Chapter II

The New American Adam:
Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)

Praised for his vision, his ear for detail, his humor, and the masterful artistry of his prose, Saul Bellow, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, is among the major representatives of Jewish-American writers. In this capacity Bellow:

> Brings to the post war scene a vision of life which incorporates his Jewish heritage, the long, historical experience with suffering, scorn, rejection, and the tempering of the soul to confront, live with and *transcend* the suffering and trouble in the very atmosphere of human existence.¹ [Emphasis added]

Although he most often writes about Jewish-American immigrants or their children, the scope of his fiction is universal. The Swedish Academy praised Bellow for creating stories about:

> A man who keeps on trying to find a foothold during his wanderings in our tottering world, one who can never relinquish his faith that the value of a life depends on its dignity, not on its success, and that the truth must triumph at last, simply because it demands everything except — triumphs. That is the way of thinking in which Saul Bellow’s ‘anti-heroes’ have their foundation and acquire their lasting stature.²

*The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr Sammler’s Planet* (1970) — each won the National Book award. *The Adventures of Augie March* is the third of Bellow’s novel and is his celebration of the American experience. "Are human beings free moral
agents capable of real choice, or merely products of biology, culture and history?”

This is the question that Augie March puts to himself in *The Adventures of Augie March*. While the nature of Augie’s quest grows out of Bellow’s earlier fiction, the shape of his third novel is a marked departure from the tight formal construction of his two prior books *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947). *The Adventures of Augie March* was a breakthrough, a surge of creative energy, different in tone and style. The book is a picaresque narrative chronicling the adventures of Augie from his childhood in Chicago to his adult years in Mexico and Europe. “*Dangling Man* hardly ventured beyond the consciousness of its narrator; *Augie March* covers continents and the whole range of American society.”

Robert Penn Warren called it “rich, various, fascinating, and important.”

Bellow began his fiction-writing career by arguing against the values of an established tradition, that which admired physical strength and stoicism. He advocated an alternative approach, which commended the virtues associated with the heart and the emotions. Bellow has never diverged very far from this central position, since the idea of exploring the inner emotions of his characters and providing the justifications for their humanistic feelings remain his basic themes. Bellow finds a chance for “selfhood” in the modern world despite literary realism’s “myth of the
diminished man and disparagement of modern civilization.” His strongly felt belief in the possibility of maintaining selfhood in a world that levels individualism is a major theme throughout his work. He immerses his protagonists in “a multiplication of facts and sensations,” which threatens to suffocate their selfhood.

In his essay *Some Notes on Recent American Fiction*, Bellow writes

Destroying the enemy — false conceptions of self — brought on by Christianity and its successors in the Enlightenment — are not enough. The old idea of the self has been abandoned, and we are in need of knowing who we are and what we are. Modern writers do not know, argues Bellow, and the mystery remains.7

Daniel Fuchs comments: “Bellow sees his characters in their personal realities, sees them as selves, or better, souls, whose thoughts move with the inevitability of emotion.”8 *The Adventures of Augie March* is about the formation of an identity, of a ‘soul’. Like Keats, he is certain of nothing but “the holiness of the heart’s affection;” he has not lost belief in the self or even the soul (Fuchs, p. 9).

Thoughtful yet humorous, his work pursues the timely question of what it is to be fully human in an increasingly impersonal and mechanistic world. Bellow firmly rejects the modern concept of the absurdity of human existence. Instead, his protagonists struggle for a kind of spiritual balance to enable them to exert the will and imagination
necessary to control their lives. Bellow's whole effort has been toward the restoration of a balance in modern consciousness. Literature, Bellow believes, interprets the chaos of life, gives it meaning. Chester E. Eisinger provides an excellent summary: "[Bellow] Knows that man is less than what the Golden Age promised us, but he refuses to believe that man is nothing. He is something, Bellow says, and saying it he performs an act of faith."  

In Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, his main character, Joseph, recognizes that he shares his lot with all mankind and poses the question, "How should a good man live; what might he do? And plans a colony of the spirit or a group whose covenants would forbid spite, bloodiness, and cruelty."  

This question reverberates throughout Bellow's novels, as the protagonists embark on quests to discover the meaning and purpose of their existence searching for the ground of moral and intellectual truth upon which to base their conduct in the world. When Bellow's Joseph complains that emotion, inner life, is suppressed in "an era of hard boiled-dom" (DM, p.9), he is valuing emotion in a way, which makes sense when describing Bellow's career as a whole. "Full of modern disgust and self-pity, he is cast as a victim, yet he has the energy to write in the confessional style, and the principal virtue of the psychological age in which he is living — honesty" (Fuchs, p.11). Here is
established, Bellow’s first link to the Romantic ‘I’ of Goethe and Wordsworth, “who felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions” (DM, p.9). Similarly, in *The Victim*, the central character overcomes apathy in a tawdry urban landscape. Yet the real break from modernist apathy occurs in *Augie March*, for Augie does not have to choose dignity; it is the quality of the world he inhabits. The city, the neighbourhood, the family, and the affair — all have reality. In the opening pages Augie states the principle clearly and never loses sight of it:

> What did Danton lose his head for, or why was there a Napoleon, if it wasn’t to make a nobility of us all? And this universal eligibility to be noble, taught everywhere, was what gave Simon airs of honor…. (AM, p.29)

Simon is Augie’s older brother, but “the universal eligibility to be noble” is a statement of the American dream. All of Bellow’s heroes want to embody what in the simplest terms can be called “true nobility.” Both Simon and Augie don’t “make it”. But that is not the point, for it is an ideal not a promise. Bellow has sought in his fiction for ways to recover the civilized self, assuming that, for all that has gone wrong with our civilization, we can still learn within its context how to live decent, satisfying really human lives showing how life could be lived by renewing universal connections. Precisely, revision, not rejection or
revolution, has characterized the relationship of Bellow’s fiction to both literary and moral traditions.

In *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow employs his usual themes, characters, and images, but he is able to transform — or, better yet, expand — them so that they assume new life. In his introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories* Bellow isolates two fundamental qualities of the Jewish imagination. One quality is the tendency “to over humanize everything, to invest all things in the universe with intense human meaning.” In an interesting scene, Thea accuses Augie of over humanizing everything: “Oh, you screwball! You get human affection mixed up with everything, like a savage. Keep your silly feelings to yourself” (AM, p.347). The other is “the ability to respond to the human condition in a manner that teeters between laughter and trembling.” The Jewish imagination accepts the predicament in which all mankind (and Jews, specially) finds itself in and yet it opposes this terrible fact a comic sense of life. Starting with *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow began to write a new kind of novel, which opened into an exuberant and positive comedy. Augie acknowledges the way in which most people accept the terrible human condition. At the end of his adventures, Augie does not learn how to act, but he does have a faint inkling of why Jacqueline with her dream of Mexico refuses to lead a “disappointed life” and why he
himself travels all through Europe: “That’s the animal ridens in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up” (AM, p.536). The Jewish comic sense of life is mysterious and inexplicable and he cannot understand its secret origins. It is this bounteous humor that loudly and emphatically asserts the difference between Bellow’s first two novels and *The Adventures of Augie March*. Augie is aware of the darkness in which mankind exists; he knows about human disappointment and deformation, and yet he bounces merrily along. His laughter and his hope and his joy issue from a sweeping “comic vision of life, which embraces and reconciles the tragic sense and then transcends it.”

This shift to comedy also marks the beginning of a new phase that was to give a significant dimension to Bellow’s concern with the problem of affirmation. The most distinctively Jewish element in the novel is Augie’s new attitude toward experience in America:

Instead of the blindness of affirmation and the poverty of rejection, Augie March rises from the streets of the modern city to encounter the reality of experience with an attitude of satirical acceptance, ironic affirmation, and comic transcendence of affirmation and rejection.

In *The Writer as Moralist* Bellow argues:

Either we want life to continue or we do not . . . If we do want it to continue . . . in what form shall life be justified? To answer this question is the writer’s moral Function.
This is Bellow's main question, and his answer is an anguished yes.

Augie, like all Bellow heroes, is his representative in determining whether life can go on. Augie articulates the dilemma:

[There’s] too much history,... too much example, too much influence, too many guys who tell you to be as they are, and all this hugeness, abundance, turbulence, Niagara Falls torrent. (AM, p. 455)

Bellow reassesses the human situation within this torrent. In an article in the New York Times Book Review Bellow said that the writing of Augie March had been a spontaneous act: “It just came to me...the great pleasure of the book was that it came easily. All I had to do was be there with buckets to catch it. That's why the form is loose.”¹⁵ To Bernard Kalb, Bellow revealed the sense of freedom he experienced:

In ‘Augie’ one of my great pleasures was having the ideas taken away from me, as it were, by the characters. They demanded to have their own existence. It was liberation for me.¹⁶

Writing Augie March was, for Bellow, a freeing of his energies, an act of liberation from certain artistic inhibitions and repressions, a discovery of the “true country of his fiction, its shape and substance” (Rodrigues, p.75). The novel is Augie's “song of the open road, a song of himself, a celebration of America with its variety.” (Rodrigues, p.75) Bellow favours a prose style in which he can “talk his characters into existence,” (Warren, pp.22-23) reflecting his casual dependence on plot
and his emphasis on dialogue, monologue, and inner voice. As his protagonists speak to each other and to themselves, the reader is drawn into their struggles with self and society.

The open-endedness of the novel accounts for its episodic character, its length, and the unrelatedness of several adventures to the main theme. The "repressive manner of the earlier novels", Bellow said, could not encompass "the variety of things I knew intimately in Chicago as the son of immigrants." But he felt he had gone too far in throwing off restraints, an awareness that accounts for flaws in the novel, perhaps an overextension of its imaginative reach. These flaws cause a thematic and structural imbalance that several critics have noted. Leslie Fiedler called it "overly expansive" and Richard Chase felt disappointed because Augie was left "waveri...
the first to reintroduce the picaresque, having been preceded by J.D. Salinger with *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Ralph Ellison with *Invisible Man* (1952), he was the first to consciously choose the genre as a frame for his narrative. Bellow commented on the kind of form he had used: "I kicked over the traces, wrote catch-as-catch-can, picaresque. I took my chance." (Breit, 1953, p.24) The archetypal character isolated by R.W.B. Lewis in his review of nineteenth-century American literature was:

The image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry ... an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources where society is deemed the element which provides experience.  

Lewis contends that the *The Adventures of Augie March* is written in the tradition of the earlier American Adamic myth because Augie "is as youthful, innocent, optimistic, and adventurous as are the earlier Adams" (p.198) and "takes on as much of the world as is available to him, without ever fully submitting to any of the world's determining categories." He "struggles tirelessly ... to realize the full potentialities of the classic figure [of] the simple genuine self against the whole world" (p.198). But it would be incorrect to assume that *Augie March* is a picaresque novel in the purest sense of the term. It is a study in the
“spiritual picaresque” (picaresque, meaning a novel of the road) a later form of the traditional Bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel in which the picaro is ‘consciousness’ rather than simply a mindless rogue. As such Bellow attempts to reconcile the Bildungsroman and picaresque elements in this novel of “mixed intentions” (Fuchs, p.59) by making the rogue to develop, and move through its first illusion to the truth which, at the end of the road, it discovers to be its fate. Theologian Carol Christ makes a distinction between the social quest and the spiritual quest by defining the social quest (corresponding in function to the Bildungsroman) as a “search for self in which the protagonist begins in alienation and seeks integration into a human community where he or she can develop more fully and the spiritual quest as the self’s journey in relation to cosmic power or powers. Often interior, it may also have communal dimensions.”

One way of making this distinction is to perceive Bellow’s attitude to the various settings in the novel. Unlike his earlier novels, which are specifically set in Chicago and New York Augie March does not limit its action to one particular place. Augie characterizes himself as “an American, Chicago born” (AM, p. 3) and describes his upbringing in Chicago. Chicago is his home, but the willingness to roam feeds his desire to learn from the chaos surrounding him. He glories in urban life
because it is chaotic and rootless, and because it allows him to be the sole judge of what he can do with his life. Very soon, he moves into wider circles of experience, which take him to New York, Mexico City, Paris, and other places. The change of settings contributes significantly to the shaping of Augie’s consciousness and character so much so that after his Mexican interlude it is not difficult to see that a substantial change has affected his personality. But in spite of the number of experiences that he undergoes in different places his quest is essentially directed at his own self. The “change he seeks is not in his environment but in himself.”23 He is, thus, different from the hero of the picaresque novel who, in Robert Alter’s words, “is what he is; sometimes splendidly, sometimes ignominiously, but always confidently...himself.”24 That Augie has a greater affinity with the Bildungsroman can be seen from the fact that Augie views his life from an altered perspective, from the point of view of a changed person. Expressing his realization that reality is so complex that it cannot be defined with certainty he confesses, “You do all you can to humanize and familiarize the world, and suddenly it becomes more strange than ever... I see this now. At that time not” (AM, p. 285).

Although the novel concludes with Augie’s initial steps toward self-assessment, the overall tone that informs the narrative is that of a man who has retrospectively learned from his experiences or from the
reflections that the experiences have inspired. Bellow is constantly aware of the dualities of existence and appearances. He suggests that the quest for truth is difficult, ever-present task — one must take into account various deceptions. Augie comes to realize through experience that it is not possible to come to terms with life unless the darkness beneath social niceties is perceived and experienced. For example, his contemptuous attitude to social esteem is tinged by his insight into its veneer and artificiality:

It takes some of us a long time to find out what the price is of being in nature, and what the facts are about your tenure. How long it takes depends on how swiftly the social sugars dissolve. But when at last they do dissolve there’s a different taste in your mouth, bringing different news, which registers with dark astonishment and fills your eyes. And this different news is that from vast existence in some way you rise up and at any moment you may go back. Any moment; the very next, maybe (AM, p.362)

Such an experience is a necessary precondition for the education of the Bildungsroman hero because it makes him aware of the variety and depth of life. In the frame of reference to Bellow’s novels, such an understanding is an important stage in the process of self-discovery in which the protagonist is involved. Augie's retrospection is set forth in twenty-six chapters. The first four chapters, which constitute a block by themselves, concentrate on Augie's childhood. The early part of the story contains stories of the lives of several Jewish families, Augie's own
March family, especially his beloved and colourful Grandmother Lausch, the Einhorns, and the wealthy Magnus family into which Augie's brother Simon marries. Chapter 8 deals with the Renling phase in Augie's life. The first thirteen chapters, which make up half the novel, record the influences on Augie's life, the varieties of people and places he is involved with, and the picaresque adventures he experiences.

Although born into poverty, with two brothers, one of them mentally handicapped and a weak-minded mother, Augie refuses to be shaped by his circumstances or environment, trying on and casting off a wild variety of occupations, experiences, and associations in his quest for identity and freedom. In an article for The Guardian in 1995, British writer Martin Amis summed up Augie's vocational adventures:

> During the course of the novel Augie becomes (in order) a handbill-distributor, a paperboy, 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 hawker of rubberised paint, a dog-washer, a book-swiper, a coal-yard helper, a housing surveyor, a union organiser, an animal-trainer, a gambler, a literary researcher, a salesman of business machines, a sailor, and a middleman of a war profiteer.25

In short, Augie is trying on identities. He is not interested in a career but in experience. When the Depression begins to affect everyone, he resorts to occupations that are outside the law, but his sense of basic morality is always strong. Despite the squalor of his surroundings and the
vexations of the city, Augie maintains an optimistic view and is unbeaten by life. As he says, he "lacked the true sense of being a criminal, the sense that [he] was on the wrong side of the universal wide line with the worse or weaker part of humankind" (AM, p.45). It simply "wasn't in [his] nature to fatigue [himself] with worry" (AM, p.12). In incident after incident the reader perceives that Augie's dormant integrity comes in the way of his total reliance on his "reality instructors" – as a budding crook he is a failure, and as a young businessman selling newspapers at a Chicago train station he finds it hard to cheat his customers as instructed. Augie's inability to accept the Machiavellian stratagems leads him to confess, subsequently, that his character, his sensitive good nature, is his fate. A remarkable series of strong characters try to take him over and fit him into their schemes. These schemes include everything from handling prize-fighters, stealing books, smuggling immigrants and selling army surplus in Europe, to organizing new CIO unions, guarding Trotsky in Mexico, training a moody eagle Caligula, to hunt giant lizards and regenerating mankind by abolishing boredom. The projects are either accompanied or interrupted by affairs with strong-willed women who are wonderful lovers and often very rich besides. In the first eight chapters of the novel, they offer Augie the lessons of power as the ultimate and only response to the human condition. The next four chapters, relatively short,
deal chiefly with Augie's talks with his friends in Chicago. Chapter 25 focuses on Augie's experiences during the war and the novel ends with a chapter about Augie's travels in postwar Europe.

Augie, the omniscient narrator, asserts, in the novel's celebratory beginning:

I am an American, Chicago-born — Chicago, that somber city — and go at things as I have taught myself, free style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. (AM, p.3)

And it is soon clear that Augie realizes that America and adventure go together, an identification, which functions as both method and insight. As an idealistic youth, Augie is optimistic about his future and approaches all prospective experiences with an unflagging adventurousness. The only qualification to his enthusiasm is that he questions how his desires can be fulfilled in Chicago, "that sombre city" (AM, p.3). As an Adamic figure, Augie regrets the fact that Chicago, with its deep city vexation and deep city aims, disallows "the nature-painted times, like the pastoral of Sicilian shepherd lovers. He regrets that the city and the crowd yield results with . . . difficulty" (AM, p.84) for what he desires is happiness, "the misery-antidote" (AM, p.84), which he fails to discern in Chicago. Augie longed very much for excitement, and he sees himself as an innocent youth untouched by the vice and shortcomings of
the city or “the weariness of maturity” (AM, p. 84). There is no one-way of seeing Chicago. The approach to the city, via Gary, is lyrically evoked, compared to the “like greatness of place” (AM, p. 90) of winter London and Alpine Torino. Despite all the teeming life it contains, or because of it, Chicago itself is not particularly the subject of lyrical effects. The description of the city is more threatening than anything else. Augie recalls that the “EL pillars” are “like a terribly conceived church of madmen” where, “worshippers crawl their carts of rags and bones” (AM, p. 330). The “insight is Blakean” (Fuchs, p. 74):

And sometimes misery came over me to feel that I myself was the creation of such places. How is it that human beings will submit to the gyps of previous history while mere creatures look with their original eyes? (AM, p. 330)

And even more sombrely, alone, in the hospital, recuperating from his Bizocho hernia (always the mixture of the ridiculous and the serious), Augie contemplates Chicago as “the Ezekiel cauldron of wrath; stoked with bones... you’re nothing here. Nothing” (AM, pp. 458-459). Therefore, because Chicago fails to accommodate his idealistic desires, Augie yearns for the “early scenes of life ... beginning with Eden” (AM, p. 84). Speaking through the threatening Atlantic panorama, Augie wants to “beat the dark to Bruges where he can see the green canals and ancient palaces” (AM, p. 536). He still wishes, escaping the Darkness, to comfort himself with creations of human order. At the same time, as a voyager, he
sees himself as a kind of explorer in the “terra incognita” (AM, p.536) — the world not under human system or control. Augie’s learning to confront the Darkness is an important part of his search; for to confront the Darkness is to stop construction of one’s private “tower of Babel” (AM, p.152) it is to enter the “shared condition of humanity.” Here, as elsewhere in the novel, “chaos and civilization struggle to occupy the same subjective space. From Chicago to the Venice of the West, this land-locked Columbus will hope to discover the human” (Fuchs, p. 77).

The Chicago of Augie March is “magnificently alive in its multitudinous variety” (Rodrigues, p.75). It is in this modern and urban wasteland that Augie sets out to solve the enigma of mankind, to find out what a human being is. The vigor, authority, excitement, and completeness of Augie’s Chicago springs in part from Bellow’s passionate involvement with, and love for the city he grew up in. Here is the language not of a mere spectator, but of a participant. Chicago is not viewed “as an object, but as an organism with an electric vitality of its own, where a man can experience the terror of the contemporary human condition, and the insignificance of the shriveled self” (Rodrigues, p.77). Augie is not a mere witness; as Chicago-born, one who has roamed its crowded, colorful streets, the city is part of his being. And because he is completely involved with Chicago, he can make it spring to vivid life.
The first two paragraphs of chapter 2 convey the feel of the prose, its pace, its rhythms, and the darkness in which all mankind has to live:

Now there's a dark Westminster of a time when a multitude of objects cannot be clear; they're too dense and there's an island rain, North Sea lightlessness, the vein of the Thames. That darkness in which resolutions have to be made — it isn't merely local; it's the same darkness that exists in the fiercest clearness of torrid Messina. And what about the coldness of the rain? That doesn't defeat foolishness in its residence of the human face, nor take away deception nor change defects, but this rain is an emblem of the shared condition of all. It maybe means that what is needed to mitigate the foolishness or dissolve the deception is always superabundantly about and insistently offered to us—a black offer in Charing Cross; a gray in Place Pereires where you see so many kinds and varieties of beings go to and fro in the liquid and fog; a brown in the straight unity of Wabash Avenue. With the dark, the solvent is in this way offered until the time when one thing is determined and the offers, mercies, and opportunities are finished. (AM, p.201 emphasis added)

The first paragraph endeavors to highlight an awareness of darkness that is everywhere together with a sense of the accompanying rain that somehow acts as a solvent. “The rain can be accepted, by way of the American naturalists, as an emblem of the shared condition of all mankind” (Rodrigues, p.59) and indicates perhaps that what is needed to redeem us is “superabundantly about.” To recognize the two kinds “of linguistic units, the narrative-descriptive paragraphs and the speculative ones” (Rodrigues, p.60) that compose the novel is to see that structurally Augie March is “a lumpy amalgam” (Rodrigues, p.60) of the picaresque and the Bildungsroman. Augie writes out his memoirs presenting a
chronological account of his adventures from childhood to manhood. Unlike Joseph, (DM) who is continuously aware of days drifting slowly by, Augie is so immersed in his experiences that he is uncertain about chronology: his growth into manhood and maturity is never fixed in terms of years. The reader is not provided with ages but dimly, not insistently, is made aware of historical time against which Augie's adventures are set. The "oxymoron" (Pifer, 1990, p.62) in this passage suggests how Augie's vision transcends logic as well as sensory data to find clarification and illumination in darkness. Just as the dark obscures from sight the superficial appearances of an apparently solid material universe, so Augie's intuition of humanity's fallen condition, a shared darkness, dissolves like a "solven" or "rain" the illusion of his own permanence on earth. Even physical darkness, the black of night, reminds us of the subjugation of all finite existence to death — "when one thing is determined and the offers, mercies and opportunities are finished." How much more keenly, then, does recognition of a more profound darkness hold out a "black offer," the possibility of a "true vision of things." Is it nature that "insistently offers" this "gift of true insight"? Or is there an unseen presence behind the "multitude of objects" and phenomena crowding our physical perception? In any case, the "darkness" is ambivalent, illogical, and contradictory. It clarifies through blackness; it
illuminates by exposing the depth of our ignorance. It sheds the radiance of mystery upon the black doom of mortality. An affinity exists, moreover, between this "black offer" of a "true vision" and that other "gift," the "gratitude" for life that often emerges from Augie's dark experience of disaster. His near-fatal accident in Mexico — when he falls from the horse while hunting with the eagle, Caligula — brings him dark awareness of "the price of being in nature, and what the facts are about your tenure." The "social sugars dissolve" upon contact with the bitter taste of deaths immediacy; and the "news" of mortality "registers with dark astonishment in Augie's freshly opened eyes" (AM, p.362). Yet there is something regenerating as well as bitter in the process: "true vision" also restores to one's cluttered eyesight "the air, a light gold, thin but strong before daily influences took it." The spiritual history of humankind is universal and particular, recorded in the past but very much alive in the present. Augie's "adventures" in the modern world thus constitute his "earthly pilgrimage" (AM, p.478) through a landscape both ancient and contemporary — a New World Babylon. What is uniquely meaningful in each individual's life is, at the same time, discoverable to all: the "gift of creation, the legacy of their shared condition." "There always is" — says Augie, implicitly affirming Bellow's "primordial person" — "a me it happens to" (AM, p.519, Bellow's italics). Like
Henderson and Herzog in the later novels, Augie seeks to recover this knowledge, to discover what his author calls the "primordial person" within. This primordial self, Bellow tells an interviewer in 1984, exists within each of us. "He is not made by his education, nor by cultural or historical circumstances." To this "primordial person" the novelist traces the "invariable, ultimately unteachable [knowledge] native to the soul."27

Augie’s adventures are an intellectual “quest after self-awareness.”28 The recall of his past is not a form of nostalgic indulgence. The act of writing is for Augie as it was for Holden an enactment of the process of self-discovery. The digging up of the past demands “a frantic exploration of the self, for therein is one's history buried” (Rodrigues, p.60). It involves hard work:

Hard, hard work, excavation and digging, mining, moiling through tunnels, heaving, pushing, moving rock working, working, panting, hauling, hoisting. And none of this work is seen from the outside. It's *internally done*. (AM, p.523 Emphasis added)

Much of the excitement and intensity of the narrative derives from the way Augie relates to particular experiences or adventures. It is thus that experience acts as a point of reference to his character and fate. Bellow frequently employs the terms, character and fate, to express the essential particulars of Augie's wanderings. When the novel begins, Augie quotes Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ aphorism, “a man's character
is his fate" (AM, p.3) only to reverse it later by saying that “a man's fate is also his character” (AM, p.514). “The learning is in the transposition. Man's fate is that he shall inherit, be stuck with, his character. The movement, which the transposition represents, is the movement from the naturalistic to the existentialist, from what is determined to what is accepted or chosen.” (Aldridge 1956, p.131) Augie struggles to break through to life and to achieve his possibilities and most importantly, his individual potentiality. Choices are made (or not made); consequences follow. Choices, one after another — often orderly, but sometimes not — make up the plot of the novel. Initially Augie would have the reader believe that whatever constitutes his self or character is, that which accounts for what happens to him. He would, of course, prefer his character to dominate his fate, so that his self is not submerged by the strange happenings of his life. Augie at the end of the road simply comes into his destiny, although, as it happens, it is not the destiny, the alternative to the “disappointed life,” (AM, p.536) which he sought. Like Holden Caulfield he

…remains uncommitted, suspended, as it were, between native innocence and hard-earned knowledge, poised for the next adventure, which though it may not actually repeat a former escapade, guarantees no final knowledge of repose.²⁹

In David Riesman's terms, in The Lonely Crowd Augie appears, at first glance, to be an “inner-directed” man holding out against the
conformist pressures of an "other-directed" society, but it would be truer to say that he is "inner-directed" in temperament but not in aim and that he is holding out against an "inner-directed" society of strongly ambitious and acquisitive aims, the kind of society which was there until roughly the beginning of World War II.

In *Distraction of a Fiction Writer* Bellow writes that he — as does all novelist— "begins with disorder and disharmony, and he goes toward order by an unknown process of imagination." One needs to be aware of the structural strategies that Bellow the artist has deployed in his effort to impose "some kind of order on his seemingly uncontrolled, bewildering, sprawling panoramic novel" (Rodrigues, p.61). The nature of the theme precludes the discovery of an organizing principle in a sequence of causally connected events. But the novel has a tough centre, a consistent line of development, in the character and quest of Augie March. Part of Bellow's artistic strength comes from his clever fusion of Anglo-American literary traditions with Yiddish traditions; and Augie March the picaresque hero who tells his own story is what is known in Yiddish folklore as a "schlimazel" — that is, the comic victim of a series of misadventures. In so far as the 'schlemiel' is a comic hero, he is promised a 'happy ending', if not in the normal sense than at least in his
own ‘self-appraisal.’ He never fails in his final self-acceptance; otherwise the whole premise of “the loser-as-victor would be destroyed.”32

Augie’s quest for a better fate,—worthwhile, “higher, independent fate” (AM, p.424)—is a self-apparent theme, but the novel also explores with considerable complexity the conditioning “rough forces” (AM, p.536) of life, all that compels, conditions and shapes man, particularly, the shaping power of other human wills. Almost all the major characters in Augie March and almost all the major incidents, significant though they are in themselves, are even more important as influences on Augie. Their impact on Augie the picaro is strange: “All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself” (AM, p.43).

Growing up and out of his native Chicago, Augie embarks on adventures that take him to Mexico and Europe as well as through “the length and breadth of America” (AM, p.152). By keeping on the move, moreover, he can elude the snares of countless “reality instructors—these big personalities, destiny molders, and heavy-water brains, Machiavellis and wizard evildoers, big wheels and imposers-upon, absolutists” (AM, p.524) who are always trying to fit him into their schemes. The novel dramatizes the struggle of Augie with society, with “reality-instructors” and, ultimately, with himself.
In *Herzog*, Bellow has his protagonist, Moses Herzog, confronted by cynical characters, whom he calls “Reality instructors” because they seek “to teach” and “to punish” Moses with “lessons of the Real.” Though the term “Reality instructors” primarily is related to Herzog, it can also be applied to the cynics in *The Adventures of Augie March*. In fact, much of the tension in the novel develops from the struggle of Augie to resist social regimentation, to remain “in opposition.” He states, “No, I didn’t want to be what [Einhorn] called determined... and wouldn’t become what other people wanted to make of me” (*AM*, p.117).

Primarily, Augie resists being beaten or tormented or made cynical; he chooses to maintain a youthful optimism even in the face of tribulation. He says, “...we were chased, stoned, bitten, and beat up for Christ-killers, all of us...I never had any special grief from it, or brooded, being by and large too larky and boisterous to take it to heart” (*AM*, p.12).

The notion of confronting the protagonist with ‘reality instructors,’ who try to re-mould his personality and conduct on the basis of their own view of reality, seems to have been borrowed by Bellow from Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. The individual at the center of each relationship is termed a “Machiavellian” because of his ability to employ his ideas and personality for the purpose of manipulating and controlling others. The Machiavellians (the novel was
originally titled *Life among the Machiavellians* with their “ideal constructions” (DM, p.19) are an absolute contrast to Augie and his search for a worthwhile fate. Externally, these “Machiavellians” appear to be composed and authoritative. Old, eccentric, crippled, or highly neurotic, they seem capable of influencing the fate of others to their advantage. Augie has been fascinated by the Machiavellians from his childhood. Each of them represents traits, which attract as well as repel him; these people significantly enlarge his experience of the world, but he also detects blemishes in their character that he would like to do without in himself. Each of these *Machiavellis* would like, Augie notes, to enlist him in his particular *version* of reality. “Stimulated by all these people, guided later by his own observations, reflections, and intuitions, Augie arrives at a number of truths, the most crucial one being that one should be a person, a human being, that one should have a fate and not a mere function” (Rodrigues, p.63). Augie insists on remaining an amateur and refuses to be “an expert, a specialist with a function” and instead turn to the “resources of actual experience” from life. As Lional Trilling has pointed out, Bellow is “in the tradition of American Personalism which insists that a person has a fate rather than a function, and power of enjoyment and love rather than achievement.” Augie's attitude to experience is one of openness. He accepts it without pre-meditation, as he
has no clear idea of its intrinsic worth. His problems arise as he is alive to all possibilities, and can readily be drafted by others to serve their needs: “That’s the struggle of humanity, to recruit others ... I certainly looked like an ideal recruit” (AM, p.402) he says, but these “reality instructors” are foils and it must be borne in mind that they nearly always have their own needs in view. They have no glimpse of any reality but their own, and Bellow’s central characters eventually learn that reality is indeed nothing that can be taught but something that must be known for itself. Bellow’s protagonists finally know that they can never accept anyone else’s reality until they have accepted their own. Since Augie does not wish to assume a structure of personality designed by someone else, he seeks the freedom to develop his own lifestyle and to understand himself without being imposed upon by his “reality instructors.” This is the central faith, which sustains his quest for freedom and lends it whatever formal organization the novel has.

Augie manoeuvres his way out of these occasions because; though he cannot give exact name and shape to his own private holy grail — “the axial line of life” (AM, p.454) where energy, nobility, and love converge, and where he will at last meet a fate good enough for him — he can recognize and refuse all false or inadequate versions of it. In a world eager to recruit, Augie March is the un-recruitable man; and for all the
comic scrapes he gets into, he retains what Whitman called "the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself" (Spiller, 1962, p.146). A man named Einhorn sums it up when he says to Augie: "All of a sudden I catch on to something about you. You've got opposition in you."

And this was true, Augie reflects; "I did have the opposition in me, and great desire to offer resistance and to say 'No'" (AM, p.117). Resisting their instruction, Augie persists in his quest to discover, as he says, "what I was meant to be" (AM, p.310). By the end of the novel he has not reached his goal, but the quest continues. Although married and living in Europe, Augie remains, in all senses of the term, "a traveling man" (AM, p.519). Eventually, he defines his identity not in terms of religion, race, or nationality, but in terms of human essence. Maybe the major conflict of life is not between society and the individual, but within the individual himself:

> In yourself you labour, you wage combat, settle scores, remember insults, fight, reply, deny, blab, denounce, triumph, outwit, overcome, vindicate, cry, persist, absolve, die, and rise again. All by yourself! Where is everybody? Inside your breast and skin, the entire cast. (AM, p.523)

As do Bellow's other heroes, Augie like Joseph comes to terms with his impulse towards striving, towards becoming:

> All the striving is for one end ... We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit — to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace. (DM, p.154 emphasis added)
Augie March begins as a picaresque novel of one man's pilgrimage, but also includes the travels and findings of a multitude of other travelers whom Augie meets on his life's journey, who also journey to 'the craters of the spirit.' And in final effect, none of Bellow's heroes actually resigns himself to his sufferings. "Painfully they climb again and again out of the craters of the spirit, ridiculing their defeats with a merciless irony, resolved to be prepared with a stronger defense against the next assault that is sure to come."36

The three dominant Machiavellians are Grandma Lausch, with her tough tactics for survival in this cruel world; William Einhorn, who preaches and practices "lessons and theories of power," (AM, p.98) and Mrs. Renling, who wants to save him from the rat race and construct a different Augie in order "to consolidate what she affirmed she was" (AM, p.151). It all starts for Augie when he comes, under the influence of Grandma Lausch, his first Reality Instructor, a stern old lady from Odessa, a boarder in the March home, who, though "not a relation at all," (AM, p.5) appropriates command of the house. Mrs. Lausch tries to bring them up according to the standards of Czarist Russia of fifty years earlier. Augie describes her as a "Machiavellis" (AM, p.4) that enjoys making the Marches "take a long swig of her mixture of reality." Primarily, her mixture of reality is "one more animadversion on the trustful, loving, and
simple surrounded by the cunning-hearted and tough, a fighting nature of birds and worms, and a desperate mankind without feelings” (AM, p.10). She preaches cynicism and ruthlessness as the only means of survival, while debunking Augie's type of optimism and innocence. Throughout Augie's youth, she commands his home by advocating her ideals: “scheme, devise, and intrigue in all her languages” (AM, p.5).

Grandma Lausch, the reader infers, originally entered the home of the Marches as a boarder but eventually took over its management through the force of her personality. In the power she wielded over the family and the stratagems she devised to use the children to extract benefits from public institutions can be seen the seeds of Augie's built-in resistance against power reposed in individuals, and his desire to enter into relationships with others in such a way that his own individuality and identity may not be compromised. In making a bid for self-sustaining independence, he refuses to allow his identity to be disguised by anything that is false or by anything that will force him to deviate from his real purposes. He is, in effect, on the lookout for some inner order by which he may define his life, a new order that may give content to his freedom and to his adventurous spirit. It is an order, which all Bellow heroes look for in one way or another:

Our period has been created by revolutions of all kinds—political, scientific, industrial. And now law from slavery in
many of its historical, objective forms has freed us. The next move is up to us. Each of us has to find an inner law by which he can live. Without this, objective freedom only destroys us. So the question that really interests me is the question of spiritual freedom in the individual—the power to endure our own humanity.  

Augie refers to Grandma Lausch as “one sovereign who knew exactly the proportions of love, respect, and fear of power in her subjects” (AM, p.6). Highly unsentimental and alive to self-interest, she saw the feeling of love as a deception, which in the long run injured more than offered any good. Augie’s problems appeared to demonstrate to her the troublesome fate of people who were handy with their affections: “The more you love people, the more they mix you up. A child loves, a person respects” (AM, p.9). When Augie is older and leaves the house to work, he escapes Grandma Lausch's cynical dogmatism, but encounters another Machiavellian instructor, William Einhorn. Though Einhorn is a nearly complete cripple, he is as ingenious in sexual intrigue as all the others in this novel. Initially, Einhorn is not a Machiavellian cynic advising deceit and cunning. Augie admits that,

Einhorn had a teaching turn similar to Grandma Lausch's, both believing they could show what could be done with the world, where it gave or resisted, where you could be confident and run or where you could only feel your way and were forced to blunder. (AM, p.67)

But Einhorn's instructions, at first, enforce Augie's inherent optimism. Einhorn, a semi-corrupt entrepreneur who revels in the American system
of free enterprise, compares the businessman to "the conqueror, the poet and philosopher" and assumes that business offers "a world of possibilities" (AM, p.67). By working for Einhorn as an all-purpose secretary, Augie flourishes under the atmosphere of hope and accomplishment pervading Einhorn's home and offices. Einhorn preaches optimistically about "the machine age and the kind of advantage that had to be taken of it," and Augie gladly receives the lectures "from the learned signor" (AM, p.72). However, Einhorn's optimism is shattered by the stock market crash, in which he "was among the first to be wiped out" (AM, p.106). Having lost his wealth and position due to the crash, Einhorn also loses his sense of hope in the "possibilities" of America and preaches a version of cunning and deceit even more sinister than Grandma Lausch's hoping to teach Augie of the Void. Augie states that Einhorn now intended.

[T]hat as there were no more effective prescriptions in old ways, as we were in dreamed-out or finished visions, that therefore, in the naked form of the human jelly, one should choose or seize with force; one should make strength from disadvantages and make progress by having enemies, being wrathful or terrible; should hammer on the state of being a brother, not be oppressed by it; should have the strength of voice to make other voices fall silent — the same principle for persons as for peoples, parties, states. (AM, p.183)

Einhorn is contemptuous of "the universal antheap" (AM, p.457), the mass of mankind: "Look here, because they were born you think they
have to turn out to be men”? he asks Augie (AM, p.307). Augie states that if he had truly been Einhorn's disciple instead of an innocent optimist, he would have approached any important decision by asking himself: “What would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advice or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think”? (AM, p.60)

After Einhorn, Augie is forced to endure the cynical instructions of Mrs. Renling, an influential and wealthy woman, owner of a smart men’s store, who seeks to control Augie by adopting him because she is keen to have a son who would be regarded as a fashionable man about town. Augie is undoubtedly tempted by the possibility of leading a rich and comfortable life: “The situation was that I was enjoying what a rich young man enjoys, he says, and arranged my feelings accordingly, filling in and plastering over objections” (AM, p.137). But what prevents Augie from accepting his new role is his independent nature: he finally realizes that it would be impossible for him “to be built into Mrs. Renling's world, to consolidate what she affirmed she was” (AM, p.151). Mrs. Renling desires to show Augie off as a protégé. She is not able to understand what Augie understands instinctively — that to possess another person completely is to deny his innate freedom. Renling, whose vocation seems to be to coach and instruct constantly pesters Augie with what he calls
“damnation chats” (AM, p.137). Like the previous “reality instructors,” she seeks to demean Augie’s persistent “splendour of morning” attitude by calling “out her whole force of rights, apocalypse death riders, church porch devils who grabbed naked sinners from behind to lug them down to punishment, her infanticides, plagues, and incest” (AM, p.137). It is inevitable that Augie must step out of the magic-circle that Mrs. Renling has built around him. Just when Mrs. Renling is about to entrap him, Augie bounces away, asking: “Why should I turn into one of these people who didn't know who they themselves were”? (AM, p.151) Augie manages to ignore her pessimistic instructions and maintain his optimism, just as he manages to ignore his brother’s reality instructions. Augie’s brother Simon also tries to draw him into his own orbit — and not for reasons of pure brotherly affection. Although Simon, as compared to his younger brother, has achieved greater worldly success, he is intrigued by Augie's ability to live without the usual necessities of a comfortable life. He feels a need not only to guide Augie in the tricks of acquiring wealth, but also to master his life and dictate to him the rudiments of a prosperous life that most people cherish. Simon would obviously feel more secure if Augie were fashioned after his own image, as a prototype of the ordinary wealth-seeker. Augie is dissuaded from following Simon's example because of his desire to lead a free life and also because of his keen
awareness of his elder brother's vulnerability to the kinds of spiritual compromises that have to be made in the pursuit of riches. Though Simon tells Augie to make himself “hard,” Augie avoids Simon's cynical outlook, in which he “didn't fundamentally believe” (AM, p.239). Einhorn made Augie aware of his opposition, his ability to “hurl a secret No!” at people's ideas while appearing to agree with them, is the attribute that allows him to resist his persuaders: “I never had accepted determination and wouldn't become what other people wanted to make of me” (AM, p.117). Again and again Augie's spirit of resistance manifests itself. He responds to the contemporary conditions and searches for transcendence over them, justifying Bellow’s claim: “I felt it is time to write about people who make a spirited resistance to the forces of our times.” This spirited resistance is the theme of all his novels. Ultimately Augie refuses to yield to the authority of these earthly powers, wielded individually or collectively. To the machinations of the Machiavelli — and to the "Niagara Falls torrent" of statistics, data, news and information that threatens to drown his inner life and "feelings" in a flood of facts — he opposes a transcendent vision of human life and destiny (axial lines AM, p.455). This ancient vision of existence is evoked, on the most obvious level, by the numerous biblical images and allusions interwoven throughout Augie's narration. By invoking the Bible's ancient wisdom —
that earthly power is fleeting and trust in its authority misplaced — the allusive texture of Augie’s narration consistently undermines the authenticity of each “version” of reality promoted by the Machiavellis.

The Chicago adventures do not tell Augie where he belongs, but they condition and prepare him for the visions, insights, and intuitions that descend on him toward the end of his pilgrimage. The ranges of Augie’s experiences up to the time of the Mexican adventures with Thea are wide and various. “Refusing to be a specialist, refusing to be imprisoned in any single job or to be trapped by a construction of any one else’s devising, Augie is open to all varieties of people and places” (Rodrigues, p.67). He is at home anywhere and everywhere in Chicago: “I touched all sides, and nobody knew where I belonged. I had no good idea of that myself.” (AM, p.113)

Augie goes to a pier to wait for his brother Simon, who is planning a vacation near the resort at which Augie and Mrs. Renling have stayed. While he waits for his brother to disembark from a ship, he watches other vacationers and describes them as “Tough or injured, . . . bearers of things as old as the most ancient of cities and older; desires and avoidances bred into bellies, shoulders, legs, as long ago as Eden and the Fall” (AM, pp.147-148). The implication is that these vacationers have suffered the ramifications of the fall from Eden and thus are “tough and
injured.” By juxtaposing these characters with Augie, Bellow underlines Augie's role as an innocent Adam.

An interesting scene in the novel, which further reveals that Augie is living in innocence before the fall, occurs when Augie first encounters Thea Fenchel. Augie has gone to a resort with Mrs. Renling where he sees and falls in love with Esther Fenchel, Thea's sister. Esther pays little attention to Augie, but Thea is attracted to him. One evening, Augie goes into an orchard to brood over Esther, and in this Eden-like setting, Thea intrudes and tries to seduce him. Beneath the orchard leaves she kneels beside him, seductively touches his feet and ankles with her thighs, and says she has fallen in love with him. Augie, always the innocent fantasist, is astonished that she would challenge his love for Esther by professing her own love for him. He stands up to leave and says to her, “Now, Miss Fenchel . . . You're lovely, but what do you think we're doing? I can't help it. I love Esther” (AM, p.146). Thea, however, is adamant and attempts to pursue him. Recognizing her intentions, Augie had to escape from the swing and get away in the orchard. He retreats further into the garden to avoid consummation of desires. In doing so he exemplifies the type of innocence, characteristic of the early American Adam.

The encounter with Thea Fenchel and his adventures with Caligula in Mexico drive Augie for the first time to a crucial investigation of his
own character and destiny. Augie, who has always refused commitment, who has never entangled himself with another human being, falls powerfully and absolutely in love. It is a strange situation for this determined searcher for an independent fate to be in: “The great astonishment of this state was that the unit of humanity should maybe be not one but two” (AM, p.323). “I was never before so taken up with another human being,” he confesses. For the first time he surrenders his self to another: “I went where and as she said and did whatever she wanted because I was threaded to her as if through the skin” (AM, p.315).

For a while Augie almost abandons his quest for an independent fate to help Thea realize her dreams of greatness. However, despite Augie's attempts to remain innocent, optimistic, adventurous, and unbeaten, a number of devastating events finally shatter his idealism. First, his friend Mimi Villars becomes pregnant, attempts to have an abortion, procures the services of an incompetent doctor, and almost dies. Like the other instructors, she berates Augie about how he

...wasn't mad enough about abominations or aware enough of them, didn't know many graves were underneath [his] feet, was lacking in disgust wasn't hard enough against horrors or wrathful about swindles. (AM, p.209)

She, too, tries to teach him her cynical viewpoint and tries to drag him down into the mire of nihilism. Augie, however, rejects her instructions. Though she asserts, “most people suffer,” Augie can only
tell her “about how pleasant [his] life has been” (AM, p.254). He maintains an optimistic concept of life, he is unable to believe that “all was so poured in concrete and that there weren't occasions for happiness” (AM, p.255). An acquaintance of Augie's sees him helping Mimi, assumes he is the father of the child, and runs to tell Lucy Magnus, Augie's fiancée, that Augie has been unfaithful. Though Augie is not the father but only has attempted to aid Mimi, Lucy and her parents break off the engagement. Next, Simon, who has chosen Lucy for Augie because she is wealthy, is offended that Augie has compromised himself and lost this chance of an economically promising marriage. In his anger, Simon more or less disinherits Augie and says he never wants to see him again. Though Augie is able to stand up under the pressures rather well, he suffers a final indignity, which crushes his optimism. He is caught in a squabble between the members of the restaurant workers' union CIO, and legal representation of the AFL (AM, p.289) and is beaten by agitators, and has to hide to avoid being killed.

In contrast to the Machiavellians, who would impose their own constructions and controls on people are those “whose lives have been fixed for them and those obsessed by and lost in a theory or project of their own” (Rodrigues, p.64). They are object lessons warning Augie not to imprison himself in any ‘ideal construction.’ On the simplest level is
Jimmy Klein, Augie's boyhood friend, who becomes a store detective and has surrendered himself to the will of others; “I go where they put me and do what they tell me” (AM, p.266). Two of Augie's friends, Hooker Frazer and Sylvester, align themselves with communist ideology. Frazer becomes one of exiled Trotsky's secretaries, while Sylvester believes in the communist dream:

That humiliated, bandy-legged, weak-haired, and injured-in-the-eyes Sylvester, however, the subterranean draftsman and comedy commissar of a Soviet-America-to-be, teaching himself the manner and even the winner's smile and confidence, why, he was going to blast off the old travertine and let the gold and marble shine for a fresh humanity (AM, p.213)

He becomes one of Trotsky's bodyguards. Augie sees the ravages written on Sylvester's face: it is “severe, melancholy, duty-charged and baffled” (AM, p.375) before leaving Mexico for Chicago, Augie comes to realize the deadly pressure ideology and ideologists exert on a human being:

My next idea was how nothing was more dreadful than to be forced by another to feel his persuasion as to how horrible it is to exist, how deathly to hope, and taste the same despair. How of all the impositions this was the worst imposition. Not just to be as they make you but to feel as they dictate. If you didn't have the strongest alliance you surely would despair at last and your mouth would drink blood. (AM, p.417-418)

Augie, who refuses to allow any theory to rule his life, runs into two theoreticians caught in the grip of their own obsessions; Robey, the eccentric millionaire, crazy about Great Books, is busy putting together a
guide and a program for mankind. Basteshaw, brilliant, crazy, a genius, offers Augie a theory of human boredom and a vision of the new brotherhood of man, which his experiments will achieve. Augie can respond to the fervent desires of both men (both are modern parody versions of visionaries such as Campanella and Thomas More), but can see the damage that their utopian dreams inflict on them. With his blood-streaked eyes, his sullen lips and his belly-heavy walk, his five marriages and his stinginess, Robey is a warped idealist. Augie finds him one-day “standing on a kitchen chair, wrapped in his bathrobe, pumping Flit into a cupboard while hundreds of roaches rushed out practically clutching their heads and falling from the walls. What a moment that was! He wildly raised hell as he worked the spray gun, full of lust” (AM, p.444). And the cold inhumanity of Basteshaw, who wanted to rescue all mankind from endless suffering, both shocks and enlightens Augie: “I realized how much he was barren of or trying to be barren of in order to become the man of his ideas” (AM, p.512). Both theoreticians open Augie's eyes to “the comic horror of being a mere slave of an idea” (Rodrigues, p.65). But Augie continues to drift away from these attempts to transform his life and conduct. After giving up his assignment as a union organizer, he confesses:

I couldn't just order myself to become one of those peoples who go out before the rest, who stand and intercept the big
social ray, or collect and concentrate it like burning glass, who glow and dazzle and make bursts of fire. It wasn't what I was meant to be. (AM, p. 310)

After these traumas, Augie loses much of his innocence and states that he “was no child now, neither in age nor in protectedness, and [he] was thrown for fair on the free spinning of the world” (AM, p.285). Though his “reality instructors” had been unsuccessful in shaking his optimism, the traumas he suffers eventually force him to realize that life is brutal and that no one can remain as idealistic and youthfully innocent as he had been. Augie recognizes that his initial innocence has been destroyed, and he finds that “in any true life you must go and be exposed outside the small circle that encompasses two or three heads in the same history of love. Try and stay, tough, inside. See how long you can” (AM, p.285).

Once Augie concludes that he has lost Eden, he no longer is like the early American Adam; Bellow proceeds to depict Augie as a modern Adam who is defeated by life and who seeks to escape the world by imagining a new Eden in which he can hide. Before, he had retreated into the garden to escape being seduced by Thea so that he could maintain his youthful innocence. Now, Augie has to seek a new Eden in which he can retrieve the innocence he has lost.
Ironically, Thea offers him his first vision of escape in Eden. Thea plans to go to Mexico to get a divorce, and she “assumed that [Augie would] go to Mexico with her” (AM, p.313). Augie, having been wounded by reality, “never seriously thought of refusing” primarily because he thinks Mexico will allow him to escape his traumas. He concludes this because Thea has suggested that in Mexico they will experience “something better than what people call reality” (AM, p.316). To this suggestion, Augie thinks, “Very good and bravo! Let's have this better, nobler reality” (AM, p.316). That Mexico will be paradisiacal for Augie is further indicated through what Thea's house in Mexico is called “Casa Descuitada... — Carefree House” (AM, p.343). The implication is that Mexico will obliterate Augie's cares by allowing him to return to innocence in a new Eden.

However, as Patrick Morrow states, Bellow is a hopeful artist who has come to “believe that man's living within society is preferable to self-imposed alienation.” Bellow asserts that it is impossible to escape reality by envisioning paradise and that one must adapt to the world rather than attempt to flee it. To emphasize this assertion, Bellow surrounds Augie's trip to Mexico with portents and eventually depicts Mexico as a pseudo-paradise, which is actually hellish. For instance, even
before Augie departs for Mexico, he is made uneasy by his friends' warnings not to go.

Nobody, then, gave the happy *bon voyage* I'd have liked. Everybody warned me . . . I argued back to myself that it was just the Rio Grande I had to cross, not the Acheron, but anyway it oppressed me from somewhere. (AM, p.323)

This portentous atmosphere is further heightened when it is learnt that Thea, the temptress earlier in Augie's life, plans to travel to Mexico with snake-catching equipment. In fact, once Augie and Thea are in Mexico, Thea spends much of her time collecting snakes or visiting 'snaky' areas. After a while, she has collected so many snakes and deposited them at her home that Augie says their porch became “a snake gallery” (360). He quite understandably observes with pleasure Thea's snakes as they shed: “Toughest of all was the casting of the skins…. But then they would gleam out, one day, and their freshness and jewelery would give even me pleasure, their enemy, and I would like to look at the cast skin from which they were *regenerated* in green or dots of red like pomegranate seeds or varnished gold crust” (AM, p.369 emphasis added). Augie refuses to see a world of “deterministic ugliness and low opinions” (Dutton, 1982, p.46). The final portent surrounding Augie's supposedly paradisiacal venture into Mexico is that Thea takes with her an eagle, which she plans to train to hunt iguanas. Though the eagle is Thea's idea, the chore of handling it is relegated to Augie. Forced to spend a great deal
of time with the eagle, which he names Caligula, Augie becomes almost possessed by it. Just as Thea is a snake-like temptress who corrupts Augie's paradise, Caligula, "who glides like a Satan, is a demonic intruder into his Eden." The eagle becomes almost a reminder to Augie of his mortality. As he says,

> In the most personal acts of your life you carry the presence and power of another; you extend his being in your thoughts, where he inhabits. Death, with monuments, makes great men remembered like that. So I had to bear Caligula's gaze. (AM, p. 335)

Rather than finding Eden in Mexico, Augie has to live with the satanic eagle whose gaze he must endure. The combat between Caligula and Thea (for the eagle’s body and soul), the wonderfully precise passages describing the eagle soaring off to satisfy his beautiful trainer and miserably failing her, crystallize a notion about the will to power and dominance that is central to nearly every one of Augie’s adventures. These incidents that cloud Augie's quest for paradise prove not only to be portentous but turns his stay in Mexico into a disaster. Not only does he suffer an accident in which his skull is cracked, he and Thea began to drift apart. Thea leaves him alone at her "Casa Descuitada," (AM, p.343) and for days he feels like one of the damned. He finds no solace in the new Eden. In fact, his escape in paradise leaves him even more wounded
than he was before he left for Mexico. Being left alone there most of the
time, he says

And suddenly my heart felt ugly, I was sick of myself. I thought that my aim of being simple was just a fraud, that I wasn't a bit goodhearted or affectionate, and I began to wish that Mexico from beyond the walls would come in and kill me and that I would be thrown in the bone dust and twisted, spiky crosses of the cemetery, for the insects and lizards. (AM, p.401)

Perhaps one of the reasons why Augie suffers so in Mexico is that his expectations are excessively romantic. He assumes that Mexico will be paradisiacal; when this assumption proves fallacious, he is destroyed.

If he could learn to adapt to reality rather than seek escape from it, he possibly could have avoided such pains. When Thea, outraged because Augie had helped Stella Chesney escape from her current love, outraged further when Augie reveals what he really thinks about her hunting, runs away, Augie feels utter desolation and despair. His friend Iggy suggests that Augie had to experience suffering before he could get anywhere: "you got to get knocked over and crushed like this. If you don't you'll never understand how much you hurt her. You've got to find out about this and not be so larky" (AM, p.400).

Augie begins a "terrible investigation" (AM, p.401) into his own nature. He cannot harmonize his desire to be simple and free, unencumbered by money or profession or duties, with his genuine desire
to please people and be a sincere follower of love: “An independent fate and love too – what confusion!” (AM, p.401) he exclaims painfully. Thea was right when she told him that love would always appear strange to him no matter what form it took. He seems primarily moved by the need for love. Thea puts it more emphatically and indignantly: “You want people to pour love on you, and you soak it up and swallow it. You can’t get enough. And when another woman runs after you, you’ll go with her. You’re so happy when somebody begs you to oblige. You can’t stand up under flattery” (AM, p.317). His desire to please people, he now realizes, did not spring from a real love for them, but from his need for protection: “While as for me, whoever would give me cover from this mighty free-running terror and wild cold of chaos I went to, and therefore to temporary embraces” (AM, p.403). Real love seems foreign to Augie because he is not able to reconcile his ideals with reality. His idea of love, high and noble, is barren and uncreative; indeed it is self-damaging because it is not based on the real condition of its object — the human condition.

After Thea leaves him, he comes close to recognizing his penchant for fantasy and begins to adapt to life. He states “my invention and special thing was simplicity. I wanted simplicity and denied complexity” (AM, p.402). At this point in the novel, he realizes that he has desired to
hide from the complexity of life. With this realization, he decides to find Thea, ask for her forgiveness, and start a more realistic life with her. However, the more he thinks of her, the more he dreams of a perfect, paradisiacal life that the two could share:

Imagining how this would be, I melted, my chest got hot, soft, sore, and yearning. I saw it already happening. It's always been like that with me, that fantasy went ahead of me and prepared the way. (AM, p.403)

Rather than adapt to reality, Augie again chooses to fantasize about life with Thea. Though Augie and Thea never get back together, his dreams of paradise continue. How could Augie have fallen for someone so domineering? Augie says, “I had to accept her version of everything, this being the obstinacy of assertion I spoke of. Also it was evident that she was used to having what she wanted, including me” (AM, p.316).

To sum up, the affair reveals a more intense Augie, but one who remains essentially confused, unable to find solutions. It turns out that even in love Augie’s quest for noble identity must remain inconclusive. Augie returns to Chicago a sadder, if wiser, man. He has lost some of his ‘larkiness.’ In spite of his deeper awareness of the darkness that surrounds man, he still retains like other Bellow protagonists his faith in human existence. Before leaving Mexico he arms himself with the important insight that it is impossible to live “without something infinitely mighty and great” (AM, p.413).
In his journey towards a worthwhile fate, Augie is enlightened by his encounters with a number of people. Together these encounters “spell out the truth that society today does not encourage anyone to have a fate of one’s own. Instead society demands an expert” (Rodrigues, p.65). Augie tells Clem Tambow after his Mexican experiences: “In the world of today your individual has to be willing to illustrate a more and more narrow and restricted point of existence. And I am not a specialist” (AM, p.436). Aware of the dangers of being a specialist, Augie takes a quick, ironic look at him, but cannot determine who he is. He sees a figure that is ever restless, always circling around in an elliptical orbit, never stopping to be defined: “Lord, what a runner after good things, servant of love, embarker on schemes, recruit of sublime ideas, and good-time Charlie!” (AM, p.432) Later in the novel, he tells a friend of his that he hopes to buy a piece of property and settle down on it and start a school. Because his friend is sceptical of the idea, Augie attempts to remove his friend’s doubts. Augie states that his idea is not fantastic:

Oh, I don't expect to set up the Happy Isles. I don't consider myself any Prospero. I haven't got the build. I have no daughter. I never was a king, for instance. No, no, I'm not looking for any Pindar Hyperborean dwelling with the gods in case, a tearless life, never aging. (AM, p.456)

However, despite his claims to the contrary, what he envisions is a paradise in which he will have a chance at beating “life at its greatest
complication and meshuggah power" by starting "lower down and simpler" (AM, p.457). What he actually desires is a pastoral Eden:

What I had in my mind was this private green place like one of those Walden or Innisfree wattle jobs under the kind sun, surrounded by velvet woods and bright gardens and Elysium lawns sown with Lincoln Park grass seed. (AM, p.515)

As the novel evolves, Bellow makes Augie remain vulnerable, not become masterful. Though humour is Augie’s major defence, he does not know enough to always see the joke. He is hardly married for two days when he sets out on a new adventure across half the world. At the end of the novel, he is found conducting black market trading while his wife, Stella, pursues her career in acting elsewhere. The goals he had set for his wedded life have disappeared: he does not even hope to build the foster home that he had dreamed about: “now my foster-home and academy dream was not a preoccupation but one of those featherhead millenarian notions a summer butterflies... Other preoccupations are my fate, or what fills life and thought” (AM, p.516). His life continues to spin into and out of new adventures. He has not found “a secure tether or a still point, but he has been able to view his moral situation with a certain amount of clarity” (Kulshrestha, p.104).

In Chapter 10, Augie reflects on the difference between daily life and what he calls “triumphant life,” which can only be touched at rare moments. He believes that there are two ways of approaching life. One
can accept the reality of every day occurrences and thus submit to
drudgery and the commonplace, or one can rise above normalcy and seek
a more "triumphant life." That Augie assumes life can be divided into
only these two categories hints at his naiveté. That he chooses to ignore
what he considers normalcy and yearns for adventure emphasizes his role
as the youthful optimist. He says,

I had no eye, ear, or interest for anything else — that is, for
usual, second-order, oatmeal, mere-phenomenal, snarled-
shoelace-carfare-laundry-ticket plainness, unspecified
dismalness, unknown captivities; the life of despair-harness,
or the life of organization-habits which is meant to supplant
accidents with calm abiding. Well, now, who can really
expect the daily facts to go, toil or prisons to go, oatmeal and
laundry tickets and all the rest, and insist that all moments be
raised to the greatest importance, demand that everyone
breathe the pointy, star-furnished air at its highest difficulty,
abolish all brick, vault like rooms, all dreariness, and live
like prophets or gods? Why, everybody knows this
triumphant life can only be periodic. So there's a schism
about it, some saying only this triumphant life is real and
others that only the daily facts are. For me there was no
debate, and I made speed into the former. (AM, p.194
Emphasis added)

What Augie does is describe a dichotomy between reality and
fantasy; he ironically states that no one can really believe in the
"periodic" triumphant life, but that one should surely accept "the daily
facts" propounded by "reality instructors" such as Lausch, Einhorn,
Renling, Simon, and Villars; then he asserts that he does choose triumph
over reality, adventure over normalcy, and optimism over the "despair-
harness.” Augie seems closer to the mixed experience of the novel when he realizes that life is a state of becoming, a movement between idealism and the daily facts, between “the pointy, star-furnished air and oatmeal and laundry tickets and all the rest.”

Augie's preoccupation is with the nature of humanity — with love, reality structures, and the axial lines. Augie March makes his most famous thematic statement when he talks about “the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy” (AM, p.454). When Augie questions what makes one's existence necessary, and decides that reality comes from being accountable (which he also considers being the ultimate in helplessness)

Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn't correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn't try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be. (AM, p.378)

Kayo Obermark's insight that love is the only protection against the overwhelming conditioning forces of life, explains,

What you are talking about is moha — a Navajo word, and also Sanskrit, meaning opposition of the finite. It is the Bronx cheer of the conditioning forces. Love is the only answer to moha, being infinite. I mean all the forms of love, eros, agape, libido, philia, and ecstasy. (AM, p.450)
Augie elaborates on his idea of the axial lines of life, for it is they which seem closest to the love which Kayo sets forth as the answer to moha:

1 must have had a feeling since I was a kid about these axial lines which make me want to have my existence on them, and so I have said 'no' like a stubborn fellow to all my persuaders, just on the obstinacy of my memory of these lines, never entirely clear. But lately I have felt these thrilling lines again. When striving stops, there they are as a gift. I was lying on the couch here before and they suddenly went quivering right straight through me. Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony! And all noise, grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal. And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines. (AM, p.454)

The paragraph sounds the thematic dichotomy between the world of flesh “being” and the world of spirit “becoming.” The above quotation is long, but one needs to examine it closely. In the first place, it is the key passage — a statement of theme — for the entire novel. One can find such apt statements in each of Bellow’s novels, as though he had built the novel around the statement. In the second place, it is the passage, more than any other, in which Augie sees the condition of falling into blessedness, into grace. “When striving stops”, Augie tells us, “the axial lines are there as a gift.” A man can come back to them, but not through striving. He must wait. Augie is doubtlessly looking for something lasting, something durable, and something akin to what Kayo calls the infinite, as opposed to the finite. One must view the axial line of Bellow’s
vision of the world as a “radically religious perspective,” which Nathan A. Scott sees in Bellow: “What we confront, in other words, in this whole body of fiction is a radically religious perspective on the human reality.”

Man has to base his existence on the axial lines of truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, and harmony. These thrilling lines had passed through the center of Augie's being as a child. Augie believes that these lines demand to be rediscovered in later years and are miraculously bestowed upon anyone who stops hunting furiously for them: “At any time life can come together again and man be regenerated” (AM, p.454). Augie offers a mystical vision of human possibility:

[Man] will be brought into focus. He will live with true joy. Even his pains will be joy if they are true, even his helplessness will not take away his power, even wandering will not take him away from himself, even the big social jokes and hoaxes need not make him ridiculous, even disappointment after disappointment need not take away his love. Death will not be terrible to him if life is not. The embrace of other true people will take away his dread of fast change and short life. (AM, p.455)

This act of faith marks the climactic moment of Augie's search for humanness. It reveals Augie's (and Bellow's) “sacramental reverence for the gift of life” (Rodrigues, p.71). It implies that everyone vibrates with intimations of immortality in the lost world of one's childhood, intimations that can be recovered again. Augie acknowledges the
presence of disappointment, pain, and absurdity in human life but refuses to accept alienation, anxiety, doom, and despair as inevitable to the human condition. “He ends with a dream of a colony of the spirit wherein man can truly be himself, redeemed from his fear of death by the warmth of human brotherhood” (Rodrigues, p.65). He cannot achieve it unless he unlocks his imprisoning self. Self must be transfigured, even if the process is hindered by society’s coercive influence. The novel therefore involves endless self-questioning and “re-figuration — a re-figuration — itself conditioned by history and our changing maps of consciousness.”

This human transformation is necessary for social re-birth. In this novel Bellow has shown the vision of the intersection of the conscious mind and emotions in the life of Augie. In his discussion of the “axial lines of life” Augie mentions Osiris, the god torn apart by his followers. Osiris is an ideal because the devoured god is somehow regenerated. The previous images in the novels suggest that life is dangerous, ugly, and heavy. Thus Bellow’s characters consider themselves imprisoned. The Adventures of Augie March contains many prisons — we wonder if Augie can avoid them more successfully than Asa (The Victim) or Joseph (DM). On the first page Augie tells us that he will knock at the door of life — “sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent” (AM, p.3). He shuns confinement but finds that there are many doors, which remain
closed, even after the knocks. Several institutions are significant in this respect: the Home to which George is sent — that home with “wired windows, dog-proof cyclone fence, asphalt yard, great gloom” (AM, p.57) the home for the blind where Mama is sent; Grandma Lausch’s institution; and the university with the old-world-imitated walls. Perhaps the very existence of such prisons of the spirit compel Augie to picture life a bit differently towards the end of the novel when he says: “We left what company we were in and went privately to take a few falls with our select antagonist, in his secret room like inside a mountain or down in a huge root cellar” (AM, p.419). Everyone has an inner room and no matter what preparations for life he finally makes, men are always within “the walls of his being” (AM, p.455). So we leave him still a traveller, a Columbus: “Why, I’m a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hands and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze” (AM, p.536). “Will he discover America or be shipwrecked? The question is open — like his crisscrossing, happy voyages.” At the end of the novel, the strange ride with Jacqueline to the Normandy coast shows us an Augie who knows that his dream can never be translated into reality. Augie has also acquired an understanding of the minute movements of his own being:

I said when I started to make the record that I would be plain and heed the knocks as they come, and also that a man’s
character was his fate. Well, then it is obvious that this fate, or what he settles for, is also his character. And since I never have had any place of rest, it should follow that I have trouble being still, and furthermore my hope is based on getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found. When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift — bounty, harmony, love and so forth. Maybe I can't take these very things I want. (AM, p.514)

Augie rightly infers that his life would reach fulfillment to, what he calls, the axial lines, but the novel offers little hope or prospect of such a fulfillment or realization. The only affirmation that the novel offers is located in Augie's intuitive grasp of the terms of spiritual fulfillment. At the end of the novel, he is still involved in experience, but he has taken stock of his situation and his ‘possibilities.’ There is little doubt that he is frustrated by his inability to work out any satisfactory conception of self: at every turn he finds that he is being shaped not by powers within himself, but by social pressures, by chance, by the force of other personalities, in short, by those factors which are broadly said to constitute fate. Bellow makes his position clear when Augie closes the story: “I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America” (AM, p.536).

All of which is to say that Augie knows his ideals are right, in spite of his less-than-high fortune. In Augie's view of himself as Columbus, Bellow intends an “illumination for his protagonist — a
discovery of likenesses between himself and another explorer. While both seem to have failed, their hope, vision, judgment, and courage are realities of their natures, which give to them powers and potentialities that allow them the possibilities of a better fate." Bellow leaves it to the reader to understand that Augie's failure lies not in his high ideals but in his refusal to live them through positive action and personal involvement — and in his seeming willingness to be used by those who are actively involved but who do not possess his vision of existence. From Augie's perspective, the world exists to teach him how to devote his daring to the pursuit of success and self-discovery. It does not matter where he serves as life's pupil, whether in the poolroom of the wheelchair-bound Einhorn or drifting in a lifeboat in the Atlantic after his merchant ship has been torpedoed. "All the consciousness there was to me seemed a hairlash in the crushing water universe" (AM, p.495). But his sense of the frailty of individual consciousness does not lead him to despair; it leads him to a balanced sense of the comedy of existence — of the human being struggling for importance and the forces of life resisting but never quenching the individual’s hope. His mission is to keep faith with a vision of himself as the American in search of the world, as much a Columbus as modern life will permit.
Because a number of characters in the novel see that Augie is a dreamer who will not adapt to reality, they try to wean him from his excessive idealism. Unlike the “reality instructors” who tried to force their cynicism on Augie, characters like Padilla and Clem Tambow simply try to teach Augie to be more realistic. Padilla tells Augie that

You want too much, and therefore if you miss out you blame yourself too hard. But this is all a dream. The big investigation today is into how bad a guy can be, not how good he can be. You don't keep up with the times. You're going against history. Or at least you should admit how bad things are, which you don't do either. (AM, p. 431)

Padilla recognizes that Augie is detached from reality and is unable to adapt to the world. He does not necessarily want to drag Augie down into the mire or the Void as did the reality instructors; he simply wants Augie to get in step with history and at least see the world clearly. Padilla tells Augie that his dream about human greatness is too ambitious to be realized. Clem Tambow tells Augie practically the same thing. He pokes good-natured fun at Augie's “campaign after a worth-while fate” (AM, p.432). He states that Augie's ambitions are too general and that Augie is “not concrete enough.” He says to Augie, “What I guess about you is that you have a nobility syndrome. You can't adjust to the reality situation” (AM, p.434). Because of this, Tambow fears that Augie is “going to ruin [himself] ignoring the reality principle and trying to cheer up the dirty scene” (436). He believes that Augie “should accept the data
of experience” (AM, p.436). Clem Tambow, who has been reading psychology, suggests that Augie cure himself of his nobility syndrome, his belief in Man, by taking some of Freud's medicine. Augie himself does not define his dream, but he senses its power within him all through his adventures. Augie dreams of “a good enough fate” (AM, p.28); he has a restless desire “to be taken up into something greater than [himself]” (AM, p.204). But he refuses to be goaded on by others; sensing the needs of his own being, he insists on setting his own pace, “I never tried to exceed my constitution. In any case, when someone like Clem urged me and praised me, I didn't listen closely. I had my own counseling system. It wasn't infallible, but it made mistakes such as I could bear” (AM, p.204).

Considering Augie's experiences in Mexico, one can assume that it would be better for him to overcome his naive idealism and see the world clearly. However, Augie is never able to adapt to life. On the contrary, despite his traumatic experiences throughout the book, the novel ends with Augie “grinning again” (AM, p.536). Patrick Morrow says that Augie’s comments at the end of the novel reveal that Augie has succeeded in adapting to the world, “accommodating through the comic, specifically by his good-natured grin” (Morrow, 1967, p. 402). Hassan supplies a different interpretation when he says that the novel offers “no proper ending” (Hasan, 1961, p.311). Whereas Patrick Morrow assumes
that Augie’s “good-natured grin” (AM, p.402) allows him to adapt successfully to the world, Hassan states that at the end of the novel, Augie is still un-initiated. The implication of Bellow’s ending is that for Augie there is always some unknown land, some distant horizon that is fertile ground for his imagination and for his desire for escape to a paradise. At the end of the novel, Augie is searching for peace and happiness; though he might be a flop like Columbus and end up in chains, as a modern American Adam he will not discount the possibility of a new Eden. The last paragraph of *The Adventures of Augie March* contains the statement of hope on which the novel ends. Augie is in Europe, motoring to Bruges, and in the last half of the paragraph after gazing at all the absurdities of existence — including his own position — he understands the ultimate purpose of humor. “The laughter is against human hope, but also is that hope":

...Is the laugh at nature — including eternity — that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Nah! Nah! I think. It never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both. (AM, p.536)

“Comedy then, is an enigma because it transcends categories of pain or joy; it resolves ambivalence in a mysterious way” (Malin, 1969, p.133). Bellow has remarked too on the power of the comic in the Yiddish tradition: “Laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that
it is not easy to determine the relations of the two” (Jewish Stories, pp. 9-16). What strikes one about this final passage is that Augie is willing to wager on the unknown. He shares in a common humanity refusing to believe that nature and eternity can win out “over us and the power of hope” (AM, p. 536). The analogy to Columbus says much about hope and belief concerning the nature and state of man; it is in fact an analogy based on a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. “A leap of faith is the act of believing in something without, or in spite of, available empirical evidence.” It is an act commonly associated with religious belief as many religions consider faith to be an essential element of piety. The phrase originated with Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Christian philosopher who believed that the only way to accept genuine Christianity is through a leap of faith, through complete understanding that one's faith is independent of reason or evidence. In order to fully understand what Kierkegaard meant by a leap of faith, one must understand what Kierkegaard means by “leap.” In Kierkegaard's book The Concept of Anxiety, he describes Adam's qualitative leap into sin. “Adam's leap signifies a change from one quality to another, mainly the quality of possessing no sin to the quality of possessing sin” Kierkegaard maintains “the transition from one quality to another can take place only by a leap.” This means that when the transition happens, you move directly from one
state to the other, never possessing both qualities. Kierkegaard developed a philosophy based on the idea of the importance of the individual and individual choice. He also said that it is especially important for people to have a meaningful existence. And meaning, he said, comes from whether or not people sense that their lives have a permanent significance. The problem is, though, that most people believe that their lives have importance only temporarily. He said:

If you are aware of the importance of your existence, you will eventually feel dissatisfied with a life devoted to art and pleasure; then your own impermanence and insignificance will fill you with despair. At this point, you can either try to go on living in despair, or you can try to lead a more ethical, responsible existence, the second stage of development. When you start to lead a more responsible existence, you start to introduce an idea of permanence to your life. This sense of permanence is only partial and creates conflict that leads to despair again. You can only reach the third stage through a leap of faith because there aren't any rational reasons for making this move. You have to make it without any philosophical or conventional religious excuses. This is because what is most important is the truth that only you can know. Making this leap of faith is the way out of despair and it gives you a sense of the permanent significance of your life.45

Thus, he advocated the "leap of faith" in which a person makes a passionate commitment to something without objective certainty. For Kierkegaard, the "leap of faith" was a passionate choice to believe in the Christian God apart from evidence that this God existed. For Bellow like Kierkegaard, existence is not a passive state but rather an active
engagement with the world and with one’s life. Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the individual and personal responsibility in discerning appropriate courses of action has come to be viewed as a cornerstone of the twentieth-century Existentialist movement. Indeed society will only be enhanced if one is able to forsake nostalgia for the past and worries about potential disaster, and concentrate on the true goodness that exists inherently within us all.

As ego-centred as Augie is, occasionally something comes from within the depths of him, suggesting that the real business of life has nothing to do with being a successful functionary. Rather, the real business of life, Augie discovers, like Joseph in *Dangling Man* lies in carrying the burden of self: “Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being here. Maybe he was supposed to make them and suffer from them on this earth.” (*Seize the Day*, p. 56) Such a realization is essential to Augie overcoming his egoism — to his taking his hands off himself and thereby submitting to life. Again Joseph (DM) says, “I am somewhat afraid of the vanity of thinking that I can make my own way toward clarity’ (DM, p.166), but he remembers having read Spinoza concerning the preservation of self: “He didn’t say one’s life. He said oneself... He did not mean preservation of the animal.” Recognizing that it is the soul, spirit, or mind that Spinoza
meant by self, Joseph remarks: "It is our humanity that we are responsible for it, our dignity our freedom" (DM, p. 167). Augie also comes to realize that grace is not to be had through striving. From Dangling Man to Mr. Sammler's Planet, the Bellow hero has been faced with the challenge of reconciling the views he has of himself with those that others have of him. He must decide whether to conform to the pattern of existence that surrounds him, or to explore new possibilities. He may ultimately not discover what he seeks, but the search itself is of prime significance. In Dangling Man, The Victim, The Adventures of Augie March, and Seize the Day only ambiguous resolutions are attained.

In the end, Augie March is still alienated from his fellow men, still another 'dangling man.' But at least he has followed his pilgrimage in search of perfect love to the realization of the inadequacy of this false faith. His heart was reaching out for identification with his imperfect fellow man with whom he had been raised in suffering and in joy. Only one more step and he would cease to be a "dangling man." Carl Jung's descriptions of transformation or "individuation" process are helpful in understanding Augie. Jung defines Wiedergeburt as involving transformation of an individual so that all of his or her faculties are brought into conscious play. This may involve a "renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not
changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality, are subjected to *healing, strengthening, or improvement*” (Emphasis added). The ego, as Jung defines it, “extends only as far as the conscious mind,” whereas the self comprises “the whole of the personality, which includes the unconscious as well as the conscious component. The Ego is thus related to the self as part of the whole.” Whatever is experienced in the inner journey must be understood to be at the same time individual and collective, the materials of the unconscious deriving from the repository that Jung spent his lifetime in codifying what he termed as intrinsic organization in “definite recognizable patterns.” The resolution that Bellow's heroes move towards springs from a triumph over the ego rather than the simple destruction of it. They go beyond their own striving for absolute perfection and in so doing experience the sense of a new reality. The external world comes to them not as a paradigm of death, but as a mystery. This mystery has little to do with hope or despair or with any intellectual formulation of these states. Bellow's heroes see that their commitments, like Bellow's, are to something “far more rudimentary than any position or intellectual attitude might imply.” What they arrive at is not an “explanation” but a sense of “mystical” sense of wonder at life and reality which is independent of any final judgment of good or bad. “In the end, you can't save your soul and life
by thought," Augie is told by Einhorn, the earliest and most important of his mentors, “but if you think, the least of the consolation prizes is the world” (AM, p.117).

Bellow’s intellectual heroes are acutely aware of the reasons for their alienation from the rest of society, but they are unable to think their way through to an accommodation with it. “Thinking leads only to more thinking — not to action.” Bellow expanded on this idea in his acceptance speech upon receiving the National Book Award for Fiction in 1965 (this time for Herzog):

> There is nothing left for us novelists to do but think. For unless we think, unless we make a clearer estimate of our condition, we will continue to write kid stuff, to fail in our function, we will lack serious interests and become truly irrelevant.48

Augie is a new kind of American hero who still demands a certain kind of freedom. Not death, life's natural and inexorable limitation, but “disappointment,” the steady smothering of a man's best talents and efforts, is what Augie renounces: “Not that life should end is so terrible in itself, but that it should end with so many disappointments in the essential. This is a fact” (AM, p.412). Although Bellow's protagonists are unable to accomplish anything that significantly reshapes their world, a number of them do manage to save themselves by coming to an accommodation with the world as it is. Often, this accommodation
requires a new sense of self and of the protagonist's relation to the human
community.

The quest for freedom, knowledge, and love are merely versions of
the real; they give the quest its form without determining its end. What
we do recognize, in the end, is that reality eludes the versions we make of
it, eludes and transcends them. What remains when all our seeking is
done amounts to this; “the inestimable gift of awareness, of life willing
and overreaching itself. This may be an axiomatic statement, but beyond
this the heroes of bellow cannot go.” Freedom is the provisional goal of
their quest, but freedom forces upon them knowledge of the self they did
not bargain for, and self-knowledge discloses to them a world intelligible
only in love. Perhaps the best summary of the moral pattern is Bellow’s
play *The Last Analysis*, which delightfully transposes virtually all the
major themes of his fiction into a farcical key. Every one of Bellow’s
heroes suffers, like Bummidge in the play, from “humanitis,” which as
Bummidge’s secretary explains is when “the human condition gets to be
too much for you.” Every man is his own analyst, Bummidge suggests,
and this is pretty much the condition of each of Bellow’s protagonists. It
is not so much the avowal of life that is important, but the analysis of
lives. Their allegiance to essential values requires them to asses their
place in society. All of the stories end with no sense of finality, as if each
man's suffering represents a phase rather than a realization. From the standpoint of schlemiel-literature, Salvation for the schlemiel is always partial and personal. Bellow does not affirm the objective presence of goodness, but merely the right and the need to believe in it as one component of the human personality. Saul Bellow affirms an American reality that is "new, promising, changing, dangerous, and universal." Augie will not discount the possibility of a new Eden as a modern American Adam. "An ideal construction... This is the only possible way to meet chaos" (DM, p.19). Augie is confronted with the vision of a future in which there will be no fulfillment of an earthly utopia. The garden path, which was supposed to lead to a New World, has instead led to this brink of nothingness.

The end of the novel captures wonderfully the doubleness of Nature: it offers darkness and light, heaviness and motion. It suggests hopefully that pastoral comfort lies ahead, if Augie can "beat the dark" where he can see "the green canals and ancient palaces" (AM, p.536). Augie is admired for his knowledge of the limits of his understanding and for his measurable honesty to self. So Augie's reality laid in a vision of life as triumphant, a goal that he is ever speeding toward. He is the soul of cultural optimism and great self-destiny — to him; all is possible, even in a chaotic world. Bellow is not saying, "Look at man with all of his
endowments, to these depths he comes" (Dutton, 1982, p.50). Instead he is saying that man comes to these depths only through his mistaken goals and wasted abilities. Bellow endows Augie with all of the weapons needed to achieve a better fate, “to overcome ignominy,” if he will only see the “contradictions between his ideals and reality” (Dutton, 1982, p.50). At the end of his story Augie indicates: “It must be clear, however, that I am a person of hope” (AM, p.529). At the end of the novel, Augie has benefited from his experience, but, as one critic has observed, he is no more suited to “the established forms of American life...than Huck or Holden” (Hassan, 1961, p.311). Only by “shedding systematic formulations of reality can the individual discover,” as Bellow suggests, a “personal connection to the creative mystery underlying appearances.” Bellow searches for “human significance,” (Reader’s Encyclopaedia, p.82) in a seemingly senseless, chaotic world. Augie, the New American Adam is precisely what he tells us he is in the novel's opening: “Chicago-born” (AM, p.3), the American in quest of the independent self. Ultimately, Augie, like other Bellow protagonists, fumbles his way toward richer, albeit tentative, human truths: “It was only an intimation of understanding. A promise that mankind might — might, mind you — eventually, through its gift which might — might again — be a divine gift, comprehend why it lived. Why life, why death? A promise filled with
qualifying might's is, perhaps the best we have — it is certainly the most that Bellow’s honesty will allow for — but given the gloomy modern conditions, such promises are infinitely precious". And there can always be a journey to see a newer world that may be clearer and richer as a result of having looked at and been moved by images of others and thereby to understand one’s own individual identity. If it is true that the self has been eroded or even erased in this post modern world, then perhaps images such as those in this book may indeed help us discover more about who we are and where we are going as we enter the twenty-first century. Mr. Bellow probably is saying, and rightly, that the “American Dream is a faith which, like any other, can only be maintained stubbornly in spite of the evidence” (Podhoretz, 1979, p.18). In the foreword to Allan Bloom's widely debated book about the decline of higher education in America, The Closing of the American Mind (1987), Bellow summarizes: "In the greatest confusion [of our age] there is still an open channel to the soul . . . and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves — to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments, and put everything together." Whatever our views on these matters, we cannot but admire the honesty, and intelligence with which Bellow has pursued the quest to restore the soul to American literature.
End Notes


51 Saul Bellow, "In No Man’s Land," *Commentary* 11 (February 1951), p. 204.
