

A Writer from Chicago
SAUL BELLOW

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SAUL BELLOW was born in Canada of Russian immigrant parents who moved to Chicago in 1924. He was educated at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Wisconsin. He worked on the WPA Writers' Project, taught at the University of Minnesota, and has been, since 1963, Professor for the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Mr. Bellow has been a Fellow of the Ford and Guggenheim Foundations and at Princeton University. His bibliography includes stories, plays, reviews, and translations as well as novels, of which *The Dean's December* is the most recent. He has received the International Literary Prize (1964), the Jewish Heritage Award (1968), and the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres (1968), and the National Book Award for 1953, 1964, and 1970. Mr. Bellow was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976.

I. CHICAGO: ONCE OVER LIGHTLY

People have often asked, ‘When will you write something about Chicago?’ Over the years I had of course written many Chicago stories, but I was being urged to do Chicago itself. After all, I had been a Chicagoan for most of my life (since 1924, when I was nine). I flattered myself that I knew it well, and I decided about two years ago to try to give a personal account of the place — nothing historical or sociological, simply Chicago as I knew it. I soon became aware, first that contemporary Chicago was beyond me; and then I began to realize that I had no secure grip on the old Chicago either, hadn’t understood it at all. Memory shockingly demonstrated that all along I had been looking at it with eyes that saw not. I now began to see that my failure to understand was a failure of self-understanding to the extent that I had always described myself as a Chicagoan — not a microcosm (unbearable thought) but subject to the influences or invisible formative powers of the city. And the more time I spent in courtrooms, hospitals, housing projects, jails, schools, hotels, places of business, the more apparent it became that my errors of judgment were a result of prolonged effort to make a tenable position for myself in the city. The categories *I*, the writer, and *It*, industrial Chicago, were not what I had thought them. But how realistic can an American writer be? He is inevitably a solitary who is by origin one of the great mass. He is distinguished from that mass when he practices his trade. When he does this, writing or painting, he must necessarily believe that it is possible to send in the forces of style to subdue its chaos. The elementary corollary of this belief is that he must be or should be (if he is not fatally deluded) a man who has the temperament for it, and also the necessary powers, the forces of style under his command.

Such ideas and motives (the conquest of Chicago's chaos by the imagination, the idea of subduing it by the powers of style) are, to say the least, exotic. In this city of immigrants, there is no objection to foreigners. But a writer here is doubly, triply, centuply foreign, exotic to the point of deformity, a Quasimodo. I refer, of course, to writers, to the real thing, not to journalists, advertising men, or the TV types who disseminate culture through the great networks. The city is their habitat; they naturally belong.

To be sure, Chicago prides itself on its culture. It has great museums, universities, orchestras, an opera company, little theaters. It has even a "Culture Bus" operated by the Transit Authority, to take out-of-towners, suburbanites, and school children to points of interest. Culture is important. It attracts young executives; it especially attracts their wives. But I do not intend now to make a frontal attack on the cultural question. Let me first try to make clear what that question really is — and when I speak of Chicago and its Culture Bus, of its industries, skyscrapers, neighborhoods, its slums, its crimes, its courts, I am speaking also of New York, and Philadelphia, or of St. Louis or L.A.: of America, in a word. I am referring in some sense even to London, Rome, and Paris. Let me see if I can explain myself more fully.

Since I have spoken, as a writer from Chicago, of certain parallels to our American cultural situation in London and Paris, it will be useful to quote some informed European views on the thinness of culture in America. De Tocqueville has been so often cited that I need do no more than remind you that while he praised democracy he judged the daily life and interests of Americans to be paltry and anti-poetic. Closer to our own time is Wyndham Lewis who, in his invaluable book *America and Cosmic Man*, has this to say about American cities:

If the city—the "manufacturing village" — is big, there are big universities, theaters, art schools, and a Symphony Orchestra—the latter *de rigueur*. There are large libraries, usually very good art museums The experts and officials

of these public institutions are generously remunerated and are extremely courteous and helpful, as are also the people in the libraries.

But all this immense apparatus of culture, of learning and taste, is a discreet screen to cover the void — “the air-conditioned vacuum,” as Henry Miller puts it. And, of course, such things are there to advertise the city, not to promote letters, fine arts and science.

The young man or woman of unusual gifts might just as well have been born in Eskimo Land as in such an environment as this; better, in fact, for as Eskimos they would have been spared all these beautiful works of art, these massed books full of disturbing knowledge, produced in more propitious times and places — spared the frustrations such cultural excitements provoke.

Powerful American books, Lewis tells us, offering Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot in evidence, are written in Paris and London. Writers have to leave the U.S.A. “to do their good American work because . . . there is no place in the States where the creative life, as distinct from the purely critical or educational, can be pursued.” Now Lewis’s view of America is generally friendly. He believes American politics and society to be superior, on the whole; he argues that Europe would gain greatly by adopting the American federal system, and he sees in America a hopeful new culture and “an incipient universalism.” But he has few illusions about the present prospects for art in the United States.

In quest of beautiful surroundings and cultural support, the inspired or ambitious children of American “manufacturing villages” hurried overseas in the forties and fifties even before the debris of Hitler’s war had been cleared away. In Rome, London, Paris they did not find what earlier generations of Americans had found. The greatness of these capitals had been sadly diminished by the war. They were under the overlapping shadows of the rival superpowers. The ideological shadows of Moscow were especially thick. Napoleon had described the English as a nation of shop-

keepers. To an American living in postwar Paris, the French sounded extraordinarily like a nation of Marxist high-school teachers. Everywhere barbers, waiters, hotel clerks, concierges, and intellectuals (of course) spoke to you about the class struggle, the end of the bourgeoisie, the crimes of capitalist imperialism, and the coming of the proletarian revolution. Parisians were on the whole hostile to Americans. Sartre seemed to suspect most American writers of being secret agents in the pay of Washington. Even right-wing intellectuals like Mauriac, who feared the Soviet Union, nevertheless expressed a cultural and spiritual preference for Russia. America had produced no Dostoevsky. And despite the Marshall Plan the revolution was seen to be moving ineluctably westward, and many French and Italian intellectuals were preparing to be overtaken. Not many of them were unhappy at this prospect. Professors of philosophy expected to turn into commissars. In office they would be superior to the Lunacharskys and the Bukharins because they were, after all, graduates of the *École Normale*, educated Frenchmen.

Yes, the Paris of Sartre was very different from that of Proust and Valéry. Ideas or hopes of revolution in a setting of existentialist philosophy made art as unimportant here as philistinism had made it in *Terre Haute*, Indiana. Parisian acquaintances still insisted on the preeminence of French civilization. In the arts of life, they said, France still led the world. They pointed to their achievements in haute couture, in stage decoration, lovemaking, and cookery. Seductive Paris! When American hopefuls tried to embrace it, it pricked them with its nihilist and Marxist quills.

Of course the culture of a great civilization does not disappear so quickly. Educated Venezuelans, Iranians, Rumanians continued to read the latest books from Paris — much good they did them. The same thoughts — hand-me-down Marx, Heidegger with water — were now thought on both sides of the Atlantic. Paris, once so rich a center, was culturally not greatly different from Caracas or (before its destruction) Beirut.

American writers who attempted to settle in Europe after 1946 had some fun, sat in cafes, visited cathedrals and shrines, reverently breathed the air of the sacred past (somewhat poisoned by war and ideology); but they eventually recognized (although an advantageous rate of exchange sometimes delayed the moment of truth) that they could not do their “good American work” in this setting. Such books as they might be capable of writing would have to be written — in Terre Haute? (Well, not literally Terre Haute or Hoboken, no need to drive the point home so harshly.) To live *like artists* in Europe’s famous capitals isn’t possible now. Not even Europeans can do it. The world has shifted too far from its old course. Brutal men, savage forces have made new channels, set different orbits. This is sad for those Americans of my aging generation who in their student days were thrilled to read (in Chicago) how the youthful heart of Henry James beat hard when he was invited to dine at Magny’s in the company of Flaubert, Turgenev, and the Goncourt brothers. The celebrities who discussed literature and painting at Magny’s more than a century ago are more remote from us than the age of chivalry was from Don Quixote when he took to the road to perform great deeds. The Paris of Hemingway and Fitzgerald in the twenties was already over the hill, and by the time Henry Miller arrived from Brooklyn it was all over. You could be a bohemian adventurer in Paris, and you could write about your exploits with whores; you could be a Hip pioneer, but that was not the same as living like an *artist* — not as people like James or Whistler, George Moore or Rilke would have understood it.

Miller, moreover, had become familiar with the masterpieces of European modernism while he was still working in the Western Union office in New York. Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* was being read in Chicago in the first decade of the century. Nihilism crossed the Atlantic well before the flu epidemic of 1919. American intellectuals and artists were reading *transition* after the Great War. *The Dial* in the twenties, *Partisan Review* in the forties and fifties,

and innumerable smaller importers of fancy European goods made readers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Flint, Michigan, familiar with avant-garde movements, with the names and achievements of Gide, Cocteau, and Andre Breton, of Céline, Sartre, and Beckett. And thanks to the labors of academics, names like Artaud and Derrida are recognized in the remotest corners of the country. That is why Paris and Seattle, Washington, are now virtually on the same level. Gifted young Americans no longer think of moving abroad to write their powerful American novels. We have imported Europe's Derrida, Europe has imported our Kenneth Burke. On both sides myths are studied, not made, and there is no need to live *like artists*. Everywhere there are of course celebrities who still behave like artists. The media encourage this. As popular attractions literary celebrities do not rival Elvis Presley, but there are some twenty million college graduates in the United States who encourage writers to make themselves conspicuous; and some of these writers have found that by replacing the old sentimentalism of goodness with the not much younger sentimentalism of badness they can endear themselves to the Hippified public. Hip (and here my authority is the essayist Milton Klonsky) is the form assumed by irony in our time. Mass irony (a subject deserving special study: it is possible that Hitler in his successful years was supported by German masses trained in irony during the Weimar period) has contributed immensely to the transformation of America. The industrial villages described by Wyndham Lewis as providing no place for "the creative life" no longer exist. Once it was assimilated to Hip the project of living *like artists* appeared in dispersed attenuated forms in every part of the country. It was disseminated by the media, mainly by TV, and by the entertainment industry, the clothing industry, and other transmitters of culture. On the "creative life" Hip has had a cooling and anaesthetic effect.

"Adversary culture," a term coined by the late Lionel Trilling, referred to the success of a negative sort of romanticism altogether different from the earlier romanticism of Wordsworth or Shelley.

It was asserted by the later romantics that the *real* powers could no longer be active in human life. The modern world (Capitalism, Science, etc.) having murdered, annihilated the spirit, negative romanticism acted in bitterness and revenge. The adversary culture presents us now with the sentimentalism of badness. A degenerate negative romanticism is at the core of modern mass culture. Mr. Klonsky, with citations from Kierkegaard, speaks of this as "irony." A better description, in my opinion, is popular nihilism.

Neither in brash, and now demoralized, Chicago nor in New York, the capital of victorious mass culture (American culture is the culture of the TV networks), will any writer try to live like an artist. If he is a person of any degree of seriousness, why would he want to? An older generation of American poets — Yankees like E. E. Cummings, representatives of tradition like T. S. Eliot, epigoni of Confederate gallantry like Allan Tate — complained that America was ruined (for artists) by vile commercialism, modern barrenness and vulgarity; it was degraded beyond redemption by hordes of wop and kike immigrants. It is natural that to the descendants of such immigrants the project of living like artists (presumably of high breeding) should seem a peculiarly repulsive, servile, masochistic form of assimilationism.

No, the problem of how an artist should live cannot be one of my preoccupations. There are no images to project, no charms to cultivate. The struggle with subhumanity is too close and tight for images and charms. What is really needed is a new organization of inner powers. As America is now all city, wherever you touch it, it can't much matter whether this reorganization of powers takes place in Chicago, San Diego, or Detroit. It goes without saying that earlier cultural desires and expectations have been painfully disappointed, but in examining these disappointments a writer may be unexpectedly compensated by an improved understanding. He may find, for example, that it was a mistake to have believed that, if a given "culture" did not deposit its wealth in his mind, he must be empty as the masses are empty. He may get rid

of his rage against history. He need not agree that a man must be only what a city or a culture has made of him. He may discover that that is merely a superstition.

Here is the writer, then, on a Sunday morning looking through his windows at Lake Michigan, a great expanse of fresh water working under the wind, surf breaking on the beaches, while thousands of automobiles driven by restless spirits who find no peace at home crowd the Outer Drive. The wind is not altogether nature's wind, nor is the water nature's water. Both are saturated with pollutants; the invisible air waves are polluted with ridiculous words and images. As for the writer — he is a man in his sixties — his mind is stored with recollections, traditions, ideas, and old notions in which clever people are unlikely to be interested. They do not think his notions to be particularly wonderful. The wonderful, supplied for some time by literature and the other arts, is now provided by miraculous technology. The prevailing forms of mental organization are not for him. Judged by them he is somewhat freakish. However, he does not think himself a judge of all these matters — he is their medium, rather, a refined recording instrument capable of making meaning, making interest. A seismograph in Troy, New York, can register earth movements in Tibet. The analogy is imperfect but not altogether inappropriate. The writer in Chicago has his feelers out. He picks up tremors.

But still — Chicago!

To some of the greatest European poets of the early years of this century, America was culturally the darkest of continents. It had an almost mythological character. Osip Mandelstam reviewing Jack London's *Collected Works* in the twenties wrote, "Contemporary man does not need to travel to the Klondike or to the Pacific Islands to experience the sensations of a wild animal: it is easy enough to lose oneself in the labyrinths of New York or San Francisco, in the elemental forests of the new civilization whose mighty vegetation is impenetrable to the life-giving rays of culture." He speaks of "the malady of the New World, the mys-

terious disease of its monstrous cities — its cultural wildness.” Rilke, even more severe, says that America makes commodities in which there can be nothing human; “empty indifferent things, sham things, life decoys,” he calls them. Since young Americans of my generation, those who intended to paint or write, were powerfully affected by such opinions or myths, they might either seek islands of European culture (pseudo-culture) in Chicago and New York or else declare themselves a new breed of cat. Some of them learned, in the words of Harold Rosenberg, that they could “not hope to define themselves as individuals so long as they follow[ed] European models in respect to the past, even a past of their own.” If they did not learn this, they might lose their sense of a “difference in spiritual form of a nation with a past of immigration, pioneering and democratic revolt.”

In an essay called “Tenth Street” Rosenberg observed that Greenwich Village, filled for generations with refugees from the disease of monstrous cities, of manufacturing colossi, was a transplant or imitation of Paris. The crooked streets of the Village, its little trees, made poets from Pittsburgh or Denver feel that they had at last reached their true home. Here American artists “entered the twentieth century as semi-Frenchmen,” said Rosenberg. Those who did not wish to be Frenchmen of any sort had to learn “to speak in the modern idiom.” The Village had a good effect as a bad example and was an eye-opener “for the artist who wished to begin with his own reality.” Nobody could “mistake the artists’ block of Tenth Street for an aesthetic creation.’ Its liquor shops, poolroom, and metal-stamping factory made it an American street like other rotting side streets of Chicago, Detroit, and Boston. There was nothing picturesque here, nothing European, only the unmitigated U.S.A. “Here,” wrote Rosenberg, “de Kooning’s conception of ‘no environment’ has been realized to a maximum.”

The point of view is not completely new. In his radical prewar years Wyndham Lewis had said that England was a fine place for creative artists because it was a cultural desert. No static noises from

old culture; it had ceased to crackle. Later he wrote of America that it was an excellent vacuum: "Noone really belongs there more than I do." From a similar premise Rosenberg reached a more complete conclusion: poets and novelists who protested against anti-poetic business America doomed themselves to barrenness, but the painters, with a sounder instinct, threw the unpoetic U.S.A. into the hopper and got something entirely new out of it. Their Tenth Street was a neutral American space in which people might discover or create themselves. In Rosenberg's own words, "In this neutral zone, whose featurelessness would drive a simple criminal into a depression, the tramp may pursue his surrender of personality while the artist engages in finding the point at which his begins." American abstract art, art "without a foreign return address," was the creation of immigrants and the sons of immigrants. Rosenberg says, "Apparently, the role for newcomers in the aesthetic affirmation of America has been as significant as in the physical exploration and development of it."

Chicago's nineteenth-century founding capitalist fathers had no cultural interests whatever. "A half savage country, out of date," was E. Pound's judgment on the United States in those years.

Something like a century ago a reporter asked the great meat-packer Phillip D. Armour, "You have made your pile, why not clear out?" Armour's reply:

I have no other interest in my life but my business. I do not want any more money; as you say, I have more than I want. I do not love the money. What I love is the getting of it. All these years of my life I have put into this work, and now it is my life and I can't give it up. What other interests can you suggest to me? I do not read. I do not take part in politics. What can I do?

To Elbert Hubbard, who made little pilgrimages to the homes of great men, Armour remarked, "My culture is mostly in my wife's name."

There was a sort of animal simplicity about these hog butchers. The inquiring reporter prodded Armour to explain why he didn't take his fortune to Europe like so many of the Eastern rich who collected art objects or were forced by their wives to visit ancient monuments; but Chicago pork butchers were provincial in their tastes. They taught Sunday-school classes, they were respectable men, and they could see nothing more significant, in the meta-physical sense, than money. It is perhaps true that they did not love it — in the ordinary sense of love. Money was a vital substance. It was the final product of a vast system of bloodshed, labor, sacrifice, and nutrition resulting in the organization of a huge, monstrous, and painful urban ugliness. Here sweetness and light were inconceivable, historically obstructive, incompatible with belly-logic and with dollars. Culture was in the wife's name. Armour founded an institute of technology in Chicago. (Ring Lardner was a student there, I think.) The sons of the rich went to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, but came home without culture. These great institutions, dependent upon endowments, did not presume to tamper with the minds of young millionaires. These Ivy League graduates entered the family business, played golf, sailed their boats. Yes, they supported orchestras and libraries, they became university trustees, founded art museums; but learning, art, even science — none of these could be given the weight of money. This fact of life has never been disguised in Chicago.

The old yards, the "killing beds" now are gone, but until the Second World War Chicago was an animal-flavored city. You knew what its big industry was when the wind blew from the Yards. Along Cermak Road and other South Side streets red cattle cars waited on the sidings, cows and sheep staring through the slats in brute innocence, death-bound. The odor of blood, manure, bacon-making, soap- and fertilizer-manufacture became a weight lying on your heart. Indeed it was a smell which seemed to have the power to enter into the light, less dense than the carbon exhaust of cars and trucks but adding itself to the air as a sort of

broad-daylight blood gloom. Upton Sinclair's Lithuanian peasants arriving to work in the Yards noted the odor at once. An elemental pungency, said Sinclair, closed in over the streetcar in which they were riding. "Some might have called it sickening," we read in *The Jungle*. They, the greenhorns, were divided in their opinion about the raw, crude "rich, almost rancid, sensual and strong" smell.

I suppose that I had tried as a young writer to come to terms with Chicago in Whitmanesque terms. "I hail with joy," wrote Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, "The oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States. But woe to the age and the land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas." Wealth, science, materialism must feed the highest mind, the soul. "Man, so diminutive, dilates beyond the sensible universe, competes with, outcopes space and time . . ."

This was where we, the children of greenhorns, came in — diminutive but capable of dilating — most eager, given the character of the sensible universe in Chicago, to begin outcoping time and space without delay.

Having decided to write something about Chicago, I read the newspapers with more attention, and watched the television set. I concluded that the overwhelming power in Chicago remains the power of money and goods. People of course wanted fun, they seemed to want religion, too — they joined hands, they prayed, they joined the Moral Majority and responded to appeals for contributions. But as you watched the programs and turned the pages of the *Sun-Times* and the *Tribune*, you were aware that the economy was a sort of divinity. You said, with some reluctance, a bit dazed, somewhat disheartened — but this was confirmation, not a fresh discovery — "These be your gods!"

I called on Mr. Clayton Kirkpatrick, managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, to discuss — well, to discuss what I could with

him. I asked him what proportion of the paper's space was devoted to advertisements. More than 80 percent on weekdays, he told me. On Sundays the percentage was higher. I wondered whether his readers objected to this. He said that on the contrary the public loved the advertisements best. People studied the endless used-car columns, the real-estate ads. They compared prices. It mattered, truly mattered, that some brands of dog food were cheaper this week at Dominicks, but that plate-beef was a big bargain at Jewel's, that Capri luggage could be bought at reduced prices at J. C. Penney's (sale effective thru Saturday). And what about automobiles — twenty full pages, in small print, daily. Hundreds of thousands of readers studied this news — the *real* news — brooded over interest rates, social security, commodity and stock prices, the contracts of athletes and the salaries of public officials, the use of federal funds. Real news is news of goods and money.

Mr. Kirkpatrick must have thought my inquiries very curious. Didn't I know? Where was I from? These were hardly the questions of a grown man, and a public man at that. Where had this writer been all his life? Why, in Chicago. Then how was it that he was only now learning what people here did? It was true, certainly, that for quite special reasons having to do with the preservation of the integrity of the *deeper* mind, I had adopted singular measures to keep my equilibrium amid unsettling distractions. Absorbed in art and "dilation," "tending to ideas," I had missed quite a lot.

Was it the colossal project of the advanced societies to push subsistence ever further into the territory of death; to ensure that masses of us would remain substantial and real for as long as possible; to make mankind as comfortable as possible in the outer world? (It was all outer world now. Only freakish people indeed still thought of any other.) If the Whitmans still called on materialism to feed the highest mind, the soul, okay. There was no great harm in that, but neither was it of real interest. All real

interest was absorbed by the colossal project mentioned above, that of driving subsistence deeper into the territory of death. Man, because he is mortal, has the right — a tragic right — to satisfy fully his creaturely needs. This is no mere dream project. It is minutely actual, systematic, technologically complete, and metaphysically complete, too. The economic problem, wrote J. M. Keynes, “*is not the permanent problem of the human race.*” Maybe not, practical Americans will say, but the connection of the economic problem with death makes it permanent enough.

Above the railroad station in Trenton, New Jersey, there once stood a huge billboard (I don’t know whether it is still there) with the legend, “Trenton Makes, the World Takes.” To this I would like to offer in contrast a photograph of the personal effects of Mohandas K. Ghandi. It was taken shortly after his death and is universally familiar. In it we see his horn-rimmed spectacles, his sandals, his loincloth, and his rice bowl. This is how the spiritual leader of India had lightened himself for the heavy struggle with the British Empire and the other materialist colossi of the West. He had reduced his needs to a saintly minimum.

I had occasion not long ago to discuss this photograph with a young Indian businessman in Chicago. I had met him at Gaylord’s Indian restaurant during one of our blizzards. I asked him what he did. He told me that he dealt in appliances and invited me to visit his shop in the Uptown district — one of Chicago’s most desolate slums. We made an appointment for lunch.

This young man, Mr. Patel, had come from Ahmadabad near Bombay to study electronics, but had left school and turned to business. His shop is on Broadway near Wilson Avenue. He and his associates, all of them Indians, sell TV sets, tape recorders, hi-fi equipment, washers, dryers, calculators, refrigerators, and dishwashers. What was this band of dark young men doing in this once respectable, now decayed district? To whom were they selling their goods? Wilson and Broadway is a notorious corner. Here one can find specialists in every sort of prostitution, male or

female, adult or minor. Here one sees junkies, alcoholics, derelicts. Here assaults, knifings, and shootings occur. Wilson Avenue, bad even in the thirties, is now, fifty years later, a disaster area. Before calling on Mr. Patel, I revisit the neighborhood. I walk quickly; it is too cold for a stroll, we are below zero Fahrenheit, sunk in bleak winter.

When I was in high school and worked for a florist, I used to deliver funeral wreaths out this way. I had to stand on the platform of the streetcar; the wreaths wouldn't go through the door. This was then a mixed neighborhood, Scandinavian, German, Irish, and Jewish. There was a great ballroom on Lawrence Avenue where name-bands played, and there was a Balaban and Katz movie palace, very lavish. Still standing, it reminds me today of the abandoned wedding feast of poor crazy Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* — twenty years have passed since the bride was jilted, but the cake is still there. In Uptown my late brother-in-law, Charlie, who was a dentist, opened his practice on Argyle Street circa 1930. His office was a second floor walk-up with a bay window over the drugstore below. You entered his waiting room from a dark corridor that smelled of cigars and also of the pungent material heated on the end of an instrument for temporary fillings. On one of his mahogany chests of tiny drawers was a bell-jar clock with rotating gilded weights which had been given him by my mother when he started out in life. Here Charlie remained upwards of forty years. Jews moved out and mountaineers from Kentucky and Tennessee came in. These were followed presently by Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, East Indians, blacks. The neighborhood also shelters—if shelter is the word — Koreans, Thais and Vietnamese, but Uptown is becoming largely black. Blacks escaping from the welfare slum tenements — Robert Taylor Homes, Cabrini Green, the high-rises built with federal funds by the Daley administration — are entering this neighborhood in large numbers. This is for the most part a welfare population.

About this growing population the black historian John Hope Franklin had this to say, in an interview given last year:

I am terrified of the growing alienation of that great mass of unemployed and under-employed people. I am absolutely terrified! I don't see how this country can remain a viable, open and moral society when we are raising a whole generation (I mean, and it's running in the millions) of people who don't work, who have not ever worked and who will become maybe middle-aged or older without ever having worked. It seems to me that that's going to cut into the fabric of our society. If a man has never worked and has no stake in society, he doesn't have any obligation to that society. He may think that he should rob and steal with impunity. And I'm not sure that I can argue with him very successfully. But I shudder at the thought that 20 years from now, on the eve of the year 2000, we will have perhaps 15 million people who are not working or have never worked. I don't know what this is going to do to us. And when their kids are coming up in that same kind of situation, it's terrible. And to say I'm worried about it is an understatement.

In Uptown it is inevitable that I should think of my late brother-in-law. Charlie had practiced on Argyle Street in quieter times. Sheridan Road, near the Lake, was once a law-abiding, comfortable, middle-class street. At the Edgewater Beach Hotel, lately demolished and replaced by a high-rise, there were classy weddings and receptions. True, the late Yellow Kid Weill, dean of Chicago's confidence men, recently dead in his nineties, once told me that after a big score he would rent an entire floor of the hotel and fill it with naked hookers. But by middle-class Chicago standards, the Edgewater had class. Wilson Avenue even in the thirties was a street of clip joints, handbooks, and brothels. But these Uptown streets are now burnt out, boarded up with plywood. To whom did Mr. Patel and his exotic partners sell their Electro-luxes, Sonys, and Amanas? My walk was brief. A stinging wind blew snow into my face. Everywhere, empty pint flasks. They

accumulate in snowdrifts and spill out on the crusty ice with every thaw. You hear the scraping of the El trains off in the winter yellow that gapes to the south — grey, really, but with a yellow tinge — and the growling traffic. You wonder about the—what shall we call them: the other Chicagoans, fellow citizens, your countrymen — the mortals who come and go in these streets. There was a time when you could make a fair guess about them. In those more stable days you didn't bristle or fill with dark fear-hormones when there were footsteps behind you. You didn't ask yourself the famous question that Carlyle said any two men might put silently to themselves when they met: "Can I kill thee, or canst thou kill me?" But now there are two distinct populations in Chicago, one unarmed, the other carrying knives and guns; and you know damn well what the answer must be.

Do you want to live dangerously? asks Michael Kilian in a recent column in the *Chicago Tribune*. Danger is vanishing from the most dangerous of places. There are now tours up the Amazon River where tourists may watch bulldozers tearing down the jungles to make farms. But if civilization has taken the old challenges away, it has created new ones every bit as dangerous in American cities. People, says Kilian, go to Kenya to see wild animals from Tourmobiles. "Let them go on a safari through the South Bronx or Chicago's Uptown."

On a winter safari, then, in Chicago's Uptown, I approach Mr. Patel's shop. Appliances are exhibited in the windows, but the door is locked. I must be inspected before I am admitted. Buzzed in, I see dark, supple people. Indoors, faces recover their humanity. I am told that Mr. Patel is expecting me and will return in fifteen minutes. To pass the time, out of the weather, I cross Broadway to the Uptown branch of Goldblatt's Department Store. In my adolescence I worked at Goldblatt's. I learned in the window shade department how to tighten the spring of a shade by winding it with a table fork.

There are eight or ten sets of double doors facing Broadway, but for security reasons only one door at the north end of the store is open. Goldblatt's customers are from the lower middle class, working class; many are welfare clients. Few shoppers in this brutal weather. Business looks bad. All about is a sort of low-level commodity radiation. And here are the goods — house dresses, skirts, pantyhose, snowsuits, kitchenwares, socks, cosmetics, hardware. I go down to the basement and buy picture-books and light bulbs merely to keep up my reserves of picture-books and light bulbs. A Spanish-speaking cashier takes my money — I am the gray-haired customer in a ten-year-old, often-reinforced brown Antarex coat, the leather beginning to turn upward at the knees and to whiten at the seams like an old dog's muzzle. I can't say that my heart actually grows sadder in these bazaars of consumer products. Your state in the back streets is one of stabilized depression, a melancholy wariness. One of the sternest lessons of Chicago is that one must not let the environment get the upper hand.

Mr. Patel has returned and he shows me around his shop. There aren't many novelties to see — we are all so miracle-sodden by now that we can't be impressed by electric carving knives, Cuisinart units, or elaborate tape recorders. The cold television screens are mysteriously porous, coke-colored. Patel wants to give me a stylish lunch away from Uptown, but I have no heart for stylish lunches; I rule out such escapism, and we settle on a Chinese restaurant a few blocks north on Broadway. We drive over and park beside a levee of snow. The chop suey joint is big and empty; it has an old-fashioned stamped tin ceiling, and the booths are covered in red plastic and Formica. A tiny Chinese waiter approaches from distant brown shadows. A drink? Can whiskey help? There is a boozer in a back booth — he is old, burly, red-eyed, and sitting alone. Whiskey hasn't helped him. We decide to skip the drinks. Mr. Patel advises me to order chicken chow mein. The chow mein noodles taste like Styrofoam, but the chicken is good.

I am less depressed. And Uptown does not seem to depress Mr. Patel. Does he live in the neighborhood? Not at all, his apartment is farther west and north, off Devon Avenue, at a safe distance from his place of business. And his customers, are they locals? Not at all. His clientele is citywide. Thais, Iranians, Indians, Pakistanis, Koreans, and Filipinos are his customers. He advertises in all the ethnic newspapers and on UHF TV, especially Channel 26, whose announcers speak a dozen languages.

He explains, "These Third World people come to IIT and the other schools to study computer science or electrical engineering or medicine or nursing or banking. Some of them are in the consular service and so on, and when ready to return are allowed to ship these goods to themselves which are priced out of sight in their own countries, and they will never again have American currency. So we ship — we do a big trade in all these amenities. These give people prestige at home in addition to comfort and convenience. If they do not keep the items for personal use, they can sell them at great profit. But it is a big deal in Third World countries to own such articles. We ship to South America also and Africa . . . sometimes to countries of socialistic, in some cases revolutionary, outlook."

"Couldn't your customers buy as cheaply at Sears, Roebuck, or Montgomery Ward?"

"Certainly, but you see we are specialists in packing, shipping, customs regulations, documentation. My partners and I have found a business opening unnoticed by the big companies. We have just bought our own building, here in Uptown."

"Have you been bothered here?"

"We were robbed once, but it was only an attempt. The burglars broke in through the roof. The man jumped down in the dark, and we figure he fell on a refrigerator and injured himself. Almost nothing was taken. His pals must have had trouble dragging him back through the hole. There was evidence that he was hurt."

From this corner in blighted Uptown, this company of young Indians exports Swiss, English, West German, Japanese, and American products. These air conditioners, Mixmasters, vacuum cleaners, Cuisinarts go to Sri Lanka or Thailand. I form pictures of towns and streets in hottest Asia where American machines are giving birth perpetually to ice cubes shaped like half-moons. I mention the fact that ice preserved between decks in sawdust to make sherbets for sultans was being shipped from New England ponds in the very years when de Tocqueville was writing about the craving for physical gratification characteristic of democracy, the democratic emphasis on the practical, its catering to the cravings of human vanity, the trimming up of commodities to give them "attractive qualities which they do not in reality possess." Mr. Patel, still a student at heart and a reader, has not invited me here to eat chicken chow mein but for conversation. We consider together what these wonderful appliances signify. I have been reading a new book, *The Last Half Century*, by Professor Morris Janowitz, a sociologist's view of American society and politics, and Professor Janowitz discusses the shift in popular culture from "idols of production" to "idols of consumption." He bases his observations on a study by Leo Lowenthal which shows that before 1924 the idols of the mass media, such as they were then, were the Fords and the Edisons, empire builders, makers of goods and machinery. By the end of the twenties, idols of consumption were, however, at the center of the pantheon. The gods were fat, eating and drinking and driving about in luxurious machines. Professor Janowitz notes, "the shift from mass media themes of production to consumption has been augmented by a third phase, namely, an emphasis on the details involved in the management of interpersonal relations Themes of consumption still exceed those of production; the concern is to include excluded groups in the culture of consumption."

Consumption, in other words, is filled with an expansive impulse, perhaps even a missionary impulse. No one is to be under-

privileged, and of course all of mankind understands this perfectly well. From the idols of consumption, Patel and I turn to the final photo of Gandhiji's possessions. Perhaps you can't contend with power for power unless you strip yourself for the struggle. When there is nothing your opponents can take away from you, you fight more effectively. In his dhoti Gandhi must have seemed childlike. Sophisticated political forces did not know how to deal with a child-man. Gandhi's loin cloth may have made the opposing world of great structures and possessions seem alien to the real purposes of life. In this case, archaic man defeated historical man — for the moment. Of course, Gandhi, too, was sophisticated. After this warm, friendly, and interesting luncheon, Mr. Patel returns to his appliance shop and I go back to my mental and aesthetic gymnasium for further training.

Christopher Isherwood, asked whether he had a special liking for California, said that — well, there were certain things you had to get used to, like driving on the freeways, and a certain kind of ugliness, but that there was enormous beauty along the coastline, and a tremendous kind of vitality. He went on,

I used to hear a lot against America when I went back to England. People took such very superior attitudes. They don't understand a bit what the feeling is here, what it's all about . . . they don't understand that this is where the mistakes are being made — and made first, so that we're going to get the answers first We really do in spite of our failings . . . really air things here. Quite brutally It's no place for people who want to sleep quietly in their beds.

That covers certain rather important points. Ugly? Yes, shattering. Also beautiful, vital. Unquestionably, too, this is the most modern of countries still, the country in which the mistakes of the future are being made, and where the speed of transformation is such that whole communities appear, disappear, reappear transformed in a matter of decades. Immigrant Chicago of the nineties,

square, wooden, and upright, rotted away — no more industrial villages strung together, but a core of skyscrapers, a “magnificent mile” where retailers gross billions; beyond this a wasteland; then a slum horror; then a region of precarious stability — Greek, Italian, Scandinavian, Irish; and finally the suburbs. All this is what Colonel McCormick, our own Ludwig of Bavaria, looking down from the Tribune Tower, called Chicagoland, and Chicagoland it has remained, a place like the land of Oz.

Chicago stood for something in the twenties and thirties. That something was not entirely good, but it was distinctive. What is there to distinguish it now? Many economists agree that the American balance has shifted, the South and West have made progress, the Northeast and the Midwest are declining, and now Chicago is part of the disorder of the country. It stagnates, rots. The chief justice of the Supreme Court declares that urban America is in the hands of its own terrorists. When America does a Third World number, it does it with a vengeance.

In the streets, an armed population. In flats and houses, the unarmed with their newspapers, magazines, radios, television sets. What they receive is news of the day. What they hear comes to them in a journalistic, academic, psychological, sociologic, and bureaucratic jargon, a creation of the media intellectuals — the language of discussion, of information. Is there any other sort of public language? Can books still be read as writers intended them to be read? Information is superabundant, but it sometimes occurs to a writer to ask why there is so little news of being.

It is against this background that one should consider “the writer from Chicago” and the project of “living like an artist.” The “industrial villages,” in collapse, are being scraped away. We begin again, if we do begin, from base-level. We cannot possibly begin in simplicity. No more than Gandhi can we avoid sophistication.

Professor Janowitz, referring to TV soap operas, speaks of “the extent to which popular culture contributes to the trivializa-

tion of the prophetic aspect of existence." I combed his thick book repeatedly but failed to find any other mention of this "prophetic aspect." I assume it came out of Max Weber. We cannot expect sociologists to go very deeply into such questions. Nor do philosophers concern themselves with them. Artists may, if they like, have them all to themselves. But those who should decide to take them up would find that they had no time to look for circumstances favorable to their art. There are no such circumstances. But that does not mean that there is to be no more art. To assert that is to believe that a man can only be a creature of his own time, to say, "Tell me where you come from, and I will tell you what you are." I do not myself accept this proposition. Support from culture such as we have heretofore looked for is not to be had; the perfection of the best is out of reach. But those of us who desire to be humanly awakened need not depend upon "culture." We are what we are. Not without certain resources.

I recently came upon the following sentences in Samuel Butler's introduction to his odd book *The Authoress of the Odyssey*:

... Living permanent work in literature (and the same holds good for art and music) can only be done by those who are either above, or below, conscious reference to any rules or canons whatsoever — and in spite of Shakespeare, Handel and Rembrandt, I should say that on the whole it is more blessed to be below than above. For after all it is not the outward and visible signs of what we read, see or hear, in any work, that bring us to its feet in prostration of gratitude and affection. What really stirs us is the communion with the still living mind of the man or woman to whom we owe it, and the conviction that that mind is as we would have our own to be. All else is mere clothes and grammar.

Well, we are below the canons, that is certain. But in communion with the still living mind, nevertheless. That is still possible. Something in us cries out for news of being, and those of us who feel that they have received it will continue to try to transmit it,

even though that news brings us to the region where art itself is threatened with disintegration.

You can see whom I have been reading lately, and also what I have been looking for. I always loved Whitman, and I should like to quote from him in conclusion. This is from one of his Civil War letters. He is speaking here of wounded soldiers:

. . . tens and twenties of thousands of American young men badly wounded, all sorts of wounds, operated on, pallid with diarrhea, languishing, dying with fever, pneumonia etc., open a new world somehow to me, giving closer insights, new things, exploring deeper mines than any yet, showing our humanity . . . tried by terrible, fearfulest tests, probed deepest, the living soul's, the body's tragedies, bursting the petty bonds of art.

Chicago is, in its own way, a battlefield. So at least it seems to me. We are at a point at which, faced with the worst, we turn with hope to the imagination. Perhaps it isn't hope, perhaps it is simply obstinacy. Not even that is an unanswerable objection. It is the turning toward the imagination that matters. There, it seems to me, is where modern seriousness begins. "Bursting the petty bonds of art"? Yes, and also bursting the bonds of petty art.

II. VARIATIONS ON A THEME FROM DIVISION STREET

I thought at first to call this talk "Division Street Revisited," and I next considered "Culture and Creativity, With a Brief Conducted Tour of Chicago," but in the end "Variations on a Theme from Division Street" seemed to me the best choice.

Division Street, which has achieved a limited sort of fame through Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, and other writers and publicists, is the main stem of the neighborhood in which I grew up. From 1924 until the Second World War, this was my turf. And

on a chilly Sunday afternoon last autumn I revisited it in the company of three old friends. Our Division Street stroll was somewhat artificial because we were followed by a television crew. We were taping a show. The producer occasionally asked us to stop and record our reminiscences and impressions. Fussy camera artists ordered us about. Behind them there gathered a crowd of kids. We did not perform at all well. No one felt easy. This had seemed, when the network suggested it, a good and useful thing to do; but it proved to be a strain, a disappointment, a mistake, another good idea gone sour. There were tedious retakes. The air was bright but the wind was cold.

So we stood waiting — three elderly men and a woman — for the technicians to tell us what to do. We tried in the intervals to locate old landmarks. The neighborhood, once Scandinavian, Polish, and Jewish, was now a Puerto Rican slum. It had never been an attractive part of the city. Division Street in the twenties was a car-line, a clanging commercial street of immigrants — “Ethnics,” as they now are called. Our parents had been Ethnics. We had been their American kids, eagerly memorizing English poetry at school: “Hence loathed melancholy.” Or, more appropriate today, “Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain.” We looked about us, we elderly visitors who had once belonged here, with a certain nostalgic bitterness. Endless ruined blocks, buildings burned out and boarded with plywood. In which of these *carnicerías*, *cervecerías*, Pentecostal churches had the tiny, refined, bespectacled Ceshinsky with his small bent nose, his large head of hair sold books to the Russian-Polish-Yiddish intelligentsia? And had this secondhand bed and mattress shop once been the Tolstoi Vegetarian Restaurant? Division Street was never the Via Veneto, it had always been slummy, but slums too can go downhill. We had had a good slum here, vital, not dehumanizing, and with a cultural life of its own. Under the street lamps people used to gather at night to listen to orators and educators — Nietzscheans, Anarchists, Zionists, followers of Max Nordau, Henry George,

Brann the Iconoclast, interpreters of Karl Kautsky or Rosa Luxemburg. They discussed intellectual questions on the street corners and in the park nearby. There have lately been serious riots in the park. On the benches where garment workers and carpenters read Ibsen you now find drug pushers and adolescents who belong to street gangs. There is a large narcotics market on Rockwell Street. Porsches and Jaguars from the suburbs pull up here for heroin and cocaine.

In these backstreets where an occasional wife-beating once scandalized the neighbors and brought out the cops, muggings, rapes, stabbings, and shootings happen daily. There are still relatively safe enclaves in the city looking much as they did in the old days — wide, clumsy, lumpy streets, brick bungalows, cottonwoods, geraniums which seem to have been cranked up from the soil; but these Irish, Polish, Scandinavian enclaves are not at peace, they are in a state of siege. In the brick bungalows there are guns in the closets, cans of mace under the beds, doors and windows wired with alarm systems.

Chicago's white population is declining. The black middle class is also trying to escape to the suburbs. Factories are pulling out. School registration is 85 percent black and Hispanic, but the Department of Justice and the federal courts insist on full desegregation nevertheless. Before long the schools will be entirely black and Hispanic. With white taxpayers pulling out, Puerto Ricans, blacks, and Mexicans may have the city entirely to themselves. Pessimists ask what sort of civilization such cities will produce. They wonder also what new forms of civilization the suburbs may develop and what ideas the fugitives have for filling the exurban emptiness with sweetness and light.

But my friends and I are trying to locate Ceshinsky's little island of culture. In the days of our youth our neighborhood didn't look very different from similar districts in Manchester or St. Etienne, but it is undoubtedly worse now. There are no cultural islands like Ceshinsky's. He may not have been aware that

he was selling inflammatory books — *Germinal* *The Flowers of Evil*, *Man's Fate*, the works of Marx and Engels — to high-school students. To him all books were precious. But there was nothing to worry about. His customers were only cultivating their minds, broadening their culture. If they were reading Zola, it was because he was the great naturalist and the famous author of *J'Accuse*. They were not inspired to loot shops like the rioting miners of *Germinal* or rape Ceshinsky's wife. No one was raped, no one was castrated or knifed. The rapists and knifers who came later were not readers.

In those days my own innocent preferences were for Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, for Walt Whitman; and as I look for familiar landmarks, I find a text from Whitman working its way through my head. "You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house," wrote the poet of change. The soul must travel:

Allons, be not detained!
 Let the paper remain on the desk, unwritten
 And the book on the shelf unopened . . .
 I give you my hand,
 I give you my love, more precious than money
 Will you come travel with me?

A delicious offer. Walt's love is indeed more precious than money. But it turned out that we couldn't dally in the house. The houses were razed. The evicted soul had no choice but to free itself from material attachments. To Eliot it was a tragic humiliation to "stiffen in a rented room." As we grew up in rented rooms, we could not share his bitterness although we sympathized with him willingly. Gerontion minded having to rent decaying quarters from a Jew; Whitman blithely walked away from houses. We never had houses to begin with, and even the little we did have now is gone. (Most of the landlords, by the way, were Polish.)

On Division Street the television crew attracts a group of Puerto Rican children and huge automobiles pull up blasting

music, getting into the sound track. Grinning, gesturing, jeering young men go round and round in their Oldsmobiles and Pontiacs, gunning their engines and making the tires squeal by taking off at high speed from a standstill. This is a rich event, and they seem to want a piece of the action. You may not, yourself, feel real; but what you see on TV is undoubted reality, and to be seen on the screen by millions amounts to a sort of metaphysical certification. So these young men make their bid to get in the act, to be represented, to share the privilege of visibility. For it is a privilege, they feel, yet another privilege denied them. That's why they race up in their Buicks and Pontiacs, blasting us with their music, grinning and gesturing, "What about *us*?"

Now let me go back a few hours. I live in another part of the city, in an apartment building beside the lake. The slums lie behind me, to the west. I needn't see them if I don't want to. I can look eastwards instead over the freshwater sea. My walls are lined — no, barricaded — with books. These defenses do not, however, shut out the city. Our building is vandalized every day. Burglaries are frequent. Elderly people are robbed and beaten in the streets below. My bookish defenses are inadequate; there are moods of the city to which I am unconsciously attuned, atmospheres against which no book barricades protect me. These moods are especially potent on Sunday mornings, I find. Sundays make me singularly vulnerable. Each Sunday is really a mass of Sundays. For this reason I shun the heavy Sunday papers. I haven't the heart to read about the crimes and sensations of the weekend and the latest news of world crises. Better to look at Lake Michigan circling under the sun than to face the Sunday *Tribune*. What good is this protective project, this rampart of poems, histories, classics? I needed it. I built it. But it is there. What good can it do to ask what good it is? It is Sunday, I have promised to go to Division Street. The afternoon is short, the morning too is damaged. Then I find myself hanging over the back of the sofa looking for some titles on the bottom shelves. The fact that I turn

to books means that reality is especially oppressive. "You read too many books," a biologist once said to me. I suppose he was right. But I am not a random reader and bibliomaniac. I follow themes. You dip your thread into the mother fluid and presently you begin to see the crystals forming on it, as Owen Barfield once said to me. I know exactly what I am looking for.

Cities and literature are on my mind. I turn first to a passage in Erich Auerbach's essay *La Cour et la Ville*, describing seventeenth-century theatergoers in Paris who preferred the *parterre* to the *loge*—an odd thing for a Chicago writer to be interested in, but I am simply telling things as they are. The merchants of the rue St. Denis were regular devotees of the *parterre*. They were not "the people." They were not the "bourgeoisie" or even the "petite bourgeoisie" of Marxian class struggle, but merely a small and clearly circumscribed group, namely the shopkeepers, the *boutiquiers*, and more specifically dealers in articles of luxury and fashion. In the seventeenth century the *quartier* St. Denis was approximately what the rue de la Paix is today, or at least what it was until very recently. It was the quarter of the tailors, glovers, lace-dealers, jewellers. Here also were the most celebrated dealers in optical instruments, fine glassware; it could boast the presence of a *fabricant de mouches*, and of *Maître Jean Bourgeois épinglier de Sa Magesté la Reine . . .* despite their wealth these merchants seldom went to the expense of a *loge . . .* they preferred the *parterre*. "You had a good view of the stage, and it was cheap." I shall not quote much more from this delicious text. It will suffice to mention in passing that Auerbach is concerned here with the appearance of the idea of culture. "There was no special word for 'cultured,' such words as *poli, galant, bel-esprit, bonnete* come close to it from different angles." There are jewel dealers downtown in the Maller's Building ("Robbers' Roost"), but they are not *galant* or *bonnete*.

It gives me a lift to read Auerbach's wonderful account of the public that received Molière's *The Misanthrope*. That was

a city! We have no pin-makers to Her Majesty the Queen who are also good judges of dramatic poetry. We have First Ladies who wear clothes made by designers of international fame, and these couturiers and Bill Blasses are themselves kings or Molières, celebrities often in the White House whose works are discussed learnedly in fashion magazines. Here in Chicago we have crooked, entertaining politicians; picturesque owners of ball clubs; a lady mayor who clowns and makes mean faces for our entertainment; big-shot lawyers who have no time to fool with books — their culture is in the wife's name. (This is a permissible digression if we do not lose sight of the shattered city struggling to survive.)

The next book I pick up (more mother-fluid for my crystal-gathering thread) is Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*. I turn to the following passage.

But now [says Goethe] conceive a city like Paris, where the highest talents of a great Kingdom are all assembled on one spot, and by daily intercourse, strife, emulation, mutually instruct and advance each other, where the best works of both nature and art, from all the Kingdoms of the earth, are open to daily inspection — conceive this metropolis of the world, I say, where every walk over a bridge or across a square recalls some mighty past, and where some historical event is connected with every corner of a street. In addition to all this, conceive not the Paris of a dull spiritless time, but the Paris of the nineteenth century, in which, during three generations, such men as Molière, Voltaire, Diderot and the like, have kept up such a current of intellect as cannot be found twice in a single spot in the whole world . . .

If Auerbach gives me a lift, Goethe is like ice water. Germany, he is saying, has no Paris.

But then it must be said neither does contemporary France. The bridges and the squares are there and people are proud of them, but the cultural level seems not much higher than that of Mexico City. This fact, which stares us in the face, need not be

discussed here. But it is the sort of fact that Americans can be counted on to register, because America was for so long culturally dependent on Europe that when the current stopped flowing, we Americans felt it at once. Since I am not an historian, or historicist, to speak of beginnings and endings is not in my line; and it's not for me to declare that the decline, prophesied by many, and manifest in New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere, has made wicked progress. It's enough to say that with the powerful modernist movement there had come a pause. In that pause we looked back on Proust, on Rilke and the other great figures of the first post-war period and wondered what would happen next — more specifically, how to take hold of the new age imaginatively. If you grew up in Chicago, you had access, of course, to this great culture, just as you might have had it anywhere between Glasgow and Seattle, Washington. You read the masterpieces, and perhaps even more you read the scholarly works in which they were described and analyzed (I have cited Erich Auerbach — I might have mentioned Mario Praz as well, or E. R. Curtius).

When I was an undergraduate in Chicago, we were told not to bother with humanist scholars but to study the Great Books themselves. It may seem odd — funny — that this skirmish between ancients and moderns should have taken place in the home of the steel mills and the stockyards — but it makes excellent sense, really. If you're starting from scratch, you had better start with Plato and Thucydides, you need your Shakespeare. Bright undergraduates from the slums, the suburbs, or the sticks agreed that the *Phaedrus* or *Hamlet* was exactly what they should be reading. But it's clear to me, looking back, that our teachers, although brainy and systematic enough, had little feeling for poetry. Really, they were interested in “ideas” only. They mined ideas out of Sophocles and Shakespeare, they rooted them out by the light of Aristotle's *Poetics*. They said that they respected Beauty. They *had* to. After all, Plato and Aristotle were their stock in trade (their racket); but in their attitudes, their conduct, their tone our

professors were no less Philistine and obtuse than downtown lawyers or bankers.

But it does no good to attack the cultural weakness of the professors. What would Chicago be without its universities? What we are considering is not the inadequacy of this or that group of teachers but the tragic impotency of a civilization challenged by a phenomenon like the city of Chicago, its failure to build anything behind its gorgeous façade, to educate, to keep order, or to attach its population to life.

On my way to Division Street, I drive through the old Chicago neighborhoods. They weren't much to look at in their best days; but was it necessary to smash, strip, board up, burn, or raze so many of them? Was this demolition a judgment on their petty bourgeois ugliness? When you turn your head, you see the sparkling skyscrapers of the new Chicago which have risen in the Loop. From the seventieth floor of the Hancock Building or of the Sears Tower, the fields of rubble in the middle distance form part of the privileged executive's view. He doesn't have to look at the minute particulars of the middle distance. He can fix his gaze on the horizon. At the rim of the city residential areas are still standing, but no one can predict how long they will last. Yes, in the twenties these streets through which I drive were dull, and in the thirties they were depressed and grim, but it was not because they were dull that they were forsaken, boarded, burned, or bulldozed. In less than a century some force — we may call it for convenience the world historical spirit — raised up a giant city and then scraped most of it away. Fifty years ago we all thought it would endure forever.

Volatile adolescents like myself hated it. Judicious adults took a very different view. American cities were not pretty, but they were all right. Americans were fundamentally sound. Let me quote from the famous Dutch historian, Huizinga, who wrote a book about the United States in the early twenties. He asks, when

sound middle-class Americans read disturbing modern books, what do they make of them? And here is his answer:

The average reader — and socially speaking, it is he with whom we are concerned — no matter how much literary pessimism, revolutionary thought, romanticism, amoralism or mysticism he reads, remains a good citizen, a sober businessman and a more or less dutiful person The spirit of American culture in general continues to be steadily filled with bold confidence in life, confidence in education and progress, and respect for the established moral and national institutions. In brief, it is healthy-minded, positive and optimistic.

Well, perhaps Huizinga was writing about the real, the permanent America, and what we see now is only an unhappy interlude. I wish I were healthy-minded enough to believe it; for if I were healthy-minded, I would conclude that the modern books with their pessimism, amoralism, romanticism did not have it right. My own opinion is that American confidence in education and progress went wrong somehow when the country made a giant effort to improve and to assist and lift up and to educate, and when, under the New Deal, the New Frontier and, later, Johnson's Great Society programs, hundreds of billions were spent on liberal programs. The efforts of the government gave the country a sense that all the problems were manageable, that its troubles were being handled by experts, and that solutions could be bought and paid for. Washington was being moral for us. We were thus able to think well of ourselves, covered by moral insurance, federally centralized. Everybody was publicly for all the good things — public health, free education, equal justice — and against the bad ones. People were consequently free to "realize" themselves. There was money enough for every purpose. If in addition it was your personal desire to be a virtuous person, there was nothing to stop you. Virtue was like a Western ghost-town. If you proclaimed yourself mayor and marshal, no one would mind at all. But the gesture would be superfluous — you had already

approved the government's generous programs and contributed to private philanthropic agencies. There were large appropriations for public housing, child care, education, job training; but somehow no one was educated, the housing projects were a disaster, welfare programs created a larger population of permanent dependents.

Enough of that, I am not writing a sociological treatise.

The drive to Division Street takes me through the Uptown slum and then through more of the same, the inner-city wasteland. You are aware that the people who moved out found better housing in better neighborhoods, or in the suburbs, but the city you knew has fallen apart. It is painful to see. It makes you think how you have passed your life, and leads you to consider again the plan, formed so many years ago, to interpret your surroundings, sift their secret message, reach their human meaning — to work them through yourself somehow. The project itself survived, the city in which it was conceived did not.

Now, then, the television filming: I didn't come to it with high expectations. The *media* rule American culture. TV *is* American culture; still the thing was well worth doing, it was instructive. The network wanted me to talk about old Chicago, to walk through the Division Street neighborhood chatting with survivors from the thirties, friends of fifty years ago. I had given a list of names to the program director. Not a single refusal, the old friends all turned up, but they were all disappointed in the results. One boyhood pal, a building contractor, said afterwards, "I couldn't be myself in front of the cameras." His confession took me by surprise. He seemed shocked. My friend is a big, square-set, ruddy, irrepressibly outspoken man, uninhibited. We were filmed, he and I, at the site of a settlement house, but the settlement house had been pulled down. There was nothing at all to see — two elderly men reminiscing about basketball games in a gymnasium that wasn't even there — a building contractor who

thinks of himself as a “mold-smasher” but couldn’t be himself. The producer eliminated the settlement-house footage.

The network had told me that it wanted to film *my* Chicago, but that wasn’t true. For my part I wanted a look at the Chicago of the media. I thought, too, that I might learn something about TV. Some 200 million people spend an average of thirty hours a week in front of their sets. At night I see colored images shuttling and shifting in all the windows of the huge apartment complex across the way. Also in slum housing projects, in waiting rooms, in bars, in rural post offices, in bus stations, planted by each seat in the cells of the county jail, everybody stares at the same pictures, hears the same voices, words. In nursing homes the eyes of the aged are fixed on the screen: how many must die while watching.

If the crime rate does not rise more rapidly, it is because citizens in the high-rise apartment buildings are afraid to go out at night. They triple-lock their doors and set the alarm system. Too tired to read, they switch on the set for warmth and companionship. They fear, with good reason, that in the garages below their cars are being ripped off. There are gangs of thieves who prop the axles up on bricks. Cars themselves are driven away to the chop shops and taken apart, engines and transmissions sold in other cities, even in Central America.

The writer, keeping to his plan, obstinate, still trying to interpret his surroundings and reach their human meaning, has his work cut out for him. I am with uncanny obstinacy hanging in there. I have my ramparts of masterpieces and scholarly works. I have the great University as well. If the University hadn’t been there, I would not have been able to bear Chicago; but nothing could ever have induced me to take sanctuary in a college town. Like Mrs. Micawber, I have remained loyal.

The abrupt contrasts of Chicago have always intrigued observers. Harvey Zorbaugh in the twenties called his study of the

Near-North Side *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, rags and riches side by side. But this is now the condition of the whole city. Chicago safe and unsafe face each other from opposite sides of the street. From the residential high-rise apartments, the assault troops are always visible, riding in jalopies or doing their thing openly. You step westwards from Sheridan Road and find yourself in the Uptown, East Rogers Park slum. In the condominium apartments curtains are heavy, carpets thick, security measures are elaborate. Democracy was not meant to be exciting — the Federalist Papers tell you that. Great irregularities of passion were to be eliminated; but if life was somewhat duller, it was also more safe. On these premises ordinary people organized their lives. Danger and irregularity of the passions, perversity, crime, evil were put into our entertainments. Home in the bourgeois nineteenth century was safe, profoundly comfortable, lavishly decorative — a sort of loge, said Walter Benjamin, in the theater of the world. But all this privileged bourgeois and lower-middle-class immunity has ended. The condominium apartment bought with prudent savings is neither a Biedermeier loge nor a nice little pad, but a small fortress very hard to defend. People feel themselves as much jailed as sheltered. Fear and weakness keep them jailed. The assault troops are below. The slum begins across the way, and what a slum it is! It makes the slums of the Roaring Twenties seem Arcadian. Their crimes were so tame, their vices were so quiet. Why are so *many* people over there now, and why are they so savage, menacing, *ungrateful*? ask the condominium owners. Their misery isn't *our* fault. We are not the Ku Klux Klan. We were always willing that their problems and miseries should be regulated away, and that they should be humanely provided for, educated. But the opportunities when offered were rejected.

This is what one hears from the high-rise dwellers.

The assault troops, inner-city blacks of the third or fourth generation on welfare, are less articulate; but it isn't hard to find

words for their state of mind. What they ask is simply, "How do you propose to attach us to life?" But how well attached are the condominium owners? Do property, savings, pensions, prudence, the desire for an untroubled "Golden Age" constitute an attachment?

At night in the great building opposite, the colored TV images shift and flutter in every window. Some of the tenants are reading books or listening to music, but most of them take the easy way out and turn on the set. As cable TV proliferates, they will be offered still more rough stuff, battle, murder, pornography. By flipping a switch they can see today rioters in Belfast, African children starving to death, executions in San Salvador, street warfare in Beirut, terrorists in action — the shooting of a President, the shooting of a Pope, the murder of a Statesman. Our Madisonian system is not working. The "great irregularities of passion" are not harmlessly discharged as entertainment. The schools are worse than useless. Real instruction comes from TV, from street gangs, from "hip" influences. The irregularities of passion are translated into the facts of urban life.

This view of America from Division Street may reconfirm for many the opinion that we are sunk in hopeless decadence and that liberal democracy has gone down for good. That is not my opinion. Candor should not be taken for defeatism. Stopped in the street by an inquiring reporter, I should still say that America is where the real action takes place, the modern action, and that the future of civilization is being decided here. But that is merely a public statement, political not imaginative. As a writer, I have no real use for it.

The reason for this is that such public statements have little or nothing to do with the power of the soul to experience its being or to apprehend events. The descent into subhumanity begins with the thinning out of the imagination. Public experience has no value of its own. The so-called "triumph of communications" only increases the meaninglessness of existence. Nor am I often

satisfied by the accounts of the human condition given by social scientists or journalists. Such accounts can at times be intelligent, but they are generally lacking in deeper human meaning. In 1965 the late Louis Fischer presented me with a copy of his biography of Lenin. He inscribed it to me and added “for deeper thought.” I am prevented by the *de mortuis* rule from making fun of Fischer. I read his book, a very good book in its way. It was informative, useful, but it contains no real news of being.

I understood him to be saying, “Why waste time with novels ?” Well, of course the question was a fair one. Novels are on the whole unsatisfactory. But when people complain about them, say that novels are dead, or wish that they were dead, it is only fair to suggest in reply that perhaps it is the generally accepted, the prevailing view of what human beings are that is dead, and this is the real heart of the complaint. And this prevailing view or standard version, so threadbare, boring, vexing, dangerously shallow, is our problem. Journalists, historians, social scientists — yes, psychologists, too — give us the standard interpretation from the public side, and from the public side it is only barely tolerable — it is the impoverished inwardness that sets our teeth on edge. “Get a real subject,” Louis Fischer was telling me. I see what he meant. But I think I may after all have one. I may even go so far as to say that it is politically an important subject. The private life is the most important of democratic problems. Plenty of deeper thought, I should say.

But now to draw the threads of my talk together, obviously the traditional cultural powers of our civilization could not bear the strain put on them by our revolutionary century. In 1902 Yeats wrote to James Joyce to compliment him on his verse technique. The work was remarkable, said Yeats, “for a man who has lived away from the vital intellectual centers.”

Where would we find those vital centers now? In Paris, London, etc.? In the universities? In the *New York Times*? At the same time there is a diffused vitality, there are great capacities,

talent and intellect are looking for employment. In all civilized countries there are trained minds. Civilization is, if anything, more mental and clever than before. Even from the black Chicago underclass, when you talk to street people, hospital patients, prisoners in County Jail, you often hear sophisticated notions. Some of these are merely professorial phrases, disseminated by the media. These may do more harm than good, in the end, but they seem to me nevertheless to be signs that even at the lowest cultural level nothing like the old ignorance exists. You converse with people who are confused, lost, sick, on trial for murder, doomed—and they can speak very nicely, like TV actors. At the higher levels you meet people with very high IQ's and a fair degree of education. It rings a bell when Plato's Cave is mentioned, or Shakespeare's Coriolanus, or Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. They've heard of the Cave, they remember Coriolanus. Their minds are good, but they haven't enough culture to cover their nakedness. Their nakedness is of the present age. What good is their once having read Coriolanus? It may come in handy when they do a crossword puzzle. The real, the deepest needs are unrecognized; and perhaps because intelligence, highly trained, perfected, has nothing but technical tasks to occupy it, those needs secretly gnaw at and destroy the most gifted persons.

Fifty years ago, Chicago was a vital, powerful proletarian and Philistine city. It had great centers of learning and scientific research — it still has them. At the center of Chicago stand the impressive skyscrapers — beyond the Loop, vast areas of devastation.

An elderly writer, having returned from his afternoon on Division Street, looking over Chicago from his not-very-secure sanctuary, understands that it is impossible, at his time of life, to back away from the city.

When the traditional cultural powers of a civilization fail, said Gottfried Herder, men are compelled to develop their "organic powers" and find a way to transform or transcend the cultural legacy to meet the new conditions of their existence. (This is one

of the crystals I get by dipping my threads in the mother fluid.) “Men,” says Herder. He seems to mean, he must mean, an occasional man or woman. One finds oneself looking for these transformers and transcendents. They don’t often turn up in the academic community.

But a clear case of transforming power is described by the Russian poet Brodsky in a recent article on Nadezhda Mandelstam. Her two books, *Hope Against Hope and Hope Abandoned*, he sees not only as memoirs and guides to the lives of Mandelstam and Akhmatova but as books which clarified the consciousness of modern Russia. “A Day of Judgment on earth for her age and its literature,” he says. And it is language that makes this Judgment on earth possible. The poetry of Akhmatova and of her own husband had shaped her mind. “Both in their content and style her books are but a postscript to the supreme version of language which poetry essentially is and which became her flesh through learning her husband’s lines by heart.” In poetry, Mandelstam and Akhmatova could only have been followed by epigones. What was necessary was that prose should inherit the discoveries of the poets. But all this would have happened regardless of what took place in Russia in this century. These people became what they were because they were *gifted*. “Basically, talent doesn’t need history.” And, further along, “A frail woman of sixty-five turns out to be capable of slowing down, if not averting, in the long run, the cultural disintegration of a whole nation.”

People of this sort do not mean to be so grand or set themselves up as cultural heroes. The widow Mandelstam, says Brodsky, did not try to get even with “the system.” She was one of those whose *deeper thought* comes to them from the best poetry of their age and from the traditions out of which this poetry, this special language, arose. They do what they have been shaped to do by their art, by a spiritual discipline which gives them the power to interpret experience and to apprehend events. With this comes the strength to resist false interpretations, to hold out for true meaning.

A lifetime in Chicago has taught me quite a lot about this. It was through Chicago that I began to see my own outline. You must turn to the outer world to see yourself, but then it is only from within that the outer world itself can be studied. We ourselves, individually, are the only knowers of its qualities — qualities which, as matters stand, we are not nowadays educated to grasp. We are trained in a literalness which the technological and business world itself expresses in its institutions, buildings, artifacts, and judgments. That world is one described by a most intelligent friend of mine as a world of outsides without insides. In a world of outsides, we are cut off from reality and meaning; and as art cannot live in a world of such extremes only, writers must necessarily struggle with modern literalness.

That doesn't mean that I am an enemy of Chicago — no, no, I am one of its true friends, simply one who does not stop writing about what is omitted from the common-sense, down-to-earth, bread-and-butter literalness that prevails. I even think that I can somewhat understand the behavior and attitudes of the blacks and latinos of the underclass. They took possession of the near-nothing (our old Chicago slum) and annihilated it (brought it to total ruin), in this way asserting the utter nothingness of their surroundings, and thus reaching the boundaries of literalness. Humankind is always involved in some kind of metaphysical enterprise.

I have the right, I think (having written so long in Chicago, about Chicago, in a style for which most of Chicago has little use), to call attention to the discrepancy between what "Chicago" educates us to believe and what our souls require if we are to be attached to life. This discrepancy between the triumphant towers of the Loop and the desolation of Division Street does bring an unlooked-for advantage, it frees us to disown the ruling forms of perception — to disown, to reconsider. The failure of these forms stares us in the face. But through this desolation and failure we may also obtain our release.

And this is where the real action is.

We modern creatures, most of us, have come from some Division Street or other, and these Division Streets had great power to form or disfigure human beings. But not the ultimate power — not if you found your own ground for rejecting that ultimate power. Anyway, it is clear that far greater disfigurements are imposed on us by the reigning rules of perception than by ruined streets. These ruling perceptions, false to our own reality and to the realities that surround us — those of society and of nature — it is impossible for us to live by.

It remains for writers and artists to recover what the ruling perceptions leave out. And this is what the imagination does. It restores what mutilating perception has cut away.

Does this suggest a bitter, grinding struggle? It shouldn't. It has its own gratifications. It can even be a rich source of comedy.

So a writer in Chicago continues to do what his betters, under less extreme conditions, did better before him.

I had planned to conclude this talk by a last reference to poor old Louis Fischer's deeper thought, with a few words about novelists like Tolstoi, Proust, artists who had the power to pass the life of an entire civilization through their souls. Journalists do not often do this, nor journalistic historians; few intellectuals, even, achieve it. The ruling reptiles of the intellectual world don't even know what this might signify — passing the life of French civilization through *what?*

I will finish instead by mentioning one of Kipling's stories. I had never read it before. I picked it up the other night. In rapid outline it has to do with three journalists, one of them Kipling himself. They are passengers on a voyage from Capetown to Southampton. In mid-ocean a volcanic eruption of the sea bottom nearly capsizes the ship. The ship survives, but strange things rise up from the bottom, among them two huge blind sea serpents, one mortally wounded, its mate frantically swimming near. These monsters presently sink from sight. One of the journalists, an

American from Dayton, Ohio, thinks he has the greatest scoop in the world. He heads for Fleet Street as soon as he has landed, with his sea-serpent story. Of course the editors throw him out. He offers Kipling as a witness. Even worse. The reporter has seen a great thing and no one will believe him. He asks Kipling, "What will you do about this?" "Write a story." The Dayton man recoils, repelled. "Fiction?"

Fiction, certainly. Truth, Kipling says, surges up naked from the bottom of the sea. The writer covers her nakedness with a decent petticoat of print.

This has been a dark talk, I think. Not a bad idea to end it with a light touch — a touch of light.