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THE QUEST FOR REALITY IN HENDERSON

THE RAIN KING

The heroic quest is no new theme in literature. Eugene Henderson of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, however, while engaged in a quest similar to that of earlier heroes, is no ordinary hero. Aged 55, indifferent possessor of \$3,000,000, husband of one (Lily) and father of five ("Edward, Riccy, Alice and two more"), Henderson is, nevertheless, a hero in modern dress. Like the crusaders, like the grail seekers, he is driven by a desire to learn what the world is all about, to discover reality, and thus satisfy the "ceaseless voice" in his heart which says, "I want, I want, I want, oh, I want", over and over again. This he does successfully and sees not only that "chaos doesn't run the whole show" (155-6)¹ but also—following trials of head and heart—that his love of "the old bitch life" has been justified. It is true he learns that "man must not demand a heaven of earth"² and that reality is not something which, once glimpsed, stands before one as clearly and stationary as a statue. Instead, continual effort, energy, will, discipline, and replenishing are required if it is to be kept in view, and even then it threatens to change forms, to be inconsistent. (The quest is then part of the total concept of reality.) Yet Henderson's (and Bellow's) conclusion is:

I have always argued that Lily neither knows nor likes reality. Me? I love the old bitch just the way she is and I like to think I am always prepared for even the worst she has to show me. I am a true adorer of life, and if I can't reach as high as the face of it, I plant my kiss somewhere lower down (133-4).

While this passage illustrates that Henderson has a great love of life, it illustrates also that he has certain other characteristics essential to the hero

who will grapple with life in order to discover the nature of reality. The syntax and diction suggest the energy which Henderson possesses in abundance. Although it is tempting to underestimate the value Bellow places on such energy, it is important to bear in mind that Joseph (in *Dangling Man*) and Asa Leventhal (in *The Victim*) fail to act sooner than they do simply because they lack Henderson's energy.

It can be shown that this energy is an important characteristic of the hero who wants to go "deeper" than others in "unearthing life's meanings". First of all, we are told, more than an ordinary amount of energy is needed to encourage the hero to meet trials of the head and heart which he must meet before he can break from death-loving, for while Henderson has a huge, blind appetite for life, he has, at the same time, a desire for death: thus he exhibits an enjoyment of misery throughout much of the early part of the novel; he attempts to kill the cat, he repeatedly threatens to commit suicide; he hears a voice within him which asks, "Do you love death so much?"

Secondly, Bellow believes great energy is necessary because reality, properly viewed, "is associated with inspiration" (150). No passive or lukewarm response to life will produce the inspiration which leads to a full and clear view of reality. Only great energy will do that, as the following passage suggests:

A dull will produces a very dull good, of no interest. Where a fellow draws a battle line there he is apt to be found, dead, a testimonial of the great strength of effort, and only effort (150).

Since Henderson possesses this energy, he can be inspired and so put down the death wish. Thus the trip to Africa, which saves him:

So for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth effort. You, too, will die of this pertilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain (37).

And so, prompted by desire and carried forward by excessive energy, Henderson begins the quest and, in fact, begins to bring the blurred images of reality into focus, since responding vigorously to life is a part of viewing reality. But other tasks lie ahead. Henderson must, first of all, learn the value of the heart, that is, of love and feeling. This is relatively easy for him since all his life he has, if anything, too much feeling. In fact, Bellow tells us, too much feeling has contributed to Henderson's belated understanding of what reality is:

Men of most powerful appetite have always been the ones to doubt reality the most. Those who could not bear that hopes should turn to misery, and loves to hatreds, and deaths to silences, and so on (205-6).

But since the heart is involved in the total response, the trials of the heart must be endured again.

Therefore we find Henderson among the Arnewi, a tribe governed by their emotions. Everything about them suggests this. Consider Willatale, first of all. She is all flesh. (The last two syllables of her name were not chosen accidentally.) No cold clasp of the hand for her when greeting a friend. Instead, the friend's hand is thrust (pulled, if the friend is Henderson, a bit unsure of himself) deeply between her mammoth breasts and buried there in the deep flesh. That this gesture is meant to suggest sexual love goes without saying. That it is meant to suggest more—a kind of generous human warmth emanating from the heart—is perhaps not so obvious. The following passage makes this clear:

On top of everything else, I mean the radiant heat and monumental weight which my hand received, there was the calm pulsation of her heart participating in the introduction (64-5).

And she is even more than human warmth. She is a power capable of evoking feelings not only new to Henderson, but also more powerful than any he has ever known. He is invited to kiss her on the belly, the age-old source of emotions. As he does so, shivering in the heat that he encounters, he is aware of her strictly female breasts hanging over his head, her internal organs living beneath mounds of flesh, her fingers moving along her thigh in a decidedly sexual gesture.

Furthermore, she extends back in time and over both sexes. When Henderson meets her gaze, she coyly greets him with a wink from her white blind eye (which connects her with Time and Tiresias) given *as if intended to last a lifetime*. That she is a modern Tiresias in African undress is further verified in that she is, in a sense, both man and woman. She is a Woman of Bittahness, and as such has both husbands and wives. No wonder, then, that upon making actual physical contact with her Henderson enjoys new heights of feeling so that, sinking his face in her belly for the second time, "the hour [occurs] that burst the spirit's sleep".

This great feeling, however, gushing forth with the brilliance and force of water from a fountain, has as well the lack of restraint of such water. Of this Bellow, and later Henderson, does not approve. There must be more

than feeling, though feeling is good. Henderson, erroneously labeled stupid by a number of critics,² learns this quite early in the novel. Reflecting on the chaos and misery of his life despite good intentions, he says: ". . . maybe I have kissed life too hard and weakened the whole structure" (115). This is exactly what not only he, but also the Arnewi, have done. The disaster resulting from such behavior can be illustrated.

The Arnewi should be a happy tribe. They have a great capacity for feeling as shown not only by Willatale, but also by Mtalba with those "colossal thighs and hips" she is so eager to give to Henderson; and by Itelo, bursting with life and energy, "a real friendly king", to quote Henderson; and by the tribe in general who take so readily to Henderson (and Henderson to them), recognizing a kindred spirit. In addition, they have all that a primitive tribe needs for sustenance: readily available meat and water.

Yet they are not happy. Children cry, the cattle die of thirst, the tribe in general have empty bellies. All this stems from their willingness to be governed by their feelings. The Arnewi are unwilling to slaughter their cattle because of a superstition proceeding not from the head but from the heart. They believe, without any evidence, that their cattle are sacred. Meanwhile, the cattle die of thirst because the water—so readily available—is polluted by frogs which—again because of a superstition—cannot be touched. So Henderson comes to the rescue. Unfortunately, however, he, like the Arnewi, is governed more by "send-sation" than sense and thus succeeds only in compounding the misery. In his eagerness to purify the water, he destroys not only the frogs but also the wall that retains the water. The water seeps into the earth.

So although Henderson has reached a new level of emotional experience among the Arnewi, has refined his feelings, he still does not have what he needs to be granted a long, clear view of reality. He has, however, made some progress and is ready for the next task: learning discipline. Romilayu thus leads him to the Wariri.

The Wariri are greatly superior to the Arnewi. They are all that the Arnewi are and more. First of all, they do not reject the importance of the qualities endorsed by the Arnewi. Bellow makes this clear through Dahfu:

"Ah, yes, I know the qualities. Generous. Meek. Good. No substitutes should be accepted. On this my agreement is total and complete, Mr. Henderson" (148).

And, a bit later, "Granted, grun-tu-molani [man want to live] is much, but it is not alone sufficient" (193). In recognizing that grun-tu-molani is not

enough, the Wariri gain their superiority. What more is needed can be seen by viewing what it is the Wariri have that the Arnewi do not.

We are told the Arnewi and Wariri were once one tribe but separated because of what Dahfu refers to somewhat misleadingly as the luck problem. What this amounts to is that the Wariri, fighters, as their name implies, are willing to work at consciously creating their destiny rather than be guided blindly by emotion. Like Augie March they are willing to grant that although one's character may be his fate, yet also his fate may be his character (which he has a hand in forming). One makes his luck by using his mind.

The contrast between the two tribes is suggested by the animal associated with each tribe. With the Arnewi we associate the cow: lethargic, contented and stupid. With the Wariri we associate the lion: vigorous, intense, the essence of being.⁴ A further contrast is suggested by the response each tribe has to the cow. (Presumably, once their responses were the same.) Since the Arnewi will not harm the cows, they prolong their hunger and misery. In contrast, the Wariri utilize the cow:

A priest with ostrich feathers that sprayed out in every direction threw his arm about the neck of a cow, caught the muzzle, raised her head, and slit her throat as if striking a match on the seat of his pants. She fell to the ground and died. Nobody took much notice (156).

It is important to notice that in restraining and channeling the emotions, that is, in allowing the mind to govern the passions, the Wariri lose little or nothing and gain a great deal. In sharp contrast, the Arnewi, in failing to govern their emotions, gain nothing and lose a great deal. That Bellow intends that we see this is illustrated in a passage describing Dahfu. Lily and Willatale have a strong "gift of life", we are told, "But this King Dahfu was more strongly supplied with it than any person I ever met" (185).

Bellow is pointing out that although strong feeling is not only desirable but also necessary for a full and clear view of reality, it must not be allowed to rule. It must be directed by the mind. Henderson, in eagerly and senselessly building the bomb, and the Arnewi, in refusing, first of all, to slaughter and eat the cows and, secondly, to rid the pond of frogs, are like the Jews who refused to defend themselves against the Romans because it was Saturday. Henderson, the Arnewi, and the Jews invited certain defeat.

From the Wariri (and especially Dahfu) Henderson learns what he needs to know about the connection between feeling and discipline so that eventually he is no longer like the third member of a relay team who can

hardly wait to get the baton and yet, having gotten it, rarely takes off in the right direction. He is given some readings by Dahfu. "Most of these articles had to do with the relation between body and brain" (218). The brain says the body must be made to slow down, as Henderson has vaguely suspected all along. Thus when Dahfu asks rhetorically, "Do you not rush through the world too hard, Henderson?" he is echoing a thought that had occurred earlier to Henderson himself. But he does Henderson one better. He tells him what he must do after he has slowed down. Live, Henderson, Dahfu says. "I, too, endorse grun-tu-molani, but it must have shape and form" (206).

Grun-tu-molani is given shape and form dramatically by Mupi, a beautiful young girl with "elegant long legs" who wished to demonstrate her love for Dahfu. While dancing she seized his burning pipe and

knocked out the coals on her thigh, pressing down with her hand, and while she burned herself her eyes, which were fluid with the pain, never stopped looking into his (226).

Here is feeling greatly intensified and meaningfully controlled in terms of ritual and individual experience.

Henderson, like Mupi, must learn to control his feelings meaningfully in order to complete his task and thus progress toward comprehending reality. He is given an opportunity to do so when invited by Dahfu to descend into the den of Atti, a lioness. Just as only great love for Dahfu enabled Mupi to endure the glowing coals on her thigh, so too only a similar love enables the frightened Henderson to descend into the den and approach and even touch the lioness. I must not do anything that will weaken my relationship with Dahfu, Henderson says. Here is discipline exerted for the sake of love. When Atti thrusts her muzzle into his crotch (significantly a source of feeling, the reader will grant), Henderson does not run. So fear, the "ruler of mankind", Bellow tells us (229), is conquered and love made meaningful. Henderson has completed another task, as he himself is aware. He says to Romilayu who, long before Henderson, is devoted to "undeviating loyalty" and devotion, "Romilayu, I'm learning more about your good points all the time. You're right. I've got to wait" (180). He realizes that if he waits he will be granted what he wants—an understanding of reality and himself in terms of that reality—just as Romilayu, by waiting, will receive what he wants—Henderson's jeep.

In waiting and thus allowing the blurred images resulting from rushing too rapidly through the world to come into focus, Henderson is able to see

aspects of the world he saw either unclearly or not at all earlier. He sees that life is inevitably end-punctuated with death. He sees further that longing for death or fearing it will only weaken one's enthusiasm for life. On the positive side, he sees that acknowledging the inevitability of death and living in its presence without fear intensifies life. This idea is illustrated in the novel mainly through Dahfu.

Doom hangs over all that Dahfu does. Knowing he will die when he ceases to be virile, he does all he can to remove from his existence all trivia, all that contributes to premature impotence. His every movement is aimed at enabling him to be fully and intensely exactly what he is: a king who, while honored and granted a glorious life, will be strangled as soon as he loses his vitality.

He is able to live life fully and intensely partly because he does not deny that death exists, partly because he does not fear it. Instead, he plays a game with it, almost literally. Periodically he brings forward the skulls of former kings among which his own will soon be numbered. Then a beautiful young amazon with "breasts fixed, as if really made of gold" (a suggestion of the eternally youthful and thus a sharp contrast to Dahfu) tosses the skulls high into the air and catches them. The king joins in the game.

This game, bound intrinsically to the king's death, is not the only reminder of death which Dahfu deliberately encounters. He walks among the corpses which hang from ropes in one part of the village. He makes frequent visits to Atti, believed to embody the soul of his predecessor on the throne. (Thus the fear the king must quell upon entering the den is that not only of physical violence, but also of death. Some day his soul, also, will pass into the body of a lion.) He consorts daily with the Bunam who is, first of all, a symbol of life's decaying forces, as suggested by his "stare of wrinkled and everlasting experience" (166), and, secondly, the man who one day will strangle Dahfu.

It is through the Bunam that Bellow makes the suggestion that Henderson has learned from Dahfu that life ends with death; therefore, seize the day. He is a continual reminder of the fact that Dahfu will die, as has been shown above. He is also a reminder that Henderson will die for, looking at the wrinkled and ugly face, he sees his own image reflected in it. With this new knowledge, he is able to say to himself:

... intensify rather what you are. This is the one and only ticket—intensify. Should you be overcome, you slob, should you lie in your own blood senseless,

unconscious of nature whose gift you have betrayed, the world will take back what the world unsuccessfully sent forth (166).

It is important to consider this passage carefully, for it contains not only reiterations of earlier themes, but also suggestions of new ones. Notice Henderson's acknowledgement at this point in his quest that intensity is important. Although he seemed to know this at the outset, here he indicates he has learned something about how to intensify his life in a meaningful way. The *carpe diem* theme is suggested, which in turn suggests not only that man is mortal, but also that because he is mortal he should be doing something good and possible. Intensity is necessary to avoid being "overcome" by death-loving or by fear. Discipline is needed to direct the energy so that something can be achieved. All of these things working together enable a person to be exactly what he is, just as Dahfu—by unceasing effort—succeeded in being exactly what he was.

Learning to be what he is, is the next task that faces Henderson. Using all that he has learned about energy, feeling and discipline, he undertakes this difficult task. It is especially difficult for Henderson because he comes from a family that has a long record of thinking they are something they are not. For example, one of Henderson's ancestors believed he was an Oriental and so "got himself mixed up in the Boxer Rebellion". More recently, his daughter came home with a Negro child perfectly convinced she was its mother.

So, like Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Henderson must learn to distinguish between his real soul and his "pretender soul". He must learn to have a suitable and accurate image of himself. Only then will he have the freedom granted to the person who knows both his limitations and his potentialities.

To learn this distinction he descends again into Atti's den where he has already learned so much. Here he is given "a shot of animal nature", which means simply that he learns to be fully human. All his inhibitions give way. All sophistication fades. For a while he is, symbolically but also through imitation, the lion herself:

Roar, roar, roar, Henderson-Sungo. Do not be afraid. Let yourself. Snarl greedily. Feel the lion. Lower on the forepaws. Up with hindquarters. . . . Be the beast! You will recover humanity later, but for the moment, be it utterly (236).

Just as earlier Henderson experienced a new refinement of feeling, so now he becomes himself more fully than ever before. "My lungs supplied the air but the note came from my soul" (236), he says. A new depth of self is realized. It is this realization of the self that enables him to return to America perfectly intent on going to medical school—despite his age—since he has always wanted to be a doctor.

Having learned what the self is, re-birth is possible, and man can "welcome life anew". (This re-birth is suggested by a ritualistic mud bath on page 176 of *Henderson*.) Indeed, the idea that it is never too late for a man to change—an idea expressed specifically by Dahfu—is one that resounds through much of Bellow's work and is involved in his concept of reality. Given the proper tools—a willingness to act, intensity, disciplined feelings, a willingness to be oneself—even reality can be changed. "It's you who make the world what it is. Reality is you" (109).

This conclusion is derived from Bellow's belief in the great power of the mind and man's ability to control that mind. The world *is* a mind, he says. Henderson can, then, make of the world what he wants: he can be Henderson-Sungu or Dr. Henderson. There is, however, difficulty inherent in this approach, as Bellow acknowledges. One is confronted with the difficult task of deciding what is real, what unreal, and the more difficult task of deciding what should be incorporated into one's concept of reality, what discarded from it. Suggesting that one must learn to go beyond the world of facts without discarding facts, Bellow writes:

The world of facts is real, all right, and not to be altered. The physical world is all there, and it belongs to science. But there is the noumenal department and there we create and create and create (148).

It is important to observe that Bellow does not emphasize the limitations of the mind in creating a personal reality. Elsewhere, however, he does warn of the dangers that arise from trying to create a world outside the "human theater". If man expects a perfect world, he will be disappointed. If he expects a perfectly consistent view of the world and of reality, he will again be disappointed. Dahfu confirms this when he says, "It is not up to me, Henderson—Henderson-Sungu—to make the world consistent". We are not masters, then; nevertheless, "the thing [reality] comes from within" (210).

So, as already suggested, reality consists not only of the immediate physical and visible world, but also of that outside of the "human theater" which the individual chooses to have co-exist with the physical world of facts.

Admittedly Henderson learns limitations. He learns that he must wait; that he must discontinue his violin playing since he will never reach his father—or the angels—anyway; that he “can’t expect to live five or six lives” (70). But he learns also that he can be Dr. Henderson or at least think of himself as becoming Dr. Henderson (the fact that he misses September registration near the end of the novel suggests he will never become a doctor), since this will cause no harm. He can love Lily “even if she only seemed to love” him. And he can do more. He can make the world much greater than it is without being dishonest. Henderson muses:

We don't see the stars as they are, so why do we love them? They are not small gold objects but endless fire (253).

Yet it is as gold objects that we love them. No matter, then, that they are endless fire. The illusion is what produces a real feeling and enables man to love the world for more than it is and thus to satisfy his romantic longings.

Much is included, then, in Bellow's—and Henderson's—concept of reality. Ultimately it consists of an unusual blending of facts and illusions. But because it is not constant, because it includes the illusory which is, first of all, hard to maintain and, secondly, disastrous if it moves too far outside of the “human theater”, because it involves a not very simple relationship of mind and body, each man's personal reality demands constant replenishing. This can be accomplished only by great energy, effort, will, and discipline.

NOTES

1. Page numbers which appear parenthetically in the body of this paper are references to *Henderson the Rain King* (New York, 1963).
2. “Don Quixote”, *Time*, Vol. 48, No. 8 (Feb. 23, 1959), p. 102.
3. Representative of this attitude is Donald Malcolm in “Rider Haggard Rides Again”, *The New Yorker* (March 14, 1959), p. 172.
4. Marcus Kelin, “A Discipline of Nobility”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring, 1962), p. 214.