

Similarly, I can confirm the accuracy of Wolfe's remarks about the "apostates"—those modern architects who dared to step out of line to try to design something rich, decorative, and enjoyable—who found themselves virtually excommunicated in polite architectural society: Edward Durrell Stone, Eero Saarinen, John Portman. Americans, I am sorry to say, have fallen for the "High Tech" gimmickry of British architects like Stirling, Foster, and Rogers, so that when I say that the glazing of English buildings by Foster is less sophisticated and interesting than that of a Hyatt Regency Hotel, American architects think I am either joking, which I am not, or that I am trying to damn Foster by comparison with something palpably awful, which I do not think those wonderfully extravagant hotels are.

But the United States is not alone in this craven subservience to foreign fashions; the tyranny of Modern dogma is worldwide. British architecture also completely changed direction in the 1930s and 40s following an influx of Continental refugees, and they soon acquired native acolytes who did their best to wipe out the old guard and suppress the traditions of building in which we once excelled. The result, paradoxically perhaps, is that postwar British commercial architecture has been little else but a cheap, inefficient copy of New York and Chicago. I begin to think that a cultural inferiority complex is a condition peculiar to the Anglo-American liberal intelligentsia.

Even so, as extraordinarily badly taught as the British architectural schools are, they are not yet as pretentious and as ethereally theoretical as those in the United States. On the current state of affairs in the architectural compounds Wolfe is superb, and by quoting the words of the Whites and the Greys, the Post-Modernists, the Rationalists, and the rest, he successfully makes them seem ridiculous, and strangely irrelevant. His basic point is that, despite all the new "isms" and the apparent rejection of Modernism by many architects, the compound walls are as high and as impenetrable as ever. Traditional styles can never today be used straightforwardly; rather, a detail must be made nonsense of to show that it is "an ironic historical reference." To provide an architecture which is truly popular and decorative has yet to be attempted, despite all the verbiage in *Skyline* or *Oppositions* or any of the other

journals over which architectural students in the compounds pore. As Wolfe observes in a crucial passage, "For any architect to have explored an avenue such as a new, straightforward (non-ironic), exuberant (non-camp) system of decoration for American architecture in the late twentieth century would have been a revolutionary development. It would also have been heretical. . . . no architect who tried it was likely to have any significant effect on the course of American architecture. The entire structure of the compounds and the clerisy, with all their rewards, psychic and mundane, would have to be dismantled first." Or perhaps, as

the wittiest and cleverest pseudo-apostate of them all, Philip Johnson, observes, perhaps the scholasticism of the East Coast is becoming irrelevant and a vigorous American architecture is going up in places like Houston or Los Angeles.

Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* became a cult book for a time—because it was about theories—and was carried around by students (who probably never opened it). I cannot see the same happening with *From Bauhaus to Our House*: it is too irreverent, too funny, too accessible. A pity, for though young architects will find it disconcerting, the book has much to teach them. □

THE DEAN'S DECEMBER
Saul Bellow / Harper & Row / \$13.95

Stephen Miller

"The artist," Flaubert said, "must be in his work as a god in his creation, invisible yet all-powerful." Yet few great novelists have been invisible in their novels. They often insist upon their presence—commenting on a character's actions, offering a reflection about human nature. Even Flaubert did not always follow his artistic creed. But some novelists, of course, are more visible than others. Like Nabokov and Updike, Saul Bellow is often very visible in his novels. Reading his novels—or, to be precise, reading all but his first two novels, which are Flaubertian—we hear a vigorous, sardonic, brash voice, the voice of a writer refusing to be confined to the demands of plot and character creation. If Updike is the narrator-as-preacher, nudging his readers to speculate about what it all means, and Nabokov is the narrator-as-aesthete, insisting that his readers pay close attention to his exquisitely detailed observations, Bellow is the narrator-as-taxi driver, telling his readers to cut the nonsense and stop taking this or that fashionable idea seriously. Even though some of his novels are in the third person and others are in the first, it does not seem to make much of a difference; we hear Bellow talking in all of them, hear the voice of a writer who is in turn amused, ex-

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asperated, and angered by the way we live now.

As a worldly-wise taxi driver—one, moreover, who has read all the Great Books—Bellow is not afraid to pursue his own reflections while the plot languishes. He is our most essayistic novelist; his main characters are always struggling with ideas—getting angry at them or, more often than not, being confused by them, befuddled by the profusion of ideas on the loose in the modern world.

The dangers of Bellow's essayistic approach to fiction are obvious. At times his novels veer too close to monologue; we do not know who is doing the struggling with ideas—the main character or the novelist. Bellow is most successful when he creates characters who are not intellectuals, such as Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day*, Hattie of "Leaving the Yellow House" (a short story), and Woodrow Selbst of "The Silver Dish," a recent short story that is one of Bellow's most powerful works of fiction. But even novels such as *Herzog* and *Humboldt's Gift*, which have intellectuals as central characters, are generally successful despite their garrulity and gimcrack plots

because Bellow makes them farcical as well as serious. He doesn't endorse his central characters' opinions; he merely offers them for inspection.

Bellow's sardonic voice can be heard in his latest novel, *The Dean's December*. Explaining why he returned to live in Chicago after spending years in Paris, Albert Corde (the central character) says: "There's the big advantage of backwardness. By the time the latest ideas reach Chicago, they're worn thin and easy to see through. You don't have to bother with them and it saves lots of trouble." It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Corde here is simply a spokesman for Bellow, because Bellow has always made much of his Chicago connection. And because Bellow often has trouble distancing himself from his main character, it is hard to know what to make of Corde's opinions. But the problem with *The Dean's December* is not simply that Bellow is, so to speak, too close to Corde; the problem is that Bellow takes Corde all too seriously. He is not a farcical figure. Far from it, he is a hero of sorts, but his heroism is not sufficiently tested in the novel. Only one other character—an old school pal who is now a famous columnist—acts as a foil to Corde, but Bellow never gives the columnist a chance to challenge Corde's views. Corde comes though the novel with flying colors—getting high marks for insight, decency, moral seriousness. The result is a novel brimming with important ideas yet inert as a work of fiction.

Corde's own situation seems far-fetched, as if Bellow were desperate

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to come up with a character who might be a suitable mouthpiece for his own ideas. Corde is an ex-journalist who has become a professor of journalism at a local university in Chicago to have more time for reading and thinking. He is also—strangely enough—a dean of students. When the novel opens, Corde is in trouble with the powers-that-be at the university: He has written a bruising article for *Harper's* on the "whirling souls" of the black underclass in Chicago and has involved

himself in the prosecution of two blacks accused of killing a white student of his. In short, he is an activist professor, but one who goes against the liberal grain, asking obvious questions about the realities of the underclass, not afraid to appear to be on the wrong side of many issues, though clearly he is not a racist. Indeed, he befriends two black men who themselves are trying to do something about the sordid realities of life in the underclass—a prison reformer and an ex-addict

who runs a drug abuse program.

If the novel is about death in Chicago—the death of his student and the slow death of an underclass bent on destroying itself as well as other people—it is also about death in Romania. Corde spends most of the novel in Bucharest, having flown there with his wife to pay his respects to a dying mother-in-law. The world of Chicago, of course, is very different from the world of Bucha-

rest, but Corde is disturbed by both. In Bucharest, Corde knows that there is nothing he can do about the gray death-in-life that is Stalinist Romania, and he lets others do the wheeling and dealing necessary to ensure that his mother-in-law dies in a relatively humane way and gets a decent funeral. In Chicago, however, Corde feels that he can do something. "In the American moral crisis," he thinks,

the first requirement was to experience what was happening and to see what must be seen. The facts were covered from our perception. More than they had been in the past? Yes, because the changes, especially the increase in consciousness—and also in false consciousness—was accompanied by a peculiar kind of confusion. The increase of theories and discourse, itself a cause of new strange forms of blindness, the false representations of "communication," led to horrible distortions of public consciousness. Therefore the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it.

The passage is central to an understanding of what *The Dean's December* is about, but it somehow doesn't work—in that the ideas advanced are not sufficiently assimilated into the novel. We feel that we are reading a lecture, not a novel. "All through my career as a writer," Turgenev once said, "I have never taken ideas but always characters for my starting point." *The Dean's December* reads as if it began with an idea; the characters, especially the character of Corde, were an afterthought.

Yet the ideas themselves are compelling. Despite its limp central character, *The Dean's December* is in the best sense a disturbing novel, disturbing because Bellow confronts the problem of the black underclass—refusing to blink at it, to make easy sense of it by invoking the "deep" explanations of psychology and sociology. Corde realizes that in order to see what life in the underclass is like you have to "recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or nonexperience." He refuses, for example, to collaborate with an eminent scientist who explains the conduct of the underclass by the pervasiveness of lead poisoning in the slums. Following the train of Corde's thoughts, we sense that Bellow has thought deeply about a subject that is on the minds of most Americans—not bureaucracy, alienation, or the other fashionable subjects most American novelists wine and dine on, but crime. And in this novel he has grimly observed that if in the East the danger comes from above—from the



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Stalinist bureaucracy with its secret police and informers—in the West the danger comes from below, from an underclass out of control. But Bel- low has not imagined the subject fully. One hopes he will return to the

question again, for he—more than any other American novelist save, perhaps, Ralph Ellison—has the imagination, intelligence, and knowl- edge to write a novel that will make us *see* the question. □

THE ULTIMATE RESOURCE

Julian L. Simon / Princeton University Press / \$14.50

Philip F. Lawler

During the past month, my baby son grew two inches. If he continued to grow at the same rate, I suddenly realized, he would be ten feet tall when he entered the first grade. Confronted with this frightening prospect, I saw only two possible alternatives. I could begin scouting around for grammar schools fur- nished with extra-large desks (and basketball teams). Or I could do some historical research into typical pat- terns of childhood growth. Since I am not a social scientist, I chose the latter option.

During the 1970s, however, social scientists preferred the first alter- native, and thus created an unprece- dented bull market in the doom-and- gloom industry. The public was treated to a bewildering succession of scenarios for disaster—overpopula- tion, famine, depletion of the ozone layer, shortages of key raw materials—all based on the assumption that the future would be exactly like the present, only more so. Each predic- tion was based on a simple, naive extrapolation of an existing trend. If oil prices rose last year, they would rise again next year. If my son grew two inches last month, he would sprout two more this month.

Ironically, such predictions have ignored two of the social scientist's most valuable analytical tools: the historical record and the laws of supply and demand. And as Julian Simon argues, anyone using these two tools would have realized that the doomsayers were talking nonsense. Take, for instance, the case of "vanishing" raw materials. Contrary to the popular myth, we will *never* exhaust our supply of vital materials. If supplies run short, prices will rise, impelling users to find substitutes or to do without. In the long run, as adequate substitutes are developed,

consumers will have the option of choosing among competing alterna- tives. Since competition will eventu- ally bring down prices, the net result will be an increase in the abundance of raw materials, with a concomitant decrease in their cost to the con- sumer.

Unfortunately, crises make better news than solutions. So when a new disaster is predicted, the popular media rush to publicize it, never wondering how soon it will be proved spurious. When the bubble is burst and sanity restored, the story is relegated to the bowels of the newspaper. When the Club of Rome issued its pessimistic *Limits to Growth* in 1972, popular coverage was intensive. But when the same group reversed its findings in 1976, virtually no one noticed. Conse- quently, when the *Global 2000* re- port* reiterated the discredited *Lim- its to Growth* analysis, few critics noticed the irony.

The Ultimate Resource is written as an antidote to these follies, and so Simon has aimed for a popular audience. His style is conversational, even combative. He challenges the reader continuously, in one case volunteering to bet a substantial sum of money against anyone who dis- agrees with his proposition that the price of mineral resources will de- cline over time. But the truly delight- ful aspect of the book is its persistent iconoclasm. Page after page, Simon punctures myths of scarcity and offers instead the counsels of opti- mism. Thus, he demonstrates that food should become more plentiful and less costly, pollution less severe, minerals more accessible.

The main force of Simon's argu- ment, however, is directed at the

Philip F. Lawler is managing editor of Policy Review.

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