surprisingly rewarding. In the nursing home on Coney Island, he not only successfully gets the gift from Humboldt's uncle; he also runs into Menasha, who brings back many wonderful memories of his early urban experiences in Chicago.

Leaving Coney Island on the subway, Citrine reads Humboldt's

loving, posthumous letter with avidity. He is moved to tears as he reads along. The letter ends with a significant sentence: "we are not natural beings but supernatural beings" (347). Although the letter is only a prelude to Humboldt's gift, it testifies to Humboldt's power as an imaginative poet. Writing with "end-of-the-line lucidity" (373), he reiterates the importance of the imagination, the love of the good and the beautiful, and the passion for literature. It is indeed a valuable legacy to Citrine and to the world.

The box office success of the movie created out of a scenario by Humboldt and Citrine proves that art still has a power to instruct, to delight, and to move people. Moreover, it further testifies that if the artist is not too naive in the "famous romance of business" (469), he can make money, too, in cannibalistic, capitalist society. At the end of the novel Citrine's shrewdness in business, ironically, converts Humboldt's gift into great assets which relieve him, Kathleen, and Humboldt's uncle of their financial troubles.

VI

Citrine and Humboldt love each other, despite their fight and estrangement. Each figures prominently in the other's obsessions and fixations throughout their lives. Their friendship is bound by their love of poetry. To them, poetry is the Ellis Island to a "new city of Friends" which, through the power of love, will stand firmly as a fortress against the callous, philistine physical city surrounding them. Both of them try to find beauty in the ugly city and dream of rescuing the city with art.

Humboldt's Gift is a great novel of two cities, Chicago and New York. Citrine has a fierce love for his city. No matter where he is, in Madrid or in New York, he, like Augie, is always thinking about his

home city. He chose Chicago, instead of other places, to settle in because of his loyalty to his past, his dead parents, and his city. Chicago, a symbol of his roots, is his own turf where he can feel at home.

Living in a modern city like Chicago--a city noted for its criminality, violence, industrialism, and philistinism--inevitably exposes him to many distractions, making it difficult for him to concentrate on his great project or meaningful work. The turbulent urban environment with its sounds, people, cars, things, smells, and sensations, always poses a great challenge to his mind and heart and body. He wishes he could stay serenely in his sanctuary.

However, a writer by profession, he knows that he cannot shut himself up in an ivory tower. He needs to engage in urban experiences and to be among street people. Caught in this paradox, Citrine begins his man-city dialogue in Chicago.

Chicago is both a source of distractions and an emotional anchor to him. Cantabile, Denise, and lawyers are major agents of distraction, while his old sweetheart, his present mistress, his school chums, his daughters, and his friends are the source of comfort and love. In Chicago, Citrine is obsessed with the dead: among his "significant dead" are his parents, his fiancee, Demmie, and his late poet friend, Humboldt. His recollections of Humboldt also evoke his memories of New York City.

Although New York is not the principal setting for the novel, it is a very important setting. Bellow deftly exploits the symbolic significance of the landmarks of New York City: Wall Street (money and power), Greenwich Village (poetry and ideology), the Bowery (poverty and wretchedness), Bellevue (insanity and terror), CCNY (rationalistic

and naturalistic education), the public library (imagination and learning), the subway (anarchy and degeneracy), and Broadway (theatre, glamour, and success). In fact, the novel begins and ends in New York City. Although the novel ends in a graveyard scene, Menasha's singing and a bunch of crocuses suggest hope and affirmation.

In this rich and profound city novel, Bellow celebrates love, friendship, poetry, and the imagination, which he thinks can help rescue the modern city from becoming a waste land or a "City of Destruction." Through these, Bellow implies, we can build the "new city," a city dreamed by Whitman, which will be "invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth."

Notes

[1] Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking, 1975) 72. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] In an interview with Bellow, Kakutani records, "[Bellow's] decision to leave New York and return to Chicago in the early 60's, he says, was motivated, in part, by what he saw as the increased politicization of writers in New York" (Kakutani 29). See also Boyers 12-13.

[3] In Chicago money weighs much heavier than learning, art, even science. As Bellow says in "A Writer from Chicago," "This fact of life has never been disguised in Chicago" (187). After watching popular culture in Chicago more closely, Bellow discovers that "the overwhelming power in Chicago remains the power of money and goods" (188).

[4] In his study of Bellow's manuscripts, Fuchs points out that Bellow deleted Citrine's recollections of his early family life before publication (273). Fuchs comments, "In a number of Bellow works, the author must cut down on his tendency to remember, on the enormous lure of childhood. Humboldt's family history is central and quite enough. Citrine, to be sure, has his persistent memories, but Bellow wants to emphasize his worldly perceptions rather than his filial pieties. What is appropriate to the subjective world of Herzog would be indulgence in the relatively objective world of Citrine" (274).

[5] As in *Herzog*, Bellow has drawn on the same personal experience in depicting the TB sanatorium scene. His miraculous survival makes him a devout worshipper of life. As he tells Brans, "I always had a great piety about my life. . . . I always thought it the most extraordinary, brilliant thing in the whole history of the universe that we should be all together" (Brans 67).

As pointed out in Chapter I, light is an important image in Bellow's fiction; the Bellow hero is always looking for sunlight. In that somber city--Chicago--Citrine is no exception. At the Art Institute, both Citrine and Thaxter love to look at Monet's painting of a Norwegian winter landscape, which depicts a house, a bridge, and the snow falling: "Through the covering snow came the pink of the house, and the frost was delicious. The whole weight of snow, of winter, was lifted effortlessly by the astonishing strength of the light" (252). Citrine loves to listen to Dr. Scheldt explaining the light-in-the-things to him.

See also Rodrigues, "Beyond" 100 and Wilson 159.

[6] According to Clemons and Kroll (39), Bellow's school chum, Dave Peltz, who now owns a home improvement company in Gary, Indiana, lost heavily in a poker game with Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, and two underworld characters. Advised by Terkel, Peltz did not pay and promptly got two cement blocks through the windows of his home and a threat on his life. From this incident came Citrine's encounter with

Cantabile.

Bellow's fascination with Chicago con men and mobsters such as Yellow Kid Weil (Chicago's consummate confidence man) also helps him in his depiction of such characters as the big-time hoodlum Vito Langobardi, the minor mafioso Cantabile, and the swindler Guido Stronson. See Bellow's interview with Yellow Kid Weil.

[7] For Bellow's ties to that street, see Bellow's "Variations on a Theme from Division Street," Second Part of "A Writer from Chicago" and "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is." As he writes, "Division Street . . . is the main stem of the neighborhood in which I grew up. From 1924 until the Second World War, this was my turf" ("A Writer" 200-01).

[8] In his interview with Jo Brans, Bellow says, "I know the common people in Chicago; the bums, or whatever you like, in Chicago all have these unfathomed cultural and intellectual ambitions, and they don't know what to do about them really. They bring the greatest enthusiasm and devotion to these things, but at the same time they're clumsy, stupid, arrogant, ambitious" (Brans 69).

[9] Walt Whitman's poem "I Dream'd in a Dream" is a perfect description of "the new city of Friends" envisioned by the poet:

> I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth,
> I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
> Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love, it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
> And in all their looks and words. (107)

[10] As Bellow tells Robert Cromie, Humboldt is drawn from his late poet-friends--John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, and Delmore Schwartz, all noted for their passion for literature and their tragic ends; undoubtedly, Schwartz is the main source for Bellow's Humboldt. See Atlas and Fuchs.

[11] In the novel Citrine is not precise when Humboldt died: "Humboldt, who had been dead for five or six years, re-entered my life. . . . I shan't be too exact about the time of this. I was then becoming careless about time, a symptom of my increasing absorption in larger questions" (34). According to Bellow's Chicago friend-colleague Daniel Stern's recollection, the novel started as a memoir of Schwartz. In early manuscripts, Bellow writes, "My friend the poet Delmore Shwartz died last week in New York [1966], presumably of heart failure, in a derelict's hotel in the Broadway area" (20.I, 1) [See Fuchs 267]. According to Fuchs, Bellow had not seen him in ten years, but two weeks before he died Bellow did see him in the street and avoided him (267). For Bellow's description of Schwartz, see Fuchs, 267-68.

[12] Bellow told Clemons and Kroll that "the history of literature in America is the history of certain demonic solitaries who somehow brought it off in a society that felt no need for them. In Chicago,

where I grew up, we dreamed of the literary life--we were mad for it, but never got a smell of it. I went to Greenwich Village like everybody after college. It wasn't very glamorous, but I did get a feeling in New York that you weren't a bum or an outcast if you wanted to write" (Clemons and Kroll 33).

In an interview with Bragg, Bellow describes his experience of Greenwich Village:

> "Any self-respecting Chicago writer of my generation would immediately cut out for New York as soon as he'd gotten his college degree, to find the action. The action was in Greenwich Village, and that was what I made a beeline for. . . . I found a group of people who were importing European culture into the United States--that is to say, the *Partisan Review* people. Philip Rahv, Delmore Schwartz and Dwight Macdonald were the principle Americans. . . . There were very good master-conversationalists in the Village in the Thirties, and Forties, and Fifties." (Bragg 75-76)

[13] As Kazin recalls, "He [Schwartz] had come on the scene in his early twenties with stories and poems that astonished everyone by being impeccably formally *right* in the prevailing Eliot tradition--emotional ingenuity tuned to perfect pitch by gravity of manner" (37).

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CHAPTER VIII

The Dean's December: Dean Corde in Bucharest and Chicago

> The first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it.[1]

I

Like *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Dean's December* (1982) is a tale of two cities, Chicago and Bucharest.[2] Albert Corde, its central character and central consciousness, is a professor of journalism turned dean of students in an unnamed Chicago college. With his Rumanian-born wife Minna, Corde flies to Bucharest to be at the bedside of his dying mother-in-law Dr. Valeria Raresh. Having made an unauthorized visit to Valeria in the Party Hospital, the Cordes are prohibited from seeing her again. As the novel opens, the Dean is cooped up in his wife's room in wintry Bucharest, awaiting the death of Valeria. Having much time at his disposal, he reflects on his personal history, especially on two pieces of unfinished business back home in Chicago. One of the Dean's students has been killed. The Dean has pressed murder charges against two Blacks, thus evoking the antagonism of his nephew Mason, a militant student, and his cousin Detillion, a publicity-chasing lawyer. Meanwhile, the Dean has published articles in *Harper's* on the deterioration of urban life in Chicago and has consequently stirred up much trouble.

A man of searching intelligence and self-reflection, Dean Corde, in his late fifties, is "continually attentive to his surroundings" (232), "[a]s if he had been sent down to *mind* the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation" (232).[3] Like Herzog, Sammler, and Citrine, Corde is a "hungry observer" (9), taking in signals from his environments, brooding on the human predicament with eager zeal, and longing to express the pain and wisdom that score his soul. As he describes himself, he is "an earnest, brooding, heart-struck, time-ravaged person . . . with his moral desires and taking up the burdens of mankind [sic]" (135). Corde, the "moralist of seeing" (135), believes that "the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would re-present it" (136). He attempts to find a journalistic poetry to "recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or nonexperience" (270). Through the eye, mind, and soul of such a "persistent, almost fixated observer" (268), Bucharest in Communist Rumania contrasts sharply to Chicago in Free America; together they form a bleak picture of the modern world.

II

Bucharest is a stark city, with a seemingly interminable winter. Corde's impressions of it are mainly associated with death, cold, boredom, dismalness, scarcity, and oppression. Before he flies in, Corde imagines the city as "a Mediterranean sort of place, a light city not a heavy one; rococo" (19). Upon arrival, however, he finds only "mass after mass of socialist tenements and government office buildings" (19). As a visitor from the free West, Corde feels displaced in this dreary, comfortless, repressive, recently earthquake-ravaged city. Moreover, he is strongly affected by his mother-in-law's imminent death, the

hospital superintendent's bureaucracy, his solitary brooding in his wife's room, and the bleak December weather.

Describing the twilight of Bucharest, Bellow sets the mood for the novel:

> December brown set in at about three in the afternoon. By four it had climbed down the stucco of old walls, the gray of Communist residential blocks: brown darkness took over the pavements more thickly and isolated the street lamps. These were feebly yellow in the impure melancholy winter effluence. Air sadness, Corde called this. In the final stage of dusk, a brown sediment seemed to encircle the lamps. Then there was a livid death moment. Night began. (3-4)

This passage effectively evokes a melancholy and depressive ambience which is in concert with the pivotal event in the Bucharest story--Valeria's death.

Alien as the surroundings are, Corde feels an instant intimacy in his wife's old room. In a distinctive Bellovian posture, Corde stares from its windows at the city's "earthquake-damaged buildings, winter skies, gray pigeons, pollarded trees, squalid orange-rusty trams hissing under trolley cables" (1). Shut up in the room, Corde does little but read, muse, and sleep. The room--"his refuge, his sanctuary, his cell" (193)--is often dark and cold. In the sadness of the afternoon, he feels especially the mortifying chill; he even detects the "crystalline bitterness setting in" (115). When he opens the door of the apartment, he feels "like being thwacked with the flat of a saber" (58). As the sun goes down, the city, as if abandoned, becomes dissociated. The unusually black and cold night gives rise to evil visions about "the moronic inferno" (23).

Life in Bucharest goes on, however, while the earthquake damage is being repaired. To the shut-in Dean, both the percussion of carpet-

beaters and the barking of the dog heard in the morning sound like protests against totalitarianism: were people dogs, they would howl, "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!" (11).

Since they are constantly under the surveillance of the secret police, people go out on the street for private conversations. During such walks, Corde minutely observes the city's people, scenes, weather, and colors. His observations often blend poetic touches with realistic details, as exemplified in the following passage:

> Towards midafternoon, the December sun was ready to check out. Below the winter beams there were violet shadows; these were collected in the pitted surfaces of the stucco walls, and made Corde think of choppy winter water. A similar color gathered about the pollarded trees. The pigeons afoot on the sidewalk had it, too, with iridescent variations. In mid-street Corde noticed the remains of small rats. Here and there amid the Balkan Haussmann blocks were earthquake ruins or tumuli, and Corde assumed that they must also be graves. The brick heaps exhaled decay. There were unrecoverable bodies underneath. The smell was cold, dank and bad. Coupled rusty-orange tramcars ran with a slither of cables. Pale proletarian passengers looked out. . . . You saw the decades in reverse. Even the emotions belonged to an earlier time. (118)

The powerful image of the flattened rats' corpses sticks in Corde's mind. Later, while walking with Minna on the street, he finds himself looking for the rats' remains: "The street was gray. The piled earthquake rubble smelled moldy, even though refrigerating December checked the decay. Corde found himself looking for the rat silhouettes in the street, flattened like weathercocks by traffic" (283).

The oppressiveness of the city is embodied in the vindictive Party Hospital director, a Colonel in the secret police, who, situated in "his tall broom-closet office" (115), gives the Cordes lessons in the Communists' "hard nihilism."[4] Just as Mr. Sammler is prevented by various people and incidents from seeing Dr. Gruner alive, the Cordes

are thwarted by the Colonel in their attempts to see the dying Valeria, who, like Dr. Gruner, is one of the most positive characters in Bellow's canon. Shortly before Valeria's death, Corde and Minna are allowed to visit her one more time. This death-bed scene--in which Corde expresses his affection for Valeria--is the climax of the Bucharest story.

On the day of Valeria's funeral, there is funeral weather: "No more sun that was gone, only linty clouds and a low cold horizon" (231). Sitting in a small car following the van-hearse over the gloomy boulevards of the city, Corde looks out noticing, trying to penetrate into the reality of the city. At the crematorium Corde rehearses death. Having to go downstairs for final identification of the corpse before cremation, Corde is caught "between frost and flames" (236) when he goes upstairs again. On the stairs, he suffers "the extremes of heat and cold like two faces of an axe, splitting him in halves" (262); his breast, "as narrow as a ladder, was crowded with emotions--fire, death, suffocation, put into an icy cold or, instead, crackling in a furnace" (237).

In the bleak and freezing Bucharest, there is no pastoral moment for Corde but he finds some solace in the cyclamens which, thriving in his chilly room, are suggestive of the community of women that formed around the matriarch Valeria. They try to make their difficult accommodations within the system. The "mutual-aid female network" (116)--or "feminine league" (143)--includes Valeria's sister Gigi, her daughter Minna, old Cousin Dincutza, Ioana the concierge, Minna's classmate Vlada, women doctors in the hospital, distant relatives, neighbors, and even a male, Petrescu. By extending love, help, advice, and sympathy to one another, they affirm the Old system, the old

European life. Like the cyclamens, their solidarity survives and preserves humanity despite harsh and repressive political circumstances.[5] This sisterhood, akin to the Blakean brotherhood and the Whitmanesque "new city of Friends" extoled by Herzog and Citrine, respectively, is what makes these Rumanian women human.

The Bucharest story tells us grim facts about orderly but oppressive life behind the Iron Curtain. Despite his great depression, however, Corde does not yield to pessimism or nihilism. As he says, "If intensive care doctors could light candles for the dying, secret agents could mourn their adoptive mothers. There was sentiment all over the place" (203). He believes that "the inmost essence of the human being must be making its own, its necessary, its unique arrangement as it best could" (116). The flickering candlelight prepared by the women doctors for Valeria emits hope, faith, and humanity, however dim it is.

III

Terrible as Bucharest is, Corde is quiet because he is free of Chicago's agitations. Yet he cannot keep his mind off his city. In fact, he is engrossed in it. Besides, various people and things keep reminding him of Chicago, among them two messengers from Chicago--his friend, Dewey Spangler, and his colleague, Vlada Voynich. They not only keep him informed about what's happening on his home turf but give him chances for lengthy conversations during which he reminisces about the city's past and reflects on its present. Thus, through Corde's ruminations, recollections, readings, and conversations in Bucharest, the Chicago story is reconstructed.

If Bucharest is cold, grim, dismal, and imprisoning, Chicago is hot, chaotic, corrupt, and murderous. The Chicago story begins with

the death of Rick Lester, Corde's student, who is bound, gagged, and pushed out of a window to his death by a Black prostitute and her pimp. Lester's violent death is highlighted by "the crying ugliness of the Chicago night" (48). Corde remembers it is a "rotten night" when he is called to identify Lester's corpse:

> The air was heavy with the smell of malting grain from the kilns of Falstaff beer, near Calumet Harbor. This was better than the hot sulfur and sewer gases vented by U.S. Steel. *That* acid stink made you get out of bed to shut the windows. Through an ectoplasmic darkness--night was lifting--the Dean rode to the hospital. There he viewed the murdered boy. (30)

The circumstances of Lester's death are difficult to reconstruct, because of many ambiguities related to the city's milieu. It is one of "those choking, peak-of-summer, urban-nightmare, sexual and obscene, running-bare times, and death panting behind the young man, closing in" (42). Seeing Lester, barefoot, in the morgue, Corde cannot understand why the youths of Chicago are so ignorant or naive about the dangers of their city: "Many young people removed their shoes in hot weather--as if they were surrounded by woods and fields, not these broken-bottle, dog-fouled streets" (30).

The Lester episode brings out several themes of the novel: sexual anarchy, robbery, murder, the Black "underclass," student militancy, and the news media's noise. Through the entire episode, it is, ironically, Corde's own relatives who pit themselves against him. Mason's alliance with Detillion against Corde in the law court contrasts sharply to the family feelings Corde experiences in a foreign city in Rumania. Yet, based on his conscience and sense of duty, Corde the moralist demands justice for the victims in spite of all the agitations and protests.

Corde's *Harper's* articles are inspired by more complicated motives. At first Corde seems to take up the task which Thaxter in *Humboldt's Gift* urges on Citrine--to "go around Chicago like Restif de la Bretonne in the streets of Paris and write a chronicle" (*HG* 269). As a native son of Chicago, Corde, like Augie, Herzog, and Citrine, is strongly attached to his city. He especially cherishes his memories of Old Chicago's lovable neighborhoods. His reunion with his old pal Spangler in Bucharest gives him not only "the pleasure of nostalgia" (123) but the opportunity to explore the motives behind his writing those *Harper's* articles.

In an exotic city, two journalists from Chicago indulge in reminiscences of the good old days of poetry and feeling they shared in high school in the thirties. Corde recalls that they were drawn to each other because of their passion for poetry and literature: "Of course it was Swinburne, Wilde, Nietzsche, Walt Whitman, in high school. Perfumed herbage, intoxicating lyricism and lamentation, rich music, nihilism and decadence had made them pals" (74).

In Lincoln Park--their habitual haunt--they read their favorite poets and philosophers: Blake, Wilde, Swinburne, Yeats, Shakespeare, Shelley, Whitman, Pater, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. Corde remembers that they often quoted to each other Shelley's line "An old mad blind despised dying king" and they both were greatly stirred by "the wonderful hard music of those words" (76). At times, they had the company of Corde's cousin, Max Detillion, and the three read to one another their own creative works. Corde enjoyed Spangler's company because at that time nobody else was so interested in the poetry and the philosophy that he loved. In a city noted for its gangsters and stockyards, its industry and business, their love of poetry and phil-

osophy was indeed odd. Forty years later, they wonder if kids in the present Chicago still get together in Lincoln Park and read the way they used to read--"wallow in that good stuff: the *Zarathustra*, the *Phaedrus*, that *Brigge* book by Rilke" (132).

Despite the presence of "Bubble Creek," which used to bubble in the summer because of "the blood and tripes and tallow, the stockyards' shit" (124), despite the absence of a place where youngsters could take their intense passion, Corde and Spangler remember the Chicago of the thirties as "a city of immigrants who had found work, food and freedom and a kind of friendly ugliness around them, and they practiced their Old World trades--cabinetmakers, tinsmiths, locksmiths, wurst-stuffers from Cracow, confectioners from Sparta" (264).

Corde returned to Chicago ten years ago in his mid-forties after a successful career as a journalist for the Paris *Tribune*. Like Citrine, Corde tries to explain to himself and to others why he made such a decisive move.[6] According to his own analysis, he chose to become a professor in Chicago because of his allegiance to his city, on the one hand, and his desire to reorient himself in the classics, on the other. After "a twenty-year interruption by 'news,' by current human business" (208), he decided to give more attention to Baudelaire, Rilke, Montesquieu, Vico, Machiavelli, Plato, Thucydides, and Shakespeare.

To his mind, an American city like Chicago is where the real action is. Besides, as he tells his sister, "There's the big advantage of backwardness. By the time the latest ideas reach Chicago, they're worn thin and easy to see through. You don't have to bother with them and it saves lots of trouble" (148). Corde's conversation with Vlada in Bucharest reveals how seriously he takes to heart his home city, a city he will be the last to see dying or ruined:

> In Paris I was too busy doing art items and intellectual chitchat. . . . I came back to Chicago to continue my education. And then I had to write those articles. There was no way to avoid it. The youngsters would say it was my karma. Well, there's low-down Chicago and there's high-up Chicago. There's Big Bill Thompson, and then there's Aristotle, who has also had a longtime association with the city. . . . A. N. Whitehead . . . believed that Chicago had Athenian possibilities. . . . And then there was Aristotle: A man without a city is either a beast or a god. Well, Chicago was the city. Or was it? *Where* was it, what had become of it? No cities? Then where was civilization? Or was the U.S.A. as a whole now my city? . . . Cities could be written off--dying generations, the blacks and Puerto Ricans, the aged too poor to move. . . . Let them be ruined, decay, die and eliminate themselves. There are some who seem willing that this should happen. I'm not one of them. Not me. (253-54)

After a ten-year's dormancy, Corde decides to walk out of his ivory tower and see first hand what is happening in his city. Originally he plans to write about the Chicago that he knows, focusing on "personalities, scenes, feelings, tones and colors." The articles will be "more pictorial than analytical" (219), since his purpose is "to say something about this Chicago scene drawing on his own experience, making fresh observations, referring to his own feelings, and using his own language" (180). Beginning in all innocence, Corde first takes a light and nostalgic tone. He records his visits to his high school zoology teacher, his schoolmates, and his old neighbors, such as a self-educated Polish barber who used to lecture boys on Spengler's *Decline of the West*. There are quiet and relaxed passages about "the old neighborhoods, their atmosphere, their architecture, the trees, soil, water, the unexpectedly versatile light of the place" (181). Although he thinks Corde pushes poetry too hard in the *Harper's* articles, Spangler admits that Corde does a good job in describing the interior decorations of the apartment, immigrant life in the thirties,

the lakefront, parks, and the pre-war Loop.[7] Like Herzog and Citrine, Corde is saddened by the disappearance of old landmarks: "The Loop's beaneries, handbooks, dinky dives and movie palaces were wiped out. Gigantic office towers had risen everywhere. Good-bye forever to the jazz musicians, and the boxing buffs who hung around the gymnasiums, to the billiard sharks from Bensinger's on Randolph Street " (219).

However, as he probes into the present Chicago, his original plan begins to take a twisted turn. As he discovers, the city that is is not the city that was: Chicago is not "the old town anymore" (125). While collecting materials for the articles, he finds at once "wounds, lesions, cancers, destructive fury, death" (223). Chicago is the "contempt center" of America, filled with chaos, insanity, violence, sexual anarchy, and moral decay. As he says, there is a "curious lack of final coherence, an environment not chosen to suit human needs . . . favorable to manufacture, shipping, construction" (263). Believing that no one in Chicago cares about the terror, about "the terrible wildness and dread in this huge place . . . . About drugs, about guns" (224), Corde decides that it is "high time to write a piece, since I grew up here" (224).

Corde's essays begin with picturesque, charming, nostalgic recollections, ending up with animadversions and exposes. He does not mean to attack--as he says, "I'm attached to Chicago--I am speaking quite seriously" (131)--but he writes cutting polemics denouncing Chicago's criminal-justice system, the corruption of local judges and lawyers, and the violent, primitive conditions tolerated in the Cook County jail. He fills his articles with "disobliging remarks about City Hall, the press, the sheriff, [and] the governor" (13).

Under Corde's pen, the ugly and terrifying Chicago assumes a

composite of different images: a jungle, a garbage dump, a hell, a desert, a waste land, a city of destruction (319), a Sodom, a maelstrom with "whirling souls" (227). In order to see how justice is administered in his native city, Corde spends many days in the courtroom, where he witnesses exotic scenes and discovers that "all the exotics were as native as himself. On his own turf, which was also theirs, he found a wilderness wilder than the Guiana bush" (174). Despite the gaiety of sartorial color, Corde perceives a very deep gloom: "dope pushers, gun toters (everybody had a gun), child molesters, shoplifters, smackheads, purse snatchers, muggers, rapists, arsonists, wife beaters, car thieves, pimps bailing out their whores. People were all dressed up. Their glad rags were seldom clean" (175). Whitmanesque cataloquing is used here as in *Augie March*, but the picture evoked is vastly different.

His visit to the County Jail gives him a picture of hellish Chicago:

> the crazy state of the prisoners in County Jail--the rule of the barn bosses, the rackets, beatings, sodomizings and stabbings in the worst of the tiers: in "Dodge City," "H-1"; the prisoners who tucked trouser bottoms into socks to keep the rats from running up their legs in the night. Now there *was* a red hell for the soul to stray into. (12).

The Jail is a City of Destruction where vandalism runs rampant and the elevator serves not only as a urinal but as a place for murder and sodomy.

The sexual madness of the time is embodied in Corde's cousin, Detillion, who, considering himself a "personification of Eros . . . bringing life," is actually "a sexual oppressor of tragic multitudes of women (possibly also of men)" (105). His madness is revealed in his desire to set up emergency "sexual comfort-stations" around the city.

Sexual epidemic spreads through the city. Even Miss Porson, Corde's secretary, is a "lustful old frump" who has "her own sexual fat to fry," who is going to "put the sex into sexagenerian" (158).

The Spofford Mitchell case presents a ghastly picture of Chicago as a modern Sodom. Sally Sathers, a young suburban housewife, is abducted by the recently released criminal Mitchell in a Loop parking lot. He repeatedly rapes her and locks her in the car's trunk. After taking her around the city for two days, he finally kills her and covers her body with trash. Corde's heart is wrung not only by the sexual frenzy of the age but by the callousness of people toward the victim. Corde discusses this case with Mitchell's lawyer, Sam Varenness, and refuses to accept the liberal (to him immoral) cant invariably offered in such a case as this.

From the window of Varenness's office in the Criminal Courts Building, Corde sees a nihilistic waste land sprawling below him:

> Around the courts and prison buildings, viewed from the superb height of Varennes' office, lay huge rectangles, endless regions of the stunned city--many, many square miles of civil Passchendaele or Somme. Only at the center of the city, visible from all points over fields of demolition, the tall glamour of the skyscrapers. Around the towers, where the perpetual beacons mingled their flashes with open day, there was a turbulence of two kinds of light. (227)

If prisoners go back to the jail "with homecoming spirits" (227), if the police do not bother to check an *Ivanhoe* whose inside has been carved out to conceal a gun, if lethal criminals are randomly released, if pictures of sexually abused minors are taken merely for the sake of procuring evidence, if hands are not extended to a desperate victim asking for help, if denizens of the inner city continue to rape, rob, and kill, if whores, pimps, pushers, junkies go unchecked on the

street, Corde sees little hope for the city or for civilization.

But Corde does not want to yield to nihilism. Nightmarish as his experiences in the city are, he does find some people who are able to love, help, and sympathize. In the County Hospital, Corde sees the nurses and attendants, of Oriental origins, "manifest . . . a powerful but somehow indiscriminate love" (185) for those living dead men and women whose lives are linked to the kidney machine. Augie March's County Hospital reappears, almost unchanged, in Corde's world, thirty years later:

> The ancient County Hospital, yellow, broad and squat. The surrounding neighborhoods have decayed and fallen down. In the plain of collapse, this mass stands almost alone. Beyond the clearings the giant forms of the business district are gathered close. Between the antennae of the Sears Tower a rotating light blinks out. The weather is gray. The pulsating signal is fluid, evidently made of metals and crystals whose names only engineers might recognize. (183)

Corde admits that in his writing he is "often subject to fits of vividness" (167) and then there comes "'poetry,' 'impressionism,' 'exaltation'" (167); the result is "highly nervous, ragged, wild, uncontrolled, turbulent" (167), especially in his writing about Black Chicago. He uses terms such as "superfluous population" and "doomed people" (213) to describe the plight of the Black "underclass," for which use, he is accused of being racist.[8]

Corde's true purpose is to awaken his fellow citizens' conscience and make them look at reality without recoil. To him, both whites and Blacks are responsible for the slums' terrible condition. Corde's concern with the plight of American society in general and of the Black "underclass" in particular is reflected in his interest in collaborating on a project whose hypothesis is that lead poisoning is the

cause of urban deterioration:

> Millions of tons of intractable lead residues poisoning the children of the poor. They're the most exposed. The concentration is measurably heaviest in those old slum neighborhoods, piled up there for decades. . . . Crime and social disorganization in inner city populations can all be traced to the effects of lead. (151)

In Chicago, not all Blacks are economically "redundant." For example, Dr. Fulcher, the capable County Hospital's chief, is a positive character. In fact, looking for examples of moral initiative in the city, Corde finds only two--both Black.

Rufus Ridpath, director of the County Jail, has genuine human feelings for his inmates. He is the only one who tries to improve conditions and help the prisoners. When Ridpath takes over the County Jail, it is on the barn boss system, run by the gang chiefs. There are drugs, rackets, homosexual rape, beatings, stabbings, torture, and buggering. Not long after he takes charge, he cuts down the number of murders and suicides and saves a million dollars out of his budget which he refunds to the county. However, in his eagerness to clean up the jail, he provokes the anger of the local politicians and is tried for manhandling prisoners.

Toby Winthrop, ex-hit-man and ex-heroin addict, runs a detoxification center to help drug addicts gain their new lives. Like the protagonist in "Looking for Mr. Green" who goes out looking for a Black man in wintry Chicago slums, Corde goes to the South Side, not to deliver a social security check, but to see this redeemed ex-hit man-turned-savior. His trip to Winthrop's Operation Contact one wintry day brings him to the hellish district of the city:

> He drove to the South Side on a winter day streaky with snow.

> You could see the soot mingling with the drizzle. Corde hadn't come to this neighborhood in thirty years. It was then decaying, now it was fully rotted. Only a few old brick bungalows remained, and a factory here and there. The expressway had cut across the east-west streets. The one remaining landmark was the abandoned Englewood Station--huge blocks of sandstone set deep, deep in the street, a kind of mortuary isolation, no travelers now, no passenger trains. A dirty snow brocade over the empty lots, and black men keeping warm at oil-drum bonfires. All this--low sky, wind, weed skeletons, ruin--went to Corde's nerves, his "Chicago wiring system," with peculiar effect. He found Operation Contact in a hidden half-block (ideal for muggings) between a warehouse and the expressway. . . . He parked and got out of the car feeling the lack of almost everything you needed, humanly. Christ, the human curve had sunk down to base level, had gone beneath it. If there was another world, this was the time for it to show itself. The visible one didn't bear looking at. (208)

Corde's climbing the stairs to the center is, as Fuchs points out, "the upward quest in a slum setting" (307). In such a dismal and dangerous place, Winthrop and his colleagues try to save drug addicts from sinking and drowning "in the shit" (212). Winthrop's humanitarian assistance and his tropical plants in the office give out some hope to the decaying city.

Despite the keening of the articles over the city's decline, Corde notes that not all Chicago is blighted: there are "business Chicago sitting in its skyscrapers, monumental banking Chicago, corporate electronic computerized Chicago" (181). Corde also reports new housing developments south of the Loop in the disused freight yards and the mammoth Deep Tunnel engineering project. Yet, he dislikes the neighborhood of North Michigan Avenue for its "commercial and promotional smoothness. . . the showiness of the skyscrapers, the Bond Street and Rue de la Paix connections" (92) and dubs it "The Malignant Mammonism of the Magnificent Mile" (92).

The *Harper's* articles, as he expects, provoke a lot of anger: "Liberals found him reactionary. Conservatives called him crazy.

Professional urbanologists said he was hasty" (206). Students at the college object to much that Corde has written, because he has described "broad-daylight rapes and robberies, sexual acts in public places, on the seats of CTA buses, on the floors of public waiting rooms, men on Sheridan Road spraying automobile fenders with their urine" (179). The student militants pass a resolution declaring that the Dean is a racist and that he owes a public apology "to Black, Puerto Rican and Mexican toilers for making them look 'like animals and savages'" (180). His articles also anger those indignant diehard Chicago boosters who are commuters, who live in the suburbs and escape the race problems and crime.

Corde does not see his articles on Chicago as attacks on his city. He writes them not "because of the opportunities it offer[s] for romantic despair, nor in a spirit of middle-class elegy or nostalgia" (182), but because he wants "to prevent the American idea from being pounded into dust altogether. And here is our American idea: liberty, equality, justice, democracy, abundancy. And here is what things are like today in a city like Chicago. Have a look!" (135).

Perhaps what offends his friend Dewey Spangler and other intellectuals most is Corde's idiosyncratic way of writing. Unlike other journalists or urbanologists who fill their reports with jargon and cliches, Corde, motivated by "morality and justice" (182), decides to write in his own language. Throughout the novel, Corde tries to justify his incorporating poetry and philosophy into his essays. Since reality does not exist "out there"--"It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth" (295)--Corde decides to "pass Chicago through his own soul. A mass of data, terrible, murderous" (294-95).[9] To him, as to Bellow, "without art, it is impossible to interpret

reality" (Roudane 280). Thinking about virtue and vice, Corde maintains that in a crisis such as this we should use our imagination and poetry, for "perhaps only poetry had the strength 'to rival the attractions of narcotics, the magnetism of TV, the excitements of sex, or the ecstasies of destruction'" (207).

Corde does not accept his brother-in-law's claim that Chicago is a Darwinian jungle where the survival of the fittest is the law. His brother-in-law may be a beast in this jungle but he and other money maniacs are not "animals fighting honorably for survival . . . they were deeply perverted, corrupt" (293). To Corde, Chicago is "more like a garbage dump" (293) than a jungle. He thinks Chicago's slums are not that terrifying compared with "the slums we carry around inside us. Every man's *inner* inner city" (229).

Not intimidated by the criticism and hatred of his colleages, readers, and fellow Chicagoans, Corde will continue to write because he believes in his own sense of existence and his obligation to defend civilization. As he says, "I was speaking up for the noble ideas of the West in their American form. . . . 'This is your city--this is your American democracy. It's also my city. I have a right to picture it as I see it'" (136).

IV

In his last conversation with Vlada in Bucharest, Corde tells her that he is eager to go back to Chicago although he does not anticipate "order, beauty, calm, and peace" (312). Vlada replies, "Still, you'll be glad to see Lake Michigan from your window again, I'm sure of that" (312). The city he goes back to is the same: burglary, vandalism, rapes, murders, and corruption. But Corde is indeed "glad to see the lake from his window and have the freshwater ocean for company"

even though "at his back the city, unquiet, the slum and its armies just over the day: blacks, Koreans, East Indians, Chippewas, Thais and hillbillies, squad cars, ambulances, firefighters, thrift shops, drug hustlers, lousy bars, alley filth" (314).

In his highrise apartment in Chicago, sitting "with his back to the decayed city view" (316), the Dean looks down at the water of Lake Michigan:

> From his corner window he could see the Loop and its famous towers, but he looked directly downward at the working of the water, on bright days a clear green, easing its mass onto the beaches, white. The waters bathing the waters in sun, and every drop having its own corpuscle of light, the light meantime resembling the splash of heavy raindrops on paved surfaces--the whole sky clear, clear but tense. On days of heavy weather you felt the shock of the waves and heard their concussion through the building. Under low clouds you might have been looking at Hudson's Bay and when the floes came close you wouldn't have been surprised to see a polar bear. Only when you didn't smell brine, you smelled pungent ozone, the inland-water raw-potato odor. (315-16)

Suddenly he attains a recognition of his relation to his city, to his country, and of his motives for writing those *Harper's* essays:

> But there was plenty of emptiness, as much as you needed to define yourself against, as American souls seem to do. Cities . . . cities were moods, emotional states, for the most part collective distortions, where human beings thrived and suffered, where they invested their souls in pains and pleasures, taking these pleasures and pains as proofs of reality. Thus "Cain's city built with murder," and other cities built with Mystery, or Pride, all of them emotional conditions and great centers of delusion and bondage, death. *It seemed to Corde that he had made an effort to find out what Chicago, U.S.A., was built with. His motive . . . came out of what was eternal in man. What mood was this city? The experience, puzzle, torment of a lifetime demanded interpretation. At least he was beginning to understand why he had written those articles. Nobody was much affected by them, unless it was himself.* (318; italics mine)

The Dean's December, a tale of two dismal cities, presents a dim picture of the modern world. As Fuchs has pointed out, "Whereas

Bucharest is debilitation and death, Chicago is full of depravity and decadence, the 'soft nihilism' of the west. Bucharest is cold, Chicago is hot, and it seems that Bellow is posing his version of Frost's question--will the world end in fire or ice?" (306). Yet Bellow does not succumb to despair. As the novel's ending shows, Corde comes down to the sublunary earth despite the temptation of ethereal, boundless outer space, because "*terra firma*" (289) is his beat which needs his observation and interpretation.

Corde is Bellow's "best balanced hero" (Cohen 53). Like other Bellow heroes, he is in quest of equilibrium in the city, but, unlike them, he is a wise observer and brave moralist who demands justice and wants to right wrongs. The novel raises central questions about the modern city and modern society. With its companion-piece *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (Goldman), *The Dean's December* presents Bellow's solemn "plea for humanities and humanity" (Weinstein).

Despite a mixed reception, the novel won unanimous acclaim for its treatment of the city.[10] Fuchs' comment was typical: "In the rendering of urban place, Bellow is as superb as ever" (306). In *The Dean's December* Bellow again demonstrates his dexterity in using the city as a character, in catching the city's ambience to set the right mood, in grappling with complicated urban issues, and in dramatizing the tension between man and his city. Even though the novel lacks the Bellovian comedy which characterizes *Augie*, *Henderson*, *Herzog*, and *Humboldt's Gift*, it is a great city novel by a Nobel Laureate who is determined to tell the truth as it passes through his soul and to tell it with style.

Notes

[1] Bellow, *The Dean's December* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982): 136. In this chapter, further references will be cited in the text.

[2] As Bellow told an interviewer, "My wife's mother was dying in Bucharest, and I went with her to give her some support, which in that place one badly needs. The old mother died while we were there. I had been thinking of writing a book about Chicago, and as always when I go abroad I brooded about the home town" (Kennedy 50).

Speaking about the genesis of the book, Bellow said that originally he planned to write a non-fiction book about Chicago after the fashion of *To Jerusalem and Back*. However, after making hundreds of pages of notes, he decided to abandon that approach and wrote a novel instead (Kakutani 28). As he told Kennedy, "That's a subject for some kind of poetry, not a factual account" (50).

[3] Temperamentally an "image man," Corde sometimes considers himself as a kind of God-sent seer, sent to observe, to interpret, and to prophesy. For instance, he feels he is "(and how quirkily) called upon for a special exertion--to interpret, to pity, to save!" (223). To him, his writing the *Harper's* articles is not a matter of choice, because he feels that "something had come over him." In *Humboldt's Gift*, Humboldt suspects Citrine's uncanny visionary mission; in this novel, Spangler does not like his mysticism when Corde says he is "assigned" to write, thus making it "like a visionary project, or the Voice of God saying, 'Write this up, as follows'" (270).

[4] For a discussion of nihilism in *The Dean's December*, see Newman.

[5] Talking about the Bucharest setting, Bellow says that "in Bucharest and Eastern Europe one can see a more old-fashioned sort of human attachment. . . . This is the Tolstoyan sentiment of relatedness, the Slavic mode of connection made famous by the geniuses of the nineteenth century" (Roudane 271).

[6] Both Corde and Citrine are, in a sense, two versions of the fictionalized Bellow who tries to explain why he stays in Chicago and why it is possible to combine art with Chicago. Ever since he moved back to Chicago from New York in the early sixties, Bellow has repeatedly explained in interviews and essays why he has made Chicago his home turf and held onto it. See the interviews with Illig, Boyers, and Roudane. See also Bellow's essays "Starting out in Chicago," "A Matter of the Soul," "A Writer from Chicago," and "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is."

[7] Unfortunately, Bellow does not include verbatim excerpts about historical Chicago from the *Harper's* articles. Perhaps he should publish the nonfiction book about Chicago as he originally planned. Fortunately, after the appearance of this novel, Bellow has published essays about Chicago: "A Writer from Chicago," "In the Days of Mr. Roosevelt," and "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is."

[8] Since the publication of *The Dean's December*, there has been a new candor about race in America. For example, Bill Moyers's documentary, "The Vanishing Family--Crisis in Black America," aired January 25, 1986 on CBS, brings the message home via the mouths of inner-city blacks.

[9] Bellow tells an interviewer that "in *The Dean's December* what [he] did was to say, 'Look!' The first step is to display the facts. But the facts, unless the imagination perceives them, are *not* facts. Perhaps [he] shouldn't say 'passionately takes hold.' As an artist does. Mr. Corde, the Dean, passionately takes hold of Chicago and writes his articles like an artist rather than a journalist" (Roudane 273). To Bellow, no "technicians"--psychologists, sociologists, politicians, journalists, and economists--have been able to tell us the real condition of today's demoralized cities. They are only creating a "Great Noise" ("Starting" 77) which destroys meaning, because these people have no imagination of such urban evils as incoherence, sexual disorders, robbery, rape, the abandonment of children, and murder. "They don't even *see* them" (Roudane 273).

[10] For a review of the reviews, see Chavkin.

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CONCLUSION

> A literary artist is "the representative of beauty, the interpreter of the human heart, the hero of ingenuity, playfulness, personal freedom, generosity, and love." (Bellow, "Starting" 71)

I

Man in the city is a salient theme that runs through Bellow's fiction. In novel after novel, Bellow dramatizes the dialogue between man and his city with subtlety and profundity. The city--the main locus in Bellow's fictional world--is the setting for all his novels (*Henderson* excepted) because it embodies the reality of modern existence and symbolizes modern society.

All Bellow's central characters, except for Henderson, are urban-bred and urban-oriented and face more or less the same existential problems. They keep asking: How should one orient oneself in a modern city which is characterized by chaos, madness, ugliness, philistinism, and cultural nihilism? How can one retain one's sovereign, autonomous self under the weight of an oppressive and maiming mass urban society? How does one relate oneself to others when alienation, fragmentation, materialization, and mechanization are in ascendency? How can one achieve serenity, spontaneity, dignity, and humanity in a fast-moving, frenzy-bent, wastelandish urban construct? How can one maintain equilibrium between self and society? In sum, how can one conduct a successful dialogue with his city? These are demanding questions with

which Bellow's heroes--from Joseph to Dean Corde--have to come to grips in their quest for order, equanimity, and the meaning of human existence. The on-going dialogue between the Bellow hero and his city constitutes the main substance for the celebrated Bellovian human drama.

In his dialogue with the city, the Bellow hero tries to assert his Emersonian Sovereign Self. Believing in the nobility of man, he cannot accept the belittling or annihilation of Self. But the Bellow hero also realizes the dangers of self-estrangement, which is imprisoning and limiting. Caught in such a frightful dilemma, the Bellow hero tries to achieve equipoise between preserving one's selfhood and relating oneself to others. In the end, he is always drawn back to the human conditions, discovering that "any goodness is not achieved in a vacuum" (*DM* 61). With his mind bent on becoming a good man, he chooses to be among his fellow citizens--his "brothers and sisters"--because brotherhood is what makes a man human. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, each of Bellow's novels dramatizes a Bellow hero's progress from his guarding his self to his breaking out of his self and eventually to his embracing of human communion.

To dramatize the theme of man in the city, Bellow the artist has successfully integrated form and content. His depiction of the city especially testifies to the mastery of his art. The kaleidoscopic city is more than a simple locale. Bellow often evokes the ambience of the city to create the right tone for the novel, particularly in *The Victim* and *The Dean's December*. The Bellow hero often finds objective correlatives for his moods in the corresponding urban scenes. ("Cities [are] moods," as Dean Corde reflects [*DD* 316].) The chaotic urban scene often reflects the protagonist's personal crisis. Moreover,

through his wondrous evocation of the sounds, smells, sights, colors, and tones of the city, Bellow has made it a character in its own right.

To all intents and purposes, the city in Bellow's fiction has become an apt metaphor for modern society. Despite his ambivalence toward the city, the Bellow hero has to accept it as part of reality. It is mainly in the city, amidst the crowd, alone in solitude, or during conversations, that the Bellow hero gains sudden illuminations about man's place in the city, in the world, and in the universe.

Essentially a realist, Bellow, like Joyce, is a "chronicler of the city" (Schwartz 20). As he says, "Every novelist is a historian, a chronicler of his time" (Brans 67). His realistic description of the city not only yields a faithful picture of the city being depicted but gets really close to its contemporary facts. For instance, *Augie March* delineates vividly the cityscape and life style of Chicago in the thirties and forties. Through his examination of a cross-section of life in New York City during the sixties, Bellow records his honest vision about the Holocaust, the Moon exploration, and the counter-culture of the sixties in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Although he uses Chicago and New York City as the settings for almost all his novels, Bellow is not a parochial writer. In fact, his *oeuvre*, which combines "the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture," is a mirror that truthfully reflects the reality of society.

For all its realistic details, however, Bellow's city is often invested with mythical import, suggesting or echoing Eliot's Waste Land, the Biblical Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gommorah, Bunyan's City of Destruction, the Dantesque Inferno, the Jungle, Whitman's Democratic City, Poe's maelstrom with whirling souls, De Quincey's trance land, City of Darkness, and St. Augustine's Northern Cities established by

the Devil. In his later works, such as *The Dean's December*, the plight of the inner city has been used to symbolize the inner crisis of modern man.

Citrine has used the metaphor "the great mysterious book" (*HG* 266) to characterize the American city. Perhaps the best approach to Bellow's city is to look upon it as a mysterious text, which is to be read, interpreted, and penetrated.

II

Several important motifs work together in Bellow's fiction to illustrate, amplify, or highlight the theme of man in the city. Bellow usually places a protagonist (in most cases an introspective man) in a room, where he ostensibly wards off the infringement of the outer world, where he feels safe. Yet, his social self, or his yearning for communion, gradually makes his estrangement seem extremely uncomfortable. To the shut-in hero, the claustrophobic room is imprisoning; he wishes to break down the walls of his self and his apartment. The desire finds an artistic release in Bellow's one-act play, "The Wrecker" (1954), in which the protagonist rejects the city's one thousand dollars to vacate his apartment as soon as possible and insists on wrecking the walls himself.

Through the window, the Bellow hero looks at his city, whose repetitious details and ugly cityscape threaten his sanity and equanimity. This Bellovian gesture epitomizes the Bellovian hero's dilemma: to stay in the room or to go to meet the world. It suggests that, despite his seclusion in his room, the Bellow hero does not forget the outer world and that, despite his concern with his selfhood, he is inseparable from his city. At heart he yearns to get in touch with the city, however menacing it is to his quest for truth, goodness,

and beauty. Observing the city and reflecting upon its impact through the window is like reading the mysterious text of the city: gazing at the city often gives the Bellow hero epiphanies about his place in his city, in the world, and in the universe.

Because of his recognition of the dangers of being shut in, his sense of duty, his family feelings, his moral conscience, or his entanglements with agents of distractions, the Bellow hero walks out of his solipsistic, cell-like room and becomes a city voyager. Walking on the street or riding on the ferry, subway, or bus, in a taxi or in a car, the Bellow hero continues to read the text of the city. Through his observations and musings during city voyages, the Bellow hero comes in direct contact with the city and gains first-hand urban experience.

Like his author, the Bellow hero is ambivalent toward the city because of its simultaneous desolation and vitality. At times terrified by the chaotic condition of the city, the Bellow hero embraces pastoral aspirations and longs to go out of the city for fresher air or for solace. Despite his occasional idyllic dreams, however, the Bellow hero never considers living in the country a viable option, because escape from the city does not solve his problems. As clearly demonstrated in *Augie March* and *Herzog*, living in the countryside does not yield the happiness, transcendence, or tranquillity the Bellow hero expects. In the city-country dialogue, Bellow never lets the country win an upper hand over the city.

Thus the Bellow hero either remains in the city or returns to the city after a brief flirtation with pastoral ideals. Oppressed by the present city, the Bellow hero likes to indulge in memories of the old city where he enjoys closely knit family life and congenial neighborhoods. The older Bellow (and his hero) grows, the more striking the

contrast between the old and new cities becomes. However, remembrances of city past cannot obliterate the grim realities of city present. The Bellow hero has to accommodate himself to it, however terrible it is.

In the city of darkness, the Bellow hero is always looking upward for slants of sunlight, as the first monologist in Bellow's first short story tries to do. As Bellow's novels develop, the light gradually assumes symbolic, religious, and metaphysical import, echoing the light sought by the Wordsworthian persona or the Hemingway hero. It is suggestive of cleanness, order, hope, salvation, and perfection. The Bellow hero's quest for light--the light of joy, truth, hope, harmony, mystery--in the city of darkness is a key motif. Very often the Bellow hero sees the light both from above and within: to Corde, "the light was the light of warmer seasons, not of deep winter. It came up from his own harmonies as well as down from above" (*DD* 321). Throughout his canon, Bellow affirms that "*the light of truth is never very far away, and no human being is too negligible or corrupt to come into it*" (*H* 382).

Drab as the city is, the Bellow hero tries to find moments of transcendence. At times, he does find beauty in the ugliness of the city. Most important of all, through human interactions he feels part of humanity and learns to accept his fellow citizens as "his brothers and his sisters" (*SD* 92).

Despite the turbulence and agitation of the chaotic city, the Bellow hero never gives in to despair or nihilism. Bellow's affirmation is often symbolized by the plants and flowers he places amidst the dreadful and bleak urban setting. This is especially noteworthy in such bleak novels as *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Dean's Deccember*: Sammler sees lilacs blooming in the sewers and Dean Corde finds

cyclamens thriving in chilly Bucharest and tropical plants flourishing in Winthrop's office on the South Side of Chicago. Flowers are tokens of rebirth and love: Herzog picks flowers for Ramona (a florist in New York City), Citrine sees crocuses near Humboldt's graveyard, and Corde buys azaleas for his wife.

Such recurrent motifs underscore the key theme of man of the city and unify Bellow's eight urban novels. However, as the preceding chapters have noted, there are variations of and transmutations to the consistent major theme. Because of Bellow's growing insight into his created characters and cities, his treatment of the theme varies.

III

In *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, and *Seize the Day*, the heroes feels themselves to be victims of their confining and oppressive urban and social environments. Dangling in a wartime situation, Joseph shuts himself up in his "six-sided box" room. He relates to the city only from the room's window and through a few necessary excursions. He does not venture far out of his familiar area. A special trip to the Loop gives him a "prevision" of urban man's fate--a sudden death in the darkness of the city. From his in-laws' apartment window, however, Joseph does achieve an illumination which becomes a dominant motif of Bellow's urban fiction: looking at the cityscape, he sees that man can transcend his environment and that he is connected to "common humanity" (*DM* 18). Although he acknowledges the "bolt for 'nature'," he does not consider escape into the country a viable option.

Leventhal's hot, sultry New York is a contrast to the gloomy, wintry Chicago of *Dangling Man*. With its huge crowds of people, oppressive high-rise buildings, and lurking unnameable forces, the city has always been an ominous, suffocating threat to him. His feeling of

alienation is intensified by the enervating heat and constant noise of the city. He finds no solace anywhere in the city, not even in the city park. The appearance of Allbee further aggravates his sense of insecurity and victimization. Leventhal's travels between Staten Island and Manhattan carry great moral weight, give him epiphanies about his place in the city, and help him relate better to his own family and to the anti-Semitic victimizer/brother Allbee.

Wilhelm's New York City is a modern Tower of Babel where no communication is possible. Living among senile retirees on the Upper West Side of New York, Wilhelm is a failure in life, subject to the whims, petty greeds, and manipulation of those who surround him. His yearning to escape the net of the city is reflected in the flying pigeon he sees at the beginning of the novel. Despite his occasional lapses into idyllic dreams, Wilhelm is trapped in the city. However, through human interactions in the city, he experiences an Emersonian illumination that he is part of "a larger body" from which he cannot be separated.

While Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm are trying to sequester themselves in self-created worlds, Augie is an adventurer in the city, always opening himself to experiences. Bouncy, boisterous, easy-going, and innocent, Augie celebrates his city's variety, vitality, spaciousness, and exuberance. Roaming around Chicago's crowded, colorful streets and neighborhoods, he experiences city life in its great diversity. Unlike Joseph, who is detached from Chicago, Augie absorbs the city into his own being through his deep involvement. As a result, despite its somberness and oppressiveness, Chicago proves to be more liberating than confining for him.

Augie March is a breakthrough in Bellow's career. Writing in his

own style, Bellow celebrates Chicago as a quintessentially American city of ample opportunity and vitality. However, it is not a romantic celebration. Augie, especially Augie the memoir-writer, knows that his city is not all bright and hopeful. The novel effectively dramatizes the dialectics between brightness and darkness, independence and determinism.

Augie is the first Bellow hero to leave the city. However, he finds no solace in his Mexican trip. Nor is he able to realize his dream of setting up a foster home in the countryside. Similarly, Herzog's two experiences of living in the countryside fail to give him the happiness, tranquillity, and simplicity he dreams of.

Travelling between Chicago, New York, and Montreal, Herzog finally realizes how these three cities have affected his life. For his recuperation he retreats to his country house in the Berkshires, not for pastoral impulses, but to look things over. Yet, with sanity restored and complex human relationships resolved, he finally reaches a state of peace and rest in the rural setting, and is ready to return to the city.

Sharing familial, urban, and intellectual backgrounds with Herzog, Citrine also travels mentally and physically between Chicago and New York, seeking to create order and meaning out of his chaotic life. Unlike Herzog, however, Citrine does not live in the country for pastoral ideals. Instead of staying in New York after his success, he moves back to settle in Chicago. Whereas his connections with New York belong mostly to the past, he is tied to the Chicago of the past and the present. Several agents of distraction bring him out of his room. His city voyages through the present city bring him not only direct urban experience beyond his normal realm but also recall memories of

the old city.

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *The Dean's December*, Bellow creates two wise-observer protagonists who, seriously concerned with the deterioration of modern urban life, observe and comment on their cities. While Sammler--a one-eyed Tiresias-like Holocaust survivor--criticizes his fellow New Yorkers in the sixties, Dean Corde observes and comments on the totalitarian Bucharest and the corrupted Chicago of the seventies. To him, both cities are bleak, the former cold, dismal, comfortless, and miserable, the latter hot, crazy, pleasure-driven, and decadent.

Unlike his predecessors, who are mostly preoccupied with their personal dilemmas, Dean Corde actively demands morality and justice in a city which seems devoid of positive moral values. He tries to uncover the truth that is hidden under the debris of falsehood. Like Citrine, Corde moves back to Chicago in the early sixties. Throughout the novel, he also constantly seeks the reasons for his move. The ultimate reason for Citrine and Corde is their deep attachment to Chicago: they both want to rescue their city from decay through poetry, art, and the imagination.

IV

Bellow is deeply concerned not only about the plight of the slums but also about the spiritual aridity of modern man. To Corde/Bellow, it is "not so much the inner city slum that threaten[s] us as the slum of innermost being, of which the inner city [is] perhaps a material representation" (*DD* 222-23). What needs our great concern are the "slums we carry around inside us. Every man's *inner* inner city" (*DD* 229).

How to prevent one's "*inner* inner city" from deteriorating? All

through his career, Bellow has been exploring answers to that question. To Bellow's mind, the only possible way is through poetry, art, and the imagination. Only by renewing the child's light, by finding the axial lines of life and living by them, by finding the wisdom of life in the recognition of death, by breaking out of one's self, by achieving universal brotherhood, by reinvigorating ethical values, and by upholding moral initiatives, can man save his city--literal and metaphorical--from decay.

Bellow's emphasis on love, feeling, imagination, and brotherhood leads him to criticize vehemently the so-called "modern public consciousness," which exemplifies itself in indifferent-bystander attitude, bogus culturalism, wastelander's mentality, and nihilistic philosophy. To Bellow, this "consciousness" is far more terrible than frank philistinism, for it creates a "Great Noise" ("Starting" 77) that drowns meaning, brings distraction, and distorts reality.

As Fuchs sums up well, as a novelist Bellow is "primarily interested in the soul-quality of a work, its truth-telling capability, the moral function of art" (14). When moral depravity and wayward behavior follow in the wake of the blind pursuit of material and sensual enjoyment, when human dignity is severely ravaged, when rationalism, existentialism, and pragmatism are in vogue, when the death of the city is proclaimed, when apocalyptic visions about the future of civilization prevail, it is most significant that Bellow, one of the best city novelists of this century, persists in writing about the city, in emphasizing common feelings shared by humankind, in rejecting the cant of pessimism and nihilism, and in believing in the power of poetry and the imagination. Bellow is, as Spivey points out, an Emersonian representative man who has "plunged into the chaos of the

soul" and has come up again "with the awareness of the meaningfulness of all human existence, an awareness and belief, as [Simone] Weil tells us, that is love itself" (Spivey 19).

As Bellow says in "A Writer from Chicago," the city's inexhaustible details and pervading darkness can be released by a writer's style, because the forces of style can subdue the city's chaos (197). If under his pen the city is chaotic and ugly, Bellow has rescued it through the power of his art. Like Dreiser, a writer he greatly admires, Bellow has a "lifting power" to transcend the city's dark and insidious forces (see Bellow, "Dreiser"). Bellow has wrestled all his life with the forces of darkness and has tried to lift up the gate of darkness so that the reader can see the light of truth behind.

As a writer living in Chicago--"the most American of all American cities" (*DD* 333)--Bellow has tried to deal with "the American Experience, that murky, heavy, burdensome, chaotic thing" ("Starting" 77). Having spent most of his life in that "business-industrial, vital, brutal, proletarian, and middle-class city" ("Starting" 75), Bellow has aspired to write about the elements of Chicago which no previous city novelists have achieved, because the city is "this one thing, so intimately known that not only nerves, senses, mind, but also [his] very bones wanted to put it into words" ("Starting" 73). Bellow, like Whitman, can be truly called "the poet of the American city."[1]

Notes

[1] Clemons and Kroll have called Bellow "the most powerful poet of urban America" (33). As Haffenden records, "On one occasion Bellow remarked that he wanted to be a poet, Berryman, who avidly admired his craftsmanship, responded brightly, 'You are!' Bellow replied, 'Oh, I mean short lines!'" (Haffenden 235). In other words, even though he does not write poetry in its strictest sense, Bellow is a poet of the city and his poetic ability is especially reflected in his descriptions of the city. In the sense that the poet is the legislator of the mind and the spirit, Bellow is a poet of the American city because he hopes his power as a writer will prevent the city from becoming the waste land.

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