Analysis of Henderson’s Journey in Transcendence

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theory of Transcendentalism has a great influence on American Nobel prize for literature winner Saul Bellow and his novel *Henderson the Rain King*. This paper tries to analyse the main process of Henderson’s travel in Africa and to prove that his travel is a journey to nature and soul.

Keywords: Henderson, Transcendentalism, Saul Bellow

1. Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the main 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”[1]. 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”[1]. Nature is a 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 firstly 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 his 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.

2. Inspiration from Natural Scene

Henderson can not agree more with his transcendental pioneer Ralph Waldo Emerson on the point that people should go back to nature to shake off the excesses of materialism and restore to reason and faith. Henderson says:

*Shall I run back into the desert and stay there until the devil has passed out of me and I am fit to meet human kind again without driving it to despair at the first look? I haven’t had enough deserts yet. Let me throw away my gun and my helmet and the lighter and all this stuff and maybe I can get rid of my fierceness too and live out there on worms. On locusts. Until all the bad is burned out of me* [2].

In the novel, the healing power of natural scenes of Africa on Henderson is immediate. Even when he flies across the continent, Henderson comments that “*Africa reached my feeling right away even in
the air, from which it looked like the ancient bed of mankind” [2]. He also finds the climate there agree with him: “the heat was just what I craved…the color themselves did me a world of good. I didn’t feel the pressure in the chest, nor hear any voice within” [2]. But because of the apparent division between man and nature in the industrialized America and the deep obsession with materialism, it is not so easy to get rid of modern society and immerse oneself in nature. Henderson goes to Africa with his friend Charlie and Charlie’s bride, who are equipped with modern equipment such as portable generator, a shower, and hot water. The couple insist on maintaining those trappings of western civilization. Behind the lens of his camera, Charlie insulates himself from immersion in Africa, in which way Henderson was critical of. He tells Charlie “I’ve been always a sort of Africa buff, but now I realize that I didn’t come to take pictures of it” [2] Henderson then leaves Charlie and swiftly drops all the modern equipment in order to make his travel “simplify more and more”. Henderson’s decision of “simplify more and more” is obviously in keeping with Thoreau’s motto, “Simplify, simplify” in Walden. Furthermore, Henderson asks Romilayu to guide him to see places “off the beaten track”, which reminds us of Emerson who advised individual to abandon the “game of conformity” and search for an untrodden path.

As soon as Henderson parts company with the Charlies, he has the opportunity to immerse himself in the beauty of the remote continent which helps him get rid of spiritual burden. When Henderson and his native guide Romilayu wander in the desert of African continent, Henderson finds the gracefulness and beauty of nature and himself undergoes a change both in body and mind:

*There was no footprint, the stars flaming like oranges, those multimillion tons of exploding gas looking so mild and fresh in the dark of the sky; and altogether, that freshness, you know, that is like autumn freshness when you go out of the house in the morning and find flowers have waked in the frost with piercing life. When I experienced this in the desert, night and morning, feeling everything to be simplified, I was quite sure that I had gone clean out of the world, for, as is common knowledge, the world is complex. [2]*

This is a good beginning of nature’s inspiration on Henderson. With time going on, Henderson enjoys the stars, the air, the birds even the dust of the continent which is beyond history and geography. He could not help saying, “even the dust had a flavor of great age, I have a hunch this spot is going to be very good for me” [2]. Benefiting from nature both in body and mind, Henderson continues his journey to two tribes.

3. **Wisdom from Life of the Two Tribes**

Guided by Romilayu, Henderson begins his journey to the first tribe named Arnewi where he wrestles with the prince Itelo and successfully defeats him. For this very reason, Henderson is considered as Itelo’s best friend and is treated courteously by Queen Willatalie and her sister Matalba, two women of Bittahness.

Henderson gets two kinds of wisdom of life from the Queen who has risen above ordinary human limitations. The first is the transcendental view of child. The Queen finally tells Henderson, “world is strange to a child. You not a child, sir?” Henderson interprets the Queen’s words as “The world may be strange to a child, but he does not fear it the way a man fears. He marvels at it. But the grown man mainly dreads it. And why? Because of death” [2].

Henderson also feels obliged to Queen Willatalie for saying “Grun-tu-molani” which means “man want to Live” to him. Henderson considers it as an apt diagnosis of his disease. “Look what this Queen Willatalie had done for me—read my character, revealed the grun-tu-molani to me” [2]. Henderson feels very grateful to the Queen and wants to help her in return.

Henderson’s act of blasting the frogs with a bomb indicates his assertion of America’s faith in science, technology, and power. His disastrous and humiliating experience is intended to teach him that western technology is not incompatible in Africa where people believe in primitivism and nature’s
power. Furthermore, the humiliation Henderson suffers results from the blind arrogance behind his assuming that the modern technology is the key to salvation of the benighted tribe Arnewi. The destruction of the Arnewi’s water reserve is the first of several didactic lessons that Henderson must learn during his spiritual voyage. It is also a necessary part of the education he must undergo. As Pifer argues, it is not until this catastrophe that Henderson pauses to consider that his western technology is not omnipotent and cannot be used to temper with the Arnewi way of life[3]. After experiencing this incident, Henderson leaves the village in shame. After ten-day walking, Henderson and his guide Romilayu arrive at another village and encounter the Wariri. Like the Arnewi, they too are afflicted with a severe drought.

Henderson’s journey in the second tribe Wariri firstly changes his identity which begins with a ceremony. In the ceremony, the strong men in tribe Wariri try to lift Mummah, the idol of the rain goddess, but all of them fail. In contrast, Henderson also joins it and successfully lifts the Mummah. According to local tradition, the lifting of the Mummah will bring rain to a land seriously afflicted by drought. The man who moves Mummah occupies, in consequence, a position of rain king of the Wariri. The title of this post is the Sungo. Therefore, people of Wariri make Henderson their rain king. The ceremony fulfills Henderson’s craving for sense of achievement behind his initial use of western technology among the Arnwi. Furthermore, the lifting of Mummah during the ceremony symbolizes the shedding of Henderson’s using of western technology and his awakening to a new identity.

Henderson’s journey in Africa especially his encounter with the king Dahfu makes him accept the totality of life. “Although he (Henderson) never literally accepts the theory of lion imitation, he does absorb Dahfu’s philosophy on a more significant level. He discovers that the savage forces of the unconscious and the spiritual sensibility—disorder as well as order—can coexist compatibly and that each of these impulses has its own validity” [4].


*Henderson the Rain King* is a highly symbolic novel [5]. The setting of Africa first of all serves as a symbol of nature and spirit. According to the process of the story, the novel *Henderson the 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. 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 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 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 an 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 end 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 more obviously symbolizes nature and spirit.

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”[6]. 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 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”[7]. 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 Moddelmog 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 scripts of their own”[8].

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”[2]. 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”[9]. 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 ethno graphic 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”[10]. 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 neither to entertain readers nor 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”[2]. 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.

5. Conclusion
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 his 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. But at 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.

References