

MIDWESTERN  
MISCELLANY XIV

*being essays on Chicago writers  
and writing by  
members of*

The Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature

*edited by*  
DAVID D. ANDERSON

The Midwestern Press  
The Center for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature and Culture  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan

1986

Copyright 1986 by  
The Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature  
All rights reserved.

in honor of  
John Knoepfle

## PREFACE

In December, 1985, the Modern Language Association returned to Chicago, to hold its annual convention there for the first time in more than a decade. Appropriately, the weather was frigid, and the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature presented a program consisting of six papers on the topic of "Chicago in Literature." Pleasantly, the editors of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* chose to feature the Society's program in its coverage of the MLA convention in the issue of January 8, 1986. In a long essay, three of the papers were discussed, but unfortunately the other three and, indeed, the role and the name of the Society were omitted. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

However, five of the six papers presented at the Chicago meeting appear in this issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, and we hope that the sixth will appear in a subsequent issue. Each of the essays is further evidence of both the importance of place in the Midwestern literary sensibility and the central role of Chicago in the Midwestern urban experience. The essays make clear, too, that H. L. Mencken was both observer and prophet when he wrote in the English *Nation* sixty years ago that American literature in this century had received much of its direction and vitality from what he called "that gargantuan and inordinate abbatoir by Lake Michigan . . ."

Appropriately this issue is dedicated to John Knoepfle, Midwestern poet and recipient of the Society's Mark Twain Award for 1986, who demonstrates in his work the vitality of the Midwestern literary voice and the fertility of its imagination.

DAVID D. ANDERSON

October, 1986

## CONTENTS

Preface		5
“Creative Defiance:” An Overview of Chicago Literature	Kenny J. Williams	7
Chicago as Setting and Force in William Riley Burnett’s <i>Little Caesar</i> (1929)	Douglas A. Noverr	25
Mr. Dooley and Slat Grobnik: Chicago Commentators on the World Around Them	Roger J. Bresnahan	34
Working Worlds in David Mamet’s Dramas	Dorothy H. Jacobs	47
“That Somber City” Since MidCentury	David D. Anderson	58

## “CREATIVE DEFIANCE”: AN OVERVIEW OF CHICAGO LITERATURE

KENNY J. WILLIAMS

That Chicago was part of the great westward expansion of the nineteenth century is a well-known fact, but initially no one could have predicted its importance. The city stands upon some of the most unfriendly soil in the continental United States. Located in an unlikely swamp near a strange river whose north and south branches sometimes disappear in summer and usually become frozen masses in winter, Chicago—unlike other western settlements—seemed originally hostile to any human habitation. In Illinois, the important settlements were located in Kaskaskia, Vandalia, Springfield, and Shawneetown. While Chicago attracted its share of migrants, it was simply a struggling town that was not nearly as exciting as these other places.

Shawneetown, for example, was important enough in 1812, six years before Illinois was admitted to the union, that a territorial bank was established there. There is an apocryphal tale that illustrates quite clearly Chicago’s relationship to other Illinois communities during these early days. Some settlers in the little community that was to become Chicago applied to the bank at Shawneetown in 1830 seeking a loan of \$1,000 because they had great hopes for the growth and development of their little settlement on the shores of Lake Michigan. The Shawneetown bank, so the story goes, was awarding money rather generously to towns of promise. It listened to the pleas of those from Chicago, considered the application carefully, then voted against giving any financial aid. The directors of the bank said: “Chicago is too far from Shawneetown ever to amount to much.”

Despite its distance from Shawneetown, Chicago was incorporated as a town in 1833 with a population of less than 400. (No one could have predicted that the population would be over a million sixty years later.) In 1837, as the nation faced a disabling financial panic the Illinois legislature—with the optimism associated with the West—approved the incorporation of several communities that showed great promise: Alton, Lacon, Salem, and Princeville. As one of the last pro forma acts passed by the legislature while sitting in Vandalia, Chicago was incorporated as a city. But few paid any attention to the act or to the fact that the city had grown enough. All excitement was toward the move of the capital to Springfield and to the stellar group of cities that had become part of the State of Illinois.

The phenomenal growth of Chicago has been celebrated consistently since those early days. There are many reasons why Galena, Peoria, Springfield, Plainfield, or Shawneetown did not become the financial or cultural centers of the state. Each reason can be documented just as the decline of the city's better known rivals can be explained. Yet, perhaps one of the best theories offered for the strange growth of Chicago came not from some historian or social scientist but rather from a novelist. In his *The Gospel of Freedom*, which was published in 1898, Robert Herrick said:

Chicago is an instance of a successful contemptuous disregard of nature by man. Other great cities have been called gradually into existence about some fine opportunity suggested by nature, at the junction of fertile valleys, or on a loving bend of a broad river, or in the inner recesses of a sea-harbour, where nature has pointed out, as it were, a spot favourably for life and growth. In the case of Chicago, man has decided to make for himself a city for his artificial necessities in defiance of every indifference displayed by nature. . . . Life spins there; man is handling existence as you knead bread in a pan. The city is made of man; that is the last word of it. Brazen, unequal, like all man's works, it stands [as] a stupendous piece of blasphemy against nature. Once within its circle, the heart must forget that the earth is beautiful. 'Go to,' man boasts, 'our fathers lived in fear of nature. WE will build a city where men and women in their passions shall be the beginning and the end. Man is enough for man.'

Clearly underlying all rationalizations for the growth of Chicago is a sense of creative defiance.

The unparalleled development of Chicago became one of the myths of nineteenth-century America. The city that seemed destined to be a miserable failure, that was too far from Shawneetown to amount to much, captured the imagination of an era. People said, and many really believed, "if you can't make it in Chicago, you can't make it anywhere." Few Americans thought of urban success without pointing with varying degrees of pride to life in Chicago. The city that was not only too far from Shawneetown but also located in an out-of-the-way place became the center of a great railroad enterprise. It was even a peculiarity of rail travel at one time that all roads seemed to lead to Chicago, and no train ever went through the city; hence, Chicago became a major transfer point in defiance of geographical logic. Felix Fay in Floyd Dell's *Moon Calf* (1920) recalls the large map that was mounted in the railroad station. He describes it as "the map with a picture of iron roads from all" over the Middle West and "centered in a dark blotch in the corner [was] Chicago."

By the end of the nineteenth century, the city's soaring skyscrapers stood as a fascinating defiance of the swampland. The fast-multiplying population was an active testimony to frontier optimism and the effects of western energy. Businessmen defied the obvious to create an outstanding center of commerce, and—in the process—some of the great fortunes of the nation. Throughout its history, it has been blessed or cursed with being a city of superlatives. Everything is measured in terms of "the most" this or "the greatest" that. Despite being called "the second city" by many, it measures its accomplishments in terms of the number of firsts it has had. Not only was it first in transportation but also it had the first skyscraper in the modern sense. It had the largest stockyards and its meat-packing industry made fortunes for many while the untold number of foreign immigrants who came to work here experienced an American nightmare so aptly described by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*.

Few think of urban corruption and degradation without citing Chicago as a prime example, but some Chicagoans still

insist that this is "the city that works." Out of all of this, a city developed that is significant not only for what it is but also for what it is not. The story of Chicago has always been marked by strange ambiguities, as has its art. The pride of the city has been compromised by its sense of inferiority. The greatness of its cultural institutions has been balanced by a civic anti-intellectualism. The Chicago School of Architecture gave to the world a distinctive commercial architecture while its patrons were satisfied to live in imitation palaces and villas with no regard for the residential architecture of the masses. And even today, the grandeur of the Magnificent Mile has been diminished by the miles and miles of slums.

Separating the real Chicago from the legend has become increasingly difficult. In fact, the myth of Chicago had become a motivating force for thousands. Foreign immigrants who knew only one English word—"Chicago"—poured into the city. Then there were those easterners who believed there was much money to be made here, who in their treks westward were willing to stop in Chicago and cast their lots with the city. Young men and women from the small towns of the Midwest—in their searches for the good life—equated a move to Chicago with the good things of American life. And from the South came blacks and whites determined to make a new life for themselves. All converged in Chicago without realizing that the flush days of the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s (when fortunes were literally made overnight) had passed.

Yet the voices and creative energies of this diversified population did much toward establishing a unique urban culture in the Middle West. Chicago's writers unconsciously disregarded the dictates of the eastern establishment and the literary traditions produced by a New England gentility to create an urban literature that is so distinctive that it too—like Chicago itself—almost defies explanation.

### I.

Taking his cue from Sidney Smith who once questioned whether anybody read an American book, a critic of Chicago literature asked at the end of the nineteenth century: "Who reads a Chicago book?" Less than two years ago, after attending a five-day festival celebrating Chicago literature as well as the

city's literary life, Joseph Epstein lamented the absence of anything remotely resembling a literary life in Chicago and complained about the obvious civic chauvinism that had produced the conference. Clearly, there is a certain chauvinism about the advocates of Chicago literature perhaps borne out of years of defensiveness or the second-city syndrome; but over and above that, there is indeed much to celebrate about the writing that has been produced in Chicago, much of it destined to influence the literature of the nation.

Despite the extensiveness of nineteenth-century literary activity, eastern approbation came slowly. It was not until 1903 that William Dean Howells spoke glowingly of "the Chicago school of fiction." Writing in the *North American Review*, he praised the democratic elements in the literary productions of the city as "the really valuable contributions of the West, and of Chicago in which the West came to consciousness." Noting the work of Henry B. Fuller, Edith Wyatt, George Ade, and Finley Peter Dunne, Howells observed that "the democracy which was the faith of New England became the life of the West and now is the Western voice in our literary art."

Less than fifteen years later the iconoclastic H. L. Mencken praised Chicago as being more "American" and more "national" than some of the nation's older cities and claimed that "all literary movements that have youth in them and a fresh point of view" as well as "the authentic bounce and verve of the country and the true character and philosophy of its people" are products of Chicago, "the most civilized city in America." He then proclaimed:

Find me a writer who is indubitably American and who has something new and interesting to say, and who says it with an air, and nine times out of ten he has some sort of connection with the abattoir by the lake—that he was bred there or got his start there, or passed through there during the days when he was tender.

What Mencken called "a Chicago habit of mind" permeated the work of such writers as "Fuller, Norris, Dreiser, Herrick, Patterson, Anderson, and all other outstanding writers" which made them "reek of Chicago in every line" produced by them.

He felt this led to an "originality" which superceded "conformity." And his celebration concluded with a passing recognition of the stockyards: "I give you Chicago. It is not London-and-Harvard. It is not Paris-and-butter-milk. It is American in every chittling and sparerib, and it is alive from snout to tail." Three years later Mencken wrote of Chicago as "The Literary Capital of the United States" in the London *Nation* (April 17, 1920). Perhaps more temperate than his earlier article, it continued his praise of the literary efforts within the city.

Grateful though one should be for Mencken's observations, they were based upon a limited knowledge of the real literary accomplishments of the city. Yet, when the long literary tradition of the nineteenth century is considered with the prolific and experimental work produced in the early years of the twentieth century, he was more correct than he realized when he celebrated the city as "the literary capital of the United States." But because he had focused essentially upon the brief twentieth-century period known as the Chicago Renaissance, most literary historians have followed his lead and have claimed that this was the only significant period of creativity; events and writers before or after the so-called Chicago Renaissance are generally dismissed as "The Forerunners" or "The Aftermath."

There is still the tendency to treat the city's literature as an isolated regional phenomenon restricted to a few years of the twentieth century. Sandburg's "Chicago" and Dreiser's *The Titan* are cited as sufficient examples. Perhaps fearing that they will be accused of provincialism, literary critics have been reluctant to examine the totality of Chicago's writers. It may even be that they are afraid that the city's literary productions will be weighed in the balance and found wanting. For those who have been brought up to believe that American literature consists of that eastern quintet of the American Renaissance (Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman) and that the home of American literature is in the Boston-Concord area with some begrudging acceptance of Philadelphia and New York, the question often arises: who would dare lay claim for Chicago to hold such a distinction?

Certainly dealing with Chicago literature subjects one to being called chauvinistic, provincial, or insane. To view its

fiction, for example, as a significant step in the evolution of American literature is to run the risk of being accused of literary short-sightedness. While it is quite possible to deal with Chicago's writing in a vacuum or to detail the contributions of such a diverse list of authors ranging from the short story writers of the 1850s to the novelists of today, the uniqueness of Chicago fiction must ultimately be viewed against the background of American fiction if we are to move beyond the regional and if we are to understand even more clearly than did H.L. Mencken that the city is indeed "the literary capital of the United States."

## II.

Writers in Chicago, perhaps unwittingly, altered the direction of American literature in several significant ways. Perhaps of prime importance was a renewed insistence upon the relevance of place. Long before the so-called local color movement of the post-Civil War period, Chicago's first writers explained the uniqueness of their locale. In time, the power of the city's literature came to rest in the ability of a writer to transmit the sense of location. This does not deny the value of the human element; but the greatness of Chicago fiction, for example, can be seen in the interrelationship between the individual and the place. That there are so many novels set in Chicago might be of some interest, but what is more intriguing is to note that every author feels it necessary to "define" Chicago.

Of course, the various storytellers of Chicago were caught at a significant moment, but their realization of the importance of the city as a symbol for American culture generally was not the result of systematic study or analysis. Instead, their perceptions of the city evolved from their personal observations as they contemplated and questioned the meaning of the urban experience. While there are as many interpretations and definitions of Chicago as there are artists trying to deal with it, there are essentially two views that have affected literary productions.

There is the Chicago of the nineteenth century that defied everybody and everything. Product of the American Dream and western optimism, the city stood proudly before the world, boasting of its growth and accomplishments. Convinced—as was Herrick—that "man was enough for man," it produced a literature that spoke to the magnificence of human achieve-

ment: a big city, big buildings, big business, big houses, inhabited by superhuman men and women dedicated to success at all costs. Then there is the twentieth-century Chicago, the product of urban disillusionment, the city which ignored the signs of discontent as represented by the Haymarket Affair of 1886 and the Pullman Strike of 1894 as well as the multitude of other labor disputes. In this city there was a delayed recognition that in the headlong rush toward SUCCESS, the city—as the nation—had overlooked much.

As one moves from nineteenth-century glory to twentieth-century reality, history has shown that the growth of Chicago had been frankly accompanied by the belief in money—not necessarily for any social value (although the founders of the city often fooled themselves into believing that their purposes were altruistic as they made quite a show of philanthropic endeavors) but simple for the sake of getting it. Spending in the city was best described by Thorstein Veblen of the University of Chicago who, in viewing the city's elite, defined "conspicuous consumption" for the nation. Increasingly, humans were exploited and life itself became more meaningless. There was not an attempt in the city to mask the distinctly commercial goals with the vagueness of the Protestant ethic nor with any nebulous religious overtones. God or His will may have played an integral part in the destiny of early America, but Chicago reinforced the eighteenth-century deistic notion that human beings could be divine. Whatever the creators of Chicago may have believed, no one insisted that Chicago was the city of God. Instead it was clearly a place of amorality and brute force. As the city's creative artists were trying to discover meanings not only for their urban experiences but also for the American city itself, they produced a literature that can be defined on several different levels.

Chicago literature means those first urban historians who in their commitment to the city transferred the tall tale of the American West to an urban setting. They insisted that nothing less than superlatives could describe the "Chicago experiment." Many of these early writers have become mere footnotes in history. They were businessmen and entrepreneurs by both profession and dedication, but they took time to record the

minutiae of the Chicago experiment primarily because they believed in themselves and in their city. They produced a fiction that sometimes doubled as history and in so doing celebrated the giants of finance. Emerging out of this group and in a measure an apologist for it was Juliette Kinzie, who in attempting to absolve her father-in-law of any wrong doing during the Fort Dearborn Massacre made it plain that the hero of the new city would be a man of business rather than the man of military honor. In stressing the role of the businessman in her *Wau-Bun: The Early Days of the Northwest* (1855) she laid the foundation for a literary genre, the business novel, that has become so much a part of American civilization that most of us have forgotten its source.

The Reverend Mr. E.P. Roe led a second group of writers. Like others, he voiced the optimism of the period and saw the Fire as a unique opportunity for the city to correct its wrongs and begin over again. *Barriers Burned Away* of 1872 is a romanticized version of the hero who comes to the city, falls in love with the daughter of his boss, and by his Christian spirit is able to survive all adversity. While this is a story that is probably best forgotten, Roe includes the portrait of the Chicago businessman that was to reach fulfillment in the work of Fuller, Herrick, Anderson, and Dreiser.

Furthermore, he was in the forefront of a popular tradition in the city's literature. In emphasizing the relevance of place, the earliest group of Chicago storytellers had determined before other American storytellers that there had to be an acceptance of an entirely different set of standards in order to understand the growth of the city and to explain the role of the human in an urban environment. They realized that the old precepts of morality, as expressed in the conflict between good and evil, could no longer be applicable in the same old way. They also knew that the common juxtaposition of the countryside with the evolving industrial centers—the country *vs.* the city—might make good studies in American romanticism, but they hardly addressed the key issues of the growing American cities. A new American character was emerging: the city man and woman who no longer viewed the agrarian as an ideal. The old notions could not adequately explain the direction of the national life. In

spite of the differences in fictional techniques, major concerns, and dates of composition, there is a strange similarity between the works which include such characters as Dennis Fleet (*Barriers Burned Away*, 1872), George Ogden (*The Cliff-Dwellers*, 1893), Rose Dutcher (*Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, 1895), Carrie Meeber (*Sister Carrie*, 1900), Curtis Jadwin (*The Pit*, 1903), Edward Van Harrington (*Memoirs of an American Citizen*, 1905), Frank Cowperwood (*The Financier*, 1912; *The Titan*, 1914), Sam McPherson (*Windy McPherson's Son*, 1916), and Beaut McGregor (*Marching Men*, 1917). Like their historical counterparts, they arrived in Chicago with a desire to seek personal fortunes; and the story of each is a result of the meeting of the human with the urban. It is not surprising that so many of these works easily display naturalistic tendencies. The city was indeed overpowering, and the characters were caught in various webs not of their own choosing.

Chicago literature means the work of those early journalists, culminating in the work of Eugene Field and George Ade who insisted that there had to be a new language to express the life of the city. Standard English might be fine for such Eastern writers as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville; but they insisted Chicago was a different place and needed a language which expressed this fact. The urban idiom which is now accepted with little disagreement was made a viable literary medium in Chicago. These journalists turned a critical eye upon the city. Sometimes using humor unabashedly, they saw urban corruption and cultural hypocrisy while recognizing the promise of the reconstructed city was not going to be fulfilled. Yet they also knew that Chicago was not going to be—as some cultural exponents wished—a carbon copy of Boston or Philadelphia. George Ade told stories of the streets and town; Finley Peter Dunne immortalized Archer Road and his political observer, Mr. Dooley. And all of them paved the way for Mike Royko and his Slat Grobnik.

Chicago literature means the work of Henry Blake Fuller, who in 1893 created an urban novel that was destined to change the way Americans thought of cities. Called *The Cliff Dwellers*, the novel recognized the new skyscrapers. As a matter of course, the storytellers of Chicago continued to include descrip-

tions of the city's buildings, which were simply other artistic manifestations of the commercial spirit. (Within this context, it might be well to cite Gwendolyn Brooks's use of the famous 1890s building, the Mecca, to illustrate how graphically urban degeneration had taken place.) Critical of the emphasis upon business and the commercial spirit, Fuller and his followers—Herrick, Norris, and Dreiser—were fascinated by the superhuman men and women who built the city. In 1895, Fuller continued his urban study in *With the Procession*, a novel that introduced the perceptive Mrs. Bates into American literature. She perhaps understood urban living better than most. Determined, articulate, and not satisfied to be her husband's silent partner, she is committed to a life of activity and is determined to keep up "with the procession" and to head it whenever possible.

So much attention has been given to the businessman as the new American cultural hero that there has not been a full examination of the roles played by women in a commercial culture. The Chicago novelists, however, were fully aware of the new masculine figure and were also mindful that the traditional fictional female (the weak heroine often incongruously attired in rags or a ballgown, ready to faint at the least provocation) had no place in the city. The list of "strong" women indeed matches that of the "strong" men. Repeatedly one notices the frequency with which the businessman in fiction might marry a traditional fictional heroine but who will seek the companionship and advice of a woman more nearly his intellectual equal. The one-dimensional and stereotyped women of American fiction are replaced by strong figures who are unafraid of the demands of the city. They are true replicas of the pioneer women who had so much to do with the settling of the West. Unlike their eastern counterparts, they are not the vehicles for an author's exploration of sin. Instead, they are frequently patterned after Mrs. Bates, one of the strongest characters created by Fuller. Hamlin Garland's Rose Dutcher is also a "new" woman who has been freed from the restraints of the past. She travels to Chicago "to find herself" because the city's reputation as being sympathetic to freedom-seeking individuals made it the logical place for her. As she learns to understand

herself, she is aided by Dr. Isabel Herrick, one of the early portraits of the professional woman whose feminism does not create such an automaton as Dr. Prance in Henry James's *The Bostonians*.

Mrs. Bates and Rose Dutcher are simply reproductions of a type of woman who came to power and influence in nineteenth-century Chicago. Long before the feminist issue became national, women in Chicago had proved that their strength could be channeled into outstanding results. For example, the evolution of the settlement house idea in this country owes a great deal to the work of Jane Addams who founded Hull House in 1889, accompanied by Ellen Gates Starr. They were aided by a group of women who were convinced that the problems of society were essentially problems of humanity which needed a sense of humanism in order to reach viable solutions. Edith and Grace Abbott were also concerned about the immigrant women forced to labor under inhuman factory conditions, and Florence Kelley was opposed to child labor not only for what it did to the child but also for its implication in damaging the development of sound family relationships. These women were joined by others who could have settled into "the ways of society;" social arbiters such as Julia Lathrop, Mary Kenny O'Sullivan, Louise DeKoven Bowen, and Mary McDowell worked untiringly to raise the standards of living among the city's laborers and Dr. Alice Hamilton's study of the diseases of factory workers made a formidable contribution to the development of what is now called "industrial medicine." These women were further aided by Mrs. Potter Palmer, and Mrs. Pullman and her daughter Florence Pullman Lowden. Also among the Prairie Avenue group was Mrs. John Glessner, whose concern for the down-trodden was indeed real. In a different sphere and social circle were Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman, well-known radicals whose political philosophies and loyalties eventually called into question traditional beliefs. That "strong" women, like Mrs. Droun in *The Memoirs of an American Citizen*, were often minor fictional characters does not alter the fact that the women of Chicago provided a pattern that was to shift the female role in American literature.

The twentieth century saw the rise of stronger elements of protest. Such works as Clarence Darrow's *An Eye for an Eye* (1905), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and Frank Harris's *The Bomb* (1908) added another dimension to the Chicago novel as they examined the under-side of the city. Perhaps great buildings dominated the downtown area; perhaps magnificent mansions dotted the shores of Lake Michigan and such streets as Prairie Avenue, but some writers found the real city in the most extensive slums in the United States, in the disillusioned lives of the immigrants and underprivileged whose dreams of urban success had quickly turned into the reality of their nightmares.

Both Darrow and Harris examined the operation of the sacred judicial system and came to the conclusion that it favored the rich and powerful but was stacked against the poor and down-trodden. Harris was especially interested in the conditions of the city and the climate which prevailed during the Hay-market Affair. Sinclair's attack upon the meat-packing industry was a plea for greater understanding of the inhuman conditions that existed in the city for those immigrant workers whose faith in the American Dream had led them to Chicago. In all three works, the invidious city looms as a spectre controlling the lives of those whose only sin is in being poor and without the ability to "beat the system." The protests of this generation of writers were later perfected and made part of the aesthetic milieu of such mid-century novelists as James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Richard Wright.

The same sense of freedom that has permeated all phases of the city's life has also influenced literary production. Chicago's writers, from the beginning, were liberated from the need to follow established patterns and techniques. The many magazines that were published during the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s give an indication of the extent to which experimentation was supported. Then, the work of such men as Melville Stone of the *Daily News* and Francis Fisher Browne of the *Dial* illustrates the diversity of the attempts to prove that "good writing" could come out of the Middle West. The sense of literary freedom also includes such people as Herbert Stone and Hannibal Kimball, Harvard graduates who took a chance on the city and for a number of years not only produced one of the outstanding

journals in the country but also established a publishing company to prove that literature did not have to be the province of the East. For the few years of its existence, Stone and Kimball issued some of the finest work in the nation not only in terms of subject matter but also in terms of typography. Chicago literature means, in part, the daring of Harriet Monroe who believed that poetry needed an outlet and enlisted the aid of the city's businessmen in order to begin *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. It also means the daring of Margaret Anderson whose disregard for the peculiarities of her time led her to begin the *Little Review*. She faced censure and prison in order to publish James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot when both poets had difficulty finding a suitable vehicle for their work.

During a particular period of the city's history the so-called Chicago Renaissance produced literary excitement that has probably not been rivalled in recent times. Led by Floyd Dell and his estranged wife, Margery Currey, it included such dissimilar men and women as Ben Hecht, Margaret Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Harriet Monroe, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Maurice Browne, and Sherwood Anderson. They were committed to a spirit of experimentation in both their personal lives and in literature. Before Greenwich Village had become the center for America's Bohemia, these people congregated in some dilapidated buildings on 57th Street near the University of Chicago and created a Bohemia of their own. That many of them had fled the city by the early 1920s does not alter the fact that they were seldom more creative than when they lived in Chicago.

During this era Ben Hecht and Maxwell Bodenheim—whom Fanny Butcher has called our first hippie—started the *Literary Times*. In their first issue they took on New York which many considered the literary capital of the United States. In an article entitled "The National Cemetery of Arts and Letters," they said:

The thing that vaguely depresses us about New York is its long ears. The magazines devoted to The Higher Culture—*The Nation*, *The Dial*, *The Freeman*, *The New Republic*, and alas, *The Little Review*, stand on the rack of

our favorite bookstores and, occasionally, we read them. They depress us. They have long ears. They have long noses. They seem to be suffering from the lack of a good drink or a good physic. They are continually talking about Art as if it were their dead grandmother.

Chicago literature means an ethnic literature that began in the 1840s and 1850s in the midst of one of the most anti-immigrant periods in the city's history, a period that led to the establishment of a series of journals devoted specifically to the spirit of nativism. Through the humor of his created voice, Carl Pretzel, Charles Harris became a national institution. Eventually, the city's ethnic literature was to include the work of Albert Halper, Meyer Levin, Nelson Algren, and James T. Farrell who recorded for the nation the depths of urban disaffection and disappointment. The presumed open city of the nineteenth century was effectively closed by the twentieth. Many examined the immigrant experience and found it wanting, but nonetheless some thought the American Dream might indeed come true. Finally, Saul Bellow began at the level of Chicago and transcended the city to deal with the marginality of mankind in a modern world and subsequently brought back to the city a Nobel Prize for literature.

Discussions of ethnic literature are closely related to another phase of Chicago's literature. While accepting the inevitability of the city, Chicago's storytellers made another discovery that was to alter not only their definitions of the city but also the use of it generally in American fiction. One might agree with Fuller that the very word "Chicago" had become "a shibboleth," but it was soon discovered that the city was not really as unified as the name might suggest. Rather, divided by a strange river, it was indeed a series of areas and neighborhoods. In time, then, Chicago came to be defined in the specific terms of the southside of Farrell and Wright, the westside of Anderson and Levin, and Algren's expansive northwest enclaves. They recorded the lives of those destined to remain in the city's restricted neighborhoods. While the city lives in literary perceptions, these are often conditioned by neighborhoods. Carrie Meeber's Chicago is certainly not that of Bigger Thomas or Studs Lonigan. To write of the city really meant using only a part of it, but Chicago's powerful presence was never far from

the surface as THE CITY itself became an elusive, almost unknowable force.

Chicago early provided an outlet and a subject for Afro-American writers. Beginning with the publication in 1857 of the slave narrative of William J. Anderson and the influential tract by John Jones in 1864, both of which were published by the *Tribune* Book and Job Office (a firm that issued a number of works dealing with racial matters), the city supported its own group during the days of the Harlem Renaissance. And no one can forget that Chicago literature means the work of Richard Wright who came to Chicago searching for the peace that was supposed to be in the North. He faced the racism of the city and produced in its wake *Native Son*, the first novel by an Afro-American to be selected as a Book-of-the-Month selection, a book that both attracted and repelled readers but one which has made Bigger Thomas an integral part of the folklore of America. It is also means the work of Willard Motley who dismissed the glory of the city to write not of its front yard but of its back alleys.

### III.

In short, Chicago literature is the story of America—its hopes, its grandeur, its failings, and its sadness. It is a rare Chicago novel that does not at some point take this fact into consideration. In 1923, J. William Hudson published *Nowhere Else*. The novel can legitimately be forgotten for many reasons, but it does express as clearly as any of the Chicago novels just how the city best represents the American spirit. Although Dreiser might refer to the city as a magnet, Hudson thought of it as a monster, but he acknowledged:

Of all cities, Chicago best expresses the mighty American spirit.

New York is too provincial; Washington is too patrician; Boston is too haughty; Philadelphia is too placid; and San Francisco is too far away. All that America stands for, Chicago stands for—carried to its highest power. It is America come to its own—the most sincere product of its past, and the clearest prophecy of its future.

Far enough westward to be independent of the Atlantic seaboard and of what is beyond the sea; crude, haphazard,

prodigious, sprawling by its own splendid sweep of waters, it is the free and lusty creation of a new world impetuously feeling its way to power and self-realization.

All the traits of adolescent youth—which are the supreme traits of young America—all these belong to this stupendous city, overgrown, husky, exuberant, loose-jointed, awkward, unkempt, boastful, yawping its excellences over the world; ridiculously sensitive of ridicule; ambitious beyond bounds; disdainful of the old, enamored of the new, its face to the future, dreaming strange dreams, eager, impudent, noisy bawling, clamorous.

In a city that prided itself on being "non-literary," Chicago nurtured some of the major writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps, as Joseph Epstein argued, there is no literary life in Chicago; but we cannot deny that there *is* a literature. There is that literature that either consciously or unconsciously celebrates the greatness of the spirit of American enterprise. Out of this came those novels of American business that acknowledge the shortcomings of the businessman but leave readers with the distinct impression that here are the makers, for better or worse, of American culture. Then there are those works that celebrate the life of the back alleys and the slums, that realize the American city is not all that it should be, not all that it could be, but that it is a place of hope for some and of degradation for others.

Chicago's storytellers re-defined the American heroine and hero. Instead of the American Adam or a Natty Bumppo, suspended in time and place, the Chicagoans insisted that the hero had to be a man of the community, one who was intricately involved with the development of his place. But to explain Chicago's literature as a product of the city's early associations with commerce and the doctrine of success—important though such factors are—will not alone suffice. Any cursory examination of American urban history will reveal that there were other great commercial centers throughout the nation. Those who convinced themselves that the older cities of the nation were primarily devoted to "culture" and "the finer things of life" were more naive than they should have been. Money grubbers may have been in Chicago, but they were also in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Chicago, however, was not hampered by

the Puritan tradition nor by any attempt to justify human actions by masking them. Neither was it subservient to the literary dictates and patterns of Europe. This does not mean that Chicago was totally isolated from history nor that its people had no ties to the past; but early in its existence, Chicago cast its lot with the frontier, with the present, and with its future. As part of the American West, it reflected the freedom and expansiveness as well as the vulgarity associated with that region. But then so did Cincinnati, St. Louis, and a multitude of other western towns. In the final analysis, the answer rests in that Chicago mystique or Chicago spirit that still defies explanation.

Whatever else they have done, Chicago's writers—from the earliest storytellers to E.P. Roe through Fuller and Herrick, through Dreiser and Anderson, and eventually to Algren, Wright, Farrell, Brashler, and Bellow—have insisted that the city is more than a mere locale, although all of them have relied heavily upon scenes and landmarks in order to give a sense of the immediacy of the city. For all of them, Chicago is used as a symptom of national growing pains and the effects of industrialization as well as urban isolation upon human beings. While some of the writers have dealt with the city in the process of becoming, others have chronicled the city's force. Some have focused upon their inability to stem the tide of urban "progress," while agreeing with Herrick's observation in *The Common Lot* (1904). "Nothing was built to stand for more than a generation in this city. Life move[s] too swiftly for that." That much of the work produced in Chicago reflects the overpowering nature of the city is apparent. This work, then, frequently resounds with the whimpers of futility. And if this is its tragedy, it is also the tragedy of America.

Duke University

## CHICAGO AS SETTING AND FORCE IN WILLIAM RILEY BURNETT'S *LITTLE CAESAR* (1929)

DOUGLAS A. NOVERR

When W. R. Burnett arrived in Chicago in 1927, he was unpublished and unprepared for the shock of living and trying to find work in a city that, to him, was one of the most "blankly indifferent, one of the toughest cities in the world."<sup>1</sup> His father had a job managing repossessed hotels for the Chicago Title and Trust firm, so Burnett was not without family connections in what he remembered later as being an "archaic, dangerous city" that was indifferent to the then rampant gangland crime of rubouts, payoffs, bombings, and deadly struggles for territorial control. Chicagoans took all of this with unconcern or with feigned indifference. As long as gangsters killed each other and stayed within their territorial neighborhoods, the populace could feel relatively safe. Besides, the city had a reputation for toughness, aggressive masculinity, and acceptance of life's hard realities: gangsterism was, then, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The city put on a tough face to outsiders, and people were tightlipped about the workings of a city where power and influence were envied and admired. Chicago was a city where economic realities and business considerations provided the quickened pulse and heartbeat of the metropolis. It was a laboratory for naturalistic and deterministic forces, a case study of a modern day Hobbesian environment covered over by aspirations to culture and civilization.

When Burnett arrived in Chicago, he was 28 years old and had been married seven years.<sup>2</sup> He left behind a stultifying office job with the Department of Industrial Relations of the Ohio Bureau of Statistics that he had held down for six years

while futilely trying to establish himself as a writer. During the eight year period following his one semester of attendance at Ohio State University Burnett wrote five novels, a number of plays, and about a hundred short stories without selling one piece. Burnett's first impressions of Chicago were colored by what he perceived to be the rudeness and indifference of the people while he was filled with apprehensions about his decision to cast his fate there. He looked at Chicago life as a self-described "alien from Ohio," but he walked the entire city, observed its neighborhoods and denizens, and began to establish street acquaintances that gave him insight into the hoodlum underworld. He soon realized that the business workings of the criminal underworld were impervious to the moral or social considerations of middle-class morality. In their struggle for survival in this underworld gangsters were brutally direct and practical, and they worked out their own complex system of hierarchy and chain of command that controlled rackets and the business of providing services.

As Burnett worked on the manuscript for the novel that would be called *Little Caesar*, he realized that it would be impossible to use ordinary human psychology or conventional human emotions if he was to get inside the world of the gangsters and to establish the nexus of its organization. Shocked by the amorality of the underworld but fascinated with its potential for fictional treatment, Burnett worked out a style and technique of presentation strongly influenced by his reading of Pio Baroja, the popular Basque Spanish writer, and Giovanni Verga, the Sicilian Italian novelist.<sup>3</sup> He read these novelists in English translations, but he was still able to absorb the fictional techniques that captured the lives of people who were struggling to survive in environments foreign to the middle and upper class readers of novels.

From Baroja, Burnett gained a knowledge of the underworld of Madrid with its constant undercurrents of social discontent and its men of action who struggle against fate. From Verga, Burnett learned how to tell a story with simple directness and strict accuracy of observed and recorded details. Verga's concept of *Verismo* (that is, realistic treatment) included the following principles. First, the theme is expressed through

action alone, and the factual details of the narrative provide the interest of the portrayal. Second, the pattern of events is neutral, with no moralization or interpretation. The focus is on human destiny rather than on a careful analysis of human nature, and the view of human destiny is essentially tragic and ironic. Man is impotent to change his destiny or fate; he is doomed to failure even though he asserts himself and may experience some degree of success in gaining control over his life. The attempt itself is the cause of the failure as the *vinto* is prevented from reaching his goals by the very methods he adopts to achieve them. Third, Verga deliberately made his style "unliterary" as he utilized a style that reflected the impulsive, non-logical, and broken rhythm of peasant speech and self-expression.<sup>4</sup>

In the writings of Baroja and Verga, Burnett found the discipline and rigor of realistic writing as well as an authorial attitude that fitted the circumstances he found in the Chicago underworld in the late 1920s. In *Little Caesar* he focused on inarticulate characters who had little self-awareness and who were incapable of introspection or insight. These criminal figures are capable of the extremes of human passions: treachery, betrayal, cold-blooded violence, calculating cruelty, and insane rage.

Set in Little Italy, *Little Caesar* chronicles the rise and fall of Rico Bandello, who moves on to Chicago from Toledo and Hammond, Indiana and quickly takes over the Sam Vettori gang, "a big minor gang."<sup>5</sup> Rico rises to the leadership of the gang because he is able to inspire fear in others and because he is cunning and bold in his response to danger and to opportunities. Quick to sense weaknesses in others, Rico acts quickly and decisively when he is endangered or senses a threat to the gang: he personally guns down Tony Passa in front of St. Dominick's cathedral when Tony loses his nerve and wants out of the gang. Rico also strengthens his control over the gang by rewarding gang members with extra money at opportune times and by overlooking minor faults in his men. Otero is especially loyal to Rico, and Otero sees Rico as a great man in the class of Pancho Villa. In a number of situations Rico proves his ability to think quickly and to take advantage of a situation. The same day after he is ambushed and wounded he directs an instant retaliation

against his antagonist, Arnie Worch, and succeeds in driving Worch and his three lieutenants out of Chicago. Because he is driven by a desire to dominate and control others, Rico is single-minded and disciplined. His one mistake is, of course, killing police Captain Courtney in a nightclub holdup that nets the gang over \$9,000 in loot. However, Rico has a remarkable ability to turn threatening situations in his favor because of his steady nerves and quick reactions.

Although in the criminal world of his gang Rico has few observable faults, he has several private weaknesses that combine to defeat him eventually. Usually on his guard against women, Rico "was given to short bursts of lust," and "this lust, usually the result of an inner need not the outcome of exterior stimulus, would be aroused by the sight of some particular woman." (pp. 81-82). In Chicago, Blondy Belle, Rico's loyal moll, is able to satisfy Rico's "short bursts of lust" as well as to provide a reliable source of information about how Rico is being double-crossed by Little Arnie Worch. After Joe Massara, a member of Rico's gang, has been arrested in the murder of Captain Courtney and is being pressured to talk, Rico is not immediately available for decisive action because he is with Blondy Belle. Everything Rico had worked to build up is suddenly threatened as the bulls he had once thought of as only a nuisance are now hot on his trail. For once Rico is afraid, and his pride is deflated.

He was nobody, nobody. Worse than nobody. The bulls wanted him now and they wanted him bad. Goodbye dollar cigars and crockery at one grand, goodbye swell food and Tuxedos and security. Rico was nobody. Just a lonely Youngstown yegg that the bulls wanted. His face was ghastly. (p. 150)

Rico realizes now the price he has paid for relaxing his vigilance and for not eliminating Joe as a weak link in the gang. However, always thinking of his own survival, Rico makes a daring daytime escape from Chicago back to Hammond, where he finds a place to hide for a period of time. However, in Hammond Rico gets in trouble on New Year's Eve (significantly the same night he had led the holdup on the Casa Alvarado and killed Captain Courtney) with the local toughs when he sees a

Blonde and tries to talk her into going up to his room. When confronted by the Blonde's boyfriend, Rico pulls his gun and threatens him. Because of this Rico is forced to move on. Rico now only has painful memories of his great moments when he was in the limelight in Chicago's Little Italy and the Club Palermo.

Ironically, Rico ends up back in Youngstown, where his career started. There he tries to build another gang, but he cannot forget Chicago and his former glory there. Although he had risen up in the Vettori gang on the basis of his energy and self-discipline, Rico finds that in Youngstown these virtues are liabilities. He is frustrated and insulted because he has to live under another name, but he eventually reveals his identity as Rico, as Casare Bandello. Then the Chicago boys, seeking vengeance, close in on him as well as do the police. Even though he helps organize a small gang of bootleg liquor runners, Rico is a marked man. As he tries to flee another time, Rico is caught in an alley with no chance to escape. Rico's last moments are described as a frantic but futile desire to live.

Rico was frantic. He wanted to live. For the first time in his life he addressed a vague power which he felt to be stronger than himself. "Give me a break! Give me a Break!" he implored. (p. 180)

As he dies face down in the alley, Rico utters his question of astonishment and despair, "Mother of God," he said, "is this the end of Rico?"

Rico dies a nobody in Youngstown far from the scene of his notoriety and success in Chicago. There he had dreamed of the comfort of Big Boy's wonderful apartment with its pretensions of culture and high-class security. In his ambitions and energetic drive Rico wanted to be one of the top men who pulled the strings, gave the orders, and controlled the smaller gangs and their activities. However, Rico only vaguely sensed what was required for such a top position. In reality, he lacked the class, sophistication, and intelligence for such a high level post. These individuals had to be able to insinuate themselves into society, to establish protection for themselves through high priced mouthpiece lawyers and bribed officials, to create the appearances of being untouchable, and to put themselves at a distance from the actual criminal activities. In his desperate aspiration to move up, Rico fails to realize his own liabilities, ones that would

prevent him from ever rising above the level of a small gang boss. He is a man of the streets who can never become the penthouse apartment crime overlord. He mistakes the externals of success (cigars, jewelry, paintings, furniture, fancy crockery, a library full of books) for the actual realities demanded of a Big Boy or the Old Man. Rico could never be a Capone because he was not calculating enough or cold-blooded enough to eliminate all those who could be a threat or danger to him.

For Rico, the opulence of the good life is a cruel illusion that seems too easily in his grasp when it is, in fact, never within his reach. He is too marked by his lower-class Italian ethnicity, his short stature and physical unattractiveness, and crude manners. In replaying the reasons for his demise, Rico thinks his fall came because of what he failed to do, specifically his failure to kill Gentleman Joe Massara and to play up to Scabby, a gang member who resented and hated Rico and who follows him to Youngstown to exact revenge. Rico needs to believe that he could control and direct his destiny with his ever ready gun and his quick willingness to use it. However, he fails to see how his daring and his pride are in fact his undoing. He is merely one of those destined to be used and used up in the world of organized crime. His instincts for survival and self-protection are too strong, too impulsive, and too direct. In believing that he was invulnerable and invincible, Rico overlooked his own weaknesses and dissipations, thinking of them as occasional lapses rather than true weaknesses. Rico wants admiration and respect from his gang members, but in truth only Otero and Blondy Belle stick with him.

Starting out as a small-time holdup man in Toledo, Rico ends up back in Ohio, but he is afraid of the men he works with because they are undisciplined and incautious. Bored by this small-time activity, Rico loses his finely tuned survival instincts and succumbs to sleeping twelve hours a day and to debauching at a nearby call-house. He has nowhere to run or hide, and he is even betrayed by Chicago Red, a gang member who reveals Rico's whereabouts to Scabby. The cycle has now come full circle for the fated Little Caesar. He will not even be accorded the mock mourning funeral Rico had staged for Tony Passa, whom Rico had gunned down. Unable to understand the real reasons for his downfall, Rico could only attribute his problems to the misfortune of associating himself with "yellow-bellies and softies" (p. 179).

The influence of Giovanni Verga's *Maestro Don Gesualdo* (1889, translated by D. H. Lawrence in 1923), which William Riley Burnett acknowledged as the "greatest of all realistic novels" is strongly evident in *Little Caesar*.<sup>6</sup> Like Verga's Don Gesualdo, Rico feels himself to be a match for the world about him, but he loses control over his affairs. In defeat and failure, both characters realize that everything they desired remained beyond their grasps. Both are *vintos* who attempt to rise up above their origins and who are met with disaster because of their attempts. Burnett developed a narrative mode that was objective and detached with no underlying philosophy or interpretation of events. In forging a style that would be refined and developed in over twenty crime novels published from 1929 to 1981, Burnett became a consummate storyteller who established the prototypes for the gangster novel and the big caper novel. He succeeded in his goal of becoming a full-time professional writer after his move to Chicago in 1927 and moved on to Hollywood to write screenplays for such classic films as *Scarface* (1932), *High Sierra* (1941), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), the latter two based on his own successful novels. In a prolific career Burnett wrote some 35 novels and over 30 screenplays, and his novels include forays into the sports novel, the western, and historical fiction. In terms of productivity he far outdistanced such writers as James M. Cain and Samuel Fuller.

Burnett created the archetypal and generic city of crime and corruption in *Little Caesar* and in his other novels that feature Chicago and other Midwestern cities. He chronicled the lives of criminals and the group dynamics of how the system falls apart and fails as established loyalties and working arrangements break down periodically. Certain individuals are eliminated as the powers behind the scenes rearrange the hierarchy so as to protect themselves or take the heat off themselves and their organizations. The world is one of greed, betrayal, treachery, manipulation, and paranoia. As Robert Warshaw noted, the gangster's city is "not the real city, but that dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world."<sup>7</sup> The Chicago of Rico's world is one that has been corrupted by postwar conditions: the demand for liquor, the corruptions of gambling and prostitution, and the prosperity of a consumer culture that whetted the appetites of

lower-class individuals who found new avenues of success in the criminal underworld. Money and power were the new forces as the consumption of high society increased not only the desires of the poor for their version of the good life but also added to their frustrations and resentments when the prosperity never touched their lives. The city was where the dream seemed palpable and possible, but it was more often a place of failure or defeat. Only the powerbrokers, manipulators, and connivers could benefit since they shared the secrets of the inside workings of the system. Chicago was a place for powerful political bosses, corrupt businessmen, untouchable mob figures like Capone, and unscrupulous opportunists. The little guy could only wonder at all of this as it became a way of life with its own remarkable dynamics.

William Riley Burnett's career as a crime writer chronicles the cyclical pattern of crime, violence, and corruption in American urban society. In *Little Caesar* he traced the circumstances that brought about the rise of organized crime as gangs became part of a more stable system that was less dramatically violent and learned to co-opt the practices of big business and management as well as learned how to use the political and legal system to its advantage. As Burnett noted, Rico was "no monster at all, but merely a little Napoleon, a little Caesar."<sup>8</sup> Rico was the little guy individual who believed he could shoot, bully, and push his way up through the ranks and shove aside his bosses as he made them fear him. Up to a point he is able to do this within the Vettori gang, but his grim fate is to fail. He is only a one-time visitor in the lavish apartment of Big Boy, and he can only dream of what could have been if events had not conspired against him. The city is impersonal to his dreams and ambitions and even hostile to them. It is a world Rico never fully knew or understood; his success there was fleeting and deceptive. Forces beyond his control and understanding defeat him. As Rico says just before he dies, and just as he is forced out into the utter darkness of the alley where he will die, "A hell of a chance I got." In this simple statement he speaks more truth about his life that he could ever realize.

Michigan State University

## NOTES

1. W. R. Burnett, "Author's Note" to *Little Caesar* (New York: Avon Books, 1966), p. 186.
2. For biographical information on Burnett, see *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, ed. John M. Reilly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 231-234; *American Novelists, 1910-1945*, Part 1, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume Nine, ed. James J. Martine (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981), pp. 103-107; *The Annual Obituary 1982*, ed. Janet Podell and Steven Anzovin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 196-198.
3. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds. *Twentieth Century Authors* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), 225-226.
4. See D. Woolf, *The Art of Verga: A Study in Objectivity* (Sydney, Australia: Sydney University Press, 1977), Chapters 4 and 5.
5. W. R. Burnett, *Little Caesar* (New York: Avon Books, 1966), p. 56. All quotes are from this text, and hereafter page references will be cited in the text. For critical commentary on *Little Caesar* see George Grella, "The Gangster Novel: The Urban Pastoral," in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Ppress, 1968), pp. 186-198; and Gerald Peary, "Rico Rising: Little Caesar Takes Over the Screen," in *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*, ed. Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 286-296.
6. *Twentieth Century Authors*, p. 225.
7. Robert Warshaw, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" in *The Immediate Experience* (1962).
8. Burnett, "Author's Note," p. 191.

MR. DOOLEY AND SLATS GROBNIK:  
CHICAGO COMMENTATORS ON THE  
WORLD AROUND THEM

ROGER J. BRESNAHAN

Finley Peter Dunne began his Mr. Dooley sketches in the *Chicago Evening Post* in 1893. The cracker-box philosopher behind the bar of his saloon on "Ar-rchey Road," actually Archer Avenue in the center of Chicago's Irish neighborhood, held forth on all manner of topics. Early on, his listener was a small time Chicago politician, Jawn J. McKenna. In 1896 McKenna appears to have joined the "Raypooblicans" and thereafter infrequently comes to the saloon. His place is taken by Mr. Hennessey, the patient foil of Dooley's best meditations on human frailty. With growing national popularity of the Mr. Dooley columns on the Spanish-American War, Dunne focused more on national subjects. Distressed with always having to write in dialect, and believing his talents were too limited by Mr. Dooley, Dunne ended the series in 1906. Meanwhile he had brought out six book-length collections between 1898 and 1906.<sup>1</sup>

Mike Royko's reflections about his putative boyhood companion, Slats Grobnik, have appeared sporadically over the years.<sup>2</sup> Rarely has a whole column been devoted to Grobnik's philosophy. Typically, Royko will bring in Slats as the clincher in his argument. Through Slats Grobnik, Mike Royko has been able to say much about human nature, about Chicago politics, and about the world-at-large. Fans of Royko have wanted to see much more of Slats. Why Royko hasn't used Slats as fully as Finley Peter Dunne used Martin Dooley may appear as we consider their opinions.

Perhaps the best known of Mr. Dooley's observations is his review of Theodore Roosevelt's book on the Rough Riders, which Dooley retitles *Alone in Cubia*. Roosevelt claimed he and his men had taken San Juan Hill, thus sparking a controversy with those who claimed it was the Ninth and Tenth Negro Cavalry. Dooley purports to quote from Roosevelt's book to clear up any misunderstanding: "I will say fr th' binifit iv posterity that I was the on'y man I see. An' I had a tilyscope" (*Best*, p. 102). Roosevelt's regiment was composed of New York playboys and western cowboys. Of the latter, Tiddy Rosenfelt (for so Dooley always calls him) says: "I wud stand beside wan iv these r-rough men threatin' him as an akel, which he was in ivrything but birth, education, rank, an' courage . . ." (*Best*, p. 100). Having arrived in Cuba, "a number of days was spint be me in reconnoitring, attinded on'y be me brave an' fluent body-guard, Richard Harding Davis." Roosevelt sees that he is "handicapped be th' prisence iv th' army" and so he sends everyone home, attacks San Joon Hill, and wins the war by himself:

I fired at th' man nearest to me an' I knew be th' expression iv his face that th' trusty bullet wint home. It passed through his frame, he fell, an' wan little home in far-off Catalonia was made happy be th' thought that their ripsisintative had been kilt be th' future governor iv New York. Th' bullet sped on its mad flight an' passed through th' intire line fin'ly imbeddin' itself in th' abdomen iv th' Ar-rch-bishop iv Santago eight miles away. This ended th' war. (*Best*, pp. 101-102)

When Commodore George Dewey carried the Spanish-American War to the Philippines, news of the battle was sketchy at first because Dewey had cut the undersea cable to Hong Kong. Dunne took advantage of the hiatus of uncertainty to introduce Mr. Dooley's famous relative, Cousin George: "Dewey or Dooley, 'tis all th' same. We dhrop a letter here an' there, except th' haitches—we niver dhrop thim,—but we're th' same breed iv fightin' men" (*Best*, pp. 42-43). The question of what President McKinley would do with the Philippines soon became a hot issue. Even Mr. Dooley's patient foil, Mr. Hennessey, had an opinion: "I know what I'd do if I was Mack. . . . I'd hist a flag over th' Ph'lippeens, an' take in th' whole lot iv thim." Dunne's was one of the strongest voices of the anti-imperialists at this time,

and Dooley's skepticism its most potent tool. To Mr. Hennessey's jingoism he replies: " 'Tis not more thin two months since ye larned whether they were islands or canned goods." The moral dilemma posed by annexation is cleverly summed up in Mr. Dooley's reflections:

"Wan of th' worst things about this here war is th' way it's makin' puzzles f'r our poor tired heads. When I wint into it, I thought all I'd have to do was to set up here behind th' bar with a good tin-cint see-gar in me teeth, an' toss dinnymite bombs into th' hated city iv Havana. But look at me now. . . . I can't annex thim because I don't know where they ar-re. I can't let go iv thim because some wan else'll take thim if I do. There are eight thousand iv thim islands, with a population iv wan hundherd millyon naked savages; an' me bedroom's crowded now with me an' th' bed. How can I take thim in, an' how on earth am I goin' to cover th' nakedness iv thim savages with me wan shoot iv clothes? An' yet, twud break me heart to think iv givin' people I niver see or heard tell iv back to other people I don't know. . . . An' yet, Hennessey, I dinnaw what to do about th' Ph'lippeens. An' I'm all alone in th' wurruld. Ivrybody else has made up his mind."

"Hang onto thim," said Mr. Hennessey, stoutly. "What we've got we must hold." (*Best*, pp. 60-61)

Like Mr. Dooley, Slats Grobник has been known to agonize over national problems. As a boy, Slats "brooded about the national debt." He became a whiz at mathematics while he tried to figure how old he'd be when he paid his share. He called his father a deadbeat and accused him of running up a big bill and then sticking his son with it. Then he found out "that we owed the national debt to ourselves." Royko's final comment: "the last time I saw him he was writing letters to people he knew, saying: 'When are you going to pay me?'" (*Friends*, pp. 62 ff).

For a while the anti-imperialist campaign seemed a potent force, though it was an unlikely coalition of protectionists, racists, and aging abolitionists and other idealists who championed the cause of Philippine independence. Eventually, however, it appeared that most Americans shared Hennessey's view. Dooley's surmises concerning the character of these islands and peoples owe something to the Hawaiian sketches sent by the

young Samuel Clemens to the *San Francisco Examiner*, yet they also reflect the appalling misinformation which influenced the annexationists:

"I've been r-readin' about th' counthry. . . . It's a poverty-stricken counthry, full iv goold an' precious stones, where th' people can pick dinner off th' threes an' ar-re starvin' because they have no stepladders. Th' inhabitants is mostly naygurs an' Chinnymen, peaceful, industhrus, an' law-abidin', but savage and bloodthirsty in their methods. . . . Th' islands has been owned be Spain since befur th' fire; an' she's threated thim so well they're now up in ar-rms again her, except a majority of thim which is thurly loyal. . . . Th' women ar-re beautiful with languishin' black eyes, an' they smoke see-gars, but-ar-re hurried an' incomplete in their dhress. I see a pitcher iv wan th' other day with nawthin' on her but a basket of cocoanuts an' a hoop skirt. They're no prudes. We import juke, hemp, cigar wrappers, sugar, an' fairy tales fr'm th' Ph'lippeens, an' export six-inch shells an' the like." (*Best*, pp. 60-61)

After the election of 1900, the question of whether the Constitution followed the flag was finally settled by the Supreme Court. In a series of decisions, the so-called Insular Cases, the Court declared that acquired peoples may be held as subjects without the constitutional rights accorded citizens. Those who had cringed at the thought of another non-white race claiming equality were reassured, and the anti-imperialist movement faded. Expansionists spoke warmly of educating the Filipinos in the English language and passing along to them the heritage of democracy. There was much talk of eventual independence for the subject colony, once it imbibed the lessons America had to give. Mr. Dooley took on the temper of the expansionists while Hennessey became a cautious anti-imperialist. The satire of Mark Twain's "Blessings-of-Civilization Trust" is echoed in Mr. Dooley's revelations of what was in store for the subject peoples of a racist empire:

"Whin we plant what Hogan calls th' starry banner iv Freedom in th' Ph'lippens," said Mr. Dooley, "an' give th' sacred blessin' iv liberty to th' poor, downtrodden people iv thim unfortunate isles—damn thim!—we'll larn thim a lesson."

"Sure," said Mr. Hennessey, sadly, "we have a thing or two to larn oursilves."

"But it isn't f'r thim to larn us," said Mr. Dooley. "'Tis not f'r thim wretched an' degraded crathers, without a mind or a shirt iv their own, f'r to give lessons in politeness an' liberty to a nation that mannyfathers more dhressed beef than anny other imperyal nation in th' wurruld. We say to thim: 'Naygurs,' we say, 'poor, desolute, uncovered wretches,' says we, 'whin th' crool hand iv Spain forged man'cles f'r ye're limbs, as Hogan says, who was it crossed th' say an' sthruck off th' comealongs? We did—by dad, we did. An' now, ye mis'nable, childish-minded apes, we propose f'r to larn yet th' uses iv liberty. In ivry city in this unfair land we will erect school-houses an' packin' houses an' houses iv correction; an' we'll larn ye our language, because 'tis aisier to larn ye ours than to larn oursilves yours. An' we'll give ye clothes, if ye pay f'r thim. . . . an' whin ye've become edycated an' have all th' blessin's iv civilization that we don't want, that'll count ye one. We can't give ye anny votes, because we haven't more thin enough to go round now; but we'll threat ye th' way a father shud threat his childher if we have to break ivry bone in ye're bodies.' (*Best*, pp. 63-64)

Naturally, the anti-imperialists who were left in the cause, largely now isolationists and the idealists who believed in self-determination, were appalled. Said Mr. Dooley, "No matter whether th' Constitution follows th' flag or not, th' Supreme Coort follows th' iliction returns" (*Best*, p. 77). With Roosevelt as President and Taft as head of the civil government, even the Declaration of Independence was deemed seditious by the American military in the Philippines. A marvellous piece portrays Roosevelt as a senior motorman on a streetcar instructing William Howard Taft in the art of directing the ship of state:

". . . Look at thim comin' up th' sthreet. Taft knows th' brakes well, but he ain't very familiar with th' power. 'Go ahead,' says Rosenfelt. 'Don't stop here. . . . Who's that ol' lady standin' in th' middle iv th' sthreet wavin' an umbrella? Oh, be Hivens, 'tis th' Constitution. Give her a good bump. No, she got out iv th' way. Ye'd iv nailed her if ye hadn't twisted th' brake. What ailed ye? Well, niver mind; we may get her comin' back.'" (*Best*, p. 103)

When Dunne placed racial epithets in Mr. Dooley's mouth it was sometimes only to reflect Dooley's own low-life character. Seldom are such slurs merely gratuitous, however. Often they serve to remind the reader of the kind of world we live in. The column which appeared amidst the controversy about Roosevelt inviting Booker T. Washington to lunch at the White House is a masterpiece. As usual, Hennessey acts as the foil:

"What ails th' prisidint havin' a coon to dinner at th' White House?" asked Mr. Hennessey.

"He's a larned man," said Mr. Dooley.

"He's a coon," said Mr. Hennessey.

Dooley relates the outrage expressed in the newspapers of the South and its probable effect on Roosevelt: ". . . th' white man in Alabama that voted f'r Rosenfelt las' year has come out again' him." Though he avers that "if Fate, as Hogan said, had condemned me to start in business on the Levee, I'd sarve th' black man that put down th' money as quick as I wud th' white," Dooley asserts that "up here in this Cowcasyan neighborhood, I spurn th' dark coin." The results of Booker T. Washington's luncheon weren't catastrophic. Dooley comments that "th' pitchers iv all th' prisidints" didn't fall out of their frames and "th' ghost iv th' other Washin'ton didn't appear to break a soop tureen over his head." Dooley speculates that "p'raps where George is he has to assocyate with manny mimbers iv th' Booker branch on terms iv akequality." Indeed, since "they can't be anny Crow Hiven" maybe "they git on without" racial supremacy there. The conclusion to this column goes beyond even Booker T. Washington's program of accommodation:

"Well," said Mr. Dooley, "I'd take away his right to vote an' his right to ate at th' same table an' his right to ride on th' cars an' even his sacred right to wurruck. I'd take thim all away an' give him the on'y right he needs nowadays in th' South.

"What's that?"

"Th' right to live," said Mr. Dooley. "If he cud start with that he might make something iv himsilf." (*Mr. Dooley's Opinions*, pp. 207-212)

Royko's column the day after the election of Harold Washington was equally incisive: "So I told Uncle Chester—don't worry,

Harold Washington doesn't want to marry your sister" (*Like I Was Sayin'*, pp. 242 ff).

Rarely is Dooley so good as in the column on the Russo-Japanese War—"The Rising of the Subject Races":

"Hogan, d'ye mind, says that it's all been up with us blondes since the Jap'nese war. . . . A subjick race is on'y funny whin it's raaly subjick. About three years ago I stopped laughin' at Jap'nese jokes. Ye have to feel supeeryor to laugh 'an I'm gettin' over that feelin'. An' nawthin' makes a man so mad an' so scared as whin somethin' he looks down on as inferryor tur-rns on him. . . . If th' naygurs down South iver got together an' flew at their masters ye'd hear no more coon songs f'r awhile. It's our conceit makes us supeeryor. Take it out iv us 'an we ar-re about th' same as th' rest. . . ." (*Best*, pp. 132-135)

One of Dunne's best Dooley pieces is "The Dreyfus Case." Here it's Mr. Dooley who is tolerant while Mr. Hennessey displays the fundamental anti-Semitism which characterized not just the trial in France but probably also its reception in the taverns of America. The column begins with Dooley's speculation that Dreyfus would be given a new trial since some of the trial documents had been proved forgeries. "I hope they won't," said Mr. Hennessey. "I don't know annything about it, but I think he's guilty. He's a Jew'" (*Best*, p. 136). Dooley's response chips away at the American propensity for making snap judgements:

There's never been a matther come up in me time that th' American people was so sure about as they ar-re about th' Dhry-fuss case. The Frinch ar-re not so sure, but they'se not a polisman in this counthry that can't tell ye just where Dhry-fuss was whin th' remains iv th' poor girl was found. That's because th' thrile was secret. If 'twas an open thrile, an' ye heerd th' tistimony, an' knew th' language, an' saw th' safe afther 'twas blown open, ye'd be puzzled. . . ." (*Best*, p. 137)

Much of the humor of the Dreyfus column derives from Dooley's mispronunciation of Zola's title: " 'Let us pro-ceed,' says th' fairminded an' impartial judge, 'to th' thrile of th' haynious monsther, Cap Dhry-fuss,' he says. Up jumps Zola, an' says he in Frinch: 'Jackuse,' he says, which is a hell of a mane thing to say to

anny man. An' they thrun him out" (*Best*, pp. 136-137). Zola keeps shouting "Jackuse" and is repeatedly thrown out. The sad fact that Zola had little effect on public opinion, and certainly none on the likes of Hennessey, is born out in the last part of the column. Mr. Dooley relates that at the end of the affair Zola "started f'r th' woods, pursued be his fellow-editors. He's off somewhere in a three now hollerin' 'Jackuse' at ivry wan that passes, sufferin' martyrdom f'r his counthry an' writin' now an' thin about it all."

"What's he charged with?" Mr. Hennessey asked, in bewilderment.

"I'll niver tell ye," said Mr. Dooley. "It's too much to ask."

"Well, annyhow," said Mr. Hennessey, "he's guilty, ye can bet on that."

Like Slats Grobnik, Mr. Dooley has an unshakeable skepticism concerning public servants, especially politicians and the police. Dooley asserts that he believes in the concept of "th' polis foorce" but not in the police. His disappointment in the World Court is evident: " 'Be Hivins, Hinnessy, I looked forward to th' day whin, if a king, impror, or czar started a rough-house, th' blue bus wud come clangin' through th' sthreet's an' they'd be hauled off to Holland f'r trile.' "

"But I suppose it wud be just th' same thing as it is now in rale life."

"How's that?" asked Mr. Hennessey.

"All th' biggest crooks wud get on th' polis foorce," said Mr. Dooley. (*Best*, p. 145)

When Standard Oil was fined more than twenty-nine million dollars in 1907 for breaking the federal law against rebating, it seemed the power of the trusts was on the wane. A higher court, however, set aside the fine. John D. Rockefeller received no punishment but Mr. Dooley's contempt:

"I can't exactly make out what th' charge was that they arrested him on, but th' gin'ral idee was that Jawn D. was goin' around loaded up to th' guards with Standard Ile, exceedin' th' speed limit in acquirin' money, an' singin' 'A charge to keep I have' till th' neighbors cud stand it no longer. The judge says: "Ye're an old offender an' I'll have

to make an example iv ye. Twinty-nine millyon dollars or fifty-eight millyon days. . . ." (*Best*, p. 149)

Of course Rockefeller didn't pay the fine, even though Dooley points out that "he wuddn't have to pawn annything to get th' money." Since "he don't care f'r money in th' passionate way that you an' me do, Hinnissy," Rockefeller's failure to pay the fine was "a matter iv principle." After all, he's only "a custojeen iv money appinted be himsilf" and "kind of a society for th' previntion of croolty to money." John D. Rockefeller "thinks he's doin' a great sarvice to th' wurruld collectin' all th' money in sight" since "it might remain in incompetint hands. . ." (*Best*, pp. 152-153). "Mr. Grobnik and the Three-Martini Lunch" describes Slats's father's need for a drink to steady his nerves before going off to work as a quality-control inspector in the garbage-can factory where "every thirty seconds a new can would tumble off the assembly line. Two men would pick it up, turn it upside down, and lower it over Mr. Grobnik's head. He would twirl around five times, looking for holes in it." Though Grobnik couldn't earn his paycheck without drinking, "the president of the garbage-can factory could deduct his martinis. And nobody ever lowered a can over the president's head" (*Sez Who? Sez Me*, pp. 126 ff).

When Dooley tells Mr. Hennessey that the women of England are demanding the vote, Hennessey sputters with outrage, "Th' shameless viragoes." Dooley sidesteps the issue to deal with the larger question of wise use of the suffrage: "they think it's an aisy job that anyone can do, but it ain't. It's a man's wurruck, an' a sthrong man's with a sthrong stomach." As a final comment, Dooley defers to the local poet: "As Hogan says, I care not who casts th' votes iv me counthry as long as we can hold th' offices" (*Best*, pp. 209-212). "I believe ye're in favor of it ye'ersilf," said Mr. Hennessey." And perhaps he has sized up his barman well, for in these dialogues the reader is always left with the impression that it's better to let progress take its course than to stand in the way.

Taking up the issue of women in athletics, Dooley echoes generations of frightened men: ". . . th' roon iv fam'ly life. 'Twill break up th' happy home" (*Best*, p. 182). To Slats Grobnik, the very idea of women engaging in sports is unnatural. He sends

away for the Charles Atlas muscle-building course because a girl on the North Avenue Beach kicks sand in his face. "Slats jumped up and threw sand in her face. So she punched him in the jaw and knocked him down. Then she kicked more sand on him and walked away." After a winter of body-building, Slats returns to the beach, finds the girl, and slugs her. But "two young men stepped up and punched him silly." He admits it was a mistake to go back to the beach to punch the girl. "It was a dumb thing to do," he said. "I should have waited until I could get her alone and punch her" (*Friends*, pp. 65 ff).

Mr. Dooley and Slats Grobnik show the falsehood of male superiority. Yet if we inquire a little more closely into Mr. Dooley's notions of women athletes, we find a world which appears far less humorous to us, today, than it may have to Dunne's contemporaries:

". . . I come home at night an' . . . I feel in me heart that I'm th' big thing there. What makes me feel that way, says ye? 'Tis th' sinse iv physical supeeryority. Me wife is smarter thin I am. She's had nawthin' to do all day but th' house-wurruck an' puttin in th' coal an' studyin' how she can make me do something I don't want to do. . . . She's thrained to th' minyit in havin' her own way. . . . an' when har-rd put to it, her starry eyes can gleam with tears that I think ar-re grief, but she knows diff'rent. An' I give in. But I've won, just th' same. F'r down in me heart I'm sayin': 'Susette, if I were not a gintleman that wud scorn to smash a lady, they'd be but wan endin' to this fracas. Th' right to th' pint iv th' jaw, Suzette.' I may niver use it, d'ye mind. We may go on livin' together an' me losin' a battle ivry day f'r fifty year. But I always know 'tis there an' th' knowledge makes me a proud an' haughty man. I feel me arm as I go out to lock th' woodshed agin, an' I say to mesilf: 'Oh, woman, if I iver cut loose that awful right.' An' she knows it, too. If she didn't she wuddn't waste her tears. Th' sinse iv her physical infeeryority makes her weep. She must weep or she must fight. Most anny woman wud rather do battle thin cry, but they know it's no use." (*Best*, pp. 182-183)

In the Mr. Dooley dialogues and the Slats Grobnik columns, there are occasionally gratuitous references to wife-beating which are apparently intended as humorous. Writing of Slats's unsuc-

cessful attempts to get a date drunk, Royko says he "never again tried to use liquor to change a woman's mind about anything. At least not until he was married and the woman was his wife, and that didn't work out because he hit her with the bottle" (*Friends*, pp. 68 and 30). Yet in both Royko's writing and in Dunne's, it is clear that only a low-life cad would strike a woman, especially his wife. Certainly, Slats Grobnik isn't being held up as a model to emulate, nor is the suppressed rage seen in the Dooley anecdote to be taken seriously. Yet we now know, at least, that a story like Dooley's—which bears remarkable resemblance to Jackie Gleason's old Ralph Cramden line ("One of these days, Alice. One of these days. Pow! Right in the kisser")—confers a kind of social acceptability. Perhaps it's like *Paradise Lost* in which Satan becomes a greater hero than Milton intended. Royko provides a nearer explanation. When Slats's father sees the movie *Frankenstein*, he identifies with the monster on the rampage and sobs loudly at the end when the monster is destroyed (*Friends*, p. 24).

When Dunne takes up the cudgels against wife-beating, the force of his argument is blunted by the assertion that it is more an English practice than an American one and by his reservations concerning the proposed cure. The column on "Corporal Punishment" refers to "Prisidint Thaydore Rosenfelt's" suggestion that wife-beaters be treated to "th' other good old English insti-toochion iv a whippin' post" (*Dissertations*, p. 221). Dooley wonders whether it will be good for Uncle Sam: "No, Hinnissy, there ain't a hair's diff'rence between a blackguard who beats his wife an' a government that beats its childher" (*Dissertations*, pp. 224-225). Dooley, a bachelor whose observations on marriage are from "th' grandstand," holds no brief for wife-beating. Indeed, by ascribing it to the English, the Irish-born Dooley shows his contempt. But the cure proposed by Roosevelt holds no attraction either:

"Ye can't inflict corp'ral punishmint onless ye're sthronger thin th' fellow ye punish, an' if ye ar-re sthronger ye ought to be ashamed iv ye'esilf. Whiniver I hear iv a big six-fut school-teacher demandin' that he be allowed to whale a thirty-two inch child I feel like askin' him up here to put on th' gloves with Jeffreys." (*Dissertations*, p. 225)

Hennessey will not be put off with either logic or compassion. "Spare th' rod an' spile th' child," said Mr. Hennessey." "Yes," said Mr. Dooley, "but don't spare th' rod an' ye spile th' rod, th' child, an' th' child's father'" (*Dissertations*, p. 225).

Neither Martin Dooley nor Slats Grobnik are likely to be impressive in their courtship. We know that Slats is married, but so far we haven't heard what sort of woman would want him. Dooley observes marriage from afar, saying he knows "' about marredge th' way an astronomer knows about th' stars.'" Mr. Hennessey baits him, bragging that with fourteen children he's no astronomer, but a star (*Best*, p.22). Slats's girl troubles came in his youth, mostly because he was rude, or crude, or cracked his knuckles. But love struck him, too. Royko tells us that Slats punched a new girl at school. Instead of crying, she "threw a rock at his head. Slats found her irresistible" (*Friends*, pp. 48 ff). In an earlier column, "Spirit of Love Slugs Slats," Royko tells us that since Slats was sure no girl would go out with him a second time, he carefully planned his dates to get her to surrender her virtue at once. He tried music, passionate love letters, and even reciting poetry outside the girl's window until arrested "on suspicion of being a Peeping Tom" (*Friends*, p. 29).

Mr. Dooley is ignorant, sometimes a braggart, often bordering on arrogance. His various foils—Father Kelly, Hogan "the pote," Mr. Hennessey, the alderman Jawn McKenna, and Clancy—enable him to state what should be obvious, sometimes to speak for sanity, certainly to acknowledge the role of power and the well-placed bribe in politics. And that's where Martin Dooley, turn-of-the-century tavern owner on Ar-rchey Road meets Slats Grobnik, boon companion of Mike Royko's youth. Both bear a family resemblance to Langston Hughes's Jesse Semple. Slats rarely becomes aware of anything beyond his own neighborhood, but he is certainly aware of the power of a Chicago alderman. Finley Peter Dunne tired of Martin Dooley and the Archey Road crowd. His later work consists of clear, insightful essays on the ways of the world. But nobody cared as much as when he wrote in the person of Mr. Dooley. Dunne had become, as Robert Hutchins pointed out, a competitor with his own character. We are the poorer because Dunne chose to be himself. The same for Mike Royko. Slats is his most unforgettable

character, yet Royko only rarely writes of him now, and we are the poorer for it. Of course, Royko never relied as heavily on Slats as Dunne did Dooley. And unlike Dooley who through it all is an admirable character, Grobnik is a low-life. With Dooley, turn-of-the-century readers could be confident that the lower-class Irish minority was becoming an informed citizenry. After all, Dooley got his information "be th' pa-apers." In effect, Dunne's Martin Dooley was a Pat-and-Mike joke that had begun to think. In Slats Grobnik, society does not progress, it regresses. Slats is as low as an honest citizen in a free society can get. Mr. Dooley makes us hope that a free society might survive. Slats Grobnik is the kind of guy that inhabits nightmares in a free society.

Michigan State University

#### NOTES

1. *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War* (1898); *Mr. Dooley in the Hearts of His Countrymen* (1899); *Mr. Dooley's Philosophy* (1900); *Mr. Dooley's Opinions* (1901); *Observations by Mr. Dooley* (1902); and *Dissertations by Mr. Dooley* (1906). Newer collections include *Mr. Dooley at his Best*, edited by Elmer Ellis (1938) and *Mr. Dooley on Ivrything and Ivrybody*, edited by Robert Hutchins (1963).
2. *Slats Grobnik and Some Other Friends* (1973); *Sez Who? Sez Me* (1982); and *Like I was Sayin'* (1983).

## WORKING WORLDS IN DAVID MAMET'S DRAMAS

DOROTHY H. JACOBS

Deservedly, the language of David Mamet's plays receives attention. Whether defined as "gritty eloquence" (Freedman, 32) or out of "the apparent wasteland of middle American speech" (Eder, 42), Mamet's stage language belongs to characters who are identifiable, in large measure, by their occupations. Thus the language is one of the elements of coherence in Mamet's unique contribution to American theatre, the dramatization of men at work. Instead of the usual domestic setting for personal and social conflicts, Mamet's stage is a working world. Predominantly the realistic theatre is the home of the unlivable livingroom, conversational kitchen, and confessional front porch. Mamet replaces these set pieces, in some of his more distinct plays, with a junkshop, a real estate office, a lakeboat, and a theatre dressingroom. Further, Mamet does not, as do some playwrights, use these non-domestic settings as mere backdrops for the revelation of souls in agony or appeals for economic reformation. Rather, the settings are essential to the dramas. Whether the concern is "the shot," "the leads," nightman's duty, or acting, the men of *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Lakeboat*, and *A Life in the Theatre* are vitally engaged in their work.

*Glengarry Glen Ross* presents the most sustained and, at the same time, most complex working world in Mamet's plays. Two sets, the first in a Chinese restaurant, the second in the real estate office, emphasize the portability of salesmanship beyond the confines of an office. Indeed, the salesmen have contempt for the manager who never has gone out on "a sit." In the vernacular of his trade Levene tells Williamson,

You have no idea of your job. A man is his job and you're *fucked* at yours . . . You don't know what it *is*, you don't have the *sense*, you don't have the *balls*. You ever been on a sit? *Ever?* I'm selling something they don't even *want*. You talk about soft sell . . . before we had a name for it . . . before we called it anything, we did it . . . and, I *did* it . . . Cold *calling* fella. Door to door. But you don't know. You don't know. You never heard of a streak . . . what are you, you're a *secretary*, John. Fuck *you*. (44-45)

At the restaurant a series of three consecutive dialogues, each with different characters, reveals various aspects of the salesman's world, all, however, united by the urgency of their need to sell, to get on the board, to win the Cadillac. In the first conversation Levene, desperate for leads, alternately urges and disparages Williamson, who remains unimpressed and uninterested until he can get Levene to agree to kickbacks of twenty percent of any closing deal plus a hundred bucks, up front, for two leads. Because Levene has in pocket only enough for one lead, Williamson refuses. "I can't split them," he says. "Why?" asks Levene. "Because I say so," is Williamson's answer. His assertion and maintenance of present power is in continual contrast with Levene's claims to past greatness, when, ironically, he bought the Seville for the boss, when, as he says, "Those guys *lived* on the business I brought in."

Levene's self-generated confidence recalls, by contrast, Willy Loman's feeble boost of temporary hope when he makes his appeal to Howard. More than tone and diction emphasize the relative toughness of Mamet's scene, although the vulgarities are appropriate to a working world not simply a third of a continent away from Arthur Miller's polite and repressed bourgeois discourse between a dismissive employer and a worn-out salesman. Howard's preoccupation with the inane recording of the voices of his children and wife is a small reminder of the dominance of domesticity in *Death of a Salesman*, even to this one brief scene set in Willy's working world, where we see him not working, but being fired. Willy beaten, failing, dying we see through the effects on the Loman family. Families simply do not figure in the working worlds of the Glengarry salesmen. When Levene, once, says, "I'm asking you. As a favor to me? (Pause.)

John. (Long pause.) John: my *daughter*," Williamson, not surprisingly, interrupts with a blunt refusal.

Where Arthur Miller was at considerable effort to insist upon the significance of Willy, no *cri de coeur* calls out from any attendant personnel in the real estate office. The only attention paid here is to the salesboard. Fate, too, has no sentiment of lost dreams of success and popularity, but only the strict arithmetic of sales: "The top man wins a Cadillac, the second man wins a set of steak knives, the bottom two men get fired." Caught between fear of firing and exultation of winning, Mamet's salesmen compete for survival. Levene and Moss want leads enough to rob them. Roma wants to keep his preeminence. Aaronow, closest in mood to Willy Loman, wants out. His meagre articulations of chronic fears are those of a punched-out salesman, down too many times to have any spirit left. Unheroically featured, Aaronow makes a stammering, forced exit.

*Glengarry Glen Ross* gives no hint of an attempted tragic vision or any of the attendant moral trappings such a drama stipulates. A corrupt and corrupting system is evident in every one of Mamet's scenes: it is underscored at the conclusion, when Roma clearly articulates his means to success: "Do you understand? My stuff is mine, and his stuff is ours." To Willy Loman's fumbblings for understanding Miller offered significantly counterpointing characters. Linda is believable, and Biff painfully achieves a truth about himself and his family. Conspicuously balanced against Willy's expectations of the power of being "well-liked" was the unpopular, studious neighbor kid, Bernard, who, grown up, passes handsomely across the stage on his way to argue a case before the Supreme Court. No such ameliorating vision intrudes upon the shambles of the real estate office. Truth here is an inconvenience. Against the consumer rights of a client Roma constructs a ploy to delay the exercise of those rights. Caught in a crime, Levene tries to buy a reprieve. Neither is there, as in *Death of a Salesman*, any rumbling of conscience or death by choice.

The crime itself, the stealing of the leads, is nothing more than a logical extension of the competitiveness integral to the business. Mamet, in his notes to the play, calls attention to the

linguistic parallels in sales and crime: "The appointment was called a *lead*—in the same way that a clue in a criminal case is called a *lead*—i.e. it may lead to the suspect, the suspect in this case being a prospect." Gain and survival in this working world depend upon accomplishment in pretense. Like skilled actors, these salesmen can perform on any set—Chinese restaurant, suburban diningroom, or ransacked office. Manipulation through language is a professional requisite for them. To "always be closing," as the practical sales maxim asserts, is, after all, to always be selling. And, in the end, at the "close" of the sales action, the character with the most power is the non-salesman, the office functionary who controls the leads, the John who gets his percentage of every salesman's portion.

This work environment might suggest affinities with some earlier naturalistic dramas, especially those of Bertolt Brecht and Clifford Odets. In proletarian drama there is a class of workers, stockyard-workers or taxi-drivers, who collectively comprise a sympathetic group championed by heroes, Brecht's Joan Dark or Odets' just plain Joe, against the oppressor, Pierpont Mauler or Harry Fatt. Mamet's salesmen, though, have no collective identity, no Saint Joan or Lefty, and no commonly acknowledged adversary against whom they all can unite. Rather, they compete with each other, as they must.

The realistic settings are just that; they lack the oppressiveness which would intimate a deterministic effect from the environment. Arthur Miller's expressionistic set effectively squashed Willy's little home between those towering forms of New York City which deprived his garden of vital sunshine. A dominating metropolis was as debilitating as its ethos of success for Willy Loman. Settings in *Glengarry Glen Ross* do not carry this sort of symbolic weight. Mamet's salesmen, unlike Willy, are not victims of their environment. Rather, they are participants, even conquerors of it through their powers of concentration and persuasion. Roma's versatility overreaches the ambience. His spontaneity and agility, not furnishings, create a reality where the evocation of Scottish-sounding estates may lead to the purchasing of sand-flats in Arizona.

Mamet acknowledges the probable veracity in interpretations of the competitive theme in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, but he

also asserts, "All that I set out to do was write about my experiences in a real estate office." There he worked long enough to develop an appreciation for the salesmen's skills. "They could sell anyone, including you and including me, anything. The men I was working with could sell cancer . . . They were people who spent their whole life in sales . . . never worming for a salary, dependent for their living on their ability to charm." Mamet got the job when, just graduated from college, he returned to his native Chicago "to pursue a career as an actor. Theatrical work was scarce and," he adds, "I was virtually unemployable in any case, being without either skills or experience, so I registered with a temporary employment agency. The agency sent me out for a two-day job as a typist in a real estate office. I stayed a year" (*National Theatre*, 6). Earlier, as a teenager, he was a gopher in a theatre, "fascinated by the way they worked" (Gottlieb, 1). Exploring past what he defines as "a very bourgeois background," Mamet found that "in Chicago I was always exposed to a wider variety of lives. Summer jobs, the steel mills, factories, that kind of thing. I washed windows and drove cabs and spent some time in the Merchant Marine" (Wetzsteon, 101).

More sustainedly he has directed, taught, founded, and written for the theatre. Among his frequent defenses of actors and their responsibility "to make our dreams clear" (Gottlieb, 4) is his concern for "the artistic conditions of their work." Not unions, producers, or backers, but actors should control the theatre, he believes. As for his own labor, he candidly insists that "making art isn't magic but hard fucking work" (Wetzsteon, 103). In an article he wrote for the *New York Times*, "A Playwright Learns from Film," Mamet distinguishes between the craft of the dramatist, protected by his guild, and the unionized screenwriter's position as "a laborer hired to turn out a product." Conditions of work, economic demands, tangibility of the product, all figure in Mamet's scrutiny of the writer as craftsman.

The actor as craftsman is one of the primary topics in Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre*, which begins with two actors discussing, in their dressingroom, the night's performance. Ensuing scenes indicate what is deeper than the actors' differences

in age, skill, and disposition: their absorption in acting. An amusing device in the play is the inclusion of scenes where the actors are performing "onstage." "Provocative" and "beautiful" are the terms Mamet uses to describe the Chicago staging of this play where "we see the actors' backs during their onstage scenes, and a full view of them during backstage scenes—in effect, a true view from backstage" (*A Life*, 9). Thus we see them in the many aspects of their work, dressing, rehearsing, acting, removing makeup, analyzing performances. To these actions Mamet adds dramatization of their rivalries, reluctance to leave the stage, and their many necessary attentions to personal appearance. "You take excellent care of your tools," says Robert preparatory to asking John to "do less" in their forthcoming scene. Yet another part of the job is what Robert insists upon as "professional procedure" or etiquette, the grace he expects from his fellow workers, even though it is his lingering backstage which puts him in the graceless position of being asked to leave. Only John, the younger actor, communicates with the world beyond the stage: he talks on the telephone and has dates for dinner. Nevertheless the play is totally about a life in the theatre where Robert gives a curtain call speech to an empty house.

Certainly, then, the actor's working conditions include who he works with. The number of fellow workers increases in *Lakeboat*, and so do the number of locations on board ship. Beginning with the offloading of the boat, twenty-eight short scenes move from deck to fantail, engine room, rail, and galley. The second mate explains hours and duties to the new nightman, Dale. The fireman sums up his job: "That's eight hours a day watching two gauges. If you don't read, do something, you'd go insane." From able-bodied seamen Dale learns the disadvantages of straight-shift, the dollar compensation for injury on the job, and the legitimacy of Joe's question, "You get paid for doing a job. You trade the work for money, am I right? Why is it any fucking less good than being a doctor, for example?" Joe's analysis of the genuine importance of people, which includes his revelation of his wish to be "a real ballet dancer," meshes with the stories the crew develops about what happened to the drunken sailor as imaginative counterpoint to

the exigencies of fire drills and making schedule on each watch.

No such exactitude formalizes the action in *American Buffalo*. Don, Bob, and Teach move unpredictably in and out of both Don's Resale Shop and the scheme to steal a coin collection. Definitions of free enterprise and proper business procedures, as well as plans for percentages and a safe heist, clash with manifest evidence of incompetence in a comic rendition of an American ethic of business. Don knows nothing of the value of the junk he sells and everything of resentment against the man who does. Teach hocks friends quicker than he does his watch and shouts out a world-view devoid of any virtue. In this place of business, talk and negotiations take the place of constructive action, and, actually, no work is done.

Several working worlds intersect in Mamet's play of blatant ironies, *The Water Engine*. Subtitled *An American Fable*, the play is set in a radio station studio in 1934. With the opening song, "Illinois," and the voiceover of the Announcer's welcome to The Century of Progress, Mamet prepares us for the contrast between ideological promises—"upon thine Inland Sea stands Chicago, great and free"—and the experience of an inventor who has created an engine powered by water. Scenes shift rapidly among Lang in his laboratory, Murray at the Chicago *Daily News*, Mr. Wallace and Bernie at the candystore, a patent lawyer in his office, and a barker at the Hall of Science. The announcement of "the concrete poetry of Humankind" turns out to foretell not only a model rocketship at the Fair, but also threats from Oberman in Bughouse Square. Like Teach, Rita equates business with chicanery: "They all are thieves," she warns her brother. They are murderers, too. As the Twentieth Century Limited leaves on Track 5, the bodies of Lang and Rita are found "on a stretch of industrial lake frontage five miles north of Waukegan." Repeated, the phrase "The Second Hundred Years of Progress" has the acrid stink of industrial sludge.

The play's technique of intersecting scenes and voiceovers in the radio show set is an advancement over earlier expressionistic methods used to present the worker in an oppressive economic system. Elmer Rice's Mr. Zero roams in constructed Elysian

Fields before he decides to reenslave himself to the domineering adding machine. O'Neill's Yank is, according to the stage directions, unnaturally "imprisoned by white steel" in a fore-castle "peopled by Neanderthals." A chorus of metallic voices gives the impression of stokers as machines, and Yank congratulates himself as the "spirit of steel"—before he discovers his identity with the ape. More realistic, despite the pseudo-historical setting, is the pragmatic, capitalistic world of *Marco Millions*. Its tone, too, is closer to Mamet's, if only in its sense of satirical humour. Still, though, O'Neill's characters are lost souls, trapped in ideological cages, hidden behind adopted masks. There are no souls in Mamet's marketplaces. Mr. Happiness, in another of Mamet's radio plays, broadcasts truthless assurances which will soothe his troubled listeners. His easy homilies are the language of a cunningly working world.

The location of that world is given, in two of Mamet's early plays, as "a Big City on a Lake." In one of the dialogues of *Duck Variations*, George refers to the lake as a sewer. Emil counters, recalling the Illinois song, "A lake just the same. My Inland Sea." George retorts, "Fulla Inland Shit." But not Chicago alone has this content. New York City, the site of *Edmond's* purgatory, features business much the same among B-girls and combination pimp-muggers. A would-be actress's failure to say, "I am a waitress," leads to her murder. Settling into sodomic prison life, Edmond speculates on an ideal world, one where "there's work to do."

More significant in terms of working worlds is Mamet's *Reunion*. Bernie begins to establish intimacy with his estranged twenty-four-year-old daughter by telling her about his jobs with American Van Lines, the telephone company, and the restaurant. Despite the fact that he lost pension, benefits, and seniority when he was canned by the telephone company, Bernie claims to "like it at the restaurant. I love it at the restaurant," he says. "It's where I work." His sense of their lack of contact comes out in his lament, "You haven't even *been* to the restaurant." Just as the restaurant is important to Bernie, so is respect for the craft of mystification essential to John in Mamet's newest play, *The Shawl*. Similar to the backstage and onstage scenes of *A Life in the Theatre* is *The Shawl's* technique of juxtaposing scenes

where John practices his divination with scenes where he explains the sources of his professional success. Whether referred to as profession, craft, or job, the work of most of Mamet's characters is absolutely significant, if not totally self-identifying.

This sort of cognizance informs that earlier Chicago drama of men on the job, *The Front Page*. Press Room melodrama over the escaped convict is less compelling than the drama of Hildy Johnson's job as reporter for the *Herald-Examiner*. But Hecht and MacArthur's setting in a Criminal Courts building seems secure compared to the criminality existent in shop, office, and street of Mamet's plays. Tone, too, varies. In their Epilogue to *The Front Page*, the authors explain that

... the inequities, double dealings, chicaneries and immoralities which as ex-Chicagoans we knew so well returned to us in a mist called the Good Old Days . . . As a result *The Front Page*, despite its oaths and realisms is a Valentine thrown to the past. (191-92)

Mamet's valentines have no scent of nostalgia, and even when they have a comic trim, they tend to have an arrow in the heart.

Yet if Mamet's dramas are not so romantic as Hecht's, neither are they as dialectical as Brecht's. Self-conscious analysis and debate, as in *Mother Courage* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, interrupt not at all the dealings of Mamet's workers. Mamet is at odds, too, with his American contemporary, Sam Shepard, in that he eschews Shepard's "mythic" families as much as he deviates from that American tradition of family disharmonies and dislocations so dominant in the works of Williams and Miller. Mamet does have dramas without working worlds: *Dark Pony*, *Duck Variations*, and *The Woods*. So, too, does he have plays where a theme of separation predominates: *Edmond*, and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. His recent "ghost stories" indicate new milieus, too. Nevertheless, settings, characters, and actions in major plays assert the viability of his distinctive dramas of working worlds.

If Mamet took his "apprenticeship among the working class" (*DLB*, 65), it was in Chicago. Many plays are set there, and most have opened there. Actors and critics have noticed "slick, fast,

syncopated . . . rhythms" in "the unmistakable Chicago accent" (*National Theatre*, 8 Kissel, 143) of some of Mamet's characters. More significant still is the thematic link to the literature of his city. Samuel Freedman traces a lineage from Studs Lonigan's 58th Street Gang in the "vigor and corruption" of Mamet's Glengarry salesmen. Augie March's picaresque history of employment is akin to Mamet's fascination with all kinds of workers. More than the title-poem, "Chicago," is testament to Sandburg's feel for the workers of this city; there are verses on "Washerwoman," "Fish Crier," "Muckers," and "Ice Handler." Earlier Chicago realists, such as Hamlin Garland, saw the city as a "huge, muddy, windy market place" (Regnery, 265), and the novelists—Fuller, Herrick, Norris, Sinclair—presented harrowing accounts of men confronting the solid materialism of Chicago. This literary heritage, which includes Mamet's favorites, Cather and Hemingway, has, as a distinguishing quality, a "loathing of pretense." For Mamet the Chicago tradition "carries with it a certain intolerance for the purely ornamental . . . and a great support for the idea of brashness and the application of the individual intellect" (Freedman, 32, 40). Thus place is basic in Mamet's dramatically realized working worlds.

University of Rhode Island

#### WORKS CITED

- Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1981. 7, Part 2:63-70.
- Eder, Richard. "David Mamet's New Realism." *New York Times* 12 March 1978. 6:40+.
- Freedman, Samuel G. "Echoes of Lonigan, 50 Years After." *New York Times* 17 March 1985. Book Rev.
- . "The Gritty Eloquence of David Mamet." *New York Times* 21 April 1985. Magazine: 32+.
- Gottlieb, Richard. "The 'Engine' that Drives Playwright David Mamet." *New York Times* 15 January 1978. 2:l+.
- Hecht, Ben, and Charles MacArthur. *The Front Page*. New York: Covici & Friede, 1928.
- Kissel, Howard. Rev. of American Buffalo, by David Mamet. *Women's Wear Daily* 28 October 1983, in *New York Theatre Critics Reviews*. 44:143.
- Mamet, David. *A Life in the Theatre*. New York: Grove, 1977.
- . *American Buffalo, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, and Duck Variations*. London: Methuen, 1978.
- . "A Playwright Learns from Film." *New York Times* 20 July 1980. II, 6:5.
- . *Glengarry Glen Ross*. London: Methuen, 1984.

- . *Reunion; Dark Pony*. New York: Grove, 1979.
- . *The Shawl and Prairie du Chien*. New York: Grove, 1985.
- . *The Water Engine*. New York: Grove, 1977.
- . *The Woods*. New York: Grove, 1979.
- National Theatre Background Notes for Glengarry Glen Ross*. London: National Theatre, 1984.
- Regnery, Henry. "Chicago and Its Authors." *Modern Age* 27 (1983):256-66.
- Sandburg, Carl. *Chicago Poems*. New York: Henry Holt, 1916.
- Storey, Robert. "The Making of David Mamet." *Hollins Critic* 16 (1979):1-11.
- Wetzsteon, Ross. "David Mamet: Remember that Name." *Village Voice* 5 July 1976. 101+.

## "THAT SOMBER CITY" SINCE MIDCENTURY

DAVID D. ANDERSON

"That somber city" is, of course, Chicago, as it has been associated with Saul Bellow and his work since the publication of his first major novel, *the Adventures of Augie March*, in 1953; that relationship remains one of the few biographical and critical generalizations about his life and work Bellow has not yet disavowed. "I thrive on a certain amount of smoke, gloom and cold stone," he commented in 1970 in explaining his preference for Chicago as a place in which to live and work. "Here things are more strident and gloomy."

Whether remarks such as this, scattered through dozens of interviews, reinforcing the sureness of Bellow's use of Chicago in most of his works, ranging from *Dangling Man* in 1944 to *The Dean's December* in 1982, make Chicago Bellow's "place" or whether his "place" is the historical context of this century or the urban environment or the Jewish-American experience or the attempt "to propogate a kind of cultural conservatism," as Richard Poirier has asserted, or the dozens of other attempts to explain, in critical words of few syllables, the significance of his work, is an issue as critically moot and as ultimately unresolvable as such attempts deserve to be. "People who stick labels on you are in the gumming business," Bellow replied to one such attempt in 1981.

Nevertheless, Bellow's relationships with Chicago are quite close—as place to live and work, as literary setting and subject matter, as twentieth-century reality, and as changing metaphor for a changing but neither evolving nor progressing American experience. Bellow's Chicago is, simultaneously, the Chicago of Sandburg's mythical "City of the Big Shoulders," of Dreiser's

canyons of stone and glass, of Anderson's human faces, each fixed immutably in the mass, of Farrell's neighborhood microcosm, of Algren's neon nightmare. Unlike his New York, the tourist's New York or the sojourner's New York of Staten Island Ferry, Greenwich Village, the Upper West Side, and Fifth Avenue bus, Bellow's Chicago is that of a realism that goes beyond the facts of place or the limits of physical environment as it simultaneously accepts and rejects his subject matter, "the circumstances of ordinary life," as he calls it. He defines a Chicago of human dimensions, of human vices and vices humanized, the Chicago of memory, and he writes, too, of the Gargantuan Chicago, the Chicago in which medieval gluttony is transmuted by modern vice into a nightmare beyond the reaches of Rabelais's imagination but not beyond Bellow's. "I grew up in Chicago," he comments; "I got it into my bones."

Bellow's Chicago, consequently, is the Chicago of his memory, the Chicago in which Augie March proclaims confidently, "I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way . . ." But Bellow's Chicago is increasingly also the Chicago of observation, of Albert Corde, the journalist turned academic who from the drab perspective of Bucharest in December remembers "The true voice of Chicago—the spirit of the age speaking from its lowest register; the very bottom."

In these two works, separated by nearly thirty years, Bellow defines not only the extremes of the Chicago experience, but he deals, too, with Chicago from two different perspectives, from that of an exuberant youth in search of adventure, "a sort of Columbus of those near at hand," whose voice is of liberation and affirmation, and from that of "a kind of executive" who from the "oppressive socialist wonderland" of Rumania remembers "broken-bottle, dog-fouled streets," empty ideology, a generation at once fraudulent and defrauded, a city dominated by the emptiness of the Lake to the East of the Gold Coast, the wasteland to the West.

These novels are the twin polarities of Bellow's Chicago, that of the young man moulded by the city and its people—the people of Bellow's and Augie's Northwest Side—and that of the

middle-aged Professor of Journalism and Dean of Students at an unnamed Chicago college who awaits a death in Bucharest as he broods on the fate of Chicago and the people who have become its victims. Both Augie and the Dean are products of Chicago, but Augie the young man, takes the city's spirit with him as he leaves it behind; the Dean, Albert Corde, has recently returned to the city after two decades as a journalist in Paris and beyond. Augie is confident in the role Chicago has given him; Corde, conversely, is, like almost all of Bellow's protagonists, suspended in time and space, his certainties demolished, his academic identity only tentative, the Chicago he once knew and his sense of that city both apparently beyond regeneration or redemption.

Central to *the Adventures of Augie March* are people and movement, and its Chicago is America's as yet unfulfilled maturity, a maturity that insists that around the next corner, beyond the next hill, or in the next block lies the realization of the promise. Conversely, *The Dean's December* is a novel of gloom unmitigated to the end, when Corde is permitted a brief glimpse of the infinite; its Chicago is that of an aging America, its promise beyond fulfillment, with one fifth of the nation's population and more than half of the city's forever excluded from participation in a society once open to the nimble, the quick-witted, the talented, but now adrift in the stink and stagnation of fear. Augie's Chicago is the Chicago of immigrants and optimism and neighborhoods and the manageable, human corruption of Big Bill Thompson and Ed Kelley, of prohibition and depression; Corde's Chicago is that of a city and a corruption grown impersonal, inhuman, unmanageable.

Augie is drawn in the tradition of American innocence and affirmation that sent Huckleberry Finn down the Mississippi a century in imaginative time earlier, and that sent George Willard from an Ohio village to Chicago and maturity as the nineteenth century became the twentieth; like his literary ancestors, Augie moves through prohibition and depression and war and its aftermath with dignity and courage and purpose, his faith and his exuberance unadulterated to the end of the novel; his journey through its pages and across a large part of twentieth-century geography is at once flight and search in a tradition that had brought Europeans to America, and Easterners to the Midwest

and beyond throughout the course of a journey and the adventures of nearly three centuries; Augie's journey is at once metaphorical and real.

Conversely, Albert Corde's meditations move with certainty—although Corde is unwilling, perhaps unable to admit it—in the direction of the truth that Theodore Dreiser blundered toward as a twentieth-century urban industrial America emerged from the agrarian innocence and romantic violence of the nineteenth. Movement—by jet—is incidental; the drab, impersonal, uncomfortable but orderly Bucharest represents a failure only superficially different from that of drab, disorderly, uncomfortable, impersonally violent Chicago; the grim, impersonal, institutionalized, systematized death that comes in Bucharest and the random, violent death in Chicago a few weeks before both epitomize an age in which horror is doctrinally denied or transmuted by violent fantasy into mindless chaos.

As *the Adventures of Augie March* opens, pre-adolescent Augie is, like Huck Finn before him, becoming simultaneously civilized and corrupted, both qualities the conditions of survival in American society. But Augie's corruption, like Huck's, is limited by the ethics of innocence; where Huck learns to distinguish between borrowing and stealing, Augie learns to con free eye-glasses for his mother from the city; at twelve he turns employment as an elf working with a department store Santa into a lucrative—and fair-minded—graft—and he learns to take his lumps when it fails. But he cannot and will not become the exploiter who becomes rich at any cost; that path, it becomes evident, will be his older brother Simon's.

The values of the city, of playing the angles, finding a graft, are taught Augie not by the city itself but by its people—first by Grandma Lausch, the ancient March boarder and surrogate mother to Augie, the older Simon, and the younger, feeble-minded, ultimately institutionalized Georgie. Grandma, a grotesque like those of *Winesburg, Ohio*, seeks, just as they had attempted to direct George Willard, to remake Simon and Augie in her own autocratic image. Her success with Simon is balanced by the first of Augie's successful refusals to become "civilized."

But more important to Augie's development is William Einhorn, crippled but indomitable, an operator in the classic

Chicago tradition, for whom Augie runs errands in his adolescence and from whom he learns to refuse to be intimidated either by physical limitations or by circumstance as Einhorn is wiped out but not destroyed by the stock market crash. Nor is Einhorn disgusted by Augie's first brief, unsuccessful venture into crime. "You've got opposition in you," he tells Augie, but it must become purposeful. For a high school graduation present, Einhorn takes Augie to a brothel. But Augie will not become an operator in Einhorn's image.

Nor will he become civilized in the image of the wealthy Renlings who want to make him a suitable companion. Having picked up a few pointers in dress and behavior, he flees them, as he also does from the rich, beautiful, grasping Fenchel sisters, Esther and Thea. After a second brief, unsuccessful flirtation with crime, Augie rides the rods back to Chicago. While Simon marries well and begins his rise, Augie completes his education in fine Chicago fashion by stealing textbooks to order for graduate students and educating himself by reading them before delivery. At this point Augie is ready to put the geographical Chicago behind him. Refusing "to lead a disappointed life," knowing that there is nothing in life that he wants to prove to anyone, he is ready to pursue and participate in the high comedy of his age—in Mexico, at war, in Europe, at each stage rejecting not only the promise of success but the promiser, and at each critical moment fleeing in a new direction. At the novel's end he drives through the Belgian night in a faltering car through the aftermath of war. On a shady business trip, laughing at himself and eternity, he concludes, "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."

Augie's innocence, his celebration of the life that refuses to be intimidated, corrupted, or enslaved, is a clear reflection of the spirit of the Chicago out of which he came; his exuberance is based on his confidence in his search for fulfillment and his faith in its end.

*The Adventure of Augie March* is clearly the work in which Bellow found both his authentic American, Midwestern, Chicago voice and a new looseness of form radically different from

the formalism of *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, and those qualities were quickly recognized and appreciated by reviewers, critics, and National Book Award judges. But Bellow has several times repudiated his achievement in the novel. In 1965, shortly after the publication of the more restrained comedy of *Herzog* he deplored what he saw as the abuse of freedom, of liberty become artistic license. More specifically, after the publication of *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow's touching recreation of Delmore Schwartz as giver and victim, Bellow deplored *Augie March* as ingenuous, as naive, and out of artistic control: "Having adopted the role of the innocent," he said, "I couldn't doff it . . . I couldn't introduce a shrewd contrast without surrendering the original given . . . I felt trapped in an affectation of innocence."

Bellow's comments clearly apply to the sustained exuberance of the novel as Augie, like Huck Finn and George Willard before him, rejects determinism in favor of freedom, of abundance, of the richness of life, a rejection that had become impossible for Herzog, for Tommy Wilhelm of *Sieze the Day*, even for Henderson, Augie's closest relation among Bellow's people. As Augie himself recalls at the novel's end, echoing his perceptions of the city at its beginning,

There's too much of everything of this kind, that's come home to me, too much history and culture to keep track of, too many details, too much news, too much example, too much influence, too many guys to tell you to be as they are, and all this hugeness, abundance, turbulence, Niagara Falls torrent. Which who is supposed to interpret? Me?

Nevertheless, unlike Bellow's later protagonists who are ultimately unable to escape the anxieties of history, of circumstance, Augie reflects clearly the discovery of Bellow's own America, the Chicago he had found in 1924 at the age of nine, "the Chicago," he said, "that makes my nerve endings tingle."

The fact is that all these American cities were cities of immigrants, they were exotic places . . . united by certain ideas: The idea that you can lead a free life, that you don't need to fear the authorities. The idea that you entered into a contract with a hundred million others, to be an American, to forget your own history and start over again.

. . . And being foreign is not so terribly important if you grew up among Poles, Germans, Swedes, Irishmen, Mexicans, Italians, and blacks, as I did.

This, clearly, is the Chicago of memory and faith, the Chicago of Augie March's youth as well as Bellow's, where all things are possible, where Jefferson's dream of an open society becomes real, where divergent views of happiness, Augie's and Simon's, can both be pursued. It is as much if not more a state of mind, a liberation of the spirit, as it is a geographical place. But at the same time, as Bellow recognized later in the above interview, at the time of publication of *the Dean's December*, it is a Chicago as fleeting as memory, as ephemeral as shadows under the el:

I think there's a residual feeling of pride in the corruption in Chicago, and the fact that it's Toughville. You have to have guts and savvy to live there. But the sense of the old city has disappeared with the old neighborhoods. . . .

What you have now in Chicago is a new form of segregation, which is owing to the abandonment of the public institutions by the white population. They send their kids to private schools, they move out, to the suburbs or the sunbelt. Do you call that the old American moxie?

Not entirely without hope, Bellow concludes, "I don't know whether Chicago together with the rest of this country can face the test of this time. . . ."

The dimension of that question is the substance of *The Dean's December*, Bellow's first truly Chicago novel since *Augie March*. However, if that earlier novel is an exercise in memory and faith, the Dean's Chicago is an exercise in a dream become nightmare as the aging journalist turned Dean encounters what has happened to this, his city.

The novel had its inception not only in the reality of Chicago as the brave celebration of its "Century of Progress" is 50 years in the past but also in the reality of Bellow's own life and work. He had contemplated writing a factual book on Chicago as a companion piece to his *To Jerusalem and Back* and had made hundreds of notes, and then he had accompanied his wife Alexandra to Bucharest to visit her dying mother, and, "as

always," he commented, "when I go abroad I brooded about the hometown." (Not incidentally, *Augie March* was largely written in Paris when Bellow was on a Guggenheim.)

The Dean, Albert Corde, had accompanied his wife Minna, an astro-physicist, to Bucharest to visit her dying mother, one of the few remnants of a once-genteel pre-socialist civilization. Minna had delayed an important trip to Mount Palomar to go; the Dean had left behind a life that was increasingly active and frustrating. In Bucharest, Minna visits her mother in a drab socialist hospital and her aging relatives in decaying splendor; Corde waters the cyclomens in his mother-in-law's flat and broods in Minna's old room.

The Dean's meditations in Bucharest, as unrelievedly solemn as Augie was exuberant, are the substance of the novel as they fuse two cities, two friends, two deaths, two realities, two perceptions, two Chicagos. The cities are, of course, Bucharest and Chicago, each a monument of the failure, in human terms, of a system and its leadership; the friends are both from Chicago; one is an ecologist, who, like Corde, perceives failure, but attributes it, in crank fashion, to lead-poisoning rather than human failure; the other, Spangler, is a boyhood rival and journalist, who is to betray Corde and his views in print. The deaths are of Valeria, Corde's mother-in-law, and of a young white student in Chicago who, partly-tied, partly-gagged, had either fallen or been thrown from his third-floor apartment window. Both deaths are badly handled by bureaucratic bungling. The realities are of late December in Bucharest and in Chicago, mutually brown in hue, cold in the stone, with a sadness at dusk that becomes, in Corde's mind, "a livid death moment" as night begins. The two perceptions are of two Chicagos, that of Corde's youth, of neighborhoods, of immigrants, of hope and faith, and that of his return, the violent, ghettoized city of the seventies. The depersonalized gray grimness of Chicago's institutions are no more and no less inhuman and mechanistic than those of Bucharest. But in the lives of two young Chicago blacks who refuse to surrender, either to cynicism or despair, Corde finds hope for the future. Both refuse to write off Chicago's underclass as superfluous or doomed, as they

try to provide purpose and direction in a society increasingly random and violent.

While Corde dangles in Bucharest, caught between two realities, perhaps even two alternatives, he contemplates the reaction, public and institutional, to two articles, on Chicago as it had been and as it had become, that he had just published in *Harpers*; he contemplates, too, his attempt to find the truth behind the student's death; and he ponders, from the perspective of Bucharest in December, his attempts to find his place, both in the college, its identity and mission as confused, as ambiguous, as disorderly and uncertain as the American society of which it is both a part and a microcosm, and in Chicago, a montage of magnificence and horror, of makers and manipulators of money and the underclass that they despise, of power brokers and whores, of pimps, pushers, junkies, of the living dead on the kidney machines in Cook County Hospital and in the "barn boss" system in Cook County Jail. The only hope that remains, Corde concludes in the articles and in his brooding, is the determination of the few to refuse to surrender or to despair.

Corde's involvement had begun as a journalist, but it had quickly become that of an indignant human being, and he learns that reaction to the articles in Chicago is what he expected; the provost of the college, alert to the nuances of public and political reality, withholds judgement while implying dissatisfaction; the editors report "a flood of mail," liberals finding him reactionary, conservatives crazy, urbanologists hasty, all of them dubious of his premise that "perhaps only poetry had the strength 'to rival the attractions of narcotics, the magnetism of TV, the excitement of sex, or the ecstasies of destruction.'"

Behind him, too, are the yet-uncertain results of his attempt to become committed, to find justice and order in the chaos of Chicago. Although his official role in the student's death had been to identify the body, he became convinced it was murder; he persuaded the provost to offer a reward; he conferred with detectives, befriended the young man's widow. When two young blacks, a derelict and a whore, are arrested, he rejects ambiguities, insisting on justice. After having been attacked by his sister's son, a rich, spoiled veteran of the street clashes of 1968, and by radical students, with the case in court and in the

hands of the corrupt, he alternately sits and lies in the coldness of the Bucharest room, waiting for the judgement of complex, complicated institutions and the human beings of which they consist.

Valeria dies and is cremated, her smoke drifting heavenward and her ashes awaiting entombment; Minna, Corde's wife, falls ill; Spangler calls: the derelict has been convicted, receiving sixteen years in prison; the whore, plea-bargaining, will get eight. The Dean, it appears, has somehow been exonerated and a rough justice has been done. The Cordes fly home, she to a hospital bed, he to ruminate in their apartment high over the winter lake, that void before him, the slums behind, his meaning and that of his time still unresolved. But a rough equilibrium has somehow been achieved.

Bellow might have ended the novel at this period, with justice served and the twin realities of Chicago and Bucharest as perceived by a sensitive if sometimes cranky academic refined into metaphor. But three vivid, frenzied chapters remain. As Minna recovers and they make arrangements for the delayed trip to Mount Palomar, the life of their Chicago—that of North Shore, steeped in insensitivity—threatens to absorb them. But Corde's new-found equilibrium carries him through insensitivity, through his nephew's sudden flight to Nicaragua, through Spangler's betrayal in a column entitled "A Tale of Two Cities," a viciously clever portrayal of Corde's failures—as an academic, as a journalist, as a man. By using Corde's own words, distorted, misinterpreted, taken out of context, Spangler presents him as a fool. The cleverness of the column leaves Corde with no choice but to resign his deanship and to continue his commitment, not, however, through institutions, but through a renewed determination to write the truth as he finds it.

The novel's last scene is both transcendental reality and the only significant movement in the novel. As Minna goes about her astronomical business at Mount Palomar, Corde is taken by an attendant to the top of the dome. It is open to the heavens, their reality distorted only by the limits of perception and the intensity of the cold:

The young man pressed the switch for the descent.  
"Never saw the sky like this, did you?"

"No. I was told how cold it would be. It *is* damn cold.

"Does that really get you, do you mind it at all that much?"

They were traveling slowly in the hooked path of their beam towards the big circle of the floor.

"The cold? Yes. But I almost think I mind coming down more."

Corde—cord, heart, reconciler, man—returns reluctantly to earth. The ties with his false profession have broken by circumstance. But those that bind him to Chicago, to time and place and the human predicament, to commitment and to love, remain strong. Both the metaphor and the reality of his Deanship and his December have run their course.

As he did after the publication of *the Adventure of Augie March*, Bellow has commented several times on his intent and his achievement in *the Dean's December*, but his concern is less with artistic considerations than it is with sociological truth and social commitment. His concern is not what the critics will make of it but that the Chicago sections particularly will be misunderstood, praised or condemned like Corde's articles for all the wrong reasons.

His portrayal of the dehumanizing of Chicago's people, especially its blacks, is, he comments, less than the American dehumanization of Viet Nam, as Bucharest is less than the Gulag, and both are less than the Holocaust, but protest and action make a beginning in the necessary assault not only against crime or lead poisoning or whatever, but against the failure of "the social organizations, educators, psychologists, bureaucrats" who have contributed "nothing—just zilch" to Chicago's salvation and America's.

Bellow's earlier Chicago, that of Augie March and exuberance and innocence, is of an older tradition that in the hands of Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson, the latter Bellow's earliest mentor, has been transmuted from experience and reality into one of the greatest of American myths, and Bellow's Chicago, that of Grandma Lausch, William Einhorn, and the rest of the people of Bellow's memory is perhaps its purest urban manifestation.

But the Chicago of Bellow's aging temporary Dean is another Chicago, that of contemporary reality and the horror that human beings have made of what might have been their greatest, most fulfilling century and their most promising city. Yet, Bellow insists, there is hope for its redemption in a commitment beyond cynicism or despair, a commitment that must deny the material, deterministic evidence.

Bellow was sixty-six when *The Dean's December* was published, and he is now in his seventy-second year. Yet he refuses to become the grand old man of American letters that he might be, a tag that he would forcefully reject, had anyone the nerve to attempt to apply it. Instead, like the Dean of Chicago, he says,

Writers are part of this whole dismal picture that is dominated by an evasion and unwillingness to come to grips with the profoundest human facts. Writers have not served American society well, but they have been representative of what the society is. I include myself in this. I seem to have been overtaken by a kind of fit in my old age in which I want to say things definitely and firmly—and hit hard.

Augie, it seems, has not only grown up, but his feet, like the Dean's, stand solidly on the *terra firma* of America, the *terra incognita* of Chicago.

Michigan State University