

## CHAPTER - IV

### THE INTENSER QUEST FOR THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

Narrator of his own inexhaustible experience, Augie March begins with his boyhood in Chicago. Poor and Jewish, Augie starts life economically and socially alienated, yet he is neither bitter nor vengeful, only eager to absorb the knowledge and experience he hopes will help him discover a good enough fate to live by.

Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March* sought not to transcend the elements which destroy personality but to meet them on their own terms – to match them by the very force, the Whitmanian gusto of his prose. The best defense is an offense; Bellow attempted to celebrate man and the world by the very qualities his early protagonists abhor. As Irving Kristol says, Bellow wrestled with demons in his first two novels; in *Augie March* he “jumped in their midst, kissed them, and inquired if they had read any good books lately.” (1954 : 74) Having created two characters who were strangers in a frightening world, Bellow turned in *Augie March* to a hero who joyously feels at home in a colourful Chicago. To Norman Podhoretz, Augie’s adventures reflect “the intellectual’s joyous sense of connection with the common grain of American life.” (1958 : 579) Bellow celebrates America at the same time he rejects false values. While other writers struggled to discover a new ideology, and felt themselves disarmed by the size and lethargy of their culture, Bellow

turned from ideology to a world justified in itself. He argued for accommodation not by the usual indirect means of an alienated hero, but by a forthright example of engagement. "Those days," Augie says "whatever touched me had me entirely." (Bellow: 1953 : 315)

Having progressed from Joseph's rejection of the world to Leventhal's qualified acceptance, Bellow now made another leap, rejecting Flaubertian polish and despair to create a rough - hewed, energetic new world. Marcus Klein defines this experience as well as Augie's character when he says of fiction since world war-II: "The hero chooses community - he assumes racial obligations, or he declares himself a patriot, or he makes love - and he discovers that he has sacrificed his identity, and his adventures begin all over again." (1962 : 30)

If *Augie March* caught the spirit of the fifties, however, it did so by embodying some of that era's difficulties. Norman Podhoretz goes on to say that in "the willed spontaneity of the writing, the abstractness of the hero... we can also detect the uncertainty and emotional strain that lurked on the underside of the new optimism." (1958 : 579) The conflict between Augie's announcement that he will write catch as catch can - promising an episodic novel - and his assumption of moral growth - claiming a Bildungsroman - suggests that this uncertainty exists in the novel's form. If Bellow worked to contain an unruly story within his planned structure in *The Victim*, he works to impose order upon an ostensibly open story in *Augie March*. Because it involves Augie's education or change, the

question of the novel's form is also the question of Augie's character. Augie presents himself as a man of love open to any and all experience. As Chester Eisinger describes him, he is "an uncommitted wanderer upon the face of the earth, Savouring experience for its infinite variety and cherishing his independence to seek it out where he may." (Eisinger: 1963 : 355). But other critics describe a different Augie: they feel that Augie's joy is spurious, that he is not the affirmative hero he appears to be. Augie ventures into the world, but he is not a part of it; his constant movement is an evasion rather than an engagement of life. Podhoretz said that Augie "goes through everything, yet undergoes nothing." (1964 : 218) and V.S. Pritchett calls Augie "a neutral, the indifferent man." (1954 : 803) Because there is a close relationship between commitment and characterization, as Robert Penn Warren has pointed out, this issue becomes one of the fullness or life of Augie's characterization. Some critics claim that Augie's character is thin because he lacks those commitments, which might give it substance. John Aldrige summarizes this problem when he charges that as a man committed to nothing Augie can have no dramatic centrality; his conflict with society can never be really intense or meaningful because there is nothing at stake, no piece of spiritual opposition which might endow him with tragic or pathetic value.

There are of course many possible answers to this problem. Part of the issue lies in the complexity of Augie's character : he contains something adoptional about him at the same time that he

is resistant. "You've got opposition in you," Einhorn tells him. "You don't slide through everything. You just make it look so." (Bellow: 1953 : 117) This ambivalence belongs to all of Bellow's heroes, as we have seen, but it also belongs to the thought of the fifties. The difference of opinion over Augie's character is based in part on the critic's interpretation of commitment, an issue still with us. To Eisinger, Augie's lack of a concrete, specific commitment is his glory; Augie is engaged in the broad spectacle of life rather than a small corner of it. To others, engagement means concrete commitment: to talk of life or experience is too abstract, too easy, too much of a rationale for rejecting what lies at hand. There is a sense in which Augie March, like other contemporary novels, pays lip-service to engagement but celebrates our real day-dream of invulnerable self-containment. Then too Augie may be neutral precisely because of his health. His claim that it is enough to be among the animals, released on the ground as they were in their broom or in their air, is a claim to a connection with the natural world – a major theme in our fiction – but it is also a confession of innocence. If Augie embodies the values implied in much of our waste land literature, including Bellow's first two novels, he may well reveal a potential shortcoming of those values : he is heartless or neutral in the way that all innocence is neutral.

Bellow's adoption of the form and spirit of the picaresque novel in *Augie March* admirably suited his celebration of force. As Robert Heilman suggests in his essay on "The confessions of Felix Krull, "the

techniques of the picaresque novel minimize the reader's sympathy for the rogue's victims – making acceptance of a cruel world possible. The novelist precludes reader identification with the victims by sketching them vaguely or with the broad strokes of caricature. He maintains a swift pace from episode to episode so that the implications of the rogue's acts never sink in. He also creates a population that desires or deserves to be swindled: the rogue merely satisfies the victim's unconscious masochistic desires. Viewing his characters from the outside, where they become lost in a multitude of people, the picaresque novelist rejects the fine moral distinctions of the private self to find his perspective and value in the broad spectacle of man.

Bellow's use of these techniques to match the world of force raises still another reason for the difficulties in Augie's character. To be at home in a destructive world the Picaro must, be hard-boiled or neutral. Thus Augie is committed to an abstraction and is resistant. He searches for a fate good enough, a search that keeps him aloof from the world. But as a vulnerable, loving heir to Mama and Georgie, Augie is really the opposite of the Picaro. Good hearted, spontaneous and vulnerable, Augie is in fact more of a travelling victim than rogue. His character is thin because Bellow was compelled to minimize Augie's sensitivity to the world of force if Augie was to remain an affirmative character. Bellow does this by using the techniques directed at the Picaro's victims on Augie himself. Bellow early in the novel dissolves the self-hood of his protagonist in the broad spectacle of Chicago. He succeeds in creating a hero

who feels nothing at all Augie himself fits a comment Marcus Klein makes about Bellow's style: by accepting everything, Augie really accepts nothing." (1962 : 217)

This strategy permits Bellow to begin the novel on a note of joy. Augie recognises evil, the beatings he receives, the selfishness of Grandha Lausch, the atrocities that made an atheist out of a local junk collector, but he sees evil externally, its horror diluted by a colourful mass of detail. But Augie finds it increasingly difficult to dismiss evil as a colourful external. His resilience is tested in the first half of the novel by increasingly heavy blows, and he himself comes to see that he is a travelling victim. He lives, like Joseph, in a society in which people have gone underground. Fearful of the death or determinism inherent in physical existence, they are too self-absorbed to offer him the love he seeks. They are, as Bellow wrote "people testing to find whether they can eat without tasting, view without suffering, make love without feeling and exist between winning and losing in an even state of potentiality." (1954 : 313) Each builds a particular version of reality in place of the physical one he denies, and views Augie as an adjunct to it. *Augie March* and another distinguished novel of the decade, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, define a culture in which the generous or the human is lost in desperate ideology. While Ellison's protagonist is invisible because of race and institutions, Augie is invisible because of private ideals. What all this means, Augie says, "is not a single Tower of Babel plotted in common, but hundreds of thousands of separate

beginnings, the length and breadth of America." (Bellow: 1953 : 152)

Augie's rejection of Grandma, Einhorn and Mrs. Renling had been a rejection of their sterile worlds. Searching for love, he had sought an equivalent to his original family, a goal fulfilled when Simon makes a comeback by marrying for money. Simon recruits Augie to help him run a coal-yard, his wedding present. He also wants his brothers to get in on a good thing and marry Lucy Magnus, his sister-in-law. Augie objects to the calculation involved, but he loves his brother, and the Magnus family might provide the community so far denied to him. But Simon is even more enslaved by his dominant idea than Augie's previous patrons, for he has to live up to certain expectations. "He had his pockets full of money as an advance on his promised ability to make a rich man of himself and now had to deliver." (Bellow: 1953 : 224) During his busy life with Simon and Lucy, Augie makes friends with a waitress named Mimi Villars who is dominated by her idea of love. In surrendering herself to it she becomes pregnant and asks Augie, who is merely a friend, to accompany her during an abortion. Augie obliges, but the Magnus family learns enough of the details through a third party to suspect him of being the father. Lucy chooses to keep her inheritance by staying with the outraged family. To Augie's horror, so does Simon. "This is where I shake you, Augie," he shouts, "before you do worse to me." (Bellow: 1953 : 275) Scorched bitter, foul and violent," (Bellow: 1953 : 281) the good hearted young man finds himself

deprived of community once more “you do all you can to humanize and familiarize the world,” Augie tells us, “and suddenly it becomes more strange than ever.” Our way of humanising the world is to create a “Small circle that encompasses two or three heads in the same history of love”, but it is impossible for us to maintain it. “Try and stay, though, inside. See how long you can.” (Bellow: 1953 : 285) Augie’s disillusionment with Chicago is crystallized by the injustice he sees as a labour organizer. When the professional thugs of a rival union give him the second beating of his life, his reaction is far from light hearted with “the dry snot of fear in his blood clotted nose,” he is overcome with disgust. He is “harrowed by ... hate” for Chicago. (Bellow: 1953 : 308) He finds himself very much in love with Thea Fenchel, Esther’s sister, who asks him to go to Mexico with her. He accepts her offer.

Augie’s hatred for the city and his brooding reaction to his beating suggest the changes that occur in his character. He now feels and judges his experience. This provides him with the self he lacks earlier. Bellow shifts from Augie’s early joy to his later disillusionment and from the Machiavellians as a centre of attention to Augie himself. He also becomes increasingly concerned with Augie’s inner life.

By the beginning of chapter fourteen, however, Bellow has adopted a different view of Augie and a different approach to the novel. Bellow begins the Mexican adventure with Augie’s own warning about the future – revealing a reversal in his character. Committed to another

for the first time, Augie confesses that his alliance with Thea fills him with fear. Mexico too trembles with a frightening force, but it is now part of nature rather than an industrial city. Thea, the most open of all the Machiavellians in her obsession with force, hopes to match this environment with a primitive venture: she trains an eagle to hunt rare Mexican lizards. Augie joins her project out of love for her, but he also realises "how ancient it was, the kind of ambition that was involved or the aspect of game or hazard." (Bellow: 1953 : 344)

Augie also discovers that he has reason to worry about his old protections. He discovers that he is not the man he thought he was. A discovery that destroys the identity that supported him. The eagle proves to be a coward, and Augie and Thea drift apart, Thea to the hunting of snakes and Augie to a brooding convalescence among the expatriates in town. When Augie spends a night on a mountainside making love to Stella, another beautiful woman. Thea breaks with him and Augie suddenly confronts the truth about his impulsive nature. Sick with guilt, he sees the justice of Thea's charge that "love would be strange and foreign to you no matter which way it happened, and may be you just don't want it." (Bellow: 1953 : 396) He sees with horror that he "wasn't a bit good hearted or affectionate," and that his "aim of being simple was just a fraud." (Bellow: 1953 : 401) He had in fact used love to flee the world he had never really accepted. He had fled to Simon and Lucy after suffering isolation and near starvation, he had fled to Thea from the

agony of his beating. No longer the happy hero of engagement, he now sees that he had fled to Stella from the difficult love of Thea.

Augie's recognition that he is not a man of love drives him back upon himself, where he too as he says of Georgie, makes "the struggle that we make if we consent to live. Just as though, the time for it coming round, we left what company we were in and went privately to take a few falls with our own select antagonist in his secret room." (Bellow: 1953 : 4,19) Like Bellow's other heroes, Augie broods over his past mistakes. He now sees that his commitment to possibility had been no commitment at all. No longer a larky young man in search of adventure, Augie yearns not for a Machiavellian who can love but the ability within himself.

This insight and struggle give Augie an inner life and a substantial identity. Complaining that "you are nothing here nothing," he confesses an alienation similar to Joseph's and Leventhal's. He is also like them in his glimpse of transcendent reality – one which he claims has changed his life and which qualifies Bellow's celebration of the world. Augie discovers, he says, "the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is mere clownery, hiding tragedy." Because the lines offer him a sense of autonomy, Augie climes that he can now live truly in the world. The vision is what he had sought all along – and what Bellow's narrative had implicitly promised – the revelation, which offers a fate good enough. Because the lines justify Augie's rejection of the Social world and imply that a

meta-physical purpose lies within the physical, they might well supply the novel's climax. But Bellow dismisses the vision, perhaps because it is sudden or inconsistent with his original celebration of force.

Having achieved his revelation, Augie is like the other heroes in his flight from the internal self. Joseph and Leventhal retreat from the world, but they also withdraw from their internal being: they live in the narrow thread of consciousness between the awesome reality outside and the even more frightening reality deep within. If Augie had fled to temporary embraces to avoid the world's terror, he had also fled to an external reality to avoid facing his inner being: he has almost no inner life earlier in the novel because his adventures are an evasion of that identity.

In the final chapter – Augie having hailed a ship and survived the war, Bellow presents a nostalgic brooding hero who has failed in his search for a fate good enough. Eager to serve humanity, Augie makes his living by bribing European officials in order to sell surplus pharmaceutical goods on the black market. He has decided that love and home alone are a worthwhile fate, but he is deprived of both by Stella's obsession with a previous lover. Travelling about Europe by himself, alone even when with Stella in their Paris apartment, Augie is "bored sick... as any one gets, crawling around on the surface of life by himself: "I have written out these memoirs of mine," he says, "since, as a travelling man, travelling by myself, I have lots of time on my hands." (Bellow: 1953

: 519) *Augie March* Begins as a naturalistic novel and ends as a personalist one, for Bellow assumes an environmental determinism which he subsequently rejects in favour of the unconditioned self. Augie and Bellow had originally assumed that a "man's character is his fate," telling us that "all the influences were lined up waiting for me... which is why I tell you more of them than of myself." (Bellow: 1953 : 343) But Augie now adds that a man's fate or what determines his life is his character. He also sees that it is the internal self, which defines and contains reality. At the end, when he has like Donatello become a full character, Augie defines his fate as a struggle with the world and himself. His claim that he is "a sort of Columbus of those near at hand" who believes that "you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze," (Bellow: 1953 : 536) is less a summary of his character than a recognition of what has been true throughout the novel, that he has to make a long voyage to reach his fellow man.

The stories Saul Bellow wrote collected in *Him with his foot in his mouth and other stories* are marked by such personal feeling and most of them by such good humour and lightness of mood that one wonders what is going on with Bellow, Ask him and you get an answer. All my axes are hanging on the wall now, unground, "he says, "and I have no urge to take them down, I don't know what it is. The mood is lighter, more at ease. I suppose I am getting rid of the melioristic and reforming side of myself. Like many American

writers I was always pulling for something. I wanted to add my might to the general improvement fund. But I am much less concerned now. I have done my duty by democracy." (Bruckner: 1984 : 52)

If there is a change in Bellow's mood and direction, there is nothing casual about it. He can laughingly say that "all my writing life I have been trying to shed responsibility," but if one points to the emotional distance between the new stories and the sombre anger of his novel. "*The Dean's December*" published in 1982, he says "that was a cri de coeur, I just could no 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. They might talk about money to change things, but never about what was actually happening. No one laughs any more. So it was a cry. But I don't know whether anyone heard it." (Bruckner: 1984 : 52)

In his best selling book, *More Die of Heart Break*, Bellow proves everything from modern sexuality to the state of popular culture. Bellow spoke expansively with senior editor Alvin P. Sanoff about his critically acclaimed new novel. "The book began to come into focus when it struck me all at once that certain subjects, which in the past were treated very seriously are now the subject of teasing parody. *Dr. Strange Love* was a high comedy based on the impending destruction of the human race. I began to think: What has happened to human beings to make them accept this as entertainment? "It's because a lot of things that used to mean so much to us – love, murder, family relations have been

emptied of meaning and feeling. Now they are toyed with purely as a mental game.” (Bellow: 1987 : 52)

These developments are signs of an important transformation in modern life, a sort of nihilism. Things we used to think of with dread now can make us laugh. The first world war had a lot to do with this shift. Movements of art sprang up afterward such as Dada and Surrealism. They had to do with the meaninglessness and cheapness of life and the interchangeability of persons and faiths. Saul Bellow’s real concern was to know how serious people hold their own against nihilism. In this environment, the questions facing a “true person” (in a time when most people are fabricated) are “How do you protect yourself, and how do you read reality? Do people who carve out a higher life for themselves have the acumen and the general shrewdness, strength and determination to hold their ground against what they conceive to be decadence?” (Bellow: 1987 : 52)

In the book of Genesis, God simply thought that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so there had to be somebody else. That somebody else happened to be flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. This myth – if that’s what it is – really teaches us the whole story: Self-enclosed love is a kind of destruction of the person. But economists tell us that selfishness really assures the prosperity and safety of society. The message of Milton Friedman is “Don’t worry, because there’s an invisible hand that co-ordinates all and makes certain that the synthesis of so many private wills, each striving for its own interests, will be a community and the only kind of community worth having, a free one

of separate persons?" (Bellow : 1981 : 52) That may be prescription for a capitalist democracy, but it could also become a very common cause of madness. Saul Bellow discussed this with Friedmand once, he said "You're always talking about the enlightened self-interest of economic man. But you can see for yourself that so many people are nuts. So how can you depend on their enlightened self interest?" Friedman said, "They're not nuts when it comes to money."

According to Bellow, people ask ideological questions but writers don't like to give ideological answers, because they're not true. What's true is what you learn through your existence and what's supported by the weight of real events. Otherwise, it's just a statement and statements are cheap.

The assertion of brotherhood has become an affirmation of contract. The breaking of the error of the uniqueness of the self has become self-denial. And if there is a sense of universal connections, that sense contains no joy. There can be no doubt, of course, that Bellow is working with authentic materials of contemporary history, and what now is implied by Bellow's work so far is minimalisation of faith in the human connection. The fiction of Saul Bellow, may be considered exemplary. The material of Bellow's fiction was the response of sensibility and imagination and intelligence and personality – the privacy of everybody, but in its highest instances – to the moment in history. The significant, symptomatic canting term of the moment in history seemed to me to be alienation. Everybody, after any preliminary

motion of thought, was alienated. The term had come to be honorific and pretentious, Bellow had made it mean something, something hurtful, and by so doing had rescued all of us from feelings of privileged malaise. Where there had been symptom, he had created severity dilemma and challenge.