

## **Human Quest in Saul Bellow's Novels *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Adventures of Augie March***

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American fiction (...) in one of its large, vivid strains, opted for the territory ahead; for a verbal world elsewhere; for a perpetual reconstitution of romance within the novel; for pursuit of the true IT... the self in its wholeness. Whatever else the Great American Novel may be, it has been, throughout its history, a fiction zestfully committed to motion and to the free transcendent individual. (Janis Stout quoted in Hassan 26)

Great American writers have always been disposed to different forms of quest in their works as one of their main preoccupations is with the nature and the creation of the Self. Quests recover essential things to human life in encounters between cultures, with alien surroundings, people, animals, nature, or the Other; namely, the waking of individual in the knowledge of himself, knowledge about others, the world, and the meaning of life. American novels of quest lay emphasis on the nature of human freedom as the heroes of quest novels more often than not balance between their fear of being entrapped into some fixed forms of existence and that of having an amorphous identity or no identity at all. The present article focuses on Saul Bellow's (1915-2005) novels *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) in an attempt to trace the development of Bellow's characters,- their efforts to understand themselves, establish their true identity and achieve spiritual maturity. Moreover, it tries to reveal the educational nature of the writer's works.

Contemporary American literature may be said to have taken two main directions: postmodern literature or "the literature of exhaustion" which reveals a nihilistic attitude to individual existence and life in general and considers humanist values useless in a world devoid of absolutes. The humanist wing representatives of which argue that the novel has not been exhausted and defend its moral humanism and educational power. Bellow, one of the most erudite and intellectual writers of the second half of the

twentieth century, belongs to the latter direction as he is a unique spokesman for humanitarian values and ideals in American literature. In the Nobel lecture delivered in Sweden the writer stressed the role of art saying that it should emphasize the unity of man: "Art attempts to find in the universe, in matter as well as in facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential" (quoted in Dutton 9). The educational, instructive character of Bellow's fiction first of all manifests itself in his positive, affirmative, optimistic approach to existence and individual whom he treats as a "subangelic" figure, i.e., man is created in the image of God, but he is a little lower than the angels. In his essay *Distractions of a Fiction Writer*, Bellow observes the following: "There is a man's own greatness, and then there is the greatness of his imbecility – both are eternal" (15). The writer refuses the wide-spread idea of the twentieth century accepted by many modern artists that humankind has reached its terminal point. Bellow is convinced that a human being can justify his existence, that he has a sufficient power to overcome his ignominy and to complete his own life. His suffering, feebleness, servitude then have a meaning. Here the author stresses the role of man's imagination in defining his own self and completing his life. Bellow affirms that in choosing, man expresses his humanity through imagination. According to the author, it is not external reality - social forces or other people – but man himself who determines his own destiny. Bellow's heroes may grieve, complain, lament, but they never despair about the future. They are always on a spiritual quest for meaning in life, their own human essence believing that man is free to choose and that he can become better. And in most cases he succeeds.

In his novels (e.g. *Dangling Man* 1944, *The Victim* 1947, *Seize the Day* 1956, *Herzog* 1964 as well as the novels under discussion), Bellow deals with the phenomenology of selfhood, emphasizes the plight of man. He considers the vital questions of what it means to be human, what a human being should be like, how to become better and gain a complete fulfillment without alienating from society. Bellow's heroes are never static, they always aspire to something better in flight from their inner chaos and confusion, from the inhuman, superficial, and false. Therefore, a hero in quest is the pivot of Bellow's all novels. In his illuminating study *Selves at Risk*, the American literary critic Ihab Hassan argues that in contemporary quest in literature, which shares features of myth, epic, romance, the literature of travel and adventure, and autobiography, we discover "the hero with a thousand faces": an ontological voyager, a doer, sufferer, over-reacher, at once an alien and founder of cities, another version of ourselves. He then goes on to claim that "contemporary quest reacts against the postmodern assumptions of "exhaustion", finding in certain re-membered

forms, re-newed values, the sources of its own "replenishment" (Hassan 31). Bellow's heroes are always on a spiritual quest for "something beyond." In this way, the writer provides a critique of the existing values which regulate people's behaviour to each other in everyday life.

Bellow's novels *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Adventures of Augie March* can be rightly called Bildungsromans, Novels of Initiation or character formation as they deal with the protagonists' moral and spiritual crisis, their wandering and search for identity, the development of their character and their final maturity. Thus, the works are also novels of quest or quest-romances. To quote the Canadian mythologist Northrop Frye, "translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain the reality [...] Translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land" (quoted in Hassan 23). In other words, Bellow's heroes' chief preoccupation is how to learn to resist societal norms and moral values and dogmas without alienating from this society. "How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion?", asks Bellow (quoted in Harper 18).

The two heroes Eugene Henderson and Augie March are representatives of post-war America with its growing materialism, consumerism, conformity, and mass culture. The English literary critic Malcolm Bradbury claims that these negative phenomena taken together "threatened the liberal self" (28). The novels represent the dialogue between alienation and accommodation, the battle of determinism and free choice, the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood. The heroes face the problem of how to create a unique self within a mechanical money-oriented mass society which exerts a levelling influence on an individual, and where individual undergoes his personal effacement and consequent degradation.

Frye singles out four phases in the hero's of a quest-romance life journey: conflict, death struggle, (provisional) dismemberment, and recognition of a newborn world (quoted in Hassan 23). These stages can be traced in Henderson's life journey. At the first stage, he is shown in conflict with himself and society. Henderson recounts his life and reflects on the reasons of his going to Africa: "What made me take this trip to Africa? There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated" (HR 3). He admits that he is very rich as he has inherited three million dollars from his "old man" but has always behaved like a bum. He was a bad student at University and was not thrown out only because he was his father's son. To please his father he got an MA and married a girl of his social class who he "gave a terrible time"

and later divorced. Henderson describes himself as “moody, rough, tyrannical, and probably mad” (HR 4). The hero’s life in a society of material excess leads to hidden depression, rage, and finally to the conclusion that he is not fit to live among people. He seems to hate both society as it is and himself for not being able to oppose it by becoming better. Henderson argues unreasonably with his second wife Lily, alienates his son and daughter, refuses his tenants heat during the winter, fires a gun at their cat, raises pigs from which his only pleasure comes from is their annoying presence to family and neighbours, harrasses in a dozen other ways his family, friends, acquaintances, and community. All these examples prove him to be a spiritual impotent, - he perceives himself to be a failure, understands that his behaviour is irrational and unacceptable but is unable to put any effort to change it to the better. At this stage of his life, Henderson has no inner strength to resist the negative influence of society upon him, reject its values because he has absorbed its features, and is therefore at war with himself. The hero suffers a “poverty of the soul.” Again and again, he hears an inner voice that makes its demand: “There was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said, **I want, I want, I want !** It happened every afternoon, and when I tried to suppress it it got even stronger” (HR 24). Later the hero asks himself: “So what do you do with yourself? More than three million bucks” (HR 24). Here Bellow is concerned with the spiritual malaise in an environment of sufficiency in “a life of plenty.” Society Henderson lives in cannot satisfy his spiritual needs. He realizes the corrupt, pestilent nature of society and the world. He feels that “the entire world has set itself against life and is opposed to it” and that he, Henderson, is alive and finds it impossible to go along with it.

The second phase in Henderson’s existence is his direct confrontation with death when because of his fault Miss Lenox, an elderly family maid, succumbs to a heart attack and passes away. The woman’s death caused by him is that momentous event which suddenly illuminates his past, present, and future life. Now Henderson perceives that he is on the verge of his personal degradation, his spiritual downfall. He realizes that he was a destroyer, a wrecker – and if he does not change, “[d]eath will annihilate [him] and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk” (HR 40). Henderson admits that he just could not continue as he was where he was and that “something could be and had to be done” (HR 188). Thus, it serves as a turning point in his life. It is a characteristic feature of Bellow’s heroes to affirm life over death, the need for life to move in the face of its limits. Therefore, the hero leaves for Africa to find a remedy for his situation, to “burst the spirit’s sleep” (HR 76), to leave certain things behind

until all the bad is burned out of him. This is Africa of the mind where values can be reconsidered and reality subjected to new perspectives.

The third stage of Henderson's life is his account of his experiences with the natives of the Arnewi and the Wariri - his desperate attempt to "become better." In Africa Henderson returns to the primal bases of life and feeling, in nature, culture, and the animal kingdom. The hero has "grun-tu-molani", a native term indicating that you want to live, not die. With his "grun-tu-molani", his will to live, his belief that truth comes in blows, he journeys into the complex places of consciousness. Henderson is longing to perform a benefit, has a great desire to do a disinterested and pure thing - "to express his belief in something higher" (HR 188), "to work the right stitch into the design of [his] destiny before it was too late" (HR 186), "to complete his own life." The Arnewi are cattle raisers. When Henderson enters their village, he finds them in tears and sadness, because their water supply has been contaminated by the mysterious appearance of frogs. Henderson couples his desire to live with the necessity to eliminate the frogs from the cistern. He is now eager to start on what he considers his personal project. The remedy is a home-made bomb which he fashions with childish enthusiasm. The hero is overcome with frustration when he fails, - he blows the frogs out of the water, the end of the cistern is also blown out, and all the water escapes into the arid soil. Henderson cannot understand his everlasting failure to achieve something of value. At this point, the hero experiences "dismemberment": "I wish it [cf. the bomb] had gone off in my hands and blown me to smashes [...] This was how I left in disgrace and humiliation, having demolished both their water and my hopes" (HR 111-112). Robert Dutton offers a good insight into the reasons of Henderson's failure saying that technological and scientific achievement persuaded man of his godlike abilities that he does not possess. Man's misapprehension of his limited potentialities can drive him in spite of good intentions, to destroy the value of life itself. Briefly, Bellow says that man is not God (HR 99-100).

Henderson's adventures in the land of the Wariri marks the fourth and final stage in his existence when he comes to a Great Awakening and welcomes a newborn world. Here the hero undergoes two tests of his personality and learns lessons of life. First, Henderson succeeds in lifting up Mummah, goddess of rain, and is therefore appointed as the Rain King. The hero gains victory because at this moment he relies on himself and trusts his own strength and power to do it. The success is the first move towards "bursting the spirit's sleep": "My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew [...] Life anew! I was still alive and kicking and I had the old grun-tu-molani" (HR 193). Bellow makes a comparison between Henderson's failure with the Arnewi and his success with the Wariri. In the case of Mummah,

Henderson relies only on his own strength, contrary to his exhibition of technical ingenuity with the frogs. Obviously, Bellow is saying that the bursting of the spirit's sleep must be accomplished by individual's own resources.

Henderson recounts the philosophical discussions between him and Dahfu, king of the Wariri and his "guru", concerning man and his destiny. Dahfu serves as the author's mouthpiece for many of his ideas. He says that a human being is his own creator, and he can change the world by changing, improving himself, which is never too late. A brave man will not blame the world for his bad lot, as in Henderson's case, but "will try to make the evil stop with him" (HR 214). Henderson must eliminate fear from his heart, which is "a ruler of mankind" and "as everything originates in the brain" (HR 258). He also has to refuse the philosophy of avoidance. To attain this, Henderson must befriend the tame lioness Atti and achieve her fearless equanimity, unavailability, learn to act "one hundred per cent within the given" (HR 263), accepting precisely that which one is and no more. To befriend the lioness Henderson has to learn to act the lion, absorb it into himself. When his fear of the lioness subsides, he will be capable of admiring her beauty as "when the fear yields, beauty is disclosed in its place" (HR 262). Man's phobias make him self-recoiled as well as deprive him of his ability to see and enjoy the world's beauty. Learning to stand on all fours in a leonine way will enable him to conceive of the environment: the sky, the sun, the leaves and feel oneness with them, which will help him "rise from a grave of solitude" (HR 226). Roaring will release his negative emotions and teach him to relax. What is more, the lioness will "force the present moment upon him" as "lions are experiences but not in haste" (HR 260). Henderson learns to "seize the day", arrest the moment with its simplest meaning.

The hero recounts his departure for home after he "has come to himself" (HR 328), to an existential illumination, a spiritual enlightenment. He is a changed man who returns to America determined to rebuild his loving relationship with his wife Lily and to accomplish his long-deferred dream to qualify as a doctor. Here Bellow explores the Lazarus theme – a human being may rise from the dead and join the living if he can realize his human potentialities, the possibilities of his humanity which lie dormant within him. Henderson starts feeling kindness and love. Only when an individual becomes aware of and develops his potential and thus achieves harmony with himself can he start appreciating his own life and the life of others. A happy human being can endow the world with happiness.

The primary focus of Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* is on the battle of determinism and independence and free choice, the hero's

struggle with the deterministic inheritance carried to extremes. The hero is a modern picaresque in quest of "a better fate". Robert R. Dutton compares Augie to the American folk hero: he comes from a poor family; he does not know the identity of his father; he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position, or wealth; he admits that he "gives his affections too easily" and that "he has no grudge-bearing power." Bellow has endowed his narrator with the entire list of requisites to a folk hero of our time and culture" (Dutton 48). Augie's life story does not follow the clear cut pattern of Henderson's life-journey. The hero, who is also the narrator, advances through a series of adventures which are relevant to a general life experience. Still, it is possible to discern a few stages in the hero's development of personality: his inner and outer conflict and revelation. At the beginning of the novel, Augie is presented as an individual without any tangible contours, a man without direction, a single purpose of life or any high ambitions. In search of "a better fate", the words he often repeats throughout the novel, and his human essence Augie engages into many kinds of activities which are varied in character: he works as a stock boy in a department store, sells trivia in a railway station, steals and sells textbooks, begins a university education, becomes a coal salesman, enters the underworld, takes care of dogs for the social elite, falls in love twice, becomes a union organizer, trains an eagle to catch giant lizards in Mexico, joins the Merchant Marine, finally he marries and settles in Paris, where he participates in some form of shady international business. The young hero is as he says, "varietistic." Augie claims that the jobs he has ever undertaken "were supposed to lead to something better"(AM 28), to "a better fate". However, in the beginning, his understanding of "a better fate" is very vague and obscure. In the opening lines of Chapter six, Augie exclaims: "What did I, out of all this, want for myself? I couldn't have told you [...] I was circling yet [...] I know I longed very much, but I didn't understand for what" (AM 84).

Augie does not lack the attractiveness of personality, either: he is affectionate, sensitive and unlike Henderson, is able to enjoy life with its colours and odours, to see the good in all people, take them for what they are. The hero takes to everything that arouses his enthusiasm. However, his fight with deterministic inheritance tends to become an obsession. Augie shuns all kinds of influence if that makes a threat to his free unique self (as he is convinced) and means "becoming part of somebody's world", "justification of other people's existence" (AM 151). In this way, Augie offers resistance to his tenant's Grandma Lausch's efforts to make him a respectable white-collar citizen, refuses his employer's and benefactress' Mrs. Renling's idea to adopt him even if it meant "inheriting dough" (AM 151), his brother's Simon's urging him into marrying a millionaire. At this

point of his life Augie does not have a unique self - in fact, he is a faceless hero. Augie does not even know where he belongs as he is a friend to people of all kinds: grinds and criminals alike. His problem is that in search of "something better" he leads an uninvolved existence, does not get deeply involved in any experience for long. Augie is an objective observer of life unable to affirm his ideals in life situations that he has to face. Scattering those ideals, Augie fails to find something durable in the family, from his friends, outside the law, within the university, or on the road. In Bellow's worldview, it is exactly human involvement, the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood which create human nobility. The hero confuses his having no commitments - no money, profession or duties - with freedom. It is through involvement that a person can realize his human potential, create his selfhood, define his "self." Evidently Bellow is saying that with or without enthusiasm, some work is to be done, some direction and function assumed. The critic Dutton is right when he points out that "there is no identity, no integrity, no better fate, no creation, of children or anything else, without a social commitment" (51).

After Augie's beloved Thea decides to leave him, the hero has a certain revelation. He realizes that all his life he has had an inferiority complex, was "feeble and poor, some silly creature, laughing and harmless." Therefore, "to come out differently" (AM 401), - to conceal his weakness, to mislead others, Augie played their games. In other words, he has never been himself. The hero makes an attempt at self-examination:

Now I had started, and this terrible investigation had to go on. If this was how I was, it was certainly not how I appeared but must be my secret. So if I wanted to please, it was in order to mislead or show everyone, wasn't it, now? And this must be because I had an idea everyone was my better and had something I didn't have. But what did people seem to me anyhow, something fantastic? I didn't want to be what they made of me but wanted to please them. Kindly explain! An independent fate, and love too - what a confusion! (AM 401)

In this passage Augie has an insight into his problem. When this realization dawns on him, the hero makes up his mind to quit his pilgrimage. His biggest wish becomes to find the "axial lines" of life, which is the preoccupation of Bellow's all heroes. Augie's great hope, he says, "is based upon getting to be still, so that the axial lines can be found. When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift - bounty, harmony, love, and so forth" (AM 514). The "axial lines" could be discovered in the stability of a person's life, his ability "to arrest the moment", get the most from every experience, foster harmony with himself (Scott 101-149).



Augie learns many truths about himself from other people. Likewise, his friend Clem Tambow tries to prove to Augie that he has “a nobility syndrome” (AM 434) and therefore, he cannot adjust to the reality situation. The hero, as he later finds out, is in search of Man with a capital letter. He discovers that man longs to be more than he is. But life is all there is, it depends on him how he will learn “to arrest the moment”, “seize the day”, pull himself together to find his niche in life, which would help him fulfil his human potential, as “Man’s character is his fate” (AM 3). Saul Bellow’s philosophy of life is marked by his affirmation of the worthiness of human existence, a firm belief in man, his ability “to burst the spirit’s sleep”, his reason and inner strength to be his own redeemer.

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