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Saul Bellow's Triumphant Life in *The Adventures of Augie March*

By

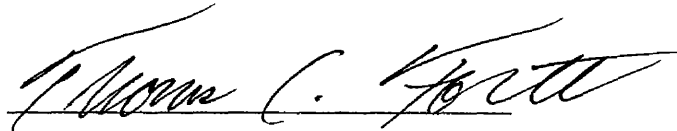
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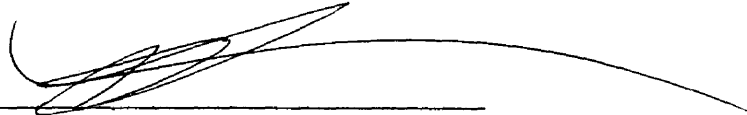
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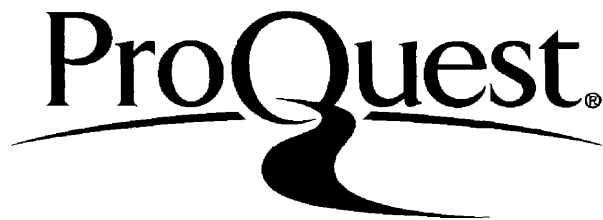
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One Face Among A Thousand

Joseph Campbell's heroic journey is the archetypal narrative that gathers all other narratives into itself. In his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell reads the myths of the of the Orient, Athens, and the Decalogue of Moses "to understand not only the meaning of those images for contemporary life, but also the singleness of the human spirit in its aspirations, powers, vicissitudes, and wisdom" (28). Beyond Gautama Buddha bringing back the Good Law and Moses the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai; beyond thousands of years and as many miles separating these men and their respective communities; beyond today's separation felt between Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, the power of Campbell's ideas reveals the bonds hidden beneath the cultural differences of places and names and humanity's heroes. It is the purpose of this essay to trace the heroic journey and the use of myth in Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* to discover what meaning heroic images have for contemporary life.

Campbell's theory is not to be used as a formula. It is not a helpful guide if characters and plots from novels are plugged into his monomyth. This would make the writer unnecessary by discrediting his or her own conscious representation of the world. However, if a novel is approached with Campbell's ideas resting just behind conscious thought then not only will the reader be made aware of the common humanity, but also of new ways of seeing the world that only that particular author could present. There is a river of eternal beauty running through the world that, however many generations pass working on its banks, never alters its course. Instead, those generations build their edifices according to their own

fashion. Their individual appearance – be it Gothic, Neo-Classicism or Modern - will affect the skyline, marking each phase of beauty's synthetic endowments. Each writer must construct his own edifice in the shadows of the past, informed by the river, surrounded by interpretations.

The template of the heroic journey presented by Joseph Campbell in 1948 is still valid. What has changed (and this is no surprise) are the places of initiation, the impetus of departure, the boons returned to the community, and of course the community itself. Where Campbell was concerned with myth, the current discussion has shifted to the novel. The novel's hero must be a character similar to people we all know; the protagonist's actions must speak the same language as his or her words; the journey must grant the character room to develop from failure; and, Stephanie S. Halldorson suggests, the hero's life must be incorporated into the belief system of the reader.

The introduction of the reader brings our contemporary American society into the discussion. It is a society not overly fond of books. It is a hectic society confronted with consumption, advertising, accumulating, reporting, planning, and entertaining. Contemplation and inner life are neglected, and the very idea of an inner reality is dismissed. There are too many distractions. Who notices when the hero embarks on his journey? Who listens when he returns? Other messiahs and salesmen drown his voice out. How is the reader to distinguish the authentic hero from the non-hero who wears the apparel of heroism?

In a busy society readers will find the character most like themselves and claim kinship with him or her. This is not so difficult in early American novels, but

when young Jewish men begin to write and take themselves seriously as the heroes of their own lives, society reveals itself to be pluralistic and heroes are presented in ways never imagined before. Readers can get lost in a multitude of options and are like ships at sea whose heroes of the past are stars obscured by storms. Instead reading is an act of self-forgetting. The moments lived in a novel are given up to the author's point of view, his character developments, his plot, and his conclusions. His heroes must be respected as such until the novel's final word. Invariably they will have a relationship with a discovery from Campbell's study of myths.

In Campbell's definition of initiation, the hero outgrows the ideas of his initial environment and the comforts of his childhood beliefs. This is usually accompanied by anxiety, the acknowledgment that the unknown looms ahead like a dark forest wherein the hero's fears and doubts about leaving have full rein in his imagination. At this point he has two choices: he can either enter the unknown in the hopes that his path will yield precious jewels or he can refuse to go on. To refuse ends in desolation. One is too coerced by habit, boredom, and business to accept fate's favors. But to pack one's objects and go forth "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (Campbell 48). The hero cannot achieve transcendence where he is and must venture forth if he has any hope of living triumphantly, which is the hoped-for result of attempting such a journey.

Such an acceptance of the call boils down to an act of self-annihilation. It is to become reborn, to pass the threshold of the temple or enter the jaws of Leviathan to find the "zone of magnified power", the knowledge of the transcendent principle, or

what Saul Bellow calls the axial lines (Campbell 64). These cannot be known unless the hero first accepts the call. The first act of self-sacrifice is to lose the ego. It is a spiritual challenge whereby the god of self is destroyed, enabling God to be a father figure rather than a demon whose will is fought, decried, and blasphemed.

To refuse the call, Ihab Hassan suggests, the hero in modern literature must become a victim or a rebel; the hero becomes the anti-hero. Bellow's early novels depict these men. *Dangling Man* reveals Joseph's passiveness in the jaws of history and *The Victim* represents the paranoia and loss of self that Asa's belief in the Other's point of view created. However, in *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow paints an alluring portrait of the *romancier*. Augie's disregard of his society's ideas and emotions, both of which he becomes aware of through his countless refusals to be regimented, comes through his recognition of a more noble aim for men. This regimentation in a democracy, the fate of conformity, results in the loss of individual potency and the power to effect change. Where Augie falls in line with Hassan's thesis is his "aspiration to order" (Hassan 30). This ordering becomes centered on Augie's soul and Bellow turns to myths to discover what is good in men, women, and society.

Bellow's view of the world is at odds with the modernity represented by Albert Camus. In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus defines the modern condition as absurd. The absurdity of life arrives when one becomes conscious of the separation between self and the world and takes on the role of an exile. This connotes unfamiliarity with the world. It brings with it the idea that at one time the man and woman knew the world and their place in it. Then, through a war or a

natural disaster or an inexplicable change of the environment within or without, all understanding is obliterated. Afterwards, those poor souls fashion a reasonably familiar life from the strange materials of the new world, hoping for the day when they could return to their homeland. Yet, this exile is “deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (6).

The modern world was not lacking in exiles. The Great War destroyed Europe and fractured the family ties of those warring nations. The revolutions that followed brought drastic changes to the lives of still more men and women. The Depression turned fortunes into handfuls of dust and took nations to the precipice of collapse. Finally, Fascism rose from the tumultuous sea like a tsunami burying six million people in its surge and casting thousands more upon foreign shores. The first half of the twentieth century saw commotion and upheaval; the lands were constantly being plowed over and not even the gulls could feast on worms.

Camus took this feeling of exile and internalized it. Men and women were not only estranged from their families, their homes, their fortunes, even their futures, now they were exiled from themselves. Even if the world around them kept a resemblance to the past, even if mankind continued making the gestures demanded from a civilized society “you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering” (5-6). And yet another rock is placed upon modern man’s shoulders. He has no memory of home and neither does he have the hope of a return. There is no room for memory

or desire. It is at this moment that Camus asks the modern question, "Is suicide justifiable in this absurd world?"

Despite everything that has come before it, Camus declares that suicide is merely the absurd transmuted into death. It seems there is a paradox here. If one is conscious of the absurd, the essential truth of modern life, revolt is the logical conclusion to living with it. If one is not conscious of the absurd the two alternatives are not considered. Mankind is in the habit of believing the world works within a reasonable set of laws. When humans become conscious of the absurd they are ignorant about what to do with their search for clarity and meaning. They are trapped between the irrational world and their desire to order it. It is impossible, "the struggle of each individual against the unreasonableness of the world presupposes the total absence of hope, the constant refusal of all consolation, and the conscious dissatisfaction with the human condition in its absurdity" (Ellison 75). In this position, Camus would revolt, the perpetual act that "gives life its value" ("Myth of Sisyphus" 55).

In using the myth of Sisyphus to parallel the modern condition Camus was following the precepts for modern literature laid out in practice by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot.

The use of myth is a modern technique. T.S. Eliot may have been the first to discover the mythical method employed by James Joyce in *Ulysses*. Eliot's own work, notably in "The Waste Land", is informed by this method as well. Upon its publication many critics overlooked the significance of Joyce's title, which explains that the order of *Ulysses* is based on the *Odyssey* "and the use of appropriate styles

and symbols to each division" ("*Ulysses*, Order and Myth"). Some critics who dismissed the significance of this parallel condemned *Ulysses* and the book was banned in Ireland until 1960. It was called perverse, chaotic, and meaningless. It was thought to be an invitation to destruction and written only to shock. Some critics connected *Ulysses* to the Dadaist movement, which believed that reason and rationality led to the First World War. In response to this belief, an anti-art, without discernible form or subject matter, was born.

When Eliot discovered Joyce's mythical method he wrote, "Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (218). Eliot would not disagree with the decadence of European society during the years surrounding the First World War. He was a strong expositor of cultural decay and his evening sky in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Like a patient etherized upon a table" was the first image reflected by society in his mirror. He saw men and women with frozen emotions; sexual relationships distorted as if by Fun House mirrors; across Europe there was silence and the bitterness of fragmented political alliances. Eliot thought the mythical method would make "the modern world possible for art" (218).

There are three reasons why Eliot believed this. First, according to his theory of tradition all past art is present and "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own

country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order”

(“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 119). This contemporaneity of the artist is like that of the scientist. Each new discovery does not spring forth randomly or automatically. Rather, the new is discovered from the work of earlier generations; from their theories and hypotheses coordinated with advancements in technology. In the literary world these advancements were in the fields of psychology, ethnology, and *The Golden Bough*. By using these new instruments, artists could continue representing the world, not as a helpless array of disassociated images and feelings, but with an order and form from past works.

Second, Eliot believed that the modern world needed to search for permanent things. Questions asked by artists through time had been lost in the rubble of modernity: where is salvation found? How does renewal come? What are the limits of the self? What is a hero? What does the pilgrimage/journey look like? Eliot looked to mythology, theology, seventeenth century mystics, and history to answer these questions. In “The Waste Land” his thunder said “da”. The Dadaist movement got its name from randomly opening a dictionary. For the modern artists, “da” was a nonsense word, but for Eliot, it signifies the fable *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata”: give, sympathize, control (Eliott note 401 in “The Wasteland”). The mythical method gives meaning to the meaningless; it is the order hidden within the fragments; it is life in a dry land.

Finally, myth offers a pantheon of powerful gods and men to which modern man can aspire. The assortment of characters from theology, fables, and myths can reassure modern man of the world’s possibilities. In spite of the world’s devastation

an Aeneas can be found; another Joshua can rise out of the desert and lead his people to the Promised Land. Stories of self-sacrifice from the Buddha to the Christ still speak across the cratered land and offer an abundant life where there is only rubble.

To know these things can elevate the mind of the artist about his or her present situation. Eliot thought history was as constant as human nature. There is nothing new under the sun. Icarus still falls and suffering occurs even while toasts are being made in palaces. The mythical method teaches the artist to see these things with a view toward contemporaneity, which will eliminate pity from poetry and return to it the hope of recovery.

In fact, Eliot used myth so often and so well that Edmund Wilson believed he “founded a school of poetry which depended on literary quotation and reference to an unprecedented degree” (Axel’s Castle 88). And while this borrowing can be viewed as a weakness of literary imagination, Eliot manages to convey his meaning despite the reader not being aware of the thirty-five writers he quotes, the popular songs of his day, or six foreign languages he calls upon in *The Waste Land*.

Bellow uses myth in much the same way. In *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow sees history living in the present. Heraclitus is mentioned at the start of the novel and it is his ideas about fate and character that act as guiding principles throughout the work. Augie’s family and neighbors inherit Machievelli, the Spartans, and Napoleon. Augie sees worthy examples of what his life could be in Seneca and Lincoln; Simon is influenced by Natty Bumppo and Tom Brown. All of this is shown in the first two chapters with more to come. The vast array of

characters culled from the past speak to Augie's belief in their presence in the world and their relevance to modern men and women.

In his quest for the permanent things Bellow uses the great men and women of history, myth, and theology. The large question running throughout the novel is, what is a worthwhile fate? What is the good that men and women find to do and is it still possible to do good? In seeking the answers to these questions Augie slides from one job to the next, from one reality instructor to the next, from one lover to the next. He is a man of experiences. This aspect of his character has led some to castigate Augie as a passive and weak narrator, unworthy to act as a Virgil leading Dante, the reader, through the world. But these critics overlook the resistance to sub-par life that such profligacy results in. They look at Augie being led by the nose into silk suits and sporting gear rather than his stripping off such costumes when he sees the fallacy involved with wearing them.

Augie's perceived passivity is also a necessary literary device. In order to show as much of the world as possible, Bellow needs a narrator who is without ties. It is because Augie is drifting and in no wise embarking on a solid career or family like Simon or Padilla that the reader is taken through Chicago's immigrant community, its high-rises and men on the make, all the way to Mexico, a life boat on the Pacific, and finally to Rome where Augie sits down to compose his memoirs.

As in Eliot, the hero of *Augie March* is the artist, the man or woman who has the historical sense, as Eliot wrote, "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 119). Augie lives with the perception that even as the Chicago skyline takes shape it will eventually be

lost in the sands of time. He lives with the idea that Alcibiades lives within him as Socrates lives within Einhorn and Machievelli lives within Grandma Lausch. It is clear Augie loves these people, but the greatness of his past, shared equally with every human being, though perceived by only a few, compels him to something more.

The initiation of Augie March has its origins in the life of Bellow. At a lecture in 1977 Bellow places himself and his writings within the history of literature. His writings were coming out of the modern novel and its preoccupations of history, psychology, symbolism, Romanticism, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Hemingway. "These writers have formed my mind," Bellow writes. "But it is for that very reason that I can see why they should perhaps be put aside by the contemporary American Novelist" (The Jefferson Lectures, 130). For Bellow, the novelist should not be simply a mimicking bird who continues to tell the same story in the same form. The difficulties and ideas of one generation cannot be the same for the following generation due to the corrections tried by the first. Bellow calls for the passing of modernist nihilism and hard-boiledness in favor of a return to a glorified version of men and women. The fragmentation of humanity was not a fact that succeeding generations should follow. It was a theoretical dead end. For after this modern novel, after the "heroes" of Andre Gide and Albert Camus, where can modernity go? Where is humanity's salvation?

Bellow's initiation into the modern condition of alienation, isolation, fragmentation, and specialization compels him "to think and feel" and complicates

his own heroism (134). In response to the confusion he returns to the freedom of the *romancier*.

My own relation to society was misty, dubious. I, too, was supposed to understand, but on my own peculiar conditions. Solitary, I was mystically connected to all this on unilateral terms. Through it all I appeared to be walking the streets minding my own business. I was on a mission of an esoteric sort. On detached service, as they used to say in the military, but drawn by powerful and vivid longings and sympathies, hungry for union and for largeness, convinced by the bowels, the heart, the sexual organs, and, on certain occasions, by clear thought that I had something of importance to declare, express, transmit... I thought I might confirm my own truths from hints provided by my chosen thinkers. ("The Jefferson Lectures" 124-25).

For Bellow, modernism is a springboard to a mystical understanding of art, "the supreme achievement", Ezra Pound called it, "...that of a man hurling himself at an indomitable chaos and yanking and hauling as much of it as possible into some sort of order (or beauty)" (119). Bellow, the *romancier*, feels this strength if indistinctly. He knows the truth of his purpose even if he has doubts.

I had to seek a significant life in my own way. My way was to write. Nothing seemed more wonderful, but I wasn't absolutely sure of my qualifications. What was there for me to write? Did I know English well enough to write it? I had thoughts. I had a heart full of something. I studied my favorite authors. I rode the bobbing el cars reading Shakespeare or the Russians or Conrad or Freud or Marx or Nietzsche, unsystematic, longing to be passionately stirred. (125).

Writing is Bellow's response to the culture handed down to him by Modernity and his beloved thinkers. If they call for isolation and despair, the disasters of the century, Bellow will believe in the ordering and beauty of art. Despite the mutilation of men in the trenches and on the urban street, the evidence of which

spills onto the page in black and white photos, for the *romancier*, "the leap towards the marvelous is a possibility he still considers" (135).

Immigration in the Gilded Age further complicates the hero's appearance and desires. Assimilation was necessary to the country's stability as what was once a relatively heterogeneous society was quickly becoming pluralistic. What the immigrant children were learning about America in the classroom was not what they saw in their crowded tenements or heard on the busy streets. While Natty Bumppo and the American character are espoused in school, on the streets Augie and his Jewish heritage is "chased, stoned, bitten, and beat up for Christ-killers" (*Augie March* 15). In the midst of the American Dream these children return every evening to decrepit housing structures and playing in foul streets. These different versions of America would meet in the center ring, at turns a bloody boxing match and circus entertainment, but always with an eye on what it means to be American.

When Saul Bellow's family moved to Chicago in 1924 his mother wanted him to become a rabbi or a concert violinist. Clearly these vocations lacked heroic drama in America. But in the Old Country these "Russian fiddlers" were household names. "Every Jewish child was a potential prodigy," writes James Atlas in his biography *Bellow*. "Once a week, Bellow got on the trolley with his violin and made the long trip down to the Fine Arts Building on South Michigan Avenue, where he was subjected to the harsh tutelage of Grisha Borushek, a stout, gloomy refugee from Odessa who trained his pupils 'by whipping them on the buttocks with his bow when he got sore at them'" (24). One can assume this scenario played out

frequently for young Bellow who was in a fever over books and would neglect his musical career in favor of *War and Peace*, *The Possessed*, and the *Iliad*.

One book that made an especially deep impression upon Bellow was Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. In it Bellow found the idea that Jews were somehow less than human and at odds with the great civilizations of the world. "When I read this... I cursed my luck because I had prepared myself to be part of a civilization, one of whose prominent interpreters told me that I was by heredity disqualified" (Atlas 25). But Bellow was already on his way to a life of letters engaged with the mind. His family spoke English, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian. He was learning how to work with books, to argue with their meanings and take up literary arms to protect his particular vision. All around him Bellow saw not-American. "Everybody in America was a visitor, a tourist, a stranger, a foreigner" living in a society "which belonged to nobody" (26).

Cities swarmed with the validity of the material world. Concrete, steel, and glass; complicated systems of pipes that brought water and took away sewage; the making and spending of money in a vast labyrinth of markets and theories; the complex situation of relationships in a pluralistic society that determined race roles and sexual expressions and gave no time in which to sit in the attitude of Whitman, observing his blade of grass away from the noise and bustle of business. The Romantic poets had their day. American Transcendentalists are good for the education of children, but, like carrying a belief of fairy tales into adulthood, they hindered initiation into the world of men and women. What should we care for a blade of grass? It grows up and is cut down ad nauseam. Instead, towers to the sky

are constructed, seemingly impervious to weather and theories and the wars of men, to stand for generations as shrines to our presence. But even these are fallible. The World Trade Center stood a mere thirty years and even the Coliseum in Rome crumbles at the speed of a fleck of dust a day. “Crudity, disappointment, sickness, heartbreak, money, power, happiness, and love in rudimentary forms – this was what we were aware of. This was a place where matter ruled, a place where stone was value and value stone. If you were drawn toward a higher life... you had to make your own way toward it.” (“A Matter of the Soul”, 74).

Growing up in an immigrant neighborhood of Chicago in the 1920s Bellow sought to find this life. He found guidance in the Romantic traditions of imagination, individualism, and the rejection of the collective consciousness. Chicago was a solid city of steel and stone, banking, politics, oil, markets, railroads, beef, and coal. These were substantial things that carried weight in ledger books and on kitchen tables. But it also was the Plymouth Rock of “artisans, of cabinetmakers, skilled ironworkers, confectioners, bakers, cooks, instrument makers, and other craftsmen from Central Europe, Italy and the Balkans” (74). Chicago was a haven from the political storms that ravaged Europe and mingled millions of young men with twisted metal and the dust of world war. They were refugees in modernity’s revolt against the Romantic and Victorian worldview. The old systems would not translate. The new environment cast a different light upon revered traditions.

In his Nobel Lecture, Bellow said, “Hemingway spoke for the soldiers who fought in the First World War under the inspiration of Woodrow Wilson and other orotund statesmen whose big words had to be measured against the frozen corpses

of young men paving the trenches... youthful readers were convinced that the horrors of the twentieth century with their deadly radiations had sickened and killed humanistic beliefs" ("Nobel Lecture", 89). Men who were formed in and grew out of those horrors wrote about that metamorphosis; they were resisting the familiar myths of God and embracing the new world.

This new world was the chrysalis of a new power structure, of new economies, and of new art forms and language. Just as the Great Wars had shown what men could become – anonymous tangles of limbs and mortar, of fluids and marrow hosed out of a turret – so modern literature did away with the ideas of character and replaced them with fragments. Albert Camus's *Meursault* is detached from his emotions and relationships; Jean-Paul Sartre's *Requiem* is nauseated by his own existence; T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock* sees himself as an insect pinned to the wall by hands (his own or something else's?) intent upon unjust scrutiny. There are no more individuals. Dostoevsky and Balzac and Dickens have nothing else to teach human beings. "Can it be humans are at an end?" asks Bellow in his Nobel Lecture. "We must not permit intellectuals to become our bosses. And we do them no good by letting them run the arts. Should they, when they read novels, find in them only the endorsement of their own opinions? Are we to play such games?" (91).

What these intellectuals (read, Existentialists) disavow is the soul of mankind and the belief in this life's possibilities. For Bellow the purpose of art is to concern itself with the wholeness of humanity that "can bring unity and carry us into a state of intransitive attention... A small cue will suffice to remind us that when we hear certain words... they revive for us moments of emotional completeness and

overflowing comprehension, they unearth buried essences" ("The Distracted Public", 168). But what are these, Mr. Bellow? He answers, "'all is but toys,' 'absent thee from felicity,' 'a wilderness of monkeys,' 'green pastures,' 'still waters,' or even the single word 'relume'". With this final word Bellow offers a clue to unravel the Gordian Knot: essences are part of the fire Prometheus stole from the gods, but even Shakespeare is bewildered as to how to rekindle his light by it.

These essences seem to be the soul itself and become the call in Bellow's working of the heroic journey. Bellow offers a way to revive its reality for the modern reader and writer. In his essay "The Distracted Public" (1990), Bellow reintroduces William Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much With Us; Late And Soon". Here Bellow is first introduced to the idea of distraction. Because of the din of money making in the great cities men and women were left without a sense of nature. "It moves us not – Great God! I'd rather be/ A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn". Wordsworth abandons the sophistication and concerns of the world to literally believe in ancient myths and receive "glimpses that would make me less forlorn". Wordsworth contemplated nature in tranquility and that appears to be the beginning of finding the essences that are, in Bellow's words, "a state of attention or aesthetic concentration that would put the world of profit and loss in its place" ("The Distracted Public" 153).

However, Bellow is not rejecting the modern reality. That it has come into being through the force of history is beyond debate. Its existence must be acknowledged. However, Bellow is suggesting that there is another existence

running parallel to the noisy street, below ground. That existence is the soul brought to the fore through art.

This can be seen in the modern sculptures of Auguste Rodin, whose *Idea* represents a serene face being birthed from a block of marble. Bellow saw it in Marcel Proust. In the midst of the Great War, of all the fragmentation and disillusionment, Proust worked to uncover the “durable human goods”, the souls of men that will not perish amidst the terrors of the twentieth century.

Only art penetrates what pride, passion, intelligence, and habit erect on all sides – the seeming realities of this world. There is another reality, the genuine one, which we lose sight of. This other reality is always sending us hints, which, without art, we can't receive... The true impressions, our persistent intuitions, will, without art, be hidden from us, and we will be left with nothing but a 'terminology for practical ends which we falsely call life' (“Nobel Lecture”, 93).

This terminology makes up much of the modern noise that, for Bellow, is distracting writers, readers, and the general public from the essentials of life. When men and women are not surviving on the urban streets they are at home watching television. This is where Americans get their news, current events, happenings, celebrity updates, weather predictions, stock tips, sports scores, political debates, health scares, and the latest threatening disasters. It is from the pundits, anchormen, talk show hosts, celebrity chefs, and university spokespersons that the parameters of national dialogue are set. It is how “WMD,” “tolerance,” “compassionate conservatism,” “love the sinner hate the sin,” “is,” “democratic governance,” and “Fergilicious” appeared in our lexicon. Bellow calls these rhetorical devices that constitute conversation in modernity jargon; they are never-ending updates of the banal events of our time due to low-resolution video recordings of the crisis. It is

the excitable mouths that appear three, four, sometimes seven or more on the television screen simultaneously, each professing the truth about the latest scandal or political position that they only recently began thinking about. Essential human goods are not discussed, being of such minimal importance when compared with the latest stimulus package or celebrity checking into rehab.

Jargon is the false appearance of depth. "TV allows your isolated American to think that he participates in the life of the entire country. It does not actually place him in a community, but his heart is warmed with the suggestion (on the whole false) that there is a community somewhere in the vicinity and that his atomized consciousness will be drawn back toward the whole" ("The Distracted Public" 159). This is a dead end and gives as much connection to authentic human feeling as does a blow-up doll.

Only art can provide human souls with what Bellow calls "aesthetic bliss". The work of art "detaches you from the world of common travail and leads you into another world altogether... Can there be anything more desirable than aesthetic bliss?" (161). For Bellow there cannot. It is for this reason that the artist must impose himself upon the tormented world. He writes,

I will grant you the 'night of the world' and accept the fullest listing of the charges: emptiness of life, the unity of mankind on the lowest level, the increasing vacuity of personal existence, the victory of urbanization and technology – in short, the prevalence of nihilism, the absence of the noble and the great (162).

Bellow asserts that it is the job of the artist to open up another world to those seeking alternatives. Bellow, like his readers, has been born into this world of noise,

distraction, and fragmentation. He understands the allure of sound bites and pre-packaged opinions, but he also knows its destructive side.

In *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow represents Chicago as seen through the eyes of a burgeoning Jewish intellect brought up in an immigrant neighborhood on Milwaukee Avenue. All around him are proofs of the existence of history, of the presence of time before he was, of an established order. It is the Chicago of Daniel Burnham's *Plan of Chicago* that connects Michigan Avenue with Pine Street and creates the Magnificent Mile; that shaped the familiar Chicago skyline with the construction of The Wrigley Building (1921) and Tribune Tower (1925); that straightens the South Bend of the Chicago River and reverses its flow away from Lake Michigan. It is a time of great achievement and restructuring what Chicago means, not just to its powerful men and artists, but to America as well. It is becoming the architectural marvel of the Union, the Second City, rising from the ashes of 1871's fire to ignite the imaginations of all who see her possibilities.

A second Chicago, running parallel to this one and given an exuberant life through the voice of Augie March, is immigrant Chicago. Within its neighborhoods are the poor and defeated cast-offs from Europe who struggle to interpret their world within the metropolitan cacophony. Somber traditions meet with the Jazz Age. How is a candle's soft flame supposed to compete with the neon signs exploding with opulence and "the new"?

Saul Bellow shows his readers all of this. We are introduced to countless characters. We are witnesses to varied scenes. We are made aware of the life of literature in our common surroundings when we pay attention. This is a theme that

consistently runs throughout *The Adventures of Augie March*. Bellow compares his Chicagoans to Moses, Abraham, Aeneas, Apollo, Xenophon, and many others. They are as much characters in the novel as Simon, Grandma Lausch, Einhorn, Thea Fenchel, and Five Properties.

When Augie introduces William Einhorn it is clear that he has never met anyone like him outside of his books. He was “the first superior man I knew... I’d ask myself ‘What would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advise or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think?’ I’m not kidding” (*Augie March* 71). It is because Augie has read about these men and is familiar with their characters and actions that he can compare them to a man he knows. In this case familiarity with historical and literary figures does not breed contempt, but triggers a spark of recognition in contemporary men. This spark is part of Bellow’s “aesthetic bliss”, the power of art that “detaches you from the world of common travail and leads you into another world altogether” (“The Distracted Public”, 161). It is the rejection of distraction and habit for the patient diligence of study and the deliberate act of noticing. For Bellow, the ills of modernity are inoculated through this method.

Here is Einhorn taking Augie to a whorehouse:

I stopped the car and went out to scout, came back when I had found the joint, and got him on my back. He used to talk about himself as the Old Man of the Sea riding Sinbad. But there was Aeneas too, who carried his old dad Anchises in the burning of Troy, and *that* old man had been picked by Venus to be her lover; which strikes me as the better comparison. Except that there was no fire or war cry around us, but dead-of-night silence on the boulevard of ice (142).

There is Augie commenting on Einhorn’s affection for him:

Somewhat it stung me, the way in which he compared me with his son. But I didn’t mind being Alcibiades, and let him be in the same bracket

with Socrates in the bargain, since that was what he was driving at. We had title just as good as the chain-mail English kings had to Brutus. If you want to pick your own ideal creature in the mirror coastal air and sharp leaves of ancient perfections and be at home where a great mankind was at home, I've never seen any reason why not (89).

And there is Augie's take on Einhorn's father, the Commissioner:

One of my responsibilities in summer was to go with him to the beach, where he swam daily until the second week in September. I was supposed to see that he didn't go out too far, and also to hand him lighted cigarettes while he floated near the pier in the pillow striping of his suit with large belly, large old man sex, and yellow, bald knees; his white back-hair spread on the water, yellowish, like polar bear's pelt, his vigorous foreskull, tanned and red, turned up; while his big lips uttered and his nose drove out smoke, clever and pleasurable in the warm, heavy blue of Michigan; while wood-bracketed trawlers, tarred on the sides, chuffed and vaped outside the water reserved for the bawling, splashing, many-actioned, brilliant-colored crowd; waterside structures and towers, and skyscrapers beyond in a vast right angle to the evading bend of the shore (72-3).

Mythology, ancient history, the names of heroic men that inspire dreams and envy, and the action of the city all swirl and dive into one another. The greatness of the Commissioner is brought down through the image of him, half-naked, floating in Lake Michigan in the shadow of enterprise. All men are small in comparison, yet all men rise above their commonness through a shared humanity with historical champions. It will be Augie's role as the hero to reveal the triumphant life among the distractions and detractors of modernity.

The Well-Being of the Soul

The Adventures of Augie March is an immigrant novel in which Augie's life begins within a set of established parameters that grow out of Chicago's immigrant community in the late nineteenth century. Augie's generation, the first immigrant children born in the United States, would continue the discussion asking, "How are we living?" Augie's answer will be to nurture his private soul through the axial lines while assimilation and anarchy dominates the discussion of what it means to be an American. Each speaks into the ears of immigrants who are unsure which is their angel and which their demon. Are they simply cogs in the new consumer economy or individuals in a country serious about liberty? Which Red Sea shore did they cross over to? Did the origins of the freedom they found there manifest through material prosperity or spiritual concerns? Daniel Burnham's City Beautiful movement built this tension upon the lakeshore. Conceived as an avenue toward spiritual growth, it was funded by the exploited labor of meat packing plants, rail yards, and lumber mills. Perhaps milk and honey could not be separated from pyramid building.

In 1909 Daniel Burnham and numerous other Chicago architects, politicians, businessmen, and city planners create the *Plan of Chicago* to address the growing city. The plan is necessary after the industrial revolution has brought new souls into the urban setting. In 1830 Chicago was a simple village of not more than one hundred people. By 1890 it boasted a population of 1.1 million and in 1910 it housed twice that number and was the second largest city in America. Carl Smith writes

the cityscape was filthy and ugly, smoke pollution and faulty sanitation were unpleasant and unhealthy hazards, freight and passenger movement through

the downtown was slow and inconvenient, a wide swath of railroad tracks isolated much of the city south of the river (including its commercial center) from the lakefront, and many streets were unpaved. A large number of working people lived amid marginal and sometimes desperate circumstances, so that eruptions of class antagonism and labor violence, though always unwelcome, were rarely unexpected (xvi).

This Chicago environment compels the planners to ask questions about the quality of life of its citizens; Upton Sinclair asks in his novel *The Jungle*; Jane Addams asks with her work at Hull House.

The mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg influenced Daniel Burnham's architectural ideas. He incorporates Swedenborg's spiritual visions of heaven into his plans for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Swedenborg's teachings made their way to America by 1790 and when young Daniel was growing up "the Swedenborgian faith pervaded the Burnham household" (Hines 5). Throughout his life Burnham adhered to Swedenborg's teachings. Perhaps the most influential of Swedenborg's ideas was that of the correspondences, which suggests everything natural has a spiritual counterpart; that the physical world represents spiritual ideas. It was this spiritual order that Burnham desired to impart to the hearts of Chicago's citizens by way of architecture. After presenting an aspect of his *Plan* to the Commercial Club in 1908, when Burnham was in his sixties, he relaxed with his assistant Edward Bennett and spoke on some of Swedenborg's tenets.

The conditions of rapid industrialization grew tiresome and Chicagoans wanted reform "on the face of the land as well as in the deeper social and political fabric, that change must occur in the physical environment and in the architectural configuration of the cities themselves" (Hines 141). Famously, Burnham asked, "How are we living? Are we in reality prosperous? Is the city a convenient place for

business? Is it a good labor market in the sense that labor is sufficiently comfortable to be efficient and content? Will the coming generation be able to stand the nervous strain of city life?" (Hines 329).

To answer these questions Burnham enacted the City Beautiful Movement to create an efficient landscape of interconnected streets and wide boulevards in the tradition of Haussmann's Paris. Colossal monuments and civic buildings in the neoclassical style would decorate the city's buildings, whose symmetry and columns referred to ideas of citizenship, logic, and efficiency favored by the ancient Greeks. It was Burnham's desire to create an urban landscape that would inspire nobility in its citizens and habits of love and civic responsibility.

In 1913 an architectural journal hails Burnham "as a poet, a dreamer, one who was dwelling in the far future" (Hines 312). It was Burnham's hope that this beautiful city would compel Chicago's elite to circulate their wealth within the economic arteries of its streets. Just as it had done in Paris, aesthetics could stimulate economic growth and prosperity for all. Why should the upper class go abroad when they live in the greatest city in the world? If those dollars stayed local the other classes would benefit as well. Ordered streets, classical buildings, and great civic halls would infuse the city with pride and emotion and generate in all its citizens a desire to prosper and the validation that they have prospered. This would be the new Spirit of Chicago.

The *Plan* is written in Swedenborgian language to this end.

It is in the grouping of buildings united by a common purpose – whether administrative, educational, or commercial – that one must find an adequate method of treatment... or again in far-stretching lines of lagoons, inviting the multitudes to seek recreation along the

endless miles of water front; or in broad avenues where the vista seemingly terminated with a tower by day, or in the converging lines of lights by night, in each case the mind recognizing that there is still space beyond. Always there must be the feeling of those broad surfaces of water reflecting the clouds of Heaven; always the sense of breadth and freedom which are the very spirit of the prairies (Hines 332)

The spirit of the prairies would not dissolve within the burgeoning metropolis.

Burnham's architectural plans were designed with the freedom of order that would come from "commercial and individual convenience and enrichment" (Hines 332).

The waterfronts would satisfy the economic aspect of the plan and neighborhood parks would edify the individuals. However, Burnham left it to later generations to deal with urban housing, the ghettos, and the slums. Even though his initial plan was to bring the working classes to the lakeshore, his final design was to use that valuable property for something else.

Imagine this supremely beautiful parkway... extending along the shore in closest touch with the life of the city throughout the whole waterfront. What will it do for us in health and happiness? After it is finished, will the people of means be so ready to run away and spend their money in other cities?... When this parkway shall be created our people will stay here, and others will come to dwell among us – the people who now spend time and large amounts of money in Paris, in Vienna, and on the Riviera. It will turn back the stream of profits which have to such a large degree gone away from us, and everyone living here will feel the result of this change (Hines 332).

By appealing to the wealthy, Burnham hoped to stimulate prosperity to every strata of society.

However, Burnham was not a naive idealist. He was aware of the striking contrast between his dream and actual Chicago. It was a union town and took to violence and strikes; class struggles, socialism, and anarchy were daily problems.

Many thought these issues could be resolved with better living conditions. Dense urban slums housed a large, forgotten populace, “300,000 Chicagoans were living in rear tenements jammed into the back of lots meant for one building and in inhumanly over packed multi-level structures. These people were assaulted by the stench of privies, animal manure, and garbage, while deprived of decent light, air, and plumbing” (Smith 46).

Saul Bellow’s Chicago in *The Adventures of Augie March* begins in the Polish neighborhood where Division, Milwaukee, and Ashland Avenue form the six corners. Augie is born to a loving and gullible woman, soft of voice and will. His father is unknown. From the start it is clear the March family – Mama, Simon, Augie, and slow-minded Georgie – is ruled by Grandma Lausch, a Russian émigré from Odessa, “one of those Machiavellis of small streets and neighborhood that my young years were full of” (6). Grandma Lausch brings her aristocratic habits and the memory of her lifestyle in the Old Country with her across the ocean. Augie writes, “she preferred to live with us, because for so many years she was used to direct a house, to command, to govern, to manage, scheme, devise and intrigue in all her languages. She boasted French and German besides Russian, Polish, and Yiddish” (7). She smoked at a time when women didn’t, claimed she was part of the intelligentsia, and played games like Timur, “with palatal catty harshness and gold in her eyes” (7).

Lausch personifies, on a small scale, the conflict between assimilation and anarchy, materialism and spirituality. She will not suffer her fallen place in America’s egalitarian society and finds her advantage over government agencies. Because Simon’s love for American values disqualifies him from her small guerilla

maneuvers, Lausch teaches Augie to lie at the dispensary “by ignoring and omitting certain large facts”, she insists on discounts with local merchants, and when Lubin, the caseworker from the Charities, comes to inspect their home, Lausch complains to him about the family’s state and the need for government support (6). When he suggests the Marches raise her rent she tells him she pays what she can afford and anyway they couldn’t get on without her. But while she goes to Dr. Wernick to care for her teeth, the Marches go to the dispensary. And a good thing too, explains Lausch, “you can’t go to a private doctor, if you get sixty-four dollars a month. The eyedrops alone cost me five when I went...And these specs... cost ten dollars the frames and fifteen the glasses” (11). The Marches are in no position to condemn their boarder and Lausch is permitted to live in a manner more in keeping with her previous station in life.

It is on these trips to the dispensary on Harrison Street, south of the Loop, that Augie catches his first glimpse of the broad city. The

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” (10).

The electric streetcars emerging in the 1920s expanded the reach of Chicago’s citizens into other neighborhoods. Downtown Chicago was expanding, flexing its new muscles found in the bustling capitalist economy. To get away from the noise of the commercial district and the Loop, Chicago’s wealthy moved to the suburbs, making an efficient mass transit system necessary.

Augie benefits from this improvement as well. His older brother Simon works a concession stand in the LaSalle Street Station and witnesses the arrival of men and women from Oregon on the *Portland Rose* and New York City on the *Twentieth Century*. “I would watch Simon at the main stand and admire the business there” Augie writes, “the pour of money and the black molecular circulation of travelers knowing what they wanted in gum, fruit, cigarettes, the thick bulwarks of papers and magazines, the power of the space and the span of the main chandelier” (44). From across the continent people came to Chicago; “the celebrities in their furs or stetsons and alpacaunas... washing in silver sinks, sipping coffee out of china, smoking cigars” (41). Simon reports seeing John Gilbert, Senator Borah, and Rockefeller and he fantasizes catching Insull’s eye. Simon finds himself in the circle of grand men and the family hopes his proximity to greatness will confer greatness upon him.

Meanwhile, Augie finds work in the Woolworth’s cellar. While Simon works in the commotion of moneymaking, handshakes, shipping deals, and land developments, Augie stokes the fires of a commodity distribution center. It is the objects of consumer economy, some significant, others less so, which build the first skyscraper, introduces the Chicago School of Architecture, and blots out the sun. Though the location didn’t suit him Augie likes the cellar.

But it was the figure you cut as an employee, on an employee’s footing with the girls, in work clothes, and being of that tin-tough, creaking, jazzy bazaar of hardware, glassware, chocolate, chickenfeed, jewelry, drygoods, oilcloth, and song hits – that was the big thing; and even being the Atlases of it, under the floor, hearing how the floor bore up under the ambling weight of hundreds, with the fanning, breathing movie organ next door and the rumble descending from the trolleys on Chicago Avenue – the bloody-rinded Saturday gloom of wind-borne ash, and blackened forms of five-story

buildings rising up to a blind Northern dimness from the Christmas blaze of shops (39-40).

The jazzy bazaar, indeed. Even Augie's immigrant neighborhood is not immune from the otherworldly, even heavenly, call from America's shop windows.

The Kleins, neighbors of the Marches,

seemed to need a great many things and bought them all on the installment plan. On the phonograph, on the Singer machine, on the mohair suite with pellet-filled ashtrays that couldn't be overturned, on buggies and bicycles, linoleums, on dental and obstetrical work, on the funeral of Mr. Klein's father, on back-supporting corsets and special shoes for Mrs. Klein, on family photos taken for a wedding anniversary. We covered the city on these errands (47).

The people buy and the city grows and more people buy and the city grows.

Together with this consumer based assimilation project in Chicago was the fact of anarchy. In 1908 a man named Lazarus Averbuch was shot seven times in the entrance of George Shippy's home. He was delivering a package, but the story in the papers was that Averbuch was there to assassinate the police chief. While his involvement with anarchist groups could not be proven or was tenuous at best, many suspected an anti-Semite impulse behind the anarchist crack down.

For many Jews the association of their ethnicity with anarchism and anti-capitalism persuades them to assimilate quickly. For the sons and daughters of immigrants this is a relatively simple transition. The traditions of the Old Country are not as meaningful to them as to their parents; their history and religion, though practiced by loved ones, at times proved quaint compared with life in the city streets. The soft flames of solemn candle ceremonies are a dim memory. The young, being easily removed from traditional habits, are quick to pick up new languages

and absorb meaning from new environments. Many households are torn between old traditions and the new possibilities in America.

Jane Addams addresses the fear that immigrant children will be disturbed by the contrast between the home and school. The city offers many pitfalls for naïve adolescents struggling to find their way and they are twice as likely to be arrested as native-born Americans. New acquaintances, street-wise con men looking for patsies, and the desire to fit in somewhere all conspire to fill state prisons. “Don’t be a sap, Augie, and fall into the first trap life digs for you,” warns Einhorn after discovering that Augie stole some purses.

Young fellows brought up in bad luck, like you, are naturals to keep the jails filled- the reformatories, all the institutions. What the state orders bread and beans long in advance for. It knows there’s an element that can be depended on to come behind bars to eat it... It’s practically determined... the clinks and clinics and soup lines know who’s the natural to be beat up and squashed, made old, pooped, farted away, no-purposed away. If it should happen to you, who’d be surprised? (137).

In 1910 immigrants make up 80% of the population of Chicago (Pacyga 184). In order for the growing city not to fall into chaos the Commercial Club of Chicago unveils the *Plan of Chicago* and Jane Addams works through Hull-House to assimilate the foreign born. In the Maxwell Street area most of the population speak Yiddish; they are coarse and uneducated, ridiculed and defensive. The instinct to survive convinces immigrants to form communes, enclaves within the city where their traditions and struggles were understood. “We extolled free association and the discussion of common problems as the bases of self-government,” wrote Addams. “We especially urged upon the immigrant that he talk out his preconceived

theories and untoward experiences. We believed that widespread discussion might gradually rid the country of the compulsions and inhibitions, the traditions and dogmatisms, under which newly arrived immigrants suffered” in order for them to become “prosperous and bourgeois citizens” (Elshtain 244).

The fundamentals of an urban industrial capitalist society are at odds with the reality of the slums and ghettos. In Chicago at the turn of the century nearly 400,000 people in a city of 1.7 million live in New York-style tenements, five story buildings that housed 150 souls in six flats. This population density, if spread out over Chicago, could have housed the entire population of North America (Miller 457). Sanitation in these areas is non-existent; fresh air, natural light, heating, and water are all in short supply. In 1893 a smallpox epidemic rages through the West Side. Immigrants cannot be persuaded to throw out contaminated garments; “For a tailor to surrender a coat that he had made...was to give up a week’s food and shelter for his family to prevent the spread of germs he did not believe existed anyway” (459). Jewish mothers, with little understanding of modern medicine, flee from doctors trying to stem the tide. Some doctors are attacked and even shot. The America of golden streets and unequalled opportunity disappears like a river’s morning mist and reveals an impossible hell.

Corruption accompanies police officers like the batons they carried. Men-on-the-make proved to be men on the take. *The Adventures of Augie March* is filled with such men, their underlings and their plans, deals, swindles, and scams. Jimmy Klein’s uncle Tambow “delivered the vote of his relations in the ward and was a pretty big wheel in Republican ward politics” (*Augie March* 49). His racket, one of

many, was to buy up “razors, leather straps, or doll dishes, toy xylophones, glass-cutters, hotel soap, or first-aid kits, being exempt from licenses, he’d set up a stand on Milwaukee Avenue and hire us to run it... put in a fix with the cops so we wouldn’t be bothered, and went back to his card game” (49-50). A man named Sylvester ran that joint and introduced Augie to Soviet Russia, his Red sympathies, and praised the actions and thoughts of Lenin and Trotsky.

Despite the warnings of Grandma Lausch, Augie’s first reality instructor, about the simple surrounded by the cunning - Zeus amongst the maidens - Augie finds himself drawn into the orbit of the poolroom and William Einhorn’s step-brother Shep, known as Dingbat after John “Dingbat” O’Berta who helped supply speakeasies with alcohol while a candidate for the Illinois State Senate. Dingbat was enamored with gangland and followed the violence in the city papers and word on the street. With him, Augie took his place

in the shoeshine seat above the green tables, in a hat with diamond airholes cut in it and decorated with brass kiss-me pins and Al Smith buttons, in sneakers and Mohawk sweatshirt, there in the frying jazz and the buzz of baseball broadcasts, the click of markers, butt thumping of cues, spat-out pollyseed shells and blue chalk crushed underfoot and dust of hand –slickening talcum hanging in the air. 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, tinorns and small-time racketeers and pugs, ex-servicemen, home-evading husbands, hackies, truckers, and bush-league athletes (95-6).

Chicago was home to all of this. Augie grows up in a Polish immigrant neighborhood where Einhorn owns a building occupied by the poolroom and Klein’s dentist office. At the same time fifty-one properties were bought by the city in preparation for widening Michigan Avenue and connecting it with Pine Street.

Dingbat followed the exploits of Al Capone, Dillenger, and Dion O'Bannion while the Tribune Tower and the Wrigley Building were anchoring the south side of Michigan Avenue and the flow of the Chicago River was reversed, keeping the city's waste localized. Chicago was a city of the sublime and the foul, pure breds and mutts, mud, filth, and new pavement, white columns and civic pride, anarchy and gang violence, Jane Addams and City Beautiful promoters.

This synthesis and Bellow's preference for ordinary lives is shown in Chapter IV. Augie is working for the florist Bluegren "in that Elysian Fields' drift of flowers... the roses, carnations, and chrysanthemums" (59). Bluegren is a "cupbearer" to the mob. It is his flowers that gangsters like Jake the Barber and Dion O'Bannion use to say farewell to their fallen. Bluegren is a large man with "blue, cold eyes, prepared for any kind of findings, a big fleshy nose... sharp thoughts and a broad face" (59). Augie reports he came to be this way from the effects of temporariness. He was intimately acquainted with the sun's setting on this life while rising in Elysium, the afterlife of heroes and the virtuous. Death is the fate common to all; it is the great equalizer. "And a lot of guys were shot that winter... It was a bad winter for everyone - not just for notables but for people oblivious of anything except their own ups and downs and busy with the limited traffic of their hearts and minds. Kreindl, say, or Eleanor Klein, or my mother... There was plenty of such impulse, enough to reach and move all, just in the tone of days" (60). The tone then was of "anarchy and unruliness" (58).

It is not surprising then that Chicago was the center of the American trade-union movement at the end of the nineteenth century. A quarter of all labor in the

city is organized in 1886. It is the capital of American radicalism, “with the country’s most visible and highly mobilized anarchist movement” (Miller 468). The anarchist Johann Most formed the International Working People’s Association (IWPA) with the essential agenda of “a war to the death with capitalism”. “Nowhere in America was the division between rich and poor greater; nowhere were the enemies of labor more solidly united; nowhere was nativism more pronounced” (Miller 470). Chicago is ripe for a labor war.

Enter Haymarket. What begins as a march for an eight-hour workday ends with a stick of dynamite, seven police fatalities, and sixty injured in “three minutes of wild carnage” (475). The *Chicago Times* reports that the enemies are not American; rather they were “rag-tag and bobtail cutthroats of Beelzebub from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula, and the Elbe” (476). The association of immigrants with anarchy is just beginning. At a reception to welcome the new Chicago archbishop in 1916 three hundred people escape arsenic poisoning. An oversight that saw an extra one hundred people arrive necessitates more soup, which dilutes the arsenic dose and causes only a small number to become sick. The room of German-born Jean Crones is searched and contains a laboratory and anarchist literature. Fears of another Haymarket surface and new Americans rush to assimilate by diluting their own foreignness.

By the mid-1920s Grandma Lausch would pick and choose which Jewish customs to integrate into the March home. Augie points out that she is not an atheist or a free thinker. In fact, she

burned a candle on the anniversary of Mr. Lausch’s death, threw a lump of dough on the coals when she was baking, as a kind of offering,

had incantations over baby teeth and stunts against the evil eye. It was kitchen religion and had nothing to do with the giant God of the Creation who turned back the waters and exploded Gomorrah, but it was on the side of religion as that (15).

Augie's brother Simon takes to the assimilation program as well. He reads and internalizes the lessons derived from Natty Bumppo and Tom Brown and sides with English manners. "Opposed to his British style was his patriotic anger at George III... Simon was very hot at Cornwallis" (6). Simon studies American history and fables and keeps to himself. He excels at school and becomes valedictorian and President of the Loyal League. After he works for a summer at a rich resort in Benton Harbor, Michigan he "came back with some different aims from his original ones and new ideas about conduct" (38). America is becoming a place Simon understands. He catches on to the idea of money and believes in its power to affect a good life even advising Augie to short-change people at the concession stand. Making money was the thing and if it required a little dishonesty that was a fine thing to keep a job.

As for Augie and the assimilation project he writes, "I was just a slow understudy" (16). A Polish friend in the neighborhood turns on him with a group who accuses the "Jew bastard" of hitting an imaginary brother. Even slow Georgie is not immune and "sometimes we were chased, stoned, bitten, and beat up for Christ-killers" (15). But this didn't grieve Augie nor did he hold a grudge; rather he turns his eyes upon the life around him.

Augie's "special gift of vision" reveals the spectrum of possibilities (36). He sees this world as an organic whole with each soul fulfilling his or her essential part, but never without an opportunity to elevate oneself if they perceive a way. "What

did Danton lose his head for, or why was there a Napoleon, if it wasn't to make a nobility of us all?" (36). This nobility, Augie believes, has "universal eligibility".

Augie's "special vision" involves his awareness of the past in the present. To the great men, Bellow enlists the larger portion of humanity that history cannot possibly remember or take note of. Augie does not forget the King's cupbearer. While *The Adventures of Augie March* is full of references to the great men, both world historical and national, the power and sympathy of the novel resides in Augie's personal history: Mama being left by a drifter, Georgie's moans when he is left at the home. In the process of combining these histories, Augie succeeds in adding to the American repertoire of myths.

Within Chicago's world historical development, tangential lives vie for space. It is for these lives that Augie developed his "special vision" and he found they are one of two types: the daily and the triumphant life. Daily lives are lived in habitual acceptance of the world's ambitions and sadness. The routines of these men and women keep their thoughts on a surface level of survival and they approach life with an interest in satisfying ordinary needs. The triumphant life attempts to transcend these daily habits through art and culture with a belief in the marvelous. These men and women are aware of something substantial existing outside of the present tense and hidden from the senses.

The daily life confronts Augie most powerfully on the day Einhorn takes him to a prostitute. On the pretext that they would go to McVicker's to see an innocent stage show of trained animals and the unthreatening sights of little girls and a man

standing on his head on a pop bottle, Einhorn has Augie drive him to a back door of a building he has never been to.

I stopped the car and went out to scout, came back when I had found the joint, and got him on my back. He used to talk about himself as the Old Man of the Sea riding Sinbad. But there was Aeneas too, who carried his old dad Anchises in the burning of Troy, and *that* old man had been picked by Venus to be her lover; which strikes me as the better comparison. Except that there was no fire or war cry around us, but dead-of-night silence on the boulevard, and ice (142).

The heroic lives of fire and love are juxtaposed with the cold silence of modernity. The destruction of an ancient world led Aeneas to found Rome, whereas Augie's only solace to his world's destruction, a world ignorant of higher things, is a female line-up from which he can't decide whom to take as a lover. After he gets Einhorn situated with his girl he delays the decision further by standing awkwardly at the end of the bed listening to Einhorn tell his girl to take off his shoes and give instructions about his back. He notices the girl's red fingernails and felt slippers, the intimations of delicate choosing for the anonymous men she would entertain.

In the parlor the girl is chosen for him, "she whose business or burden it was to be calm in the primal thing... She wasn't young... and she had a sort of crude face... Undressing, she had playful frills or paint edges on her underthings - the gewgaws that go with the imposing female fact, the brilliant, profound thing. My clothes were off and I waited" (144). Like any young man on the precipice of the "brilliant, profound thing", Augie has expectations. However, writing these memories years later and with other experiences to help explain this one, Augie understands that, unlike Aeneas, he will not build a new city to rule the world. Whatever destruction Augie imagines fleeing (youth, innocence, the disappointment

of great things) the city on the seven hills will have to wait until he passes through silence and ice.

Of this first time Augie writes

Yet when the thrill went off, like lightening smashed and dispersed into the ground, I knew it was basically only a transaction. But that didn't matter so much. Nor did the bed; nor did the room; nor the thought that the woman would have been amused- with as much amusement as could make headway against other considerations - at Einhorn and me, the great sensationalist riding into the place on my back with bloodshot eyes and voracious in heart but looking perfectly calm and superior. 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... (145).

The image of Aeneas carrying his father out of the destruction of Troy should be uppermost in the reader's eye at this moment. Leaving the brothel, avoiding eye contact both for their comfort as well as the other customers, Augie sees his girl with another man and Einhorn paying with grace and generosity. Descending three stories on rickety, frozen stairs with Einhorn riding his back Augie writes "a whore came out, in a coat like an ordinary woman, to light our way down to the yard, where we thanked her and said good night" (145). Augie's tone changes from seeing the prostitutes as women and girls to addressing them as whores. Obviously, something substantial has happened to his outlook. He has suffered a hurt. The sex lacked love; it had the feel of daily life, of an occurrence done so often that it loses its polish and lends it the feel of handed down clothes or of riding a streetcar. Augie pays a fee, boards the car, takes a trip, gets let off; a simple transaction, a way of getting from A to B, and he sees another take his place on the car and imagines the man whose place he took. Confronting him, perhaps for the first time, is the banality of the daily life.

It is this experience with the prostitutes that convinces Augie of the existence of the two modes of life. The daily life equates sex to scratching an itch or quieting the stomach, bereft of its beneficial aspects of communion, love, and the gestures of affection. Augie will see this painfully acted out by his brother Simon who marries Charlotte Magnus for money. With the whores there is only a temporary retreat from annihilation.

Soon after this adventure Augie abandons the daily life by rejecting Mrs. Renling's attempt to adopt him, "to become Augie Renling, live with them, inherit all their dough" (176). Augie rejects this life with his mantra; "it wasn't a fate good enough for me..."

I was not going to be built into Mrs. Renling's world, to consolidate what she affirmed she was. And it isn't only she but a class of people who trust they will be justified, that their thoughts will be as substantial as the seven hills to build on, and by spreading their power they will have an eternal city for vindication on the day when other founders have gone down, bricks and planks, whose thoughts were not real and who built on soft swamp. What this means is not a single Tower of Babel plotted in common, but hundreds of thousands of separate beginnings, the length and breadth of America (176-77).

In a short time the reader is taken from the destruction of Troy to the founding of Rome to the democracy of America and the belief in individualism; from myth to history to contemporary life. These are all connected on a linear plane for Augie and his understanding of the present is dependent on his knowledge of the past. Mingling with Augie's new freedom is the realization that amidst all these building projects, his "reality instructors", and the recruitments taking place around him, he is able to choose his own enterprise and construct a tower of his own. He only lacks building materials and the vision to see a good fate.

To this end Mrs. Renling offers a suggestion, though not in the manner that Augie eventually takes it. Mr. Renling's business is the principle factor, but that world of monetary success, if adorned with learning, could make something of Augie. "You'll have money and culture and your pick of women. Even a girl like Thea Fenchel. An educated man with a business is a lord. Renling is very clever and has come far, but with science, literature, and history he would have been a real prince and not just average prosperous" (*Augie March* 177). Even the promise of superior prosperity is not temptation enough for Augie and he bolts for a new territory, the triumphant life, rather than become civilized in that way.

By the time Augie begins reading the books he steals he has attempted running illegals from Canada, spent time in jail, and thumbed back to Chicago; he has wept at Grandma Lausch's death, the degradation of Mama, and the fate of Simon, whose beloved left him for Five Properites and whose money left him for the mob. With all of this swirling about like so much trash through the windy streets of Chicago, Augie is living with an idea about what constitutes the triumphant life's peculiar aim, the individual soul.

In his essay "A Matter of the Soul" Bellow discusses the false dealings of the "deepest human needs" in America (77). He writes of the public that they "hear the ideas of music in elevators... The media offer flimsy ideas of human attachment; the films produce the spooks of passion and of love. Then there are impresarios, performers, painters, and writers who offer in various packages the thinnest recollection, the phantom of art... This is how the modern world meets the deepest of human needs – by fraud, demagoguery, opportunism, and profiteering" (77-78).

Einhorn responds in this way to a broken Augie March. Unknown to Augie, Simon had asked Einhorn for seventy-eight dollars to get Augie out of jail only to use the money to bet on the White Sox. So Einhorn, having been taken by a March rather than lauded by one, lays into Augie for his family feeling. "He deserves it. He left you in a hole, he sold the flat, he got the money out of me because of you and you didn't smell a dime of it. If you were honest with yourself you'd be glad... and I'd respect you more for it" (*Augie March* 212).

By rejoicing in the troubles of another, Einhorn forgets his own misery. The Great Crash of 1929 leaves him in charge of the poolroom from which he was beginning to emerge, but his empire has become a shadow of what it once was. "Besides, there was the environment, narrowed down to a single property, the thickened and caked machine-halted silence from everywhere lying over this particular sparseness and desolation, plus the abasement from dollars to nickels. And he, a crippled and aging man, scaled down from large plans to mere connivances" (127). Einhorn is diminished. Not only in his own eyes, but in the eyes of his neighbors, for much of the debt owed the Commissioner was not documented by legal forms and Einhorn suffers the double humiliation of not being repaid and stripped of any power to take revenge.

Einhorn teaches Augie that a man shouldn't let other men believe he will back down. That was his theory of power, the essence of the soul of a man. The perfect soul is the one with the power to make others back down. That, "in the naked form of the human jelly, one should choose or seize with force; one should make strength from disadvantages and make progress by having enemies, being

wrathful or terrible; should hammer on the state of being a brother, not be oppressed by it" (213). It is the Machiavellian power Augie has already encountered in Grandma Lausch and rejected.

Augie is able to see past this bombast and his affection for the crippled Einhorn to the truth of his own soul's worth. For Einhorn the soul is valuable only for a select few who make the world, for everyone bows to someone eventually, and cannot remain on the throne forever. Einhorn is situated to be a world-shaper until the Crash, yet in spite of that and the onset of difficulty, he still believes the old maxim that might equals right. For Einhorn, the wealth of a man equals the worth of his soul.

Augie next encounters Kreindl, an Austro-Hungarian conscript, too short to be a guardsman, but ideally a Frederick the Great. "But there was nothing of the enemy about Mr. Kreindl. He merely, sometimes, sounded menacing because of his drill-sergeant's bark... a neck that had strained with pushing artillery wheels, a campaigner's red in the face, a powerful bite in his jaw and gold-crowned teeth, green cockeyes and soft short hair, altogether Napoleonic" (8). A large belly in harmony with his humor, Kreindl played games with Grandma Lausch in the old days and was a good neighbor. However, he contributes to Simon's marriage and Augie's education in a specific way: he matches Five Properties with Cissy Flexner, Simon's girl. Augie doesn't care for Cissy. Her body is

a beautiful piece of tall work, or colossal but careful legs, hips forward; her mouth was big and would have been perfect if there hadn't been something self-tasting in it, eyes with complicated lids but magnificent in their slow heaviness, an erotic development. So that she had to cast down these eyes a little to be decent with her endowment, that height of the bosom and the form of hips and other

generic riches, smooth and soft, that may take the early person, the little girl, by surprise in their amplex when they come on (173).

Augie finds her to be slow, though sly, and she makes Simon suffer for her beauty.

This consequence of female loveliness is not lost on Augie when Kreindl draws him close to teach him his idea of the soul.

A beauty. Such *tsitskies*! But don't blame me, Augie. I don't force anybody. *Zwing keinem*. Especially a pair of proud *tsitskies* like that. Do you know anything about young ladies? I should hope! Well, when a girl has things like that nobody can tell her what to do. There's where your brother made his mistake, because he tried. I'm sorry for him... That girl makes my little one stand up. At my age. And salute! Anyways, she's too independent for a young fellow. She needs an older man, a cooler head who can say yes and do no. Otherwise she could ruin you. And maybe Simon is too young to marry. I've known you since you both was snot-noses. Pardon, but it's true. Now you're big, so you're hungry, and you think you're ready to marry, but what's the hurry? You got plenty of jig-jig ahead of you before you settle down. *Take it! Take, take* if they give you! Never refuse. To come together with a peepy little woman who sings in your ear. It's the life of the soul! (214)

In the same way that Einhorn's idea of the soul doesn't coincide with a man's poverty, Kreindl's idea doesn't coincide within man's suffering. Kreindl also proposes "flimsy ideas of human attachment" that only justify the primal cravings of man and not his "deepest human needs".

Augie is not exempt from these attachments, but he is aware of another love besides the sexual. His actions tend toward this belief as well. Being in desperate financial straits himself, Augie takes it upon himself to care for Mama who is taken in by the Kreindl's when Simon sells the flat and the furniture out from under her. This, coupled with Simon's fleecing of Einhorn and Einhorn's subsequent instructions to approach Simon with joy at his failures, would be enough for any brother to relinquish that bond.

However, Augie responds to Simon with ideas of brotherhood; the fact that they are brothers only means Augie has more at stake in Simon's success. The bond between them proves to be suffering, of which Augie has had his share on his adventure with running illegals from Canada with Joe Gorman. After they ditch the stolen car, Augie witnesses an organized march on Washington, D.C. by the unemployed crying for a relief increase. Greyhound stations, rail cars loaded with the stench of men, like cattle, and their covert sexual desires; Buffalo, NY, Erie, Pennsylvania, Ashtabula, Ohio "gave me no feeling that I had arrived somewhere, in a place that was a place in and for itself, but rather that it was one which united on other places to give it life by occurring between them; the breath of it was thin, just materialized, waiting" (193). The landscape is dark and monotonous, heaving with men who have more in common with animals than angels. Even the freedom bestowed upon these animals, the better to endure their fate, is taken away from Augie when the train cars are cleared by plainclothes policemen.

We had to empty our pockets; they were after knives and matches and such objects of harm. But for me that wasn't what it was for, but to have the bigger existence taking charge of your small things, and making you learn forfeits as a sign that you aren't any more your own man, in the street, with the contents of your pockets your own business: *that* was the purpose of it. So we gave over our stuff and were taken down, past cells and zoo-rustling straw where some prisoner got off his sack for a look through the bars (202).

Meanwhile, Simon finds himself in jail as well, contemplating suicide, simmering in jealousy while thinking of Cissy and Five Properties in their wedding bed, and plotting to be rich. Simon agrees with the neighborhood ethos of Einhorn and Kreindl. Any thoughts about love are reserved for Cissy and the sexual aspect of affection; having failed that he would make love the means to power and respect.

Devoid of grand sentiments, Simon speaks about the death of Grandma Lausch as a fact detached from any feeling and thoughts he has toward Mama are equated with a completed chore. Simon's "daily life" ideas about love lead him to marry for money, the grandest revelation of his life. "What's cold-blooded about it? I'd be cold-blooded if I stayed as I am. I see around this marriage and beyond it" (231).

In his dream of the beyond, Simon plays Aeneas riding the back of Anchises, in this case the Magnus family; his is the villain rather than the hero who will use the blood of his wife's father to establish his own kingdom. He asks Augie, "Why be fooling around to make this perfect great marriage?... Because while they're looking for the best there is – and I figure that's what's wrong with you – everything else gets lost. It's sad" (231).

The difference between the two brothers is this "everything else". Simon sees it as money, power, his might never being in the wrong, and he attacks it through the Magnus coal yards; Augie believes it is love and noble feelings and he seeks it out in books. "I noted that Simon was aware of their contribution to my opposition and his eye marked them as opponents... But I couldn't deny or be disloyal to, at the first hard blink of a challenger or because of derision, things I took seriously and consented to in my private soul as I sat reading" (231).

The idea of anything private in Augie's life has taken on the aspect of gold. Never before has March family matters been more open to public knowledge. Even Lubin, the caseworker from Augie's youth, didn't have full knowledge of the house. When the neighborhood sees through their domestic walls they see Simon's misery,

which he passes on to Mama by selling her out for love and the vulnerability of young men in need of a street, a home where their small things are their own.

For Augie, this place became his mind; the small things are his thoughts. “I was struck by the reading fever. I lay in my room and read, feeding on print and pages like a famished man” (225). Einhorn’s collections of classics that survived the fire gave off a charred smell that becomes the backdrop for Augie’s learning. He is always reminded, when he reads, of rising from the ashes and purification by fire, the idea that a man can be more than he is and that his soul can be improved through a renewing of the mind. He is familiar with Greek and Roman myths, of the Caesars and Napoleon, the stories of the Hebrew Bible, and he can spot a Machiavelli in the Chicago streets.

And what did I think of myself in relation to the great occasions, the more sizable being of these books? Why, I *saw* them, first of all. So suppose I wasn’t created to read a great declaration, or to boss a palatinate, or send off a message to Avignon, and so on, I could *see*, so there nevertheless was a share for me in all that had happened. How much of a share? Why, I knew there were things that would never, because they could never, come of my reading. But this knowledge was not so different from the remote but ever-present death that sits in the corner of the loving bedroom; though it doesn’t budge from the corner, you wouldn’t stop your loving. Then neither would I stop my reading. I sat and read. I had no eye, ear, or interest for anything else – that is, for the usual, second-order, oatmeal, mere-phenomenal, snarled-shoelace-carefree-laundry-ticket plainness, unspecified dismalness, unknown captivities; the life of despair-harness, or the life of organization-habits which is meant to supplant accidents with calm abiding. Well, now, who can really expect the daily facts to go, toil or prisons to go, oatmeal and laundry tickets and all the rest, and insist that all moments be raised to the greatest importance, demand that everyone breathe the pointy, star-furnished air at its highest difficulty, abolish all brick, vaultlike rooms, all dreariness, and live like prophets or gods? Why, everybody knows this triumphant life can only be periodic. So there’s a schism about it, some saying only this triumphant life is real and others that only the daily facts are. For me there was no debate, and I made speed into the former (225-26).

This triumphant life has something in common with Augie's idea about the axial lines. A spiritual axis exists as well as a physical and for man to fulfill his own fate those lines must bisect toward the spiritual side and reduce the daily life's importance in his life. Keith Opdahl writes that the lines "justify Augie's rejection of the social world and imply that a metaphysical purpose lies within the physical" (91). This idea, in line with that of the correspondences, has already occurred in Burnham's architecture and Swedenberg's spirituality.

Still hurting from Thea Fenchel and the Mexican adventure, Augie returns to Chicago and makes the rounds. "I was getting somewhere, you mustn't go always by appearances. I was coming to some particularly important conclusions" (521). Here is the image of the *romancier* in the final stage of his metamorphosis and when Augie emerges from the chrysalis it is to talk about the axial lines; it is the most sustained speech on his part in the novel. Previously the novel dealt with the characters of Augie's formation, his initiation into adulthood and mature sexuality. The reader was bombarded by their speeches and ideas, but now Augie has returned from the Mexican wasteland and has an intimation of what the thunder said. "I have a feeling... about the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is mere clowning, hiding tragedy... Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony! And all noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal" (522). Behind the cacophony of the modern metropolis, the superabundance of ideas, and the programs of other men are the soft, persistent calls of a simpler strategy. Through

these lines Augie can find his fate and neither pain, nor wandering, nor disappointment, nor death will discomfit him.

There are two possible sources for these lines: Karl Jaspers and Ralph Emerson. For Jaspers, this simpler strategy dominated human life before 800BCE, what he calls the beginning of the Axial Age. This age, ending in 200BCE and having its most significant contribution to the world around 500BCE saw the rise of spirituality, individuality, reason, and creativity. It was “that point in history when men first discovered the notion of himself that he has realized since, the point in time when there occurred that shaping of man’s being which has produced the most important results” (430). This was the age of Confucius, Lao-tse, Buddha, Zoroaster, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Homer, and Plato. These thinkers built the modern world, for “out of the vision of the axial age grow the questions and criteria through which we approach all previous and all subsequent development” (434). That subsequent development is Alexander the Great, Hellenism, the Enlightenment, democracy in America, Romanticism, Luther, Cubism, the Great War, and the Depression.

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. It doesn’t give my feelings enough of a chance if I have to store up and become like an encyclopedia. Why, just as a question of time spent in getting prepared for life, look! A man could spend forty, fifty, sixty years like that inside the walls of his own being. And all great experience would only take place within the walls of his being. And all high conversation would take place within those walls. And all glamour too. And even hate, monstrousness, enviousness, murder, would be inside them. This would be only a terrible, hideous

dream about existing. It's better to dig ditches and hit other guys with your shovel than to die in the walls (523-24).

Isolation is the culmination of this history learning. The axial lines are a call to action, to contribute. In his essay "The Uses of Great Men" Emerson writes, "Life is girt all round with a zodiac of sciences, the contributions of men who have perished to add their point of light to our sky... and every man... is a definer and map-maker of the latitudes and longitudes of our condition" (9). Because of the sheer numbers of Everyman and the world their contributions have made, it is necessary for great men to see beyond the limited collective vision to a more meaningful life, the "summons to boundless communication...the secret of achieving humanity" (Jaspers 435). Emerson's great men see beyond the body and the material needed for its survival and establish "a new gymnasium" where there are "summersaults, spells, and resurrections wrought by the imagination" (11). They remind us of our own powers as men and women and demand that we think of ourselves as gods in a world convinced it is dust. Without this belief, the spirit of the axial age disappears for "great men exist that there may be greater men" (22). In the modern age, in Bellow's Chicago, Augie struggles to impart man's heritage onto his progeny and fights for a fate, as the son of gods, good enough.

However, the sun has since set on that noble endeavor. Augie knows he cannot live in the upper atmosphere at all times. Boundless communication has been drowned out in the aphrodisiac streets of "ripple-assed luxury" and their call to Mammon (218). But Augie still hears the call of the lines that can remove a man from the modern chaos.

So I don't want to be representative or exemplary or head of my generation or any model of manhood. All I want is something of my own, and bethink myself... I aim to get myself a piece of property and settle down on it. Right here in Illinois...get married and set up a kind of home and teach school... I'd get my mother up out of the blind-home and my brother George up from the South... I'd fix up a shop for woodwork. Maybe I'd even learn how to repair my own car. My brother George could be the shoemaking instructor. Maybe I'd study languages so I could teach them. My mother could sit on the porch and the animals would come around her, by her shoes, the roosters and the cats. Maybe we could start a tree nursery" (524-25).

Augie's plan takes him away from the modern condition and back to the idyllic retreat of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The poet praises manual labor for its universal aspect and believes those who perform it could remain balanced and happy. Hesiod was also a poet who predates Jasper's modern man. "This is the most fantastic thing I ever heard come out of you yet", says Clem upon hearing Augie's scheme to be rid of schemes. "I'm also appalled when I think of the things you must think about when you look so calm and restful" (525).

To put poor Clem's mind at ease Augie tells him he isn't looking for Hyperborea, a perfect land where the sun shines twenty-four hours a day; that he is no Prospero, who, with his sorcerer's arts controls his island. "I haven't got the build. I have no daughter. I never was a king, for instance", but at the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero asks to be released through the audience's applause (524). But Clem will not applaud Augie's idealism. In fact he responds with modern cynicism

You do want to be a king... You sonofabitch, you want to be the kind goddam king over these women and children and your half-wit brother. Your father ditched the family, and you did your share of ditching too, so now you want to make up for it (525).

There will be no such release from the world of the kind Augie presents with his farm and school. History has shown man too much for him to return to the Happy Isles, or Adam's garden. "I wish you luck... But I don't think it ever can happen" (526).

From the Chicago environment of human misery and achievement to the spirituality of the axial lines and back again, Augie attempts to carve out of pre-existing marble his own beautiful fate. Working from European, Classical, and American ideas, Augie combines the New World with the Old to offer the life of the soul to those pursuing temporary gains at the expense of human feeling. To answer Burnham's question of "How are we living?" Augie suggests the private soul must ascend in importance to combat the truth of the modern metropolis and the daily life it evinces.

Adventures with Caligula

Joseph Campbell writes that the hero's ultimate adventure lies in "a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess... within the darkness of the deepest chambers of the heart" (*The Hero With A Thousand Faces* 91). For Augie, the Mexican adventure is precisely that. After all that transpires there he will see himself differently. Not as the man of love, but a man afraid of love, a coward who flees the transcendence of a man united with a woman.

Keith Opdahl has pointed out that for this adventure Bellow approaches his novel differently from the exuberance of Augie's initiation into the world. Augie becomes disillusioned and concerned with his inner life rather than the external world. The somber mood is necessary when a young man leaves his familiar world and the protection of family, real or "adopted", and finds he is not what he had hoped. Wide-eyed Augie March is afraid, "what happened to her had to happen to me, necessarily. This was scary" (*Augie March* 375).

The focus on Augie's inwardness also reveals the tight grip he still has on his ego. The "mystical marriage" is a combining of forces through which mysteries are revealed. "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (Campbell 97). The mystical union is also a passing through a threshold, a form of self-annihilation. Take an episode from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Aeneas braves the Sybil's fury, descends into Hades and, with his father, whom he carried on his back away from a burning Troy, hears of the future of Rome, the city Aeneas will raise. In order to return to the community with a great boon, the hero must first journey to a dark place; Hades for

Aeneas, Mexico for Augie. This is the fate worthy of Augie, but he cannot yet annihilate the self. “Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting... the life-centering, life-renewing act” (Campbell 77).

First Augie must meet with the goddess. This is the Greek meaning of Thea’s name, but at the outset the reader is warned that this name does not comprise the entirety of her character. In Benton Harbor, Augie sulks after Esther Fenchel rejects him. Thea comes to him

In her white dress and her shoes that came down like pointed shapes of birds in the vague whiteness of the furrow by the swing, with lace on her arms and warm opening and closing differences of the shade of leaves back of her head, she stood and looked at me (168).

Thea appears in nature, blending into it even as she stands apart from it. Her feet are like birds, doves perhaps, giving the impression of peace and flight. The lace of her white dress mimics the varying leaf shades behind her in that its whiteness gives contrast to her dark skin. Yet the white dress, the symbol of purity, clearly separates her from nature. She first comes to Augie in a wedding gown. She looks at him as though it were an embrace. She accepts Augie despite his intentions toward Esther and the appearance of being Mrs. Renling’s lover because she loves him. Augie has never been able to stand against flattery and quickly “the world had never had better color” (170). However, “I left something out of account, a limping, crippled consideration which seems to lose ground as you reach beauty and Orizabon flowers, but soon you find it has preceded you” (170).

What loses ground is the darker aspect of nature, its destruction and blood. The Pico de Orizaba is a dormant, though not extinct volcano west of Veracruz and is

visible to ships entering its port in the Gulf of Mexico. It is a beautiful vision when the sun alights on it, but its destructive side must not be forgotten.

I began to understand that I was with someone extraordinary, for it was a hot, prompt, investigative, and nearly imploring face. It was delicate but also full of strong nerve, with the recklessness that gives you as much concern as admiration, seeing it in a young woman; as when you see birds battling, like two fierce spouts of blood (169).

Again there are the birds denoting delicateness and recklessness, lace and blood, Goddess and Temptress. As the two sides of Thea battle within Augie's idea of her they will also compete in Augie's examination of her. He will have to decide which nature Thea is for him.

When they meet again in Chapter XIV it is from a "powerful feeling of love" (361). Initially, Augie sees Thea as the goddess. All other loves pale in comparison with her. "I don't blame them that I loved them less than Thea. Only it was through her that I began to learn somewhat about the reasons behind my opinions..."

Thea had perfect life. So that any no-account thing, such as her walking to the kitchen or bending to pick up an object from the floor, when I would see the shape of her back, her spine, or the soft departure of her breasts, or her brush, made my soul topple over. I loved her to the degree that anything she chanced to do was welcome to me. I was very happy. And when she was going about the room and I lay stretched and occupied so much of her bed with my body, I was about like a king, as to the pleasure of my face, looking on, watching her (362).

Thea makes Augie feel like a king and through her he begins to realize himself. Even seeing her perform inconsequential acts has the power to stretch and topple him. She is the reward for embracing annihilation. Joseph Campbell writes that the Goddess "is the incarnation of the promise of perfection; the soul's assurance that, at the conclusion of its exile in a world of organized inadequacies, the bliss that once

was known will be known again... young and beautiful – who was known to us, and even tasted, in the remotest past” (92). So Augie has to run to Thea. The world has come down hard on him at a hotel where he is attempting to organize a union. A competing union tries to stop him with force, but Augie is given reprieve from the blows through the protection of maids and kitchen staff who uses scissors and other weapons. Augie escapes to the street, “the taxis in the file of cars fluddering and shimmering off their blue gas stink in this dull hot brute shit of a street. I was harrowed by my hate for it” (*Augie March* 358).

Beaten and disillusioned, Augie runs to Thea and the promise of perfection, the mystical marriage. Augie’s previous sexual experiences were dominated by the physical aspect and by pleasure. The coupling with Thea is something different.

She didn’t delay, or seem to hurry either. As if studying deeply from a surrendered mind, and with the lips, the hands and hair, the rising bosom and legs, without the use of any force, presently it seemed as if an exchange or transfer had happened of us both into still another person who hadn’t existed before... And so finally, as if I had been on my bent knees in what’s supposed to be an entirely opposite spirit, praying, with my fingers pressed together, I think it would have been no different from what I felt come over me with the fingers not together but touching her on the breasts instead. My bursting face with the swatted eye lay between, and her arms were around my neck (361)

This is the mystery of how two become one flesh in Christianity; it is the state of the human being in Plato before Zeus splits the sphere with his thunderbolt; it is the Hindi *mysterium conuinetionis* of Kali and Siva composed of self-discipline and dying to the self, losing one’s life.

Although the great men are considered in *Augie March*, it is a novel composed of real characters in that they are flawed and lacking in supernatural

abilities. Augie has never been a King and Thea, as will be shown, is firmly rooted in the earth. It must never be forgotten that it is men and women who roam this world and with them their will to love.

Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By different eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But the eyes of understanding redeem her. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world (Campbell 97).

To illustrate what Thea knows and what Augie comes to know through her is his weakness under flattery. This has less to do with how Augie likes to appear to others – the cut of a new suit or the sportsman gear Thea outfitted him with for their trip – than how he opposes fates that aren't good enough for him. The couple has only just started out for Mexico and Thea calls him out on a character flaw that has thus far propelled the entire novel. Augie has an idea about himself, with no bearing in reality, that he is reserved for something more. All of this points to Augie's pride and its presence as an obstacle to the mystical union: evidence of self.

But the teaching isn't done. Thea then confronts him with her idea about love. Those who flatter Augie want him to love them as they present themselves. It is a hollow love based on appearances rather than a substantial union. "They live through observation by the ones around them, and they want you to live like that too" (370). By speaking of their flatteries, Thea has pinpointed Augie's approach to love. There is no evidence that Augie really knew Lucy Magnus and Sophie Gerritis was already engaged and meant solely for bodily pleasure. Augie has loved without being known as well, which is not a love of any consequence. Thea tells him, "You

only matter when someone loves you. You matter to me. Otherwise you don't matter, you're only *dealt with*" (370). Lucy was dealt with when Mimi Villars had complications from her abortion and Sophie was dealt with when Thea knocked on Augie's door. Now Thea wonders how she will be dealt with.

"Did you like that Greek girl?"

"Yes, sure I did."

"Was it just the same with her as with me?"

"No."

"I can tell you're just lying, Augie. Of course it is was the same for you."

"Don't you find it different with me? Am I like your husband?"

"Like him? Never!"

"Well, can it be so different for you and not also for me? You think I can put it on and not love you?"

"Oh, but I came to look for you, not you for me. I had no pride... You were getting tired of this little Greek chambermaid, and I happened to show up, and it flattered you so much you couldn't resist. You like to get bouquets like that... You want people to pour love on you, and you soak it up and swallow it. You can't get enough. And when another woman runs after you, you'll go with her. You're so happy when somebody begs you to oblige. You can't stand up under flattery!" (368).

This is the wisdom of the Queen Goddess. Much was against Augie, but he was eager to understand himself and Thea wanted to warn him of his tendencies as they related to her. Thus they drove to Mexico.

Thea needs to travel to Mexico via Chicago to get a divorce from her husband Smith, a wealthy older man. Augie's near marriage to Lucy Magnus gave him an understanding of why Thea would marry like her sister and when it was time for Thea to go to Mexico there was no doubt, on either side, that Augie would accompany her. Before the reader is taken into the Mexican landscape the idea has already been presented that it is a place of destruction. Earlier in the novel, Jimmy Klein's sister, Eleanor, went to Mexico for love and was broken. Even when Thea

describes it to Augie, it “didn’t make me altogether happy. It sounded like a risky place when she talked of the mountains, hunting, diseases, robbers, and the dangerous population” (370).

Fierce nature is in Mexico. Away from the Chicago streets – the cultural masks of its citizens, the aesthetic display of its architecture – nature is naked; her landscape is unaccommodating and its effect upon one’s character is direct and dreadful. “What was wrong with the enjoyment of love, and what did there have to be an eagle for?”, Augie wonders (398). The eagle, Caligula, has taken Augie away from his idea of love and brought him closer to Thea’s. While in Chicago with her, Augie was a king, “wearing one of her bathrobes and my legs were stretched under the table from a silk armchair” waiting for his Queen (363).

She had black hair. The roots came a little unevenly from her forehead, upward, beautiful at that. You had to look well to notice this eccentricity. Her eyes were most dark. She often applied rouge to her mouth from a little tube on the bed table as though feeling she had to stay adorned at least that way, with the carnation color, and a fire smudge came off on the pillow and on me (362).

Finery and cosmetics are the masks of civilization hiding its savagery. Augie is vain and gives the impression of adobtability, the perpetual subject. Thea is vulgar and unsympathetic; she refuses to bestow on Augie domestic terms like “husband” in favor of the primal, uncertain “lover”. Caligula has the appearance of fierce nature, but is a coward.

Augie writes, “I know that, both in love, we were not quite the same in our purpose. She had the idea of an action for which love makes you ready and sets you free. This happened to be connected with Caligula. He meant that to her. But as she suspected now that he preferred brought meat to prey, perhaps she thought also,

about me, whether I could make the move from love to the next necessary thing” (404). Caligula is Thea’s hope and Augie’s mirror. When the eagle fails with the small lizard he suffers Thea’s wrath and Augie feels condemned with him. He comes to Caligula’s defense as a form of self-preservation with Thea, who burns with anger at Caligula’s fraud; he is something other than his nature should be and she abandons him. “For all I care you can feed him to the cats” (411).

In the beginning however, Caligula was something else to each of them.

Augie remembers a poem by Lermontov,

the eagle of money, the high-flying eagles of Bombay, the NRA eagle with its gear and lightnings, the bird of Jupiter and of nations, of republics as well as of Caesar, of legions and soothsayers, Colonel Julian the Black Eagle of Harlem; also the ravens of Noah and Elijah, which may well have been eagles; the lone eagle, animal president. And, as well, robber and carrion feeder (385).

Augie hates him from the start. For Thea, Caligula “was right away her absorption and *idée fixe*, almost child” (386). That Thea views Caligula as a child confirms her dual nature as both goddess and temptress. With the goddess they will have godly offspring, but here the child is a hunter, devouring humanity, as did Caligula’s namesake.

Thea has the finery and aesthetic beauty adorning the walls of her life with Smith. He dumps ice in their lake when it became too warm; he buys apples directly from Oregon, and wears obscenely expensive cufflinks. His is a kingdom greater than the Commissioner’s. Thea was his queen. It is a role she abandons in favor of the desert of the Mexican landscape and a seedy hotel called La Regina. “And soon we found that the queen for whom the place was named was the licentious old Cyprian one. The closets were full of douche pans, the beds were heavily pampered

with rubber under the sheets, which was an annoyance" (393). Of course it is! Augie does a wonderful job of connecting the present to the past, of bringing history's great men to bear on their progeny. Now in Mexico Augie is confronted with the dark side of the moon. Joseph Campbell:

The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of someone else.

But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul. (101-2)

Even the joy of Oedipus dissipates when he realizes who his queen is. When Augie's ideas from books and the ideals of his imagination meet a dimmer reality he is likely to take flight. In the hotel the facts of generation repel him. In the field, the cowardice of Caligula repels Thea. Each is disappointed in nature, which, in Mexico, cannot be kept at bay. It is the foremost fact in the environment.

Before, (Caligula) had interfered with love; but now that he had flopped he did even more harm. Suddenly Thea and I appeared to have lost the place, and I was bewildered. What was the matter that pureness of feeling couldn't be kept up? I see I met those writers in the big book of utopias at a peculiar time. In those utopias, set up by hopes and art, how could you overlook the part of nature or be sure you could keep the feelings up? (415-16).

Augie's use of the great men served him well in Chicago. Through them he was building a utopian character for himself, the idea that he was reserved for something greater just beyond his reach. He thinks of Rousseau,

this sheer horse's ass of a Jean-Jacques, who couldn't get on with a single human being, goes away to the woods of Montmorency in order to think and write of the *best* government or the *best* system of education. And similarly Marx, with his fierce carbuncles and his poverty, and the death of children, whose thought was that the angel of history would try in vain to fly against the wind from the past. And I can mention many others, less great, but however worried, spoiled, or perverse, still wanting to set themselves apart for great ends, and believing in at least one worthiness. That's what the more deep desire is under the apparent ones (381).

One worthiness. This accounts for Augie's sympathy toward his reality instructors, his family situation, even Thea's plan to hunt with an eagle. He believes in the best and seeks it out in everything that comes his way. He writes "if I had a different, independent idea I might have tried to take the lead instead. But I had none" (377). He is indifferent to the external actions of the world, the apparent desires. He has the example of Rousseau and Thoreau, who set themselves apart from society to achieve their "one worthiness". Even in Mexico Augie reads Capanella, Moore, St. Simon, Comte, Marx and Engles. "Utterly fascinated I was, and forgot how I sat on my bones, getting up lamed, dazed by all that boldness of assumption and reckoning. I wanted to talk to Thea about this, but she was preoccupied with other things" (412).

This was Thea's second lesson: short, brutish, and violent life in nature was the reality. She introduced this idea to Augie when she entered lizards into Caligula's life. He had never been outside his cage since hatching and had never hunted wild, never seen a lizard, even. Thea gave the larger lizards ether to make them sluggish and give Caligula confidence. Of course Augie became attached to them. "You stroked them on the little head with a finger and they got affectionate, up your sleeve or on your shoulder, into your hair... I wished we could leave them

alone, thinking of that thunderous animal whose weight was on the toilet cistern, with his ripping feet and beak" (401). This tendency toward personification compels Thea to teach Augie about nature. She insists the lizards would run down his throat to catch beetles and that Caligula would devour him. Nature has no affection for human beings and it is ridiculous to think of lizards, as Augie does, as "gilded Hyperion's kids" (402). But Thea is more concerned about what Augie's views reveal about his character,

whether I was a man of hope or foolishness. But I suppose I felt the good I had must be connected with a law. While she, I guess, didn't care for my statue-yard of hopes. It seemed when somebody held me up an evil there had to be a remedy or I pulled my head and glance away, turned them in another direction. She had me dead to rights when she accused me of that; and she tried to teach me her view.

Nevertheless I hated to see the little lizards hit and squirt blood, and their tiny fine innards of painted delicacy come out under Caligula's talons while he glared and opened his beak (402).

Again there is blood, the fact of nature, spilling and squirting forth from the body upon the ground. Augie doesn't come to terms with this fact until he hunts with Caligula the second time. He feels the rush of nature then. "I got the idea of what it was to hunt, not with a weapon but with a creature, a living creature you had known how to teach because you'd inferred that all intelligences from the weakest blink to the first-magnitude stars were essentially the same. I touched and stroked him" (417). Riding through the Mexican landscape on his horse, Caligula clutching his arm ready for the kill, Augie finds a bond with nature, an acceptance of its violence through its simplicity. When Augie caresses Caligula before the big moment he is really petting himself, accepting his own nature.

Augie cannot stop thinking of things in their higher forms – the glory of nature is depicted here in its ideal form, but nature’s alternate is never far behind. The horse, Bizcocho, stumbles down the hill, throws Augie and kicks him in the head. Thea shoots the horse, Caligula is sent to a zoo, and Augie suffers, thinking of himself as his mother and Georgie, the unfortunate handouts of nature.

During Augie’s convalescence Thea hunts wild pigs and other creatures across the Mexican hills, but eventually settles on snakes, red and green vipers. She is the Huntress Diana. Sometimes young townsmen accompany her: Jacinto, the doctor, or Talavera. Sacks full of snakes need to be cared for: washed, inoculated for tuberculosis, petted, their skin softened while being cast off. “But then they would gleam out, one day, and their freshness and jewelry would give even me pleasure, their enemy, and I would like to look at the cast skin from which they were regenerated in green, or dots of red like pomegranate seeds or varnished gold crest” (426). After what befell Augie from Thea’s desire to hunt with an eagle he is not about to join her in this eccentricity.

The failure of Caligula destroyed the hopes Thea had for the nobility of her project and one of her life’s forming ideas, “that there must be something better than what people call reality” (367). This could account for Thea’s eccentricities, or her family name and the money, but, like Augie, she is searching for something greater. “The lizards were really huge, with great frills or sails – those ancient membranes. The odor here was snaky, and we seemed in the age of snakes among the hot poisons of green and the livid gardenias”, writes Augie.

These beasts were as fast and bold as anything I had ever seen, and they would jump anywhere and from any height, with a pure writhe of

their sides, like fish. They had great muscles, like fish, and their flying was monstrously beautiful. I was astonished that they didn't dash themselves into pellets, like slugs of quicksilver, but when they smashed down they continued without any pause to run (409).

The final dissolution of Augie's relationship with Thea comes from an apparently harmless discussion. She asks, "Why don't you come with me tomorrow? Talavera has a safe horse for you. There are some places I want to show you, wonderful places."

"Well, that'll be swell,' I said." (427).

Happy-go-lucky, wide-eyed, innocent Augie speaks his first cynical line of the novel here.

Within this short exchange are the budding flowers of pain and heartache. In extending this invitation to Augie, Thea betrays her disappointment in him on par with Caligula's failure. Augie's weakened condition mirrors that of Caligula's tamed nature. Augie is not fit to maneuver nature, Mexico's or Thea's, or even his own. That Talavera has a safe horse for Augie means that Talavera will be handling a dangerous horse. He was bred in the Mexican landscape and is at home in his nature. He, and not Augie, is the better reality Thea is looking for. She is Diana. She is the goddess who, if an unworthy man should happen upon her bathing in the woods and see her naked form, will not hesitate to bestow on that unfortunate man a horrible end. Augie becomes Caligula, rather than Actaeon who became an elk devoured by his hounds.

He is not ignorant of Thea's disappointment of him. "As to young Talavera," writes Augie,

I didn't know just what to make of him. It was obvious that he looked me over measuringly, and he made me conscious, from the outside, of how I seemed, with tanned face and freestyle hair. I felt foolish somewhat, but I had to grant after all that I had studied him too. I wasn't experienced enough to be suspicious of the young man and native of the place who attaches himself to the foreign visitors, especially to women. Such are the broke characters to whom ancient names belong, in Florence in front of Gilli's Café, or the young men in tight pants who wait around at the top of the funicular in Capri for Dutch or Danish girls to pick up. And if I had been that experienced I might not have been quite right about Talavera. He was a mixed type. Very handsome, he looked like Ramon Naavarro of the movies, both soft and haughty, and was said to be a mining engineer by profession; that was never proved but he had no need of work, his father was rich, and Talavera was a sportsman.

I said to Thea, 'I don't think that young fellow likes me much.'
 'Well, what about it?' she answered carelessly." (407-8).

It is with this Talavera that Thea spends two days with on the hunting trail. When at last she returns, Augie stays in a card game until late, "I thought she would sob, but she only shook" (427). She shrugs off her own absence and attacks Augie's crowd with "their faulty humanity" (438).

Thea's love of nature does not extend toward men and women. For her, animal nature is pure; it lacked false motivations and appearances. When Caligula fails to meet her version of his nature she drops him without taking into account his life in captivity. In the same way she does not make allowances for a humanity that has been transformed into something contrary to its original intent.

Besides being a place of dissolution, Mexico is also the repository of failed schemes, broken people, and failed relationships. Wiley Mouton and his pall Iggy are pulp writers from New York for *Jungle Thrillers* and *Doc Savage*, a man with super-human abilities, the amalgamation of Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and Abraham Lincoln, whose creed is "Let me strive every moment of my life to make myself

better and better, to the best of my ability, that all may profit by it. Let me think of the right and lend all my assistance to those who need it, with no regard for anything but justice. Let me take what comes with a smile, without loss of courage” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doc_Savage, 11/20/09). Mouton is “big-bellied and long-haired; his face was sort of subtle, with brown lids; his teeth were small and tobacco dyed; his fingers seemed all bent-back at the last joint” and “made the most partial little good climb around in tremendous mountain ranges of opposition to prove itself” (406). The frail man creating the super man; fragmented society needing a whole man with a selfless creed. Doc Savage represents idealized humanity as much as Augie’s utopians and his creed is something Augie would say of himself. His idea of justice, in regard to Mimi Villar’s abortion, had cost him an affair with Lucy Magnus and his future with her family.

Oliver, another fragmented soul, is in Mexico due to tax evasion. Stella, his girlfriend, becomes frightened when a Treasury officer appears and Oliver begins to lose himself. He starts fights and pays exorbitant fines. How did Stella take this – in her sleeveless lace dress and wearing a hat? “She appeared to me with her large disturbed eyes to see for myself what she was up against” (435). Another woman in lace pleading with Augie for help. It is Augie’s frail humanity disguised as nobility.

When Oliver throws a lavish party as a diversion to make his escape Augie takes a reluctant Thea. “I’ve never seen such a goons’ rodeo as that party”, remembers Augie.

When we got to the villa we found ourselves in the overflow of a mob that covered the street. I saw the most amazing male and female bums, master-molds of some of the leading turpitudes, fags, apes,

goofs, and terminal and fringe types, lapping, lushing, gabbing, and celebrating notoriety (438-9).

When Augie sees Stella by an orange tree he throws Thea into the arms of Moulton for a dance and tends to her. Stella pleads with him to help her escape Oliver, winning him over by their shared propensity to follow along with other people's schemes. "It was an emotion of truth that I had, hearing this. Mostly truth" (444). The other emotion is escape and when Thea confronts him while he is making it she tells him again what she knows about him. "By a little flattery anyone can get what he wants from you, Augie. I've told you that before. Where does that put me? I came after you. But I can't outflatter everyone in the world" (447). Thea knows what Augie doesn't, that his nobility complex is a pretext for banality. Augie sleeps with Stella, "a woman who wouldn't put me on trial for my shortcomings or judge me" (444).

Despite his lofty ideas about himself, Augie's relationships are built with escape clauses. His life has been a search for a worthwhile fate informed by myths and the great men of Western culture, utopia builders and marble gardens of humanity that reflects the sun and offers no place for hidden shadows. When Thea presents Augie's character flaws to him he jerks back from that image of himself. To prove he is what he believes himself to be he rescues the damsel from the jungle – a super man resisting the world's schemes. When he returns with Stella's smell still upon him, Thea leaves him. "Yes, I guess love would come in a queer form. You think the queerness is your excuse. But perhaps love would be strange and foreign

to you no matter which way it happened, and maybe you just don't want it" (457).

Thea has imparted her last gift of knowledge to the hero.

With this thought Augie retreats to an attic room, sick, damned, waiting for Tertullian to rejoice at the sight of his world-beaten soul. Thea has laid bare Augie's nature and its noble premise is shown to be a mask that hides the selfish conceit of his worthwhile fate. It is telling that in Chapter XVI, when Thea and Augie arrive at Smith's house in Acatla, Bellow begins with a line from *Antony and Cleopatra*: "And strange it is/ That nature must compel us to lament/ Our most persisted deeds". Augie's free-style, commitment-free ethos, instead of allowing him to flee toward a fate good enough with the belief that he is chasing actual love now shows itself to be merely a defense mechanism in the "fight or flight" manner. Alone in the attic, Augie has only his memories available to him. He has time to recount all his experiences of love. "Why, it was so! And I had always believed that where love was concerned I was on my mother's side, against the Grandma Lausches, the Mrs. Renlings, and the Lucy Magnuses" (462). Thea has revealed that Augie is in league with the Machievellis and against the simple notions held by Mama. All of his knowledge of the great men and unifying myths, of utopias and culture, has worked against his self-knowledge. While believing himself to be one thing he was actually another. He has his schemes like everyone else.

Me, love's servant? I wasn't at all! And 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, spiky crosses of the cemetery, for the insects and lizards...

I must be a monster to make such a confusion. (462)

The fraud of simplicity. While he is his mother's son and has the same blood running through him that Georgie does, Augie is of sound mind and able to devise clever schemes and hide them even from himself. "I must be a monster". Hardly a statement made by a man who believes in the perfection of human motivations. More like a man who has seen his own humanity, "disfigured, degenerate, dark mankind makes it... It's made up of these inventors or artists, millions and millions of them, each in his own way trying to recruit other people to play a supporting role and sustain him in his make-believe... to recruit others to your version of what's real" (463).

Augie's dominating idea is that he is one of the great men. The fact that he has an aura of adoptability reinforces this idea. Everyone he meets likes him and tries to make him a believer in their version of reality, for he would make an ideal convert. He lives in the clouds. He is Tertullian come to the window of heaven to survey the world – the criminals and bums and lackeys, the grotesque crowd of the poolroom and the "goon's rodeo" in Mexico – rejoicing in his room above the odors and banal motivations of humanity. The fall off Bizcocho reveals his fragile flesh, "that I couldn't stay with my purest feelings. This was what tore the greatest hole in me" (463). In the end Augie is just a man. A terrible revelation for him! It implicates him in the Fall and unites him, not with Moses, Socrates, and Buddha, but with the steam ship and the subway station.

Tell me, how many Jacobs are there who sleep on the stone and force it to be their pillow, or go to the mat with angels and wrestle the great fear to win a right to exist? Those brave are so few that they are made the fathers of a whole people.

While as for me, whoever would give me cover from this mighty free-running terror and wild cold of chaos I went to, and

therefore to temporary embraces. It wasn't very courageous. That I was like many others in this was no consolation. If there were so many they must all suffer the same way I did (464).

Even in this revelation Augie is determined to trumpet his individuality. His pain and suffering – the loss of Thea, yes, but more the loss of his ideal self – must be recognized. His companions have all left him and in his isolation he befriends a Russian who drinks Augie's tequila and listens to his sad fate, but only to a point. "I mean you have been disappointed in love, but don't you know how many things there are to be disappointed in besides love? You are lucky to be still disappointed in love. Later it may be even more terrible" (474). Augie comes to agree with him. His experience of the world has shown him many miseries: the loss of fortunes, the loss of freedom, the descent into consumerism and status anxiety. He concludes "Not that life should end so terrible in itself, but that it should end with so many disappointments in the essential. That is a fact" (475). And the goddess takes her leave.

Saul Bellow's Cultural Mediation

The central theme of Jewish writing in America is assimilation. Thousands of Jews from the old worlds of Europe and entrenched traditions immigrated to America and were confronted with modernity. This move became the unifying myth for Jewish writers and how they reconciled those competing worlds became their theme. Some chose to invest wholly in American culture and became freethinkers while others chose to blend the two in their lives and became translators between both. Saul Bellow became just such a translator.

Murray Baumgarten writes about the complexity of this decision in his book *City Scriptures*. He suggests the informing myth for the Jewish writer is that of the social outcast rising out of the shtetl, occupying a place in the urban community, and moving toward an ethnic and individual identity. The Jewish writer, while escaping from the traditional beliefs and politics of the countryside, also seeks the possibility of weaving that tradition into the tapestry of modernity. "An awareness of the place of Yiddish in the work and life of modern Jewish writers should help to clarify their role in the history of western modernization, as well as to reveal some of the rhetorical sources and linguistic riches of their narrative fiction" (11).

The Jewish protagonist in literature is often a free thinker or a pariah. The freethinker throws his arms wide to release the political and religious traditions of the past. He no longer wants guidance or protection from those rituals. He no longer seeks wisdom in their tenets. That language no longer speaks to him or for him. Instead, he embraces the dominant culture where "Learning its codes and

employing its languages, the freethinker could buy an entrance ticket to European culture” (15).

The conscious pariah, on the other hand, accepts his dual cultural citizenship even though this means neither will be particularly strong. The synagogue and the library will compete for the right to be the temple of truth. How will a Jewish man live inside his religion in a place that is disinterested in it at best? How will the traditions continue to captivate the younger generation who can now speak English, who swing in the Jazz Age, who curse the 1919 Chicago White Sox, and praise Babe Ruth rather than Joshua the son of Nun, who led the Israelites into the Promised Land?

The pariah is in both camps. Like Daniel from the Hebrew Bible, who, in exile, was trained in Babylonian literature yet devoted prayers to his God and received visions, the modern Jew who continues in the way of the Patriarchs finds himself straddling two cultures and has to find a home among strange gods. That home is found by taking the heroes and heroines out of the context of the Hebrew Bible and placing them in the shtetl and the urban environment of modern Yiddish poetry. Baumgarten writes that it is the mixing of the sacred tongue with secular linguistics that is the triumph of Yiddish and “stakes out its own territory in modern Western literature, culminating in an unusually wide range that encompasses folk and high culture” (57).

For Jewish pariahs to reconcile their diverse dichotomies within themselves (high and low; country and city; Jewish and secular) it is not surprising that many became artists and intellectuals. This was the case with Saul Bellow and his

protagonist in *The Adventures of Augie March*. But while Bellow did have a Jewish heritage, Augie has none. The fact that Augie is a Jew has little power over him and from Bellow's extensive use of Western myths and European historical figures it is clear whose cultural traditions Augie takes part in. He wants to be considered an American, as opposed to a Jewish-American, and announces from the beginning, "I am an American, Chicago born" (*Augie March* 5). Indeed, he is a bastard born to a feeble-minded woman, nearly an orphan, a boy without the traditions of the synagogue, but conversant with Chicago streets, going "free-style" through neighborhoods and parental figures. Saul Bellow grew up in a consciously Jewish household speaking Yiddish around the dinner table. At an early age he had memorized the Torah. Because an author puts himself entirely into his work one can ask just how did Bellow utilize his Jewish heritage in the novel about a young man without it?

To answer this question one can begin with Bellow's translation from Yiddish into English, of I.B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool". In a four-hour period Bellow reimagined the story that vaulted Singer to the heights of Jewish popularity for English ears. Indeed, Gimpel found favor with a new audience and is an example of Walter Benjamin's assertion that only a poet can give birth to a foreign work's essential substance: "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'" ("Task of the Translator" 253). Between the lines of text and the static tyranny of words lives the true language, "tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets from which all thought strives" (259). The meaning of sentences, literary works, and criticism becomes that true language.

Because the translation is not a copy, but an expression of the relationships between languages, Bellow has a distinct advantage in correlating English and Yiddish. He knows both languages and as a writer himself he fulfills Benjamin's criteria as a fit translator. Because the true language informs all languages these are not strangers or competitors, but cousins, each originating simply from the Tower of Babel or, more complicated, formed through centuries of metamorphosis of use and contrasted with estranged kin. The translator then is a kind of exile living within one language and without in another. He bridges the unities and cacophonies of the two. "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language impersonal in a work in his recreation of that work. For the sake of the pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language" (260).

Bellow is this liberator of Singer's work and in the process of translating he aids in the maturation of both Yiddish and English, for in *Augie March*, Bellow uses English in an invigorated way previously unheard in American literature.

How Bellow achieves a "reverse translation" from his Yiddish upbringing into the life of Augie March can be explained in part by the use of Biblical characters in Yiddish poetry, what Baumgarten calls the "enduring Jewish habit of translation," and through intercultural references (56).

In her book *Call it English*, Hana Wirth-Nesher illustrates how this works in Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*. Published shortly after *Augie March*, the novella played with the English language by informing it with Yiddish. Bellow's Yiddish speaking and writing audience would be able to read through the English text to see

another level of meaning. Tommy Wilhelm's theater agent Maurice Venice runs a company called Kaskasia Productions. In Yiddish *kash-kash* translates into fish scales in one sense and nonsense in another. Bellow hints to his readers not familiar with Yiddish the peculiarity of this business, its dubious nature, when Tommy asks himself, "Was there perhaps something fishy about this Maurice Venice?" (*Seize the Day* 18). English readers will not miss this point and those familiar with Yiddish would see that their culture was still alive, albeit underground.

Another example derives from Bellows translation of Singer's "Gimpel the Fool". In Yiddish the title is "Gimpel Tam". "Tam" can be translated as fool, honest, or pure. It is pronounced "tom", the name of the Americanized hero in *Seize the Day*. Wirth-Nesher writes that Bellow achieves two things with this literary move. First, the English name suggests a rich American culture from Thomas Jefferson to Tom Sawyer and even the New Testament's doubting Thomas. It also references the Yiddish meaning that hearkens back to the character of Gimpel. "All of this testifies to the echo of another language and another culture in Bellow's consciousness and his writing. In each of the instances mentioned above, Bellow positions himself as cultural mediator, the man who translates from one language and culture into another... (Bellow) repeatedly invokes the double textual inheritances of Jewish Americans of Bellow's generation. He navigates between two worlds, two discourses, two audiences" (Wirth-Nesher 105, 107).

If Singer's Gimpel is a fool, then his foolishness is not that of a dog returning to his own vomit. Instead he is a fool, a *schlemiel*, who believes in the possibility of everything. It is not that Gimpel actively believes the tale he his told by the ruthless

villagers (that he must kiss a wall after visiting with his rabbi or that the son born to Elka seventeen weeks after he married her is his), but that people are angered when they sense their words are not trusted. Better to believe them and be thought a fool and anyway, whatever he has been told has probably been true, if not in the past then perhaps one hundred years in the future. “No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world” (Singer 247). Gimpel is a fool precisely because, for him, the world once removed is truer.

While Augie does exhibit some of the characteristics of the *schlemiel*, the note he strikes is in a variant key. He does not neglect the world. “Although persisted efforts have been made to connect Augie with the archetype of the *schlemiel* (who never gets anything right), his breezy confidence, his appetite for experience, his extraordinary self-awareness, and his obvious delight in the gamut of American language relates him to the speaker in ‘Song of Myself’” (Guttman 192). It should not be surprising that in Bellow’s hands a traditional Jewish character would morph into an American equivalent. If Bellow is writing from a bilingual perspective, then certainly Augie would have two traditions living within him as well.

Another proof of Augie’s dual tradition is seen from the Jewish propensity toward scholarship, especially in the mid-1950s. A *talmid* is a permanent student and Augie steadily returns to the idea of going to college. Augie’s boyhood friends, Tambow and Padilla, are examples of this move into the ivory tower and they press upon him to specialize. Even while he waits on himself, Augie is seen holed up in his room with a set of encyclopedias or else reading the books he has stolen for poor students, discovering in himself a love for literature, ideas, and the appeal of a

monastic distancing from the world. But a life alone in a dimly lit attic pouring over close-typed pages looking for spiritual meaning or working for a psychology degree to tell people what is best for them is not the worthy fate for him. He further alienates himself from this characteristic by neglecting the Torah and having no ideas about becoming a rabbi. He is more a student of life and of himself. For Augie, everything is possible and in the course of reading his memoirs the reader feels that nearly everything has been tried.

Seen in this light, Augie is the fictional representation of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment. The early nineteenth century saw a move within Judaism toward the West. It was a response against the dry Talmudic scholarship of the time and sought to “ridicule sophistry, or sterility of thought, which is dissociated from practical experience” (Wisse 11). Education reform followed and secular subjects were taught alongside the Torah as well as local languages, trades, crafts, and Western dress. It was thought this outward move away from tradition would also curry favor with the political powers. However, many believed this move was a form of assimilation and apostasy.

Fast-forward a century and a half and Bellow was reacting in the same way. Modern literature, especially that from Europe, was moving away from the individual. Theory removed itself from practical experience and declared the rationality of suicide in response to living in an absurd world. Bellow railed against theories that belittled the individual, first in the dense novels *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, then through the language of experience in *The Adventures of Augie March*. Augie becomes the “Columbus of the commonplace” (Guttman 192), dressing his

theories in an exuberant language; the free-style manner of a life worthy of celebration. If the eyes of the world had grown dim through existentialism and the death of the gods, Bellow would look toward the world once removed.

This world takes the form here of the old Jewish traditions. Early in Chapter X of *Augie March*, Augie has made his way back to Chicago from his smuggling adventures with Joe Gorman. His mama has been turned out of her home by Simon and taken in by the Kreindls and Augie is told that Grandma Lausch has died. On his way to Einhorn's, Augie is stopped by Five Properties who tells him he is getting married to Joe Flexner's daughter; the one Simon was hot for. In a very small section of the novel Augie's world is broken apart. The matriarch from Odessa, his first Machiavelli, is gone; Mama has become a burden and will soon be institutionalized; Simon has proven to be a heartless brother who has swindled Einhorn and left Augie in a cell; and Simon's experience with love will solidify his ill-will toward such romantic notions. In effect, Augie is cut off from his family and the laws that governed his upbringing, including the love of his family.

While describing these situations that will propel the novel forward, Augie is on the street.

I headed for Einhorn's, and on the boulevard, where the trees had begun to bud in the favorite purple of Chicago April evening, instilled with carbon and with the smells of crocodile beds of guck from the cleaned sewers, by the lamps of the synagogue, people were coming out in new coats and business hats, with square velvet envelopes for their prayer things. It was the first night of Passover, of the Angel of Death going through all doors not marked with blood to take away the life of the Egyptian first-born, and then the Jews trooping into the desert (207-8).

Only in passing does Augie relate his circumstances to the Jewish calendar, but he is aware of the special festivals. When Augie arrives at Einhorn's his wife has blown the fuse with a curling iron, and two women "slow from weight and uncertainty approached with candles and so recalled to me a second time it was the night of Exodus" (209). Passover celebrates the release of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. God sends death to all households not streaked with the blood of a lamb. Seeing this gore on the doors the angel would pass over the home. While observing this Jewish festival from the street, Augie is pulled by the collar, "Who is in *shul* tonight!" exclaimed Five Properties.

Augie is inwardly aware of his Jewish roots, though he is ambivalent towards them. When Mr. Renling asks him if he was *Jehudim* before hiring him to work in his store a third party has to translate the word. "Jew?" the buyer said to me. He well knew the answer; he merely passed the question on. 'Yes. I guess' (*Augie March* 151).

Augie does not read Hebrew, he does not speak Yiddish, and he is not a member of a synagogue. What marks him as a Jew is his appearance, which, according to Mr. Renling, is not so authoritative. He is told throughout the novel how attractive he is. Thea Fenchel chases after him and when Mr. Renling tells him his shoulders and rear-end are right for the job "my vanity was more influential than my self-respect" (151). His appearance is not accompanied by neurosis, but pride. Einhorn's set of encyclopedias has more influence on him than the Torah. Augie is familiar with that religious book as a work of literature, of stories not unlike those of ancient myth with similar morals and heroic examples.

Though outwardly Augie is not a Jew in the strict sense of ritual and physiognomy, he is following in a rich tradition of Jewish storytellers. In his essay "On Jewish Storytelling", Bellow writes: "The message of the Old Testament, however, cannot be easily separated from the stories and metaphors" and that, through the power of Joseph's story in Genesis, he "may have been a greater man than the Pharaoh, his master" (15). Here the greatness of the Patriarch derives from having such a remarkable story, and the greatness of Judaism comes from telling it. The Old Testament is full of heroic and fallible men, men whose humanity has confused readers for ages. How is David a man after God's own heart when he commits adultery and destroys the husband? How can Solomon, David's son, be the wisest man to ever live when he sacrificed his own children to foreign gods? These are eternal questions that do not allow for easy answers and cause anxiety in pious readers.

The question of how honest or realistic to be when writing about Jewish life has been asked since Moses made carvings on two pieces of stone. To write such things, Moses was admitting that Jews were murderers, thieves, adulterers, blasphemers, and idolaters. He was proven right when he descended Sinai to find a golden calf had taken the place of Almighty God, the "I am". Even in modernity Bellow writes that the "raw things – jealousies, ambitions, hatreds – were frequently withheld". Life,

whatever it was, ordinary or extraordinary, harsh or sweet, it was difficult to recognize it in the work of most modern Jewish writers. These writers generally tended to idealize it, to cover it up, in prayer shawls and phylacteries and Sabbath sentiment, the Seder, the matchmaking, the marriage canopy; for sadness the Kaddish, for amusement the *schnorrer*, for admiration the bearded scholar. Jewish

literature and art have sentimentalized and sweetened the ghetto; their 'pleasing' pictures are far less interesting than the real things (17).

For Bellow, the representation of life includes warts and all. He states this in the beginning of *Augie March*: "and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent" (5). Augie shows the dubious character of his motivations, his pride and vanity. He writes about the fleeting love that gave him life. He reveals the heartless manner in which Simon treats Charlotte Magnus and her mother, and Simon's preoccupation with appearance and respectability as a mask to conceal or assuage his despair with life.

The tradition of modern Jewish literature begins as a tributary from the mighty river of the Enlightenment. It began, according to Ruth R. Wisse, by examining Jewish/Gentile relations and the secularization of Judaism. With this secularization came the loss of the oral tradition of storytelling within the Yiddish community. The rabbis at the time opted "to turn story into Scripture and bestow an aura of sanctity on a modern form of entertainment. What better way to bolster the shaky stock of Tradition in a secular world than with the rising capital of oral storytelling?" (Roskies 120). The Jewish tradition of storytelling that began with Abraham and Moses continued through I.B. Singer, Peretz, and S. Y. Agnon.

With the Enlightenment in Europe came Hasidism. Because of its appeal to myth it was a primary factor in the revival of traditional Jewish culture. "The repertoire of medieval miracle tales, exemplar, and even romances... provided Hasidism with an esoteric science for subjecting almost every text to an allegorical

reality. The simplest folktale could yield profound clues to the cosmic struggle” (Roskies 122). The slightest episodes were endowed with great wisdom and the storyteller became something of a sage. Stories could offer a reprieve from death; they could redeem a people lost in a foreign culture; they were the storehouses of collective memory and could bestow pride on a community. Walter Benjamin writes that storytelling is the cure for modern angst. The storyteller is the keeper of local traditions, provider of ecological blessings, and giver of “a humane counter vision in a world gone mad” (119).

The Adventures of Augie March is that counter-vision. It is the intersection where second-generation immigrant Jews meets the West and the American reading public meets Jewish tradition. In his use of myth, Bellow is predominantly interested in the West. By their substantial use Bellow is claiming that those allegories and stories are his own to do with as he pleases, but primarily to explain exile, foreignness, and the establishment of home in a new world. His most memorable evocation is of Virgil’s Aeneas carrying his aged father out of burning Troy, his home, and embarking on their quest to found Rome much as Augie carries a crippled Einhorn down the slippery steps of the brothel. This is the meeting of Jewish and Gentile culture; it is the secularization of Jewish thought.

Throughout the first third of the novel, Chicago is as much an acting figure as Grandma Lausch or Einhorn. Its creators, like Insull and Gangland, are mentioned in passing, like the view inside a speeding trolley. The reversal of the Chicago River, the business at the LaSalle Street Station, and the Woolworth’s store all speak to the power of modernity, its technology and its consumption. Chicago is a veritable city

of Babel where neighborhoods spill into one another, where tempers flare, anarchy is a threat, and union strikes are becoming a successful means to gain revolutionary benefits. To make sense of all this Bellow utilizes the myths that proved so valuable to the Hasidic Jews of the early nineteenth century.

Irving Howe wrote of Augie's language as "a yoking of opposites, gutter vividness with university refinement, street energy with high culture rhetoric" (Shechner 35). Good storytellers have done this for ages. The oral traditions of Homer dressed ideas of civic duty and the beautiful in the gore of the battlefield, and while Herodotus told his listeners about the mysteries of Babylon and Egypt he was not unwilling to indulge their ears with peculiar sexual practices. (One such tradition had every woman, by law, prostituting herself to the gods and accepting the first coin thrown in her lap regardless of the class or gender of the person approaching her. This proposition would have slaves in a frenzy of fantasy for weeks after hearing about it.) After reading *The Adventures of Augie March*, who does not want to experience the crowded LaSalle Street station and be picked from among the masses by Fortune (or Insull) or travel to Benton Harbor with the hopes of having a love affair with Ester Fenchel? Through these adventures Bellow lets his readers know they have fates rather than functions; that it is as individuals alone that we have our worth, the very proof of being. And while our fates as individuals may not avenge the despair extolled by modernity, the idea that everything is possible for us surely can.

It has been argued that Augie's character is too passive to be at the center of a novel. He is too easily pulled from one thing to the next, one job, one girl, and one

idea of himself until it no longer suits him or a different opportunity presents itself. If this is the case, it is a necessary evil. In order to evoke the vast array of human experience in Chicago, Augie must have first-hand knowledge of it. The dynamic use of language in the novel is Augie's voice. If his voice is taken away and Augie has to learn about riding hobo on the rails or being jailed and having freedom removed by another voice the impact on Augie's character would be scant, just another reality instructor to dismiss. The flow of the novel would start and stop, like a ship in the Chicago locks waiting for the water to rise.

If Augie had decided to be "adopted" by the Kleins his story would be bounded by those neighborhoods, the politics, the material needs and credit plans, perhaps even marriage to Eleanor Klein who "called me 'lover' and 'little brother' and 'heartbreaker' ... wrapped in flamboyant floral material, heavy black hair slipping back loose and tuberos from a topknot, drinking coffee, knitting, reading, shaving her legs, playing operettas on the gramophone, painting her nails, and doing the necessary or half-necessary or superfluous things, invisibly paid herself out farther and farther into the mood of a long-seated woman" (*Augie March* 49). Augie's memoir would quickly become a dissertation on boredom, Bateshaw's lifeboat proposition. No eagle training here; no Esther Fenchel and the pangs of longing; no meetings with Einhorn or Mimi Villars, no time for reading and the lessons of the great men.

In fact, Augie's character in the novel is the strongest of the bunch. Grandma Lausch, Einhorn, and Mimi Villars are the pillars upon which Augie's character is built: his boyhood and his initiation into manhood and *Eros*. These characters arrive

on the scene fully developed, sure in their life stations and the beliefs that brought them there. Yet, while their influences leave their mark on Augie, he will not be led by any of them. It is not the strength of Augie to propel the novel by taking it into dead ends. By refusing to accept any fate that walks by, Augie exerts his belief that anything is possible and his adventures confirm this belief. In the end, Augie is the storyteller of his own adventures.

For Walter Benjamin a storyteller is either one of the land or of the sea. If from the land the storyteller relates the local folk tales and legends, if from the sea he describes the lands of exotic places. With the rise of the modern city, folklore disseminated to its furthest reaches. Miles separated the financial districts of steel and glass and the crowded immigrant neighborhoods. These neighborhoods, though touching one another at street level, were worlds apart in language and custom, culture and tradition. Yet the trolley car would take any traveler from one end of the city to the other. Benjamin's storytellers blend into each other in the person of Augie; they interpenetrate and fuse "the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natures of a place" (89). From Augie's early trolley rides to the dispensary with Mama, to his trip to Mexico and all the great cities of Europe, he interpenetrates the soil and the sea and makes his experiences available to the reader.

Ancient storytellers passed their tales from mouth to mouth. But the invention of the printing press, and the rise of literacy sounded the death knell for that oral tradition. The Industrial age, the rise of cities, the predominance of commerce, and the fetish of materialism finished it off. A feature as innocuous as

the gaslight replaced the communal fires around which stories were told in the past. The gaslight kept the city open later, and rather than illuminate the storyteller, “in which the righteous man encounters himself”, those small communal fires highlighted the consumer economy (109).

Although Benjamin found much gold to be mined in the idea of the city he was also aware of the increase of fool’s gold in that environment. If the righteous man found himself in the old stories, in the city he was finding himself less and less. The oral traditions stopped when men and women no longer remembered the tales, when they no longer resembled the old heroes. The greater the “story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely it is integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer... boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation” (91). According to Benjamin, boredom occurs when listening and retention are at their peaks. “The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory” (91).

After the *Sam MacManus* sinks and Augie is alone in the life raft with Bateshow and his “home-town familiarity”, Augie learns of Butcher-Paper’s end. Bateshaw laughs at hearing about his father’s nickname. “My dad, you see, drowned in the lake... At Montrose Beach during his vacation. Busy men often die on their holiday, as if they had no time for it during the business week. Relaxation kills them” (*Augie March* 527-3). Modern men have lost the benefits of boredom while keeping its evils.

Bateshaw tells Augie his life story and his decision to study boredom, to become “the world’s leading authority on it” (579). Boredom, he begins, is useless effort and the belief that you can’t change. In society you are justified by your work, but this feeling of usefulness is habitual and may not be real. To know if one’s usefulness is real, Bateshaw enlists the Sunday variable. “But on Sunday, how are you justified?” he asks.

Hideous Sunday, enemy of humanity. Sunday you’re on your own – free. Free for what? Free to discover what’s in your heart, what you feel toward your wife, children, friends, and pastimes. The spirit of man, enslaved, sobs in the silence of boredom, the bitter antagonist. Boredom therefore can arise from the cessation of habitual functions, even though these may be boring too. It is also the shriek of unused capacities, the doom of serving no great end or design, or contributing to no master force (579).

Boredom is the freedom to think about and understand one’s self. The Socratic “know thyself” sounds archaic just as Benjamin’s storyteller “having counsel” is old fashioned. Benjamin continues, “we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a principal concerning the continuation of a story that is just unfolding. To seek his counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story” (86). The boredom of Bateshaw and Benjamin are like lifeboats passing in the night. Benjamin’s leads to self-knowledge, to the awareness of one’s righteousness, while Bateshaw’s comes from the habit of function, the sterility of imagination, where freedom elicits heart failure.

That Bateshaw claims to have created life suggests that neurosis is one way to obscure the power of boredom. Absent anything real it is necessary for men and women to create greatness from nothing, which absent the world’s myths, is just

what happens. Bateshaw confirms this, “to be not neurotic is to adjust to what they call the reality situation... A billion souls boiling with anger at a doom of insignificance. Reality is also these private hopes the imagination invents” (578-9). In this sense Augie is also neurotic. He has dismissed his reality instructors and has chosen to see the world in the light of his righteousness as inherited through the stories of myth, history, and heroes. His failure to find a worthy fate leaves him with enough time to sit around the ancient fire, alone in his room reading, or else at the poolroom listening to Chicago’s folk tales. *Augie March* exhibits another aspect of Yiddish literature. Benjamin Harshov in “The Semiotics of Yiddish Communication” discusses the typical Yiddish convention of associative talking, “a national sport in Yiddish – is a long, exuberant, and rambling affair” (154). It is a wild and creative force in narrative where “Anything can be linked with anything else. From every situation one can shift to another situation that does not explicitly relate to the problem at hand, but is rich in new experiential detail... Thus, every trivial anecdote may attain ‘metaphysical’ dimensions” (154).

Bellow’s use of associative talking can be taken at random in *Augie March*. In Chapter X Augie gets a job washing dogs.

The chief was a Frenchman, a dog-coiffeur or groom or *maitre de chiens*; he was rank and rough, from Place Clichy near the foot of Montmarte, and from what he told me he had been a wrestler’s shill in the carnivals there while studying this other profession. Some ways his face was short of humanity, by its energetic stiffness and abruptness of color, like an injection. His relation with the animals was a struggle. He was trying to wrest something from them. I don’t know what. Perhaps that their conception of a dog should be what his was. He was on the footing of Xenophon’s Ten Thousand in Persia, here in Chicago; for he washed and ironed his own shirts, did his own marketing, and cooked his own meals in he beaverboard quarters in a corner of this doggish place – his lab, kitchen, and bedroom. I realize

much better now what it means to be a Frenchman abroad, how irregular everything must appear, and not simply abroad but on North Clark Street (216).

This paragraph is principally about Augie's new boss, but it takes the reader from Montmartre in France and associations to Paul Cezanne and nature free of concrete and mortar, exploding with color and shadow that at every instant is new and worthy of attention to the historical retreat of Xenophon, the rise and fall of Persian empires and Greek city-states, of pain and anxiety of surviving in a foreign land with death looming behind, to North Clark Street and a new view of it through displaced eyes, a de-familiarization of the ordinary neighborhood. This last bit leads back to Montmartre and the brushstrokes of Cezanne, who depicted the same mountain countless times, each time seeing it anew at different times of day and in all seasons. This is exactly what Bellow does throughout *Augie*. He is constantly challenging the reader's ideas of the familiar and directing us to the strangeness of it all by alerting us to its greatness.

Bellow will return to this in *Herzog* where he writes "Late in spring Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have out, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends" (4). Harshav writes that as Bellow "describes Herzog's psychological state... he could have described the semiotics of one mode of typical Yiddish communication" (145).

Augie March is the first Bellow narrator or protagonist to explain the world through associative talking, and though this narrative form was unique in American letters, it proved to be the recent tip of the long shadow of Jewish literary history. Throughout this essentially American novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* looks

backward, to the Jewish oral traditions of the Old World, to explain the phenomena of the New World. In the guise of translator between two cultures, Saul Bellow stretches the possibilities of the new American novel while breathing life into the old forms.

The Hero's Exuberant Return

The final phase in Joseph Campbell's journey myth is the return of the hero to his initial society with a beneficial gift that justifies his adventures. Augie March returns to Chicago from Mexico with bruised ideals regarding his own nature and belief in the axial lines' mystical power to set men aright in relation to love. This gift, however, is not well received by his Chicago community and in the end Augie is living in Europe conducting shady business deals and writing his memoirs. These pages, filled with joy and the beauty of a new American language, are Augie's true gift. They establish him as a hero whose vision contains what Campbell writes, "the knowledge of the unity in multiplicity and then to make it known" (31).

What separates the hero from the non-hero is a peculiar vision, a vision that does not necessarily recreate the world as much as it reveals its hidden structures. The axial lines reveal man's nobility to Augie; despite good intentions gone wrong and the conscious swindles of man against man Augie believes there is still a capacity for love in man, a divine spark that speaks to the availability still of God's mercy. "Even if God did have mercy, this was what He'd have mercy on" (509). That man's fallible nature is not the end of the story is Augie's heroic gift.

But how is that gift received? And does its rejection disqualify Augie's heroic journey? Stephanie S. Halldorson critiques Campbell's journey myth in her book *The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction*. She writes

The definition of hero is incomplete... as the journey (separation-initiation – return) defined in Joseph Campbell's study... The definition must include both the character and the action but is not complete until the character and the action become solidified in narrative, heard by the reader, and incorporated into the reader's belief system. The non-hero or reader is integral to the concept of hero because through listening and incorporation

of the narrative it is the non-hero who differentiates between what is heroic and what is not (5)

This definition confers heroic status upon non-heroes by allowing them to determine what a hero is and creates the image of a hero only, placing men back in Plato's cave where appearance is truth. Men do not wish to be those locked in the stocks watching shadows move across the wall, but free to walk about in sunshine and see the shadows for what they really are, a reflection of a higher order. This is the hero whom non-heroes will have nothing to do.

And why should they? The community as it was understood in the age of myths no longer exists. The gift of a returning hero will not benefit a large number of people anymore, but must content itself with a few individuals. A pluralistic society will not be easily swayed by one point of view. Campbell writes,

there is no society any more as the gods once supported. The social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization. Its ideals are not those of the hieratic pantomime, making visible on earth the forms of heaven, but of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources. Isolated societies, dream-bounded within a mythologically charged horizon, no longer exist except as areas to be exploited. And within the progressive societies themselves, every last vestige of the ancient human heritage of ritual, morality, and art is in full decay (334).

Today all is in the individual. The "ancient human heritage" has been forgotten; the gods have been destroyed. Is it any wonder then that *The Adventures of Augie March* is full of reality instructors and people trying to recruit others to their own program and point of view? As an antidote to this, Augie returns with the mythic heroes. Where modernity believes in determining how bad a guy can be, Augie's individuality consists in reminding men of the god-like stock they come from. "The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the

lost Atlantis of the co-coordinated soul... for the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant... of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life" (334). Campbell's co-coordinated soul is Bellow's axial lines "older than the Euphrates, older than the Ganges" (*Augie March* 523). Before the noise of city building, the great economies, and the discovery of natural resources for technological use, there were the quiet facts of truth and beauty and the nobility of man. If today men are fragmented, they were once whole; if today they are isolated, then they once embraced. The modern hero returns with the belief that what was before can be again.

In Chapter XXI of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Augie makes his return to Chicago from the underworld of Mexico. Upon his return he meets with all the major players who formed his adolescence and maturity to manhood. Their separate reactions to Augie's message, from Halldorson's perspective, will determine Augie's true heroic merit, but it is Augie's message, regardless of its incorporation into the lives of his listeners, that makes him a modern hero.

Of all the individuals Augie returns to none accept his message of man's nobility. His mother questions his life of meandering, rudderless on the ocean of possibility. "I am living," he declares to her in exasperation (485). The spiritual gift of knowledge he received about his nature in Mexico has taken him years and many adventures to discover. It has taken hard work below the surface, but as much care and determination as was required by Simon in his endeavors to become rich.

About Simon, Augie wrote, "I didn't say anything about the bird or my failures and lessons" (486). When a sensitive man is confronted by a rough character, he knows better than to wax sentimental about the workings of his soul. Augie's closest community has been further diminished. Mama is in a home and Simon is a millionaire with all the concerns of the self this implies. "No, what I told him was that I had gone down to Mexico to work out something important. Then he started to talk about himself" (486).

Simon had turned hospitals into tenements, found interests in cobalt mines, and sold potato chips in railroad stations surpassing William Einhorn in imagining schemes and the fortitude to pull them off. In this flurry of luxury and determination Augie thinks about his other brother Georgie "for the way he took his fate. I wished I had one that was more evident, and that I could quit this pilgrimage of mine" (487). Upon his return, Augie cannot find the words to convince his community of the importance of his gift. The quiet soul that sees kings and gods in his neighbors and enemies is not equipped for communication in the violent metamorphosis of strip mining, building renovation, and the banal selling of snack foods.

From Simon's apartment on the twentieth floor Augie looks out on Chicago for the first time since coming back.

Well, here it was again, westward from this window, the 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 (489).

But while buildings silently rise and fall like the fortunes of those who had a hand in both directions, Simon is full of speech.

In his office Simon wore his hat like a Member of Parliament, and while he phoned his alligator-skin shoes knocked things off the desk. He was in on a deal to buy some macaroni in Brazil and sell it in Helsinki. Then he was interested in some mining machinery from Sudbury, Ontario, that was wanted by an Indo-Chinese company. The nephew of a Cabinet member came in with a proposition about waterproof material. And after him some sharp character interested Simon in distressed yard-goods from Muncie, Indiana. He bought it. Then he sold it as lining to a manufacturer of leather jackets. All this while he carried on over the phone and cursed and bullied, but that was just style, not anger, for he laughed often (490).

Simon is Augie's first substantial non-hero, to use Halldorson's term, and he rejects the hero's gift even before it can be expanded on in favor of his own interests. Simon has already incorporated the lesson of his heroes before Augie, his lazy, disinterested, wandering brother, comes back with his second-rate ideas about a "higher' independent fate" (488). It didn't come much higher than twenty stories! And anyway, Simon already has Augie's heroic notion of love for his fellow man. Seeing his mother-in-law in a drowsy brown dress he

threw himself across the table, spilling the cherries and overturning coffee cups. He grabbed his mother-in-law's dress at the collar, thrust in his hand, and tore the cloth down to the waist. She screamed. There were her giant soft breasts wrapped in the pink band. What a great astonishment it was, all of a sudden to see them! She panted and covered the top nudity with her hands and turned away. However, her cries were also cries of laughter. How she loved Simon! He knew it too.

"Hide, hide!" he said, laughing.

"You crazy fool," cried Charlotte. She ran away on her high heels to bring her mother a coat and came back laughing also. They were downright proud, I guess.

Simon wrote out a check and gave it to Mrs. Magnus. "Here," he said, "buy yourself something and don't come here looking like a scrubwoman." He went a kissed her on the braids, and she took his

head and gave his kisses back two for one and with tremendous humor (493-4).

Augie's return to Einhorn and Mimi Villars, now in a relationship with Einhorn's son Arthur, goes much the same way. There is little mention in Augie's recorded speech of Mexico to either and Augie must listen to Einhorn's claims that Mimi was ruining his son and to Mimi's complaints of what Einhorn has done to Arthur. Surrounded by these licks of love Augie thinks, "now maybe was my chance to pass them by" (495). When Mimi does ask about Augie since he'd been away, Augie admits to his memoire

how I had been brownd by Mexico, aged by hard going and experience, finally thrown on those rocks by Bizcocho and eating cinders and ashes over Thea. Why, the way I came back I must have had something in common with a survivor of Crassus's army in the eastern desert, barely making it back from the massacre in tattered armor scales (496).

But Mimi's response is not shown. Instead Augie records his conversations with Manny Padilla and Clem Tambow who offer their lessons to him. Rather than returning as a heralded conqueror, he is (he imagines) only heroic in his retreat; able to relate the true heroics of others, but with a stigma attached to his words that won't allow him a share of the accolades. His "readers" see nothing resembling a hero in the tattered Augie March, only a heartbroken man, which is the price one pays for breathing the air of life.

To Augie's community his message does not justify his departure. That men have a share at the banquet of the gods, that he is created to judge the angels is a despised belief. It is no longer applicable. "This is all a dream." Informs Padilla. "The big investigation today is into how *bad* a guy can be, not how good he can be"

(496). Padilla didn't have ideas that involved the whole world that Augie struggled with. He enjoyed the rackets and swindles of everyday life. "He had all kinds of information about crooks, about dips, wires, and their various tricks" (22). Augie visited Padilla's apartment where they wooed a couple of girls and even exchanged them during the night "so no exclusive feelings would develop" (233). These were things Augie witnessed in his friend, but he also saw him at the chalkboard in math class; "it was godlike that relations should be so clear to anyone" (219). This was the divine spark that Augie saw in everyone, but could only be conveyed through his book.

For Clem the question wasn't how bad a guy could be as much as the fact that specialization had entered the world through the division of labor. "The whole mystery of life is in the specific data," Clem tells Augie as he tries to recruit him to sail down the Nile as an Egyptologist. Never mind about Man, instead catalogue the life observed along the banks of a river. "And you know you're going to ruin yourself ignoring the reality principle and trying to clear up the dirty scene. You should accept the data of experience" (501). But whose experience? The world at large or his own? And if the world's then settle down to any old thing and forget your own peculiar vision.

But Augie is not blind to the dirty scene. He spilled his own blood and tears and semen beneath Mexico's desert sun. He was the betrayed and the betrayer of his ideals and came to an intimate knowledge of what he really was. It is the study of Man that Augie goes for; the broad, sweeping movements of his history that could very well have begun in Africa and stretched from Abraham to Xenophon to

Rousseau to Sartre to March. Augie will never be satisfied cataloguing the flowers along the ancient river. "In the world of today your individual man has to be willing to illustrate a more and more narrow and restricted point of existence. And I am not a specialist" (501).

When Clem attempts one more recruitment scheme Augie counters with his axial lines, the first vocalizing on his part of what he has returned from Mexico with. Clem receives Augie's ideas about the nobility of man with skepticism and then the Second World War breaks out. "After a while, if I thought of my great idea, I told myself that after the war I'd get a real start, but I couldn't do it while the whole earth was busy in this hell-making project, or man-eating Saturns were picking guys up left and right around me" (526). The events of history were proving that the great men still exist, but also that the individuals were still tossed on its ash heap. The grand ideas that proved worthless after the Great War and its ideas about the importance of men would take another hit after the discovery of Hitler's camps and the destruction by Fat Man and Little Boy. Not only does Augie's immediate community disavow his message, but the entire arc of human history seems to do so as well. If the true hero's message must be incorporated into the lives of his listeners then Augie must be considered a lunatic and there can be nothing heroic about him.

Still, Augie March, the young Crusader of Love, looks for a community to share his gift with. He lives in Europe with his wife Stella, working for Mintouchian in a less-than-legal endeavor. In the low hours he picks up his pen.

I have written out these memoires of mine since, as a traveling man, traveling by myself, I have lots of time on my hands. For a

couple of months last year I had to be in Rome. It was summer, and the place broke out in red flowers, hot and sleepy. All the southern cities are sleep cities in summer, and daytime sleep makes me heavy and tasteless to myself. To wake up in the afternoon I would drink coffee and smoke cigars, and by the time I came to myself after the siesta it was wellnigh evening. You have dinner, and it's soft nerveless green night with quiet gas mantles in the street going on incandescent and making a long throbbing scratch in the utter night. Time to sleep again, so you go and subside thickly on the bed.

Therefore I got into the habit of going every afternoon to the Café Valadier in the Borghese Gardens on top of the Pincio, with the whole cumulous Rome underneath, where I sat at a table and declared that I was an American, Chicago born, and all these other events and notions. Said not in order to be so highly significant but probably because human beings have the power to say and ought to employ it at the proper time. When finally you're done speaking you're dumb forever after, and when you're through stirring you go still, but this is no reason to decline to speak and stir or to be what you are (596).

Here is the modern hero's return.

It should come as no surprise to the readers of *The Adventures of Augie March* that Augie is greatly influenced by the great books. Within their pages he finds the nobility of man and evidence that human beings are still capable of thinking deeply about and acting through large ideas regarding man's purposes, his soul, and what constitutes a well-lived life. It is only a recent phenomenon that sound bites and politically correct speech have become the wellspring of democratic thought. It is light and easy, requires little knowledge about the self, and wishes only to present the appearance of truth. Having few examples of true heroism in the democratic society, or on the flip side having too many to choose from in its pluralistic form, the idea of the hero is weakened and supports any definition available. Alan Bloom writes that a lack of literature leads to a poverty of distinguishing the subtlety of human types.

The psychological obtuseness of our students is appalling, because they have only pop psychology to tell them what people are like, and the range of their motives. As the awareness that we owed almost exclusively to literary genius falters, people become more alike, for want of knowing they can be otherwise. What poor substitutes for real diversity are the wild rainbows of dyed hair and other external differences that tell the observer nothing about what is inside" (64).

Bloom goes on to report the response of his students to his question, who are your heroes? Silence follows. Why should anyone other than themselves be their heroes? That they could aspire to greatness is anathema to the democratic principle of equality and posits many of them in the camp of the non-hero. "But deprived of literary guidance, they no longer have any image of the perfect soul and hence they do not long to have one. They do not even imagine that there is such a thing" (67). The heights are taken away along with the depths of human nature and all we are left with are luke-warm souls, neutered, castrated, hearts devoid of eternity, lacking god-like offspring.

In the foreword to Bloom's book, Bellow writes, "A style of this sort will seem to modern readers marred by classical stiffness - "Truth," "Knowers," "the Good," "Man" - but we can by no means deny that behind our objection to such language is a guilty consciousness of the flimsiness, and not infrequently the trashiness, of our modern talk about 'values'" (12). The writer is one who takes these archaic terms seriously and in the process admits that his community is a small one, "The real community of man... is the community of those who seek truth, of the potential knowers... of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact, this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good" (11). This is why Augie's return is met

with rejection, more recruitments (Mintouchian and Bateshaw), and exile from American shores to the old cities of Europe. The heroic message is not for everyone, but only for those aware of the impotence of flimsy ideas that pass for truth and seek kindred souls who take seriously the perils of living.

These perils were coming to the fore in the novels of the 1950s when Bellow published *The Adventures of Augie March*. With the onset of youth culture and the freedom from fascism won by the Greatest Generation, novelists began to embrace self-expression and individuality. Morris Dickstein writes, “the first-person voice, with its vernacular ebb and flow, conveys the dreams and frustrations of the youthful protagonist... written in nervous, syncopated, jazz-like riffs veering unpredictably between the colloquial and the literary” (10). If Augie is not a believable hero to some because he appears passive, the memoir that he constructs in Europe certainly is heroic. The book is a monument of language and style no less impressive than Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s apartment houses on North Lake Shore Drive (1951) or Jackson Pollock’s conspicuous drippings.

The Adventures of Augie March springs forth out of Bellow’s early novels that tended to be formal in language and plot structure as well as being keenly aware of the European tradition of intentionality laid down by Flaubert and Balzac and the novel of ideas put forth by Dostoevsky. His first novel, *Dangling Man*, has the feel of Kafka in its inwardness and the journal effect puts the reader directly into Joseph’s mind. What the mind perceives comes from the body’s orbit in this world and Joseph’s orbit is small to nearly non-existent. He is waiting for induction, jobless, wandering, brooding, with occasional encounters with friends and family. James

Atlas writes that it was “derivative of the existential, European, ‘literary’ novel that was then in vogue, and nearly plotless” (94). But from the beginning Bellow makes clear what he intends to do with his writing career.

But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hard-boiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy – an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman – that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace back to Alexander the Great – is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody’s business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them... Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring... To hell with that! I intend to talk about min, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice (*Dangling Man* 9)

From the outset Bellow aims at America’s representative man. Ernest Hemingway would win the Nobel Prize in 1954, the year after *Augie March* was published and when he did, Atlas writes, “*Time* reported the honor under the rubric ‘Heroes’ instead of ‘Books’ (97). Hemingway hunted big game in Africa, ran with the bulls in Spain, fought in WWI, wrote a distant yet emotional prose that captured the lost feeling of the Jazz Age, and drank. He was Teddy Roosevelt leading the Rough Riders across the literary landscape, occupying the hill that Bellow wanted so badly. To topple the giant of American letters, Bellow wrote consciously literary books, taking his cue from Europe and ideas.

With *The Victim* Bellow “accepted a Flaubertian standard” and borrowed from Dostoevsky’s novella *The Eternal Husband* (Atlas 125). For Gustave Flaubert, the great French realist, every word had a distinct place in the novel, like a link in a

chain, each depending on the previous to follow and the next to tie it to the end. He chose his words by contemplating their meaning as well as their sound and wrote beautiful works about banal people. While writing his second novel, Bellow “deliberately renounced ‘style’ and sought for transparency because I think the distinction between poetry and fiction has, from Flaubert to Virginia Woolf, been greatly weakened to the detriment of both and of fiction particularly’. Bellow writes this European novel in an American voice and creates a “new” American. This one was cosmopolitan, at home with literary questions, and ambitious toward literary concerns. He lifts New York City off its island and sets it down next to Bangkok to describe an American summer. “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” (*The Victim* 1). Bellow defamiliarizes the world in order to show his readers a different America than what they were used to seeing. In his next novel, he would do the same with its citizens.

With his first two novels Bellow forged a new direction in American literature. How unlikely would success be for his third? After all, even Bellow acknowledged that it would take a few more novels before the public and the critics caught a sense of what he was doing. However, with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953 both the critics and the public were aware of what a new book it was. And time has proven these first readers correct. In an essay that serves as the introduction to a later edition of *Augie March*, Martin Amis

writes, "*The Adventures of Augie March* is the Great American Novel. Search no further" (vii). While some complaints of the novel have been borne out, including Bellow's own admission that he was overpowered by the freedom spilling onto the page, the power of Bellow's language, his genius for opening a world to the reader and making him or her smell the street gutters and feel the heat coming off the city buildings, is always fresh. Whatever else the novel does, Amis continues, it "is above all *free* – without inhibition. An epic about the so-called ordinary, it is a marvel of remorseless spontaneity. As a critic, therefore, you feel no urge to interpose yourself. Your job is to work your way round to the bits you want to quote. You are a guide in a gallery where the signs say Silence Please; you are shepherding your group from spectacle to spectacle – awed, humbled, and trying, so far as possible, to keep your mouth shut" (viii). The language of *Augie March* launched Bellow's Noble Prize winning career and elevated American letters in general.

At the end of Augie's adventures he sees behind a village of ruins a "line of white which was like eternity opening up right beside destructions of the modern world, hoary and grumbling" (*Augie March* 615). It is as if Bellow has re-written history with this novel and creates a blank page from which future novelists will fill with a new vision of the world. Out of the ruins rises a new man, much like how out of Einhorn's burned Harvard classics arose the fired imagination of a young Jewish boy discovering the foundations of Western civilization.

The heroism of Augie March is his discovery of an American language. Bellow's first novels were written as "small-public art". That is, art created for a limited readership, intended for connoisseurs of literary fiction. This was the

influence of Flaubert, Kafka, and Baudelaire. “Of course I felt it myself,” writes Bellow in “A Second Half Life”. “I was schooled, as others were, in this art of choice means. On refined instruments. I Think *The Adventures of Augie March* represented a rebellion against small-public art and the inhibitions it imposed. My real desire was to reach ‘everybody’. I had found – or believed I had found – a new way to *flow*” (325).

To understand these inhibitions one has only to look at Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* and compare him to Augie. Asa is alone in New York City, it’s hotter than an equatorial island, his wife is with her parents, he gets coerced by his double, takes his complaints to heart, and tortures himself with guilt. It is an insular novel, atmospheric in its closeness and stifled, both in action and language. While *The Victim* looks inward *Augie March* expands in vision. He is exuberant, confident, and ready to leave guilt and suffering behind if they don’t provide a means to a worthy fate. It opens new possibilities for novelists by exploring all avenues of plot and denying no character a line or two on the stage.

These differences have their origin in Bellow’s use of language. Amis asks, “Why is ‘loud-played’ music, in a dimestore, so much better than ‘loud’? Because it suggests willfulness, vulgarity, youth, whereas ‘loud’ is just *loud*. *Augie March* isn’t written in English; its job is to make you feel how beautiful *American* is” (xxv). In American letters the English language exemplified by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot was the favored form. The social realism of Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Upton Sinclair used matter-of-fact plots in which the characters acted out their prescribed roles as dictated by society. *Augie March* waved society away, like a cat

batting about a dying bird. The true star of his adventure was the individual inspired by gods. He needed his own language, “free-style”, to accompany him.

What I found was the relief of turning away from mandarin English and putting my own accents into the language... in *Augie March* I wanted to invent a new sort of American sentence. Something like a fusion of colloquialism and elegance... Street language combined with high style... I felt American writing had enslaved itself without sufficient reason to English models – everybody trying to meet the dominant English standard. This was undoubtedly a very good thing, but not for me. It meant that one’s own habits of speech, daily speech, had to be abandoned (“A Second Half Life” 317-18).

This manifesto is laid out in the opening sentence: “I am an American”; the specific location, “Chicago born”, offers the subject and its being a “somber city” will be the thesis that Augie tears down in order to “make the record in my own way” (*Augie March* 5).

Paris in 1948 was a depressed city and Bellow was depressed in it. *The Crab and the Butterfly* was not working out so well and Bellow “became aware one morning that I might break its grip, outwit depression, by writing about something for which I had great feeling – namely, life in Chicago as I had known it in my earliest years. And there was only one way to do that – reckless spontaneity” (318). It’s been reported that Bellow was walking the streets of Paris, a *flaneur* beneath the arcades, when he saw water rushing along the sidewalk and into a gutter and had the epiphany to write about Chicago in that way. However it came about

I *took* the opening I had found and immediately fell into an enthusiastic state. I began to write in all places, in all postures, at all times of the day and night. It rushed out of me. I was turned on like a hydrant in summer. The simile is not entirely satisfactory. Hydrants are not sexually excited. I was wildly excited (318).

It is the perfect analogy for Bellow's belief in the nobility of man; this prism of color reflected in the dirty water rushing toward a drain; a rainbow spotted in the gutter, but only by a man willing to look at the bile as it anonymously runs its course.

Heraclitus believed that no man stepped into the same river twice. Bellow's dirty water constitutes this river and for him the god-like qualities of men are never the same.

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