

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE IN THE WRONG WORLD?:
SAUL BELLOW'S *THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*.

As long as the world shall last there will be
wrongs, and if no man objected and no man
rebelled, those wrongs would last forever.
Clarence Darrow.

*The Dean's December*¹ (1982) compares several aspects of the Eastern and Western World using a dual structure: life and death, Communism and Capitalism, family differences, etc. The argument deals with both Bucharest and Chicago; the common denominator being the deaths that occur on both parts of the ocean. It is highly ironical to find the protagonist, Albert Corde, fighting corruption in his articles about Chicago and, at the same time, bribing officials to solve his bureaucratic problems in Bucharest. The cold weather as well as the presence of death seem to be the catalyst agents that wake him up from his idealistic stage, inducing him to change his values after reaching a new conclusion about the world's problems.

Corde quits his job as a correspondent journalist to work as a professor at a Chicago university because he feels a need to get in touch with the younger generation, adding a stimulus to his career: "I had some reading to do, and wanted to find people to talk to. The right people to talk to—that's the hardest part of all" (60). However, after accepting the post as dean of the Journalism School, he does not enjoy his new professional situation, a dissatisfaction reflected in his personal life: "Assembling a dean who was less and less a dean within" (51). His behavior and manner of dressing do not match with those required for his academic position: "He was not exactly deanlike in appearance. He wore a three-piece suit; the vest wasn't buttoned right somehow" (33). He is not popular with the students because his extravagance is in discord with the times and fashions, and "no up-to-date official courting favor with undergraduates would dress in this style." (33)

After the many years of service as a professional journalist, he admits that he is still in a learning stage trying to solve the problems of society, which represent a moral burden he feels incapable to cope with: "Look at him—an earnest, brooding, heart-stuck, time-ravaged person (or boob), with his moral desires and taking up the burdens of mankind" (122). He questions to what degree the punching style articles published in *Harper's* denouncing the

¹ Bellow, S. 1982: *The Dean's December* New York: Harper. References are to this edition and pagination is provided parenthetically.

political and social irregularities can be critical of society because “Nothing true—really true—could be said in the papers.” (54)

He travels to Bucharest with Minna, his Romanian-born wife, with the sole purpose to visit Valeria, her sick mother.¹ Dr. Raresh, Minna’s father, was a prestigious doctor who once was Health Minister and whose wife Valeria, also a doctor, continued with that post after his death. But due to various political circumstances regarding the change of the government, she was forced to retire professionally. Fearing further retaliations, she sent her only daughter to study to the United States of America, where she became an international renowned astronomer.

Regardless of her double nationality, Minna cannot go back to Bucharest, because she is considered a deserter. She enters the country, though, with her husband’s visa, probably with the help of some contacts at the Embassy.

At the hospital, Corde and Minna make the mistake of not following the necessary bureaucratic steps in order to be granted an official permit by the top official, the Coronel. Since they are not allowed a second visit, they decide to talk to him. As Valeria is not good at dealing with people, her husband takes over the situation. The dean, lacking in tact, imposes his social and cultural elitism, with the further inconvenience of the language. The Coronel offers them the possibility not only to visit Valeria as often as they wish, but also to be next to her on the condition that she be transferred to a multiple-patient room. However, this situation will lead to the disconnection of all the machines which regulate her vital signs and, consequently, will cause her instant death.

While the whole family patiently waits to be granted permission to the hospital, Minna and Gigi spend their days talking on the phone with family members and friends who are concerned about Valeria’s health. Due mainly to the language barrier, Corde seeks refuge in his room to meditate, alienated from the Romanian society. He hibernates while thinking about the personal and professional problems he has left back in Chicago: a tense family relationship and a series of situations which have damaged his reputation as a dean and as a journalist. His circumstances are similar to those of Joseph in *Dangling Man*: both seeking solace in their rooms with the sole purpose of analyzing the exterior world. Surrounded by books, Corde sleeps in the same cold room and on the same tiny bed where Minna used to when young. The intense cold and the lack of natural light in the winter season give a mystical air to his situation. The cold is not only determined by the exterior world, but also by people’s feelings: “the slums we carry around inside us. Every man’s *inner city*” (207). In his flashbacks, Corde contrasts both cities as examples of two political corrupt systems: Chicago standing out for its political bureaucracy and penitentiary system; Bucharest, for its dictator-

¹ Bellow travelled in December, 1978 to visit the mother of his fourth wife, the mathematician Alexandra Ionescu Tulcea. Aderman, R. M. 1982: The Dean’s Bucharest: Saul Bellow and Romania. *Yearbook of Romanian Studies* 7: 1-8.

ship. The cold and desolate climate, common elements in both places, serve as a point of comparison: "No more sun, that was gone, only liny clouds and a low cold horizon. ... It was like the Chicago winter, which shrank your face and tightened your sphincters" (208). In contrast with the family independence in Chicago, the people on the other side of the iron curtain appear more clannish, perhaps because those who have survived a war and suffered its consequences seek emotional refuge in the traditional family. Moreover, solidarity helps to support the burden of fear and reprisals of the police, whose punishments for those who disobey the rules are not only physical but also psychological. The economic problems which lead to ration out the scarce food do not affect the humanism in people in their survival instinct, a situation that could perfectly occur in the poor neighbourhoods of Chicago: "If the cold reminded you of Chicago, the faces were from the ancient world. But then in Chicago you had something like a vast international refugee camp, and faces from all over." (209)

The dean has problems when he publishes two articles in *Harper's* which denounce the existence of serious social problems in Chicago especially affecting black people, such as injustice, crimes, prisons, drugs, sexual assaults, etc. His mission as a journalist is to portray the social reality in his writings in order to inform his readers: "As if he had been sent down to mind the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation. The object of which was? To link up? To classify? To penetrate?" (208). The problem with these articles is, ironically, the tone of language used, whose misinterpreted conclusions are taken as a criticism against blacks. Consequently, his professional career as a dean is affected by those comments.

Corde analyzes Chicago, the city where he was born, recalling the actual interviews he conducted in order to write his articles. He thinks about the injustice with Rufus Ridpath and Toby Winthrop. Ridpath, the director of the county jail, is a black person who has worked hard for his position, and who wants to be just with everybody. His project consists of reforming the penitentiary system and the life conditions in jails. He tries to create a self-supporting society where the prisoners have their own internal rules, a disciplined mini-society where anarchic criminals have to exist side by side with others. The discipline he implants starts with strict rules against bribery and corruption. Upon elaborating and examining the budget, he discovers that certain quantities of money are shared among politicians. To reform is to go against the corrupt system; therefore, the authorities rebel against him and he gets expelled. Winthrop is a black reformed ex-criminal, and ex-drug addict. One day, after an overdose, he feels illuminated and discovers his true mission in life: to help drug addicts. This altruistic posture also goes against the system because it does not produce any benefits.

All of the visionaries who have applied their theories to meliorate society and to eradicate the corruption have failed, even Corde when he writes his articles to denounce a social problem. Now, his immediate superior, the Provost Alec Witt is not satisfied with the dean's bad reputation. Corde criticizes those who break the rules to gain personal profit and praises those who want to change the system to fight corruption.

Dr. Beech, a geophysicist, is the only person who praises the dean's direct style in his articles, but he does it for his own personal and professional interests because Corde can help him

transmit his ideas “not only to general public but also to the Humanists” (136). Beech, with his strange theories, reveals that lead is a chemical substance adhered to civilization and that its residues affect the underprivileged classes. These chemicals attack the nervous system with devastating results, although not easily demonstrated scientifically. The visionary Beech proposal consists of humanists and scientists joining forces to palliate the causes and effects of these problems affecting society, and to improve the quality of human life. If scientists have communication problems when they send their messages to society, humanists lack of palpable scientific methods to prove the effects: “Liberal humanist culture is weak because it lacks scientific knowledge” (222). Unfortunately, people cannot appreciate the need and importance of Human Sciences.

Vlada, as Minna’s friend and Dr. Beech’s disciple, tries to convince Corde to make him participate in Beech’s project. The Humanist Corde tries to give his own explanation to the problems of industrialized societies, and goes beyond Beech’s theories suggesting that those effects not only affect the body but also the mind: “Where Beech sees poison lead I see poison thought or poison theory” (227). Although the dean is not totally convinced about Beech’s theories, he finally accepts Beech’s proposition to help him write his article about lead, on the condition of limiting his aid to a linguistic level: “Those lead conclusions are his, not mine. *Something* deadly is happening. I’m with him to that extent. So I’ll advise him about language only. Then I won’t have to agree ignorantly” (307). He cannot afford to have more problems with miscommunication. Therefore, the ideal person to deal with problems of society is a mix between a humanist and a scientist. As that person does not really exist, Beech and Corde need each other.

In Chicago, the dean has problems at a different level. He is the responsible university official asked to identify the victim’s body, who was tied up, gagged, and pushed out from his third floor apartment: “Rick Lester’s face had the subtracted look of the just dead” (27). Corde tries to make up the circumstances of the death. Rick’s is a clear sample of the multiple violence and homicide cases committed every day; however, few are actually solved. His moral vision unconsciously forces him to pursue the case to the limit and to participate fully in the investigation. He offers a reward with the university funds to clarify the circumstances of the case so that the murderers can be punished.

Lucas Ebry, a black waiter, and Riggie Hines, a prostitute, are accused of the homicide by witnesses, whose need of selling information is centered on the reward money, and not on their moral vision to solve a social problem. All systems share some of these circumstances to control their members. The recurrent images of both cities are symbolic: the Romanian spies who inform the police of the events act similar to the American witnesses which look forward to the reward. The Romanians get favors from the police; the Americans money.

Mason, Corde’s nephew, claims that his friend Lucas, who works at the same restaurant, is innocent. When Mason visits Corde in his office, the conversation they hold symbolizes the lack of communication between them. The family hierarchy serves as a precedent to the personal distance between the anarchic Mason and his uncle. Both language registers vary so

much that they clash: Mason speaks the popular university language of the times, while Corde uses a cult and elitist language.¹ Another added problem is Mason's attitude, because he attacks his uncle in personal terms, not professional, to make him withdraw the accusation against his friend. Mason wants to destroy his uncle's reputation as a dean, but Corde reacts in a passive way towards his nephew's political intolerance. The *Harper's* articles about the underprivileged society and the relation between crime and social class appear when his reputation is at stake, and the students think that their dean is a racist. Corde listens to the accusations and defends himself from the idealist fighter and revolutionist and Communist Mason: "Corde was careful with him, never uncled him, never lectured" (37). Corde firmly maintains his position of incarcerating the murderers. Both uncle and nephew are too narrow-minded in behalf of their idealism. The profound true love and affection in the fraternal relation Elfrida-Albert Corde is reciprocal: ² "Corde was strongly attached to his sister, he loved her" (38). Zachner, Corde's brother-in-law and Mason's father, had always tried to break the good relations between brother and sister. Now, Mason is the live example of his father because he also acts against his uncle, admitting that he makes his mother suffer: "I'm the one who makes her unhappy, you're the one that protects her. Love your sister" (53). He is jealous because, as an only son, he has not been able to enjoy fraternal love. Due to the family problems in the West, Corde needs to be accepted in his new Eastern European family: "Here everyone was kind—family and friends, warm hearted people" (7). Language problems and different backgrounds are not obstacles to Corde's well understanding of and mutual respect for Minna. He had many relations and affairs when young that affected his reputation as a husband, "a wickedly experienced but faithful man, a reformed SOB, a chastened chaser, now a gentle husband" (260). Worried about what Minna's family may think about his wild past, Corde wants to demonstrate especially to his mother-in-law Valeria, that he is trustworthy enough to earn the position of "a secure husband—a crystallized, not an accidental husband." (26)

Valeria represents the matriarchal figure in the Eastern family structure.³ In order to have a mutual understanding and a natural sympathy for each other, Valeria thinks that her daughter should marry a scientist. Corde needs to be accepted not only as a son-in-law but also as an integral part of that matriarchy: "She accepted him, soon enough. He was all right. They were both all right. If his manner was quiet (the parolee on good behavior), hers was undemonstratively accommodating" (13). However, the signs of total acceptance do not come until the last moment, right before Valeria's death.

The Coronel calls Minna on the phone to grant the couple a last visit to Valeria, thanks to diplomatic pressure. Once at the hospital, Corde must blackmail the employees in order to allow Gigi to see her sister, breaking his code of ethics but actually feeling that he is doing

¹ The communication between family members gives as a result a problematic professional relationship. Weinstein, M. 1986: Communication in the *The Dean's December*. *Saul Bellow Journal* 5. 1: 63-74.

² The protagonist's brother who constantly appears in Bellow's novels has been replaced for the first time by a sister.

³ *Henderson the Rain King* is the other novel where there is a matriarchy. Bellow, S. 1959: *Henderson the Rain King*. New York: Viking.

the right thing, as a humane cause. The communication with Valeria is telepathic. However blind and motionless she might be, she seems to perceive the presence of her family. Corde thinks that she is analyzing the final moments of her life: "She was studying her death, that was for sure. Corde thought of her with extraordinary respect. Her personal humanity came from old sources" (105). He compares both situations in which death is present: Valeria's is conscious; Rick's is sudden and unexpected. As he needs Valeria's final approval to take part in their matriarchal mini-society, he whispers to her on her deathbed: "I also love you, Valeria" (133). According to him, she wanted to hear those words; however, due to her paralysis she cannot show her happiness, although she does receive the message because "the monitors jumped simultaneously. All the numbers began to tumble and whirl" (128). Corde behaves like a true adopted son, and expresses his love with all his heart, as his own name indicates.¹

Minna feels depressed upon receiving the news of her mother's death on Christmas Eve. Corde remembers his mother's death forty years ago about the same time, which did not affect him as much. Now, it is the moment to connect both deaths and feel realized as a son: "Four decades ago and two continents didn't make much difference, for the present day was much like the other zone—freezing blue, the sunlight and women dying or dead" (242). By doing so, he learns to endure life, and also to strengthen his character. Corde uses American cigarettes this time to blackmail the hospital employees so that they sign the necessary official papers and accelerate the process of the death certificate, burial, and crematory: "It was not a simple matter to obtain a death certificate. First you had to go to the hospital. You needed releases, authorizations, any number of official papers" (170). It is ironic, though, that the protagonist openly praises Ridpath's ideas about cleanliness in a corrupt system, but he does not practice what he preaches and goes against his own ideas for his benefit.

At the crematory, Corde confronts death again upon finding out that the corpses are dressed in their best attire for their earthly farewell. He is going through a crisis, and starts praying unconsciously: "Lord, I am ignorant and a stranger to my fellow man. I had thought that I understood things pretty well. Not so" (173). When he has to identify Valeria's body before Romanian officials, he recalls the time when he did the same with Rick's in Chicago. In both cases he feels part of death, but it is this time when he reconciles himself with the trauma of identifying Rick's body. Valeria's burning image remains in his mind, imagining a life for her soul in the beyond. The recently deceased Valeria is the catalyst agent which makes him perceive reality from a different perspective, in a more humane way. Corde's total regeneration as a complete individual has not met any ends yet, because he must first reconcile himself completely with his past.

Dewey Spangler is a friend from his childhood who is by chance in Bucharest. Dewey is Corde's professional antagonist: a journalist who does not feel any remorse. His professional career has reached its maximum peak by interviewing important political figures, "a syndicated big shot opinion-maker, ... a public spokesman, a large scale operator in DC." (67). In

¹ Corde comes from Latin: "cor" (heart).

search of sensationalist news, he meets Corde right after Valeria's burial. He mentally criticizes Dewey's need of asking personal and professional questions at such a sad moment. The dean, in his ability to capture details, can describe this peculiar person physically but not psychologically. The loneliness the language barrier imposes forces the protagonist to look forward to communicating with somebody to relieve his pressure. Their relation has been tense since they were young, and Corde can feel a similarity to his cousin Max Detillion, the lawyer who accuses the dean of being racist in court. If Mason is the antagonist in the family context, Max is the one in the social, and Dewey in the professional. Dewey, as a good orator, speaks as if he wanted to help the dean but actually he is trying to get as much information as possible to destroy his decayed public image in Chicago. The protagonist, in a moment of helplessness, confesses openly and sincerely to his friend, as always, without scruples: "There's the whole thing—having people to talk to. To be able to say what you mean, mean what you say. Truthfully, it did occur to me at the Intercontinental that Dewey was interviewing me." (305) Dewey is a journalist who writes what his readers want to read, and who represents the perversion of the language and the manipulation of information through sensationalist news: the modern professional values and the new communicative style of tabloids that, instead of informing, entertain with stories and opinions. However, he criticizes the dean's published commentaries: "I'm frankly surprised that the *Harper's* people let you go on as you did. The language you used from time to time..." (237-38). Modern journalism has changed from the mere information to the personal interpretation of the facts adapted to the readers, to the audience: "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" (300). Corde, as a journalist, feels depressed because he cannot even communicate with his colleagues. The protagonist notices Dewey's shrewdness by using his friendship to show the world his personal and professional problems: "What a smart little monster Dewey was, and what a keen schemer, and how rivalrous. ... Dewey was a master of the public forms of discourse" (300). The ambiguity of the cult language and the incorrect interpretation of the linguist discourse can be self-defeating: "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" (300). Dewey writes a rather personal article about the dean and his problems, a stab in the back which deceives the dean profoundly and permanently damages their friendship. Once back in Chicago, Corde resigns as dean and admits his failure in public life.

The process of liberation of the past through the present has gradually followed the necessary steps in Corde's mind when he recalls his own life and experiences with death, reinforcing his humanist feelings. Corde has experienced a change as a person: he now better understands other people's feelings. Minna, after her mother's death, observes her husband and discovers new aspects in him, "going over him so closely, seeing him as if she had never seen him before" (206). Moreover, she has also changed along with her husband: "This was how he wanted people to be judged. Minna gave him a true reflection of his entire life" (289). Now it is the moment to think about the initiation of a new family life. This is the second time that a

Bellow's hero regenerates himself and overpasses the barriers of his ego and makes the life of the people around him be a integral part of himself.¹

The presence of death has forced him to accept his own mortality and to feel realized as a complete person. In his Chicago apartment, he feels trapped because the balcony is closed with bars which resembles a jail: "Did the bars remind you of jail? They also kept you from falling to your death" (290). The recurrent images of a prison are intertwined: jails are like mini-societies which avoid contact with reality and the bars of his balcony prevent him from dying. Intellectual decadence or death is an important topic because the protagonist feels himself mentally a prisoner of his own ideas.

The visit to Mount Palomar, the astronomical observatory in California where Minna studies the stars, helps him escape from human reality because "The astral body has the power to cancel everything merely human" (305). Corde accompanies his wife to the observatory dome, where the temperature is very low. The images of cold, in Chicago, Bucharest, as well as in California, reach a conciliatory moment. The cold fulfils a regenerative process in the protagonist' mind. The dome is the union between heaven and earth, a function which the cathedrals of the world perform: "The hugeness of the dome referred you—far past mosques or churches, Saint Paul's, Saint Peter's—to the real scale of the night" (309). Going up to the dome in the elevator, he feels as if he were ascending to the metaphysical sky and, at the same time, experiences a representation of his own death. At this moment, the protagonist reconciles with his own past and enjoys personal freedom. In the giant telescope, Corde finally perceives things clearer: he feels realized personally and professionally as a man as he recalls his own past.

The sensation of personal regeneration has made him closer to his wife. The situations which carry a deterioration of his public image counteract with his gain in humanism. Death is only the beginning of a new life. Corde, in his flashbacks and experiences, has tried to combine two worlds in search of perfection: the Eastern and the Western; the personal and the professional, the physical and the metaphysical; the humanist and the scientist.

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¹ Nilsen, H. M. 1986: A New Kind of Male-Female Relationship: A Note on Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December*. *International Fiction Review* 13. 2: 90. The similarities with *Henderson the Rain King* continue in this novel; both offer a positive ending to the troubled protagonist.
