

Is Genuine Communication Possible for Saul Bellow?

— A Reading of *The Dean's December*

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Saul Bellow (1915-) received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, which firmly established his literary reputation in the eyes of the critics. After receiving the honor he felt that he now had to fulfil even greater expectations than before. Few American authors have been awarded the Nobel Prize and those who received it generally saw it as a sign that their best creative days had ended. It may have been this sense that the prize is somehow a blight on the career of a writer that caused a slow down in Bellow's production of fiction. His next novel, *The Dean's December*,¹⁾ did not appear until 1982. It wasn't well received; many critics wondered whether Bellow had, indeed, gone into a decline. Fearing for his reputation, but with the desire for an adequate form of representation to communicate of his world to readers, Bellow was engaged with the problem of what kind of writer he could aspire to be in the postmodern world. As are most writers, he is interested in the political and social context of literature. *The Dean's December* is his most political novel. In it he is wrestling with his major preoccupation: What is it that enables us to communicate, to transmit our hearts?

Contemporary writers have degenerated into "farcical martyrs" in Bellow's eyes. In *The Dean's December* Bellow examines his own incapability for communicative transformation through an appropriate form of language. Malcolm Bradbury has indicated that "in *The Dean's December*, Bellow explores a new hero, a new man of feeling, who ... knows his own complicity"²⁾ in the failure of language. The protagonist, Albert Corde, is much more

1) Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (Pocket Books: New York, 1982) Hereafter, further references to this book will be identified in the paper with the abbreviated title as DD.

2) Malcolm Bradbury, *Saul Bellow* (London: Methuen, 1982) p. 93

profoundly aware of this complicity or guilt than many of Bellow's other characters. As a Bellow's protagonist, he feels compelled to transcend the limitations of his politics and communicative form. He actually makes the lives of a few other people an integral part of his existence by overcoming miscommunication among human beings. This paper will cover the problems of communication that Albert Corde has as Bellow's accomplice in three major spheres: the political wall between the East and the West, communicative transformations within intimate relations, and the problematic situation of signifying practice of Corde as a journalist.

In *The Dean's December* Albert Corde is a dean and journalist from Chicago, visiting his dying mother-in-law, Valeria in Bucharest. Because of the problem of communication in a different culture, he ponders the fundamental problems of language that structuralists insist on, and only through which the world can exist. While he encounters the totalitarian oppression in Bucharest on the one hand, Corde, as a journalist, on the other hand, is compelled to decode the cause of the social problems he has left in Chicago and directs his indignation against the decaying capitalist order of Chicago. Corde's observations of Eastern Europe can unpack the possibilities of true communication that may give order, coherence, and intelligibility to his spirit. He has the sort of mind capable of experimenting with the codes of the language available to him.

In the first paragraph of *The Dean's December*, Albert Corde realizes that "language was a problem" (DD 1). He is thinking specifically about the difficulties of communication between an American and Rumanians, but the expression reverberates throughout the novel. Corde and his wife, Minna visit Bucharest, where Valeria is hospitalized. This American Dean lands in Bucharest without a visa and meets a U. S. official who can arrange for Minna to be with her mother, Valeria. Unfortunately, he can do little to affect this arrangement because of the language barrier as well as the political one. When he looks at Valeria in her sick bed who "cannot speak, cannot open her eyes" (DD 5), he has a terrifying sense of "each of us in peculiar communication with his own organs and their sick-signals" (DD 5). Just like Valeria's paralysis Corde himself has "a mouth like a simple declarative sentence, although there were so many complex-compound things to be said"

(DD 19). His words are declarative but non-transmittable to others. How does one reach out to others if he has his own language and different social systems? Albert never says "what people expected of him although he chose his words with care" (DD 28). How does one achieve human agreement? Both at the beginning and at the end of the book, Corde emphatically wishes for "the right people to talk to — that's the hardest part of all" (DD 60, 305). This repetition reverberates in the reader's mind and underscores Bellow's own struggle with the structure of meaning.

In an interview Bellow said of the hero of *The Dean's December*:

Corde is a humanist, perhaps, in the sense that he is obliged to find some explanation for his moral impulse, which is challenged not only by the disorder of life but by a sort of nihilistic questioning in the modern world.³⁾

In what way can Corde "find some explanation for his moral impulse" in the world of disorder and nihilism? Confined in Bucharest, Corde meditates upon these complex problems that echo what he left behind in Chicago. To Corde Chicago is not a location but a condition under which he must decode an inexplicable totalitarian system and its language but also the motivations of the moral transgressions that habitually happen in Chicago. However, many Chicagoans are very upset about his unusual perspectives on the city's social problems. In his recent articles in *Harper's* he criticized every aspect of Chicago society. For Corde, these articles attempt "to recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or non-experience" (DD 243). It is ironic for Corde that his whole-hearted criticism in *Harper's* of the courts, the prisons, and many other institutions of American society brings the wrath of the press and his intimates, while his incapability of good conduct and effective communication in Bucharest brings him hospitality.

What Corde, as a journalist, is preoccupied by is for the role of the communicator in American society, a society that to him seems indifferent or

3) Melvin Bragg, "An Interview with Saul Bellow" *London Review of Books*. 14. no. 8 (May 1982) p. 22.

hostile to the role of writer. Bellow's *Corde* is situated in a difficult process of true communication, because his political and sociological consciousness is torn between Eastern Europe and the West. This split parallels Bellow's own multiple ethnic identity. Through *Corde's* self-reflexive meditation on Chicago, Bellow can explore the problematic situation of the modern writer who has the inexplicable burden for the moral impulse as well as that the representation in literary art itself.

Bellow, whose father was an Jewish immigrant from St. Petersburg in the USSR, was born in Canada but grew up in Chicago, spent most of his youth, and some of his adulthood there. So out of this politico-regional diversity, Bellow may have been motivated to produce a true ethnic identity and real communication with American readers. In 1976 he published *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account*.⁴ Although this is an unashamedly pro-Israeli book, it has at its centre a series of questions that are closely connected to the concerns of his fictions, questions about survival in a world that seems to be disintegrating, about the loss of moral authority of the West, and about Bellow's own sense of identity as an American and a Jew. Bellow is deeply involved with the fate of Israel, and the book traces a journey into his own history. "It is my childhood revisited" (JB 2), he says in the book's opening paragraph, as he looks at a group of Hasidim who are also on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His own journey was to Jerusalem and back, however, and it ended in Chicago, "this huge, filthy, brilliant, and mean city." (JB 164)

Bellow happened to uncover more of his own personal history on a trip to Rumania with his fourth wife, Alexandra Inonescu Tulcea. The purpose of the trip was to visit Alexandra's dying mother, and the parallels between this situation and that in *The Dean's December* as well as between Alexandra, a Rumanian-born mathematician and Minna are clear.⁵ Rumania at that time was Communist and under the control of the USSR where Bellow's parents

4) Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) Hereafter, further references to this book will be identified in the paper with the abbreviated title as JB.

5) Ruth Miller, *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1987) p. 256.

had once lived. It is quite conceivable that Bellow felt a spiritual affinity to that part of the world. Eighteen months after Bellow's trip to Rumania, in 1982, *The Dean's December* came out. A kind of "higher autobiography" and higher journalism — a combination of essay and narrative — what Allan Chavkin rightly labels an unconventional "meditative" novel came out.⁶⁾ After the Communist regime was toppled in December 1989, a new constitution approved by popular referendum declared Rumania to be a multi-party presidential Republic and guaranteed human rights and a free market economy. The social anarchy of Rumania just before the vortex of political revolution must have had a profound impact on Bellow during his actual trip to Bucharest.

Bellow once wondered in an interview what narrative form could represent Chicago as it really is. He intended to write another nonfiction work as a successor to *Jerusalem and Back* which would have ended in Chicago. However, his decision to abandon his nonfiction work on Chicago for his fictional tale of two cities is a complex issue itself.

I wanted to write a book about Chicago, and I went out to look at the town again. This new inspection didn't inspire humor. The facts were dreadful. What were my thematic concerns, you ask? One of my themes is the American denial of reality, our devices for evading it, our refusal to face what is all too obvious and palpable. The book is filled with protest against this evasion, against the techniques of illusion and the submission to taboos by means of which this is accomplished. Corde thinks that we are becoming wraiths, spooks. It seems to him that we have lost all capacity for dealing with experience — no capacity to think about it, no language for it, no real words.⁷⁾

In order to show the "denial of reality" in Chicago, the primary reason Bellow chose the fictional form over the nonfictional one is that the former allows him

6) Allan Chavkin, "Recovering the World That is Buried under the Debris of False Description," *Saul Bellow Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 2, Spring/Summer 1982, p. 47.

7) Matthew C. Roudané, "An Interview With Saul Bellow," *Contemporary Literature* (Fall 1984) p. 270.

greater freedom in exploring the subject of the “no language and no real words.” As a novelist he can be an imaginary historian who is able to get closer to contemporary facts than social scientist could. As a novelist he can more effectively transmit his view on the historiography of Chicago to his readers.

As Melvin Bragg has already mentioned, this novel is “a tale of two cities,” Chicago and Bucharest. It explores the complicatedness of the modern individual’s life and suggests the political clash between the East and the West, his individual freedom being crushed in the East and being threatened in the West. The Rumania depicted in the novel is actually a composite of several Eastern European countries and represents the penitentiary society of the Communist bloc in which Bellow sees no hope. Bellow not only contrasts such differences as political and social structures but also their implications for the individual’s range of personal freedom to communicate. In fact, Bellow’s fear is that this penitentiary society may represent “our own future” when “we’ve worn ourselves out with our soft nihilism” (DD 20, 276). America is moving toward a spiritual bankruptcy and a social anarchy similar to that of Rumania.

Although a major subplot of the novel focuses on Bucharest, the core of the novel consists of Bellow’s evocation of Chicago. Bellow’s delineation and indictment of a variety of social evils, including nihilistic totalitarianism of the communist world in Bucharest and the racism and its concomitant evils in Chicago, is the most vociferous one in the work. The social deterioration of American society is a complex problem with a number of causes, but the primary one, Bellow implies, is inequality between the races.

One would like to think that genuine communication is still possible between individuals of the same culture and language, but Corde generalizes his failure in communication in Chicago: “It would have been a terrible mistake to try to discuss things with Mason frankly, or... on a theoretical level: ... although people talked to themselves all the time, never stopped communing with themselves, nobody had a good connection or knew what racket he was in — his real racket (DD 32). As the name “Corde” suggests the Latin “cor,” the heart, especially as the seat of feelings and of thought, Corde wants to open his heart, to let himself go, to make contact. But all his attempts

failed. Although Corde "wanted to open his heart to Maxon... the kid would never have listened to this.... Mason wouldn't — he couldn't" (DD 78).

On this level of individual communication, the conversations of intimates, genuine communication seems to be extremely difficult for Albert, even though he is a widely known newspaperman. At the end of the second chapter, we learn that "the Cordes had a language problem" (DD 28). The question of communication between Albert and Minna, husband and wife, receives most persistent and complex treatment throughout *The Dean's December*. They work in different worlds. She explores the sky; his assignment is the earth. Because she came from Eastern Europe she not only experiences a language barrier in the US but is also culturally marginal. In consequence, it was Corde's habit to explain matters to his unworldly wife. She counted on him to spell things out. But he also has a language problem. Doubting that she has even read his articles about Chicago, he tries to explain to her why he had written them. He, however, realizes that she is not listening to him. In fact, Minna did not talk much to her husband about her work either. In general, despite Albert's attempts, communication between the Cordes is not good. Albert and Minna are at opposite extremes of culture and language. He is trying to communicate with Minna throughout the book. This could easily reflect a similar impasse between Bellow, the writer and Alexandra, the mathematician who knew nothing about literature. But after her mother's death, Minna recovered from her own illness, and she turned to her husband for help. Husband and wife begin to communicate again, which I will deal with later in this paper.

Corde makes strenuous efforts to communicate not only with his wife but also with his life-long friend, Dewey Spangler. He has two long conversations with Dewey. At their first meeting in Bucharest, Corde and Dewey are clearly on different wavelengths. Dewey was startled by Corde's articles in *Harper's*. The popular journalist can neither understand why Corde has switched from being a journalist to being a professor, nor recognize how this Dean opened up his heart in *Harpe's*. Corde finds it difficult to even begin discuss his concerns with Dewey. At their second meeting, however, under the continued prodding of Dewey, "Corde weighed the matter. Shall I talk? ... I'll talk." He describes to

Dewey his own vision of the present relation between reality and communication:

We prefer to have such things served up to us as concepts. We'd rather have them abstract, stillborn, dead. But as long as they don't come to us with some kind of reality, as facts of experience, then all we can have instead of good and evil is... well, concepts. Then we'll never learn how the soul is worked on. Then for intellectuals there will be discourse or jargon, while for the public there will be ever more jazzed-up fantasy. (DD 270)

He tries to open his heart to communicate with his friend, a popular journalist whom this novel identifies with the jazzed up fantasies of mass culture. Corde's articles were an attempt "to recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or nonexperience" (DD 270). Contrary to his intellectual will, Spangler, a world-communicator was a maker of discourse and he increases the debris of false description. Corde and Spangler are in the same profession, but have different ideas about what journalism is. Ironically it is Dewey Spangler who most incisively sums up the Dean's attitude:

Professor Corde... is very hard on journalism, on the mass media. His charge is that they fail to deal with the moral, emotional, imaginative life, in short, the true life of human beings, and that their great power prevents people from having access to this true life. What we call 'information' he would characterize as delusion. ... If he emphasizes strongly the sufferings of urban populations, especially in the ghettos, it is because he thinks that public discussion is threadbare, that this is either the cause or the effect of blindness and that our cultural poverty has the same root as the frantic and criminal life of our once great cities. He blames the communications industry for this. It breeds hysteria and misunderstanding. (DD 334)

In a totalitarian system problems with openness and communication may be a given, but genuine communication is equally rare in the free West. Albert Corde believes that "nothing true — really true — could be said in the papers"

(DD 54). Although he clearly believes the same about all public media, the novel focuses on the press. Dewey Spangler "had in fact become ... a public spokesman, a large-scale operator" (DD 67), a "syndicated columnist who was a sizable node in the relaying of the tensions that pulsated through the civilized world" (DD 113), "a great figure in his progression, ten times more important than any U. S. senator" (DD 121). But Corde fears that "in the current language, that of the mass situation, nothing could be communicated. Nothing was harder to get hold of than the most potent, the most manifest evils" (DD 140).

The former newspaperman, Corde, wrote two articles for *Harper's*, because he feels people are no longer talking about anything. Because he thinks the discourse of journalism has shut out experience, he tries to make himself "the moralist of seeing": "Here is what things are like today in a city like Chicago. Have a look!" (DD 123). Unfortunately, however, he realizes now that he has not mastered the public forms of discourse: "If you were going to be a communicator, you had to know the passwords, the code words, you had to signify your acceptance of the prevailing standards. You could say nothing publicly, not if you expected to be taken seriously, without the right clearance. The Dean's problem had been one of language. Nobody will buy what you're selling — not in those words. They don't even know what your product is" (DD 333-34). As Albert Corde fears, the mass media have so infected people with dead categories of intellect and words that even personal communication is difficult.

At the end of his argument with Spangler, Corde admits his journalism is only a failure after "forty years of almost communication ..." (DD 338). He has wrongly concluded that communication followed the format of an interview, but it didn't cross his mind to open his heart to the press. Alienated and powerless, Corde is apparently threatened by the role of journalism, but he finds it so hard to let himself play. He can call himself neither a real professor nor a standard journalist passing for a dean; nevertheless, he remains unsure that what he is doing is really journalism. What Corde does display is a loyalty to spiritual life in general. Corde seems relatively content to occupy the traditional position of an intelligent messenger to an American society in

which he is actually an outcast.

Like previous Bellow's heroes, Corde's first apprehension about the "unknowability" of truth concerns the isolation of the human creature. Like Saul Bellow, Albert Corde is a moralist of seeing. He registers the specifics of people's appearance, their actions and motives, the external world. He insists that "reality didn't exist out there." It begins to be real only "when the soul found its underlying truth. In generalities there was no coherence — none. The generality-mind, the habit of mind that governed the world, had no force of coherence, it was dissociative" (DD 266). To be true to himself, Corde must remain true to his inner vision. Corde's aims in writing the Harper's articles was to "disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it" (DD 123). His purpose was to make a positive difference, to make people "see." Corde wants to be able to give experience to the members of the human race so that they will wake up and see the world clearly. This high hermeneutic achievement results primarily from Corde's use of language as an analytical tool through which he formulates and reformulates reality.

The escape from history then is an escape from false intellectual and linguistic formulas or, in other terms, an escape accomplished through an act of the artistic imagination. His journalistic writings seem very nearly to have taken him out of the human world. Corde thinks of Rilke's lament: "When Rilke had complained about his inability to find an adequate attitude to the things and people about him, Corde had thought, yes, that's very common — that's me, too" (DD 181). Like Rilke, Corde believes he has become a man too impartial, too objective, too given to disinterested judgment. He calls himself "impartiality intoxicated," led away from contact with human beings and with the world. Corde thinks as he walks along the corridor of corpse alcoves in the crematorium, "Lord, I am ignorant and strange to my fellowman. I had thought that I understood things pretty well Not so" (DD 249). "If I'm some kind of artist," Corde states, "I need to be busy with some kind of art. I wish I knew what it was" (DD 252). Albert Corde, assuming, he is a double of Saul Bellow, best represents author's humanistic agreement with the reader.

In his memoir of the trip to Jerusalem, he quotes the journal of Andrei

Sinyavsky on the writing of *Biography*: "Art is a meeting place. Of the author and the object of love, of spirit and matter, of truth and fantasy, of the line traced by a pencil, the contour of a body, of one word with another."⁸) Corde expresses his wish for "the right people to talk to." Here he expects writers are the right people to talk to. But within the world of journalism itself, communication remains problematic.

At the end of *The Dean's December* we find Corde inside the giant telescope at Mount Palomar, ascending towards the stars with his astronomer wife. Moving between heaven and earth, between the coldness of the stars and that of "the death house," between an intimation of transcendence and one of mortality. Corde momentarily feels that he would like to remain suspended gazing into the enveloping starlit semi-darkness rather than return to earth. The construction of the novel represents a movement in a kind of spiral, because various circles reappear in different time layers, repeating the same story only slightly modified. What is more, the spiral could be considered the epitome of the universal balance of tensions.

And what he saw with his eyes was not even the real heavens. No, only white marks, bright vibrations, clouds of sky roe, tokens of the real thing, only as much as could be taken in through the distortions you saw objects, forms, partial realities. The rest was to be felt. And it wasn't only that you felt, but that you were drawn to feel and to penetrate further, as if you were being informed that what was spread over you had to do with your existence, down to the very blood and the crystal forms inside your bones. ... — but free! It didn't matter, since you were free! It was like that also when you approach the stars as steadily as this. (DD 345)

Albert and Minna Corde rise up towards the stars in the observatory and the elevator moves on a parabolic (spiral) curve. They go up and wonder how to get down again.

His situation again recalls that of the author, Saul Bellow. Perhaps Bellow

8) Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p. 33.

should give us the autobiography that he has come so close to writing in his novels; surely the hero of this book would not be utterly nowhere. Salman Rushdie confidently asserted that "like his dean, Bellow looks up to the stars with awe; but he knows the stars are not his job; his place, and his subject, is the earth."⁹⁾

This novel had its genesis as a nonfiction book in which Bellow hoped to depict the reality of modern Chicago, but he eventually concludes that a purely factual account could not convey truth. A nonfiction approach demands that one dedicates himself or herself to an accurate depiction of external reality and to "the facts." A responsible journalist does not envision cities as "emotional conditions" or examine "what was eternal in man" — those tasks are for the visionary artist, who is not obligated to report only the facts.

Bellow questions the validity of a merely journalistic "objective account" and suggests that truth can be discovered only when a serious artist applies his powerful imagination to real experiences. Bellow's original intention to write a nonfiction book on Chicago had to be abandoned when he realized that to do justice to his subject only visionary art would suffice, and thus Bellow wrote this novel in which cities function symbolically. In order to represent his incapability of communicative transformation, Bellow created Albert Corde who is situated behind the iron curtain as a journalist, which makes him unable to show his true self. And Bellow tries to let Corde transcend the world of journalism toward that of art as that which might possibly convey truth to the human heart. In so far as Bellow has succeeded, his reputation as a novelist remains secure.

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9) Salman Rushdie, "The Big Match," *New Statesman*, 2 April 1982, p. 22.

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