

# Chicago and the Contemplative Process in Saul Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March* and "Looking For Mr. Green"

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"Give Chicago half a chance, and it will turn you into a philosopher"

– Saul Bellow, 1983 (Bellow, "Chicago" 245)

In Saul Bellow's third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), the protagonist's encounters with Depression-era Chicago lead him to contemplate the very nature of city living and, beyond that, the twentieth-century human condition. The novel is an unusual *bildungsroman*. Education comes from many sources, sometimes through attempts to navigate Chicago's industrial landscapes, mass transit systems, and modern architecture. These historical phenomena created unprecedented subjective experiences for the city dweller.

Bellow's fiction represents not just a different approach to urban representation but also an uncommon optimism about the modern city's possibilities for the individual. As Murray Baumgarten has said, "For Bellow, living in the city is a philosophical activity. Urban life makes possible the discovery of the self because it highlights the ways in which individuality is an event of consciousness as well as history." Only in the city "one can be an individual and thereby participate in the enterprise of Western culture" (Baumgarten 399). Chicago is the modern American city *par excellence*, a center of innovation and new technologies, and an ideal setting for Bellow's explorations of modern life.

Robert Alter's exploration of urban fiction in his book *Imagined Cities*, although focused on nineteenth and twentieth century European novels, is a useful guide to studying Bellow's fiction. Alter's argument is that "new objective realities, from architecture to public transport to the economy" in nineteenth century European cities led to a change in the very "perception of the fundamental categories of time and space" (Alter xi). So how did novelists respond to these changes? Or rather, how did they create these new types of cities in prose? Alter observes a trend in nineteenth century literature: "The practice of conducting the narrative more and more through the moment by moment experience—sensory, visceral, and mental—of the main character[s]" (x). He calls this practice *experiential realism*, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. The subject of Alter's book *Imagined Cities* is "the intersection of the subtle deployment of experiential realism and the emergence of a new order of urban reality" (x).

*Augie March's* experiential realism is created through the protagonist's retrospective first person voice, an exhaustively detailed prose combining unusual use of metaphor, (often comic) juxtapositions of grandeur and the mundane, sometimes grotesque evocations of the body, and casual sentence structure. Furthermore, Bellow uses this experiential realism not just to vividly *recreate* Augie March's subjective encounters with modern urban phenomena, but also to lead the reader through the philosophical contemplations provoked by such encounters. In these encounters, Augie contemplates the 20<sup>th</sup> century human condition faced with modernity and city life. Bellow's repeated illustration of the power of the modern urban environment to shape consciousness—and to stir it into contemplation—is one of the factors that makes *The Adventures of Augie March* a startlingly original twentieth century American novel of the city.

### Augie March's Adventures

The adventures begin in the slums of Chicago's Humboldt Park. "I am an American—Chicago born," Augie March tells us in the novel's famous first sentence (Bellow, *Augie March* 3). Augie is also a bastard, fatherless, with a "simple-minded" (3) mother, retarded younger brother named George, and an older brother, Simon, whose relentless and ruthless social climbing is at odds with Augie's uncommitted "free-style" (3). In the early years the family is guided by an old lady lodger who acquires the honorary title "Grandma" Lausch. She has hopes to make something

wholesome of Simon and Augie. She is disappointed, and slowly fades from influence until institutionalized. George, too, is placed in an institution. Mrs. March is eventually sent to a Home for the blind. Free of family responsibilities, Simon and Augie make their divergent ways in Chicago.

*Augie March* chronicles its narrator's progress from this impoverished childhood through a range of apprenticeships, occupations and schemes. As itemized by Martin Amis, Augie is successively "a hand-bill distributor, a paper boy, a dime-store packer, a news vendor, a Christmas extra in a toy department, a flower deliverer, a butler, a shoe salesman, a saddle-shop floorwalker, a hawkler of rubberized paint, a dog-washer, a book swiper, a coal-yard helper, a housing surveyor, a union organizer, an animal-trainer, a gambler, a literary researcher, a salesman of business machines, a sailor, and a middleman for a war profiteer" (Amis 116). "Look at me, going everywhere!" Augie says on the last page (536). Modern Chicago is revealed in this sprawling, flashy, almost six hundred-page novel.

### Bellow's Experiential Realism

Saul Bellow's "two very correct" (Bellow and Roth 72) early novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), were written with an acute awareness of his identity as a Jewish writer of English language fiction. In the years before his death, Bellow wrote a series of essayistic letters to Philip Roth, posthumously published in the *New Yorker*. Referring to these early novels, Bellow had felt that

I, as the child of Russian Jews, must establish my authority, my credentials, my fitness to write books in English. Somewhere in my Jewish and immigrant blood there were conspicuous traces of a doubt as to whether I had the right to practice the writer's trade. (Bellow and Roth 72)

Finally, Bellow revolted against the self-imposed confines of this "very correct" prose style which seems to have condemned the novels to a bleak, pessimistic outlook. Bellow remembered early encounters with the English language as the son of immigrants in Chicago, and that

You could not be excluded when the common language became your language—when you knew the National League standings, when you had learned about the Chicago gang wars. ...

You didn't know the full story from sober, reliable, dependable sources. You had come to know it by mastering the language in which it was gussied up by newspapers and by magazines like *Ballyhoo*, *College Humor*, and Henry Luce's *Time*. Chicago was big on gab in the twenties and thirties, and under the influence of gab you came to feel yourself an insider. (75–76)

Here we have Bellow interpreting the gap between appearance and reality, the “gussied up” truth of “gab,” which is a central philosophical obsession in the works under consideration. Bellow also reflects:

There was something deeply unsatisfying about the language used by contemporary writers—it was stingy and arid, it was not connected with anything characteristic, permanent, durable, habitual in the writer's outlook. For as long as I could remember I identified body and limbs, faces and their features, with words, phrases, and tones of voice. Language, thought, belief were connected somehow with noses, eyes, brows, mouths, hair—legs, hands, feet had their counterparts in language....In this way the words and the phenomena were interrelated. (76)

In Paris after World War II, Bellow drew upon memories of the family of a boisterous boyhood neighbor named Chuckie August, “a handsome, breezy, freewheeling kid who used to yell out when we were playing checkers, ‘I got a scheme!’” “[Describing] their lives” in fiction, Bellow found that “subject and language appeared at the same moment...In the next two years [during the composition of *The Adventures of Augie March*] I seldom looked into Fowler's *Modern English Usage*” (74–75).

The prose of *Augie March* reads like the prose of emancipation. In an earlier essay apparently responding to Bellow's then-unpublished letters, Philip Roth writes of the liberating impact of the novel's opening sentence: “This assertion of unequivocal, unquellable citizenship in free-style America (and the five-hundred-odd-page book that followed) was precisely the bold stroke required to abolish anyone's doubts about the American writing credentials of an immigrant son like Saul Bellow” (Roth 143). Roth also notes that “I read Bellow's liberty-taking prose as the syntactical demonstration of Augie's large, robust ego” (141).

Bellow has a famously abundant metaphorical imagination, yet it's his unorthodox *use* of metaphorical language that is most startling. James Clements, in an analysis of Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), cites its descriptions of “clawlike” nails and “pagodalike” shoulders. He says:

these latter descriptors appear less like similes than descriptive adjectives because of the omission of the expected hyphen. Bellow wants to deny the reader the usual distance between appearance and meaning and uses metaphorical language so tightly wound...that the objects of description seem to collapse into their referent. (Clements 78)

These kinds of metaphorical oddities, Bellow's interference with the “usual distance between appearance and meaning,” exist as well in the earlier *Augie March*.

For example, early in the novel Augie joins Dingbat Einhorn on a journey to Muskegon, Michigan, where Dingbat's protégé, a crummy boxer named Nails Nagel, loses a fight. Having sailed across Lake Michigan on the *City of Saugatuck*, the now-penniless trio are forced to make their way back to Chicago by hitch-hiking. They pass through Gary and Hammond, satellite cities of Chicago. Gary was created by US Steel on leveled sand dunes twenty-six miles southeast of Chicago at the lowest point of Lake Michigan (across the Indiana State border). The city was named after the corporation's chairman of the board. Incorporated in 1906, Gary was “more a gigantic tract development than a model town. The choice sites along the lake went into industrial plants and a harbor” (Mayer and Wade 242) Augie recalls the scene of

...flames seen by their heat, not light, in the space of noon air among the black, huge Pasiphaë cows and other columnar animals, headless, rolling a rust of smoke and connected in an enormous statuary of hearths and mills—here and there an old boiler or a hill of cinders in the bulrush spawning-holes of frogs. (Bellow, *Augie March* 90)

Metaphors often appear in unlikely slots in the sentence, here as pseudo-adjectives. Here Augie evokes the human wife of King Minos, Pasiphaë,

whose coupling with the Cretan bull resulted in the birth of the Minotaur (Harris and Platzner 246). From this we must assume that the cows of the satellite cities are big and fierce, larger than the cows of mundane reality; only by referring to myth can Augie convey their monstrosity. Yet Pasiphaë is a human character in the myth, rather than a category of cow, and Augie makes no attempt to correctly categorize the cows adjectivally as, say, “Pasiphaëan” (Augie probably means “Minoan” cows, anyway). Instead he allows the noun “Pasiphaë,” an associative metaphor, to act as an adjective—as elsewhere we find a “Mark Twain suit” (Bellow, *Augie March* 67), an “Odessa black dress” (97), or the more abstract “poodle locomotives” (345), and so on. It is an efficient evocative method that once again, in the words of Clement, has the result of making “the objects of description...collapse into their referent” (78).

The cows are accompanied by “other columnar animals, headless”; such stony “headless” animals fit well into Augie’s metaphorical designation of the hearth-and-mill landscape as a collection of statues—a “statuary.” But how startling to render this unquestionably *modern* setting by evoking antiquity; also how unusual to use the stasis of a “statuary” when describing a dynamic landscape that is the epitome of industrial progress in motion. Then there is the bizarre metaphorical collective noun given to the smoke, “a rust,” which is presumably meant to also work adjectivally, to suggest “rust-colored”; this is also fitting because of the smoke’s origin in steel production. We are presented with the unlikely but vivid image of a “rust of smoke” that is “roll[ed]” by the cows.

Writing in retrospect, Augie recalls his youth with an expansive vision drawing on his self-acquired classical education: he has read the stained set of Harvard Classics owned by his mentor William Einhorn, the oft-mentioned “Five Foot Shelf” of Dr. Eliot. Nevertheless, Augie is prone to toss his classical references into a sentence as casually (“Pasiphaë cows”) as he would a contemporary reference to, say, “Colossimo [*sic*] and Capone in Cicero” (22). This juxtaposition of grandeur and the mundane, the timeless and the topical, occurs throughout *Augie March*; it seems to epitomize Bellow’s stated decision to seize on the “gussied up” everyday “gab” of the 1920s and 1930s and apply it to all types of discourse, even to the lofty realms of philosophy, myth, and history. Long before the postmodern interrogation of the high and mass cultural divide, Bellow threw it all together in *Augie March*. His approach to language means that all phenomena Augie encounters in Chicago, no

matter how ephemeral in the flux of a modern city—and what is more ephemeral than a cow led to the slaughterhouse?—can be documented with the timeless power of myth.

Another component of Bellow’s prose is his description of bodies, which often extends to the grotesque, to Dickensian caricatures. Physicality seems to sit at the center of Bellow’s particular experiential realism. As James Wood has said, Bellow’s “characters are embodied souls, stretched essences. Their bodies are their confessions, their moral camouflage faulty and peeling: they have the bodies they deserve” (Wood xv). A good example of this type of caricature is the depiction of William Einhorn’s father.

William Einhorn’s father is evoked in this way:

...he floated near the pier in the pillow striping of his suit with large belly, large old man’s 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...” (Bellow, *Augie March* 61).

This kind of microscopically-detailed description is a classic component of Bellow’s mature prose style. “It’s normal for me to have such curiosity about details” says Augie at one point (197). The close-zoom specificity over Einhorn Senior has the effect of creating an old man afresh from his various parts, even if he seems like something of a caricature. The frequency of such detailed physical descriptions seems extravagant in comparison to Bellow’s contemporaries, and a particular affront to the terse Hemingway and hardboiled schools. Bellow devotes many words to evoke the physicality of marginal or transitory characters. In the end, this plenitude of seemingly irrelevant specific detail, a spilling-over of verisimilitude beyond the call of duty, has the effect of implying authenticity. What is it but an instruction that the reader should believe in this world?

But these re-creations in prose of Augie’s subjective experiences do not just stand alone as an effective mode of experiential realism. Rather, the experiences regularly lead Augie to essayistic contemplations on the very nature of city living and, beyond that, the very condition of twentieth century humankind.

### The Lot of Twentieth-Century Humankind

Bellow's novels are deeply concerned with philosophical questions. It is usual for his fictional protagonists to ponder the deeper significance of material life. Discussing the later Bellow novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), Clements explains the protagonist's preference for "distinguishing" over "explanation." To *explain* phenomena involves the "imposition of reductive patterns upon a complex reality," whereas *distinguishing* is defined as "to become aware of each person and thing's unique reality without ideological imposition" (Clements 75). Clements implies that Bellow shared Mr. Sammler's position on this matter:

This does not mean, however, that one seeks an unimaginable objective vision; Bellow was aware that the subject cannot be eradicated from any act of perception. However, Bellow challenges the Cartesian assertion by insisting that one can encounter truth through subjectivity, as the subject does not stand apart from the world, but within it. In his novels, he sought to "distinguish" between false self-created (rational, intellectual, systematic) ideas and what he calls "natural" knowledge, which is innate, intuitive and sensory; it is the product of one's inherent connection to the external world. (75–76)

Bellow's earlier fiction also illuminates this philosophical stance. "Looking For Mr. Green" narrates a quixotic attempt by a welfare agency employee to impose order on the chaotic city. *The Adventures of Augie March*, in contrast, shows the greater success of a "free-style" engagement with the city. Here Bellow's experiential realism insists the reader share the process of philosophical contemplation—"distinguishing"—that proceeds from Augie's open-minded subjective encounters with the modern urban landscape.

An example of Augie's contemplative process occurs in chapter IX of *Augie March*, a powerful series of Depression-era industrial visions towards which Augie maintains a somewhat detached fascination. After his botched people-smuggling adventure with Joe Gorman near Buffalo, close to the Canadian border, Augie escapes the police and tries to return to Chicago. He hops a train heading for Toledo, misses the stop, and winds up on his way to Detroit. As ever, his thoughts turn to an interrogation of the landscape around him:

Queer that I didn't worry more about being taken these hundreds of miles out of my way when there were only a few quarters and some thinner stuff in my pocket, about a buck in all. Riding in this dusk and semiwinter, it was the way paltry and immense were so mixed, perhaps, the jointed spine of train racing and swerving, the steels, rusts, bloodlike paints extended space after space in the sky, and then other existence, space after space.

Factory smoke was standing away with the wind, and we were in an industrial sub-town-battlefield, cemetery, garbage crater, violet welding scald, mountains of tires sagging, and ashes spuming like crests in front of a steamer, Hooverville crate camps, plague and war fires like the boiling pinnacle of all sackings and Napoleonic Moscow burnings. The freight stopped with a banging and concussion, and we jumped out and were getting over the tracks when someone got us by the shoulders from behind and gave us each a boot in the ass. (170)

Here, deeper into the Great Depression, Augie's perspective reveals a more wretched landscape than Gary and Hammond, a borderless intersection of "paltry" industry (the mundane) and "immense" natural world (the grand); the "bloodlike paints" of industry and the dusk sky a continuum of color. The lack of division between the "paltry and immense" fascinates Augie; this has an analogue in the very prose of *Augie March*, which repeatedly juxtaposes the mundane and the grand. Here Augie smashes together the various elements of the landscape with typical grammatical haphazardness. Strange metaphorical images such as the "violet welding scald"—in which we must imagine the land burned like flesh by the industrial activity—are wedged between the concrete descriptors "garbage crater" and "mountains of tires sagging". The paragraph shifts ever more towards a kind of Melvillean grandeur—the "spuming" ashes that are metaphorically likened to ocean crests—and then comes Napoleonic war imagery and the biblical "plagues" and "war fires." But, as if to comically trump the immensity of this vision, there is the concluding prosaic paltriness of the "boot in the ass."

Later that night, under arrest in Detroit and waiting to be booked, Augie surveys the other people in custody as "four or five faces of peculiar night-wildness by the electric globe of the desk" including a man "with a bloody beehive of bandages" (171). A surreal image: the "four

or five” faces seem to have taken on the shape of their illicit doings; another set of what Wood calls Bellow’s “embodied souls.” Augie zeros in on minute impressions: one cop has eyes “as explicit as otherwise everything was vague about this gray, yellow, and white-haired head, bent with weakness. The eyes, however, trained so they were foreign to anything but their long-time function, they had no personal regard” (174). When Augie is forced by the police to empty his pockets, he appraises the process as “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 content of your pockets your own business: that was the purpose of it” (174). Augie rarely fails to ponder the deeper significance of any social activity.

Startling metaphorical evocations abound. On his procession to his cell, Augie hears “zoo-rustling straw where some prisoner got off his sack for a look through the bars” (174). Another bizarrely slotted evocation, metaphorical verb working as an adjective, “zoo-rustling” immediately evokes the image of a caged lion, even though it is not the straw that rustles a zoo, but animals that rustle straw. Then there are the sounds in Augie’s cell: “by the wall, at day, a big dull rolling began, choking, the tube-clunk of trucks and heavy machine fuss, and also the needle-mouth speed of trolleys, fast as dragonflies” (174). Bellow’s prose freely throws words together in strange juxtapositions: “Tube-clunk” for a sound, “needle-mouth” for speed. This has the appearance of being improvised, proto-Kerouac “spontaneous prose.” Bellow had indeed abandoned Fowler for the syntax of the street.

Almost passive during these experiences, Augie is always a keen observer of Depression squalor. The weight of his observations finally strike him as he enters Eire, Pennsylvania:

There is a darkness. It is for everyone. You don’t, as perhaps some imagine, try it, one foot into it like a barbershop “September Morn.” Nor are lowered into it with visitor’s curiosity, as the old Eastern monarch was let down into the weeds inside a glass ball to observe the fishes. Nor are lifted straight out after an unlucky tumble, like a Napoleon from the mud of the Arcole where he had been standing up to his thoughtful nose while the Hungarian bullets broke the clay off the bank. Only some Greeks and admirers of theirs, in their liquid noon, where the

friendship of beauty to human things was perfect, thought they were clearly divided from this darkness. And these Greeks too were in it. But still they are the admiration of the rest of the mud-sprung, famine-knifed, street-pounding, war-rattled, difficult, painstaking, kicked in the belly, grief and cartilage mankind, the multitude, some under a coal-sucking Vesuvius of chaos smoke, some inside a heaving Calcutta midnight, who very well know where they are. (175)

Here we find the essayistic turn of *Augie March*, the philosophical contemplations that reaffirm Baumgarten’s view that in Bellow’s vision “living in the city is a philosophical activity” (Baumgarten 399). Augie’s experiences as a temporary pauper under the yoke of Depression-era authority lead him to an appraisal of the human condition that draws deeply on history and myth; a powerful characterization of humankind’s lot by the juxtaposition of strange adjectives—sometimes concrete (“street-pounding”), sometimes abstract (“difficult”), sometimes both (“grief and cartilage”). Each of these adjectives are rendered more effective by their evocative power.

### The Consequences of City Life

As I have mentioned, there is a frequent clashing of oppositions in *Augie March*: of the grand and the mundane, of great luxury and squalor, of high energy and dour protocol. Observing these juxtapositions and clashings, these contradictions, Augie keenly contemplates city consequences.

Here for example, is a passage in which Augie attends his brother Simon’s wedding to a society woman at an unnamed luxury hotel. Chicago was the home of hotels such as the Drake (1920) and Palmer House (rebuilt 1923–25) and the Stevens (1927; later the Hilton). These were symbols of modern luxury. We find the Bellowian theme of appearances and realities:

And then we came to the proud class of the hotel and its Jupiter’s heaviness and restless marble detail, seeking to be more and more, introducing another pot too huge for flow-ers, another carved figure, another white work of iron; and inside luxuriously warm—even the subterranean garage where

I parked had this silky warmth. And coming out of the elevator, you were in an Alhambra of roses and cellular ceilings, gilt and ivory, Florida feathering of plants and muffling of carpets, immense distances, and everywhere the pure purpose of supporting and encompassing the human creature in conveniences. Of doing unto the body; holding it precious; bathing, drying, powdering, preparing satin rest, conveying, feeding. I've been at Schönbrunn and in the Bourbon establishment in Madrid and seen all that embellishment as the setting of power. But luxury as the power itself is different—luxury without anything ulterior. Except insofar as all yearning, for no matter what, just so its scope is vast, is of one cluster of mysteries and always ulterior. And what will this power do to you? I know that I in, say, an ancient palace like Venice or in Rome, passing along the side of majestic walls where great men once sat, experienced what it was to be simply a dot, a speck that scans across the cornea, a corpuscle, almost white, almost nothing but air: I to these *ottimati* in their thought. And this spectacular ancient aggrandizement with its remains of art and many noble signs I could appreciate even if I didn't want to be just borne down by the grandeur of it. But in this modern power of luxury, with its battalions of service workers and engineers, it's the things themselves, the products that are distinguished, and the individual man isn't nearly equal to their great sum. Finally they are what becomes great—the multitude of baths with never-failing hot water, the enormous air-conditioning units and elaborate machinery. No opposing greatness is allowed, and the disturbing person is the one who won't serve by using or denies by not wishing to enjoy.

I didn't yet know what view I had of all this. It still wasn't clear to me whether I would be for or against it. But then how does anybody form a decision to be against and persist against?

When does he choose and when is he chosen instead? (237–238)

The luxury hotel creates a uniquely modern sensory experience for the city dweller. Bellow uses classic metaphorical passages (“an Alhambra of roses”) as well as his pseudo-adjectives: the “Florida feathering” of the plants, which are presumably swampy and lush, and the promise of “satin rest,” which evokes satin sheets but also a sleep that has the

smoothness of satin. The subjective encounter with the modern city, conveyed in this mode of experiential realism, has led Augie to address his prevailing concern about the diminishment of the individual by technology in the modern city. Augie finds himself unsure which position to take on the question.

This kind of pessimistic vision of the individual doomed in the modern metropolis had great currency in Bellow's youth. According to Bellow's biographer James Atlas, “one of Bellow's formative books” was Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (Atlas 25). Spengler, in Romantic reaction against the influence of “the Enlightenment insistence on mechanism and causality” proposed an organic theory of the life of a “culture analogous to the growth, maturity and decay of a plant” (Lehan 211). The condition is entropic as the city becomes distant from its roots in the land. The vision is also racially pessimistic; Spengler believed that “with the rise of ethnic diversity, what is organic and homogeneous to a culture breaks down. As these factors drive the move from Culture to Civilization, a process of decline begins. The modern city thus has a shell that promises great vitality...while an inner reality works destructively and pushes us toward death” (220).

Rightly or wrongly, Spengler would acquire a permanent posthumous association with Nazism. Yet his ideas about the decline of civilization in the city had much currency in the America of the twenties and thirties. Richard Lehan cites the influence of Spengler on T. S. Eliot as well as on *The Great Gatsby* (1925): “Fitzgerald located an impossible ideal in an exhausted past and, like Spengler, saw modern man as victim of a nostalgia for an old, untainted world that the modern city had rendered impossible” (216). Of course Spengler's ideas have many antecedents in the history of anti-rational Romanticism, and would continue to be voiced by such writers as Henry Miller. “I'm still a great believer in Spengler,” Miller said in 1962 (Miller & Wickes 1962). In consideration of the above passage in *Augie March*, Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) seems an apt engagement from the Spenglerian angle with the idea of modern America luxury. In Pittsburgh, Miller writes:

I am in a small, supposedly comfortable room of a modern hotel equipped with all the latest conveniences. The bed is clean and soft, the shower functions perfectly, the toilet seat has been sterilized since the last occupancy, if I am to believe

what is printed on the paper band which garlands it; soap, towels, lights, stationery, everything is provided in abundance.

I am depressed, depressed beyond words. If I were to occupy this room for any length of time I would go mad—or commit suicide. The spirit of the place, the spirit of the men who made it the hideous city it is, seeps through the walls. There is murder in the air. It suffocates me. (26–27)

Norman Mailer, in a similar mood, would write of the luxury San Francisco Hilton upon its opening in 1964: “Molecules were being tortured everywhere” (50).

As Atlas points out, we find the title character of *Herzog* reading Spengler (“struggling and drowning in the oceanic visions of that sinister kraut”) as a teenager in the early 1930s while the Chicago West Side streets were “coated with steely ice”:

I learned that I, a Jew, was a born Magian and that we Magians had already had our great age, forever past. No matter how hard I tried, I would never grasp the Christian and Faustian world idea, forever alien to me...I had better resign myself to Destiny. A Jew, a relic as lizards are relics of the great age of reptiles, I might prosper in a false way by swindling the *goy*, the laboring cattle of a civilization dwindled and done for. Anyway, it was an age of spiritual exhaustion—all the old dreams were dreamed out. I was angry; I burned like [the] furnace; reading more, sick with rage...I looked away from the dense print and its insidious pedantry, my heart infected with ambition, and the bacteria of vengeance... (234)

Needless to say, Bellow’s vision of the city in *Augie March* is the antithesis of Spengler. Although it does not specifically invoke Spengler, the following passage from the novel seems an engagement with the contemporary concerns of the Spenglerian school of Romantic anti-urbanism. Using Chicago’s less than luxurious mass transit, Augie is led to contemplate the ability of the human individual to thrive in a modern city. The experience of travelling on the El and/or streetcars in bleak winter is recreated not only in *Augie March* but in Bellow’s later Depression-set stories “A Silver Dish” (1979) and “Something To Remember Me By” (1989). In

another of his apprenticeships, Augie is employed as a salesman of rubberized paint. He rides Chicago’s mass transit on his quest to sell the wares, although sees little purpose, the rubber paint is already established as “a flop” (Bellow, *Augie March* 158).

Augie is tempted by the Spenglerian conclusion that the modern city deadens the individual but, mulling it over, finally rejects it. Once again the contemplative process is dramatized: Bellow’s experiential realism, his re-creation of the experience of travelling on the densely-packed streetcars and El, engages his contemplative tendencies, and leads to a philosophical conclusion:

It was now full winter, and barbarous how raw; so going around the city on the spidery cars, rides lasting hours, made you stupid as a stoveside cat because of the closeness inside; and there was something fuddling besides in the mass piled up of uniform things, the likeness of small parts, the type of newspaper columns and the bricks of buildings. To sit and be trundled, while you see: there’s a danger in that of being a bobbin for endless thread or bolt for yard goods; if there’s not much purpose anyway in the ride. And if there’s some amount of sun in the dusty weep marks of the window, it can be even worse for the brain than those iron- deep clouds, just plain brutal and not mitigated. There haven’t been civilizations without cities. But what about cities without civilizations? An inhuman thing, if possible, to have so many people together who beget nothing on one another. No, but it is not possible, and the dreary begets its own fire, and so this never happens. (159)

Departing from a reliance on the usual proliferation of specific sense data, here the mode of experiential realism recreates Augie’s subjective experience almost exclusively through metaphor; even the vivid image of the rain trails through the dust are described in human terms as “weep marks.” To see that “sun in the dusty weep marks of the window” is worse than all-consuming bleakness, because it hints at an elsewhere bittersweet beauty denied our protagonist. This vision is part of Augie’s recognition of the danger of consciousness and speculation without the freedom to exert agency. In this manner Augie asserts that to ride these

commuter cars without much purpose is worse if you have an awareness of your lot (“to sit and be trundled—while you see”).

The metaphorical language is usually drawn from the mechanized city. The exception is the “spidery cars”; another unlikely and startling metaphor, but ultimately apt by its implication that the dense network of trolley lines are a kind of spider web imposed over the cityscape. Otherwise, the metaphors are taken from familiar industrial commonplaces, such as the garment industry (the bobbin and the bolt). Likewise, the illuminating comparison between newspaper type and buildings, each built from uniform small parts (type and bricks, respectively), those very small parts potentially befuddling, “the mass piled [*sic*] up of uniform things.” The implication is that the people are also being piled up in uniform groupings.

Bellow shows civilization as a defining characteristic of the city, a positive thing. He does not see civilization as Henry Miller did (after Spengler) as “the arteriosclerosis of culture” (Miller and Wickes). Cities without civilization are an “inhuman thing.” Augie interrogates this bleak hypothetical but rejects that such a phenomenon could exist. Such a cluster of humanity without energy (“people together who beget nothing on one another”) is inconceivable, because “the dreary begets its own fire.” This is an optimistic conclusion, albeit with dark possibilities.

At this stage of his career, Bellow was almost unfailingly optimistic in his city visions. In the city, the individual is free, in the words of Baumgarten, to “[make] possible the discovery of the self” (399). See also Simon March’s discovery that “things to be done in one street, building, room...need have no bearing on what came later in the day elsewhere” (Bellow, *Augie March* 231). The context of this realization is Simon’s womanizing; in one room Simon is a devoted fiancé to a rich woman; in another he can be a brash seducer. Chicago is almost always a city of possibilities for the individual.

### The Invisible Energy of Chicago

The various transit lines of Chicago converged on “the Loop” in the downtown area between Wabash Avenue and Wells Street. The Loop has been described as “a steel girdle” that “unmistakably defined the core of Chicago’s central business district and identified the desirable and prestigious locations” (Mayer and Wade 214). It was a nexus of industrial and

commercial noise and movement that created unprecedented modern sensations for Chicago’s inhabitants:

“The sky is of iron, and perpetually growls a rolling thunder,” a French artist wrote after standing under the El at Wabash. “Electric lights are emitting burning sparks; below are wagons of every size and kind, whose approach cannot be heard in the midst of the noise; and the cars, with jangling voice which never ceases, cross and recross.” (214)

Three-quarters of a million commuters were delivered into the Loop area daily as of 1910. Mayer and Wade quote a “traveler” who wrote: “I saw here for the first time in my life such a dangerous procession of street cars—cars above my head, cars under my feet, cars everywhere” (214). Edmund Wilson said of La Salle Street: “In the morning, the winter sun does not seem to give any light: it leaves the streets dull. It is more like a forge which has just been started up, and is beginning to burn red in an atmosphere darkened by coal-fumes” (Wilson quoted in Atlas 5). The density of activity on the Loop was striking:

Few other large cities had so concentrated their central functions. “Within an area of less than a square mile,” wrote City Club secretary George E. Hooker in 1910, “there are found the railway terminals and business offices, the big retail stores, the wholesale and jobbing business, the financial center, the main offices of the chief firms of the city, a considerable portion of the medical and dental professions, the legal profession, the city and county government, the post office, the courts, the leading social and political clubs, the hotels, theatres, Art Institute, principal libraries, the labor headquarters, and a great number of lesser factors of city life.” (Mayer and Wade 226)

The Loop stands as an extreme example of the modern city’s revolution in (to use Robert Alter’s phrase) the “perception of fundamental categories of time and space.”

Early in the novel, Augie gets a job at a clothing shop on the Loop. He is soon promoted from the basement-level shoe department with its

“cardboard-cell walls” “under the honeycomb of the sidewalk” where “shoppers pass over the green circles of glass set in concrete” to the street level. There it is, a

...snazzy operation. For the place was a salon, with Frenchy torches held by human-arm brackets out from the walls, furled drapes, and Chinese furniture—such corners as are softened, sheltered from the outside air, even from the air of the Rue de Rivoli, by oriental rugs that swallow sounds in their nap, and hangings that make whispers and protocol unavoidable. Differences of inside and outside hard to reconcile; for up to the threshold of a salon like this there was a tremendous high tension and antagonistic energy asked to lie still that couldn't lie still; and trying to contain it caused worry and shivers, the kind of thing that could erupt in raging, bloody Gordon or Chartist riots and shoot up fire like the burning of a mountain of egg crates. This unknown, superfluous free power streaming around a cold, wet, blackened Chicago day, from things laid out to be still, incapable, however, of being still. (127)

Here Augie's perception of his environment—of the “softened, sheltered” store corners, the rugs which “swallow sounds in their nap,” a situation which necessitates “whispers and protocol”—leads him to more contemplations of the subtleties of city “energy.” In Bellow's Chicago, “energy” often arises from the clashing of irreconcilable forces. In this case, we have the “differences of inside and outside”—the quiet rug-muffled store and the “tremendous high tension and antagonistic energy” of the street. Augie not only perceives a tension—or an “unknown, superfluous free power”—but pinpoints the source in “things laid out to be still, incapable, however, of being still.” The energy escapes the threshold of the salon and starts “streaming around.” So here we have a vision of “raging, bloody Gordon or Chartist riots” similar, perhaps, to that of the “fire” begotten by the “dreary” streetcar riders.

A similar perception of the invisible “energy” created by clashing city circumstances occurs to the philosophically-obsessed protagonist of “Looking For Mr. Green.” On the South Side in the early thirties, George Grebe observes that:

Rebuilt after the Great Fire, this part of the city was, not fifty years later, in ruins again, factories boarded up, buildings deserted or fallen, gaps of prairie between. But it wasn't desolation that this made you feel, but rather a faltering of organization that set free a huge energy, an escaped, unattached, unregulated power from the giant raw place. Not only must people feel it but, it seemed to Grebe, they were compelled to match it. In their very bodies. He no less than others, he realized. (Bellow, “Mr. Green” 103–104)

Here again is the typical contemplative process of the Bellowian protagonist: subjective city experience followed by an essayistic evaluation of the questions raised by such experience. The experiential realism in “Looking For Mr. Green” necessarily differs from *Augie March*. It is a third-person narrative restricted to the point-of-view of George Grebe; much of the story takes the form of an inner-monologue interspersed between conversations. Grebe is just as worldly as the grown-up Augie—dishing out references high and low—but the metaphorical flights here seem less radical. In *Augie March*, the protagonist encounters all layers of the city. “Looking for Mr. Green,” less than one-twentieth the length of the novel, necessarily restricts its account to a black neighborhood of the South Side, specifically “between Cottage Grove and Ashland” (Bellow 93). The narrative is set at a point of frozen innovation and observable decay.

George Grebe is a white scholar of classical languages fallen on hard economic realities. Desperate for work, he finds a job with a welfare agency. He will deliver relief checks to the black neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side in the “pre-thanksgiving” winter. Although a Chicagoan (“a city figure entirely”), Grebe is a stranger to this district. Still, he is said to have a “superabundance” of “a peculiar energy” apt for the job (86). Grebe's supervisor, Mr. Raynor, is a smart cynic amazed that Grebe has thus far pursued an idealized intellectual course while, as Raynor suggests, “everybody else labored in the fallen world of appearances” (96).

Grebe is obsessed with deciphering the relationship between appearances and reality. In the terms of the story, an “appearance” or “scheme” is the encountered world of surfaces—the “seeming.” Behind these surfaces is perhaps a different “reality” or truth—the “being” Grebe tries

mightily hard to fulfill his intellectual need to discover the elusive reality behind appearances, his need to find a key to impose abstract order on the concrete fuddling city. The black population, Raynor informs Grebe from the outset, will not help him deliver relief checks; Grebe attempts to triumph over the subterfuge inspired by his role as an “emissary from hostile appearances” (109). The dogged search for Tulliver Green comes to symbolize Grebe’s naïve optimism that he will be able to discover a means of successfully navigating this hostile “fallen world of appearances.” As David Demarest has written, Grebe comes to consider “the urban relief agency” as “the pattern, the form that might impose organization on this flux” (Demarest 176).

Demarest writes that

The incongruity between the amorphous world Grebe faces and the tools of abstraction that form his mode of operation creates a comic undertone in the story...the expectation builds that Grebe will have to admit more openly to himself the disparity between the ordered symbols of society and the anonymity of the slum. (178)

At the relief office, Grebe witnesses an incident in which Staika, a poor black woman known as “The Blood Mother of Federal Street” for her professional blood donations (\$10 a pint), sets up her ironing board and irons her clothes. This is her creative protest against her electricity being cut-off. Staika’s performance is excessive and theatrical. The sensitive Grebe is confronted by a strange fact: “She was telling the truth. But she behaved like a liar. The look of her small eyes was hidden, and while she raged she also seemed to be spinning and planning” (Bellow, “Mr. Green” 98). Staika must communicate her real plight in the guise of a scheme, that of the welfare cheat, because it is the only language others can understand.

Grebe heads out to the streets with the checks. We have the aforementioned recognition of the “energy” set free by the brisk Chicago cycle of building and ruin. Then Grebe passes “four or five dark blocks” of crumbling buildings including “black churches.” His contemplative process is again in action:

Objects once so new, so concrete that it could have occurred to anyone they stood for other things, had crumbled. Therefore,

reflected Grebe, the secret of them was out. It was that they stood for themselves by agreement, and were natural and not unnatural by agreement, and when the things themselves collapsed the agreement became visible. What was it, otherwise, that kept cities from looking peculiar? Rome, that was almost permanent, did not give rise to thoughts like these. And was it abidingly real? But in Chicago, where the cycles were so fast and the familiar died out, and again rose changed, and died again in thirty years, you saw the common agreement or the covenant, and you were forced to think about appearances and realities... once you had grasped this, a great many things became intelligible. (104–105)

Grebe’s belief here is that the uniquely modern city of Chicago can reveal the reality behind the appearance. Examining the ruined cityscape, Grebe sees the point of decay where the symbol ceases to be a symbol, and stands for itself. For example, the black churches are no longer places of God but simply brick-and-mortar ruins. Grebe is encouraged by this discovery; he then reconsiders the wild scheme of one welfare recipient, Mr. Field, to make a black millionaire by subscription. Grebe imagines Field inspired by the vision outside his window, the El: “the chart, the very bones of a successful scheme.” The El is attributed solely to the entrepreneurship of Charles T. Yerkes, who figures largely in the history of Chicago’s mass-transit system. Yerkes was the inspiration for Theodore Dreiser’s character Frank Algernon Cowperwood in *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914) (Kazin 86). From 1886, Yerkes bought existing rail lines and built new ones, ultimately merging them into the Chicago Consolidated Traction Company (Mayer and Wade 140–42). In “Looking for Mr. Green,” the El is interpreted as not a scheme but a reality that looks like a scheme—just like Staika. “Viewed as itself, what a scheme of a scheme it seemed, how close to an appearance.” Grebe thinks of “how little reality there was to start with” and yet Yerkes “had known that he could get people to agree to do it” (Bellow, “Mr. Green” 105). In one of Grebe’s most extravagant fantasies, Yerkes’ subsequent philanthropy, which led to the establishment of an astronomical observatory, is imagined to be a response to the success of the “bizarre enterprise” of the El. Yerkes is imagined funding a philosophical search for “where in the universe being and seeming were identical”

(105). Grebe follows this line of thought logically for awhile, but finally gives up the questioning.

Grebe's quest ends in self-delusion. He finds a mailbox with the name "Green." The door belonging to the mailbox is answered by an "entirely naked" (107) drunk woman who is cagey about her identity. Is she Mrs. Green? "Maybe I is, and maybe I ain't," she says. "Who want to know?" (108) Grebe gives her the check, anyway. He decides that the woman "stood for Mr. Green"—to whom she may not have any relation—which seems an ironic willingness on Grebe's part to allow an ambiguity between appearance and reality. It is by no means a triumph, although Grebe is left saying to himself, "He *could* be found!" (109).

As Demarest concludes, "Looking for Mr. Green" (and another story, "A Father-To-Be" [1955]) dramatizes a question:

Which of two responses to life is appropriate—a search, on the one hand, for intellectual order; a willingness, on the other, to take life as it is. The stories suggest Bellow's typical answer: both attitudes are inevitable and appropriate; and the man who does not recognize that humans alternate, often abruptly and illogically, between the two perspectives deludes himself with a half-vision of what life involves. (175)

In a manner similar to Augie's contemplative process, Grebe's experience of the modern city leads him to interrogate the appearance/reality divide. The difference is that Grebe's comic faith in his ability to impose order on bewildering chaos must end in self-delusion. Augie's similarly questioning outlook is less rigid, less dependent on resolution: as Murray Baumgarten has said, Augie's "free style enables him to modulate his responses to new situations and to take advantage of the fluid experience of the city" (Baumgarten 398).

Bellow sympathetically recreates the South Side ghetto through the experience of the naïve Grebe. "Looking for Mr. Green" is a gently comic story about the intractability of racial problems in the depths of the Depression. Yet his concern is not really racial injustice, the poverty of Chicago blacks, the world depicted in the work of Richard Wright; rather, it is the impossibility of a totalizing vision of the city. The story is a celebratory vision of the energizing power of a chaotic metropolis. "Looking For Mr. Green" and *The Adventures of Augie March* constitute

a major evolution in Bellow's prose from the "very correct" novels that preceded them. His unique mode of experiential realism effectively recreates Augie March's subjective experience of Chicago; readers from the 1950s onwards have been invited to share Augie's encounters with the industrial modernity of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Additionally, by the use of such experiential realism, the reader is made an accomplice in Augie's contemplations of the philosophical questions raised by the city.

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