THE DEAN'S DECEMBER: SAUL BELLOW'S TALE OF TWO CITIES

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> [*The Dean's December*] was a *cri de coeur.* I just could not longer stand the fact that the city and the country were in decay under our very eyes and people would not talk about the facts.[1]

Most early critical response to Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* (1982) has been as cold as its title. Detractors find the novel unsatisfactory because, with a cold, detached, and retrospective protagonist, it does not have much conflict. The novel, according to those nay-sayers, is a failure because it does not contain typical Bellovian wit and humor, dramatic confrontations, outbursts of wrath and delight, and unforgettable supporting characters.[2] It is to be granted that *The Dean's December* is a gloomy book with its solemn tone and moral imperatives; yet, to me, those fault-finding critics founder in one point: they forget that Bellow this time is writing a different novel and that it should be read accordingly.[3]

This paper attempts to read *The Dean's December* as what it is. By considering the fact that Bellow is writing a novel which is different from its predecessors and which in genre bears much affinity to the form of "the epistemological essay" (see Bach 300), this paper aims to show how Bellow has created a novel which, in a "nonfiction novelistic style," superbly dramatizes his protagonist's persistent concerns over the deteriorating conditions of American society and contemporary civilization.[4] This paper contends that *The Dean's December* is not, as those negative reviewers claim, a poor novel; it is in truth a tour de force, an important city novel ever penned by an American author.

The Dean's December is a significant urban novel in that it not only stages most persuasively the man-city dialogue—one of the most salient themes in Bellow's oeuvre—but it also renders the city very vividly.[5] The protagonist—Albert Corde—is a highly intelligent, minutely observant visionary who takes up the responsibility of telling the truth about modern urban landscape. Of all Bellow's heroes, he is, to me, the best balanced one with a strong moral vision. His dialogue with his cities—Bucharest and Chicago—provides the best thrust for the novel. In depicting Dean Corde's dialogic relationship with his cities, Bellow has rendered the cityscape in such a convincing way that it turns out to be more than a mere backdrop where the plot unfolds; it becomes practically a distinct character in its own right. Besides, the city in *The Dean's December* is, to all purposes and intents, an apt metaphor for modern reality, with which

the protagonist has to come to grips in his process to seek humanity and equanimity.

I

Like its predecessor *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Dean's December* is a tale of two cities, with Dean Corde as its central character and central consciousness, moving as much between Chicago and Bucharest as between action and contemplation. Corde is a professor of journalism turned dean of students in an unnamed Chicago college. With his Rumanian-born wife Minna, he flies to Bucharest to be at the bedside of his dying mother-in-law, Dr. Valeria Raresh. Having made an unauthorized visit to Valeria in the Party Hospital, the Cordes are prohibited from seeing her again. As the novel opens, the Dean is cooped up in his wife's room in wintry Bucharest, awaiting the death of Valeria. Having much time at his disposal, he reflects on his personal history, especially on two pieces of unfinished business back home in Chicago. One of the Dean's students has been killed and Corde has pressed murder charges against two Blacks, thus evoking the antagonism of his nephew Mason, a militant student, and his cousin Detillion, a publicity-chasing lawyer. Meanwhile, the Dean has published articles in *Harper's* on the deterioration of urban life in Chicago and has consequently stirred up much trouble.

In his late fifties, Dean Corde, a man of searching intelligence and self-reflection, is continually attentive to his surroundings, "[a]s if he had been sent down to *mind* the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation."[5] Like Herzog, Sammler, and Citrine, Corde is a "hungry observer" (9), taking in signals from his environments, brooding on the human predicament with eager zeal, and longing to express the pain and wisdom that score his soul. His self-description betrays that he is "an earnest, brooding, heart-struck, time-ravaged person ... with his moral desires and taking up the burdens of mankind [sic]" (135). He believes that "the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it" (136). As a journalist-artist, he attempts to find a journalistic poetry to "recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or nonexperience" (270). Through the eye, mind, and soul of such a "persistent, almost fixated observer" (268), Bucharest in Communist Rumania contrasts sharply to Chicago in democratic America; together they form a bleak picture of the modern world.

Bucharest is a stark and bone-chilling city, with a seemingly interminable winter. Corde's impressions of it are mainly associated with death, cold, boredom, dismalness, scarcity, and oppression. Before he flies in, Corde imagines the city as "a Mediterranean sort of place, a light city not a heavy one; rococo" (19). Upon arrival, however, he finds only "mass after mass of socialist tenements and government office buildings" (19).

As a visitor from the free West, Corde feels displaced in this dreary, comfortless, repressive, recently earthquake-ravaged city. Moreover, he is strongly affected by his mother-in-law's imminent death, the hospital superintendent's bureaucracy, his solitary brooding in his wife's room, and the bleak December weather.

Describing the twilight of Bucharest, Bellow sets the mood for the novel:

> December brown set in at about three in the afternoon. By four it had climbed down the stucco of old walls, the gray of Communist residential blocks: brown darkness took over the pavements more thickly and isolated the street lamps. These were feebly yellow in the impure melancholy winter effluence. Air sadness, Corde called this. In the final stage of dusk, a brown sediment seemed to encircle the lamps. Then there was a livid death moment. Night began. (3-4)

This passage effectively evokes a melancholy and depressive ambience which is in concert with the pivotal event in the Bucharest story--Valeria's death.

Alien as the surroundings are, Corde feels an instant intimacy in his wife's old room. In a distinctive Bellovian posture, Corde stares from its windows at the city's "earthquake-damaged buildings, winter skies, gray pigeons, pollarded trees, squalid orange-rusty trams hissing under trolley cables" (1). Shut up in the room, Corde does little but read, muse, and sleep. The room "his refuge, his sanctuary, his cell" (193) is often dark and cold. In the sadness of the afternoon, he feels especially the mortifying chill; he even detects the "crystalline bitterness setting in" (115). When he opens the door of the apartment, he feels "like being thwacked with the flat of a saber" (58). As the sun goes down, the city, as if abandoned, becomes dissociated. The unusually black and cold night gives rise to evil visions about "the moronic inferno" (23).

Life in Bucharest goes on, however, while the earthquake damage is being repaired. To the shut-in Dean, both the percussion of carpet-beaters and the barking of the dog heard in the morning sound like protests against totalitarianism: were people dogs, they would howl, "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!" (11).

Since they are constantly under the surveillance of the secret police, people go out on the street for private conversations. During such walks, Corde minutely observes the city's people, scenes, weather, and colors. His observations often blend poetic touches with realistic details, as exemplified in the following passage:

> Towards midafternoon, the December sun was ready to check out. Below the winter beams there were violet shadows; these were collected in the pitted surfaces of the stucco walls, and made Corde think of choppy winter water. A similar color gathered about the pollarded trees. The pigeons afoot on the sidewalk had it, too, with iridescent variations. In mid-street Corde noticed the remains of small rats. (118)

The powerful image of the flattened rats' corpses sticks in Corde's mind. Later, while walking with Minna on the street, he finds himself looking for the rats' remains: "The street was gray. The piled earthquake rubble smelled moldy, even though refrigerating December checked the decay. Corde found himself looking for the rat silhouettes in the street, flattened like weathercocks by traffic" (283).

The oppressiveness of the city is embodied in the vindictive Party Hospital director, a Colonel in the secret police, who, situated in "his tall broom-closet office" (115), gives the Cordes lessons in the Communists' "hard nihilism."[7] Just as Mr. Sammler is prevented by various people and incidents from seeing Dr. Gruner alive, the Cordes are thwarted by the Colonel in their attempts to see the dying Valeria, who, like Dr. Gruner, is one of the most positive characters in Bellow's oeuvre. Shortly before Valeria's death, Corde and Minna are allowed to visit her one more time. This death-bed scene--in which Corde expresses his affection for Valeria--is the climax of the Bucharest story.

On the day of Valeria's funeral, there is funeral weather: "No more sun that was gone, only linty clouds and a low cold horizon" (231). Sitting in a small car following the van-hearse over the gloomy boulevards of the city, Corde looks out noticing, trying to penetrate into the reality of the city. At the crematorium Corde rehearses death. Having to go downstairs for final identification of the corpse before cremation, Corde is caught "between frost and flames" (236) when he goes upstairs against. On the stairs, he suffers "the extremes of heat and cold like two faces of an axe, splitting him in halves" (262); his breast, "as narrow as a ladder, was crowded with emotions fire, death, suffocation, put into an icy cold or, instead, crackling in a furnace" (237).

In the bleak and freezing Bucharest, there is no pastoral moment for Corde but he finds some solace in the cyclamens which, thriving in his chilly room, are suggestive of the community of women that form around the matriarch Valeria. They try to make their difficult accommodations within the system. The "mutual-aid female network" (116)—or "feminine league" (143)—includes Valeria's sister Gigi, her daughter Minna, old Cousin Dincutza, Ioana the concierge, Minna's classmate Vlada, women doctors in the hospital, distant relatives, neighbors, and even a male, Petrescu. By extending love, help, advice, and sympathy to one another, they affirm the old system, the old European life. Like the cyclamens, their solidarity survives and preserves humanity despite harsh and repressive political circumstances.[8] This sisterhood, akin to the Blakean brotherhood and the Whitmanesque "new city of Friends" extoled by Herzog and Citrine respectively, is what makes these Rumanian women human.

The Bucharest story tells us grim facts about orderly but oppressive life behind the Iron Curtain. Despite his great depression, however, Corde does not yield to pessimism or nihilism. As he says, "If intensive care doctors could light candles for the dying, secret agents could mourn their adoptive mothers. There was sentiment all over the place" (203). He believes that "the inmost essence of the human being must be making its own, its necessary, its unique arrangement as it best could" (116). The flickering candlelight prepared by the women doctors for Valeria emits hope, faith, and humanity, however dim it is.

II

Terrible as Bucharest is, Corde is quiet because he is free of Chicago's agitations. Yet he cannot keep his mind off his city; in fact, he is engrossed in it. Besides, various people and things keep reminding him of Chicago, among them two messengers from Chicago his friend, Dewey Spangler, and his colleague, Vlada Voynich. They not only keep him informed about what's happening on his home turf but give him chances for lengthy conversations during which he reminisces about the city's past and reflects on its present. Thus, through Corde's ruminations, recollections, readings, and conversations in Bucharest, the Chicago story is reconstructed.

If Bucharest is cold, grim, dismal, and imprisoning, Chicago is hot, chaotic, corrupt, and murderous. The Chicago story begins with the death of Rick Lester, Corde's student, who is bound, gagged, and pushed out of a window to his death by a Black prostitute and her pimp. Lester's violent death is highlighted by "the crying ugliness of the Chicago night" (48). Corde remembers it is a "rotten night" when he is called to identify Lester's corpse.

The circumstances of Lester's death are difficult to reconstruct, because of many ambiguities related to the city's milieu. It is one of "those choking, peak-of-summer, urban-nightmare, sexual and obscene, running-bare times, and death panting behind the young man, closing in" (42). Seeing Lester, barefoot, in the morgue, Corde cannot understand why the youths of Chicago are so ignorant or naive about the dangers of their city: "Many young people removed their shoes in hot weather as if they were surrounded by woods and fields, not these broken-bottle, dog-fouled streets" (30).

The Lester episode brings out several themes of the novel: sexual anarchy, robbery, murder, the Black "underclass," student militancy, and the news media's noise. Through the entire episode, it is, ironically, Corde's own relatives who pit themselves against him. Mason's alliance with Detillion against Corde in the law court contrasts sharply to the family feelings Corde experiences in a foreign city in Rumania. Yet, based on his conscience and sense of duty, Corde the moralist demands justice for the victim in spite of all the agitations and protests.

Corde's *Harper's* articles are inspired by more complicated motives. At first Corde seems to take up the task which Thaxter in *Humboldt's Gift* urges on Citrine to "go around Chicago like Restif de la Bretonne in the streets of Paris and write a chronicle" (*Humboldt's* 269). As a native son of Chicago, Corde, like Augie, Herzog, and Citrine, is strongly attached to his city. He especially cherishes his memories of Old Chicago's lovable neighborhoods. His reunion with his old pal Spangler in Bucharest gives him not only "the pleasure of nostalgia" (123) but the opportunity to explore the motives behind his writing those *Harper's* articles.

In an exotic city, two journalists from Chicago indulge in reminiscences of the good old days of poetry and feeling they shared in high school in the thirties. Corde recalls that they were drawn to each other because of their passion for poetry and

literature: "Of course it was Swinburne, Wilde, Nietzsche, Walt Whitman, in high school. Perfumed herbage, intoxicating lyricism and lamentation, rich music, nihilism and decadence had made them pals" (74).

In Lincoln Park–their habitual haunt–they read their favorite poets and philosophers: Blake, Wilde, Swinburne, Yeats, Shakespeare, Shelley, Whitman, Pater, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. Corde remembers that they often quoted to each other Shelley's line "An old mad blind despised dying king" and they both were greatly stirred by "the wonderful hard music of those words" (76). At times, they had the company of Corde's cousin, Max Detillion, and the three read to one another their own creative works. Corde enjoyed Spangler's company because at that time nobody else was so interested in the poetry and the philosophy that he loved. In a city noted for its gangsters and stockyards, its industry and business, their love of poetry and philosophy was indeed odd. Forty years later, they wonder if kids in the present Chicago still get together in Lincoln Park and read the way they used to read–"wallow in that good stuff: the *Zarathustra*, the *Phaedrus*, that *Brigge* book by Rilke" (132).

Despite the presence of "Bubble Creek," which used to bubble in the summer because of "the blood and tripes and tallow, the stockyards' shit" (124), despite the absence of a place where youngsters could take their intense passion, Corde and Spangler remember the Chicago of the thirties as "a city of immigrants who had found work, food and freedom and a kind of friendly ugliness around them, and they practiced their Old World trades–cabinetmakers, tinsmiths, locksmiths, wurst-stuffers from Cracow, confectioners from Sparta" (264).

Corde returned to Chicago ten years ago in his mid-forties after a successful career as a journalist for the Paris *Tribune*. Like Citrine, Corde tries to explain to himself and to others why he made such a decisive move.[9] According to his own analysis, he chose to become a professor in Chicago because of his allegiance to his city, on the one hand, and his desire to reorient himself in the classics, on the other. After "a twenty-year interruption by 'news,' by current human business" (208), he decided to give more attention to Baudelaire, Rilke, Montesquieu, Vico, Machiavelli, Plato, Thucydides, and Shakespeare.

To his mind, an American city like Chicago is where the real action is. Besides, as he tells his sister, "There's the big advantage of backwardness. By the time the latest ideas reach Chicago, they're worn thin and easy to see through. You don't have to bother with them and it saves lots of trouble" (148). Corde's conversation with Vlada in Bucharest reveals how seriously he takes to heart his home city, a city he will be the last to see dying or ruined:

> In Paris I was too busy doing art items and intellectual chitchat. ... I came back to Chicago to continue my education. And then I had to write those articles. There was no way to avoid it. The youngsters would say it was my karma. Well, there's low-down Chicago and there's high-up Chcago. There's Big Bill Thompson, and then there's Aristotle, who has also had a longtime association with the city. ... A. N. Whitehead ... believed that

> Chicago had Athenian possibilities. ... And then there was Aristotle: A man without a city is either a beast or a god. Well, Chicago was the city. Or was it: *Where* was it, what had become of it? No cities? Then where was civilization? Or was the U.S.A. as a whole now my city? ... Cities could be written off dying generations, the blacks and Puerto Ricans, the aged too poor to move. ... Let them be ruined, decay, die and eliminate themselves. There are some who seem willing that this should happen. I'm not one of them. Not me. (253-54).

After a ten-year's dormancy, Corde decides to walk out of his ivory tower and see first hand what is happening in his city. Originally he plans to write about the Chicago that he knows, focusing on "personalities, scenes, feelings, tones and colors." The articles will be "more pictorial than analytical" (219), since his purpose is "to say something about this Chicago scene drawing on his own experience, making fresh observations, referring to his own feelings, and using his own language" (180). Beginning in all innocence. Corde first takes a light and nostalgic tone. He records his visits to his high school zoology teacher, his schoolmates, and his old neighbors, such as a self-educated Polish barber who used to lecture boys on Spengler's *Decline of the West*. There are quiet and relaxed passages about "the old neighborhoods, their atmosphere, their architecture, the trees, soil, water, the unexpectedly versatile light of the place" (181). Although he thinks Corde pushes poetry too hard in the *Harper's* articles, Spangler admits that Corde does a good job in describing the interior decorations of the apartment, immigrant life in the thirties, the lakefront, parks, and the pre-war Loop.[10] Like Herzog and Citrine, Corde is saddened by the disappearance of old landmarks: "The Loop's beaneries, handbooks, dinky dives and movie palaces were wiped out" (219).

However, as he probes into the present Chicago, his original plan begins to take a twisted turn. As he discovers, the city that is is not the city that was: Cheago is not "the old town anymore" (125). While collecting materials for the articles, he finds at once "wounds, lesions, cancers, destructive fury, death" (223). Chicago is the "contempt center" of America, filled with chaos, insanity, violence, sexual anarchy, and moral decay. As he says, there is a "curious lack of final coherence, an environment not chosen to suit human needs... favorable to manufacture, shipping, construction" (263). Believing that no one in Chicago cares about the terror, about "the terrible wildness and dread in this huge place .... About drugs, about guns" (224), Corde decides that it is "high time to write a piece, since I grew up here" (224).

Corde's essays begin with picturesque, charming, nostalgic recollections, ending up with exposes and animadversions. He does not mean to attack--as he says, "I'm attached to Chicago I am speaking quite seriously" (131) but he writes cutting polemics denouncing Chicago's criminal-justice system, the corruption of local judges and lawyers, and the violent, primitive conditions tolerated in the Cook County jail. He fills his articles with "disobliging remarks about City Hall, the press, the sheriff, [and] the governor" (13).

Under Corde's pen, the ugly and terrifying Chicago assumes a composite of different images: a jungle, a garbage dump, a hell, a desert, a waste land, a city of destruction (319), a Sodom, a malestrom with "whirling souls" (227). In order to see how justice is administered in his native city, Corde spends many days in the courtroom, where he witnesses exotic scenes and discovers that "all the exotics were as native as himself. On his own turf, which was also theirs, he found a wilderness wilder than the Guiana bush" (174). Despite the gaiety of sartorial color, Corde perceives a very deep gloom: "dope pushers, gun toters (everybody had a gun), child molesters, shoplifters, smackheads, purse snatchers, muggers, rapists, arsonists, wife beaters, car thieves, pimps bailing out their whores. People were all dressed up. Their glad rags were seldom clean" (175). Whitmanesque cataloguing is used here as in *Augie March*, but the picture evoked is vastly different.

His visit to the County Jail gives him a picture of hellish Chicago. There are "the rackets, beatings, sodomizings and stabbing in the worst of the tiers" (12) and he thinks "there *was* a red hell for the soul to stray into" (12). It is is a City of Destruction where vandalism runs rampant and the elevator serves not only as a urinal but as a place for murder and sodomy.

The sexual madness of the time is embodied in Corde's cousin, Detillion, who, considering himself a "personification of Eros ... bringing life," is actually "a sexual oppressor of tragic multitudes of women (possibly also of men)" (105). His madness is revealed in his desire to set up emergency "sexual comfort-stations" around the city. Sexual epidemic spreads through the city. Even Miss Porson, Code's secretary, is a "lustful old frump" who has "her own sexual fat to fry," who is going to "put the sex into sexagenerian" (158).

The Spofford Mitchell case presents a ghastly picture of Chicago as a modern Sodom. Sally Sathers, a young suburban housewife, is abducted by the recently released criminal Mitchell in a Loop parking lot. He repeatedly rapes her and locks her in the car's trunk. After taking her around the city for two days, he finally kills her and covers her body with trash. Corde's heart is wrung not only by the sexual frenzy of the age but by the callousness of people toward the victim. Corde discusses this case with Mitchell's laywer, Sam Varenness, and refuses to accept the liberal (to him immoral) cant invariably offered in such a case as this.

From the window of Varenness's office in the Criminal Courts Building, Corde sees a nihilistic waste land sprawling below him. In Chicago, if prisoners go back to the jail "with homecoming spirits" (227), if the police do not bother to check an *Ivanhoe* whose inside has been carved out to conceal a gun, if lethal criminals are randomly released, if pictures of sexually abused minors are taken merely for the sake of procuring evidence, if hands are not extended to a desperate victim asking for help, if denizens of the inner city continue to rape, rob, and kill, if whores, pimps, pushers, junkies go unchecked on the street, Corde sees little hope for the city or for civilization.

But Corde does not want to yield to nihilism. Nightmarish as his experiences in the city are, he does find some people who are able to love, help, and sympathize. In

the County Hospital, Corde sees the nurses and attendants, of Oriental origins, "manifest ... a powerful but somehow indiscriminate love" (185) for those living dead men and women whose lives are linked to the kidney machine.

Corde admits that in his writing he is "often subject to fits of vividness" (167) and then there comes " 'poetry,' 'impressionism,' 'exaltation' " (167); the result is "highly nervous, ragged, wild, uncontrolled, turbulent" (167), especially in his writing about Black Chicago. He uses terms such as "superfluous population" and "doomed people" (213) to describe the plight of the Black "underclass," for which use, he is accused of being racist.[11]

Corde's true purpose is to awaken his fellow citizens' conscience and make them look at reality without recoil. To him, both whites and Blacks are responsible for the slums' terrible condition. Corde's concern with the plight of American society in general and of the Black "underclass" in particular is reflected in his interest in collaborating on a project whose hypothesis is that lead poisoning is the cause of urban deterioration, crime, and social disorganization.

In Chicago, not all Blacks are economically "redundant." For example, Dr. Fulcher, the capable County Hospital's chief, is a positive character. In fact, looking for examples of moral initiative in the city, Corde finds only two—both Black.

Rufus Ridpath, director of the County Jail, has genuine human feelings for his inmates. He is the only one who tries to improve conditions and help the prisoners. When Ridpath takes over the County Jail, it is on the barn boss system, run by the gang chiefs. There are drugs, rackets, homosexual rapes, beatings, stabbings, torture, and buggering. Not long after he takes charge, he cuts down the number of murders and suicides and saves a million dollars out of his budget which he refunds to the county. However, in his eagerness to clean up the jail, he provokes the anger of the local politicians and is tried for manhandling prisoners.

Toby Winthrop, ex-hit-man and ex-heroin addict, runs a detoxification center to help drug addicts gain their new lives. Like the protagonist in "Looking for Mr. Green" who goes out looking for a Black man in wintry Chicago slums, Corde goes to the South Side, not to deliver a social security check, but to see this redeemed ex-hit man-turned-savior. His trip to Winthrop's Operation Contact one wintry day brings him to the hellish district of the city—the fully rotted South Side. He found Operation Contact in a hidden half-block between a warehouse and the expressway. Corde's climbing the stairs to the center is, as Fuchs points out, "the upward quest in a slum setting" (*Saul* 307). In such a dismal and dangerous place, Winthrop and his colleagues try to save drug addicts from sinking and drowning "in the shit" (212). Winthrop's humanitarian assistance and his tropical plants in the office give out some hope to the decaying city.

Despite the keening of the articles over the city's decline, Corde notes that not all Chcago is blighted: there are "business Chicago sitting in its skyscrapers, monumental banking Chicago, corporate electronic computerized Chcago" (181). Corde also reports new housing developments south of the Loop in the disused freight yards and the mammoth Deep Tunnel engineering project. Yet, he dislikes the neighborhood of

North Michigan Avenue for its "commercial and promotional smoothness ... the showiness of the skyscrapers, the Bond Street and Rue de la Paix connections" (92) and dubs it "The Malignant Mammonism of the Magnificent Mile" (92).

The *Harper's* articles, as he expects, provoke a lot of anger: "Liberals found him reactionary. Conservatives called him crazy. Professional urbanologists said he was hasty" (206). Students at the college object to much that Corde has written, because he has described "broad-daylight rapes and robberies, sexual acts in public places, on the seats of CTA buses, on the floors of public waiting rooms, men on Sheridan Road spraying automobile fenders with their urine" (179). The student militants pass a resolution declaring that the Dean is a racist and that he owes a public apology "to Black, Puerto Rican and Mexican toilers for making them look 'like animals and savages' " (180). His articles also anger those indignant diehard Chicago boosters who are commuters, who live in the suburbs and escape the race problems and crime.

Corde does not see his articles on Chicago as attacks on his city. He writes them not "because of the opportunities it offer[s] for romantic despair, nor in a spirit of middle-class elegy or nostalgia" (182), but because he wants "to prevent the American idea from being pounded into dust altogether" (135). Cordes cares about American ideas such as liberty, equality, justice, democracy, abundancy and he just wants his fellow citizens to look at what happens to them today in a city like Chicago.

Perhaps what offends his friend Dewey Spangler and other intellectuals most is Corde's idiosyncratic way of writing. Unlike other journalists or urbanologists who fill their reports with jargon and cliches, Corde, motivated by "morality and justice" (182), decides to write in his own language.[12] Throughout the novel, Corde tries to justify his incorporating poetry and philosophy into his essays. Since reality does not exist "out there"–"It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth" (295) - Corde decides to "pass Chicago through his own soul. A mass of data, terrible, murderous" (294 -95). To him, as to Bellow, "without art, it is impossible to interpret reality" (Roudane 280). Thinking about virtue and vice, Corde maintains that in a crisis such as this we should use our imagination and poetry, for "perhaps only poetry had the strength 'to rival the attractions of narcotics, the magnetism of TV, the excitements of sex, or the ecstasies of destruction' " (207).

Corde does not accept his brother-in-law's claim that Chicago is a Darwinian jungle where the survival of the fittest is the law. His brother-in-law may be a beast in this jungle but he and other money maniacs are not "animals fighting honorably for survival ... they were deeply perverted, corrupt" (293). To Corde, Chicago is "more like a garbage dump" (293) than a jungle. However, he thinks Chicago's slums are not that terrifying compared with "the slums we carry around inside us. Every man's *inner* inner city" (229). It is this internal wasteland of the mind that should be purged and resurrected.

Not intimidated by the criticism and hatred of his colleagues, readers, and fellow Chicagoans, Corde will continue to write because he believes in his own sense of existence and his obligation to defend civilization. As he says, "I was speaking up for the

noble ideas of the West in their American form ... 'This is your city– this is your American democracy. It's also my city. I have a right to picture it as I see it' " (136).

In his last conversation with Vlada in Bucharest, Corde tells her that he is eager to go back to Chicago although he does not anticipate "order, beauty, calm, and peace" (312). Vlada replies, "Still, you'll be glad to see Lake Michigan from your window again, I'm sure of that" (312). The city he goes back to has the same old problems: burglary, vandalism, rapes, murders, and corruption. But Corde is indeed "glad to see the lake from his window and have the freshwater ocean for company" even though "at his back the city, unquiet, the slum and its armies just over the day: blacks, Koreans, East Indians, Chippewas, Thais and hillbillies, squad cars, ambulances, firefighters, thrift shops, drug hustlers, lousy bars, alley filth" (314).

Sitting in his highrise apartment in Chicago, "with his back to the decayed city view" (316), the Dean looks down at the water of Lake Michigan and suddenly he attains a recognition of his relation to his city, to his country, and of his motives for writing those *Harper's* essays:

> But there was plenty of emptiness, as much as you needed to define yourself against, as American souls seem to do. Cities ... cities were moods, emotional states, for the most part collective distortions, where human beings thrived and suffered, where they invested their souls in pains and pleasures, taking these pleasures and pains as proofs of reality. Thus "Cain's city built with murder," and other cities built with Mystery, or Pride, all of them emotional conditions and great centers of delusion and bondage, death. *It seemed to Corde that he had made an effort to find out what Chicago, U.S.A., was built with. His motive ... came out of what was eternal in man. What mood was this city? The experience, puzzle, torment of a lifetime demanded interpretation. At least he was beginning to understand why he had written those articles. Nobody was much affected by them, unless it was himself.* (318; emphasis mine)

III

The Dean's December is, as the foregoing sections show, a tale of two dismal cities. While Bucharest is full of decay and demise, Chicago, depravity and decadence. Bellow juxtaposes the chilly Bucharest and the hot Chicago in such a way that he seems to pose his version of Frost's question—"will the world end in fire or ice?" (see Fuchs, *Saul* 306). Yet, to me, Bellow is not a writer that easily succumbs to despair. His arrangement of the novel's ending suggests that: despite the temptation of ethereal, boundless outer space, Corde comes down to the sublunary earth because "*terra firma*" (289) is his beat which needs his observation and interpretation.

In my opinion, Corde is the best balanced hero Bellow ever created. He is the moral center of the novel, who gives weight to the novel's significance as a major urban

novel of the twentieth century. Despite a mixed reception mentioned above, the novel won almost unanimous acclaim for its superb rendering of the city. As the present study indicates, Bellow in *The Dean's December* again demonstrates his dexterity in using the city as a character, in catching the city's ambience to set the right mood, in grappling with complicated urban issues, and in dramatizing the tension between man and his city. The city in the novel is sometimes a mysterious text for the protagonist to read and interpret, to meditate and penetrate, sometimes becomes a distinct character in its own right, while at other times it is modern reality itself, with which the protagonist has to come to terms in order to seek humanity, equanimity, and serenity.

As a writer living in Chicago—"the most American of all American cities" (333) Saul Bellow has tried to deal with "the American Experience, that murky, heavy, burdensome, chaotic thing" ("Starting" 77) almost all through his life. Bellow is "primarily interested in the soul-quality of a work, its truth-telling capability, the moral function of art" (Fuchs, "Saul" 14). Today when moral depravity and wayward behavior have followed in the wake of the blind pursuit of material and sensual enjoyment, when human dignity has been severely ravaged, when the death of the city has been proclaimed, and when apocalyptic visions about the future of civilization have prevailed, it is most significant that Bellow persists in writing about the city, in emphasizing common feelings shared by humankind, in rejecting the cant of pessimism and nihilsim, and in believing in the power of poetry and the imagination. Bellow is indeed, as Spivey points out, an Emersonian representative man who has "plunged into the chaos of the soul" and has come up again "with the awareness of the meaningfulness of all human existence, an awareness and belief, as [Simone] Weil tells us, that is love itself" (19).

Even though the novel lacks the Bellovian comedy which characterizes *Augie March*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog*, and *Humboldt's Gift*, it is a great city novel by a Nobel Laureate who is determined to tell the truth as it passes through his soul and to tell it with style.

Notes

1. D. J. R. Bruckner, "A Candid Talk with Saul Bellow," *New York Times Magazine*, 15 April 1984:52.
2. See Atlas, Beatty, Dubar, Johnson, Kenner, Stade, Updike, Wisse, and Wolcott for example. For a review of the reviews, see Chavkin.
3. Bellow himself concedes that *The Dean's December* is a different kind of work. And he predicted the critical response to the novel: "Some readers will be disappointed. 'You didn't write a Bellow book,' they will say." See Eugene Kennedy 12.
4. Interviewed by Roudane, Bellow makes the following remark about the "nonfiction novelistic style" of *The Dean's December:* "But I wasn't thinking 'novel' when I wrote the book. I was dealing with a sort of mind rather than with a

literary form."

In his interview with Kakutani, Bellow speaks about the genesis of the book. Bellow says that originally he planned to write a non-fiction book about Chicago after the fashion of *To Jerusalem and Back*. However, after making hundreds of pages of notes, he decided to abandon that approach and wrote a novel instead (Kakutani 28). As he tells William Kennedy, "That's a subject for some kind of poetry, not a factual account" (50).

5. See Chen for studies of the man-city dialogue in Bellow's novels.
6. Bellow. *The Dean's December* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982) 232. Further references will be cited in the text.

   Temperamentally an "image man," Corde sometimes considers himself as a kind of God-sent seer, sent to observe, to interpret, and to prophesy. For instance, he feels he is "(and how quickily) called upon for a special exertion to interpret, to pity, to save!" (223). To him, his writing the *Harper's* articles is not a matter of choice, because he feels that "something had come over him." In *Humboldt's Gift*, Humboldt suspects Citrine's uncanny visionary misson; in this novel, Spangler does not like his mysticism when Corde says he is "assigned" to write, thus making it "like a visionary project, or the Voice of God saying, 'Write this up, as follows' " (270).
7. See Newman for a discussion of nihilism in *The Dean's December*.
8. Talking about the Bucharest setting, Bellow says that "in Bucharest and Eastern Europe one can see a more old-fashioned sort of human attachment. ... This is the Tolstoyan sentiment of relatedness, the Slavic mode of connection made famous by the geniuses of the nineteenth century" (Roudane 271).
9. Both Corde and Citrine are, in a sense, two versions of the fictionalized Bellow who tries to explain why he stays in Chicago and why it is possible to combine art with Chicago. Every since he moved back to Chicago from New York in the early sixties, Bellow has repeatedly explained in interviews and essays why he has made Chicago his home turf and held onto it. See the interviews with Illig, Boyers, and Roudane. See also Bellow's essays "Starting out in Chicago," "A Matter of the Soul," "A Writer from Chicago," and "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is."
10. Unfortunately, Bellow does not include verbatim excerpts about historical Chicago from the *Harper's* articles. Perhaps he should publish the nonfiction book about Chicago as he originally planned. Fortunately, after the appearance of this novel, Bellow has published essays about Chicago: "A Writer from Chicago," "In the Days of Mr. Roosevelt," and "Chicago: The City That Was, The City That Is."
11. Since the publication of *The Dean's December*, there has been a new candor about race in America. For example, Bill Moyers' documentary, "The Vanishing Family Crisis in Black America," aired January 25, 1986 on CBS, brings the message home via the mouths of inner-city blacks.
12. Bellow tells an interviewer that "in *The Dean's December* what [he] did was to say,

'Look!' The first step is to display the facts. But the facts, unless the imagination perceives them, are *not* facts. Perhaps [he] shouldn't say 'passionately takes hold.' As an artist does. Mr. Corde, the Dean, passionately takes hold of Chicago and writes his articles like an artist rather than a journalist" (Roudane 273).

Bellow is essentially a realist, even though he has tried various modes of fictional technique. He is, as Yetman points out, an "archlogocentrist": "Like those archlogocentrists before him, the English Romantics, he believes that, properly used, words capture and preserve the truth or reality of human experience, including its moral dimension" (Yetman 430).

To Bellow, no "technicians"—psychologists, sociologists, politicians, journalists, and economists have been able to tell us the real condition of today's demoralized cities. They are only creating a "Great Noise" ("Starting" 77) which destroys meaning, because these people have no imagination of such urban evils as incoherence, sexual disorders, robbery, rape, the abandonment of children, and murder. "They don't even *see* them" (Roudane 273).

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