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THE DEAN'S DECEMBER- AN APOCALYPTIC REACTION OF SAUL BELLOW TO THE URBAN DECAY AND RACIAL CONFLICTS

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Bellow, a Canadian-born Jewish-American novelist, short story writer, playwright, and essayist, is one of America's most celebrated writers of fiction. Life and death, reason and emotion are among the principal themes of his vital, disciplined, and intellectual novels. Saul Bellow's mature fiction can be considered as a conscious challenge to modernism, the dominant literary tradition of the age. For Bellow, modernism is a "victim literature" because it depicts an alienated individual who is conquered by his environment. According to him, this "wasteland" tradition originated in the middle of the nineteenth century with the birth of French realism and culminates in the work of Samuel Beckett and other nihilistic contemporary writers. This victim literature reveals a horror of life and considers humanist values useless in a bleak, irrational world. Modernism assumes that the notion of the individual self which underlies the great tradition of the novel is an outmoded concept, and that modern civilization is doomed. It appears that although Bellow's insistence on being free is not a complete view of human destiny, neither is it simply a piece of naïveté or moral irresponsibility, as has sometimes been suggested. He believes that if we ever define our character and our fate it will be because we have caught up with our own legend, realized our own imagination. Bellow's fertile sense of the ever-possible conversion of reality and imagination, fact and legend, into each other is the source of the richness and significance of his writing. He differs in this respect from the traditional practice of American prose romance, which forces the real and imaginary far apart and finds that there is no circuit of life between them…. Bellow differs, too, from the pure realist, who describes human growth as a simple progress away from legend and toward fact, and from the naturalistic novelist, who conceives of circumstance as always defeating the human impulse of further thrusts toward autonomy. This is merely to say that Bellow's sense of the conversion of reality and imagination is something he shares with the greatest novelists.

The Dean's December embodies an engaging tale, one as complex and multivalent as any Bellow fiction to date. A careful examination of Bellow's ninth novel reveals a successful fusion, in the Coleridgean sense, of idea and image. This fusion accounts for a novel that extends Bellow's philosophical absorption with the individual's struggle with the complex business of living.

The Dean's December is Bellow's tale of two cites—Chicago and Bucharest. The protagonist, Albert Corde, is a newspaper man who has become a Professor of Journalism and subsequently Dean of Students in an unnamed Chicago college. As Dean, he has embroiled himself in controversy by writing a series of articles indicting Chicago for its racism, its clubhouse politics, and its lack of what he calls 'moral initiative'. He has also pressed for the conviction of a black man who murdered one of the college's white students, and he has endeared himself thereby neither to the college provost nor to young liberals on the campus – among them, his nephew. In short, the Dean is too morally passionate for Chicago. He has jeopardized his professional standing as both journalist and college official by his impulse to take absolute moral readings.

The Dean is geographically, if not mentally, distanced from the Chicago fray when he and his wife Minna spend the month of December in Bucharest visiting her dying mother, the distinguished psychiatrist, Valeria Raresh. From the outset of their stay, they find that a Rumanian official obstructs their visits to the dying woman, apparently because of Valeria's history of disdain for the Socialist government. Thirty years earlier she had fallen into disfavor as Minister of Health, officially exonerated years later, she had declined to rejoin the party. The government officials respect Minna's international standing as an astrophysicist, but she had defected from Rumania twenty years earlier while studying in the West, and they are not disposed to overlook Valeria's behaviour for her sake. Indeed, because she did not formally renounce Rumanian citizenship when she became a citizen of the United States, she is arguably subject to Rumanian authority, a situation that worries Corde. Incautious conversation must never be indulged in her mother's wiretapped apartment, he warns, and he is anxious that they leave as soon as possible after Valeria's death on Christmas eve.

A childhood friend of Corde named Dewey Spangler happens to be in Bucharest when Valeria dies, and Corde confides in him, imprudently so, because Spangler is an international journalist who fancies himself a Walter Lippmann. Upon the Dean's return to America he is embarrassed to find that he has given Spangler an interview and is the subject of one of his columns. Insidiously, the column mimics the Dean's articles about Chicago in tone and style, and with pseudo-analytical eloquence Spangler concludes that Corde possesses "earnestness too great for his capacities" (300). So damning is the indictment and so dismissive is Spangler's suggestion that Corde goes into a shock when he glimpses into the world outside the academe, Corde feels his professional credibility destroyed, at least in moral matters. He resigns his Deanship immediately, intending to write further articles but no longer attracted to controversy. The novel ends with him accompanying Minna to the Mount Palomar.

Corde is a well-read man. His talks and his articles carry evidence of his reading of Plato and Aristotle, reading of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. He is well aware of the different traditions of thought, the different forms of society. But Corde's notations are not very incisive. In fact, he tends to make easy formulations and categories. He tends to punctuate his writings with platitudes to focus attention on the surface details:

> It was an instinct with Corde may be it was a weakness – always to fix
> attention on certain particulars, in every situation to grasp the details…
> with him, exclusively mental acts seldom occurred. He was
> temperamentally an image man.*

These suggest that Corde is not sure of himself and is beset with certain contradictions and confusion. For the most part he remains a passive figure, not so much a participant in the action as a witness to the action. Perhaps that is the reason why critics have labelled the book as nonfiction in nature. Albert Corde and his wife, Minna visit Bucharest to see Minna's dying mother. What strikes him about Bucharest is that like Hamlet's Denmark it is a city under surveillance; every citizen is under observation, so to say. The institutions show rigid regiment of heart, free and frank exchange of views is not to be permitted. Corde is a virtual prisoner there. He shuts himself up in his wife's room and keeps looking out of the window. While in Bucharest, he has some unpleasant encounters too. But again these things are not so important. What is important is Corde's perception of the culture of Bucharest. Bellow uses this perception as a foil to Corde's experience of Chicago.

The Dean writes articles recording his impressions of the culture of Chicago. He writes about violence and abuse to be found there. He writes about the rising crime graph and about corruption. Albert Corde's fraternity does not take kindly to these articles. Even some of his relatives turn against him. The Dean himself is not too happy, neither with himself for speaking the truth, nor with those who are critical of him because he has spoken the truth. The fact is that Albert Corde's response to Chicago is itself marginal. He has not yet reached the level of consciousness which will permit him a gestalt view of Chicago or of Bucharest. Consider for example, Albert Corde's response to the death of a white student in a bar brawl. Two Black students are accused of causing the death. As a Dean, Corde has to involve himself in the murder trial, he knows that the death was accidental, but he hopes that the verdict will go against the two Black students. The episode shows the limitations from which Albert Corde's consciousness suffers.

Albert Corde has glimpses of the wholeness of the past. His problem is that he himself fails to reach it. His transcendence, what Sartre would call his 'leap of faith', comes when he gets the courage to throw away his tenure and decides to go to Mount Palomer. The focus in *The Dean's December* is mainly on the manifestations of social disorder. As in other novels, here too the protagonist's development is on by now the familiar Sartrerian lines. Albert Corde also transcends his various acts of bad faith, and moves towards self-definition, his 'essence'. Albert Corde is allowed a vision of wholeness and integration but that is more predicated on him than enacted through action.

For sometime Bellow had been working on a long non-fiction book about Chicago, which, he came to realize, could only be given its due in fictional treatment. Chicago, he told an interviewer, was "a subject for some kind of poetry, not a factual account", or "the very language you have to use as a journalist works against the true material" (1984: 265). Another case of public life is drowning out of private life. Bellow's protagonist, Albert Corde, a former journalist and Professor of Journalism turned Dean of Students at a Chicago University also knows that "nothing true—really true—could be said in the papers" (106). Inspiration came when Bellow fused the Chicago book with one about Bucharest, a tale of two cities, as was *Humboldt's Gift.*

Corde, as Stanley Trachtenberg, in writing about Bellow's heroes in general, observes: "Environment has functioned less as an influence on events and characters than as a projection of their inner conflict, a symbol as well as an agent of inhuman darkness. Bellow's protagonists are thus placed in a social environment but oppressed by personal natural forces that obscure the resulting tensions by developing them in oblique relation to their framing situations" (1979; xiii). Trachtenberg's remarks apply to Corde precisely. To be sure, the narrative line of the novel, with its graphic depiction of 'social environment,' interests us; but what engages Bellow's imagination is Corde's ongoing struggle to evaluate internally his self, and the way in which that self responds to the other. It is a disarming correlation. Within *The Dean's December*, Bellow thus presents the inner reality of Corde, a consciousness which is in crisis with the external world. As cosmic observer, Corde discovers 'the slum' of the psyche, a corrosive force which, for Bellow, devitalizes contemporary civilization in general and its denizens in particular.

Corde's compassionate (and at times misplaced) assault against such a corrosive force motivates his responses throughout the novel. As Corde reflects: "But I (damn!), starting to collect material for a review of life in my native city, and finding at once wounds, lesions, cancer's destructive fury, death, felt (and how quirkily) called upon for a special exertion—to interpret, to pity to save!" (201). We sense in the preceding passage Corde's optimism, and Bellow scholars will quickly note that such an attitude is characteristic of the Bellow hero. What confirms our sense, however, is Corde's qualifying reflection which immediately follows: "This was stupid. It was insane. But now the process was begun, how was I to stop it? I couldn't stop it" (201). Corde's 'review' of Chicago led to a discovery of a more unnerving fact—that the 'lesions' and 'cancers' were only surface manifestations of a deeper condition: "It was not so much the inner city slum that threatened us as the slum of the innermost being, of which the inner city was perhaps a material representation" (201). Reflecting on the rootedness of such a condition generates much anxiety in Corde, an anguish that reveals more about the quality of his sensibility and values than Chicago's slums: "As I spelled this out I felt that I looked ailing and sick. A kind of hot haze came over me. I felt my weakness as I approached the business of the soul—its true business in this age" (201).

Corde's relationship with Valeria is thematically central to the novel. Their relationship reveals the depth of Corde's capacity to love. An early key scene demonstrates this point. In the opening chapter, we learn that while Minna read a paper at a scientific conference, Corde escorted Valeria for two days. It was an awkward time for Corde, presumably because his mother-in-law scrutinized his character and his worthiness during this time. Touring the Etoile, Corde realized the vacation was physically too demanding for the near-eighty-year-old Valeria: "He was upset for her. She couldn't keep her balance; she was tipping, listing, seemed unable to coordinate the movements of her feet" (15). Although she does not care to admit it because of her strong spirit, Valeria is extremely frail.

But what makes this scene thematically important is its suggestion that Corde appears intuitively in touch with Valeria: he is not only aware of her frailty but radiates a genuine concern for the old woman's predicament. Bellow elaborates this point later when Valeria is moments from death: "Corde thought of her with extraordinary respect. Her personal humanity came from the old sources" (105). It is her "personal humanity," of course, to which Corde responds; further, it is a response tempered not out of any sense of familial duty, but out of his authentic rapprochement with Valeria: he has discovered in Valeria "the feeling of human agreement" for which he constantly yearns (13).

Bellow further presents the nature of Corde and Valeria's relationship during a rare hospital visit. Verbal expression of their love surfaces for the first time within this scene:

> Consciousness was as clear as it had ever been. No, more acute than ever, for when Minna signaled that he should take her hand (again he noted the blue splayed knuckle, and the blue kink of the vein there), she pressed his fingers promptly. He said, "We came as soon as possible." Then as if he should not delay the essential message, he said in his deep voice, "I also love you, Valeria." (128)

Bellow emphasizes the sympathetic correspondence between Corde and Valeria a final time: during the funeral and crematorium scenes. While the authorities politicize her death, Bellow suggests that Corde humanizes the event, a point made clear when he evaluates the proceedings: "The speeches now began. Corde had lived long enough in Europe to be familiar with the Communist oratory, the lame rhythms or rhetorical questions and answers. "Who is this woman? She was … a comrade, a militant… Terrible stuff" (211). Although the ossified, politically correct speeches serve their purpose, they also negate, by implication for Corde, the loss in human terms. The political speeches, what Sinclair Lewis, in *It Can't Happen Here,* calls "orgasms of oratory," (1984: 634) have the same anesthetizing influence that American journalism has on the public consciousness. Such an influence motivates Corde to reaffirm his humanity. In some of the strongest writing in the novel – the Dantean crematorium episodes – Bellow clearly presents the humanizing quality Corde interjects during Valeria's funeral.

Bellow seemed less interested in narrative for its own sake and didn't appreciate the usual kinds of plot that novelists concoct and readers expect. In *Dangling Man*, we can see where Bellow's real interests lay from the beginning of his career. In *The Dean's December,* we can also see the seeds planted by his first novel coming to fruition.

The Codes' nearly futile attempt to see Valeria, who is held virtually a prisoner by the colonel in the hospital, is one prong of the novel's plot. The other prong is Dean Corde's attempt to obtain justice for the death of Lester. Both end in rather Pyrrhic victories: Albert and Minna get to see Valeria briefly once more before she dies, and those accused of the homicide are found guilty in a trail and sentenced accordingly. Albert Corde's nephew, who has been the perpetrators' advocate, is also charged and skips bail.

Perception of reality – and especially the unreality that burdens and clouds perceptions – are essentially what interest Saul Bellow. As Michiko Kakutani puts it, "Like these characters [i.e. Moses Herzog, Eugene Henderson, Arthur Sammler, Albert Corde] who are continually searching for a way to apprehend reality, Mr. Bellow tends to regard fiction as a kind of tool for investigating the society around him; he sees the novelist as 'an imaginative historian, who is able to get closer to contemporary facts than social scientists possibly can" (1982: sec. 7: 1). His task as writer, therefore, has been to penetrate into *what is* – to focus as clearly as possible on the very reality that T.S. Eliot described as a threat. According to Bellow, perceiving that reality and then dealing with it is the only way to come to grips with human existence and thereby become fully human.

The Dean's December is an apocalyptic text that articulates the author's neo-conservative reaction to the urban decay and racial conflicts that characterized America in the 1970s and early 1980s. Bellow's politics of cultural apocalypse is driven by a clear racial discourse. Bellow's prophet-like narrator, Corde, tries tirelessly to redeem Chicago, a city on the brink of destruction. For a writer impatient with the apocalyptic world-view of the modernists, Bellow takes recourse in this novel to apocalyptic thinking inspired by the horror of decadent Chicago. Bellow's apocalyptic representation of his times, as it emerges in this novel, is unique in that it is steeped in the stark reality of decaying cities and racial traumas in contemporary America. *The Dean's December* emerges as a significant text in the American tradition of apocalyptic writing and as a crucial text in Bellow's canon.

Kiernan, Robert F. observes that Corde tries to make physical perception a vehicle of humanistic understanding. His endeavor can be compared to the Sharp-Focus Realists in modern painting. Like the exaggerated clarity of Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" (photo), Corde's intensity of observation produces a sense of signification rather than explicable meanings. In demanding coherence of a divided world, Corde seeks an idealistic enterprise. Bellovian man enters as Corde finds no possibility of synthesis being real without his perceiving it. "Reality didn't exist 'out there'.... It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth" (263). Rather than relax into dividedness, he seeks to resolve opposite opinion into ultimate truth.

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