CHAPTER-VI
John Updike is not incorrect when he says that *The Dean's December* (1982) is essentially a “non-fiction book inside the novel” (1983: 256). Michiko Kakutani tells us how after his trip to Israel in 1975 Bellow had an urge to write about “great public matters”: “The winning of the Nobel Prize in 1976 no doubt provided some of that necessary confidence, and he made plans to write a nonfiction book about Chicago. After making hundreds to abandon that approach and write a novel” (1981: 137-38).

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

*The Dean’s December* is Bellow’s tale of two cites—Chicago and Bucharest. The protagonist, Albert Corde, is a newspaper man who has become a Professor of Journalism and subsequently Dean of Students in an unnamed Chicago college. As Dean, he has embroiled himself in controversy by writing a series of articles indicting Chicago for its racism, its clubhouse politics, and its lack of what he calls ‘moral initiative’. He has also pressed for the conviction of a black man who murdered one of the college’s white students, and he has endeared himself thereby neither to the college provost nor to young liberals on the campus — among them, his nephew. In short, the Dean is too morally passionate for Chicago. He has jeopardized his professional standing as both journalist and college official by his impulse to take absolute moral readings.
The Dean is geographically, if not mentally, distanced from the Chicago fray when he and his wife Minna spend the month of December in Bucharest visiting her dying mother, the distinguished psychiatrist, Valeria Raresh. From the outset of their stay, they find that a Rumanian official obstructs their visits to the dying woman, apparently because of Valeria’s history of disdain for the Socialist government. Thirty years earlier she had fallen into disfavor as Minister of Health, officially exonerated years later, she had declined to rejoin the party. The government officials respect Minna’s international standing as an astrophysicist, but she had defected from Rumania twenty years earlier while studying in the West, and they are not disposed to overlook Valeria’s behaviour for her sake. Indeed, because she did not formally renounce Rumanian citizenship when she became a citizen of the United States, she is arguably subject to Rumanian authority, a situation that worries Corde. Incautious conversation must never be indulged in her mother’s wiretapped apartment, he warns, and he is anxious that they leave as soon as possible after Valeria’s death on Christmas eve.

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

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

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

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

perception of the culture of Bucharest. Bellow uses this perception as a foil to Corde’s experience of Chicago.

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

Albert Corde has glimpses of the wholeness of the past. His problem is that he himself fails to reach it. His transcendence, what Sartre would call his ‘leap of faith’, comes when he gets the courage to throw away his tenure and decides to go to Mount Palomer. The focus in The Dean’s December is mainly on the manifestations of social disorder. As in other novels, here too the protagonist’s development is on by now the familiar Sartreian lines. Albert Corde also transcends his various acts of bad faith, and moves towards self-definition, his ‘essence’. Albert Corde is allowed a vision of wholeness and integration but that is more predicated on him than enacted through action.
For sometime Bellow had been working on a long non-fiction book about Chicago, which, he came to realize, could only be given its due in fictional treatment. Chicago, he told an interviewer, was “a subject for some kind of poetry, not a factual account”, or “the very language you have to use as a journalist works against the true material” (1984: 265). Another case of public life is drowning out of private life. Bellow’s protagonist, Albert Corde, a former journalist and Professor of Journalism turned Dean of Students at a Chicago University also knows that “nothing true—really true—could be said in the papers” (106). Inspiration came when Bellow fused the Chicago book with one about Bucharest, a tale of two cities, as was *Humboldt’s Gift*.

The novel makes it clear than ever that ‘Looking for Mr. Green’ is one of the central pieces of the Bellow canon, for the radical split between appearance and reality dramatized in the early work—gains currency in such later works as *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *Humboldt’s Gift*—and is dominant in *The Dean’s December*.

In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) Bellow characterizes the publicity intellectual. He also creates the ideal intellectual in the figure of his protagonist, Sammler. A European Jew, Sammler is over seventy years old. As a young man he was a journalist in London and friend to the British novelist H. G. Wells. Sammler later experienced the atrocities of World War II; he was shot and then buried alive in a mass grave before managing to escape. Through such fictional circumstances, Bellow gives to his protagonist a symbolic significance. Having lived through the range of human experiences, Sammler has an impersonal viewpoint. His wealth of cultural experience also suggests a perspective that is distant and objective. Sammler’s experience makes him valuable to Lionel Feffer, Bellow’s publicity intellectual. Feffer is a graduate student in diplomatic history at
Columbia University in New York City, where the novel is set. As the novel unfolds, he has invited Sammler to lecture in his seminar on the topic of 'The British Scene in the Thirties.' Feffer tells Sammler that the lecture will raise money to support underprivileged students. Sammler distrusts Feffer and thinks of him as an 'ingenious operator, less student than promoter'; nonetheless, he agrees to lecture. When he arrives at the university, Sammler's suspicion deepens; for Feffer does not lead him to a seminar room, but rather to a large auditorium filled with unruly students. After beginning his lecture, Sammler is shouted down by a student who dislikes what he says about George Orwell. Shaken and unable to find Feffer, the old man leaves the auditorium. Bellow elaborates the image of Feffer as an intellectual who is unreflective and unprincipled. Sammler’s final meaning as a character lies in his role as a seer, for he reads events as signs that are laden with a historical significance. In this role he discloses Bellow’s need to grasp the implications of social phenomena. Further, Sammler’s conclusions regarding Western civilization are those of Bellow’s. The verdict that civilization is in collapse derives mainly from the behaviour of Sammler’s relatives, Angelia and Wallace Gruner. These are the grownup children of his nephew, Elya Gruner, a wealthy physician who has supported him.

Bellow advances a coherent historical theory to explain the self-indulgence of the Gruner children. He leads Sammler to the recognition that the Enlightenment was a false direction in the development of Western history. The Enlightenment initiated a preoccupation with ideals of personal happiness and with human rights. With the rise of the middle class, these ideals were institutionalized; and the result was a weakening of traditional, social allegiances. In Sammler’s understanding, Enlightenment principles eventuated in the prevailing absence of social consciousness:
He saw the increasing triumph of Enlightenment - Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Adultery! Enlightenment, universal education . . . the rights of the majority acknowledged by all governments, the rights of women, the rights of children, the rights of criminals . . . the struggles of three revolutionary centuries being won while the feudal bonds of Church and Family weakened . . . Dark romanticism now took hold (72).

This passage also evinces Bellow's opposition to the intellectual theory that Romanticism was a culmination of the Enlightenment. Romantic thought, as Bellow perceives it, represents the continued enfeeblement of the Western mind. Bellow regards the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an extension of the Romantic movement. In a 1973 interview, he had remarked upon the prevalence of the Romantic assumption that self-fulfillment is an absolute: "I think people in Western countries live Romanticism all the time. . . . They think . . . the individual utterly free, his main responsibility to fulfill himself and to realize his own desires as richly as he can" (1973: 976). As Mr. Sammler's Planet reveals, the manifestation of this Romantic assumption is a society in chaos. Through the protagonist of Mr. Sammler's Planet, Bellow suggests the limitations of speculative thought. As Sammler stresses historical fact and experiential knowledge, Bellow communicates the insufficiency of intellectual theories to render the meaning of contemporary events.

In Humboldt's Gift (1975) Bellow dramatizes the impact of public life upon the sensibility of an intellectual. Indeed this book is a cautionary tale: it exemplifies the ruinous influence of money and notoriety on the life of its protagonist, Charles Citrine. Citrine is a famous historian and playwright, who has won a Pulitzer Prize. A play produced on Broadway has added wealth to this reputation. In addition, he is editing a journal of thought that purports to study boredom as an American social problem. As the novel unfolds, it is apparent that Citrine has been living "the art-life." When he might
have been engaged in intellectual labour, he has been acting like a Hollywood celebrity. On the basis of his reputation as ‘the Brain,’ he also has become involved with a contractor who enrolls him in a Chicago physical fitness club. Recognizing that he is making a muddle of his life, Citrine tries to free himself from these distractions. He begins to practice techniques of meditation; turning inward, he attempts to simplify his existence.

The subject of his meditation is his dead friend Von Humboldt Fleisher, a writer who encouraged him at the beginning of his career. Humboldt’s gift is a script for a play that he left to Citrine in his will. Along with legal rights to another script for a successful movie, this gift enables Citrine to live modestly, after his former wife and his friends have taken most of his money. Humboldt’s gift is a spiritual legacy. It is the instructive example of a writer whose life was ruined by his craving for public approval. Conceiving of himself as ‘a candidate of power,’ Humboldt expects to become a ‘cultural advisor’ in Stevenson’s administration. When Stevenson loses, Humboldt is crestfallen, and he dies before his dreams can be realized. Yet Humboldt’s career suggests the process in which intellectuals ceased to be an adversary culture. Humboldt’s Gift centres on the conflict between materialistic values and the claims of art and high culture. The protagonist, Charles Citrine, is a successful writer who questions the worth of artistic values in modern American society after suffering exhaustive encounters with divorce lawyers, criminals, artists, and other representative figures from contemporary urban life. He also recalls his friendship with the flamboyant artist Humboldt Fleischer, a composite of several American writers who despaired in their inability to reconcile their artistic ideals with the indifference and materialism of American society. Citrine finally concludes that he can
maintain artistic order by dealing with the complexities of life through ironic comic detachment.

Like Moses Herzog, Charlie Citrine in Humboldt's Gift, is also a 'self-conscious egotist.' He has delusions about his being "a marvelous noble person" (46), and he thinks that it is up to him to "prevent the leprosy of souls" (135). Citrine's nobility is put to the test when he is overtaken by the 'nagging rush' of social and metaphysical realities. Citrine also struggles to overcome his feelings of guilt and responsibility for his late friend Von Humboldt Fleisher. He puts on a mourner's dress and mourns the death of love. The act of sharing grief with others at the pension helps him 'recover' from the emotional shock. He ritualizes his predicament by participating in a public phenomenon where his grief is depersonalized and overcome. Likewise, he overcomes the feelings of guilt and responsibility for Humboldt by ritualizing his reburial. After Citrine is "struck with blessings" by Humboldt's gift, he helps Waldemar, Humboldt's uncle, with money to fulfill his friend's last will (338). Together they rebury Humboldt beside his mother's grave. The ritual of reburial is followed by the sprouting of spring flowers in the graveyard, which symbolizes Citrine's rebirth into a new life, free from egotism and anxiety.

The protagonists of Saul Bellow's later novel, More Die of Heartbreak (1987) are Benn Crader, a renowned botanist, and his nephew, the book's narrator, Kenneth Trachtenberg. Crader is based at a university in a decaying, Midwest rust-belt city. Kenneth is an Assistant Professor of Russian literature at the same institution, having left his native Paris and Francophile American parents (against their better judgement) to be with his uncle. The plot concerns Crader's love-life and the critical question of whether he
can “complete his humanity” by extending his “seer-like” talents in plant morphology into the private sphere. Since the death of his beloved first wife fifteen years previously, Crader’s erotic adventures have been consistently disastrous. But now he embarks on a second marriage to Matilda Layamon, a local beauty and the daughter of a multi-millionaire politicking surgeon. As the book progresses, we witness the disintegration of Crader’s marriage as he becomes involved with his in-laws in an attempt to recover profits ($10 millions or so) that Crader’s own uncle, the politician Harold Vilitzer, made from the sale of land that had belonged to Crader’s parents. The novel ends with Crader’s flight from marriage and botany on an expedition to study the life of the Arctic lichen, most meagre of species. In More Die of Heartbreak, however, the prototypes of the new man are grotesque and somewhat ambiguous. Typically, individuals re-hash the old unregenerate egoistic individualism, re-casting it in the more extravagant forms that American largesse permits. And while the signs of reconstruction are faint, endless energy is expended in the persistent desire to crush the old (for Bellow, ironically already redundant). Rather, the profound dichotomy between the collective and the personal spheres remains unaffected, with the developments in the former continuously undermining and highlighting the shortcomings of the latter. This disparity in human abilities is painfully personified by Benn Crader, a man of first-rate scientific abilities, yet an erotic buffoon. Almost in partnership with his nephew, he sets out on marriage as on a project for the rejuvenation of the sorry private world of the individual, their aim “to do (or try to do) for human subjects what Uncle Benn did for algal phycobians of the lichens”. In the effort, though, Crader is ultimately pulled apart: “But this is what befalls talent when one tenth of the person makes gigantic calculations while his human remainder is still counting on its fingers” (1987: 80).
For the most part, Kenneth and Crader succeed in illuminating rather than closing the gulf, and what is illuminated is a new dark age of technically sophisticated idiocy; a disaffected torpid state almost untouched by the ‘fiddle-faddle’ of humanist endeavours. This is the post historic condition, and: “The best term for this gap between high achievement and personal ineptitude is ‘barbarism’!” *More Die of Heartbreak* is as bleak a novel as one could find, but if all humour derives in some way from the recognition of human weakness, Bellow’s book is also a comedy. Specifically, it is a satire on the vanity of human knowledge—in an age when power is dedicated to the overthrow of ignorance and weakness.

During an interview Bellow clarified what were his central thematic concerns within *The Dean’s December*.

I wanted to write a book about Chicago, and I went out to look at the town again. This new inspection didn’t inspire humour. The facts were dreadful. What were my thematic concerns, you ask? One of my themes is the American denial of real reality, our devices for evading it, our refusal to face what is all too obvious and palpable. The book is filled with protest against this evasion, against the techniques of illusion and the submission to taboos by means of which this is accomplished. Corde thinks that we are becoming wraiths, spooks. It seems to him that we have lost all capacity for dealing with experience—no capacity to think about it, no language for it, no real words (1984: 270).

Corde “would have liked to tell his nephew that men and women were shadows, and shadows within shadows, to one another” (32). When Corde climbs the stairs to the detoxification centre – again the upward quest in slum setting—he thinks, “If there was another world, this was the time to show itself. The visible one didn’t bear looking at” (189). The contemplative Dean attends to his surroundings, “As if he had been sent down to mind the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation” (210). His task is ‘to
recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description of non-experience’ (243).

Corde is surrounded by a world which seems incapable of “dealing with”, Corde is at once attracted to and repulsed by, in terms of his public and private self, those in Bucharest and Chicago whose “denial of real reality” obfuscates their political, aesthetic, and moral faculties. Bellow summed up the effect of this condition on the individual as ‘the slum’ of the psyche.

Bellow’s narrative technique shows the world as filtered through the consciousness of Corde. Bellow’s strategy is to use the inner meditative perceptions of Corde’s mind as the shaping principle of the novel. As Allan Chavkin convincingly argues, “The style of the novel is in accord with the meditative form. Bellow has created a language that captures the process of Corde’s mind as it explores its problems” (1982: 52).

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

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

As one approaching “the business of the soul,” Corde extends the tradition of the Bellow hero. Like Arthur Sammler in Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Charlie Citrine in Humboldt’s Gift, and Herschel Shawmut in “Him with His Foot in His Mouth”, Corde appears overly sensitive, high-minded, shrewd, contradictory, a man “subject to fits of
vividness" (151). That is, Corde wrestles with the same psychological conflicts that weigh so heavily on the Bellow protagonist. He inherits many of the traits, which M.A. Klug, defines in Bellow's central figures: "Bellow's heroes contain both the heroic self and the ordinary self..... His heroes are driven in pursuit of self-perfection and at the same time paralyzed by immersion in a hostile environment of death" (1979: 18). Corde finds himself caught in such a conflict.

A Dartmouth graduate, World War II veteran, and formerly talented journalist, Corde now holds a Deanship at a Chicago University. Disheartened by the media's inability to report honestly and adequately about human intercourse, Corde had recently published, in his 'pursuit of self-perfection,' a highly controversial series of articles in *Harper's*, an expose chronicling the human wasteland of his native city. Corde explains his motives for writing the articles to childhood cohort and now-prominent journalist Dewey Spangler, pinpointing the source of his lover's quarrel with the world:

I meant that we'd better deal with whatever it is that's in us by nature, and I don't see people being willing to do that. What I mainly see is the evasion, but this is a thing that works on the substance of the soul—the spirit of the time, in us by nature, working on every soul. We prefer to have such things served up to us as concepts. We'd rather have them abstract, stillborn, dead. But as long as they don't come to us with some kind of reality, as fats of experience, then all we can have instead of good and evil is ... well, concepts. Then we'll never learn how the soul is worked on. (243)

We learn much about Corde's sensibility as well as Bellow's moral seriousness in the above passage. To learn about the human soulscape, Corde feels a moral imperative to rediscover, ontologically, the nature of human communication and objective reality. Bellow establishes this point emphatically while presenting one of Corde's inner reflections: "Therefore the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it" (123). This is why
Corde’s directing force in life centres on the impulse “to recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or non-experience” (243). In Bellow’s presentation, Corde believes that our reliance on abstractions denatures the vitality implicit in human interaction. Such a dependency, for Corde, blocks any real communication.

We may gain deeper understanding of Corde by examining the way in which he responds to selected key figures within the novel. Corde finds himself in Bucharest, lending emotional assistance to his wife, Minna, who is attempting to visit her stricken mother, Valeria Raresh. Such visits seem impossible because of strict Communist Party Hospital rules.

The enforcer of the Hospital’s rules is the Colonel, whose unyielding stance brings him and Corde into immediate conflict. “Where the Colonel was tight, Corde was inclined to be loose. The Colonel’s sparse hair was straight back, military style; Corde’s baldness was more random, a broadbay; a struggling growth of black hair” (2). In context, the physical dissimilarities are emblematic of deeper differences, based on human values, between the two. The Colonel lends himself an image of a man who appears detached from human suffering, but who, like Nurse Ratchett in Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest or the interrogators Zakarakis and Theophiloiannakos in Oriana Fallaci’s A Man, relishes dogling out punishment:

The Colonel, towards the end of the interview, put on a long, judicious look—cunning, twisting the knife—and said that if Valeria was removed from the intensive care unit Minna might come as often as she liked. Unhooked from the machines, the old woman would die in fifteen minutes. This of course he did not spell out. But there was your choice, madam. This was the man’s idea of a joke. You delivered it at the point of a knife (5-6).

The callousness of the Colonel counterbalances the sensitivity of Corde, who appears overwhelmed by the sight of bedridden Valeria:
Every bit of it moved him—more than that, it worked him up; more than that, it made him wild, drove him into savage fantasies. He wanted to cry, as his wife was doing. Tears did come, but also an eager violence, a kind of get-it-over ecstasy mingling pity and destructiveness. (5)

The intensity of his response provides us with an early indication concerning the depth of Corde’s capacity to feel.

That many of the characters in the novel are unwilling or unable to match Corde’s passionate immersion into daily and worldly encounters, his capacity to feel, becomes obvious when, through the meditative consciousness of Corde, we are privy to their responses. One who plays a pivotal role is Dewey Spangler.

However, from Corde’s viewpoint, Spangler looms as a well meaning yet lacking individual. This is not to suggest that Spangler assumes the charlatan role Dr. Tamkin does in *Seize the Day*, but we sense a scheming and selfish quality to Spangler that invites the comparison. Like Tamkin, Spangler “was suavely solicitous — oh, what a smoothie Dewey had become in the great world!” (233). And Spangler seems perceptive but, again like Tamkin, uses his knowledge to manipulate. Corde senses this — “Corde wondered whether he wasn’t being interviewed by Dewey” (244), an intuition which is confirmed when, near the end of the novel, Spangler publishes such disparaging remarks about his ‘friend’ that Alec Witt, provost of the University, fires Corde.

Despite his weaknesses, however, Spangler provides the reader with more insight on the novel’s central intelligence, Corde:

In Harper’s you crossed and offended just about everybody. You might have gotten away with it if you had adopted the good old Mencken *Boobus Americanus* approach. Humor would have made the difference. But you lambasted them all. Really — you gave ‘em hard cuts straight across the muzzle. The obscurity of your language may have protected you somewhat — all the theorizing and the poetry. Lots of people must have been mystified and bogged down by it, and just gave up. All the better for you if they
didn’t read your message clearly. They’re all happy, of course, to see you get your lumps. (117-18)

But the nature of Spangler’s remarks on his lifelong friend are throughout the novel double-edged: on the one hand they function to illustrate the shared perceptivity and reactions both men have towards certain American institutions; but Spangler’s critical remarks on Corde, on the other hand, point towards a gulf in values that ultimately will sever their relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The Dean’s December* is Bellow’s work *par excellence* that examines this theme. The novel opens in Bucharest, Rumania, in the early 1980s, when Ceaucescu’s Stalinist Communism had the country frozen in its grip. The metaphor is used deliberately because in this book, Bucharest is freezing cold, both literally and figuratively. Albert Corde has flown there with his wife, Minna because her mother is desperately ill and near death.
Minna is a world-class astronomer who, thanks to her mother’s efforts, was able to get out of Rumania and get a good professional education elsewhere. Evidently, the hard-line Communists who run the Intensive Care Unit where Minna’s mother, Valeria, is staying are terribly vindictive, not only about Valeria’s refusal to rejoin the party that once threatened her with death, but also about Minna’s defection to the West. The colonel in charge of the hospital thus creates difficulties in allowing Minna to visit her mother, particularly after her second visit for which permission had been neither sought nor obtained.

If Bucharest is frozen, Chicago is, by contrast, burning up with passion -- a ‘whirling’ city, as Corde refers to it more than once (159, 193, 203, etc.). In a couple of articles published in *Harper’s Magazine*, Corde exposes the various kinds of corruption in his native city. As a result, he has been attacked by many of the vested interests he challenged. In addition, he has become directly involved in the homicide of Rick Lester, one of the students attending his college. The perpetrators of this crime, described by Bellow in lugubrious detail, are two members of Chicago’s black ‘underclass.’ The contrast between Bucharest and Chicago could hardly be more vivid than it is as Bellow presents it.

While in Bucharest, Corde discovers that his old childhood friend, Dewey Spangler, is also staying in the city for a short while. Spangler has become a famous journalist whose bi-weekly articles appear in many newspapers throughout the world. He has attained both fame and fortune through his work despite never having obtained a college degree. Born of a poorer family than Corde, he was nevertheless vitally interested in literature and philosophy and had many long discussions with Corde about books they
read. They even wrote a book together as adolescents. The importance of Spangler in the novel is not so much that through his contacts he can wield some influence intended to assist the Cordes in the struggle with the Communist authorities. Rather, Spangler’s purpose is to provide an opportunity for Corde and thus for Bellow to discuss several of the important issues that the novel discusses.

Again, Bellow uses strong contrasts to begin his treatment of the novel’s important issues. Dewey Spangler, he says,

grew up among warehouses garages and taverns on Clark Street, not far from the site of the great Valentine’s Day massacre, but now he was a great figure in his profession, ten times more important than any U.S. senator you could name. When he discussed plutonium sales to the Third World or Russian natural gas . . . he did it with a flavor of art and high thought. He quoted Verlaine or Wittgenstein - in fact he quoted them too much... He lived . . . in a kind of event-glamour, among the deepest developments of the times, communicating what most concerned serious and responsible opinion. (121-122)

This is how Albert Corde sees Spangler’s accomplishment — that “there was something bogus and grotesque about [it]. It was only ‘modern public consciousness.’ There was no real experience in it, none whatever” (121-2).

This inexperience is what distinguishes Spangler’s journalism from the articles that Corde wrote for Harper’s which Spangler claims to have read and which he criticizes. He wonders about Corde’s motives:

the high intention — to prevent the American idea from being pounded into dust altogether. And here is our American idea: liberty, equality, justice, democracy, abundance. And here is what things look like today in a city like Chicago. Have a look! How does the public apprehend events? It doesn’t apprehend them. It has been deprived of the capacity to experience them (123).

In explaining motives to his old friend, Corde goes further:
In the American moral crisis, the first requirement was to experience what was happening and to see what must be seen. The facts were covered from our perception. More than they had been in the past? Yes, the changes, especially the increase in consciousness — and also in false consciousness — was accompanied by a peculiar kind of confusion. The increase of theories and discourse, itself a cause of new strange forms of blindness, the false representations of ‘communications,’ led to horrible distortions of public consciousness. Therefore the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the truth, represent it anew as art would represent it. (123, emphasis added)

In this, Corde is clearly Bellow’s mouthpiece. As R.Z. Sheppard writing in Time, 18 January 1982 puts it,

The Caul that separates, mankind from nature and the power of art to restore perception and feeling are not new themes for Bellow. But never has he started them with more force or political intent”. In an interview, cited by Roudane’, Bellow himself says of his novel: “one of my themes is the denial of real reality, our devices for evading it, our refusal to face what is all too obvious and palpable. The book is filled with protest against this evasion. . .

Bellow has always been an ardent humanist insofar as humanism may be defined in the passage above — as the perennial endeavor to uncover reality and present it through art. In The Dean’s December Bellow is attempting to do just that, both in regard to the reality that was Soviet-style Communism and to the contemporary situation in one of America’s largest cities — the so-called ‘City That Works’ — which may represent many cities in contemporary United States.

Having left his successful work as a professional journalist for many years Corde had become an academic, only to discover the “treason of the intellectuals” (302), “Corde was not a subversive,” Bellow says,

[He was] no fifth columnist, nor had he become a professor with the secret motive of writing an expose. He hadn’t been joking when he quoted Milton to his sister Elfrida: ‘How charming is divine philosophy’ ...and the universities were where philosophy lived, or were supposed to be living. He had never forgotten the long, charmed years in a silent Dartmouth attic,
where he had read Plato and Thucydides, Shakespeare ... Wasn’t it because of this Dartmouth reading that he gave up the Trib and came back from Europe? To continue his education, he said, after a twenty year interruption by ‘news,’ by current human business (188).

His disappointment in academic life is profound and may have led, in part, to his writing those articles for Harper’s. As Michika Kakutani notes Bellow’s ambivalence toward universities: “He believes, on one hand, that it’s in the university and only in the university that Americans can have a higher life, and yet he also contends that professors are so eager to live the life of society like everybody else that they’re not always intellectually or spiritually as rigorous as they should be” (1981: 7: 1). As a sometime professor at more than one university, Bellow should know. Unfortunately, Corde’s college provost, Alec Witt, is symptomatic of all that is wrong with modern universities – too subtle and smooth to attack Corde outright for his articles in Harper’s, which have caused the college some embarrassment. Corde’s analysis of Witt is acute:

a man in a position of real responsibility ... protects his institution from everything immoderate. That’s how the silky style is justified. That’s his method for dealing with disruption: never lose your cool with the disrupter, gag him with silk, tie him in knots with procedures (186).

And without doubt Corde has been a ‘disrupter,’ though he admits that he had given no indication that he would be disruptive: “Dumb thoughtful sweet, was my type,” he says, mulling things over. “Then I turned out to be of these excessive, no-inner-gyroscope fellows he can’t stand. So he despises me; what of it? I detest him, too. That’s neither here nor there” (187).

Personal feelings are indeed “neither here nor there,” but the issues that Corde has raised in his articles are very much here and now. Eventually, for the good of the college, Corde resigns his position—a decision that is regrettable, since every college needs those
who, like Corde, are willing and able to see the reality that surrounds us and communicate it anew with the resources of art.

As the novel ends, then, Bellow presents a hero who once again can clearly attend to his surroundings and who accepts what seems like a naturalistic universe. That is, like Yakov Bok in Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, who can finally celebrate the particulars of his world upon his prison release, Corde can now celebrate his rediscovered capacity to focus on his world. His public self thwarted by a world inimical to his values, Corde at least can gain solace, and energy, from his private self. Bellow clearly illustrates this when Corde learns from the benevolent Dr. Tyche that Minna will, despite her trauma, be able to complete her research at the Mount Palomar observatory in California. In the following passage, Bellow underscores the sense of Corde’s regeneration:

Corde drove home, comforted. The weather was bright, keen blue, an afternoon of January thaw. His car had been parked in the sun, so he didn’t need to turn the heater on. At home he set a kitchen chair out on the porch. It was mild enough to sit there, on the lee side of the flat. The light was the light of warmer seasons, not of deep winter. It came up from his own harmonies as well as down from above. The lake was steady, nothing but windless water before him. He had to look through the rods of his sixteenth story porch, an interference of no great importance. Whatever you desired would be measured out through human devices. Did the bars remind you of jail? They also kept you from falling to your death. Besides, he presently felt himself carried over the water and into the distant colors. Here in the Midwest there sometimes occurred the blues of Italian landscapes and he passed through them, very close to the borders of sense, as if he could do perfectly well without the help of his eyes, seeing what you didn’t need human organs to see but experiencing as freedom and also as joy what the mortal person, seated there in his coat and gloves, otherwise recorded as colors, spaces, weights, this was different. It was like being poured out to the horizon, like a great expansion. What if death should be like this, the sol finding an exit. The porch rail was his figure for the hither side. The rest, beyond it, drew you constantly as the completing of your reality (289-90).
Whereas Corde viewed the Rumanian horizon as a larger, naturalistic projection of a sometimes malevolent world—"That's right, blame nature" (3), here he recognizes both his own and nature's "harmonies." Such "harmonies" signal recuperation for Corde.

Within this passage also lies a transcendental quality which Malcolm Bradbury finds in the conclusion of several Bellow novels. "Such transcendental intentions," argues Bradbury, "are an essential direction of his work, and part of his philosophy of the novel's power for us" (1982: 80). Bellow's transcendentalism in the above passage signifies, Corde's new-tempered acceptance of his predicament; even the tonal quality of the language mirrors not only Corde's newly discovered calmness, but his sharper, more mature perceptions of his surroundings. If the protective bars in his Chicago apartment windows remind him of prison, they also serve, he sees, as a buffer against the kind of death Ricky Lester suffered. Even Spangler's damning exposure of Corde in "The Tale of Two Cities" column, although clearly upsetting, seems to help him clarify for himself the importance of persevering, if more tactfully, in his social criticisms.

Finally, Corde attempts, Bellow successfully suggests, "to will to recovery" his feeling, not only for humanity but for Minna, for their marriage. The freezing temperature at the observatory generates, for Corde, an internal warmth—"the melting project"—that begins to dissolve the 'iceberg' to which Bellow referred. Like the ending of an Albee play, the closing of The Dean's December offers no guarantee that the future will be secure: "It won't be a restful life," Minna accurately confides to her husband (307).

For Bellow, however, just the possibility of communicating and loving the other provides a necessary source of hope. It appears as if Corde regains a much-needed perspective on his public and private self by realizing and accepting what Henderson
discovered in *Henderson the Rain King*: “It’s too bad, but suffering is about the only reliable burster of the spirit’s sleep. There is a rumor of long standing that love also does it” (1958: 280). In *The Dean’s December*, Bellow suggests something of the unifying force of love, linking the three in this novel who experience it most intensely – Valeria, Minna, and Albert.

Rediscovering the sources of their love, Albert and Minna gain a kind of transcendental spiritual bonding. This is most evident when Minna shares her world with Albert during their ascent to the top of the observatory. It is Albert’s first trek up in the dome, and the atmospheric conditions seem perfect for Minna’s research: it is a Hemingway—like clear, cold, and dry evening.

The regenerative ambience enveloping the observatory dome stands in unmistakable contrast to the devitalizing aura of the crematorium dome. Symbolically, the death of Valeria now gives way to the rebirth of her daughter, whose research activities at the end of the novel assume a therapeutic role for her. As Corde reflects, “This Mount Palomar coldness was not to be compared to the cold of the death house [Valeria’s crematorium]. Here the living heavens looked as if they would take you in” (311). For the first time in the entire novel Minna appears alive, and is one with “the living.” Minna is “cheerful” (312), buoyed by three key points: her coming to terms with her mother’s death; her return to her professional passion; and her renewed love for her husband. Bellow suggests that through literally surveying the cosmos, Minna symbolically becomes rooted in reality, fixed in the earth. Coupled with Albert, she regains her ability to observe the galaxy as well as, in context of Bellow’s imagery, her own inner space, her soulscape. Bellow further implies that through Minna, Albert relocates some semblance of meaning and value.
in the complex business of living. As Bellow points out, Albert “seemed to be picking up signals from all over the universe, some from unseeable sources” (132), but it is only with Minna’s support that, ultimately, he can interpret clearly these “signals.”

In seeing the universe body forth above the telescope, Albert experiences what the existentialists call a sense of freedom. This sense of freedom appears during his reflective analogy of the water and its liberating effects on the soul to his Mount Palomar experience:

Once, in the Mediterranean, coming topside from a C-class cabin, the uric smells and the breath of the bilges, every hellish little up to date convenience there below to mock your insomnia – then seeing the morning sun on the titled sea. Free! The grip of every sickness within you disengaged by this pouring out. You couldn’t tell which was out of plumb, the ship, or yourself, or the sea aslant – but free! It didn’t matter, since you were free! It was like that also when you approached the stars as steadily as this (311).

Celebrating his freedom, Albert authentically feels his connection with Minna, who stands as his “representative among those bright things so thick and close” (312).

Apocalyptic in tone, *The Dean’s December* shows Bellow trying to come to terms with a world that is irredeemably corrupt. The pessimistic tone of the novel arises out of the grisly vision of the cities. *The Dean’s December* treats two cities – Chicago in America and Bucharest in the East – which though removed in space, are yet alike in the nature of evil that haunts them. Both these cities are thoroughly ‘atrophying’ in character, and with the ‘sub-savage’ (154) machinery of power at their command are also inimical to everything that is ‘human’ in nature. Thus Bellow brings to bear on this novel a vision of universal wasteland encompassing both the ‘rotten West’ (133) and the iron-curtained East.

*The Dean’s December* opens on an atmosphere of twilight darkness in Bucharest where the Cordes are on a visit to attend on the dying Valeria, mother of Minna Corde. This darkness is syndromic of the dreaded wasteland withering life in the East. Bucharest;
it appears, is haunted by a "livid-death moment" (9) before nightfall. To Albert Corde, this city seems macabre with its power to annihilate all human values. Adopting egalitarianism in principle, the Communist government is strangely contented with keeping its citizens perpetually in want. The typical city scenario emerges from the following description:

Aged women rose at four to stand in line for a few eggs, a small ration of sausages, three or four spotted pears. Corde had seen the shops and the produce, the gloomy queues – brown, gray, black, mud colors, and an atmosphere of compulsory exercise in the prison yard (56).

Familiar as he is with the contents of the mail addressed to his wife from the Civil Rights Organization, Corde has gained a fairly complete idea of how things are in this part of the world – "forced labor, mental hospitals for dissenters, censorship" (67). His experience in Bucharest testifies to the charges of the Organization against the Communist hegemony. Valeria and her husband, Corde's in-laws, were earlier party members and Valeria had even served on the cabinet with a ministerial portfolio, after the death of her husband. But her subsequent estrangement from the Communist regime compelled her to send her daughter Minna from the tyrannical system to the USA.

Arriving in Bucharest, the Cordes are disappointed to realize that they are even denied the right to visit Valeria frequently in the party hospital. The sense of human community suffers disintegration, under the state's requirement that everyone should keep the others under surveillance and report to the party any suspicious activities on their part. Iaonna Valeria's concierge, often referred to as being very loyal to Valeria, for example, is herself an informer on her mistress. Corde guesses that the praises of Tanti Gigi, Valeri's sister, about Iaonna are far from genuine but understands that such hypocrisies are necessary to survive in Bucharest.
If this is the state of affairs in the East, they are no better in America considered the cradle of democracy. With a predominant black population, Chicago becomes representative of the “rotten West” (133). As L.H. Goldman perceptively argues, “…Black becomes a symbol, in Bellow’s works, for the state of affairs in which society finds itself” (1983: 269). Crime, violence, philistinism, and sexual frenzy bedevil Chicago. Professor of Journalism in a Chicago college, and incidentally its Dean too, Corde is dismayed by the state of ‘moral corruption’ in the social institutions of this city and personally investigates the matter and reports his investigation for The Harper. The apocalyptic tone of his articles and his implicating certain people for being callous to the atrocities committed in the prisons and hospitals earn him a lot of displeasure and ill-will. To compound this situation, his efforts to bring before law the murderers behind the death of Rick Lester, a married student of the college, assume a racial dimension. Corde suspects the involvement of two blacks in the murder of Lester. In their misplaced enthusiasm to espouse the cause of the underdog, both his nephew and his cousin gang up and rouse racial antipathy against Corde. Besides, the press which had earlier suffered his vitriolic criticism joins his detractors to embarrass him. It is under such adverse circumstances that Corde leaves Chicago to attend on the ailing Valeria in Bucharest.

Chicago of The Dean’s December, unlike the Chicago of most of Bellow’s novels, does not have any “ambivalent underpinnings.” Strangely enough, there is nothing to neutralize the horror and malevolence of Chicago and the portrayal is clearly apocalyptic in vein. In the “feverland” (152) of Chicago, primitivism and baby-lonishness reign supreme. Investigating the atrocities perpetrated in the prisons of Chicago, Corde brings to light drug-trafficking, rackets, homosexual rape, violence and torture. Perhaps, the
situation warrants the doubt that 'anti-Christ' had already descended on this city. Many of
the fear-ridden inhabitants of Chicago flee it and settle down elsewhere. Bellow states the
motive behind the apocalyptic vein of Corde's articles in the following passage: "It wasn't
as if Corde had made a beeline for the blight. Nor did he write about it because of the
opportunities it offered for romantic despair; nor in a spirit of middle-class elegy or
nostalgia. He was even aware that the population moving away from blighted areas had
improved its condition in new neighbourhoods. But also it was fear that had made it move.
Also, it was desolation that was left behind, endless square miles of ruin." (165)

The craze for "sexual niggerhood" is so rampant in the Bellovian wasteland that
sexual morality has, perhaps, ceased being any virtue at all. Sex is often associated with
sickness and death in The Dean's December. Corde often refers to the "sexual epidemic"
(43) gripping the West to which he himself had been a prey once. Though there is no way
of ascertaining why Lucas Ebry and the black whore (suspects in the murder of Lester)
were in Rick Lester's place, Corde himself suspects that Lester might have brought them
there for wild sex. Similarly, the criminals in Chicago prisons are described as an
abominable lot given to heinous sexual crimes. They indulge in sodomy, buggering, and
homosexual rape and such satanic activities often lead to permanent psychic wreck of the
victims and, in worst cases, also to death. Max Detillion, Corde's cousin, whose chief
pastime is womanizing is another of those "personifications of Eros" (98). Corde realizes,
however, that he is as much responsible as others in letting sexual promiscuity become a
collective historical phenomenon: "Oh, those sexual offenses! He was by the strictest
marital standards decent, mature, intelligent, responsible, and an excellent husband. But
within the historical currents he could not be viewed from the positive aspect because he
was a representative of the rotten West, lacking ballast, the product of an undesirable historical development, a corrupted branch of humanity” (133).

Chicago, in its mindless hostility to life, becomes a veritable city of destruction and death. While crime and cruel death are over-looked, pity, paradoxically, is lavished on the criminals for their psychological and social maladjustments. To cite an instance, a psychopath named Mitchell abducts a woman and kills her after repeatedly raping her. The lawyer who defends Mitchell wants him condoned because “certain human and social failures” (201) are responsible for his defendant’s crime. Corde is disturbed knowing that no value whatever is accorded human existence by such self-appointed humanists. Likewise, in Lester’s case everyone wants to slight the enormity of the crime and thus insure against possible reprisals from the blacks who hold the city in thrall. It is only Corde who wants justice done to the murdered and this naturally makes him unpopular with the whites who have their own vested interest in hushing up the facts of the case.

While the blacks celebrate by their anarchic ways in Chicago, in Bucharest it is the organized regimentation of Communism that denudes everything of human significance. Though deprived economically, the blacks of Chicago enjoy a sort of political sovereignty that ensures both their right to crime and immunity from prosecution. Thus The Dean’s December is clearly a political novel and it indicts the political systems of both the East and West for bringing “misery and mayhem” to the human community.

Behind Corde’s apocalyptic writing about Chicago, there is a fervour to evoke among his fellow-citizens the thirst for order, moral clarity, and faith in the human community. Making himself “the moralist of seeing” (125), Corde in all these articles espouses “the noble ideas of the West in their American form” (125). He is different from
other apocalyptics in that he does not want “the dying generations” (226) living in Chicago to bring upon themselves ruin and death as some extreme doomsters desire. Corde believes that it is not wholly impossible to check the dangerous trend in Chicago and pave the way for its amelioration. Even with the near unbearable conditions in Chicago, he would not like to leave Chicago and settle in a place with less “city-vexation.” Knowing full well that “a man without a city is either a beast or a god” (226), Corde prefers to stay on at Chicago and fight his lonely battles as a dignified human being among the human beasts thriving there.

Trying to figure out the reason behind his writing of the apocalyptic articles on Chicago, Corde understands that it was to find out what “mood” went into the building of this city. Like all great cities of the past, he finds Chicago a “centre of delusion and bondage, death” (281). Surveying this city, Corde realizes that it is a monstrous “Wilderness” (205). In a mood of intense despair, he muses thus: “Christ, the human curve had sunk down to base level, had gone itself. The visible one didn’t bear looking at” (188). Corde is convinced that the terminal point has already been reached in human affairs, and all that one could do is to look within oneself and purge one’s consciousness. “But for a fellow like me, the real temptation of abyssifying is to hope that the approach of the ‘last days’ might be liberating, might compel us to reconsider deeply, earnestly. In these last days we have a right and even a duty to purge our understanding” (274). Bellow’s perception in his novel is almost Conradian both in its awareness of evil and the relentless pursuit to know the cause behind its manifestation. Even while Corde sounds pessimistic, there is a passionate longing on his part to understand the real behind
appearances and to come to terms with it. Such a "choiceless awareness" is redemptive in character because it helps one to shed all delusions and attain a kind of liberation.

The closing scene of *The Dean's December* has a deep symbolic purport. The Cordes are seen at the observatory at Mount Palomar where Minna has an appointment. Viewing the heavens from the end of a telescope, Corde finds the stars hazed by atmospheric disturbances. The nebulousness of the starry skies probably suggests that man's vision at the present suffers from a lack of spiritual clarity. Knowing the haziness of the skies for "distortions of the atmosphere" (306), Corde reflects: "And what he saw with his eyes was not even the real heavens" (306). Bellow, perhaps, is suggesting that there is hope for mankind in that it might yet glimpse into the true and the real. In presenting his protagonist Corde as an absolutely honest human being who attempts to see beyond appearances, Bellow asserts that humanity survives on the strength of individuals like Corde.

In its projection of a singularly horrific vision of life, *The Dean's December* makes a departure from the rest of Bellow's canon to date. It is open to speculation whether the absence of Jewish sensibility is the cause of Bellow's pessimism in *The Dean's December*. Such a speculation however, does not provide a satisfactory clue. Does the strain of pessimism then indicate a volte-face in Bellow's attitude to the "wasteland ideology"? Bellow, assuredly, has not become any less animated in his position to the wasteland outlook on life. Perhaps, the clue for the pessimistic stance lies in what Bellow himself had said in one of his speeches: "This (wasteland pessimism) is one of the traditions on which literature has lived uncritically. But it is the task of artists and critics in every generation to look with their own eyes. Perhaps, they will see even worse evils, but they
will at least be seeing for themselves" ("Thinking Man's Wasteland", 1965: 20). In mapping the modern consciousness, Bellow has seen into the depths of human depravity and *The Dean's December* is a firm testament to that reality.

Bellow's main concern in presenting his political and social views in para fictional terms is, as will be shown, the manner and method by which his protagonist unearths arresting cultural phenomena, and the path by which he arrives at conclusive evidence. In other words, the *how* of procedure is of greater importance to Bellow than the *what* of end results. Thus *The Dean's December*, although it does provide definite insights into the American dilemma, first and foremost concentrates on the mental, sensual, and spiritual processes instrumental in procuring such insights. Consequently, the novel establishes two prerogatives for the protagonist to contend with: in the mental-spiritual realm the refinement of thought into crystal-clear images, and in the practical realm the search for a common language with which to express these images.

The world, in trivial pursuit of 'meaning', is used to rushing to conclusions and packaging them into concepts so as to have them neatly available for discourse when the situation demands. In creating Corde, Bellow rejects this intellectual diversion and its multifarious variations as mind-boggling, life-denying. Instead, he charts Corde's course as an experiential principle: if the real realities are to become visible to the inner eye, the perceptory sense with which to experience them must be readmitted to the modern mind currently devoid of imaginative powers.

Albert Corde's removal from his all too familiar home base in Chicago to a different type of jungle in Bucharest is an enforced displacement. Initially he dreads the thought of leaving unfinished business behind, "raging trouble" to be resolved in his absence; and
Bucharest at first appears to be a setting adequate only insofar as its death-like atmosphere conforms with Corde’s death-ridden mind. Bucharest is a prison, a death-trap:

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

While his wife Minna conducts their sorrowful “business” (to which in many respects the death, cremation, and burial of Minna’s mother is reduced), Corde agrees to a kind of solitary confinement in Minna’s old room of adolescent days. A double prison thus surrounds him: one of inner confinement within a larger societal one. But as Corde ruminates among Minna’s childhood possessions, he begins to reassemble her past; this is a life of the past new to him and emblematic of the present situation, a life whose dying embers cast a gloomy light on “air-saddened” Bucharest and on what remains of Minna’s family. It is a past life, nevertheless, and irretrievable, of an old European consciousness and tradition which has been crushed just as the city of Bucharest itself had been devastated in the 1977 earthquake. As he observes with an outwardly subdued but keen interest how people around him manage to survive and retain their humanity, a chord is struck in Corde; and his previously dulled senses of observation, perception, feeling, and imagination rekindle. Corde quickly realizes that Bucharest, in comparison to Chicago, is “quite a string of lesser evils” (29) that actually the “mortifying” iciness of his prison room has a much needed mind-cleaning effect activating his dormant senses. As he goes into hiding in Minna’s underheated room, the chill puts him into a trance of pure being and thus into immediate touch with a life of thought and feeling uninhibited by concepts and
conscious rearrangements of impressions. He takes his cue from the flowers in his room, cyclamens which thrive and blossom in a continual state of “perfection devoid of consciousness” (61). The faint pattern of their leaves, “a smaller heart shape within the heart shape of the leaf” (156), signifies the perfect fit of the form within the mould. At the same time it is a projection of Corde’s momentary predicament: to find his own spiritual “under pattern” (156) within his given mould of knowledge, this “organic, constitutional sensory oddity in which [his] soul had a lifelong freehold” (294).

As Bellow proceeds to chart Corde’s processes of thought, he recurrently uses two terms to signify the two elements constituting the protagonist’s mental-spiritual makeup: sense and soul. Corde discovers a truth-related “sense” in himself which compels him to seek contemplative states. This sense is arresting, since it reveals that the inner and outer variants of chaos are inseparable, reciprocally conditioning and effecting, his own sense of the way things were had a strong claim on him, and he thought that if he sacrificed that sense – its truth – he sacrificed himself. Chicago was the material habitat of this sense of his, which was, in turn, the source of his description of Chicago. In this unrestrained commitment to experiential/felt perception and sense activated observation of the eternal, Corde is unlike any of the previous Bellow protagonists: unlike Augie, who sponges up “events” and knows how to skirt commitments, whose innocence is such that consultations with the soul are unnecessary since in its formative stage it is in unison with the external; unlike Sammler, who pits himself against the world, barring his vulnerable soul in moral protection against it; even unlike Citrine, who makes it his habit to “tune out” when events put him on the defensive, Corde is not yet prepared to open his soul for the world of Cantabiles to pass through and play havoc. To these, city-creatures just like Corde, their
city is the reality of steel and glass and the government machine, or the vanishing protection of the middle class, or the "contempt-centre of the world" (46). To Corde, these realities are only shadows of the real; the center of corruption lies within ourselves. Therefore, his is a search for "everyman's inner inner city, ... the slums we carry around inside us" (228). It is this internal wasteland of the mind and the soul where civilization must begin to purge and resurrect itself.

Once activated, these senses become Corde's tools with which to investigate the phenomena of the external world. His investigation, quite methodically takes him through the stages of observation, contemplation, objectivation, and resolve. Their regenerative and creative "home base" is what Bellow (disturbingly to many) calls the soul. The real becomes real ('the truth') only when the soul has taken hold of it and cleansed it from the mind cluttering world of readymade concepts which suffocate the self and the real. Consequently, Corde accepts it as his moral task to "recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description of non-experience," (270) and so he takes it upon himself 'to pass Chicago through his own soul. A mass of data, terrible, murderous. It was no easy matter to put such things through. But there was no other way for reality to happen. Reality didn't exist 'out there.' It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth" (294-295).

In *The Dean's December*, then, Bellow creates a series of images in which these realities hardened into dead concepts ("shadows," "appearances") are symbolically contracted. Some of these images gain an additional dimension in that they are parallel exemplifications, East (Bucharest) and West (Chicago), of the same basic pattern, or paired associations of the one basic idea. The differences Bellow sees in these double
representations, as prominent as they may be historically and politically, fade before their impinging societal similarities. Appearances may differ, Bellow insists, but once their deceptive shadows are discarded, the reality of their likeness is clear and direct.

Corde’s rekindled senses of perception and imagination gradually focus his perceptive mind on the underlying hidden realities. This is a slow and painful process, as painful as the clarifying Bucharest coldness in which it takes place. Still in Chicago, Corde’s will had on occasion slackened, and he had succumbed to that classic Bellovian retreat into the self. But then “you tire of this preoccupation with the condition of being cut off and it seems better to go out and see at first hand the big manifestations of disorder and take a fresh reading from them” (181). He moves to Bucharest with “all the Chicago perplexities … injected into his nerves” (21). But the task of charting present conditions is extremely exasperating and Corde must force himself to put events and experiences into the proper perspective. “Begin with the crying ugliness of the Chicago night,” he admonishes himself. “Put that in the center” (48). This perspective uncovers a city of unrest, upheaval, destruction, corruption and compromise, built on a vast sewage system into which its shiny “Magnificent Mile” is destined to topple. Leaving the city for the airport, its appalling waste is once more impressed on Corde:

Winter’s first blizzard had struck Chicago. The cab was overheated and stank of excrement. Of dogs? of people? It was torrid, also freezing: Arctic and Sahara, mixed. Also, the driver was sloshed with eaude cologne. The ribbed rubber floor was all filth and grit. Corde said, ‘People have even stopped wiping themselves.’ He took the precaution of saying this in French, and there was something false about that – raunchy gaiety (and disgust) in a foreign language (20)

Cynicism is not a redeeming approach, however, and therefore it falls on dead ears; but ironically, the full impact of this event comes clear to Corde later in Bucharest
where he finds himself in a similar squeeze of imprisonment between killing heat and numbing cold, a predicament which culminates in a moment of existential fear in the crematorium. Horror cancels out cynicism and enforces a clear view of the final options:

It was a tight fit in the staircase... On the first landing it was cold again. Corde felt cut in half by the extremes of heat and cold... Better this cold than that heat. Corde's breast, as narrow as a ladder, was crowded with emotions – fire, death, suffocation, put into an icy hold or instead, crackling in a furnace. Your last options. They still appeared equally terrible. How to choose between them! (237)

Similar terms of imprisonment and devastation had been discerned by Corde in the Chicago governmental machine, the dead brain centre of the city creating an environment where human needs are defined by their marketability. Among the typical urban Americans of the Chicago species Zaehnes, Corde's former brother-in-law, is an outstanding example. He combines in his person all the despicable but socially admired traits of that “special breed” (35) of the Chicago insider: “A big fellow, he was forceful, smart, cynical, political, rich and he had no use for those who weren’t. In the city that worked, he was one of those who gave people the works” (92). The more subdued but equally dangerous version of this “breed” is found in the educated, cultured intellectuals, such as the black ambassador in Bucharest, the busy official perpetuating the government machine from the wings just as perfectly as, at the other end of the spectrum, the Rumanian colonel in charge of the Bucharest hospital machine and also the journalist Dewey Spangler, who controls the media with his weekly “crisis-chatter” (55). These "princely communicators" are part of America's “cultural intelligentsia” which has been a source of constant exasperation for Bellow; they have been bred in the Universities and apprenticed in the media, and from them issues the real danger of self-perpetuating thought control in the form of ignorant, philistine culture-discourse. Bellow shares with Corde the
contempt for American higher education, the breeding ground of submissiveness to ‘facts’ departmentalized into so-called science. And it is only by “strength, luck, and cunning” that people emerge unharmed from “the heaving wastes of the American educational system” (1975: 56). The university’s perpetration on intellectualism and the skills of discourses as substitutes for education have supported the hardening class-structure of American society. There is no clearer indication of this for Corde than the reaction of his own University to the murder of a black student and Corde’s subsequent involvement in the case as it goes to court. Not that he regrets the loss of his job (he feels elated), what disturbs him is the double standard the University exposes as just another variation of American’s inability or unwillingness to solve the problems of the black underclass, which a business- pious society deems “economically redundant”; it is “locked into a culture of despair and crime... There is not culture there, it’s only a wilderness, and damn monstrous, too. We are talking about a people consigned of destruction, a doomed people... We do not know how to approach this population. We haven’t even conceived that reaching it may be a problem. So there’s nothing but death before it” (228-29). In this projection of another holocaust, entire cities are being written off, blacks, Puerto Ricans, the aged: “Let them be ruined, die and eliminate themselves. There are some who seem to be willing that this should happen” (253-54).

Corde’s first moment of awareness of the impending crisis comes as he stands at the top of the winding staircase in the American embassy looking down. Its banister coiling inward like a nautilus shell forces his mind to confront the centre of the existential dilemma. And here, in a similar, if reversed vision to the one to come on Mount Palomar, Bellow has Corde experience his personal circumstances as the face of twentieth-century
man. What he witnesses as deformity, decline, and death is not just an exaggeration of a tense mind but the state of things at large.

No, it wasn’t only two, there, five chosen deaths being painted thickly, terribly, convulsively inside him, all over his guts, liver, heart, over all his organs, but a large picture of cities, crowds, peoples, an apocalypse, with images and details supplied by his own disposition, observation, by Ideas, dreams, fantasies, his peculiar experience of life (77)

Paralysis and death are the symptoms of an impending collapse. There is no surer indication of this for Corde than the Beech-findings about dangerous levels of lead poisoning threatening drastic mutations in human life. But Corde refuses to accept the mode of thought in which ‘hard’ science presents these discoveries, their direct material causes and consequences as a cause-effect chain which nicely serves to explain everything from crime to social disintegration, directly suggesting that given a balanced diet mankind could put earth back in balance. Earlier in Bucharest, Corde involuntarily remembers Goya’s painting of Saturn, the leaden, “saturnine” planet, - “the naked, squatting giant, open-mouthed, devouring” (71). Puzzled, he ascribes the momentary vision to hypersensitive nerves; the apocalypse context remains, as yet, cryptic. In the wake of Beech’s discoveries, however, Corde establishes the link. “Here was an apocalypse yet another apocalypse to set before the public. It wouldn’t be easy. The public was used to doom warnings; seasoned, hell—it was marinated in them—Homo sapiens was incapable of hearing earth’s own poetry, or, now its plea. Man would degrade himself into an inferior hominid” (154-55).

Again Bellow’s main concern is reflected in the imagery he creates to find a language which will adequately and understandably render the powerful images which the inner eye perceives. It is well worth remembering that Corde has once before attempted to
do something like this in a kind of reportorial documentary on his home city, which was published in *Harper’s* and, if Spangler’s judgment accounts for anything, had completely failed. Initially, Corde had suspected the reason for the failure to be a matter of style (which Spangler had been quick to deride as the ‘drone of poetry’); now, as the Beech-case opens up before him, he realizes that it was not the words he used that failed him but that modern society, so used to warnings of doom, prefers to cling to its emotional views and distorted concepts of reality. Reassured that the only language possible to reach the core is a language inspired by the powers of perception and imagination, the language of art, Corde decides to join the Beech project, neither as moralist nor as prophet, but solely as an interpreter of the findings of ‘hard’ science.

*The Dean’s December* culminates in Corde’s and Minna’s ascent to the centre of the dome of the Mount Palomar observatory. Criticism has it that this episode reflects the standard Bellow-device of a final epistemological tableau, leaving the reader to take his options: A “Dangling Dean” (26), with “A Foot in the Stockyard and an Eye on the Stars”? (53) “A Whirling Soul” (126) or a “Reformer”? (40). Initially, Dean Corde had established *terra firma* as his ‘beat’, quietly admiring his wife’s ability to “bring together a needle from one end of the universe with a thread from the opposite end” (15). Apparently, nothing has changed towards the end. Leaving his wife to her task of closing herself in with the stars, Corde still admits her to be his “representative among those bright things so thick and close” (346). To deny the Dean an end to his dangling would leave us an Albert Corde in the guise of an Arthur Sammler, and consequently a Bellow recoiling to the noncommittal ‘Not me and the Universe’ of the sixties. But this is not so: in accepting the challenge of the beech project, Corde answers affirmatively to the universe’s calling; he
himself has become a representative, explaining to the modern technological, science bound (ed) mind its own secret realities.

*The Dean's December* depicts a world in the grip of spiritual crisis. It has a prophet-like narrator who believes in the power of the word to transform the world. As Lois P. Zamore has observed, the narrative is clearly driven by the narrator's opposition to "existing spiritual and political practices" (1989: 2), an opposition that plays a significant role in structuring and guiding the central theme of the novel.

The protagonist's experiences when examined signify the presence of a moral vacuum in the contemporary world. It is this dichotomy in Bellow's fictional vision that Malcolm Bradbury focuses on in noting that "for a writer critical of modern apocalyptics, his own work is remarkably dominated by apocalyptic views of history" (1985: 25). *The Dean's December* articulates a forceful plea to face up to the "real reality" (428) of the human condition manifested in Chicago and Bucharest, and unabashedly shows how it warrants cultural despair. The moral landscape that is recreated for the reader through Bellow's descriptions is evocative of the biblical cities--Sodom and Gomorrah--consigned to destruction. While Corde initially refuses to concede that he is an apocalyptic, he is later partly convinced, especially when Dewey Spangler, his former schoolmate and currently a leader in the media, takes issue with him on the apocalyptic tone of his articles: "It was when you got apocalyptic about it," Spangler tells Corde, "that you lost me: the dragon coming out of the abyss, the sun turning black like sackcloth, the heavens rolled up like a scroll, Death on the ashen horse. Wow! You sounded like the Reverend Jones of Jonestown" (243). There is a definite correlation between the apocalyptic view of the cities presented in this novel and the prevailing urban decay in the America of the 1970s.
and early 1980s. However, Corde would argue that he is only “disinter[ing] the reality” and “represent[ing] it anew as art would represent it” (124). Assuredly, it is an article of faith with Corde, as it was with Matthew Arnold, that it is only poetry that can eventually minister to one’s anguished soul in a lonely universe. Corde expresses his conviction thus: “perhaps only poetry has the strength to rival the attractions of narcotics, the magnetism of TV, the excitements of sex, or the ecstasies of destruction” (186-87).

In his poetic soul, Corde nurtures an idea that resists the turn to discourse. But like the seals of apocalypse, it has to bide time for final disclosure. Bellow’s narrator expresses it thus: “Corde did have an idea, certainly, but he kept it shrouded. It belonged to a group of shrouded objects which he promised himself one day to examine. But on that day a philosophical light would have to shine. Otherwise it wouldn’t do to remove the shrouds” (97). These “shrouded objects” in Corde’s consciousness include human relationships, particularly difficult ones, like his relationship with his cousin Detillion and brother-in-law Zaehner.

Forever interrogating false consciousness and seeking “human agreement” (18), Corde surveys his native Chicago with the aim of gauging “the mood of the country, the inner city, urban decay, [and] political questions” (196). Admittedly “more pictorial than analytical” (196), the descriptions of the cityscape in his exposé derive from his intellectual preoccupation with the “great sources” (164)—Baudelaire and Rilke, Montesquieu and Vico, Machiavelli and also Plato (163). Bellow, like Allen Bloom (The Closing of the American Mind), privileges an ideal community of men in the Platonic mode who meditate on “the permanent concerns of mankind” (1987: 19).
The apocalyptic narrative in *The Dean's December* is evocatively reminiscent of the apocalypses of the Romantic poets, notably Blake. The novel also draws considerably on Friedrich Nietzsche's doctrine of nihilism. Bellow's vivid narrative conjures up Corde as a prophet desiring the spiritual rejuvenation of the human community. Given Corde's aim of "recover[ing] the world that is buried under the debris of false description or non-experience" (240; emphasis added), he qualifies supremely for being an apocalyptic in a most fundamental way. The etymology of the word 'apocalypse' holds out a sense similar to Corde's own mission in life. Imbued with Emersonian idealism, Bellow's protagonist battles a world that is irredeemably corrupt. The pessimistic tone of the novel arises out of the horrendous vision of the cities. *The Dean's December* focuses on two cities that share the same malaise: Chicago and Bucharest. Deploying the "sub-savage" (154) machinery of power, both these cities are inimical to all human values. Bellow brings to bear on this novel a vision of a universal wasteland encompassing both the "rotten West" (133) and the iron-curtained East.

Corde's apocalyptic framing of Chicago is inspired by his fervour to evoke among his fellow citizens a passion for order, moral clarity, and faith in the human community. Assuming the role of "the moralist of seeing" (125), Corde in his *Harper* articles espouses "the noble ideas of the West in their American form" (125). While his nephew refers to him as a "mastermind nemesis" (47), Corde perceives himself as a "Welsh prophet" (79). Corde believes that it is not wholly impossible to check the dangerous trend in Chicago and pave the way for its amelioration. Even though Chicago is past endurance, he refuses to contemplate settling down in a place with less vexation. Knowing full well that "a man
without a city is either a beast or a god” (226), Corde prefers to stay in Chicago and fight his lonely battles as a dignified, responsible human being.

Meditating on what prompted him to write those morally indignant articles about Chicago for *The Harper*, Corde grasps that it was to gain a sense of the mood that predominated at the time the city was built. Like all great cities of the past, Chicago, it so strikes Corde, is a “centre of delusion and bondage, death” (281). Surveying the city, Corde registers that it is a monstrous “wilderness” (205). In a moment of intense despair, he ruminates: “Christ, the human curve had sunk down to base level, had gone itself. The visible one didn’t bear looking at” (188). Convinced that human destiny is imperiled, Corde in his Chicago articles urges the readers to look inward and purge their consciousness. “But for a fellow like me, the real temptation of abyssifying is to hope that the approach of the ‘last days’ might be liberating, might compel us to reconsider deeply, earnestly. In these last days we have a right and even a duty to purge our understanding” (274). Bellow’s eschatology perfectly meets Frank Kermode’s definition of the phenomenon as one that is “stretched over the whole of history, [and] the end is present at every moment” (1968: 26). The apocalyptic tone evoked by Bellow’s narrator is clearly symptomatic of a certain post-1960s discouragement that was so pervasive in the seventies and the eighties. Kevin Philips graphically captures the dominant mood of defeat that characterized America in the 1970s and 1980s: “The American belief in Manifest Destiny honed by centuries of Westward advance toward the Pacific and then by over a half-century of global advance from Manila Bay to V-J Day, was shaken during the 1970s much as Germany’s self-image was after November 1918” (1982: 160). Even if pessimistic, Corde’s vision nonetheless embodies an intense longing to seize the real
behind appearances. Internalizing the Hegelian understanding “that the spirit of the time is in us by nature” (240), Corde reflects: “we’d better deal with whatever it is that’s in us by nature, and I don’t see people being willing to do that. What I mainly see is the evasion” (240). This choiceless awareness on Corde’s part is redemptive in that it ensures him a sense of liberation.

The crematorium scene in Bucharest and the closing scene at Mount Palomar Observatory in America, with their crucial symbolic significations, provide meta-commentary on the apocalyptic theme of the novel. Accompanying Valeria’s coffin down the stairs of the crematorium, Corde is affected by the oppressive heat and wonders if the cold of the freezing dome overarching the crematorium is preferable to the heat down below. His description of the journey recreates the ‘bottomless pit’ of the biblical apocalypse. Dramatized this way, death and its allied emotions become sutured in Corde’s imagination. “Corde’s breast, as narrow as a ladder, was crowded with emotions--fire, death, suffocation, put into an icy hole or, instead, crackling in a furnace. Your last options. They still appeared equally terrible. How to choose between them” (212). If it benumbs him, this “death rehearsal” (214) serves as an epiphany in which he becomes aware of his own mortality. The narrator’s conflation of death with a larger apocalyptic destiny of mankind in the novel is in tune with apocalyptic theory; As Lois P. Zamore has observed, “we gain understanding [of] our mortal condition from the mythic structure of apocalypse, which imposes shape upon human time and suggests a cosmic context for our individual ends” (1982: 132). Corde’s love for Valeria, which fortified him against the inhuman cold and heat of the crematorium, constitutes a stay against death, for love has a reality beyond the finality of death. The crematorium scene touches upon an important
aspect of Bellow’s eschatological imagination. If there is any one way to counter death, it is by hallowing the loved object in one’s memory.

At Mount Palomar Observatory, Corde views the heavens from the end of a telescope and finds the stars hazed by atmospheric disturbances. The starry skies appearing in a nebula suggest that the human race is far from attaining spiritual clarity. Knowing the haziness of the skies for “distortions of the atmosphere” (306), Corde reasons: “And what he saw with his eyes was not even the real heavens” (306). Bellow, perhaps, is positing hope for humanity in that it might yet glimpse the true and the real. Like the prophet of the biblical apocalypse, John, who deciphers heaven’s mysteries for the benefit of his fellow beings, Corde too tries to help his fellow citizens to cut through modern distractions into the heart of life, even if he makes the self-deprecating comment on his role that he is merely “crawling between heaven and earth” (221).

As behooves his name, Corde forever tries to establish bonds and connections with his fellow human beings. It is only appropriate to view him as a “cosmic interpreter” and “poetic astrologer,” one who “had been sent down to mind the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation,” as Matthew Roudane observes (1989: 260). In delineating his protagonist as one who cares for, and is concerned about, the destiny of the human race, Bellow asserts that humanity endures on the strength of individuals like Corde.

In many ways a profoundly disturbing novel, The Dean’s December meditates on the self-destructive proclivities of human beings that have almost paralyzed life in contemporary urban America. Bellow does Corde justice in assuring him personal redemption. But there is no suggestion that he has a similar reward for the society he depicts. In the final analysis, Saul Bellow’s apocalypse in The Dean’s December, if it aims
to discover what is "eternal in man" (281), projects a sad vision of horror inspired by the reality of "inner slums" (205) in human beings.

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

Kiernan, Robert F. observes that Corde tries to make physical perception a vehicle of humanistic understanding. His endeavor can be compared to the Sharp-Focus Realists in modern painting. Like the exaggerated clarity of Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" (photo), Corde's intensity of observation produces a sense of signification rather than explicable meanings. In demanding coherence of a divided world, Corde seeks an idealistic enterprise. Bellovian man enters as Corde finds no possibility of synthesis being real without his perceiving it. "Reality didn't exist 'out there'... It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth" (263). Rather than relax into dividedness, he seeks to resolve opposite opinion into ultimate truth.
In the final scene of the novel, Corde takes the lift back to the ground, and says to Minna, “The cold? Yes. But I almost think I mind coming down more” (309). That “almost” is all that stands between Corde’s reluctance and his readiness to resume his role in the world below.