ANALYSIS

The Adventures of Augie March (1953)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

"Reading *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953 must be a good deal like reading *Ulysses* in 1922…. Tentatively: Saul Bellow is perhaps a great novelist, *The Adventures of Augie March* perhaps a great novel. If *The Adventures of Augie March* is great, it is great because of its comprehensive, not-naturalistic survey of the modern world, its wisely inconclusive presentation of its problems; because its author dares to let go (as so many very good and very neat modern writers do not); because the style of its telling makes the sequence of events seem real even when one knows they couldn't be; because the novel is intelligently and ambitiously conceived as a whole that esthetically comprehends its parts; because it is an achievement in and a promise of the development of a novelist who deserves comparison only with the best, even at this early stage of his development."

Harvey Curtis Webster
Saturday Review
(19 September 1953) 13-14

"Augie introduces the most startling extremes of realism with cheerful casualness. He does not hold them against life itself. There is a great deal of vigorous love-making, explicitly described but with a joy and attractiveness very rare in recent fiction…. Not since Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* has there been in a novel such an enormous range of discriminating reporting as in this one…. The crowding of descriptive epithets and hyphenizations recalls Hopkins."

Robert Gorham Davis
New York Times
(20 September 1953) 1, 36

"If such a novel is to be fully effective the sense of dramatic improvisation must be a dramatic illusion, the last sophistication of the writer, and…the improvisation is really a pseudo-improvisation, and…the random scene or casual character that imitates the accidental quality of life must really have a relevance, and…the discovery, usually belated, of this relevance, is the characteristic excitement of the genre. That is, in this genre the relevance is deeper and more obscure and there is, in the finest examples of the genre, a greater tension between the random life force of the materials and the shaping intuition of the writer. It is the final distinction, I think, of *The Adventures of Augie March* that we do feel this tension, and that it is a meaningful fact."

Robert Penn Warren
New Republic
(2 November 1953) 22

"Saul Bellow's new novel is a new kind of book. The only other American novels to which it can be compared with any profit are *Huckleberry Finn* and *U.S.A.*, and it is superior to the first by virtue of the complexity of its subject matter and to the second by virtue of a realized unity of composition. In all three books, the real theme is America, a fact which is not as clear in this new book as it is in its predecessors, perhaps because of its very newness…. *The Adventures of Augie March* is a new kind of book first of all because Augie March possesses a new attitude toward experience in America: instead of the blindness of affirmation and the poverty of rejection, Augie March rises from the streets of the modern city to encounter the reality of experience with an attitude of satirical acceptance, ironic affirmation, and comic transcendence of affirmation and rejection."

Delmore Schwartz
Partisan Review
(January 1954) 112-13

"Mr. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* is [a] study in the spiritual picaresque, a later form of the traditional *bildungsroman* in which the *picaro* or hero is consciousness rather than swashbuckling rogue, and so is required, as the rogue is not, to develop, deepen, strike through its first illusion to the truth which, at the end of the road, it discovers to be its fate. But *Augie March* begins with the aphorism, 'Man's character is his fate,' and ends with the aphorism, 'Man's fate is his character.' The learning is the transposition. Man's fate is that he shall inherit, be stuck with, his character. The movement which the transposition represents is the movement from the naturalist to the existentialist, from what is determined to what is accepted or chosen."

John W. Aldridge
In Search of Heresy
(McGraw 1956) 131-32

"It is not unfair to say that in his first two novels Bellow had not yet discovered the dramatic equivalent of joy. His heroes swat continually, suffer from nausea and headaches, and their crotchety imagination broods on a spectacle of unrelieved moral [squalor]. They are heirs to a metaphysical drabness, their power, at best, is a pained, blistered power. The change to *The Adventures of Augie March*, 1953, seems therefore wondrous and staggering, so much so that critics whose pride is their sophistication must contrive to see in this trend-busting novel a subtle elaboration of Bellow's earlier concerns. Insofar as the concerns of this novel are still with personal character, social environment, and human destiny, the critics are no doubt right.

The character of Augie March is not merely the thread on which, picaresque fashion, the gay beads of events are strung, it is a character that directs these events. When Heraclitus says, and Augie concurs, that a man's character is his fate, he means that character is the *given* part of our nature and, also, that what we have been given determines what we are likely to hold and *receive*. Augie's character is a paradox. He seems at times too vague and easily diverted, a creature who shines only in the reflected light of others and is defined particularly by the affectionate glances of all the women he attracts. His brother Simon feels that Augie's wheels turn too freely, that he is hasty and too enthusiastic, 'in few words, something a *schlemiel*.' But Einhorn discerns early in the book the more essential quality of Augie. He says to him, 'You've got *opposition* in you. You don't slide through everything. You just make it look so'; and Augie concurs: 'I did have opposition in me, and great desire to offer resistance and to say "No!"

Augie does say No repeatedly, to the aggressive Simon, who wants to make a worldly success of him, to the Renlings, owners of a posh Evanston store, who want to adopt him, to the rich, intense Thea Fenchel, who wants to mold him to her idea of ruthless perfection. And yet Augie remains open to the highest bid of freedom and call of experience. His school is the world—later on, when he steals books to attend the University of Chicago for a time, he rejects academic knowledge as presenting too short a cut 'from the brute creation to the sublime mind.' The incredible variety of jobs he holds, the motley company among whom he moves and odd influences to which he consents, do for him what the Hundred Great Books could never be expected to do. Schooled to the toughness of the world, he still retains a gift of vision, something like Gatsby's willingness of the heart… It is this accountable dreaminess that sustains Augie through experiences that might have soured a stronger man… As a realist, Augie accepts; as a dreamer who knows that human life is intolerable without some way of mediating its finitude, he advocates love. Yet the final note of the novel is not one of love, or freedom, or even endurance. The final note is sounded by the Norman maid, Jacqueline, and it is a note of *laughter*!

Augie, we see, entertains a radical generosity toward…life, and yearns, somewhat idolently, for a 'proud, independent life,' a 'worthwhile fate.' Hence his conception of himself as a 'servant of love,' a neophyte, that is, in the luminous mystery of acceptance. And hence, too, his instinctive desire to remain always in touch with the 'axial lines' of existence: 'Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony!' There is no doubt that the impact of the novel derives from its range of social perceptions…within three widening circles of reference: the Jewish family, the big city, the spirit of American culture at mid-century. These, after all, makeup the world in which Augie grows to his particular destiny…. The old forms and conventions are exhausted, Einhorn never tires of saying, and each grabs for himself as best he can. Yet it is not the grabbiness of people that strikes us in the novel; it is rather the abstract power of money, which everywhere cuts across love, family, happiness, self-respect. In a culture of abundance—the Depression

notwithstanding—one must either serve luxury of possess it. The dreams of the French Revolution have been finally realized in the New World….

The high aim of comedy is to assimilate the contradictions of reality. This is what Bellow manages to do in the best scenes of the novel where thought and character are dramatized in the process of a single symbolic action. The Mexican episode, which marks a turning point in Augie's career, is in this connection particularly relevant. Augie, we remember, goes to Central America with Thea—they are passionately in love—to hunt giant lizards with an eagle she had desperately trained. The episode is not exotic: it stands in a meaningful and symbolic contrast to the teeming scenes of Chicago life. The atmosphere evokes obsidian knives and cruel Aztec rituals, a sky hard and blue, nature in the raw, death. Thea wants everything sharp and extreme, to the point of inhumanity; she passionately believes in the ferocity of nature. Augie humanizes everything and seems, in contrast to her deep-water nature, a creature 'sculling a shallow bay.' When the eagle turns out to be a craven bird, the rage of Thea is boundless. But Augie takes the eagle's side, for he sees that wild nature is also cowardly—humanity is mixed in it! He will have nothing to do with Thea's guns and cameras, her snakes and iguanas….

Love, at any rate, does not last between them; their conception of it is too different. For Thea love is a preparation to a more exalted state, for him it is a worthy end. For Thea reality is something created in the burning depths of being…. On reality Augie has this to say: 'Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn't correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn't try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be very surprising.' Within the compass of a single action, we see, Bellow brings to life the ideas of love and death, illusion and reality, city and nature, social power and individual freedom. The encounter between two lovers transforms abstractions into felt experience.

Transformation, however, occurs more often on the level of style which has, alas, more admirers than the book itself can claim. Yet the style is far from blameless. It is ebullient, carnal, omnivorous; it bristles with neologisms, crackles with wit and references and asides. Its jostling compounds parallel the loose-strung structure of the narrative and testify to its guiding vision, and its mixture of racy lingoes—Polish, Yiddish, Midwestern, Underworld—celebrates the generosities of American life. The most striking instances of Bellow's writing are often the opening paragraphs of each chapter, which, read in succession, given some idea of the novel's pitch and motion. At its true best, the style circles round the ragged edge of poetry, refracting a thousand gay and broken lights. But it can also be turgid, obscure, knotted-up in philosophic ambiguities and Gordian syntax. Its major fault, however, is not that it seems too artless-cunning—Bellow likes, for instance, to begin his sentences with a preposition, a conjunction, or pronoun. The fault, which lies deeper in the structure of the novel, is that the style has to counteract the simplicity inherent in Augie's point of view. This is a criticism that warrants some elaboration.

The Adventures of Augie March is written in the first person; the voice we hear is Augie's, and the vision with which we see things is to a very great extent his own. But the comic flaw of the hero, by his own admission, is simplicity, enthusiasm. This is a classic picaresque trait, from Don Quixote to Parson Adams. Bellow's design, however, is ambitious, and his problem is to qualify the enforced simplicities of Augie's view with a more critical, a more ambiguous, vision which encompasses the whole action. The spirit of comedy, which is known to deflate all things but the true objects of excellence, is harbored by the style. Augie speaks, but as he speaks Bellow perceives and criticizes, too. The voice is Augie's, the style Bellow's, and it is the disparity between what Augie can see and Bellow must render that forces the style of the novel so heavily upon our attention.

This predicament of style reflects itself in some concrete ways. In a novel so large and rough-grained, there are things style cannot be expected to do alone. It cannot, for instance, convince us of Einhorn's greatness; in the end, we simply have to take Augie's word for it. Marvelously attuned to the resiliences of experience, the style cannot make the sorrows of Augie authentic as his joy—one is left with the impression that Augie's griefs are simply ballast to his nature. Nor does it finally persuade us that Augie deserves to be so generously sponsored by life. These are basic matters of dramatic vision and structure which Bellow, swinging as he does abruptly from early nausea to subsequent joy, must still resolve.

We have said that *The Adventures of Augie March* is a trend-busting book. We should add that it is a trend-making book in the great tradition of American novels. By reopening the form of the novel to the blatancy of American experience, it not only sets an example to writers who have surrendered their art to Jamesian refinements or Jungian archetypes, but also reaffirms the possibilities of experience itself at a time when the individual finds it easier to shrink in terror from the world he confronts. And yet if *Augie March* is a story of initiation, it is a story that, American style, can have no proper ending. Augie remains, like Huck, uncommitted, suspended, as it were, between native innocence and hard-earned knowledge, poised for the next adventure which, though it may not actually repeat a former escapade, guarantees no final knowledge or repose. Augie is no victim, and a rebel only in the most circumstantial way, but he no more belongs to the established forms of American life about him than Huck or Holden or Holly did."

Ihab Hassan
Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel
(Harper/Colophon 1961) 303-11

"This modern picaresque novel about a youth who grows up in Chicago during the depression catapulted its author into national recognition. The book was a best seller and recipient of the National Book Award. Because he will not accept any defining rule in life, Augie finds himself being swept along in a current of alternately hilarious and tragic events.

Unlike his brother Simon, who marries the daughter of a wealthy Chicago coal dealer in order to rise from his lower class Jewish slum environment, Augie refuses every opportunity for a settled existence that comes his way. He suffers some hard knocks, but as he says, there is an 'animal'…in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up.' His ability to laugh at himself as he tells his story makes Augie a memorable hero. In sharp contrast to the economy of style popular in American writing since Hemingway, Augie's prose is endlessly rich, varied, and complex. Through him the author speaks at once in the pithy language of the streets and the inversions of a Chicago University intellectual."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 48

"Augie March, a young Chicago Jew, leaves his charity-supported mother, tyrannical grandmother, and mentally retarded brother George, and with his opportunistic older brother Simon ventures into the world to make a living. He manages to graduate from high school but learns about life and himself through diverse jobs and experiences. He first works as a 'man at arms' for the crippled William Einhorn, a learned but inept and dishonest businessman who instills in him a love of books; then he becomes a salesman in an elegant saddle shop, leaving when Mrs. Renling, the owner's wife, tries to refine and adopt him. He takes part in a robbery, tries to smuggle immigrants over the Canadian border, steals and sells expensive books, and is briefly a union organizer.

Unlike Simon, Augie remains emotionally involved with his family, is deeply upset when his mother and George are institutionalized, and grieves when Grandma Lausch dies. Unwilling to emulate Simon, who married Charlotte Magnus for her money, he leaves his job with Simon and stops courting Charlote's cousin Lucy, persisting in searching for his own fate in his own way. His love affair with Thea Fenchel, on their iguana hunt in Mexico, convinces him that independence and love are irreconcilable but, sometime later, back in the U.S., he marries Stella, an actress he aided in Mexico. Considering the shambles of Simon's marriage and reflecting on his own unachieved desires for a stable life, Augie recognizes that 'everyone got bitterness in his chosen thing,' but retains his optimism, humor, and amazement at man's 'refusal to lead a disappointed life'."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 45

"*The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) reaches…a mood of ebullient hopefulness. Augie is, or was in the time that he is engaged in remembering, an inverted Joseph [in *Dangling Man*], a constantly

accommodating youth, plastic and submitting, a ready participant in other people's projects. Augie is 'susceptible to love.' People are adoptive toward him, and there is, as he says, something adoptional about him. He is an adoptee. He is his society's most willing recruit. But at the same time Augie has 'opposition' in him and, fallen again and again midst theorizers and absolutists and universalists, enticed by glitter and wealth and glamour, engaged by social causes and by lovers, he remains loyal to his sense of his own distinctness and to his clouded prevision of what he calls a good enough fate. Augie's dozens of high adventures are, all of them, engagements in a battle which forces him always back to himself, which imply to him the virtue of disengagement. Like Joseph, Augie is caught, but now at the level of impulse, between community and individuality.

'Kindly explain!' Augie says. 'An independent fate, and love too—what confusion!' Like Joseph, Augie rejects the last shift of ideal constructions. Humanity is made up of millions of artists and inventors all inventing versions of the real. 'But the invented things never became real for me,' Augie says, 'no matter how I urged myself to think they were.' And like Joseph, who had wrestled with the question of 'a separate destiny' and found it insoluble, Augie is unable to find a principle of reconciliation between himself and others. But unlike Joseph, Augie is provided with quick emotional responsiveness, with equipment for experiencing the universe and others, and that once again makes the difference of precluding either romantic isolation or romantic surrender.

Augie is feelingly alive, and, like Asa Leventhal, he is ineluctably a part of an ordinary, felt social reality. Because he is alive, he must live…with his confusion. If the principle of reconciliation is not at hand, still the act of living demands that its possibility be always considered. The hope for reconciliation, finally, is the principle of Augie's livingness, and it is his fate. After many adventures in hard usage by the world and then within a marriage that is an incomplete compact, that hope is his last word."

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 37-39

"Bellow began his career as a novelist of somber intellectuality: his impressive early book *The Victim* asks almost to be read as a fable concerning the difficulties of attempting a secure moral judgment in our day. With *Augie March* he made a sharp turn, casting aside the urban contemplativeness and melancholy of his previous work, and deciding to regard American life as wonderfully 'open,' a great big shapeless orange bursting with the juices of vitality. Though in some ways his most virtuoso performance, *Augie March* suffers from a programmatic exuberance: it is fun to watch the turns and tricks the suddenly acrobatic Bellow can execute, yet hard to suppress a touch of anxiety concerning his heartbeat.

With *Augie March* Bellow also began to work out a new fictional style, for which there may be some predecessors—possibly Daniel Fuchs and Nathanael West—but which in the main is an original achievement. By now it has come to be imitated by many American Jewish novelists as well as by a few gentiles trying wistfully to pass, but none of these manages it nearly so well as Bellow himself. What Bellow did was to leave behind him the bleak neutrality of naturalistic prose and the quavering sensibility of the Jamesian novel: the first, he seemed to feel, was too lifeless and the second insufficiently masculine.

Beginning with *Augie March*—but none of this applies to his masterful novella, *Seize the Day*—Bellow's prose becomes strongly anti-literary, a roughing up of diction and breaking down of syntax in order to avoid familiar patterns and expectations. The prose now consists of a rich, thick impasto of verbal color in which a splatter of sidewalk eloquence is mixed with erudite by-play. Together with this planned coarsening of texture, there is a great emphasis on speed, a violent wrenching and even forcing of images, all the consequence of his wish to break away from the stateliness of the literary sentence.

Analytic refinement is sacrificed to sensuous vigor, careful psychological notation to the brawling of energy, syntactical qualifications to kinesthetic thrust. (One is reminded a bit of action painting.) Psychology is out, absolutely out: for to psychologize means to reflect, to hesitate, to qualify, to modulate, to analyze. By contrast, the aim of Bellow's neo-baroque style is to communicate sensations of immediacy and intensity, even when dealing with abstract intellectual topics—to communicate, above all, the sense

that men are still alive. Toward this end he is prepared to yield niceties of phrasing, surface finish, sometimes even coherence of structure.

It is a style admirably suited to the flaming set piece, the rapid vignette, the picaresque excursion. But it is not so well suited to a sustained and complex action, or a lengthy flow of experience, or a tragic plot, or what George Moore, in discussing the nature of fiction, called the 'rhythmic sequence of events.' In *Augie March* there is a run of action but hardly a plot; in *Herzog* a superbly realized situation but hardly a developing action; and in both of these novels, as well as in *Henderson,* not much of a 'rhythmic sequence of events.' That is why, I think, none of them has a fully satisfying denouement, an organic fulfillment of the action. In principle these books could continue forever, and that is one reason Bellow finds it hard to end them. He simply stops, much against one's will."

Irving Howe
"Down and Out in New York and Chicago" (1964)
The Critical Point
(Dell/Delta 1975) 125-27

"*The Adventures of Augie March* established Bellow as a major novelist at the beginning of the fifties, a position he consolidated with *Henderson the Rain King* at the end, the two novels forming his most considerable work: one devoted to growing up, the other to exploration and revival…. Bellow's point throughout…is that the individual will can become hostage to the very energies feeding it. Bellow places Augie in the Depression years in Chicago, but the twenty-year period to the present is telescoped from what we were to what we are….

The 'opposition' Einhorn observes is Augie's dualism, that alternation of will and ennui, even anomie, which impels the novel. It moves along on two tracks, the driving energy of the I-narrator, Augie, and the enervation of the senses which acts as a countering force of equal strength. On one hand, Augie has the energy of Ulysses and something of his wily ability to survive; but on the other, he acts like Orpheus, although lacking artistic talent. Remarkable in Bellow's achievement is how convincing he makes Augie's potentiality; we always expect him to explode. Here, in contemporary terms, is a meeting of the forties and the fifties: energy confronting enervation and ennui….

Augie is not Augustus or august, but *Augie*, a name for a man of the people; he must march…. Augie slides away from any decision in which he must engage himself fully…. Women appeal to him greatly, as do the things of the world, but he refuses the way of his brother Simon. The March family consists of three brothers (Karamazovs, Chicago and Jewish): George, who is simple-minded; Simon, hard as nails, always ready to strike for the main chance; and Augie, in between, a sexy Alyosha, more interested in 'good' that in assertions of self….we can see Augie as located between two large figures, each given an extended series of episodes. One extreme is Einhorn, a superbly drawn character. Crippled, ultimately dependent, Einhorn lives by his wits and achieves considerable fortune before the Crash. But even during the Depression years he does not surrender; pure will, all function, he claws his way and keeps himself from drowning.

The other part of the equation involves the adventure in Mexico, where Augie and Thea Fenschel travel to train the American bald eagle to capture gigantic iguanas. Earlier, Einhorn had been a kind of eagle, who would never release his talons once he obtained a grip. Augie could not identify with that, and here the giant bird, the principle of nature, suggests that same feral instinct for survival. Yet the bird proves cowardly…. Augie applauds the eagle's cowardice, identifying it with love; whereas Thea is furious at the eagle's withdrawal, for she believes that love is only a stage toward action. Love being insufficient, Augie will fail her in action as Caligula [the eagle] has. The drift between the two occurs in their relationship to the eagle, which, in turn, is connected to the ambiguous relationship of man to nature….

Bellow is clearly using Einhorn and Caligula as comments on Augie's attempts to locate himself. Although the Mexican scenes convey some of his confusion—the circuslike atmosphere, the drift toward disaster, the kaleidoscope of disconnected images (fiestas, bands, Cossack chorus, Indian circus, card-playing, drinking)—they do not have sufficient rootedness. Even the brief glimpses of Trotsky are forced. The presence of Trotsky has a certain grandness, the legend himself, and Augie for a time thinks he may be

employed as a disguise for Trotsky's entrance into the United States. But the idea does not cohere. Augie's drift is permitted to become the drift of the novel. Bellow so moves him around that we do not find sufficient braiding or textural variety. Augie is so defined by Chicago that…he loses his strength when he departs.

Bellow had the problem of form. Picaresque calls for episodic development, but the social rootedness of modern-day picaresque requires greater texture than the old form demanded. Like Bellow's with form, Augie's dilemma is that he must leave himself open to experience. As a consequence, he prolongs that period we associate with adolescence well into his twenties. He takes different shapes, chameleonlike—a holding pattern while he tries to discover what is real. Ultimately, the narrative becomes so attenuated that its links cannot hold; as readers we are put in a holding pattern, which is quite a different aesthetic experience from observing the protagonist in such a pattern.

This insistence on life as against theories, ideologies, legends, and myths moves Bellow closer to storyteller than to novelist. If anything, the novel of our time has been one of ideas, often exploded in failure, or ideologies, which provide their own traps. In his *Paris Review* interview, Bellow stated his preference for nineteenth-century realism, of which Dreiser is a major American proponent. Favoring this kind of novel, which includes the Russians, has preempted Bellow's development in the postwar years. Not only has he not bent to new technical styles, he has refused, after *Henderson*, to move along the contours of new ideas…. Bellow achieved the highest points of his art in sections of *Augie March*, and then dissipated them in the 1960s, in *Herzog* and *Sammler,* which are seriously flawed….

An urban novelist attracted by nature, by a type of harmonious association between the individual and God's creation, he also knew man was solipsistic, impelled by needs he could neither disguise from himself nor fully comprehend. This, too, was a form of terrible knowledge: despite nature, man could easily become enclosed in his own circuitry, failing to grasp the experience that lay around, or growing up stunted. This other counter was the world itself, beyond simply 'nature,' and encompassing ideas, knowledge, and self-knowledge, the life of the good man, the Socratic ideal."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 141-44

Michael Hollister (2015)