

Existentialism and Saul Bellow's *Henderson, the Rain King*

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In all of his work Saul Bellow has been concerned with the nature of individual identity in the mass-culture of the modern absurd world. His analyses of the quest of modern man for a meaningful existence in a postwar world which has lost all traditional values are based mainly upon the influences of two widely different – indeed even contradictory – philosophical schools. Keith Opdahl has pointed out that Bellow writes partly within the American Romantic literary tradition, and partly he adopts, and Americanizes, the theses of French existentialism.¹ This duplicity of philosophical adherence is employed throughout his fiction² and Bellow seems to have adopted it in an attempt to compromise between the two contradictory world views which have been predominant in the Western world since Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. In this article I shall be concerned only with the influence of French existentialism on Bellow's work.

Jean-Paul Sartre is the principal exponent of French existentialist philosophy, and it is mainly his work that has given Bellow inspiration for his novels. In his deliberate rupture with the metaphysical world view of the Middle Ages, Sartre maintains that existence precedes essence³: Human beings exist, but what they are or what they may become depends entirely upon what they themselves choose to do. They must take the responsibility for their own development. Sartre makes a fundamental distinction between:

- 1) the unconscious being, *the being-in-itself* ("en-soi"). This group consists of ordinary things and material objects. They are essentially what they are; i.e. they are what they are completely. They are solid ("massif").

2) the conscious being, the *being-for-itself* ("pour-soi"), on the other hand, is the human being with no fixed essence. The individual human being possesses the freedom to choose his own life. This freedom, however, soon turns out to be unbearable, and in the face of it the individual suffers anguish. He suffers because he knows that everything is up to him, and he knows that he must take responsibility for himself. But there are ways of trying to escape this anguish, for by attempting to conceal his freedom to himself, the individual may delude himself into thinking that he cannot help it if his life is miserable. In this case the individual shirks responsibility for himself and instead he clings to some transcendent belief in "Destiny." This is what Sartre calls "mauvaise foi" ("bad faith"). "Bad faith" "consists in pretending that we are not free, that we are somehow determined, that we cannot help doing what we do, or having the role that we have."⁴ Roleplaying is thus an indication of "bad faith." In an attempt to escape the burden of freedom and of the personal responsibility which it entails, the individual flees into "bad faith."

Human beings are "beings-for-themselves"; i.e. conscious beings with no fixed essence. They therefore have the opportunity to develop and to improve; they are free. But they long for a state of "being-in-itself," an unconscious state in which things essentially are what they are without the possibility of change. By adopting various kinds of pretences, they may seem to themselves to have no choices left, and they may convince themselves that their actions are totally determined by the role they play. In this way, they feel, they cannot be held responsible. In *L'Être et le Néant* Sartre gives an example of such a person⁵. He deliberately plays at the role of being a waiter and his only wish is to become identified with this role completely. As Mary Warnock sums up:

All conscious beings, beings-for-themselves, are without essence. . . They have to choose their life, and so choose what they are. Beings-in-themselves, on the other hand, are *massif*. They are wholly and unambiguously, for ever, what they are. Conscious beings long for this safe, solid condition. The hollowness which afflicts them is the same as their freedom, and it is burdensome. So the aim of Bad Faith is to bring a man as near as possible to the condition of a thing, an object, to be simply summed up in a word, a *pure* waiter through and through, who has no more choice of how to behave than a robot-waiter has.⁶

"Bad faith" is thus "essentially a denial of our freedom of choice," and therefore any evasion of responsibility is considered by Sartre as an instance of "bad faith."

The conscious being has been especially prone to make this lapse into "bad faith" since Nietzsche did away with the comforting belief in a transcendent justification. The two world wars have also played their part in heightening the sense of disillusionment which always accompanies the loss of fixed traditional values, and the result has been that the existentialist notion of the absurdity of life has acquired a status of almost general validity.

Albert Camus has developed his entire philosophy around the thesis of the absurdity of life. According to him, the disparity between the individual and the world does not stem from either one of these two factors, but is determined, rather, by the interaction between the two. In itself, the world is not absurd; it merely exists. Likewise, man is not absurd when taken on his own. He merely exists as a being who has certain demands to make of life. He asks for purpose, order, and fulfilment, but the world cannot fulfil these demands (only *man* can) and therefore the relationship between man and the world, i.e. life, becomes absurd. Man makes it so with his demands.

When life has no transcendental purpose and when existence has no meaning outside of itself, conscious beings feel "nausea" when they contemplate the multiplicity and chaos of things in the world. They seek the easiest way to defend themselves from the unpredictable ways of this hostile world and they find it by becoming so self-involved that they are no longer vulnerable to the blows it gives. They lapse into "bad faith." The problem with "bad faith," however, is that it leads to alienation. The individual's way of looking at himself gradually becomes so different from other people's view of him that he is in danger of alienating himself from himself. He risks to lose his identity – and this leads me back to Bellow's novels.

In *Mr Samler's Planet* Saul Bellow has stated the thematic setting of all of his novels in Mr Samler's reflection that,

Now, as everyone knows, it has only been in the last two centuries that the majority of people in civilized countries have claimed the privilege of being individuals. Formerly they were slave, peasant, labourer, even artisan, but not person. It is clear that this revolution... has also introduced new kinds of grief and misery, and so far, on the broadest scale, it has not been altogether a success... We have fallen into much ugliness. It is bewildering to see how much these new individuals suffer, with their new leisure and liberty. (SP, p. 183)⁸

The modern individual's conflict with his conception of self in his administration of this new freedom is a theme which runs through all the novels. This theme is viewed on the background of the ex-

existentialist demand that the individual fulfil himself as an existing person. In order to feel secure in the chaos of modern reality, the individual has created "roles" and limited versions of reality, reifying himself by lapsing into "bad faith." Instead of reducing himself to a thing by playing at different social "roles" in different situations, and, especially, by identifying himself with those masks, he must strip himself of all of those artificial "pretender-souls"⁹ which make up his "death-in-life," and make an effort to realize his true, natural self.

The individual has taken on the "roles" in a desperate attempt to subject himself to fate in order to escape responsibility for himself or, more specifically, to escape the responsibility of administering his freedom to choose to become a truly existing person. This is what Sartre calls "bad faith." He must now throw this false identity off and accept responsibility for his own development. In existentialist terms real life (acceptance of reality) is an opportunity; it is a form of being which must be chosen by the individual and which does not exist until it is chosen. It is the only form of existence which is worth-while.

In choosing reality, however, the individual must accept the existentialist notion of the absurdity of life. Man must accept the fact that life is not determined for him; he must determine his life for himself. He is free to make his own choices, but he must also be aware that no matter what he eventually chooses, the choice will be for nothing. It is absurd. And because existence has no transcendental meaning outside of itself, the only thing that man can rely on is death. Only death is certain. Everything else is subject to the individual's own free choice. Man must, therefore, accept the fact that death is part of reality. It is especially important that he learns to accept his own personal death as a natural part of true reality. This means that he must give up his comforting belief in immortality, or, in the case of Bellow's heroes, his romantic belief in a release from mortality.

This is where most of Bellow's protagonists become frustrated and alienated. None of them are able to accept reality because of their intense fear of facing death as the only certainty in an absurd world, and in their paranoid flight from a confrontation with their own mortality, they only entangle themselves even more in the suffocating web of alienation which is a result of "bad faith." Trying to escape from physical nature, the protagonists are suddenly confronted with a sense of unreality. The ephemeral nature of the world has

become unreal to them because they have deluded themselves into thinking that they are not part of it. In their attempts to evade the limitations of physical existence, they have set themselves above reality – and have lost it. Lapsing into "bad faith" they seek to reify themselves, to identify themselves with "things" in order to escape death, and in this way they create an artificial world. Therefore the first obstacle to be overcome in man's search for a meaningful existence, for a life within reality, is this evasion of physical nature. Instead of trying to overcome insurmountable limitations, man must accept that he, too, is part of that physical existence which he has been trying to set himself above; i.e. that he, too, will perish. Only then may he realize himself as a truly *existing* person.

Eugene Henderson seems to have sensed that the acceptance of one's own mortality is a prerequisite of self-realization when he gives his opinion of the social and moral background for the quest of modern man: "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. We've just got to do something about it" (HRK, p. 258)¹⁰. The individual's search for a fulfilment of his life, for a transfer from a life of unreality to one of reality, is thus dependent upon his acceptance of death. This seems to me to be the overall theme of Bellow's fiction. Bellow has developed this theme throughout his novels, experimenting with it by applying it to very different types of characters in an attempt to solve the problem of the nature of individual identity in the absurd modern world. His characters all pursue their own redemption from their "death-in-life," each in accordance with the traits of his personality, but their development shows a common pattern: in every novel a frustrated individual is gradually forced by circumstances to try to give up his constructed reality and his constructed self (the "thing^m-role to which he has been trying to subject his true self in his lapses into "bad faith.") He must do this in order to fulfil his life; i.e. in order to enter reality. They all succeed to a certain extent, I think, and I shall attempt to illustrate this by making a close analysis of one of the novels.

I have chosen Bellow's fifth novel, Henderson, *the Rain King*, for my analysis because I think it provides a good example of "an existential hero in search of existential values,"¹¹ and therefore it can serve to illustrate the influence of French existentialism on Bellow's work.

Eugene Henderson is an activist hero. This rich and violent giant has lost his identity in the noise and mass-culture of modern

America. By continuously lapsing into "bad faith" he seeks to avoid taking any responsibility for his own life. It seems that he has thrown his true self away in order to achieve several different social "roles" which create a false identity:

When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five. . . all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins – my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! (p.7)

He has taken on certain "roles" in his relationships to those people and to those occupations, and when he tries to answer his own question "Who am I?" he inevitably points to those relations, thus identifying himself with all his social "roles." But this reference to his "roles" does not identify his true self, only its relation to the various "roles," and he comes to the conclusion that he is merely an empty shell with a false and unreal identity. By having created his own (false) reality and his own (false) self in relation to it, he has made himself into an image to protect himself from physical reality, and, especially, from having to face his own mortality. But in this attempt to go beyond human mortality – and human life generally – he plays at being God, and this results in his alienation from life, from other people, and most importantly, from his true self. Henderson's need to set himself above the reality which includes his own personal extinction places him in the realm of unreality. He feels his "living death" as "a pressure in the chest" (p. 7), and his perpetual role-playing and his insistence that he deserve a special destiny make it impossible for him to associate himself with other human beings. Henderson's despair of the meaninglessness and emptiness of his life is manifested by "a ceaseless voice in my heart that said, I want, I want, I want oh, I want" (p. 15). The voice wants without saying what it wants, so in order to satisfy it, Henderson must proceed by the method of trial and error to find out what it is that it wants so badly. He looks for an answer in literature, he tries to satisfy it with money, with sex, with violence, with hard manual labor, with yells, with pigs, and with violin lessons (in an attempt to recapture his own past and thus to escape morality), but nothing works. As his frustrations increase in number, he gets more and more aggressive. In old Mr Sammler's words: "When people are so desperately impotent they play that instrument, the personality, louder and wilder" (SP, p. 187). Apparently all Henderson's social and human needs are fulfilled: he has money, sex, and

the sense of continuity which children bring, but his voice still wants more, and he is beginning to sense that this "more," which the voice wants, must be a qualitative change and not a quantitative one.

The "actual day of tears and madness" (p. 39) brings Henderson the confrontation with his own "living death" that is necessary to make him realize that he cannot go on "spending" his "life" in this way. Looking down at his dead housekeeper he realizes that death is inevitable, and he seems to sense that not even he may escape it. Instead of seeing death as a manifestation of all human limits, as he has done until now, he suddenly feels that it has no real significance: "So this was it, the end – farewell?" (p. 40). Therefore there is no need for him to go on deceiving himself that he is a "thing" beyond the limits of the human condition. He might as well try to face true reality and to accept death as a natural part of his existence. In order to pursue this new train of thought, he "pins a note DO NOT DISTURB to the old lady's skirt" (p. 40) and goes to have a look at her cottage. Looking at all the junk she has collected to fill up her empty existence, Henderson is shocked to see the obvious parallel to his own life:

Oh, shame, shame! Oh crying shame! How can we? Why do we allow ourselves? What are we doing? The last little room of dirt is waiting. Without windows. So for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth effort. You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. *Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left.* While something still is – *now!* For the sake of all, get out. (p.40, my italics)

This existentialist insight heightens his awareness of his own wasted life. He realizes that he has reduced himself to "nothing" by the way that he has "spent" his "life" until now. Having fled his human condition, which must be lived within an acknowledgement of death, he has been trying to reduce himself to a state of pure "thingness," and thus he has alienated himself from his surroundings and from his own true self. He sees that unless he tries to work with himself in order to make himself give up his role-playing and those perpetual lapses into "bad faith" which the role-playing signifies, he will eventually imprison himself in the realm of unreality, and he will end up having made a gross absurdity of his life – just like the old woman.

Henderson goes to the Africa of his soul. The wilderness and darkness of the African interior is likened to the bewilderment in Henderson's mind, and thus his experiences in Africa represent his various stages of development in this Bildungsroman. This interpretation is supported by Henderson's recognition that "maybe

every guy has his own Africa" (p. 257), and by his assertion that "the world is a mind. Travel is mental travel" (p. 157), and it is further underlined by the dream-like quality of the experience, which is stressed throughout the novel: "For me the entire experience has been similar to a dream" (p. 262). Henderson starts out on his quest in order to pursue his true self and to learn to accept reality. If he is able to attain both, he hopes that he can thereby fulfil himself as a truly existing person. In this way the confrontation with death has turned him into an active searcher for self.

The two native tribes Henderson meets in Africa make up a picture of two Sartrean fundamental ways of relating oneself to others. Although Sartre claims that any genuine, harmonious relationship between people is impracticable, he nevertheless admits that the fellow being is indispensable for our understanding of ourselves. We need "the Other" in order to define ourselves: "the existence of the person, the for-itself, is actually dependent on the existence of another person. Without it, no one would be able to conceive any definition of himself."¹² The two alternative types of "relationships of consciousness"¹³ which Henderson is confronted with in Africa are those which are most common, according to Sartre.¹⁴ In Sartre's terms, the Arnewi tribe symbolize the *masochistic* aspect of a relationship in that they continuously try to reify themselves by wishing to make themselves into "objects" to be dominated by others, or by external events (cf. the drought). They submit themselves to fate because they are unable to accept responsibility for themselves. The Wariri, on the other hand, are embodiments of the sadistic type of relationship. They try to dominate others by subjugating them to their own personal wishes (cf. the beating of the gods). Together, they make up the dual aspect of that sado-masochism which any existentialist must accept as the basis of his relationships to other beings.

On this point Bellow seems to have adopted Sartre's distinction between the various possible types of relationships, but simultaneously it looks as if he rejects the conclusion reached by Sartre: that all human relationships are bitter fights in which the two parties involved alternately try to subjugate themselves to the other, or to subject the other, as the case may be. Instead of considering genuine human relationships impossible, as Sartre does, Bellow seems to entertain a romantic hope that Henderson may achieve a state of harmony by seeking to find a compromise between those two alternative ways of behavior towards "the Other."

Henderson first visits the meek and cattle-loving Arnewi tribe, who suffer because a drought is killing their cattle. During his stay here, he is taken to see the Arnewi queen. This old woman asks Henderson who he is and where he comes from, but he is not prepared for those very obvious questions and he becomes frustrated because he does not know how to answer her. He is the total sum of all of his social and moral "roles," but he senses that the queen will not be satisfied by an answer which simply refers to all those relationships, i.e. to his false identity. What she deserves to learn is what his true self is really like, and this he cannot tell her:

I began to suffer. I wish I could explain why it oppressed me to tell about myself, but so it was, and I didn't know what to say. (p.73)

Once more it was, Who are you? I had to confess that I didn't know where to begin. (p.74)

Seeing that Henderson is unable to answer her question, queen Willatale understands that he is fleeing responsibility for himself, and she tells him: "World is strange to a child" (p. 81). Henderson's desire to live within the physical world, but beyond the reach of death has alienated him from himself, because he has tried – in a very Sartrean manner – to reconcile these two irreconcilable alternatives. In this self-deception he has behaved like a child in the various "roles" he has taken on in order to escape responsibility for his own life. When he admits this, she answers, "grun-tu-molani. Man want to live" (p. 81). Henderson gladly accepts her words as an affirmation of life. This is, indeed, exactly what he has been looking for, and he keenly adopts "this molani" (p. 82) as his new philosophy of life. But the Arnewi philosophy is not enough. It provides Henderson with only half of the clue to the nature of the possible relationship between man and his world. In its affirmation of the opportunities of human life, it evades the question of facing death, a problem which is essential to Henderson's further salvation.

On the symbolical level this is indicated by queen Willatale's "defective eye" (p. 70). One of her eyes has "a cataract, bluish white" (p. 70), and Henderson refers to it as "the mother-of-pearl eye" (p. 76), "the white [eye] though blind" (p. 79), and her "one-eyed dreamy look" (p. 80). The choice of color and of sea-imagery brings to memory the frightening and vivid confrontation with death which Henderson once had in an aquarium in France:

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-blanché, speckled. The eyes spoke to me coldly. . . a cosmic 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." (p.22)

The eye with which it should be possible for Willatale to see death is blind, and so her outlook on reality is one-sided. Even Henderson senses that an affirmation of life is only part of the reality which he claims he has come to seek: "I figured that these Arnewi . . . had developed unevenly; they might have the wisdom of life, but when it came to frogs they were helpless" (p. 83). When it comes to facing death, the life-affirmative Arnewi are "irrational" (p. 83). But so is Henderson for he can only accept death as a part of the reality of others. He fails, however, to recognize this parallel to his own behavior, and instead he makes an attempt to master reality by mastering the death of others: he prepares a bomb to kill the frogs which pollute the cistern containing the drinking water for the Arnewi cattle. His bomb, however, eventually blows up the entire reservoir, and he has to leave the Arnewi tribe very quickly.

The Arnewi have provided Henderson with an affirmation of life, the "grun-tu-molani." This affirmation has fulfilled part of his need but not all of it, so he must continue his search for personal redemption, for his own true "I."

The other aspect of the dual nature of man's relationship with his world is provided by the Wariri tribe, the "chillen dahkness" (p. 108) as Romilayu calls them. On his very first night in their village, Henderson is confronted with death. Seeing that he and Romilayu have been let into a hut in which there is a corpse, he is "maddened by the provocation of this corpse" (p. 130). He has constantly been confronted with death in its various forms (the death of his brother Dick, the octopus, the housekeeper, the Arnewi frogs), and, desperate, he begins to wonder: "Why was I lately being shown corpses?" (p. 127). He seems to have a vague idea that these confrontations with death might be meant to teach him a lesson about that aspect of reality which he is not yet able to recognize: "the dead man in his silence sending a message to me such as, 'Here, man, is your being, which you think so terrific.' And just as silently I replied, 'Oh, be quiet dead man, for Christ's sake'" (p. 129). Henderson, however, still does not understand that an acceptance of his own mortality is a prerequisite of fulfillment as an existing person. Though he - rightly - says that he is "convinced that the presence of this corpse was a challenge which had to be answered" (p. 129), he nevertheless shirks from meeting this challenge in a

proper way, and he seeks the easiest way out. Instead of trying to understand and accept the nature of death, he plunges headlong into "bad faith" and makes a paranoid attempt to reify death, sadistically hoping to subject it to his own personality. So, "determined as only a man can be who is saving his life" (p. 132), i.e. his superficial life and his false identity, Henderson drags the dead man out of the hut and throws him into a ravine. Of course Henderson does not escape an acceptance of death so easily, and when he wakes up the next morning the corpse is back, symbolizing to him that other part of reality which he must recognize in order to reach his true identity.

The Wariri king, Dahfu, is Henderson's exact opposite. On the symbolical level he functions as Henderson's alter ego. He is an embodiment partly of Reichian, partly of existentialist psychology, and in the beginning Henderson sees Dahfu as a kind of perfect reflection of himself: "I saw that he was some kind of genius. Much more than that. I realized that he was a genius of my own mental type" (p. 202). Dahfu lives his life within an acceptance of death, whereas all Henderson can accept is the "grun-tu-molani," the affirmation of life which he has been taught by the Arnewi. Through his conversations with king Dahfu, Henderson is confirmed in his earlier recognition that this affirmative theory of life reveals only one side of the problem of facing reality: "Grun-tu-molani was just a starter," (p. 204), and a little further on Dahfu answers: "Granted, grun-tu-molani is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr Henderson, more is required." (p. 204) With the purpose of teaching Henderson some of this "more" which is "required," Dahfu leads him down into the cellars below the palace to confront him with the lioness Atti. Dahfu sees Atti as an embodiment partly of Reality, partly of Reichian primordial force, the orgone energy. By studying and imitating her, Dahfu has obtained a relaxed attitude (suggested by the name Atti) towards death, and he wishes to share this attitude with Henderson: "You ask, what can she do for you? Many things. First she is unavoidable . . . And this is what you need, as you are an avoider. Oh, you have accomplished momentous avoidances. But she will change that . . . She will force the present moment upon you" (p. 242-3). Dahfu, in other words, wants to change Henderson by forcing him to confront and accept reality. He wishes him to combine his acceptance of life, which the Arnewi have taught him, with an acknowledgement of his own mortality. Only when he has done so will he be able to leave his false reality behind and

enter reality, the given: "I should move from the states that I myself make into the states which are of themselves" (p. 265).

At first, however, Henderson holds back out of his fear of death. The challenge of facing Atti seems to be almost too great for him to meet, but it nevertheless urges him forward on his way to self-realization. Not only must he accept his own mortality; he must also acknowledge the inhuman aspects of his soul, his own primordial passions. The vehicle which Dahfu employs for Henderson's transformation is Reichian psychoanalysis; he wishes to crack up the "pretender-soul," which Henderson has constructed to defend himself from anxieties, by physical means. Henderson must try to "act the lion" (p. 247) and to "be the beast . . . be it utterly" (p. 249). But he has difficulties: "'I feel the old self more than ever,' I said. 'I feel it all the time. It's got a terrific grip on me . . . As if I were carrying an eight-hundred-pound load – like a Galápagos turtle. On my back'" (p. 257). Like most of the other Bellow-heroes, Henderson tries to throw off the burden of his old self which prevents him from becoming human, and as in most of Bellow's other novels this burdensome ego is described in terms of a huge weight which the hero feels is weighing him down. Tommy Wilhelm felt that he "was assigned to be the carrier of a load which was his own self, his characteristic self" (SD, p. 44), and he described this burden as "a wallowing hippopotamus" (SD, p. 61). Henderson's complaint of the weight he has to carry brings to mind Bellow's use of sea-imagery for connotations of death. The Galápagos turtle is a sea animal like the octopus, and both are symbols of death, and, by extension, of his old false identity which must be given up.¹⁵

Henderson eventually gives in to Dahfu's wishes and obeying his instructions he tries to imitate the lion. This does, indeed, help him to shake off at least part of his isolated and egocentric individualism, and at the time when he writes a letter to Lily he has reached a certain insight:

I was very stubborn. I wanted to raise myself into another world. My life and deeds were a prison. (p.266)

I had a voice that said, I want! I want? I? It should have told me she wants, he wants, they want. And moreover, it's love that makes reality reality. The opposite makes the opposite. (p.267)

So, in accordance with the Sartrean notion that one needs "the Other" as a foil against which to define oneself, Henderson recognizes that by isolating himself from other people, he has become estranged from himself. But parting company with Sartre over his

claim that genuine human relationships are impossible, he realizes that one must relate oneself to others in order to become truly human. In Martin Buber's words: "The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter."¹⁶

Dahfu's experimental transformation of Henderson is left incomplete when he dies. Contrarily to Henderson, Dahfu is not an avoider; he has lived by the rule of the lion, and hence he must die by that same rule. His death by the wild lion is an ironic confirmation of his own earlier philosophic statement that "Where a man conflicts there he will fall, and if taking the sword also perishes by the sword" (p. 185). Henderson faces his own symbolical death in Dahfu's, but he also sees it as a representation of that physical death which he must prepare himself to face.

The moment of overwhelming dread which Henderson undergoes in this confrontation with the death of his alter ego serves to shatter his ego-emphasis, and this marks for him the beginning of a new kind of existence within an acceptance of reality: "But now I was blasted away from this practice [of unreality] by the throat of the lion" (p. 287). This way of overcoming one's alienation is quite in accordance with Karl Jasper's view of the circumstances under which an individual may eventually throw off his false self and realize himself as an existing person. Jasper thinks that behind the empirical self the individual has a true self of which he is made aware in what Jasper calls "boundary situations," i.e. in "situations of an extreme kind where we confront despair, guilt, anxiety and death. In these moments of awareness we realize our own responsibility for what we are, and the reality of freedom of choice is thrust upon us."¹⁷ Henderson now realizes that he must accept his freedom to choose his own life, and he sees that in his various attempts to avoid the presence of death he has, paradoxically, avoided life. He realizes that his emphasis on his individuality has kept him aloof from other human beings and from the true existence which his inner need kept demanding. This insight agrees with Sartre's view of death. He urges the individual to cultivate the awareness of death chiefly as a means of heightening his sense of life; only when the individual has accepted the fact that he will eventually die, may he succeed in realizing himself – and thus fulfil his life.

Henderson's original purpose in going to Africa was to pursue his authentic self and to achieve an understanding of reality. It had

been his hope that those two goals would constitute, somehow, true beingness. It has not been so easy as he had expected, but through the various experiences he has undergone he has developed another awareness of himself. One insight which Henderson has gained in Africa is a recognition that he is basically just like other human beings, and especially, that others fight the same problems of identity as he has fought: "What I'd like to know is why this has to be fought by everybody, for there is nothing that's struggled against so hard as coming-to. We grow these sores instead. Burning sores, fertile sores" (p. 306). This realization has given him an understanding of himself and of "the Other." His recognition of his own reasons for creating "these burning sores" may enable him to help others toward self-realization, and thus he may finally be able to reach his goal of becoming a doctor, or maybe even a savior of mankind. To a certain extent this implies that Henderson has not changed at all, but I think that Bellow has at least intended a change. It must, however, be a sort of change that it would be likely for a character like Henderson to undergo. Henderson must still be Henderson, and this is achieved through the comic tone of the last chapters and through an insistence on his impulsiveness.

Most critics have argued that the Persian boy whom Henderson meets on the plane is an embodiment of "his true self, the child he had been and had become alienated from."¹⁸ I disagree. I think that the alien orphan is, rather, an image of his childish and alienated false self from which he has not been able to disentangle himself, and which he is now able to embrace as an empirical element of his newly found identity upon which he can build his further development. Henderson is still in a state of "becoming" (p. 150). Thus I see the boy as a confirmation that Henderson has not changed very much. He has, indeed, achieved certain insights, "Yes, I saw a few things in the interior. Yes I did. I have had a look into some of the fundamentals" (p. 309), but he is not fundamentally different from the man who set out to find himself. This view of the symbolical significance of the boy is supported by his nationality: he is a Persian and speaks "only Persian" (p. 313). Similarly Henderson "with hair like Persian lambs' fur" (p. 8) spoke only "Hendersonian" before he set out on his quest, i.e. his stress on his individuality made it impossible for him to relate himself to others – or even to communicate with them. In Africa he has been able to remove part of his ego-emphasis by his acknowledgement of other individuals ("she, he, they want," p. 267), but it seems that his char-

acter is still essentially egotistic. Thus it seems to me that the question of whether Henderson's self-realization leads to more permanent changes is left unanswered. By the symbols he has employed, Bellow seems to indicate that Henderson's transformation enables him to confront his own mortality and to exist in the here-and-now: "I guess I felt that it was my turn now to move and so went running – leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the grey Arctic silence" (p. 318). But this change is merely hinted at by the connotations of the symbols employed. Henderson's joy in the face of death ("the pure white lining of the grey Arctic silence") is not a logical outcome of his experiences in Africa, and it is not convincing.

The constant repetition throughout Bellow's fiction of the theme of the alienated individual's search for a meaningful existence underlines the importance he must assign to it. But the repetition of "open" endings reveals a certain doubt on the part of Bellow as to whether that particular kind of self-realization which he advocates is actually attainable in our absurd modern society. Unlike Sartre's and Camus' philosophical novels, Bellow's novels do not end with the hero's self-destruction. It is the logic of absurdity that the hero can only recognize his identity at the moment when he destroys it. Sartre and Camus both believe in the destructive nature of self-fulfilment, but here Bellow dissociates himself from the conclusions reached by French existentialism. As an American, brought up on the doctrine of the individual's unlimited opportunities, and writing within a literary tradition which has been dominated by authors like Emerson and Thoreau, it is understandable, I think, that Bellow *has* to try to find a different solution to the problem of the nature of existence: "Otherwise, accelerating like a stone, you fall from life to death. Exactly like a stone, straight into deafness, and till the last repeating **I want I want I want**, then striking the earth and entering it forever!" (p. 277) Philosophically this places him somewhere between existentialism and transcendentalism. In his considerations of moral and metaphysical problems he does not adhere to either doctrine, but seems, rather, to have selected the theses which he feels will be of use to him in determining the nature of modern existence from both. This is what Richard Lehan very appropriately refers to as "the eclectic nature of American existentialism."¹⁹ Henderson seems to voice this (lack of?) attitude in his letter to Lily: "We are the first generation to see the clouds from both sides. What a privilege! First people dreamed upward. Now they dream

both upward and downward. This is bound to change something, somewhere" (p. 261-2). People's dreams "upward" symbolize their belief in religious transcendentalism, whereas their "downward" dreams are symbols of their adherence to the existentialist theory of the absurdity of life. Obviously Henderson feels that the answer to the question of the nature of individual existence lies somewhere in between these two extremes, and it seems to me that this must be Bellow's solution, too.

It seems to be the nature of Bellow's work to try out his theories about the problems of existence on the various protagonists of his novels, experimenting with them by applying them to widely different types of characters. In this way he seems to hope to eventually be able to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilable philosophical movements of Transcendentalism and Existentialism. If he ever succeeds in making this compromise, Bellow will also have proved the Sartrean notion that true beingness is that state which simultaneously contains pure matter and pure consciousness. Sartre feels that such a state of purposefulness can only be momentary, whereas Bellow seems to feel his way between the two philosophical extremes in order to try to give a more permanent meaning to modern existence.

NOTES

- 1 Keith Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction* (University Park, 1967), pp. 23-24.
- 2 The only exception being Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*. In this first novel Bellow has mainly expressed existentialist thoughts.
- 3 Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics: New Studies in Ethics* (MacMillan, St Martin's Press, 1967), p. 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*. Translated as *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, by Hazel E. Barnes (Methuen, 1957), pp. 59-60.
- 6 Mary Warnock, *Op.cit.* p. 31.
- 7 Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900* (Oxford University Press, N.Y., (1960), 1966), p. 125.
- 8 It should be noted, however, that Mr Sammler is *not* Bellow's mouthpiece in the novel. SP-abbreviation for Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977).
- 9 Cf. Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (SD) (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 76.
- 10 HRK-abbreviation for Saul Bellow's *Henderson, the Rain King* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977). Below, quotations from this novel are given by a page reference in brackets after each quotation.
- 11 Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: 1* (Spring 1959), p. 181.
- 12 Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900*, p. 133.

- 13 Paul Edwards, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (The MacMillan Co. & The Free Press, N.Y. 1967), vol. 7, p. 291.
- 14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Op.cit.*, p. 222 ff. This chapter (chap. 3 of the third part of *B & N*) develops Sartre's theory about "the Other."
- 15 Cf. John Clayton, *Saul Bellow : In Defence of Man* (I.U.P. London [1968],1971) p. 180.
- 16 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (T. & T. Clark, Translation by Walter Kaufman, 1970), p. 62.
- 17 Paul Edwards, Ed., *Op.cit.*, vol. 3, p. 152.
- 18 John Clayton, *Op.cit.*, p. 184.
- 19 Richard Lehan, *Op.cit.*, p. 200.