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The Octopus in *Henderson The Rain King*

Henderson the Rain King is the most comic, exuberant, and positive of Saul Bellow's novels. In its protagonist we have a highly romantic figure who is successful in his quest for spiritual regeneration.¹ Yet Henderson's regeneration is a long, arduous one which commences only after he has come face to face with an octopus. This confrontation occurs a short time after the protagonist has had a violent argument with his second wife (then mistress), Lily. After packing Lily onto a train, Henderson jumps into his *décapotable* and heads for the south of France. He finally stops at Banyules-sur-Mer where he has a "strange experience" at the marine station:

It was twilight. I looked in at an octopus, and the creature seemed also to look at me and press its soft head to the glass, flat, the flesh becoming pale and granular — blanched, speckled. The eyes spoke to me coldly. But even more speaking, even more cold, was the soft head with its speckles, and the Brownian motion in those speckles, a cosmic coldness in which I felt I was dying. The tentacles throbbed and motioned through the glass, the bubbles sped upwards, and I thought, "This is my last day. Death is giving me notice."²

This is the only physical occurrence of the octopus in the novel. However, given his shaken state of mind and ailing inner condition, this frightening image becomes a vivid memory for Henderson.

Although not as sustained nor as prominent as the pig, frog, or lion imagery which pervades the novel, the role of the octopus is significant.³ From its first mention, the octopus is clearly a symbol of death for Henderson. In fact, as the novel progresses, Henderson's ability to face death becomes an index to his spiritual condition. In this respect the octopus is significant. As well as marking the protagonist's

progress in his spiritual regeneration the subsequent allusions to the octopus are indicative of Henderson's reorientation of values. Before these two functions of the octopus can be discussed in more detail, however, an understanding of Henderson's state of mind prior to his trip to Africa is essential.

Reflected on any of the novel's first forty pages is Henderson's painful struggle against his neurotic fear of death. He sees and experiences life in terms of violence. He is impatient, intolerant, and occasionally brutal. Through his rash aggression and reckless abandon he partially expresses his impotent anger at a life that he cannot bear. Yet because of his physical strength and stamina, his wealth, his background, and his obstinacy, Henderson can act outrageously and survive – in a fashion. As far as external consequences are concerned he survives; internally, however, he is dying an agonizing death.

Directed at his wife, and typical of his inner dissatisfaction, are Henderson's self-righteous remarks concerning reality: "I know more about reality than you'll ever know. I am on damned good terms with reality, and don't you forget it." (p.36) In retrospect, this statement is highly ironic, for it is made before Henderson has burst his spirit's sleep, before he can legitimately claim the truth which he is enunciating. In context, the proclamation is one of innumerable violent assertions of his dogmatic and egotistical approach to life. Prior to his African experiences, Henderson is terrified both of reality and of death: his violent aggressiveness and restless impulsiveness are the physical embodiments of repressed frustrations which, in turn, stem from his inability to cope with basic facts of existence, such as death.

At the novel's start, Henderson is a spiritually sick individual. The advanced state of this illness is reflected in the first chapter:

When I thought of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins – my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" (p.3)

The lengthy list of facts, coupled with his depressed yet passionate attitude toward them, reflects Henderson's discontented and chaotic state of mind. Expressing a feeling of strangulation by the many tentacles of his own existence, the same disorderly rush is later felt by Henderson when he faces the octopus at the aquarium.

Henderson also suffers from a seemingly unappeasable inner voice which incessantly cries, "I want, I want, I want." Though he pampers the voice as one would an ailing child, no amount of physical exertion nor "any purchase, no matter how expensive", will lessen it (p.24). As the voice increases in strength and occurrence, Henderson's condition progressively declines, and he lives in a state of constant irritation. Only the death of his housekeeper, Miss Lenox, shocks Henderson into remedial action. On that eventful morning, Henderson, first discovering the body and then rummaging through the collected junk that fills the old spinster's cottage, initiates his spiritual recovery. Talking to himself, he says,

"for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth some effort. You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left. While something still is - *now!* For the sake of all, get out." (p.40)

In this statement Henderson recognizes his spiritual vacuum and the need for change.⁴ The resultant trip to Africa, superficially escapist, is ultimately therapeutical.

Henderson's journey (perhaps "quest" is a more appropriate term) is a search for basic reality. He realizes that concomitant with his "biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death", is his need "to see essentials, only essentials, nothing but essentials, and to guard against hallucinations" (pp.276, 161). His experiences among the Arnewi and the Wariri are, symbolically, progressive steps in the treatment of his ailing spirit. First breaking down his old value system and then generating one to replace it, these experiences are essential for Henderson's spiritual recovery. By the time he emerges from Africa Henderson has moved from the violent, self-centered, destructive individual that he had been all his adult life and has become an aggressive, other-oriented, constructive human. This transition is primarily dependent upon Henderson's love of life (*grun-tu-molani*) and his energetic honesty. These qualities help him face the fact of death, if not wholly overcome his fear of it. Realizing that death, like life, is a fundamental rhythm of nature that "you jut can't get away from", Henderson finally acknowledges its reality: "you've got to live at peace with it, because if it's going to worry you, you'll lose" (p.329).

Following Henderson's recognition of his chaotic inner being, the next step towards recovery occurs when he is among the Arnewi. Meek, generous, and good, the Arnewi Queen, Willatale, recognizes grun-tu-molani in Henderson. Hearing this, Henderson becomes "utterly inspired" and feels that his "hour of liberation was drawing near when the sleep of the spirit was liable to burst" (p.79). This state of happy emotion lingers with him throughout a sleepless night and on into the next day. Upon rising at daybreak Henderson has an extraordinary communion with nature:

Some powerful magnificence not human . . . seemed under me. . . . At once I recognized the importance of this. . . . So, I put my face, my nose, to the surface of this wall. I pressed my nose to it, . . . knelt, . . . and I inhaled, I snuckered through my nose and caressed the wall with my cheek. My soul was in quite a condition, but not hectically excited; it was a state as mild as the [pink] color itself. . . . My spirit was not sleeping then, I can tell you, but was saying, Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho! (pp.100-02)

A few lines later Henderson compares this "vital experience" with his earlier "strange experience" at the aquarium:

It was exactly the opposite at Banyules-sur-Mer with the octopus in the tank. That had spoken to me of death. (p.102)

The warmth, light, and colour of this experience among the Arnewi speak to Henderson of life. He has recognized his grun-tu-molani and embraced it fervently. Bringing him nearer spiritual awakening, this positive assertion is the second of five stages which mirror Henderson's reorientation of values.

The remaining stages occur when Henderson is among the Wariri. Each brings the protagonist in closer proximity to physical death, the confrontation with which is essential for his spiritual life. The first of the three episodes in the Wariri village begins with Henderson's capture and imprisonment. It proceeds through the encounter with the corpse ("a challenge which had to be answered") and the initial meetings with Dahfu, and culminates when Henderson succeeds in moving the goddess Mummah (p.137). This done, Henderson remarks,

I myself was filled with happiness. I was so gladdened by what I had done that my whole body was filled with soft heat, with soft and sacred light. . . . You know, this kind of thing has happened to me before. (p.193)

The metaphors of light and warmth are direct echoes of Henderson's experience at daybreak in the Arnewi village. Now, as then, he affirms his love of life:

My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew. Damn the whole thing! Life anew! I was still alive and kicking and I had the old grun-tu-molani. (p.193)

Yet there are two differences between this experience and the former one: Henderson has learned of the two human states — Becoming and Being — and of a necessary condition if the latter state is ever to be attained. “Being people have all the breaks,” according to Henderson, and find “satisfaction in *being*” (p.160). On the other hand, “Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy, . . . always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people” (p.160). Having decided that “Becoming was beginning to come out of my ears”, Henderson ponders how he can burst his spirit’s sleep and Be (p.160). Caught up in the Rain King rituals, he becomes “excited to the bursting point” and hears a voice of “everlasting human experience” (p.187). Speaking within him it says,

do not soften, of no, brother, intensify rather what you are. This is the one and only ticket — intensify. Should you be overcome, you slob, . . . unconscious of nature whose gift you have betrayed, the world will soon take back what the world unsuccessfully sent forth. (p.187)

In other words, the voice warns Henderson to exert himself to the limit in his quest to Be, a state which presumes acceptance of death and reality, otherwise he will die a traitor of nature.

This stage of regeneration is also significant because it manifests Henderson’s first successful scrape with death: the movement of the corpse. Though initially paralyzed by his fear of the body, Henderson fights this revulsion and finally overcomes it (see pp.134-42). This accomplishment, though a significant one for Henderson, appears minute in comparison with his next encounter with death.

Immediately following the spiritual exhilaration he feels on his successful hoist of Mummah, this stage brings Henderson face to face with a death-dealing lioness. Yet before this occurs, Henderson is stripped, thrown into the super-heated sour water of a cattle pool, and beaten — the physical consequences which await the man who moves Mummah. While humiliating, this initiation into the role of Sungo, the Rain King, reveals to Henderson the value of exerting himself “it seemed to me that I was fighting for my life” (p.201). A second statement concerning life — “I had no business to make terms with life, but had to accept such conditions as it would let me have” — reflects

the change in Henderson's spiritual state (p.210). Although unsure at this time what else is necessary, he has realized that rage for living is insufficient for a full life. Dahfu, the Wariri King, agrees with Henderson on this point: "Granted, grun-tu-molani is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr. Henderson, more is required. I can show you something —" (p.218) That "something" is, of course, his pet lioness Atti.

During the dark descent into her den Henderson recalls the octopus experience, but only after he has conquered his fears — "I mastered my anxious feelings" — and asserted his trust in Dahfu — " 'Have faith, Henderson, it's about time you had some faith' " (pp.219-20). This said, there is "some light and the end of the staircase came into view,"

the last few steps being of earth and the base of the walls themselves mixed with soil. Which recalled to me the speckled vision of twilight at Banyules-sur-Mer in that aquarium, where I saw that creature, the octopus, pressing its head against the glass. But where I had felt coldness there, here I felt very warm. (pp.220-21)

The significance of this passage is two-fold. Whereas the two earlier African memories of the octopus were completely positive, untainted by any negative feelings, these opposites are now coupled. Just as the granite staircase and the walls of the palace are mixed with elemental earth at their foundations, so is man's life a mixture of elements. Here, as earlier, metaphors of light and warmth dominate. Thus, in his movement toward a true view of reality, Henderson is beginning to see that "for creatures there is nothing that ever runs unmingled" (p.339). The second point, Henderson's assertion of faith, reveals that his movement from a self-centered individual to an other-oriented humanist is nearing completion: his reborn faith in himself allows him to trust others.

The next allusion to the octopus culminates the reorientation of Henderson's perspective. One morning, after his therapy session with Dahfu and Atti, Henderson is approached by the Wariri faction who are suspicious of Dahfu. They assert that the lioness is a reincarnation of a sorceress. At first Henderson tries to avoid the situation, primarily because he has so much faith in and respect for Dahfu. However, since "these people make no bones about it", Henderson desperately contests Dahfu's innocence when confronted with the decaying head of the sorceress:

"I don't know how you can be so sure," I said. I could not take my eyes from the shriveled head with its finished, listless look. It spoke to me as that creature had done in Banyules at the aquarium. . . . I thought as I had then, in the dim watery stony room, "This is it! The end!" (p.252)

Henderson is shaken and reacts in much the same manner as he had prior to his African journey. In light of this apparent regression to previous behaviour, one questions the value of his therapeutical gains up to this point. However, close examination of Henderson's reactions manifests a significant difference from the first encounter with the octopus: then, Henderson feared for his own life; now, he fears for Dahfu's life. Henderson's present reaction is, in fact, exactly as it should be: it mirrors his outward movement from self-centeredness; it completes one upward circle on the spiral staircase. Severely tested, Henderson's faith in the noble King has remained firm.

Significantly, this is the final allusion to that single strange experience at the French marine station. The pattern has seemingly been completed: in the first instance Henderson feared for his own life; now he fears for another individual. In fact, however, the regenerative process Henderson's spirit has been undergoing is unfinished; his spirit's sleep has not yet been burst. True, he has learned of faith and nobility, but his lessons in the power of the imagination and the value of love and kindness have just begun. Only later does he learn that "Imagination is a force of nature, . . . which converts to the actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems!" (p.271). Similarly, his point of view has been reoriented, yet Henderson remains a Becomer. Although he roars out the sorrows of his soul in the face of the lioness, thus becoming the beast, "there was still a remainder. That last thing of all," says Henderson, "was my human longing" (p.267). Finally, his progress towards a confrontation with death and reality awaits one last event.

That event is, of course, Dahfu's death. Forced to capture a wild lion, Gmilo, Dahfu invites Henderson to accompany him. As the lion approaches the native snare, Henderson hears its fierce snarl, one which batters "at the very doors of consciousness"(p.306). The roaring of the beast shatters whatever illusions Henderson might have held about reality: "Unreality, unreality! That has been my scheme for a troubled but eternal life. But now I was blasted away from this picture by the throat of the lion"(p.307). Henderson is forced into a full realization of the reality of death and his spirit's sleep bursts, for the "snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death"(p.307).

Thus the snarl of the lion and the death of Dahfu complete the symbolic pattern initiated by the octopus. Confronting death, Henderson discovers life and reality; his spirit is reborn into the realm of Being. Symbolic of this rebirth are Henderson's well-executed plan of escape from the Wariri and his expropriation of the lion-cub. His hugging of the cub, significantly named Dahfu, is an emblematic embrace of death. Finally capable of accepting the rhythms of nature, Henderson's new life in the realm of Being is built around "all that's left: kindness and love", for "it's love that makes reality reality" (pp.316, 286).

By the end of *Henderson the Rain King* the protagonist has learned of nobility and love, imagination and reality, faith, death, and life. Indicating his spiritual condition at significant points in the novel and marking his progress towards the knowledge he gains from his African experiences, the octopus functions as a personal symbol of death for Henderson. Its "cosmic coldness" first warns Henderson that he is dying and that he must exert himself if he desires any satisfaction from his hitherto empty life. That the octopus does not appear in the final quarter of the book is attributable to two facts: by this time the process of transition from self-centeredness to other-centeredness in Henderson is complete. The death symbolism of the octopus is assumed by the lion and the lion-cub which dominate the latter section of the novel. Active in these two ways, the octopus is indeed a functional symbol in *Henderson the Rain King*.

Footnotes

1. While a fine reincarnation of the typical hero of a medieval romance, Henderson is also romantic in the nineteenth-century sense of the word: he seeks to move away from abstraction towards a more vital and concrete mode of living. Like Coleridge and Keats, two poets who emphasize the necessity of feeling over excessive rationalization, Henderson eventually realizes that the real value of existence is to be found in living itself.
2. Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*, Viking Compass ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1959), p.19. Subsequent quotations from the novel are from this edition and will be acknowledged within the text of the paper.
3. See Robert Detweiler, "Patterns of Rebirth in *Henderson the Rain King*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 12 (1966-67), 406-08, for a good discussion of the animal imagery in the novel.
4. See Henderson's later comment: "I discovered a pestilence when I entered the old lady's house and realized that I must put forth effort or go down in shame"(p.280).