

ANALYSIS

Henderson the Rain King (1959)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“Gene Henderson, an intense, vital millionaire, leaves his Connecticut home for Africa in quest of wisdom, and to satisfy his inner voice’s cry, ‘I want, I want.’ With Romilayu, a loyal guide, he visits the Arnewi, a humane, cattle-loving people suffering from drought. He makes friends with the king Itelo and his aunts, Mtalba and Queen Willatale, serene, wise women, tries to aid them by cleansing the polluted water supply, but accidentally destroys it, and leaves, disgraced and saddened.

Traveling to the island of the Wariri, he finds drought again and he wagers the king, Dahfu, there will be no rain, but overwhelmed by a tremendous ‘wish to *do* something...to work the right stitch into the design of destiny before it was too late,’ he persuades Dahfu to let him try to move an immense idol, the statue of the goddess of clouds. He succeeds, a deluge follows, and although he is made Sungo, the rain king, he is also delivered into the power of the ruler to whom he lost the bet. From Dahfu he learns the fate of Wariri kings: when one weakens, he is killed and his spirit becomes a lion cub that the king’s successor must catch within two years. Dahfu, still in his period of trial, has yet to capture Gmilo, the lion spirit of his father, but his uncle Horko, the Queen Mother, and Bunam, the high priest, force him to his obligation, and in his attempt he is clawed to death. As Sungo, Henderson succeeds Dahfu, into whose tomb he is placed near the cub that symbolizes the late king’s spirit. Sure that Horko and Bunam effected Dahfu’s death, Henderson and Romilayu escape, taking the cub. His inner voice at last quieted, and with an understanding of himself, Henderson and the cub, named Dahfu, take off for home, after a life ‘discontinuous with civilization’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 328

“*Henderson the Rain King* differs from *Augie March* in many interesting ways. In the earlier novel Bellow uses a loose structure to illustrate, through a long series of essentially realistic episodes, the vast possibilities of contemporary life. Beginning in poverty and illegitimacy, Augie ranges far, horizontally and vertically, to end in uncertainty. Henderson, on the other hand, born to every advantage, has lived fifty-five years of unquiet desperation. Of Augie’s kind of patient pilgrimage he has never been *capable*. He is driven by the voice that cries, ‘I want, I want,’ and the story of his search is both romantic and dramatic. I cannot say that *Henderson the Rain King* is a better book than *Augie March*: the denseness of the experience in the earlier novel is something almost unparalleled in contemporary literature. But it is a wonderful book for Bellow to have written after writing *Augie March*. It is a book that should be read again and again, and each reading, I believe, will yield further evidence of Bellow’s wisdom and power.”

Granville Hicks

Saturday Review

(21 February 1959) 20

“Anyone unfamiliar with Mr. Bellow’s earlier work would, I think, immediately recognize from a reading of *Henderson* why so many of our best critics consider him the most important American novelist of the postwar period. For one thing, it contains a wealth of comic passages that bear comparison with the wild, grotesque humor we find in some of Faulkner’s stories, and for another it is endlessly fertile in invention and idea. Beyond that, however, this is by all odds the most brilliantly written novel to have come along in years. Mr. Bellow has finally been able to discipline the virtuosity that ran away with *Augie March*, and the result is a prose charged with all the vigor and vitality of colloquial speech and yet capable of the range, precision, and delicacy of a heightened formal rhetoric.”

Norman Podhoretz

New York Herald Tribune
(22 February 1959) 3

"I surveyed nine reviews. In them Saul Bellow's hero was compared to Don Quixote (thrice), Tarzan (twice), Gulliver, Everyman, Huck Finn, Daniel, a Connecticut Yankee (twice), Odysseus and Captain Ahab. Bellow's prose was found to be masterly, exemplary, supercharged (this was bad), vivid, turbulent (this was good), brilliant and labored. Bellow's story was characterized as fantastic, melodramatic, unrealistic, ironic, anarchic, frenzied (this was good), and 'not essentially parodic.' It was concrete for some, abstract for others. The whole performance was approved by four, disapproved by five....

Henderson is one of those books clearly constructed for the delight and despair of meaning-hunters. One simply can't read it—even after reading Bellow in the *Times*—without looking at its story and its characters with an English Department's suspicion. What is the story *really* about?... It seems to me important to observe that the story is allegorical (though it is also massively concrete) and that, therefore, its readers probably ought to sit down and figure out what it is an allegory of. Most of the reviewers took a stab at this, and there seemed to be general agreement that hero Henderson was on a spiritual quest (like Don Quixote and all those others) for greater Fullness of Being; further, that he achieved a measure of success in his search, while living among the Wariri. There, as *Time* put it, he was helped to 'break the cycle of Becoming for the Serenity of Being'.... The novelist who doesn't like meanings writes an allegory; the allegory means that men should not mean but be....

I am amused for awhile, then fatigued, but never involved. The artifice is earnest. A good many of the reviewers pointed, wither happily or unhappily, to the imaginative qualities of the book, and I am impressed by them too—one doesn't for example, run into frog-bombing every day."

Reed Whittemore
The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970
(1959; Liveright 1972) 382-87

"In the fabulous story of *Henderson*, Bellow goes farther than he ever did toward freeing the individual's spiritual quest from the enmeshing substance of society. To this end, the magic never-land of Africa is chosen for setting. The result, of course, is a work that reads like a romance and has, despite the author's warning to 'those deep readers' forever engaged in a nervous quest of symbols, the universality only romance can bestow on action'.... His travels are mental journeys, and the great turbulence of his spirit attests to the measure of his involvement with reality....

Bellow renders [the] fundamental antithesis of *Henderson's* character in a pattern of recurrent images: the octopus whose cold eyes and slow tentacles communicate to him a feeling of cosmic coldness, the dead man he has to carry on his back among the Wariri. In contrast to these intimations of death, the terrible fear of a traceless calm, there are the images of life to which *Henderson* responds with a singing soul: the wonder of a child in a world death has not yet touched, the rapture an African sunrise produces, 'some powerful magnificence not human,' pink light on a white wall...

With his unusual capacity to relate one fragment of experience to another—Bellow communicates this through a deft use of numerous flashbacks—*Henderson*, unlike *Augie*, gives the impression of creating the very destiny he seeks. Though he bungles the job of purifying the Arnewi cistern and lifting the 'curse' on their cattle, he takes away, with his failure, the friendship of Itelo and the wisdom of Queen Willatale, who teaches him that a frenzied lust for living, 'grun-tu-molani,' not only affirms the basic value of human existence but further incarnates the desire to redeem its griefs. It is under the hypnotic influence of King Dahfu of the Wariris, however, that *Henderson* comes to realize that a rage for living is not enough. Man must also put an end to his *becoming* and enter the realm of *being*, the only realm in which love is possible. Between human beings, *Henderson* understands, there can be either brotherhood or crime, love or aggression. To attain the state of being man owes to his fellow man, human kind must turn to the beasts. This explains why the prophecy of Daniel—"They shall drive you from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field"—is so constantly in *Henderson's* mind, and explains also why in the past *Henderson* raised pigs with such lavish care and performed with a bear in a roller coaster.

The prophecy is actually consummated in a lion's den, under Dhafu's castle, where the king teaches Henderson in the dark, wordless presence of a lion how to capture the emanations of a vital creature, how to be still and active, sufficient and attuned; how to *be* and how to *love*. It is not merely by journeying to Africa, with its strange kings and primitive rituals, nor is it merely by performing a serviceable act of extermination or rain-giving strength that Henderson begins to attain to wisdom. It is rather by learning how to absorb the pure moment which brings together the currents of life and death, ecstasy and numbness, absorb an animal presence, that he perceives the limits of human strife.

The clamorous voice that used to cry, 'I want, I want, I want,' can now listen to other equally authentic voices: 'He wants, she wants, they want.' Identity is found in communion and communion is reached not in the civilization to which we are born but out of it. Man must live with the rhythm of things, for he cannot *live* forever against it. In the last moving scene of the book, Henderson, on his way back to Lily, on his way to start medical studies at 55, clasps an orphan child to his chest and runs about the homebound plane with him, 'leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence,' knowing that though 'for creatures there is nothing that ever runs unmingled,' chaos does not run the whole human show, and ours is not 'a sick and hasty ride, helpless, through a dream into oblivion.'

Precipitate, vigorous, candid as it is immensely colorful, the style of *Henderson the Rain King* leaps with the contortions of its hero's soul and sheds itself again on earth in a poetry of acceptance. Its exuberance is often controlled, and though it still rambles and digresses with the errant human spirit, it insinuates to us...a new idea of responsibility, namely, that man can never commit himself too late. The abstraction of a metaphysical romance is balanced everywhere by Bellow's awareness of the grotesque corporeality of spiritual experience—it is, for instance, while Henderson is wrestling with Itelo, and is tugged around prone on all fours, that he reveals to the prince the aim of his quest. But tragi-comedy, romance, and allegory sometimes add to a dubious mixture. We should be careful not to ascribe the uneasiness we feel about the novel to the conjured quality of the setting and action, for these remain within the realm of significant illusion. Our criticism, rather, must be that Bellow does not succeed in making us feel toward Henderson the detached and ironic sympathy which would have placed his clownery and shenanigans in the right dramatic perspective.

Henderson's posturing and garrulous sincerity promise more than they finally reveal; his peculiar admixture of bravado and self-depreciation seems at times too easy a substitute for the range of human emotions lying between laughter and tears. The effect is sometimes like that of a pantomime co-authored by Rider Haggard and Dostoyevsky. Nor is Henderson's playacting limited to the roles of braggart and breast-beater. He plays too often the part of an obsequious straight man in a Socratic dialogue with African sages, and frequently echoes, like a great blubbing reverberator, thoughts which we would have liked to see developed rather than repeated—even so, the book could well stand some cutting. This is all to say that there is in Henderson a quality of emotional abundance or humility, Slavic or Hebraic perhaps but not entirely American, that puts a higher spiritual valuation on events than the events actually warrant. The result is that Henderson's quest, lacking the reticence of struggle, seems a little faked; his final reconciliation to life appears self-induced. Fate, to be sure, makes buffoons of us all, yet some consent more easily than others to dance the crazy tune.

Henderson the Rain King remains, in a genuine way, the most affirmative of Bellow's works. Starting with the familiar figure of the solitary American hero, unattached to father, wife, or son, fleeing civilization and in search of love, prodigal in his services to all, Bellow leads Henderson through reality's dark dream to a vision of light, and a commitment that can only bind man back again to life. Scapegoat, messiah, a king of plenty and of the spirit's drought—'He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief,' Henderson recites from Handel's *Messiah*—the American hero discovers at last that true innocence can be renewed only in the quixotic charity of pain.' And for once the American hero can go back home again."

Ihab Hassan

Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel
(Harper/Coloophon 1961) 316-21

"*Henderson* is a work that does not really please me. Yet it is typical of Bellow's growing power as a novelist that he can now create a comic hero who is openly and jeeringly his own predicament, who feels the pang of the human situation in his six feet four, his 230 pounds, his millions, his pig farm, his two wives, his bad teeth. In Bellow's earlier novels the leading protagonists were gray, urban and dim, specters...who did not altogether convince me that they could put up much of a fight. They were almost too easily put upon. Even Augie, *picaro* and adventurer that he is, is too much a thought in Bellow's own mind to impress us with the weight that he can put into his plans to outwit life. But *Henderson* is from the beginning built to the size of the titans, the wrestlers-with-God, as the Russians used to describe the type. He is an American eccentric, a gentleman farmer, a war hero, a desperately unavailing husband and father, built to scale....

The extraordinary freedom of style that Bellow learned with Augie has resulted here in an intimate connection of temper and thought, an ease and gaiety that gives the key scenes in the book with Dahfu the native king, a new sense of the laughter that Bellow can bring to intellect. It is the kind of book that no one else could have written, and which is so much in the necessary line of his development that *Henderson* naturally takes his place alongside those other agonists, those constant strivers, who make up the significant gallery of Bellow's heroes. My quarrel with the book has to do with my feeling, suggested to me even in so good a work of its kind as *Seize the Day*, that these Jacobs give up to life a little too eloquently, that they do not struggle enough with the angel before crying out in reverence and submission....

In *Henderson*, scene after scene is brilliantly inventive, but the spaces in between do not sufficiently convey the weight that the antagonists bring to the struggle.... But the beauty of the last scene, when the hero, on his way home, steps off his plane at Newfoundland to run over the fields with a child...catches perfectly that sense of man in the middle of things, a joyous consciousness in accidental space, that gives us the abiding vision of Saul Bellow's novels."

Afred Kazin

"The World of Saul Bellow," *Contemporaries*
(Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly 1962) 221-23

"The soul's progress toward life is recapitulated in the first movement of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), once again in terms of a suffering fat man who comes upon a quirky philosopher. But the fat man is now lifted to gigantism (collar size twenty-two) and provided even in his suffering with burlesque and also with Augie's sprawling exuberance.... *Henderson* brings the isolated hero into functional activity in the community.... It is only with *Henderson* that a consummation has been achieved, achieved by a Nietzschean idea of heroic self-transcendence based on freedom, an idea that had been hinted in all the previous novels. Despite all circumstances of oppression, despite the violence of nature and the violence of men, despite the cocky, assertive 'I,' despite all determinisms and despite finitude and death, the individual is free and free to choose. He can become better....

By Bellow's own deliberation or by astonishing coincidence, *Henderson's* career follows with great closeness, with only one initial deviation, that of the spirit in the first parable of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.... He engages the Zarathustrian burdens of humility and folly. If he does not feed on acorns and grass, he raises and identifies with pigs that do, and suffers hunger in his soul....

Henderson sacrifices some density of dramatic structure to its emblematic play with beasts, as it sacrifices some sound and smell to an elaboration, throughout, of symbolic constructs. It was perhaps Bellow's own apprehension of this certain thinness for the sake of symbols that led him to publish, in the week of *Henderson's* appearance, an assault on symbolic reading and readers. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'the deepest readers are those who are least sure of themselves. An even more disturbing suspicion is that they prefer meaning to feeling.... Novels are being published today which consist entirely of abstractions, meanings, and while our need for meanings is certainly great our need for concreteness, for particulars, is even greater.' 'Deep Readers of the World, Beware!' *New York Times Book Review* (15 February 1959) 1,34. Nevertheless, *Henderson* remains a book made of symbols, shot through with meanings and abstractions, and having some consequent lack of concreteness. Indeed, the book cannot be understood, as some of its reviewers pointed out, except symbolically. See Elizabeth Hardwick, 'A Fantastic Voyage,'

Partisan Review XXVI (Spring 1959) 302; Keith Waterhouse, 'Literary Lions,' *New Statesman* LVII (6 June 1959) 806."

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 42, 44, 54, 65-67

"If we expand our idea of political to include the metaphysical 'how to be,' then Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* is our finest postwar example.... Africa serves Bellow for *Henderson*, a work of inventiveness, intricacy, and great maturity.... Bellow, indeed, creates his own Africa... *Henderson*... pointed outward, toward the large themes *Augie March* suggested. Bellow has it all here: breadth, expansion, a heroic figure, and political ideas at their fiercest. As myth, legend, and allegory, *Henderson* observes twentieth-century America as Whitman's major poems reflected the nineteenth....

Henderson is concerned with becoming more than with being; it has an existential grit to it, since it placed Henderson on the edge, much as Ellison's invisible man is brought to realization through trial and exposure. Eugene Henderson in his natural habitat appears as a somewhat eccentric rich man: big, bluff, powerfully built, with large tastes and an infallible instinct to marry unsuitable women. This is a given in Bellow, the unsuitable wife, other women more accommodating. Henderson does not permit himself to be contained or halted. Beating within him is a gigantic Whitmanesque ego with a voice that cries: 'I want, I want, I want, oh, I want—yes, go on'...

While he remains in America, he suffers a loss of innerness, except for that voice.... Like the junkies and Beats of the 1950s...Henderson is reaching out for alternatives. Their drugs, Zen, 'on the road' frenzy are his Africa.... The reader knows Henderson's [frog] project will be disastrous, since it is based on the self he came to Africa to slough off...his solution is doomed, suitable for American problems, disastrous for African.... One element does remain constant in Bellow's fiction, after its locus: women are the source of man's death, be it spiritual or physical. Dahfu, the Wariri king, explains to Henderson that as soon as he can no longer service his retinue of gigantic queens, he will be strangled, as his father was strangled before him.... Woman, in this scheme, is literally the receptacle of man's life force and has, inevitably, life and death judgment, by way of her sexual needs.

When Dahfu dies, a lion cub grows from the maggots in his body, and that cub, when developed, is in turn to be captured by his successor, and so on into history. Dahfu's sin in the eyes of the rest of the ruling class is that he keeps a lioness, against the rules, for the sole lion he must possess is the huge male that is the reincarnated body of his father. Henderson is taken in tow by Dahfu, who was trained at a Western medical school and speaks sophisticated English. He has rejected not the ideas but the practices of Western culture, in order to return to his tribe as instructor. Salvation, as he indoctrinates Henderson, lies in the lioness, Atti, whose shuffling, rippling, padding presence is that of a goddess, not of nature, but of becoming and then being. Henderson will, expectedly, achieve satori in the presence of the lioness, a kind of Zen master. Her smell is staggering, her perfume that of some other-dimensional force; her physical presence demands exact attention to protocol; and her claws and mouth remain reminders of the physical and political world she emblemizes....

Dahfu...counsels embracing the infinite, the lioness herself.... Henderson's encounter with Atti is central to the novel, and it does not, for the most part, fall into the usual platitudes of 'born free' lion experiences. The lioness, despite her fearful physical presence, is very much 'the other,' which represents whatever it is that Henderson has yearned for. It is highly sexual, and yet beyond sex... When Henderson's hand touches the flanks of the lioness, the smell of the animal penetrates beneath the skin, and his 'nails became like five burning tapers. The bones of the hand became incandescent.' Through the lioness, Henderson recognizes that his existence has been defined by natural objects: he has married a 'Lily,' whom he still loves; he has raised pigs; he tried to rid the Arnewi cistern of frogs so as to provide water for their cattle; and he had once attempted to murder a neighbor's cat.

Unfit for human companionship, Henderson discovers that his role is to loosen his self, since in his relationship to people he must dominate. He must learn to act like the lioness, to lose the restrictions of his 'extremely contracted' state of being. Dahfu is the perfect guide, Virgil to Henderson's Dante, since Dahfu

has absorbed the lion into himself. He is the cub grown up, and he will capture the lion that is the reincarnation of his father. Every aspect of his existence is tied to the life cycle of the lion; even his need to satisfy his retinue of gigantic women is connected to his role as a lion satisfying his pride, insatiable lionesses. He is the guardian of his pride, and once he cannot serve that function, he must be replaced by a male who has full powers. This is, for Bellow's males, one of the unbending laws of nature: the male must 'act the lion,' while the women are always poised to bring him down as soon as he shows a fault.

Henderson becomes known as Leo E. Henderson, Leo replacing Eugene: a replacement of 'well born' by the lion of nature. Bellow's own point about male-female relationships—the male as lion of the pride, the female waiting to humble him at the first signs of weakness—is played out in Henderson's drama with Dahfu. The latter is killed by a giant male lion who is mistaken for his father's reincarnation; Dahfu is raked to death, claws penetrating to his very being. And Henderson is to succeed him. He escaped, however, taking with him a lion cub, in a sense carrying out his succession as king, but in the West.... He adopts a Persian boy on the plane who speaks no English, is mute; with him, Henderson feels a sense of belonging. The 'I want,' which had been simply an ego shrieking to escape, has located an object, in the boy, and in the lion, now absorbed.

Henderson sprawls over the 1950s. Its hero escapes pure self-indulgence and narcissism, but barely; and for those who never connect, the 'I want' becomes a complex 'me.' We can see how the 'on the road' search for interior values led fluidly into the narcissism and self-seeking of the 1960s and 1970s...a wish for purification, conservation, personal integrity, internal satisfactions. Paradoxically, the entire process burrows deeply into an Edenic fantasy. Bellow's novel suggests that in America every seemingly political movement ends up as a personal mission, with strong self-aggrandizing tendencies, the personal function eventually overriding the original political purpose."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 254-58

"The book of Saul Bellow's that I took the most pleasure in, maybe that I didn't admire the most, but I took the most pleasure in, was *Henderson the Rain King*, which is pure invention. Exuberant invention. Out of anthropology books, I suppose. I couldn't do that."

Wallace Stegner
Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature
Stegner and Richard W. Etulain
(1983; U Nevada 1996) xxviii

"*Henderson the Rain King* (1959)...possesses some of the dark comedy of *Seize the Day*, but it is a curious hybrid of genres—exuberant picaresque narrative, lyrical meditation, quest-romance, and tragic-comedy. The protagonist, the eccentric millionaire Eugene Henderson, journeys to the heart of Africa and experiences fantastic adventures. Deliberately echoing Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality' ode at the end of the novel, Henderson affirms the idea of spiritual growth that one finds in the ode and returns home at peace with himself and the world. The importance of recognizing that spiritual rebirth depends upon employing the powers of the imagination is made poignantly clear here. At one point Henderson's mentor, Dahfu, states what might well be considered the most important theme of Bellow's fiction: 'Imagination, imagination, imagination! It converts to actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems!'"

Allan Chavkin
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1855

Henderson is an incongruous name for a Rain King. The title establishes a tone of comic irony and cosmic grandeur, uniting opposites in transcendence. *Henderson the Rain King* is Modernist in that (1) it originates in Realism, as Henderson rebels against illusions--naïve Romanticism; (2) its characters are types as well as individuals; (3) it employs the "mythic method" of Joyce and Eliot; (4) it includes a waste land, the central image of Modernism defined in "The Waste Land" (1922) by Eliot; (5) its major symbols are archetypal; (6) it is a multiple allegory of personal individuation, America, and the human race; (6) it is

Existentialist, a common Modernist theme; (7) it affirms psychological salvation and transcendence in contrast to Postmodernism; (8) it is rooted in Nature in reaction against Postmodernism; (9) it has complex aesthetics, unity and cyclical form; (10) it synergizes Realism and Romanticism through imagination. The novel is *not* typically Modernist in its lack of radical technical innovation.

The style of Bellow is *discursive* in the European and Jewish traditions in fiction, rather than *evocative* in the American Modernist mode of *holistic realism*—Cather, Hemingway, Welty. His symbolism is often explicit or obvious rather than submerged according to Hemingway's iceberg principle. His intellectuality appeals to the mind. Although the narrative voice of Henderson is full of his powerful feelings, it does not evoke deep feeling in a reader, in contrast say to Huckleberry Finn, whose innocence makes him lovable. Here the reader is more in the position of a psychotherapist listening to a fascinating and often funny middle-aged patient analyze himself through a depression. On the other hand, Bellow's method is very successful in generating comic effects, which are rare in Cather and Hemingway.

A big man in every way, in total context Henderson represents (1) the human race: "I am Man--" He sees himself as larger than life, a mythic embodiment of the human spirit: "From earliest times I have struggled without rest." But with the onset of Postmodernism his soul is dying. To be reborn, he returns to the cradle of mankind. He is "anxious to simplify more and more." He has the same motivation as Thoreau: "Wake up, America!" Except that (2) Henderson addresses *himself* as America. His Walden Pond is Africa. Thoreau actually went to his pond, and Hemingway went to Africa, whereas Bellow went to Africa only in imagination, saying "Imagination is a force of nature... It converts to actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems!" Henderson is at first comparable to Jay Gatsby in personifying America, but he is more comprehensive, he matures and he attains psychological salvation.

Henderson is like America in that his ancestors stole from the Indians, he is very rich, very big and very prominent in the world. He is powerful and proud of his strength, also blustering and brash and militaristic. He feels "unkillable." Egocentric, ambitious, lustful, intense, he suffers hard. Most of all he is an extreme individualist: "Society is what beats me." Idealistic nevertheless, he is exuberant and optimistic: "I am a high-spirited kind of guy." He is filled with the desire to serve, but he is immature, boyish, impulsive, and rash, he learns only by getting hurt or suffering. He has the best of intentions but he blunders, as when he blows up the water supply of the Arnewi tribe in trying to end a plague of frogs—a comment on American foreign policy. "I goof." Yet he is lovable and perhaps, ultimately, noble. At present, however, Henderson is (3) a pig farmer and a pig man: "I was telling the world that it was a pig." And the voice he hears inside is not his conscience, it is grunting like a pig: "*I want, I want, I want.*"

The three allegories coincide because the problem is the same for Henderson, America and the world: spiritual death, materialism and greed. In the 1950s America had emerged from World War II with the strongest economy in the world. Consumerism and competition for status upscaled the American Dream. Americans were replacing the pursuit of salvation with the pursuit of success. Henderson is pig rich. He has acquired so much stuff his mind is full of junk like the house of Miss Lenox. His humanity is dying--imprisoned, throbbing, cold—reduced to something like the octopus in the aquarium, groping hopelessly: "Death is giving me notice." This octopus is an Existentialist symbol like the squid in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Their tentacles grope for a hold on something like an Atheist gropes for meaning in facing death. Ishmael attains transcendence in pantheism by becoming a whaleman, Henderson by becoming a lion.

Henderson flees spiritual death from "Idlewild," an airport name encapsulating his mental state. His journey is a version of the archetypal journey of individuation, moving from civilization (America) to its origins (Africa); from City (New York) through Garden (Arnewi village) into Wilderness (Wariri village) and ultimately into the Sky (flight home as Rain King). Like a traditional Christian, he is also seeking redemption for his sins, his treatment of Lily, Ricey, the family cat, and himself—his suicidal thinking. This parallel adds a fourth coinciding allegory to the narrative: (4) the quest for salvation. Bellow's religious Existentialism transcends Atheism with pantheism and agreement with the general principles of Christian morality, based on psychological individuation to transcendence.

As the spirit of modern America on the verge (1959) of the Countercultural Revolution in the 1960s, Henderson is seeking regeneration: "Americans are supposed to be dumb but they are willing to go into

this. It isn't just me. You have to think about white Protestantism and the Constitution and the Civil War and capitalism and winning the West. All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time. That left the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death...it's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life. It just is. Why the hell do you think I'm out here, anyway?" "I don't know, sah." "I wouldn't agree to the death of my soul." The cultural revolution of the 1960s was ignited by death in the Vietnam War, and was driven by idealism comparable to Henderson's in Africa. A few years later, Henderson might have joined the Peace Corps. However, it should be added that Bellow became a severe critic of the barbaric aspects of the Counterculture—such as intolerance of free speech—as expressed in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970).

At first Henderson cannot face annihilation in death, as dramatized comically in his detachment when confronting the corpse of Miss Lenox. His behavior is unreal. In Africa he begins his quest in a waste land that evokes the famous poem of Eliot, but contrary to Eliot implies that the ground of being is nothingness, spiritually barren, and that all meaning must originate in Man—the premise of atheist Existentialism. Like Eliot in his "Waste Land" Bellow alludes to the Bible, as in the episodes of the burning bush and the plague of frogs, and to the Grail legend, as in the drought. Henderson is equivalent to the legendary Fisher King, but more successful in bringing rain and restoring the inner waste land to life. In his faith in Nature, though not in his lack of religious faith, Bellow here is like Hemingway in "Big Two-Hearted River" and in the fishing episode in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Clouds are born on the high ground of the waste land, like myths, which are barriers to perception of clear truth (the sun), but necessary for bringing spiritual nourishment (rain). "We are the first generation to see the clouds from both sides." Bellow appreciates the need for myths he does not believe in, like Voltaire and Melville. Henderson comes upon the pastoral Arnewi village—"like the original place." Members of the *Are-new-i* tribe are childlike, Bellow's version of Adams and Eves. Henderson begins his regeneration by wrestling with the spirit of this place, establishing contact with the power of the earth. He expresses his reverence for Nature by kissing the belly of the matriarchal Queen—Willatale, who is named after Willa Cather. Influenced primarily by European and Jewish traditions, Bellow identifies himself with American literary tradition by integrating into his vision two of the major American novelists of the century. Henderson has the same initials as Hemingway, likewise a big man in every way who went to Africa for regeneration and identified with wild animals.

Willatale is wrapped in a lion skin when he kisses her belly, identifying her with Atti the female lion through whom he later is saved: "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. Those who understand will require no further explanation." His kissing Willatale here compares with his kissing Clara Spohr (spore, a seed or reproductive body) so hard he may have loosened his teeth. Willatale assures Henderson that he has "*grun-tu-molani*"—the will to live. He displays his capacity to be childlike, recalling Christ: "Except as ye become as a little child, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." And he is suffering: "It's too bad, but suffering [*bittahness*"] is about the only reliable burster of the spirit's sleep. There is a rumor of long standing that love also does it." However, his blunder with the frogs, blowing up the tribe's water supply, comically illustrates Henderson's continuing egotism, his need "to prove...that I was deserving." He feels compelled to play God, like America in foreign policy: "You'll croak in hell before I'm done."

Henderson has such a competitive nature that he could not restrain himself even when playing checkers with his kids: "King me!" After his frog fiasco, he moves on to the Wariri village, a prototype of all competitive societies, which are by nature warlike, implying that human "progress" depends on war. By the time he reaches the Wariri tribe he has become more realistic, but he still cannot escape death--the corpse of his predecessor as Rain King left in his hut, prefiguring his own death. King Dahfu displays his mastery over fear of death by playing the game of tossing skulls and he becomes an Existential exemplar and spiritual guide. "King, I am a Becomer. Now you see your situation is different. You are a Be-er. I've just got to stop Becoming. Jesus Christ, when am I going to Be?"

Dahfu teaches Henderson lessons of Existentialism and Zen: "The tendency of your conscious is to isolate self"; "It is never too late to change"; "You could be noble"; "When the fear yields, a beauty is disclosed in its place. This is also said of perfect love if I recollect, and it means that ego-emphasis is

removed”; “The noble conception is everything.... And in the manner described a fellow really is the artist of himself.” Ironically, Henderson becomes a Christlike savior in Wariri mythology before he has yet regenerated himself. He lifts the goddess of clouds, trying to lift himself above selfish ambition. When rain comes, he is proclaimed Rain King—“Sun-go.” In the rain, running around the village in his underwear, he is a ludicrous king, in contrast to the authentic Dahfu. He explains, “King, I had a great desire to do a disinterested and pure thing—to express my belief in something higher.”

Henderson is inspired by Willatale in her lion skin and acquires the courage to face death by consorting with Atti the female lion—a pantheistic goddess. Dahfu tells him he has attained atonement with Nature in the spirit of Zen: “Now you are a lion.... You are related to all.” Dahfu sets an example of self-sacrifice, nobility and transcendence. He is killed by a lion who may be his own father, evoking the sacrifice of Christ, paralleling his pantheism with Christianity. As the spirit of America, Henderson has learned to be modest, realizing that he cannot eliminate evil in the world (frogs) but can bring some good (rain) if he is unselfish. Wariri mythology need not be believed literally, the mythology works as psychological symbolism. Escaping the primitive Wariri, he flies homeward with the spirit of Dahfu incarnate in a lion cub, both at one with Nature and transcending it in spiritual love. If God is love, Henderson is now a believer: “It’s love that makes reality reality”; “Whatever gains I ever made were always due to love and nothing else.” He loves his wife Lily, a name iconic for both death and rebirth, whose soiled undergarments identify her with what is natural as opposed to conventional.

In learning how to *be* as well as *become*, Henderson learned the importance to him of Lily: “I have observed a connection between women’s love and the great principles of life. If I hadn’t picked this up by myself, surely Lily would have pointed it out to me.” Now he is also able to love children instead of pigs. Now he loves humanity so much he intends to become a doctor, which is very unconventional for a man his age. His new capacity for unselfish love is evident when he befriends the little boy on the airplane, a kind of innocent counterpart of his reborn self. (Ironically, in view of recent history, the boy is Persian.) A new man, Henderson retraces the westward course of civilization to *New-found-land*.

Allegorically his rebirth as an individual prefigures the potential rebirth of America—his new-found land--and the world. Of course, this is a utopian ideal, with the appropriate tone of a fairy tale, yet the book is realistic with respect to the individual. At the end, the fact that Henderson does not reach the literal United States symbolizes that America has not yet achieved the rebirth that he has. And of course it never will be perfect, as the Realist knows. But we must keep striving for the ideal or we will degenerate into pigs like Henderson before he went to Africa, and like the hedonists who come to Gatsby’s parties. The prefigurative ending of *Henderson* is a characteristic of Hawthorne’s allegorical romances of American history, as in *The House of the Seven Gables* where the book ends with the group of Americans setting out, not reaching, the ideal country house. Bellow’s vision is also comparable with the last line of *Gatsby*: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

The wintry landscape of Newfoundland is another wasteland of nothingness and death, cold instead of hot like the African desert—cold like his soul before he went to Africa. Hot to cold evokes the opposites reconciled in transcendent consciousness, in seeing and becoming whole. Henderson’s spontaneous warmth, leaping around the airplane with the boy in his arms, contrasts with the frozen Arctic silence, celebrating his triumph over the inner wasteland of spiritual death. He sees the boy as “trailing his cloud of glory. God knows, I dragged mine on as long as I could till it got dingy, mere tatters of gray fog. However, I always knew what it was.” This quotation from the famous ode “Intimations of Immortality” by Wordsworth affirms the existence of the soul, though not its immortality. Henderson compares himself to the pantheist Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*.

The eloquence of Bellow’s prose elevates Henderson’s flight home to an expression of transcendental consciousness, against the current of Postmodernism and contrary to the downbeat endings typical of Existentialist literature: “I couldn’t get enough of the water, and of these upside-down sierras of the clouds. Like courts of eternal heaven. (Only they aren’t eternal, that’s the whole thing; they are seen once and never seen again, being figures and not abiding realities; Dahfu will never be seen again, and presently I will never be seen again; but every one is given the components to see: the water, the sun, the air, the earth.)” This is the pathos of atheist Existentialism: The only heaven is our earth.

Michael Hollister (2013)

Henderson the Rain King is a 1959 novel by Saul Bellow. The book's blend of philosophical discourse and comic adventure has helped make it one of his most enduringly popular works. It is said to be Bellow's own favorite among his books. It was ranked number 21 on Modern Library's list of the 100 Best Novels in the English language. Eugene Henderson is a troubled middle-aged man. Despite his riches, high social status, and physical prowess, he feels restless and unfulfilled, and harbors a spiritual crisis. Each week in *Bookends*, two writers take on questions about the world of books. Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* divided critics when it was first published in 1959. James Parker and Francine Prose discuss the experience of reading the novel today. By James Parker. The thing that holds up is the anti-poetry: the ugly-beautiful, slangy, blustery voice of Henderson. Image. James Parker. Credit... Illustration by R. Kikuo Johnson. When I read, reread, re-encounter *Henderson the Rain King*, I do so in a state of naked amazement and gratitude. It's one of those books I can't really consider in Henderson the Rain King. Saul Bellow. To my son Gregory. I. 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. When I think 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. If I hadn't been a Henderson and my father's son, they would have thrown me out. At birth I weighed fourteen pounds, and it was a tough delivery. Then I grew up. Six feet four inches tall. Two hundred and thirty pounds. An enormous head, rugged, with hair like Persian lambs' fur. Suspicious eyes, usually narrowed.

"Henderson the Rain King" is a 1959 novel by Saul Bellow. It was ranked 21 on Modern Library's list of the 100 Best Novels. The book's blend of philosophical discourse and comic adventure has helped make it one of Bellow's most enduringly popular works. Eugene Henderson is a troubled middle-aged man. Despite his riches, high social status, and physical prowess, he feels restless and unfulfilled, and harbors a spiritual void that manifests itself as an inner voice crying out "I want, I want, I want". Hoping to discover what the voice wants, Henderson goes to Africa. Upon reaching Africa, Henderson splits with his original group and hires a native guide, Romilayu. Romilayu leads Henderson to the village of the Arnewi, where Henderson befriends the leaders of the village.