

A Study of Henderson the Rain King

—Insight Based on the Old Testament—

Yoshihide Mase

Saul Bellow's *Henderson The Rain King* is a kind of picaresque novel like his previous work *The Adventures of Augie March*. The hero, a middle-aged stout American, goes into the interior of Africa, where he experiences various kinds of unusual events, adventurous happenings, dangers, and blunders among primitive tribes. The story is really interesting, exciting and amusing. Besides, it has a flavor of a bestiary, a satiric story using animals, symbolically suggesting implications about our modern existence from various standpoints, social, political, historical and religious. In particular it is felt to reflect religious insight based on the Old Testament. This essay will explore the religious background of this adventurous story.

Henderson was in hospital injured by a land mine during World War II. One day he was talking with his wounded comrade Nichy Goldstein about their future :

But at that time, Goldstein and I were lying down under the olive trees — some of those gnarls open out like lace and let the light through — and I asked him what he aimed to do after the war. He said, "Why, me and my brother, if we live and be well, we're going to have a mink ranch in the Catskills". So I said, or my demon said for me, "I'm going to start breeding pigs". And after these words were spoken I knew that if Goldstein had not been a Jew I might have said cattle and not pigs. So then it was too late to retract. (20)

The name Goldstein implies that he is a Jew, and that Gold symbolizes capitalistic society, where raising minks is synonymous with insatiably seeking money and self-interest. In spite of himself, Henderson chooses pigs as an antithesis to minks. This perverse response suggests Henderson's way of thinking and living, and at the same time the writer's rejection of our modern existence based on capitalistic free competition. Furthermore, this remark of his is closely related to his following words :

Anyway, I was a pig man. And as the prophet Daniel warned King Nebuchadnezzar, "They shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field." (21)

This quotation from the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament foretells that Henderson

will live among primitive people and wild animals in Africa. Significantly it also implies that the novel as a whole is profoundly connected with the Bible.

According to the second chapter of the Book of Daniel, one night King Nebuchadnezzar had a curious dream of a large statue made of four kinds of metals. He felt uneasy and ordered his men to find out what the dream meant :

Nebuchadnezzar Forgets His Dream

And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar Neubchadnezzar dreamed dreams, wherewith his spirit was troubled, and his sleep brake from him.

And the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king.

And the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream.

Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever : tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation. (The Old Testament 654)

But they could not interpret the dream after all. In ancient times, large statues used to be made, presumably to symbolize kings' power or human abilities. Nebuchadnezzar's statue may be linked with Mummah, the statue of a deity. By lifting this, Henderson becomes Sungo the Rain King of the Wariri tribe. In other words, the story of the Book of Daniel may give some hints about the writer's imagination.

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel, as in the second chapter, there is another story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The king dreamed a dream of a tree falling. He felt so uneasy and worried that he ordered wise men, magicians, astrologers and others to find out the meaning of the dream and interpret it for him :

I Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace :

I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me.

Therefore made I a decree to bring in all the wise of Babylon before me, that they might make known unto me the interpretation of the dream.

Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers : and I told the dream before them ; but they did not make known unto me the interpretation thereof. (The Old Testament 657)

Because none of them could interpret the dream, the king at last invited Daniel in, told it to him in detail and asked him to interpret it :

But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name was Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods : and before him I told the dream, saying, O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof.

Thus were the visions of mine head in my bed ; I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. . . .

I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and behold, a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven ;

He cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit : let the beasts get away under it, and the fowls from his branches :

Nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a hand of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field ; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth :

Let his heart be changed from man's and let a beast's heart be given unto him ; and let seven times pass over him. (The Old Testament 657)

At the king's request, Daniel prophesied that he would receive God's punishment. He would be driven from men, his dwelling would be with the beasts of the field. He would be made to eat grass like oxen. Then Daniel advised the king to cleanse his sins through righteousness, and his inquiries through showing mercy to the poor if he longed for tranquility of mind.

The age when the prophet Daniel lived was one of peril and terror for Jewish people. The capital Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was razed in the fierce attack of armed forces led by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylonia in 586 B. C. They lost independence and many important Jewish people including Daniel were sent over to Babylon as prisoners, where many of them even lost their faith surrounded by foreign customs and beliefs. It was one of the hardest times in history for Jews. In this difficult situation, Daniel tried hard to be a spiritual prop for his people.

It seems to be suggested through the novel that modern civilization, which is symbolized as the desert without rain of mercy in Africa, is as much at stake as civilization was at the time of Daniel. Just as Daniel advised Nebuchadnezzar to break off his sins by righteousness and mercy to the poor, Henderson's behavior as a whole suggests that modern civilization could be saved from corruption by trying to awaken our inner selves to righteousness and mercy.

Henderson came to the interior of Africa as a stranger like Daniel and made efforts to save the Arnewi tribe from want of water by exploding the frogs in the cistern with his homemade bomb in a flashlight case filled with the powder from the shells of

his .375 H and H Magnum. His attempt ends in failure, only to make matters worse by exploding the cistern itself. This failure implies that modern technology is not effective for the true happiness of mankind. It also seems to prophesy the American failure in Vietnam war as McConnell points out :

But 1959, the year of *Henderson*, was a fateful year : the last of the Eisenhower decade, and the earliest of America's full-scale involvement in the politics of North and South Vietnam. And the last, in many ways, of Bellow's undisputed preeminence in his country's letters. Five years were to intervene between *Henderson* and the publication of his next novel. And they were five years which saw, not only the internal and external erosion of the nation's public self-confidence, but the reemergence of Norman Mailer, the maturation of John Barth, and the appearance of Thomas Pynchon. By the time *Herzog* appeared in 1964, the contours of American fiction had changed since Eugene Henderson took his fantastic voyage to darkest Africa. Bellow came to appear, to some, less and less at home in the new climate ; to others, more and more curmudgeonly. (McConnell 103)

The name Dahfu of the king of the tribe Wariri is thought to be coined from the word ' daffy ' , which means crazy. This implies that the king is not sane but insane, as John Clayton comments :

Fiedler has pointed out that Eugene Henderson's initials are those of another " absurd seeker after high qualities — Ernest Hemingway. Both, fed up with civilized hypocrisy, go to Africa to find essential truth from essential things. But Henderson's beautiful 375 Magnum is taken from him before he can arrive at his moment of truth. He brings home no lion but only a tiny cub. Finally, if Dahfu is like a Laurentian genital hero or a Faulknerian wisdom teacher, he is also a crackpot (Dahfu=daffy) — like Dr. Tamkin. (Clayton 168)

The fact that Dahfu is crazy has a significant relation to the descripton in the Book of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar became insane, recovered himself seven years later and revealed himself as a wiser and greater king than before.

The sixth chapter of the Book of Daniel tells how King Nebuchadnezzar kept lions in his palace, and this turned out to be meaningful to Daniel. Daniel never failed to offer prayers kneeling down for God in Jerusalem three times a day. In Babylon, however, kneeling down in prayer was the way of praying for oneself, while people were supposed to pray standing, which was the way of praying for the people of Babylon as a whole.

Thus people accused him of praying in a way prohibited by the law of Babylon and

asked the king to punish him severely for it. The king was unwilling to do that at first, but, repeatedly requested, he finally ordered that Daniel should be thrown into the lion's den. His order was executed at once.

The next morning the king and his men came to the den, looked into it and found to their great surprise that Daniel had survived the hardship by the grace of the angels. He was brought out safe and sound. Wondering at this miracle, the king ordered that the slanderers should be thrown into the den instead, and the lions ate them up.

In the same way, at King Dahfu's request, Henderson cannot help going down to the basement of the palace and staying for some time with the lion named Atti, one of the lions kept there by the king. Henderson endures the fearful trial with all his might and manages to survive the hardship like Daniel. Thus by conquering the fear of death, Henderson revives and grasps the new meaning of life. Through these descriptions in the novel the author suggests that we could survive the problems, difficulties and evils of our modern civilization in the first place by reforming our inner character.

One day when Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of the palace, arrogant, haughty and proud of his power, then suddenly there came a voice from the heavens, as the Book of Daniel says :

At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon.

The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour fo my majesty ?

While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken ; The kingdom is departed from thee.

And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling *shall be* with the beasts of the fields : they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. (The Old Testament 658)

No sooner had he heard it than he became insane like a mad beast. It was the realization of Daniel's prophecy. The king remained out of his mind for seven years. Then he recovered his reason, at last realizing God's grace, and became a wiser and more honourable king than before.

Compared and contrasted with the characters depicted in the stories of the Book of Daniel, Henderson seems to be a combination and mixture of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. Thus Henderson passes through the process from madness to sanity, from absurdity to reason, from innocence to wisdom, taking off his old clothes, becoming naked and

putting on fine new clothes. Expressions symbolizing this process can be seen through the novel. For example, when he was in the army during World War II and caught by the crab lice, he went to medics to get some chemical powder to get rid of them. But instead of giving him chemicals, they forced him to take off all his clothes so that he was completely naked in public on the street and then they washed him with soap to clean out the lice as if to clear out all the evils from his personality :

I have always had a soldierly rather than a civilian temperament. When I was in the Army and caught the crabs, I went to get some powder. But when I reported what I had, four medics grabbed me, right at the crossroads, in the open they stripped me naked and they soaped and lathered me and shaved every hair from my body, back and front, armpits, public hair, mustache, eyebrows, and all. This was right near the waterfront at Salerno. Trucks filled with troops were passing, and fishermen and paisanos and kids and girls and women were looking on. The GIs were cheering and laughing and the paisans laughed, the whole coast laughed, and even I was laughing as I tried to kill all four. They ran away and left me bald and shivering, ugly, naked, prickling between the legs and under the arms, raging, laughing, and swearing revenge. These are things a man never forgets and afterward truly values. That beautiful sky, and the mad itch and the razors ; and the Mediterranean, which is the cradle of mankind ; the towering softness of the air ; the sinking softness of the water, where Ulysses got lost, where he, too was naked as the sirens sang. (22)

Since he wrote his first work *Dangling Man*, Saul Bellow has pursued human existence itself as his main theme. We human beings are as it were in a dangling condition, destined to be carried away to our inevitable final destiny of death, which dreadfully seems to destroy all our individual achievements which we have built up with out strenuous efforts through our lifetime. Thus, human existence is unreasonable and unbearable to us, the very subjective being of existence. This dire shadow of death is depicted here and there in this novel :

They keep a marine station there, and I had a strange experience in the aquarium. It was twilight. I looked in at an octopus, and the creature seemed also to look at me and press its soft head to the glass, flat, the flesh becoming pale and granular — blanched, speckled. The eyes spoke to me coldly. But even more speaking, even more cold, was the soft head with its speckles, and the Brownian motion in those speckles, a comic coldness in which I felt I was dying. The tentacles throbbed and motioned through the glass, the bubbles sped upward, and I thought, "This is my last day. Death is giving me notice." (19)

Bellow's expressions often have multiple meanings. Henderson always hears from his inside a voice which says, "I want, I want." Though the voice seems to reflect his secular desires including his sexual desire, it must imply his inner cry for salvation from his fate confined by death. Though his experiences are full of sufferings, he seems to have found a direction in which he will escape from his fate. He calls the direction "love", and this word also has multiple meanings.

Henderson discusses with Dahfu how to live. Dahfu comments that his way to live is "to be", while Henderson's is "to become". On the stage with its double images, real Africa and the world of the Old Testament, thanks to Dahfu with his double images, a crazy king and the modern Christ, Henderson has gained access to the true meaning of life, the way "to be", that is, the way to love a life as it is, accepting his fate shared by other human beings, leaving his being as God wishes. This may be what Henderson means by love.

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