Chapter-II
SAUL BELLOW. THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

The Adventures of Augie March (1953) burst on the postwar literary scene with the exuberance of a great American author finding his true voice. The most freewheeling of Bellow's heroes, Augie paints a fresh, gritty, comic view of the American landscape and poses anew the perennial questions: How do you reconcile freedom and love? How do you simultaneously find liberty and home in a chaotic world? Writing Augie March was, for Bellow, a freeing of his energies, an act of liberation from certain artistic inhibitions and repressions, a discovery of the true country of his fiction, its shape and substance.

His early works, Dangling Man and The Victim, are very different books, written in a constrained, naturalistic form that he ultimately rejected as too limiting. Their central characters, introspective intellectuals trapped in claustrophobic circumstances, are reminiscent of Kafka's narrators. Tired of the "solemnity of complaint," the plaintive tone he heard in the novels of his contemporaries and in his own first books, Bellow turned to his boyhood home in Chicago for inspiration. Bellow's first novel, Dangling Man (1944), is about a man named Joseph who does not know how to integrate himself in American life without losing the spiritual value of his isolation from society. Influenced by the current milieu of the time of modernism and existentialism, Bellow presents an alienated hero who seeks to find meaning in a hostile environment.

Dangling Man (1944), clearly not a fictional achievement, is significant in many ways for an understanding of his mind and art. It relays the bewilderment of a number of young American intellectuals during the early 1940s. It announces with emphatic assurance a break with the fiction of the immediate past: neither the Hemingway code nor
the Hemingway mode will do for Bellow. The basic premise on which all Bellow’s fiction rests — that it is marvelous to be alive — is set down here together with themes that Bellow will later explore in greater depth and complexity. *Dangling Man* indicates the general direction, thematic and structural, Bellow is heading toward a novelist, and marks the first stage of his creative quest for the human.

Joseph, Bellow’s protagonist, is forced by a conspiracy of circumstances to reexamine the values by which he has lived. His former beliefs have collapsed and cannot protect him from the chaos that threatens to overwhelm him. He sees himself as a man dangling, suspended between two worlds, one dying, the other refusing to come into existence. His state is one of demoralization and utter confusion. He cannot understand his strange behaviour, the ugly explosions of temper that erupt out of him. Nor can he come to terms with the interior darkness that has invaded his being. In a desperate attempt to dispel this darkness and to understand his condition, he decides to keep a diary. It is his way of talking to himself about himself, it is a form of release and self-therapy.

The use of the diary as a fictional device together with the deliberate break from Hemingway suggest that Bellow realized that the prevailing forms of American fiction were not adequate to nourish his creative sensibility. He found what he needed in nineteenth-century Russian and twentieth-century French fiction. Behind Bellow’s *Dangling Man* stands Sartre’s *Nausea*, and behind both these works looms Dostoevski’s bitter and savage *Notes from Underground*. Keith Opdahl and John Clayton spell out in detail the parallels between *Dangling Man* and these two novels. Bellow’s literary indebtedness to these two writers, especially to Dostoevski (Kafka hovers somewhere in the background), is evident.
Dangling Man presents a Joseph who struggles between a past that has been shattered and a future that has not come into view: "I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail. My perspectives end in the walls. Nothing of the future comes to me. Only the past, in its shabbiness and innocence. Some men seem to know exactly where their opportunities lie; they break prisons and cross whole Siberias to pursue them. One room holds me" (61). Joseph's room is an appropriate physical analogue for his psychic imprisonment. His dangling days shuttle between stretches of "narcotic dullness" (13) and times of intense, frantic self-questioning. Neither the world nor his own condition make any sense: "Jeff Forman dies; brother Amos lays up a store of shoes for the future. Amos is kind. Amos is no cannibal. He cannot bear to think I should be unsuccessful, lack money, refuse to be concerned about my future. Jeff, under the water, is beyond virtue, value, glamor, money, or future. I say these things unable to see or think straight, and what I feel is less injustice or inhumanity than bewilderment" (56). Joseph's malaise is of the spirit.

Edmund Wilson, in an oft-quoted statement, hailed Dangling Man in 1944 as "one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the depression and the war" (1940: 89).

Dangling Man does communicate a faint sense of the political and social anxieties in American intellectual life during the 1940s. It is, in a way, a crystallization of the ideas and the controversies that were featured in the Partisan Review between 1941 and 1944 (1940: 90). From the perspective of the 1980s, however, it is clear that Joseph, with the basic assumptions he starts from, with his attitude toward the war, and, above all, in
the light of his tangential involvement with Communism, is more significant as the first sketch for the Bellow protagonist in search of the human rather than a representative dangler of the 1940s.

Joseph dangles, but his dangling has to be seen in the context and against the background of the activity of other figures in the dairy. Joseph is diametrically opposite in character and temperament to Amos, his brother, a prosperous, self-made man, who has married into a rich family and who, with his wife, Dolly, believes in the gospel of money and success. The contrast between the two brothers (a device Bellow will exploit in his later novels) is vividly established, the sensitive, hesitant Joseph as against the crude, successful Amos. Bellow also places Joseph in the centre of a group of friends to establish other contrasts and tensions and to extend the novel’s meaning.

Joseph is the first of Bellow’s protagonists to initiate a search for the human. He goes forth to meet the Socratic demand: “But I must know what I myself am” (80). This cry for self-knowledge suggests that Joseph, dangler though he be, is yet another, a more modern, more subdued version of the typical American hero who continually seeks to define himself. The quest for the human subsumes the quest for the self, and both quests demand twentieth-century answers. Joseph tells Tu As Raison Aussi, the Spirit of Alternatives, that he would like to discover his “real and not superficial business as a man” (110). It is not a simple problem which can be dismissed by the assertion that since one is a human being nothing human is therefore alien. Nor is it a question of achieving mere identity, or of realizing the self in the depths of one’s self, and letting the world go by. Or, like Thoreau before him, Joseph discovers that the world and the individual self are inextricably intertwined; the world is within him, so that he cannot tear himself from
it without damaging his inner self: "I was involved with them; because, whether I liked it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together. I was aware that their existence, just as it was, made mine possible" (18). The world can and does pollute the self but, as Joseph tells Tu As Raison Aussi, it is impossible to pretend to be alienated from this complex, chaotic world because it is woven into the very texture of the self: "The world comes after you. It presents you with a gun or a mechanic's tool, it singles you out for this part or that, brings you ringing news of disasters and victories, shunts you back and forth, abridges your rights, cuts off your future, is clumsy or crafty, oppressive, treacherous, murderous, black, whorish, venal, inadvertently naïve or funny. Whatever you do, you cannot dismiss it" (91).

What buoys Joseph up and prevents him from toppling into despair are certain values he clings to. Joseph refuses to let go of the basic assumptions he, and his creator, start from. He begins with a Miranda-like wonder at the miracle of human existence, the brave new world he has been born into: "In a sense, everything is good because it exists. Or, good or not good, it exists, it is ineffable, and, for that reason, marvelous" (21). Even in moments of dark despair, Joseph never relinquishes this faith in human existence.

Joseph holds long conversations with Tu Raison Aussi, the Spirit of Alternatives. Bellow borrowed the device of the dialogue from Diderot, who used it to project two incomplete versions of himself in Rameau's Nephew, a work from which Joseph quotes (84).

Before his second meeting with the Spirit, Joseph stumbles on a spiritual discovery: the highest ideal construction is for him not a construction, but that which
“unlocks the imprisoning self” (102). He now sees human life as a continual struggle toward achieving freedom, which he interprets as a “giving” of one’s self, instead of a living unto oneself, but how and to whom and to what he knows not yet. Bellow’s later work will attempt to substantiate and dramatize the way one can give one’s self and achieve a measure of true freedom.

_Dangling Man_ is, in many ways, not only the story of Joseph’s dangling but also a skeletal parable about the spiritual confusion of modern man as experienced by a sensitive intellectual in the 1940s. Lacking the sustenance of religion, disillusioned by the limited visions proffered by Communism and by Capitalism, living not in heavenly cities but in an ugly, crowded megapolis, forced to undervalue himself despite being assured by history that the self is his most precious possession, having lost the ancient certainties about action and behaviour, and unequipped with any new assurances about himself and about human nature, haunted by death and painfully aware of millions of his fellow human beings hunting for the same goal, this modern man dangles, precariously, clinging, however, to a slim thread of hope and faith in human existence and refusing to plunge into despair.

The search for humanness gathers momentum and complexity in Bellow’s second novel. _The Victim_ (1947) presents Asa Leventhal’s slow, reluctant struggle toward the human, a struggle staged in the secret arena of the self and on the hot, crowded streets of New York, Bellow tells the story of another journey to the craters of the spirit. But this time the story is thick with colour and detail, packed with character and incident. The narrative pace is slow and moves to a deliberate, insistent, almost hypnotic rhythm. The structure is not linear as in _Dangling Man_ but a nuclear holding together of themes, ideas,
images, and events in a state of dynamic balance. And the language Bellow uses with its dark cadences and its powerful resonance amplifies one man's bewilderment into mankind's tragic cry for light.

The opening paragraph prepares the reader for a work with many overtones and levels of meaning:

On some nights, New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer. The equator, the biter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of the sky. (11).

Reduced to its essentials, The Victim is the story of education. Asa Leventhal, an editor of a small trade magazine in New York, is a good man, unambitious, happily married, with a comfortable job; he has emerged from poverty, and has attained a measure of stability. Into his placid, unremarkable life suddenly appears Kirby Allbee, who claims that Asa was responsible for the loss of his job. He repeatedly accuses Asa of having ruined his life out of malice and revenge. The ordeal Asa undergoes in his several encounters with Allbee forces him to look into the hidden recesses of his self, consider the values he has lived by, and examine the nature of his relation to the world he lives in.

It is the Allbee turmoil that compels Asa to excavate into his innermost self to uncover some bitter truths. It is a difficult task: "His large eyes stared as though he were trying to force open an inward blindness with the sharp edge of something actual" (183). It drives him to a deeper perception of the mystery of human responsibility and of the human condition. The Allbee story is punctuated by a series of collisions between Leventhal and Allbee and is climaxed by Allbee's attempt at suicide in Asa's apartment.
Every successive encounter shocks Asa out of the comfortable cocoon world he has built around himself. The novel charts the grudging, reluctant progress of Levental from a state of confusion to a kind of perception.

Unlike Joseph, Asa Levental is not an intellectual. Bellow does not endow him with a speculative intelligence that can grapple with the metaphysical and social problems that confront man. It is Allbee who poses some of these problems. It is Schlossberg who offers Leventhal some valuable insights about the human. Bellow introduces speculative discussions, dreams, and epiphanic sights in order to elevate the story of Leventhal's ordeals into a fable about the predicament urban man finds himself in today.

Asa is a person who does not think clearly but does feel strongly. All through the novel there are repeated and recurring references to the agitation in Asa's heart: it pounds, runs hot, beats agonizingly, quickens, beats swiftly, jolts. When he is told of Mickey's death, Asa feels "a clutch of horror at his heart" (156). When he talks to Max, "the blood crowded to Levenhal's heart guiltily" (207). Asa cannot "clarify his thoughts or bring them into focus" (201). Then what good was thinking, he asks, in despair about ever finding an answer. Asa's heart is the source of his unaccountable fears and sensations of doubt, dread, and guilt. At the end of his ordeal, it is Asa's heart that tells him that the showdown is over and that he has somehow made it. He feels faint with the expansion of his heart after leaving Max. And, after he has driven Allbee and the woman out of his apartment, and as he caresses the picture of his wife, Asa experiences the "remote, jubilant speeding of his heart" (243).
It is because Asa’s heart is so sensitive and vulnerable that he, unlike his friends, becomes keenly aware of the problems of responsibility. The theme of responsibility, merely touched upon in *Dangling Man*, is dramatized in *The Victim* and supplies it with an enclosing unity. The question that echoes all through this dark novel is: how far is one responsible for one’s fellow human beings? Allbee poses the problem in the context of a world that is a terrifying crowded place, choked with people who insist the world is made for each one of them:

Who wants all these people to be here, especially forever? Where’re you going to put them all? Who has any use for them all? Look at all the lousy me’s the world was made for and I share it with. Love thy neighbor as thyself? Who the devil is my neighbor? I want to find out. Yes, sir, who and what? Even if I wanted to hate him as myself, who is he? God help me if I’m like what I see around. [172]

Other themes that Bellow ingrains into the texture of his novel are the ubiquity of suffering and the reality of evil in human existence. In *Dangling Man* Joseph referred in passing to the “general malignancy” (98) that infects this world, and was aware that “trouble, like physical pain, actively makes us aware that we are living” (55). The experiences of Asa Leventahl force him out of the unreal, comfortable world into which he has withdrawn himself, and hurl him into the dark, savage, real world opened up by Allbee. Mary, his wife, had acquired the “firmness of her own confident strength” (54) only after the anguish of deliberately breaking away from her married lover.

Linked up with the insistence on suffering as a way to the human is the necessity to accept the reality of the human situation, above all, the reality of evil in this world. Albee breaks up the moral calculus by which Asa has lived, a neat and simple construct whereby man is responsible for his own fate, suffering is always deserved punishment,
and God is "the department of weights and measures." The inexplicable death of Mickey, the anarchy he sees all around him in teeming New York, and the nightmarish experiences he goes through, all confirm the truth that Allbee drives into Leventhal's consciousness: "We do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing, and there's no denying that evil is as real as sunshine" (132).

*The Victim* records Bellow's questions about human existence, its mystery, its unanswerable agonies, its paradoxes of evil and suffering, without any surrender to a feeling of despair or nada. The title itself is Bellow's metaphor for modern man. It is not merely Allbee who feels he is Asa's victim, or Asa who is persecuted by Allbee, or Mickey who is yet another innocent victim. It is man himself who feels he is the eternal victim of the human condition.

Bellow creates an atmosphere that generates, contains, and reconciles the inner and outer turbulence of his protagonist. All events are enacted in a radiant, surreal darkness (as if the world of an el Greco painting had sprung to life) that establishes a powerful sense of unity.

Malcolm Bradbury refers to, but does not elaborate on, Bellow's attempt to step up the meaning of *The Victim*: "The stylization is all in the direction of mythic and psychological intensification: the tale becomes a tale for all men" (1963: 127). Bellow achieves this heightening, this intensification, by charging his style with a tense, electric life. His use of deliberate rhythm, of recurrent image and color, creates a magic spell.

Leventhal, at one point, realizes that codes and rules are required, human nature being what it is: "Would we have to be told 'Love!' if we loved as we breathed? No, obviously. Which was not to say that we didn't love but had to be assisted whenever the
motor started missing” (77-78). He agrees with Schlossberg that man, unlike the animal, can transcend his limits because of the mind and the imagination. But Schlossberg underlines the bitter truth that man is limited because he is subject to death and has only one lifetime in which to realize his true self. These revelations about human possibilities and human limitations reinforce another basic notion that hits Leventhal twice, but which he does not quite grasp. After a dream, in which he forces his way through a crowd at a railway station and is pushed out into an alley, Leventhal awakes in a state of great lucidity, a feeling of both relief and happiness: “It was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception, took place as if within a single soul or person” (151). On the day after the birthday party, Leventhal has another moment of extraordinary illumination: “He had the strange feeling that there was not a single part of him on which the whole world did not press with full weight, on his body, on his soul, pushing upward in his breast and downward in his bowels. He concentrated, moving his lips like someone about to speak, and blew a tormented breath through his nose” (226). What Leventhal dimly realizes, but cannot articulate, is the truth that he is not alone in his suffering. The world and the crowd that pass and press through him communicate the message that he and his afflictions form part of the human condition, in which all men can be seen as victims.

In the final chapter, the coda, Leventhal is no longer bitter about the human situation which he now sees as a “shuffle, all, all accidental and haphazard” (248).

*The Victim* deals with themes of human accountability and belongingness. Bellow argues that the damnation of man is not caused by external forces alone, but also by his own actions. Man is often responsible for bringing about his own destruction. However,
he can always explore within himself the element of faith, which acts as an antidote to all his ills, despite being at odds with the outside world.

*The Adventures of Angie March* (1953) marks a complete departure from the brooding melancholy of the earlier novels. This novel got its author the National Book Award in the first year of its publication and it has since been recognized as an American classic. The change in thinking of the novelist is well reflected in its tone, style, form and ideas. The hero of the novel, Augie is in the Picaresque tradition, having the innocence of Fielding's Tom Jones, and the invention of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, being prey to the disasters which beset Dickens Oliver Twist—Augie is a petty thief, a tramp, a sporting-goods salesman, a labour organiser, a ladies man, and eagle tamer, a merchant seaman, a husband. The obvious message the novel gives is that—"A Man's character is his Fate". Augie is basically rootless like a picaro, he is always on the move. To go along with his new creation, Bellow devised a new style, which is partly cultivated, partly street corner colloquial and partly American Yiddish.

After his second novel, *The Victim*, Bellow became disenchanted with the depressive temperament and the excessive emphasis on form of modernist literature. His first two novels, *The Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, had been written according to "repressive" Flaubertian formal standards; they were melancholy, rigidly structured, restrained in language, and detached and objective in tone. Rebelling against these constricting standards, Bellow threw off the yoke of modernism when he began to write his third novel. The theme, style, and tone of *The Adventures of Augie March* are very different from his earlier novels, for here one finds an open-ended picaresque narrative with flamboyant language and an exuberant hero who seeks to affirm life and the
possibility of freedom. While the environment has a profound influence upon Joseph and
Asa Leventhal, Augie refuses to allow it to determine his fate. During the course of many
adventures, a multitude of Machiavellians seek to impose their versions of reality upon
the good-natured Augie, but he escapes from them, refusing to commit himself. With his
third novel, then, Bellow deliberately rejected the modernist outlook and aesthetic. The
problem was to find an alternative to modernism without resorting to glib optimism. It
seems that he found an alternative in two older literary traditions—in nineteenth century
English Romantic humanism and in a comedy that he considers typically Jewish. Unlike
the modernists, who denigrate the concept of the individual, Bellow believes in the
potential of the self and its powerful imagination that can redeem ordinary existence and
affirm the value of freedom, love, joy, and hope. As Harold Bloom has aptly noted,
"While comedy in Bellow is a complex matter, its primary function seems to be to
undercut the dejection that threatens his heroes. The comic allows Bellow's protagonists
to cope with the grim facts of existence; it enables them to avoid despair and gain a
balanced view of their problematical situation. Comedy, the spirit of reason, allows them
to laugh away their irrational anxieties. Often Bellow seems to encourage his worst
anxieties in order to bring them out into the open so that he can dispose of them by comic
ridicule (1986: 189).

Augie March stands for the American dream of the inviolable individual who has
the courage to resist his culture. His quest is for happiness through self-realization, the
power to find oneself and then to submit to what one is—that is the superior fate Augie
believes he can achieve. He rejects an enormous range of flattering temptations—power,
wealth, devotion to cause—because his will to oppose is stronger than his will to be a
recruit and conform. But Augie is a representative American in other ways too, the image of modern man living in a hopelessly fluid society, forced to choose an identity because he has inherited none. Augie is fatherless, Jewish, and penniless. He starts with nothing and is eventually propelled into everything, but he won’t stay put and he won’t admit defeat: “I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains, which didn’t prove there was no America” (536)*

Reflecting a wide range of literary and cultural influences, The Adventures of Augie March helped to establish Bellow as a promising young American writer and was awarded the National Book Award in 1954. Several critics have considered the novel as a turning point in Bellow’s literary career, tracing his stylistic development from his first two novels, The Dangling Man (1944) and The Victim (1947). Augie March has been characterized by critics as a distinctly “American” novel, embodying a literary style and thematic preoccupations that reflect the sensibilities of the American people during the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars have applauded the exuberance of Bellow’s prose style in Augie March, particularly his idiomatic mix of literary English and American slang. Additionally, critics have commended the wealth of observational and character detail in the novel, noting Bellow's skill with rendering sharp and accurate of portrayals of people and places—most notably, the Chicago neighbourhoods where Augie spent his childhood. However, some have argued that, despite the novel's attention

to detail, Bellow's characters read as one-dimensional caricatures. Others have faulted the novel's lack of plot structure, with various reviewers debating whether this reflects Augie's questing, spiritual nature or Bellow's inability to construct a formal narrative. Due to the novel's emphasis on picaresque and bildungsroman elements, the novel has often been compared to the works of Salinger, Twain, and Ralph Ellison. In 2003 a variety of commentators offered critical reevaluations of *Augie March* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its initial publication. Leonard Kriegel has stated that *Augie March*, "in its language as well as in the protagonist Bellow created, remains one of the truly memorable achievements in American fiction" (56).

The primary focus of Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* is on the battle of determinism and independence and free choice, the hero's struggle with the deterministic inheritance carried to extremes. The hero is a modern picaro in quest of "a better fate". Robert R. Dutton compares Augie to the American folk hero: he comes from a poor family; he does not know the identity of his father; he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position, or wealth; he admits that he "gives his affections too easily" and that "he has no grudge-bearing power." Bellow has endowed his narrator with the entire list of requisites to a folk hero of our time and culture" (Dutton 48).

Augie, a poor but spirited boy growing up in Chicago during the Depression, leaves his mother and disabled younger brother to find his way in the world. He enters a wild succession of occupations—dog groomer, saddle soap salesman, smuggler, shoplifter, boxing coach—guided by an equally fantastic array of mentors. Each of these "recruiters" attempts to determine Augie's lot in life, but whenever he is at risk of being taken by a person or profession, he slips away to a new misadventure, equal parts joiner
and escapist. Not until his affair with Thea Fenchel does Augie begin to realize that love and independence are irreconcilable.

By writing *Augie March*, Bellow was also able to release a hitherto untapped source of his creative energy. In *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* Bellow's Jewish sensibility lay dormant. It manifested itself briefly in the humanistic wisdom preferred to Asa Leventhal by old Schlossberg, a Judeo-Christian belief in man and an acceptance of the human condition. In *Augie March*, for the first time, Bellow deliberately permitted his Jewish heritage to assert itself and ignite his imagination. This heritage, a vital ingredient of his creative sensibility, had been carefully nurtured in his childhood. He grew up in an orthodox Jewish household, brought up by a mother who wanted him to become a Talmudic scholar. In the *Show* interview he says: “My childhood was in ancient times which was true of all orthodox Jews. Every child was immersed in the Old Testament as soon as he could understand anything, so that you began life by knowing Genesis in Hebrew by heart at the age of four. You never got to distinguish between that and the outer world. I grew up with four languages, English, Hebrew, Yiddish and French” (1964: 38-39). In the *Paris Review* interviews, Bellow tells us about how the pressure exerted by the WASP world inhibited him as a writer and an artist: “I had to touch a great many bases, demonstrate my abilities, pay my respects to formal requirements. In short, I was afraid to let myself go” (1967: 182). *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* were written, in part, with what may be termed a borrowed sensibility. According to Bellow, “a writer should be able to express himself easily, naturally, copiously in a form which frees his mind, his energies” (1967: 183).
The writing of *Augie March* also compelled Bellow to accept the fictional challenge of capturing the dark forces, the savage tensions, the tumults and bewilderments of the big city in which modern man finds and has to find himself. Joseph’s Chicago oppresses his spirit: as a passive witness, he casts a cold eye on the streets and the scenes of Chicago, but cannot respond to them and therefore cannot describe them or make them come alive. In *The Victim* Bellow succeeds in evoking a New York as seen through the dark, resentful, limited eyes of a Leventhal who can only respond to its hot, yellow, gloomy, crowded, bleak streets, its towering buildings and the grinding noises of its traffic. The Chicago of *Augie March* is magnificently alive in its multitudinous variety. It is not seen, but experienced. Augie is not a mere witness; as one Chicago-born, one who has roamed its crowded, colourful streets, the city is part of his being. And because he is thickly involved with Chicago, he can make it spring to vivid life. “I grew up there and consider myself a Chicagoan, out and out,” Bellow has said in an autobiographical note (1955: 72). The vigor, authority, excitement, and completeness of Augie’s Chicago springs in part from Bellow’s passionate involvement with and love for the city he grew up in.

As George Grebe in the short story “Looking for Mr. Green” wanders about the “giant raw place” that is Chicago, he feels a “huge energy an escaped, unattached, unregulated power”. He then states an idea important to Bellow’s intention in *The Adventures of Augie March*: “Not only must people feel it,” he thinks, but “they were compelled to match it. In their very bodies” (1958: 103). Grebe associates this energy with “the war of flesh and blood” (*Seize the Day*, 154), or the violence and sensuality which Leventhal fears in the city masses. In his first two novels, Bellow examined this
war in moral terms, defending subjective value by means of a transcendent vision, but he 
reversed his tactics in Augie March. He sought not to transcend those elements which 
destroy personality but to meet them on their own terms - to “match” them by the very 
force, the Whitmanian gusto, of his prose. The best defense is an offense; Bellow 
attempted to celebrate man and the world by the very qualities his early protagonists 
abhor. As Irving Kristol says, Bellow wrestled with demons in his first two novels; in 
Augie March “jumped in their midst, bussed them, and inquired if they had read any good 
books lately” (1984: 74). Having created two characters who were strangers in a 
frightening world, Bellow turned in 1953 to a hero who joyfully feels at home in a 
colourful Chicago.

This new approach earned Bellow critical and popular acclaim. His portrayal of 
Chicago in the thirties caught the spirit of America in the fifties. To J.B. Priestley, “this 
is the place, these the people” (1954: 5). To Norman Podhoretz, Augie’s adventures 
reflect “the intellectual’s joyous [new] sense of connection with the common grain of 
American life” (1958: 379). Augie’s happy acceptance of his time and place expresses 
the acquiescence of the Eisenhower decade at the same time that it breaks through the 
narrow world of the alienated hero. The “huge energy” which Bellow matches is at once 
the force of the physical world and the force of society, particularly one that is exploding 
in population and technology.

The power of Augie’s Chicago derives also from Bellow’s adoption of the 
practices and techniques of the Chicago Naturalists, Farrell, Dreiser, and Norris, who had 
written about Chicago. Bellow, in a review essay, has referred to the “lifting power” of 
Dreiser, his ability to convey forcefully the “facts of our American modern reality”
Bellow uses the method of heaping raw, accumulative detail to stamp the city upon the reader's consciousness. The details offered are not single, separate, static, but mobile, dynamic units, charged with energetic life. Here is a description of the Country hospital in Chicago after the declaration of the war:

The hospital was mobbed and was like Lent and Carnival battling. This was Harrison, Street, where Mama and I used to come for her specs, and not far from where I had to go once to identify that dead coal heaver, the thundery gloom, bare stone brown, while the red cars lumbered and clanged. Every bed, window, separate frame of accommodation, every corner was filled, like the walls of Troy or the streets of Clermont when Peter the Hermit was preaching. Shruggers, hobbles, truss and harness wearers, crutch-dancers, wall inspectors, wheelchair people in bandage helmets, wound smells and drug flowers blossoming from gauze, from colorful horrors and out of the deep sinks (474).

Augie goes up to the roof of the hospital and has an overview of Chicago:

Around was Chicago. In its repetition it exhausted your imagination of details and units, more units than the cells of the brain and bricks of Babel. The Ezekiel caldron of wrath, stoked with bones. In time the caldron too would melt. A mysterious tremor, dust, vapor, emanation of stupendous effort traveled with the air, over me on top of the great establishment, so full as it was, and over the clinics, clinks, factories, flophouses, morgue, skid row. As before the work of Egypt and Assyria, as before a sea, you're nothing here. Nothing (476).

In writing *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow moved away from the tradition of the "well-made novel" and sought to create a form based on the free-wheeling picaresque novel developed by Fielding and Smollett. As Bruce Cook has observed, the Flaubertian standard that he had accepted in *The Victim* appeared constricting and repressive and made it imperative for him to yield to "emotional limits that were very confining" (1963: 49), because the scrupulous attention paid by him to structure necessarily involved the sacrifice of his freedom to experiment in a more flexible fictional mode. In *Augie March*, therefore, Bellow said he "kicked over the traces, wrote
catch-as-catch-can, picaresque. I took my chance. The great pleasure of the book was that it came easily. All I had to do was to be there with buckets to catch it. That’s why the form is loose” (1953: 20).

Unlike *Dangling Man, The Victim,* and *Seize Day,* which are specifically set in Chicago and New York, *Augie March* does not limit its action to one particular place. Augie characterizes himself as “an American, Chicago born” (3) and describes his upbringing in Chicago. Very soon, he moves into wider circles of experience which take him to New York, Mexico City, Paris, and other places. The change of settings contributes significantly to the shaping of Augie’s consciousness and character so much so that after his Mexican interlude it is not difficult to see that a substantial change has affected his personality. But in spite of the number of experiences in a number of places that he undergoes, his quest is essentially directed at his own self. The language he seeks is not in his environment but in himself. He is, thus, different from the hero of the picaresque novel who, in Robert Alter’s words, “is what he is; sometimes splendidly, sometimes ignominiously, but always confidently ... himself” (1962: 58). Augie has greater kinship with the *Bildungsroman* because he is unsure of the sources of stability in his life and responds to experiences with the attitude of a gambler. His adventures are, as a result, without direction.

That *Augie March* has a greater affinity with the *Bildungsroman* can also be seen from the fact that Augie views his life from an altered perspective from the point of view of a changed person. Expressing his realization that reality is so complex that it cannot be codified within the fixities of any definition, he confesses, “I see this now. At that time, not” (285). Although the novel concludes with Augie’s initial steps toward self-
assessment, the overall tone that informs the narrative is that of a man who has retrospectively learned from his experiences or from the reflections that the experiences have inspired. For example, his contemptuous attitude to social esteem is tinged by his insight into its veneer and artificiality:

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

The name *Augie* comes from *augury*, from the Latin *augur*, the name for the Roman priests who divined the future by regarding the flights of birds. Thus Augie is like both the Aztec priests auguring from stars and the Roman priests auguring from birds: Augie, like all Bellow's heroes, is Bellow's representative in determining whether life can go on. This is Bellow's main question, and his answer is an anguished *yes*. In "The Writer as Moralist" Bellow argues, "Either we want life to continue or we do not ... If we do want it to continue ... in what form shall life be justified?" (1963: 62). To answer this question is the writer's moral function.

Certainly it is the function Bellow has taken on in his fiction. In this role Bellow affirms the possibilities of meaningful individual life, but he knows its difficulties and costs; he knows that the Aztec priests, "when they received their astronomical sign, built their new fire inside the split and empty chest of a human sacrifice" (338).

Rejecting the mode of his immediate predecessors such as Hemingway, Bellow reached back to the ampler, more hospitable and open-ended forms of American fiction used by Melville and Mark Twain. The title of the novel, which originally had been *Life*
Among the Machiavellians, was changed to deliberately echo The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The opening line, "I am an American, Chicago-born," summons up the opening of Moby Dick confidently announcing the reappearance of another Ishmael who has been saved from urban shipwreck to tell his tale. In the last paragraph, Augie refers to himself as a sort of Columbus and, like Huckleberry, lights out for his territory ahead, the terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze. Bellow endows Augie with an assured Emersonian joy and belief in human existence. Augie has also been given the Whitmanesque temperament, large, open, free eluding definition, able to contain multitudes. The novel is Augie's song of the open road, a song of himself, a celebration of America with its protean variety. Augie proclaims his kinship with Whitman, "being democratic in temperament, available to everybody and assuming about others what I assumed about myself" (155).

(i)

Augie March is not a novel about a social or moral masochist. As was pointed out earlier, Bellow developed in this book a conscious opposition to his own bitter nature. Yet in the conflict which Robert Alter considers between Augie March as a picaresque novel and Augie March as a Bildungsroman (1962: 58), there are still hints of Bellow's depressive, masochistic characters.

The conflict of interests is present from the beginning: we are concerned both with the characters Augie meets, and with the adventures, as well as with his process of education. For much of the novel this education is secondary: Augie's "larkiness" carries him—and us—through. But from the beginning of the Mexican adventure with Thea,
Augie grows more and more self-critical, less buoyant, less able to sustain himself by larkiness (1963: 107).

Augie is a characteristic Bellow hero, a young man with an ironic sense of the world, wary of taking direct action but certain that he belongs to a greater destiny. Like Bellow's other central characters, he is intent on finding a "good enough fate" eager to write his own part on life's stage yet stubbornly resistant to the limits imposed by any scripted role. But he is also dramatically different from the brooding thinkers of Bellow's early works. Augie is playful, subversive, adventurous, and ever optimistic. He is a new American Adam, innocently poised for a future full of promise in a land full of possibilities. No profession, no lover, no commitment can capture him. He risks his job as a book thief because he can't resist the desire to keep and read the books he has stolen. Although this very adaptability, this lack of firm obligations makes him hard to characterize or define, his first-person narrative conveys a compelling vision of American freedom, a fresh spirit of irresistible charm.

While Augie's character remains protean, the world he inhabits is painted with magnificent detail and texture. Infused with the vivid, hyperbolic Yiddish of his childhood, Bellow's narrative revels in the melodramatic people and language of 1920s Chicago. As Bellow said:

The most ordinary Yiddish conversation is full of the grandest historical, mythological, and religious allusions. The Creation, the fall, the flood, Egypt, Alexander, Titus, Napoleon, the Rothschilds, the Sages, and the Laws may get into the discussion of an egg, a clothes-line, or a pair of pants (1954: 10)

The language of Augie March is likewise rife with heroic allusions, casting a mythic glow on Augie's smallest move. Augie's thoughts about his job as a labour
organizer invoke John the Baptist, Stonewall Jackson, the Tower of Babel, and Gandhi's India in quick succession. Yet the extravagant metaphors sound uncalculated, falling as easily on the ear as a street-corner conversation. "The great pleasure of the book was that it came easily," Bellow said in an interview. "All I had to do was be there with buckets to catch it. That's why the form is loose" (1954: 17).

Praise for Bellow's ebullient new style was enthusiastic, if not unanimous, and he won the National Book Award in 1953. *Augie March* was compared to *Ulysses* and described as "a howlingly American book." Supporters and critics alike recognized in him a powerful voice, a vision of America that could not be ignored. The book brought "a new sense of laughter," wrote Alfred Kazin. "In *Augie*, Bellow . . . discovered himself equal to the excitement of the American experience, he shook himself all over and let himself go" (1973: 130).

*Augie March* holds a unique place for its revolutionary joy and exuberance. This rollicking tale of modern-day heroism is not only a portrait of determination and survival, but also a keenly observed drama of one man's "refusal to lead a disappointed life."

As in *Dangling Man*, despite the change in tone and in language, Bellow makes use of the technique of parallelism and contrast, on a magnified scale here, to dramatize the quest of his protagonist. The Machiavellians (the novel was originally titled *Life Among the Machiavellians*) with their constructions form an absolute contrast to Augie and his search for a worthwhile fate. They loom large and menacing in the first eight chapters of the novel, offering Augie, the lessons of power as the ultimate and only response to the human condition. The three dominant Machiavellians are Grandma Lausch, with her tough tactics for survival in this cruel world; William Einhorn, who
preaches and practices lessons and theories of power; and Mrs. Renling, who wants to
save him from the rat race and construct a different Augie in order “to consolidate what
she affirmed she was” (159). The philosophy of naked, aggressive power and domination
over other human beings is forcefully stated by that modern Machiavelli, Einhorn, who
insists that:

One should choose or seize with force; one should make strength
from disadvantage and make progress by having enemies, being
wrathful or terrible; should hammer on the state of being a brother,
not be oppressed by it; should have the strength of voice to make
other voices fall silent – the same principle for persons as for
peoples, parties, states (192).

The Adventures of Augie March (1953), narrated by its title character, chronicles
Augie March’s adaption to protean changes of circumstances from his childhood in
Chicago before the Depression, through the 1930s and 1940s, to his postwar life in
Europe as a young married man and a dealer in black market goods. The people in his
life vie with Augie in narrative interest, however, for Augie is self-proclaimedly
adoptable, and a procession of vivid strong-willed persons orchestrate the circumstances
of his life in an attempt to shape him to their images. Machiavellis of small street and
neighbourhood, Augie terms them in an effort to give a theme to the account of his
adventures, and he is more ready to tell about them than about himself. Among the
family members, only his elder brother Simon rivals these ‘adopters’ in importance.
Neither the simple minded Mrs. March nor Augie’s mentally retarded brother Georgie
looms as importantly in the narrative as they, for neither qualifies as a Machiavelli.

The first of these strong-willed adopters is Grandma Lausch – not really Augie’s
grandmother at all, but an elderly Jewish boarder, born in Odessa. She governs the
household autocratically, and she commands dutiful affection from Augie and Simon
while she indoctrinates them in an idiosyncratic compound of Horatio Alger idealism and streetwise opportunism when she can no longer hold the family together with the force of her personality, her last mental institution. Then, savouring bitterly her apparent failure to make something of Simon and Augie, she withdraws to a home for the aged and forgets the Marches, although not herself forgotten by Augie.

The second Machiavelli in Augie's life is William Einhorn, under whose influence Augie falls when he takes a job with him in his last years of high school. That Einhorn is crippled in both arms and legs and has to be dressed, carried about, and even taken to the toilet by Augie does not interfere with his management of varied business interests. Nor does Einhorn's disability mitigate his avid search for the woman in the world whom he might turn to a quivering mass of lust. Indeed, he is a man of vivid contradictions. Augie credits him with statesmanship, fineness of line, parsee sense, deep-dug intrigue, and the scorn of Pope Alexander VI for custom. He notes also a sense of the dollar that inspires Einhorn to install a pay telephone in his office for the use of visiting businessman.

Einhorn's influence over Augie is never entirely broken, but after Augie graduates from high school, his influence is temporarily superseded by that of Mr. and Mrs. Renling, who employ Augie as a salesman in their fashionable saddleshop. Mrs. Renling in particular adopts Augie, and under her tutelage he learns to dress, talk, and move in a manner to which he was not born. He is even taken by Mrs. Renling to exclusive Benton Harbor in the ostensible role of companion, so determined are the Renlings to make Augie their own, that they finally offer to adopt him legally, but at that point Augie flees.
Einhorn is contemptuous of the ant heap, the mass of mankind: "Look here, because they were born you think they have to turn out to be men?" he asks Augie (307).

After leaving the Renlings, Augie works briefly as a paint salesman and then falls in with an inept gangster named Joe Gorman and schemes to assist illegal immigrations from Canada. Drifting back to Chicago after a brush with the Detroit police, he moves into a student boarding house on the south side, resumes attending University classes, and supports himself by petty theft from bookstores, a skill in which he is trained by a friend named Padilla. The main adopter in this phase of his life is his brother Siman, who marries into the wealthy Magnus family and persuades Augie to work for him in the coal yard he is given by the Magnuses as a dowry. Simon picks out Augie's clothes with a paternalism reminiscent of Mrs. Renling's, and he even engages Augie romantically with another Magnus daughter in an effort to strengthen ties with the family.

Augie eliminates a chance he never really wanted to marry into the Magnus family when he helps a fellow boarder named Mimi Villars to find an abortionist and is generally assumed to be the father of her unborn child. Fired by Simon for the disrepute this brings him with the Magnuses, he works briefly as a housing surveyor for the WPA, then as labour organizer for the CIO. He also becomes involved with Thea Fenchel, an apparently wealthy Jewish girl he had first met at Benton Harbor and who had recently established herself in a Chicago hotel in order to renew acquaintance with Augie while awaiting a Mexican divorce decree. She is clearly another adopter, but when goons from the rival AFL attack Augie at a union meeting, he runs to Thea and allows himself to be drawn into her madcap plan for learning to hunt with an eagle in Mexico. Against all
advice, newly aware that Thea's money is all her husband's but fancying himself in love, Augie joins her expedition.

Although Thea is a devoted and able trainer, an eagle they purchase and name Caligula proves a coward, and the Mexican adventure gradually palls. Secretly hating the whole business and openly in revolt when Thea disowns Caligula and begins to collect poisonous snakes, Augie begins in Chilpanzingo to go his own way. When he helps an acquaintance named Stella Chesney in potential difficulty with Mexican authorities to escape the country, Thea suspects rightly that he and Stella have been lovers and leaves him. To be abandoned rather than adopted is a disorienting experience for Augie, and in the wake of Thea's departure he is briefly unhinged from reality.

Events move more quickly in the last five chapters of the novel. Returning to Chicago from Mexico, Augie finds Simon eager to take charge once again of his younger brother's life. Evading such a take over, Augie accepts a job as research assistant with an eccentric millionaire named Robey and helps him to research a projected history of human happiness. Sophie Gefalis, an old friend from his days as a labour organizer, wants to marry Augie, and Clean Tambow, another old friend, wants him to collaborate in vocational-guidance scheme, but Augie is shrewder now than before about his adoptability and sidesteps their plans. With the advent of World War II, he joins the merchant marine. On his first liberty leave, he visits Stella Chesney in New York and falls deeply in love. They are married a day after his graduation from training school but have to separate several days later when Augie ships out of Boston.

When Augie's ship is torpedoed and sunk on the fifteenth day out of Boston, he shares a lifeboat with a mad scientist named Basteshaw, who proves to be still another
adopter. Basteshaw wants to sail for the Canary Islands and be incarcerated for the war so that he can continue his lunatic research into the creation of life, and he decides that Augie will be research assistant. When Augie expresses a preference for rescue, Basteshaw overcomes him and lines him up, Augie eventually frees himself and is picked up by a British tanker. The last chapter of the novel finds him living happily in Europe with Stella and working for a blackmarketeer, Mintouchian.

In The Adventures of Augie March Bellow shifts to an open form in contrast to the closed ones in his two earlier novels. This is in consonance with the overall mental make-up of the present protagonist for search of identity and self-knowledge makes him a free-wheeler in life. Augie March tries to find out who and what he is and thereby discover the true stature of his self. The journey of the hero is towards self-knowledge which may finally lead to a fuller realization of his love for life and joy of living. From this viewpoint, the novel celebrates joy, hope and freedom. Chapter Four has thrown much light on the aspect that Augie's ethnic past has given his American character a unique stamp. The city bred American Jew, while en route on the discovery of his self, declares that a man's character is his fate:

I am an American, Chicago born-Chicago that somber city – and go at things as I have taught myself, free style, First to knock, first admitted . . . But a man's character is his fate (3).

With this aphorism, Augie starts his adventures. But notwithstanding the jubilant tone of the novel, like Bellow's earlier heroes who choose to play the role of the looser, Augie too cannot accept success and rejects position of status. He rather chooses to maintain the primal innocence of his heart and makes an honest attempt to maintain the integrity of his self, rather than falling prey to other's scheme. One is inclined to believe
that such a temperament is an inborn one not only with Augie but with most of Bellow's heroes. Even in his teens, he disappointed Anna Coblin who wanted to adopt him as her son-in-law. His search for identity had already taken a firmer root in him. This he calls a good enough fate:

Even at that time I couldn't imagine that I would marry into the Coblin family. And when Anna snatched Howard's saxophone, my thought was, go on, take it. What do I want it for. I'll do better than that my mind was already dwelling on a good enough fate (28).

Augie's search for identity thus takes the shape of 'a good enough fate' after which, he strives. When one observes that Augie's striving comes into conflict with the people around him, one can view thus as an average man's attempt at social adjustment. In other words, through the adventures of Augie, Bellow examines the issue of socio-individual adjustment in the present environment. To be sure, asserting one's individuality in the face of a crowd in a mass-society has become a hard task indeed. People like Augie are however committed to this task with sincerity.

Augie remains true to the task of the discovery of the self. It makes him perform several roles in his life. His experiences are thus many and varied. Augie helps to rob a store and associates himself with gangsters. He then earns his bread at the University of Chicago by stealing books. He becomes a demonstrator for sometime and again he is chauffeur to a dog's club. He becomes a union organizer in a Chicago hotel and later secretary-cum-writer to an eccentric millionaire. But much before he was drawn to such a vast sphere of roles, he had to face the theoreticians whom he would prefer to call the Machiavellians. Six or seven characters in the novel appear before him as reality instructors and try to educate him in the way of the world.
What Bellow presents through adventures of Augie is the fact that the individual self is continually pushed, drawn or threatened by other people's version of what life is for and how it should be led. It is a world of materialists where exploitation is the rule for the sake of more money. Not to make material progress is to be a fool. His brother Simon stands at the other pole. Simon makes money by fair or foul means and reveals its corrupting influences in so far as it brutalizes a man and devalues his life. Like in his other novels, Bellow draws on the abstract power of money that he has cut across everywhere - love, family, happiness, self-respect. Augie is thus a failure not only in his personal and emotional life, but in his material life as well. Viewed from this angle, Augie is a rebel-hero who would not submit his individuality to the corrupting forces of the world. With all his involvement, he remains true to his search for a separate destiny and keeps himself detached in saying 'no' to everyone who wants to tame him.

Such gestures of Augie can be viewed as taking to rebellion as part of his identity seeking. He demands for him, 'ideal condition' because, he feels nothing restrains people from demanding it, and tries to examine his possibility by being a person who can stand before the terrible appearances:

You have to plot in your heart to come out differently. External life being so mighty the instruments so huge and terrible; the performances so great, the thoughts so great and threatening. You produce someone who can exist before it. You invent a man who can stand before the terrible appearances. This way he cannot get justice and he can't give justice, but he can live. And this is what mere humanity always does (401-02).

Accepting that the structure of human self has become smaller in the face of a huge technological civilization, Bellow once again vindicates his faith in the potentialities of the self. Man still has the possibilities within him and still can afford to exercise this
even in the face of a mammoth technological advancement. Augie is too conscious of the protean aspect of existence and himself feels over-powered by things and objects:

... in this modern power of luxury with its battalions of workers and engineers, it’s the things themselves, the products that are distinguished and the individual man isn’t bearly equal to their great sum. Finally they are what becomes great .... No opposing greatness is allowed, and the disturbing person is the one who won’t serve by using or denies by not wishing to enjoy (238).

The last sentence is significant in so far as it refers to Augie himself. Despite his awareness of the distracting forces of a modern existence, Augie like his author is life-affirming, love-affirming and individual affirming. Augie has his human tenderness and he longs for the human. Notwithstanding his constant impulse to say ‘no’, there is deep within Augie, a feeling to share—of making life disciplined in meaningful participation. Bellow is explicit that even in the face of dehumanized forces of the present civilization the self can attain and retain its true human dignity. However he hints that one cannot have one’s self founded on dignity in his ‘ideal construction’, though at the first instance, a man may be inclined towards such a construction. In such a construction, Bellow implies, a man is isolated from humanity and therefore he ignores his mortality. But to attain dignity for one’s self, one must communicate to and participate with other human beings. In other words, he must accept imposed limitations:

Everyone tries to create a world he can live in and what he can’t use he can’t see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn’t correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on. There being better than what the people call reality, that better something needn’t try to exceed what in its actuality, since we know it so little may be very surprising. If a happy state of things, surprising, if miserable or tragic, no worse than what we invent (318).
True, one has to live a human life as it is not more, not less. It is only by behaving exactly human that one can realize one’s potentialities. While depicting the other side of the picture, Bellow comes to hint that society at present seldom promotes such striving. The extent of corruption in the present society hardly attaches any importance to values on which human life must be based. In this connection, Augie’s friend Padilla makes a significant revelation which can be applied not only to Augie, but to all of his heroes:

The big investigation today is into how bad a guy can be, not how good he can be. You don’t keep up with the times. You’re going against history. Or at least you should admit how bad things are which you don’t do either (431).

The reason why Augie cannot adjust to reality is revealed by his another friend Clem Tambo. He hints that it is their search for values, that people like Augie cannot cope with the reality as it exists, which no doubt appears to be in its debased form for the seekers like Augie:

What I guess about you is that you have a nobility syndrome. You can’t just adjust to the reality situation. I can see it all over you. You want there should be Man with capital M with great stature (434).

The meaning of human has shrunk because of the increasing abstractions and specialization of modern life coupled with the technological revolution. Seeking the whole meaning of life, Augie finds only specialized interpretation of it. When Clem Tambo tells that he is not “concrete enough” and that “you’re going to ruin yourself ignoring the reality principle”, Augie, despite his awareness of the smaller stature of man at present, is affirmative:

It can never be right to offer to die and if that’s what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them. I also understand what you’re driving at about my not being concrete. It is as follows: In the world of today your individual man has to be
willing to illustrate a more and more and more narrow and restricted point of existence. And I am not a specialist (436).

By all his efforts, Augie tries to maintain the integrity of his self. He therefore resists the attempt of other people to tame him. When he talks of the present meagre human existence in the face of the large technical advancements to his one-time neighbour Kayo Obermark, the later unfolds yet another truth before him:

What you are talking about is Moha a Navajo world, and also Sanskrit, meaning opposite of the finite. It is the Bronx cheer of the conditioning forces. Love is the only answer to Moha, being infinite. I mean all forms of love, Eros, a gape, libido, philia and ecstasy. They are always the same but sometimes one quality dominates and sometimes another (450).

Augie has meanwhile come to realize that “the reason for solitude can only be reunion”. The revelation made by Obermark strikes him very much. That Obermark’s saying has a lasting effect on him is revealed later when he talks of the axial lines of life:

I have a feeling ... about the axial lines of life with respect to which you must be straight or else you existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy. I must have had a feeling since I was a kid about these axial lines which made me want to have my existence on them and so I have said ‘no’ like a stubborn fellow to all my persuaders ... but lately I have felt these thrilling lines again. When striving stops, there they are as gift. I was lying on the couch here before and they suddenly went quivering right straight through me. Truth, peace, love bounty, usefulness, harmony, and all noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort superfluity, passed off something like unreal. And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines, even if an unfortunate bastard, if he will be quiet and wait it out. The ambition of something special and outstanding I have always had is only a boast that distorts this knowledge from its origin..... At any time life can come together again and man, may be regenerated, and doesn’t have to be a good or public servant ... but the man himself, finite and tape as he is, can still come where the axial lines are (454-55).
Conforming to his creator's immense faith in the power of imagination, Augie too falls on his inner resources to suddenly discover some hidden truth that makes his re-discovery of the self possible. This illumination brings him to acknowledge the sub-angelic position of man. Now he learns to submit and to exert his potentialities within limits. With his humanistic outlook Bellow's hero has learnt to come to terms with life. Affirming his faith in life based on love, Augie has qualified himself to join humanity. He is optimistic about the fate of men in the present century:

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

By these utterances, Augie in fact vindicates his faith in the continuation of human existence against all voids. He seems to hint that the true powerful weapon to fight the void in modern times is love and touch of true human heart. He has learnt this lesson by putting himself into test and “this is not the imaginary stuff ... because I bring my entire life to the rest” (455).

His alienation has come to an end. He has learnt that life becomes meaningful only in participation:

.... a man could spend forty, fifty, sixty years like that inside walls of his own being. All great experience would only take place within the walls of his being. And all high conversation would take place within those walls. And all glamour too. This would be on it a terrible, hideous dream about existing. (455)

Augie thus makes it explicit that not in isolation but in participation a human life can attain its order and meaning. It is dialogue and not monologue that renders a human
self its true dignity. At the same time he makes it clear that although one may require to relinuish part of his identity to participate in dialogue with his fellow beings, it does not necessarily mean that by this he loses his dignity:

"All I want is something my own, and bethink myself..... I want a place of my own. I'd take and go to Greenland, and I'd never loan myself again to any other guy’s scheme (456)."

With his hope of setting up a home for his family and children, he is still affirmative. Starting his journey in search of a worthwhile fate, he has come to acquire a newer vision. This is indicated by the transposing declaration “Man’s character is his fate” into “Man’s fate is his character”:

"I said when I started to make the record ... that a man’s character was his fate. Well then it is obvious that this fate, for what he settles for, is also his character. And since I never have had any place of rest it should follow that I have trouble being still, and further more my hope is based upon getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found. When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift—bounty, harmony, love and so forth (514)."

Augie comes to place his faith in the meaning of human life. He remains as honest at the end of the novel as he was at the beginning. By this, he seems to show that even if people cannot change reality there still remains way of making life meaningful. Even in an age like this, the human self is capable of redemption. Augie at the first instance insists on a better fate and vehemently resists temptations of falling prey to other’s scheme because his will to oppose is stronger than his will to be a recruit. By rejecting wealth and success, he acts as a Schlemiel, at the same time he assumes the role of a rebel to assert his individuality, which act implies, in turn, his persistent attempt to uphold individual dignity and values in a corrupting society. Augie’s last utterances are significant in that in search of Man with capital M, he compares himself with Colombus,
the external voyager, who remained faithful to his own vision even as he was led away in chains:

Look at me going everywhere. Why, I am a sort of Colombus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra-in-cognita that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Colombus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains, which didn't prove there was no America (536).

Augie thus comes to express his unending faith in the power of the inner self, which for him, defines and contains reality. His final claim that he is a sort of Colombus symbolically reflects his indomitable spirit of optimism and also a gesture by which he acknowledges the joke life plays on man still indicating his refusal to be defeated by it. With clear-eyed awareness of the complexity of his situation and therefore a modern man's, he still hopes to continue his search for a meaningful life. If he has not found it yet, it does not mean that it does not exist.

Like all Bellow heroes, Augie and Henderson have a spark of idealism: Augie is keen to establish a home for orphans. The adventures are essentially innocent and try to go beyond clutter and complexity. Augie finds that his "special thing," his fixation, is simplicity. It is another matter that in desiring simplicity and denying complexity "I was guileful and suppressed many patents in my secret heart, and was as devising as anybody else" (402).

In their search for reality, Augie and Henderson elude the definitions and lifestyles offered by their Instructors and decline to follow the set roles that society imposes on them. Their openness to experience is a natural derivative of their hunger for freedom. They are carried ahead by the belief that every new adventure opens fresh gateways of meaning and hope. By the end of the long narrative of his varied experiences Augie
appears undeterred by his meagre accomplishments. "I may well be a flop in this line of endeavor," he says, "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn’t prove there was no America" (536).

Augie considers it vital to achieve an independent fate “Because what if what I am by name isn’t good enough?” (485). It is hard for Augie to reconcile his conception of a “good enough” self with the demands of love because the love of others always appears to obstruct his search for a unique self.

Augie feels that “Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony” can be realized once all exertions are relaxed and the “axial lines of life” intuited. He acknowledges that “The ambition of something special and outstanding I have always had is only a boast that distorts this knowledge” (454). He does not think that the perception of life’s axial lines entails any special initiation or spiritual training: “And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines … At any time life can come together again and man be regenerated” (454).

Augie’s adventures make him intensely human. He assumes responsibility for others and cheerfully accepts the contradictions of the world. But he is withheld from religious grace because he cannot reconcile his desire for an exceptional self with selflessness. His failure is due to his inability to bridge the gap between his insights and his way of life. He continues to seek meaning through a participation in experience even though he visualizes the possibility of approaching the “axial lines of life” with a cessation of striving. Mintouchian, one of his Reality Instructors, aptly expresses his dilemma:

... You must take your chance on what you are. And you can’t sit still. I know this double poser, that if you make a move you may
Augie comes to realize through experience that it is not possible to come to terms with life unless the darkness beneath social niceties is perceived and experienced. Such an experience is a necessary pre-condition for the “education” of the Bildungsroman hero because it makes him aware of the variety and depth of life. In the frame of reference of Bellow’s novels, such an understanding is an important stage in the process of self-discovery in which the protagonist is involved. Thus, the spirit of the Bildungsroman appears more suited to Bellow’s purposes in Augie March. The form of the novel can be best apprehended in terms of the relationships that govern Augie’s life at given points of time. Since Augie does not wish to assume a structure of personality designed by someone else, he seeks the freedom to develop his own lifestyle and to understand himself without being imposed upon by his Reality Instructors. This is the central faith which sustains his ebullient quest for freedom and lends it whatever formal organization it has.

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

Our period had been created by revolutions of all kinds—political, scientific, industrial. And now we have been freed by law from slavery in many of its historical, objective forms. The next move is up to us. Each of us has to find an inner law by which he can live. Without this, objective freedom only destroys us. So the question that really interests me is the question of spiritual freedom in the individual — the power to endure our own humanity (1963: 49-50).

Much of the excitement and intensity of the narrative derives from the way Augie relates to particular experiences or adventures. It is thus that experience acts as a point of reference to his character and fate. Bellow frequently employs the terms, character and fate to express the essential particulars of Augie's wanderings. When the novel begins Augie quotes Heraclitus' aphorism, "A man's character is his fate," only to reverse it later by saying that "A man's fate is also his character." Initially Augie would have the reader believe that whatever constitutes his self or character is that which accounts for what happens to him. He would, of course, prefer his character to dominate his fate, so that his self is not submerged by the strange happenings of his life. But at the end of the novel, after his confusing and aimless wanderings, he reticently concedes that his experiences also condition his nature. Once he is in the thick of an adventure or a relationship, his behaviour-pattern is very likely to be influenced by that adventure or
relationship. His conflict, therefore, concerns the search for a proper balance between character and fate. It is true that he cannot develop his character without immersion in life, but it is equally true that he cannot immerse so fully as to drown in a particular experience.

Augie’s attitude to experience is one of openness. He accepts it without premeditation as he has no clear idea of its intrinsic worth. His problems are a function of his nature: being alive to all possibilities, he can readily be drafted by others to serve their needs: “I am constantly meeting those persons who persistently arise before me with counsels and illumination throughout my earthly pilgrimage,” (478) he says, but it must be borne in mind that those persons nearly always have their own needs in view. Thus, Augie finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: in order to preserve his identity, he must inevitably grant recognition to human ties; but once he has done so, his own freedom is in peril. His relationship with others must, consequently, be tenuous and uncommitted. Robert Penn Warren has perceptively noted Augie’s inability to commit himself (1953: CXXIX), but he fails to recognise that this lack of commitment has to be judged in the light of the selfishness of others. The freedom Augie seeks is directly proportional to his refusal to grant total authority to others on his own life.

The notion of confronting the protagonist with Reality Instructors, who try to remould his personality and conduct on the basis of their own view of reality, seems to have been borrowed by Bellow from Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain* (1976: 279).

Comedy serves to discard the solemn idea-clusters of the Reality Instructor through spoofing, creating the sense that reality is so involved and complex, so dispersed
and overwhelming, that it cannot be shaped by the ideas and attitudes of any single man. The complicated reality of life is proved by the comic fact that each interpretation of its nature is mocked by its opposite.

This sense is made available to the reader in the various relationships into which Augie stumbles. The individual at the centre of each relationship is termed a “Machiavellian” because of his ability to employ his ideas and personality for the purpose of manipulating and controlling others. Externally, these “Machiavellians” appear to be composed and authoritative. Old, eccentric, crippled, or highly neurotic, they seem capable of influencing the fate of others to their advantage. Augie insightfully refers to Grandma Lausch “as one sovereign who knew exactly the proportions of love, respect, and fear of power in her subjects” (6). Highly unsentimental and alive to self interest, she saw the feeling of love as a deception which in the long run injured more than offered any good. Augie’s problems appeared to demonstrate to her the troublesome fate of people who were handy with their affections: “The more you love people, the more they mix you up. A child loves, a person respects” (9).

Augie has been fascinated by the Machiavellians from his childhood. Each of them represents traits which attract as well as repel him; these people significantly enlarge his experience of the world, but he also detects blemishes in their character that he would like to do without in himself. In incident after incident the reader perceives that Augie’s dormant integrity comes in the way of his total reliance on his Reality Instructors: as a budding crook he is a failure, and as a young businessman selling newspapers at a Chicago train station he finds it hard to cheat his customers as instructed. Augie’s inability to accept the Machiavellian stratagems leads him to confess,
subsequently, that his character, his sensitive “good” nature, is his fate. No one need compare Einhom to a great man; he does it himself, comparing himself, to Henry V and Socrates. Each character has a dream, a fixed idea of Self; each stands out from the mass. Near the end, Dumpy Jacqueline, the Marches’ maid, tells Augie, “Ah, the dream of my life is to go to Mexico!” Augie laughs at this battered woman “refusing to lead a disappointed life” (535-36). It is a typical scene. Bateshaw, the paranoiac ship’s carpenter who escapes with Augie from their torpedoed ship, remembers as a child swimming in the municipal swimming pool. “A thousand naked little bastards screaming, punching, pushing kicking .... Skinny you. The shoving multitude bears down and you’re nothing, a meaningless name, and not just obscure in eternity but right now. The soul cries out against this namelessness. And then it exaggerates. It tells you, ‘You were meant to astonish the world. You, Hymie Bateshaw, stupor mundi!’” (503). This delightful final sentence – the name of a nebish plus the grandiose Latin phrase sums up the desire of the individual to matter, hence, to be great. Many, not just Marx and Rousseau, want to “set themselves apart for great ends....” (329), want to be, like Simon, a prince of at least the Magnus family. Throughout, characters suffer, as in Dangling Man, from “bottomless avidity” (1944: 88). Grandma Lausch establishes this theme near the beginning of the novel: “just so you want! Heaven and earth will be moved” (30). Many have this American – and Jewish–dream. In a parody of the Horatio Alger story, Simon, working as a newsboy among celebrities, “set off the hope that somehow greatness might gather him into its circle since it touched him already” (34). Here is Einhorn, sucking a pierced egg: “It was something humanly foxy, paw-handled, hungry above average need” (68). Mimi Villars, too, “had a large mouth, speaking for a soul of
wild appetites, nothing barred ...” (204). And Simon the Prince says, “I want money, and I mean want” (199).

These Machiavellians want to impose themselves on the world in a relationship of power. They remind one of Leon Trotsky, who wrote in *Literature and Revolution*, “Man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers .... In the end he will have rebuilt the earth, if not in his own image at least according to his own taste .... Man will command nature in its entirety ....” (1962: 286). Similarly, Thea forces the piano to do her bidding, captures snakes and puts them in cages, tames an eagle. Thea loves not the bird but her objective: “The motive of power over her, the same as afflicted practically everyone I had ever known in some fashion .... Carried and plunged us forward” (327). As Simon pistol-whips tough Poles and shoots rats and Thea kills crows and snakes, the millionaire Robey flits roaches. “He wildly raised hell as he worked the spray gun, full of lust” (444). In a more serious vein, the finest image of human desire and individuality is that implied by the soaring eagle:

It was glorious how he would, mount away high and seem to sit up there, really as if over fires of atmosphere, as if he was governing from up there. If his motive was rapaciousness and everything based on the act of murder, he also had a nature that felt the triumph of beating his way up to the highest air to which flesh and bone could rise. And doing it by will, not as other forms of life were at that altitude, the spores and parachute seeds who weren’t there as individuals but messengers of species. (338-39)

Gaining power and so stamping their individuality on the world, saying “You, Hymie Bateshaw, *stupor mundi!*” each person creates a version of the world and of the self with which to order reality (as shown in Chapter Two). When a friend, running across Augie in Paris, is surprised to see him “in the City of Man” Augie wants to know, “Which Man was it the city of? Some versions again. It’s always some version or other”
(521). “Every precious personality” gives his own order to reality: like the Utopians—Campanella, More, Machiavelli, St. Simon, Comte, Marx and Engels—who Augie reads while in Mexico; or like the millionaire Robey, who brawls with cabdrivers and pays for stripteasers but wants to synthesize the history of culture into a single volume and so change the world. In this figure of Robey, Bellow is parodying those historians and philosophers who fit our civilization into a niche in their System, who presume the Hew, a Magian, to be a anachronism in a post Magian era; Bellow is parodying all literary historians who tell us that the novel is dead; he is parodying all men who, like Laputans, try to fit reality into their schemes. Each person has his own version: “What this means is not a single Tower of Babel plotted in common, but hundreds of thousands of separate beginnings, the length and breadth of America” (152). Even Kreindl the marriage broker has his version: “To come together with a peepy little woman who sings in your ear. It’s the life of the soul! For Simon the life of the soul is money and the seat of glory the “Episcopal” barber chair” (184).

Each person protects his version of reality. At the extreme there is Bateshaw tying up Augie in the lifeboat to prevent him from interfering with his “dominant idea” of creating life. More moderate is Stella, who lies a good deal – “or you can call it protection of your vision. ... Stella looks happy and firm and wants me to look the same ... She’s calm, intelligent, forceful, vital, tremendously handsome, and this is how she wants to put herself across. It’s the vision” (522). It is partly to protect their own vision that nearly all characters in Augie March are teachers. One after another wants to convince Augie that he has captured reality: if Augie doesn’t see it, he’s a fool.
Grandma Lausch shakes her teaching finger; so do William Einhorn, Anna Klein, and Mrs. Renling. Responding to the “something adoptional” about Augie, they want him to share their version of reality. Thinking Augie pliable to make “perfect,” Mrs. Renling proposes to adopt him, but Augie “was not going to be built into Mrs. Renling’s world, to consolidate what she affirmed she was” (151). He was not, that is, going to reassure her that she had the final vision of the world. Augie March aims precisely at showing that no one has such a final vision; hence its expansive, open-ended quality. Mrs. Renling was one of “a class of people who trust they will be justified, that their thoughts will be as substantial as the seven hills to build on, and by spreading their power they will have an eternal city for vindication on the day when other founders have tone down, bricks and planks, whose thoughts were not real and who built on soft swamp” (152). Again the comparison is with the world of history and political power: the point here is not Mrs. Renling’s greatness but her need for greatness, akin to the needs of political leaders, akin to their illness.

Augie is no Machiavellian. “To tell the truth,” he writes, “I’m good and tired of all these big personalities, destiny-moulders, and heavy-water brains, Machiavellis and wizard evildoers, big wheels and imposers-upon, absolutists” (524). In this criticism Augie agrees with Joseph in Dangling Man who is tired of “great minds, great beauties, great lovers and criminals” who claim a special destiny (1944: 89).

Augie rightly infers that his life would reach fulfillment in proximity to, what he calls, the axial lines, but the novel offers little hope or prospect of such a fulfillment or realization. The only affirmation that the novel offers is located in Augie’s intuitive grasp of the terms of spiritual fulfillment. At the end of the novel, he is still involved in
experience, but he has taken stock of his situation and measured his possibilities. One is inclined to suspect that beneath Augie's search for new kinds of experiences lurks a gnawing anxiety, an anxiety that has its roots in his failure to provide a stable and integrated focus to his own life. There is little doubt that he is frustrated by his inability to work out any satisfactory conception of self: at every turn he finds that he is being shaped not by powers residing within himself, but by social pressures, by chance, by the force of other personalities, in short, by those factors which are broadly said to constitute "fate." This anxiety relates him to the victim-heroes; his ability to observe his own situation with clarity suggests his affinity with the survivor-heroes. What Bellow seems to highlight in Augie's predicament is the problem faced by the individual in preserving his identity in a selfish society: "It takes some of us a long time to find out what the price is of being in nature, and what the facts are about your tenure" (362). In refusing to surrender his larky spirit to fate, he has perforce accepted his role as an adventurer in order to achieve a balance between the demands of his free spirit and the inscrutable workings of his fate. Bellow drew attention to this fact while commenting upon the novel: "We are called upon to preserve our humanity in circumstances of rapid change and movement. I do not see what else we can do than refuse to be condemned with a time or place. We are not born to be condemned but to live" (1954: 3).

Augie's stance is, however, not without an element of error. Just as the victim-heroes regard their victimhood as a natural outcome of the dehumanizing power of society, Augie believes that he must be as scheming as the Machiavellians to preserve his freedom. In one of the most revealing passages in the novel, he says:

But then with everyone going around so capable and purposeful in his strong handsome case, can you let yourself limp in feeble and
poor, some silly creature, laughing and harmless? No, you have to 
plot in your heart to come out differently. External life being so 
mighty, the instruments so huge and terrible, the performances so 
great, the great the thoughts so great and threatening, you produce 
a someone who can exist before it. You invent a man who can 
stand before the terrible appearance. This way he can’t get justice, 
and he can’t give justice, but he can live. And this is what mere 
humanity always does. It’s made up of these inventors or artists, 
millions of them, each in his own way trying to recruit other 
people to play a supporting role and sustain him in make believe 
... That’s the struggle of humanity, to recruit others to your version 
of what ‘s real ... But the invented things never became real for me 
no matter how I urged myself to think they were ... I wanted 
simplicity and denied complexity, and in this I was guileful and 
suppressed many patents in my secret heart, and was devising as 
anybody else (401-402).

This point of view finely differentiates Augie from the survivor-heroes who 
develop their own system of values to resist the brutal forces of a social order that takes 
an indifferent view of the individual’s quest for happiness and stable values.

Augie writes out his memoirs presenting a chronological account of his 
adventures from childhood to manhood. This recall of his past is not a form of nostalgic 
self-indulgence. The act of writing is for Augie an enactment of the process of self-
discovery. The digging up of the past demands a frantic excavation into the self, for 
therein is one’s history buried. It involves hard work:

Hard, hard work, excavation and digging, mining, moling through 
tunnels, heaving, pushing, moving rock, working, working, 
working, working, working, panting, hauling hoisting. And none 
of this work is seen from the outside. It’s internally done (542).

Augie March as narrator, is not a dispassionate, cold-eyed artist but a human 
being, profoundly involved in and a product of the story he tells. Augie’s perspective on 
his past is not coldly orthogonal; his is not a mind’s eye that reduces experiences to order 
by using distancing, foreshortening, and scale and by making all relations logical and
intelligible. Instead, Augie’s sensibility modifies the contours of the past because that is how it perceives them now; certain areas of experience are heightened, certain periods of time become stained with meaning. To use the distinctions of James J. Gibson, in *The Perception of the Visual World, Augie March* projects for us the visual field of Augie, not his visual world (1953: 3).

Augie’s retrospection is set forth in twenty-six chapters. Certain contours of time and experience appear meaningful to the narrator. The first four chapters, which constitute a block by themselves, concentrate on Augie’s childhood. The next three tell of Augie’s involvement with the Einhorns. Chapter 8 deals with the Renling phase in Augie’s life. The next four chapters find Augie involved in a number of adventures and jobs, running immigrants across the Canadian border, acting as assistant in a luxurious dog service, stealing books. He gets entangled with the Magnus family and with Mimi Villars; he also becomes involved in union activities with Grammich, a professional labour organizer. Chapters 14 to 20 relate Augie’s adventures with Thea and the eagle, Caligula, in Mexico. The next four chapters, relatively short, deal chiefly with Augie’s talks with his friends in Chicago. Chapter 25 focuses on Augie’s experiences during the war and the novel ends with a chapter about Augie’s travels in postwar Europe.

If we regard Augie’s adventures as a quest the novel reluctantly assumes an uncertain coherence. Joseph in *Dangling Man* wanted to know his real business as a man; Leventhal in *The Victim* had to travel toward the craters of the spirit; Augie gradually, belatedly, realizes that he is a pilgrim on his way to the human. *Augie March* begins as a picaresque novel and slowly becomes an account of the drama, the discoveries and vicissitudes of one man’s “pilgrimage” (440), an account sprawling and
hospitable enough to include the travels and findings of a multitude of other travellers whom Augie meets on his life's journey.

Augie's restless search for a worthwhile, higher, and independent fate gradually becomes the dominant concern of the novel. In his search he is aided, abetted, hampered, pushed, taught, badgered, compelled, and harangued by a wide variety of characters themselves involved in the human struggle. Almost all the major characters in Augie March and almost all the major incidents significant though they are in themselves, are even more important as "influences" on Augie. Their impact on Augie the picaro is strange: "All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself" (46). They do not really "form" Augie. Machiavellians and theoreticians want to impose their views on him. Teacher figures offer him advice and illumination. Stimulated by all these people, guided later by his own observations, reflections, and intuitions, erratically, by fits and starts, Augie arrives at a number of truths, the most crucial one being that one should be a person, a human being, that one should have a fate and not a mere function. Like Dangling Man and The Victim, Augie March is yet another, story of an education in humanness.

Like an older Joseph, taught by suffering, Augie believes in the marvelousness of human existence and offers a mystical vision of human possibility. Man "will be brought into true focus. He will live with true joy. Even his pains will be joy if they are true, even his helplessness will not take away his power, even wandering will not take him away from himself, even the big social jokes and hoaxes need not make him ridiculous, even disappointment after disappointment need not take away his love. Death will not be
terrible to him if life is not. The embraces of other true people will take away his dread of fast change and short life” (472).

This act of faith marks the climactic moment of Augie’s search for humanness. It reveals Augie’s (and Bellow’s) sacramental reverence for the gift of life. It implies that everyone vibrates with intimations of immortality in the lost world of one’s childhood, intimations that can be recovered again. Augie acknowledges the presence of disappointment, alienation, anxiety, doom, and despair as inevitable to the human condition. He ends with a dream of a vast colony of the spirit wherein man can truly be himself, redeemed from his fear of death by the warmth of human brotherhood.

Augie is aware of the darkness in which mankind exists; he knows about human disappointment and deformation, and yet he bounces merrily along, choosing to laugh at life’s inconsequentialities rather than to rage or weep at its wickednesses. His laughter and his hope and his joy issue from a sweeping comic vision of life which embraces and reconciles the tragic sense and then transcends it.

That is why Augie is friends with the world. Nothing human is alien to him and he enjoys and participates in the human scene as it sprawls before him. Augie March foams with an immense cast of characters. The minor characters have pungently comic, ethnic names: “Five Properties,” “Nails Nagel”, “Nosey Mutchnik”, “Dingbat Einhorn”. The millionaire Robey and Basteshaw, the biochemist, are grotesques, realized in vivid detail. Augie accepts human variety and is never bitter or harsh about human behaviour. It is as if he had the temperament of a creative writer and the ability to set down graphically every detail and nuance, every secret drive and desire, in an effort to penetrate the mystery completely.
Augie's learning to confront the Darkness is an important part of his search for salvation, for to confront the Darkness is to stop construction on one's private Tower of Babel; it is to enter the *shared condition*. At one point, speaking of the metaphorical Darkness, Augie says that rain, "an emblem of the shared condition of all," indicates perhaps that what is needed to redeem us is also "superabundantly about" (201). "With the dark," Augie explains, "the solvent is in this way offered until the time when one thing is determined and the offers, mercies, and opportunities are finished" (201).

When Augie speaks of redemption the image he uses--of *rain* -- is an emblem of the oneness of the many. Indeed, this rain is one of the metaphors -- water--symbolizing the forces against which the individual strives. It is poetically right, then, that to be redeemed one must stop striving and must enter the "shared condition of all." And this is the third possibility, the way of being neither victim nor "precious personality."

In *Augie March* this possibility emerges in Edenic terms: as a kind of Wordsworthian innocence. Thus, when Trotsky in exile arrives in the little Mexican town with his entourage, Augie is excited to see this great man; but the kitten Augie pets was simply "nuzzling and kneading under my arm with her paws" (373). This contrast of the innocent animal world to the power-hungry human world is made many times in the novel. Augie, who often speaks of his joy in simply soaking in the day, feels able to live "almost like birds or dogs that have no human condition but are always living in the same age, the same at Charlemagne's feet as on a Missouriscow or in a Chicago junkyard" (327). One of the finest passages in the novel is about Augie's lovemaking with Thea under some pines while "the clouds, birds, cattle in the water, things, stayed at their distance, and there was no need to herd, account for, hold them in the head, but it was
enough to be among them realized on the ground as they were in their brook or in their
air" (330). Clearly Bellow is less innocent than Augie, who seems to have forgotten
about the terrible in nature. But these passages are not meant ironically; they represent a
way of life opposed to individualism. Instead of a man controlling the world of nature,
he lives in it, one creature among others. He is an entity as much as any other creature –
but not an individual. Yet Augie too is after a special destiny, a “worthwhile fate,” a
“higher, independent fate.” As the novel progresses, and especially as Bellow begins to
come down hard on his hero’s clever innocence, the reader sees that Augie, too, has a
“dominant idea” of un-encumbrance, of not being swallowed up, of a “place of my own”
– the dominant idea of an orphan who wants a home but to whom nobody’s home is his.
It is an orphan’s quest for a personal Eden.

Here is the answer to the irreconcilability of human striving and the forces
surrounding man: stop striving. It is not a comforting answer to Hymie Bateshaw in the
municipal swimming pool; it is a difficult answer for a man aware of all the forces—
death, mass life, nature, the city – opposing his separate being. But it is Bellow’s answer.
Augie speaks a number of times, late in the novel, of “the axial lines of life with respect
to which you must be straight” (454). And how does one become straight?

When striving stops there they are as a gift.... And I believe that any man
at any time can come back to these axial lines, even if an unfortunate
bastard, if he will be quiet and wait it out. The ambition of something
special and outstanding I have always had is only a boast that distorts this
knowledge from its origin, which is the oldest knowledge, older than the
Euphrates, older than the Ganges. At any time life can come together and
man be regenerated.... He will live with true joy. ... Death will not be
terrible to him if life is not. The embrace of other true people will take
away his dread of fast change and short life. (454-55,)
The quest for a special fate is self-deceptive; it hides one from his true humanity, which requires a loss of the desire for prestige, power, independence. Yet when man stops striving, nothing will take him away from himself: “Even wandering will not take him away from himself ....” (507). Thus this loss of Self is a gain of a truer Self. The individual is gone, but the human being underneath remains.

Augie adds, “And this is not imaginary stuff, Clem, because I bring my entire life to the test” (455). He does not, in fact. Bellow’s answer never really becomes Augie’s; Augie ends as a Columbus looking for his personal America although he knows that his very striving makes this goal impossible” “I have trouble being still, and .... my hope is based upon getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found” (514). Augie remains an individual, although Bellow’s answer is not individuality.

Augie presents himself as a man of love open to any and all experience. As Chester Eisinger describes him, he is “an uncommitted wanderer upon the face of the earth, savoring experience for its infinite variety and cherishing his independence to seek it out where he may” (1964: 350). But other critics describe a different Augie: they feel that Augie’s joy is spurious, that he is not the affirmative hero he appears to be. Augie ventures into the world, but he is not a part of it; his constant movement is an evasion rather than an engagement of life. Norman Podhoretz says that Augie “goes through everything, yet undergoes nothing” (1964: 803) and V.S. Pritchett calls Augie “a neutral, and indifferent man.” Because there is a close relationship between commitment and characterization, as Robert Penn Warren has pointed out, this issue becomes one of the fullness or “life” of Augie’s characterization. Some critics claim that Augie’s character is thin because he lacks those commitments which might give it substance (John Aldrige, 135).

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There are of course many possible answers to this problem. Part of the issue lies in the complexity of Augie’s character: he contains “something adoptional” about him at the same time that he is “resistant.” “You’ve got opposition in you,” Einhorn tells him, “You don’t slide through everything. You just make it look so” (117). This ambivalence belongs to all of Bellow’s heroes, it also belongs to the thought of the fifties. The difference of opinion over Augie’s character is based in part on the critic’s interpretation of “commitment”-- an issue still with the critics. To Eisinger, Augie’s lack of a concrete, specific commitment is his glory; Augie is engaged in the broad spectacle of life rather than a small corner of it (1964: 355). To others, engagement means concrete commitment: to talk of “life” or “experience” is too abstract, too easy, too much of a rationale for rejecting what lies at hand. There is a sense in which Augie March, like other contemporary novels, pays lip service to engagement but celebrates our real daydream of invulnerable self-containment. Then too Augie may be neutral precisely because of his health. His claim that it is “enough to be among [the animals], released on the ground as they were in their brook or in their air,” is a claim to connection with the natural world – a major theme in Bellow’s fiction – but it is also a confession of innocence (330).

Augie’s hatred for the city and his brooding reaction to his beating suggest the changes that occur in his character. He now feels and judges his experience. This provides him with the self he lacks earlier. Bellow shifts from Augie’s early joy to his later disillusionment and from the Machiavellians as a centre of attention to Augie himself. He also becomes increasingly concerned with Augie’s inner life. Bellow’s description of Augie’s life with the Coblins in the second chapter has focused almost
exclusively upon the colourful family. When Augie visits the Coblings again in Chapter Twelve, they are merely a background for his despair. Augie chats with them, but spends most of his visit brooding as he stares out of the window: we are given his thoughts rather than a description of his surroundings. When Mrs. Coblin gives Augie some photographs to look at, he glances at them, he says, “only to turn my eyes at last again to the weather” (284).

Like Bellow’s other heroes, Augie broods over his past mistakes. He sees that he had used Stella to protect himself from Thea; he sees what a friend in Mexico had tried to tell him, “that I couldn’t be hurt enough by the fate of other people.” He now sees that his commitment to “possibility” had been no commitment at all: “Nobody gets out of these pains like a pilgrim, looking at temples and docks and smoking cigarettes past the bone heaps of history .... there where people stayed at home and caught it in the neck” (453). No longer a larky young man in search of adventure, Augie yearns not for a Machiavellian who can love but the ability within himself.

This insight and struggle give Augie an inner life and a substantial identity. In Chicago we surprisingly learn that Augie is stingy. He is guarded with Simon, misrepresents a car he sells – for profit rather than a lark – and proves himself capable of bearing a grudge all along. “No one had been good enough for them,” he thinks while visiting the Einhorns. “Now maybe was my chance to pass them by” (430). He feels toward the city what Bellow himself now felt, that “in its repetition it exhausted your imagination”(458). Complaining that “you’re nothing here. Nothing,” he confesses an alienation similar to Joseph’s and Leventhal’s (459). He is also like them in his glimpse of transcendent reality - one which he claims has changed his life and which qualifies
Bellow’s celebration of the world. Augie discovers, he says, “the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy.” It has been his continual movement which has kept him from these Emersonian lines: “When striving stops, there they are as a gift.” At the “axis” of reality, the lines are the centre in which the physical and the spiritual coalesce, reducing man’s dependence on the world. With the lines “all noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal.” Because they are the “oldest knowledge, older than the Euphrates, older than the Ganges,” and because by their means “life can come together again and man be regenerated,” Augie feels hope for his own regeneration (454), if one can remain true to these lines, he will have the inner strength that all of Bellow’s heroes seek: “even his pains will be joy if they are true, even his helplessness will not take away his power, even wandering will not take him away from himself, even the big social jokes and hoaxes need not make him ridiculous” (455).

Because the lines offer him a sense of autonomy, Augie claims that he can now live truly in the world. The vision is what he had sought all along – and what Bellow’s narrative had implicitly promised--the revelation which offers “a fate good enough.” Because the lines justify Augie’s rejection of the social world and imply that a metaphysical purpose lies within the physical, they might well supply the novel’s climax. But Bellow dismisses the vision, perhaps because it is sudden or inconsistent with his original celebration of force.

Having achieved his revelation, Augie is like the other heroes in his flight from the internal self. Joseph and Leventhal retreat from the world, but they also withdraw from
their internal being: they live in the narrow thread of consciousness between the awesome reality outside and the even more frightening reality deep within.

If Augie had fled to “temporary embraces” to avoid the world’s terror, he had also fled to an external reality to avoid facing his inner being: he has almost no inner life earlier in the novel because his adventures are an evasion of that identity. He claims in Mexico that he “wanted another chance” and runs from himself and his vision (403). World War II breaks out right after Augie feels the axial lines and “overnight,” he says, “I had no personal notions at all .... It was just the war I cared about and I was on fire.” Viewing himself as a man of sympathy and courage, he screams at newsreels, makes speeches against the enemy, and undergoes a hernia operation to qualify for service. The narrator – the older voice which now expresses Bellow’s irony – realizes that this patriotism is another escape from himself. “Well,” he says, “what you terribly need you take when you get the chance” (457). Having achieved the means of transcending the world, Augie throws himself into the world to flee himself.

Augie is a good man tested by hostile forces like all of Bellow’s heroes, but if his goodness is biological – a morality rooted in physical impulse – he is finally as oppressed by the physical and the instinctual as Leventhal. He feels, as he said earlier, “as if I had been carrying something with special sacred devotedness and it had spilled and scalded me” (144-45). In another sense *Augie March* begins as a naturalistic novel and ends as a personalist one, for Bellow assumes an environmental determinism which he subsequently rejects in favour of the unconditioned self. Augie--and Bellow--had originally assumed that a “man’s character is his fate,” telling us that “all the influences were lined up waiting for me ... which is why I tell you more of them than of myself”
But Augie now adds that a man’s fate – or what determines his life – is his character. Having sought a fate good enough, and blamed his culture for his difficulty, Augie now says “maybe I can’t take these very things I want” (514). He also sees that it is the internal self which defines and contains reality: “all the while you thought you were going around idle terribly hard work was taking place … And none of this work is seen from the outside. It’s internally done …. Where is everybody? Inside your breast and skin, the entire cast” (523). At the end, when he becomes a full character, Augie discovers that man longs to be more than he is. But life is all there is, it depends on him how he will earn “to arrest the moment” “seize the day”, pull himself together to find his niche in life, which would help him fulfil his human potential, as “Man’s character is his fate” (3). Saul Bellow’s philosophy of life is marked by his affirmation of the worthiness of human existence, a firm belief in man, his ability “to burst the spirit’s sleep”, his reason and inner strength to be his own redeemer.