

Interpretation of *Henderson the Rain King* in Light of Emerson's Theories of Transcendentalism

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Abstract—Related to the basic features of Emerson's theories of Transcendentalism, the exploration of the novel in this thesis goes on three aspects. First, Bellow's concept of nature adopted in this novel is an expression of transcendental notion of nature. Secondly, in *Henderson the Rain King* Bellow also inherits the legacy of American transcendentalism as the emphasis of spirit or the oversoul. Thirdly, Bellow values individuality as highly as his literary predecessor Emerson did, however, in this novel he discards individualism. As Bellow's first mature novel, *Henderson the Rain King* reflects Bellow's attitude toward the tradition of American Transcendentalism: acceptance and surpass.

Index Terms—*Henderson the Rain King*, Emerson transcendentalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow (1915—2005), the famous Jewish-American novelist, is considered as the greatest writer after William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway in the history of American literature. His first novel, *Dangling Man*, appeared in 1944, and his second, *The Victim*, was published in 1947. Based on the strength of these two novels, Bellow was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948. The prize allowed him to travel in Europe for two years. He spent much of his time in Paris, where he worked on the novel which would show his fusion of high literature and street-level vernacular into a distinctly American idiom: *The Adventures of Augie March*. This book, as well as two later novels, *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), won the National Book Award for fiction. Another novel, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1976 for his "the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work". During his last years, Bellow still published such great novels as *The Dean's December* (1982), *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), *A Theft* (1989).

During a career lasting more than five decades, Saul Bellow established his status as being one of the pre-eminent novelists of the twentieth century. Although belonging to the distinguished American Jewish literary tradition, Bellow focused on culture and society at large and the complicated humanity of his characters. With humor and a prose style which is both colloquial and literary, Bellow reinvigorated the English language and gave voice to some of the most memorable characters in the canon of American literature. As the influential critic Leslie Fiedler pronounced: "Saul Bellow has become not merely a writer with whom it is possible to come to terms, but one with whom it is necessary to come to terms—perhaps of all our novelists the one we need most to understand, if we are to understand what the novel is doing at the moment" (Ousby, 1979, p.335).

Henderson the Rain King, Saul Bellow's fifth novel which was published in the year of 1959, tells a story mainly about Henderson who is an American millionaire. Besides his great wealth from the family heritage, Henderson is in good health and has a beautiful wife. Despises all of these, the hero suffers an unbearable spiritual crisis and all aspects of his life turn into chaos. In addition, there is a ceaseless voice crying "I want, I want" in his deep heart. In order to find some remedy for his rest life and seek the truth and wisdom of life, Henderson leaves America and takes a travel to the remote continent of Africa which is a symbolic of nature. In Africa, Henderson totally immerses himself in the primitive scene of Africa and goes to two tribes named Arnewi and Wariri respectively. By doing so, Henderson not only feels the beauty and grace of nature from the natural scene but gains the true meaning of life from the two tribes. The queen of Arnewi tells him "Grun-to- molani" which means "you want to live". The King of Wariri asks him to imitate a lioness and helps him understand the mysterious relation between human and nature. In the end of the novel, Henderson sheds his excesses of his old self and restores to an equipoise and calm of mind when he returns to America with full confidence to start a new life.

The novel *Henderson the Rain King* seems to be a culmination of Bellow's stylistic and thematic development. First, Bellow introduced his first non-Jewish protagonist as the central focus of the novel. The introduction of a non-Jewish hero in *Henderson the Rain King* illustrates a change and development in Bellow's moral point of view. It indicates that Bellow did not confine himself to the traditional Jewish perspective of his earlier novels any longer, but instead, was

willing to concern the broader issues of American culture. Secondly, numerous critics abroad and at home have analyzed Bellow's life and his works, but little attention has been paid to his concept of nature, for most of his works are set in cities. *Henderson the Rain King* is Bellow's only novel that does not choose city life but natural scene as its main setting. Quite a lot of descriptions of the primitive natural scene can be found in the novel which is a big difference from his other works. In addition, Bellow employed "nature" as a key element to transcend the protagonist from the state of crisis and chaos to a peaceful and orderly one.

To the famous critic Irving Marlin, the novel *Henderson the Rain King* is "important in theme and important in structure, important for what they reveal about contemporary reality and for what they demonstrate about itself and its much—healed-crisis" (Marlin, 1967, p.69). It is no wonder that critics consider *Henderson the Rain King* as Bellow's first mature works.

II. CENTRAL POINTS OF EMERSON'S THEORIES OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

There is no doubt that nature has been a central topic of western and non-western philosophy for thousands of years. Also, the nature view of the Transcendentalists plays an important role in the movement. Emerson's book *Nature*, published in 1836 made a tremendous impact on the intellectual life of America. *Nature* together with his address such as *The American Scholars* and *The Oversoul* laid a very firm foundation of his nature view. Emerson's definition of nature is a broad one. To him, nature is the fundamental context of our lives and the way things are. Philosophically, Emerson asserts, the universe is made up of nature and the soul, or nature and consciousness. Everything that is not me is nature; nature thus includes nature, art, all other persons, and my own body. In addition, nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things—how things are; it was a guide to life, a foundation for philosophy, art language, education, and everyday livings.

Emerson's greatest contribution not only lies his fresh perception of nature but also in his accounts of how nature and soul are interrelated. He defined nature as symbolic of the Spirit or God, Nature was, to him not purely matter, the relationship of nature and spirit. Emerson asserted that nature was alive, filled with God's overwhelming presence. It was the garment of the *Oversoul*. Therefore it could exercise a healthy and restorative influence on the human mind. "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secured but life, transition, the energizing spirit." Nature for Emerson was a guide to life, a way to know ourselves. Emerson also claimed that Nature always wore the colors of the spirit. That spirit was a sacred force for good and beauty which could unite man and nature. Therefore, Emerson encouraged people to go back to nature and sink themselves back into its influence and become spiritually whole again. Emerson also asked man to study nature in order to know himself so that he could redeem himself from the excess of the social life.

Emerson stressed on the significance of the individual and believed that the individual was the most important element in society. For Emerson, the individual soul was divine and could commune with the *Oversoul*, which was an all-pervading power for goodness. He ennobled man as a fountain of divine truth, a piece of the godhead: to rely on the self was finally to rely on the godhead of which each one was a part. Emerson was also very affirmative about man's intuitive potential, with which a man could trust himself to know what it was right and to act accordingly. For this reason, the transcendentalists like Emerson were willing to tell people to depend on themselves for spiritual perfection. "Trust thyself," Emerson wrote in *Self-Reliance*, by which he meant to convince that man's possibilities to develop and improve himself are infinite. They also held that the ideal kind of individual was self-reliant and unselfish. With the assumption of the inner goodness of the individual, Emerson took the individual's moral development as their concern more than social progress. In "Philosophy of History", Emerson wrote "progress is not for society, progress belongs to the individual" (Emerson, 1959, p.213).

Emerson's emphasis on spirit or soul also made a great influence on Saul Bellow. Bellow himself in an interview worried people's loss of soul in modern life: in the modern world people were losing the sense of what meant to be a human being and to have a soul. After examining Bellow's major novels, Pifer Allen observed, "this deepening faith in the inmost self or 'soul' is, then what foster Bellow's vision of life, and ultimately of literary creation, as a religion enterprise" (Pifer, 1990, p.3).

III. HENDERSON'S JOURNEY: A JOURNEY IN TRANSCENDENCE

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of American Transcendentalism, once emphasizes the important influence of nature upon mind: "the first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of Nature" (Emerson, 1983, p.60). According to Emerson, people need to go back to nature to restore their reason and faith. For nature is a site for an epiphany, in which the individual human disappears in the "currents of the Universal Being" (Ibid). Nature is the place where people come to their senses and repair their trauma in their mind. As to Henderson, a change of place may offer a cure for his mental crisis and disorderly life. He first tries to go to Europe, spending a year in France, but the results of European trip are dismal. He realizes that only Africa—an unindustrialized place that has largely escaped the ravages of materialism of the twentieth-century America. With untamed nature, Africa has the healing power of the twentieth-century chaos and people's feeling of alienation. It is a binary opposition of America. It is a symbol of nature. Thus it becomes the only ideal place that can relieve the madness and disorder. Henderson firstly

is inspired by the mysterious natural scene. The exposure to natural scene makes him realize the beauty and grace of nature. The experiences in the two tribes help him gain the wisdom of life and help him overcome the anxiety over death. Henderson's realization of the totality of life symbolizes that he is mature in mind. Thus, his journey in Africa is a journey to nature and the depth of soul. In other words, Henderson's journey in Africa is a successful journey in transcendence.

Henderson the Rain King is a highly symbolic novel (Kathleen, 1988, p44). The setting of Africa first of all serves as a symbol of nature and spiritual. According to the process of the story, the novel *Henderson the Rain King* can be divided into three parts in this thesis for the sake of convenience: Henderson's life in America, Henderson's journey in Africa and his return to America. Among the three parts, the second one is the most important in the sense of Henderson's Transcendence. It is what Henderson experiences and learns in the continent of Africa that makes his transcendence be possible. His journey in Africa makes him transform from a "giant shadow" to a whole man, from a "pig" state to a "lion" state and from the chaotic state to a peaceful one. (Bellow, 1959, p. 199). So Africa in the novel is not only the main background of the story but also an ideal locale for the protagonist's pursuit of truth and order. Africa has been a very fertile literary setting for authors both of British and America. Of course, the use of Africa as setting in the novel is closely related to the type of story and the author's intention. In the novel *Henderson the Rain King*, the reason for Henderson's leaving for Africa is to "leave things behind" and "wake the sleep of his spirit". The things Henderson wants to abandon are the things that of the twentieth-century western world: industrialization, materialism, and estrangement from nature. Compared with America, the vast and mysterious continent of Africa is the only an unindustrialized place that has largely escaped the ravages of the materialism. Africa in the novel can be seen as in binary opposition to the modernism and industrialization of America. It is a symbol of nature. Bellow employs African setting to criticize the emptiness of modern life in American and offers a way for the protagonist's transcendence over the anxiety and contradiction. With untamed nature, Africa has the healing power of the twentieth-century chaos and people's feeling of alienation. Thus it becomes the only ideal place that can relieve the madness and disorder that haunts Henderson. Through his African journey, Henderson has reconnected him with nature and put himself at the peace with his mind. At the conclusion of his journey, Henderson is able to face his life with confidence instead of avoiding it. In this sense, Henderson's spiritual exploration ends in success.

The Africa here is not a geographical continent but the product of Bellow's imagination. In other words, it is symbolic and imaginative. Comparing with Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway's Africa in their works, Bellow's Africa symbolizes nature and spirit is more obviously. Africa described in the novel *Heart of Darkness* written by Joseph Conrad is mysterious, wild and dangerous. Conrad refers to the continent of Africa as "the heart of darkness" which is the implication of hopelessness in the novel more than once. "I looked around, I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thoughts, so pitiless to human weakness" (Conrad, 2002, p166). Although Africa in the novel *Heart of Darkness* also has symbolic meaning, it is constructed as a dark place without any civilization and represents the darkness of human nature as well as the evilness of colonialism. Ernest Hemingway is another important author who frequently chooses the Africa as the background of his works. Actually, Hemingway traveled to Africa twice—once in the mid-1930s and another in the mid-1950s. His first journey to Africa became the basis for *Green Hills of Africa* and inspired his two other excellent short stories, *The Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *the Snow of Kilimanjaro*. Africa described in Hemingway's works is more factual and close to the reality. In the unpainted foreword of the novel *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway explained the purpose of his description of Africa: "the writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination" (Hemingway, 1935, p1). Although the strengths of *Green Hills of Africa* lies in its flashes of humor and its vivid, sometimes lyrical descriptions of the animals, the native Africans and the Africa itself, Hemingway the author only considers the Africa as a backdrop to the actions and the interests of his characters. He sees Africa as their playground and Africans purely as their servants. Like the critic Debra Modellmog contends "as in so much American and British literature written by white men, Africa thus becomes the stage of the white male's drama of individuation, in which black African natives served as a stage hands without histories or or scripts of their own (Modellmog, 1999, p213).

A number of critics have noted Bellow's indebtedness to Conrad and Hemingway, but unlike Conrad and Hemingway's Africa, Bellow's Africa is neither a symbol of the darkness of human nature nor just a hunting place. In the novel Bellow criticizes Hemingway's concept of Africa through Henderson's speech: "a man goes into the external world, and all he can do is shoot it? It doesn't make sense" (Bellow, 1959, p94). Instead Bellow's Africa "has to be regarded as an astonishing feat of creative synthesis. It is a world complete unto itself, a fantastic and yet entirely credible world, an alchemic fusion of Bellow's anthropological reading, his inventive skill, and his imaginative daring as novelists" (Rodrigues, 1971, p255). To the same effect, the Africa in the novel is neither a geographical continent nor the Africa of anthropologists. It is a metaphysical Africa conjured up by Bellow based on travel documentaries he might have seen and his knowledge of anthropology. Bellow never had been to Africa before the publication of the novel. His safari to Africa only happened after the year of 1959 when the novel came out. In fact, when the novel was published, Bellow was scolded by his ethnography teacher Herskovits for writing a book like *Henderson the Rain King*. Later in an interview, Bellow defended himself by saying "He (Herskovits) said the subject was too serious for such fooling. I felt

that my fooling was fairly serious. Literalism, factualism, will smother the imagination" (Bellow, 1966, p262-80) From Bellow's words we can infer his intention of creation of Africa in the novel. Although he is deeply influenced by Conrad and Hemingway, Saul Bellow did not confine himself to the two literary predecessors but was eager to embrace the mainstream of American transcendentalism. The background of Africa in the novel is not to entertain readers or to satisfy their curiosity but to offer a perfect place where Henderson can be inspired and guided to the truth.

Henderson's journey in Africa is not only a journey in nature but also a journey to the depth of his own soul. As Henderson says to himself, "the world is mind, travel is mental travel.... Maybe every guy has his own Africa" (Bellow, 1959, p 275). For without it, Henderson can not find a remedy for his spiritual crisis and sheds the excesses of his own moral and the excesses of the materialism of the America. Also without it, Henderson can not return to and the whole community with a balanced and peaceful mind. Henderson's journey to Africa is indeed a successful one, for it helps Henderson undergo a renewal of his spirit and realizes the totality of life. In this sense, the continent of Africa first of all serves as a symbol of spirit which plays a key role in Henderson's Transcendence.

There is no doubt that the journey in Africa benefits Henderson a lot. The inspiration from nature, the wisdom of life from the two tribes especially his encounter with the king Dahfu all help Henderson gain a second chance of life instead of avoid it and dreaming of death. Henderson's imitation of the lion Atti is, in one hand a necessary step for Henderson to overcome the anxiety over death, and a way for him to connect to the divine universe through the power of the oversoul. In the beginning of the novel *Henderson the Rain King*, the purpose of Henderson's journey to Africa is to leave "certain things behind," and "wake the sleep of spirit" in order to avoid the death of his soul (Bellow, 1959, p 45). In the end of the novel, the Africa proves to be able to offer Henderson a rebirth of his own soul. So Henderson's journey is a journey in transcendence which enables him back to nature and to shake off the excesses of modern America.

Henderson's spiritual exploration can be seen partly as Bellow's exploration in his writing. In an interview with a newspaper in 1964, Bellow observed that Henderson, an "absurd seeker of high qualities", was most like himself of all his characters, and the novel *Henderson the Rain King* is his favorite novel (Bellow, 1966, p189). Bellow's arrangement of Henderson's journey to "burst the spirit's sleep" and his final successful transcendence can be seen as a proof of Henderson's as well as Bellow's attempt to seek high qualities in the universe. As Emerson asserted: "Men are convertible.... They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep, out into God's universe, to a perception of its beauty and hearing of its call and your prosy, selfish sensualist awake a God and is conscious of fore to shake the world"(Emerson, 1960, p278).

IV. CONCLUSION

Saul Bellow is often considered as one of the most intellectual writers of the twentieth century in the history of American literature. Numerous philosophical influences on him can be found in his fiction or non-fiction works. Born as a Jew, however, he does not confine himself to the Jewish tradition. Typical of the new, more formally educated generation of American writers, he is keen to embrace the mainstream of American literature tradition, the nineteenth century American Transcendentalism, to be specific, at the core of his work. Bellow's transcendental outlook can be best described in his fifth novel *Henderson the Rain King* for the reason that the novel is strongly colored by the main conception advocated by most transcendentalists especially R.W Emerson.

Henderson the Rain King, Bellow's first mature novel, can be seen as a version of the characteristic genre of the Emerson's Theories of Transcendentalism. To Emerson, nature is the fundamental context of people's lives. Nature instead of tradition or authority is our best teacher. And nature is the nature of things; it is a guide to our everyday life. The central point of Emerson's understanding of nature is his conception of relationship that exists between the mind and the external nature. In "The Oversoul", he wrote "the sources of nature are in [man's] own mind." Emerson said in "The American Scholar" that "nature is the opposite of soul, answering it part to part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind". Emerson also placed emphasis on the importance of individuality. All these classic conception of nature and soul can find expression in Bellow's favorite novel *Henderson the Rain King*. The real focus of the novel is on capturing the process of Henderson's spiritual quest for the harmony of his mind in the setting of nature. To Bellow, Henderson's serious mental crisis and chaotic life in American mainly result from his estrangement from nature. And Henderson's journey in the continent of Africa is Bellow's version of what a modern man can learn from the regions of nature and soul. On his journey to "burst the spirit's sleep," Henderson goes to the unindustrialized continent of Africa which is imaginative and symbolic of nature. The travel in Africa makes it possible for Henderson expose himself to nature which has a great healing power. In Africa, Henderson successfully undergoes transcendence: from the "pig" state to the "lion" state, from disorder and chaos to order and harmony.

The ending of the novel illustrates Bellow's belief that the transcendental conception of individualism should be modified in the contemporary society. Largely as a result of his travel in Africa, Henderson bursts the spirit's sleep and overcomes the excessive anxiety over death. By the end of the novel, Bellow arranges that Henderson returns to his family and his community. Most important, Henderson returns with his discovering the absolute power of love—love not only for his wife Lily but also for others even the earth itself. Although Bellow values individuality as highly as his transcendental predecessors, he abandons it in the novel because he considers it as an undesirable burden keeping

people from love. Henderson's story suggests Bellow's faith in mankind's potential in transcend himself by achieving a harmonization of mind and nature; in the affirmation the value of the individual but avoid the over—glorification of the self; and in possibility of establishment of a society based on union of people and their love. Bellow's acceptance and surpass of nineteenth century American Transcendentalism in the novel *Henderson the Rain King* can also be seen an exploration during his journey to “render the highest justice to the visible universe”, to “find in that universe what was fundamental, enduring, and essential”.

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