

## The Question of Death in Saul Bellow's Novels— *Dangling Man, The Victim, Seize the Day* and *Henderson the Rain King*

(death/Bellow)

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In 1975 when *Humboldt's Gift* was published, John W. Aldridge stated in his paper entitled "Bellow at 60 : A Turn to the Mystical" that "Bellow's views of the nature of human existence are becoming increasingly mystical."<sup>1</sup> *Humboldt's Gift* has several passages for meditation on "such matters as the fate of the soul after death and the possibilities of reincarnation."<sup>2</sup> His previous novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* already shows Bellow's predilection for the mystical. Mr. Sammler, perhaps his alter ego, mentions that "he wished to read only certain religious writers of the thirteenth century—Suso, Tauler and Meister Eckhart" and that "in his seventies he was interested in little more than Meister Eckhart and the Bible."<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart was a famous mystic whose mode of thinking and expression is said to resemble that of Buddha. The fear of death and the transcending of death, which are closely connected with meditation on the fate of the soul after death and the possibilities of reincarnation, are a common motif found throughout all his novels. I will take up his early novels—*Dangling Man, The Victim, Seize the Day* and *Henderson the Rain King* and examine the way in which these four novels deal with the problem of confronting and transcending human mortality.

It is of great interest to note how closely death is connected with the development of the plots of the four novels. Before or after each protagonist takes up a decisive action, death occurs. Joseph in *Dangling Man* goes to the draftboard to entrust himself to "regular hours" and "the supervision of the spirit." Though the direct motive for his action may be Joseph's quarrel with his wife Ida, yet Mrs. Kieffer's death occurs immediately after that. It cannot be denied that Mrs. Kieffer's death is an important reason for Joseph's volunteering for army service. Leventhal in *The Victim* has his nephew die and the death of his nephew eventually causes him to recognize his responsibility for causing Allbee to lose his job and then to allow him to stay with him. Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, while walking along the street absent-mindedly, forsaken by all, finds himself in a line of mourners and, following the line he enters the chapel, where he howls at the corpse lying in the coffin. By being forsaken by all Wilhelm approaches the sense of Emptiness arising from the realization of form being emptiness and almost reaches Nirvana by identifying himself with death and thereby denying the emptiness.<sup>4</sup> His en-

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counter with death gives rise to his spiritual exaltation in the last paragraph of the novel. Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* goes to Africa to answer "a ceaseless voice in his heart that said, *I want, I want...*" The direct motive for his going to Africa, however, is the sudden death of his maid Miss Lenox.

The idea and thought of the personages in the four novels may arise from something close to the Buddhistic sense of mutability which they hold in the depth of their hearts. Verse 575 of the oldest Buddhistic scripture *Suttanipāta* mentions that "There is no means whereby man shall not die : Death follows on decay : such is life's course." The fact that the plots of the four novels unfold themselves with death involved is closely connected with the fact that the personages' idea and thought are related to the Buddhistic sense of mutability.

Joseph, the protagonist of Bellow's first novel *Dangling Man*, expresses his view and idea of the world, which may imply that he has something like this Buddhistic sense of mutability. Bellow expresses Joseph's sense of mutability :

What he wanted was a 'colony of the spirit,' or a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty. To hack, to tear, to murder was for those in whom the sense of the temporariness of life had shrunk.<sup>5</sup>

Joseph's realization of "the temporariness of life" comes when he sees a man fall dead on the street without notice :

To many in the fascinated crowd the figure of the man on the ground must have been what it was — a prevision. Without warning, down. A stone, a girder, a bullet flashes against the head, the bone gives like glass from a cheap kiln ; or a subtler enemy escapes the bonds of years ; the blackness comes down ; we lie, a great weight on our faces, straining towards the last breath which comes like the gritting of gravel under a heavy tread.<sup>6</sup>

In the talk with the Spirit of Alternatives, Joseph, quoting Spinoza, expresses his own sense of mutability :

He knew that everyone must die. He does not instruct us to graft new glands or to eat carp's intestine in order to live three hundred years. We cannot make ourselves immortal. We can decide only what it is for us to decide. The rest is beyond power.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph's mode of thinking, which is similar to the Buddhistic sense of mutability, along with Mrs. Kieffer's death leads him to volunteer for army service.

Leventhal, the protagonist of *The Victim* and Wilhelm, the protagonist of *Seize the Day*, have nothing like the Buddhistic sense of mutability to which verse 575 of *Suttanipāta* refers. Leventhal is always afraid of losing his job as an editor in a small magazine company. Wilhelm, who has had no job for months, stays in the same hotel as his father does, living apart from his own family. Allbee in *The Victim* and Tamkin in *Seize the Day* are queer but very important personages who teach them something like a Buddhistic sense of mutability. Allbee mentions the temporariness of life :

I don't know how you look at it, but I take it for granted that we're not gods, we're only creatures, and the things we sometimes think are permanent, they aren't permanent. So one day we're like full bundles and next we're wrapping-paper, blowing around the streets. <sup>8</sup>

Allbee shows to Leventhal, who, attached to his present job, lives in constant fear of losing it, how much detached he himself is from everything :

I'm like the Indian who sees a train running over the prairie where the buffalo used to roam. Well, now that the buffalo have disappeared, I want to get off the pony and be a conductor on that train. I'm not asking to be a stock holder in the company. I know that's impossible. Lots of things are impossible that didn't use to be...I had all kinds of expectations. But God disposes. <sup>9</sup>

Schlossberg, one of the acquaintances of Leventhal's friend Harkavy, has something like a Buddhistic sense of mutability and mentions the evanescence of human life :

Now maybe somebody will answer me. "This sounds very interesting. You say less than human, more than human. Tell me, please, what is human?" And really we study people so much now that after we look and look at human nature—I write science articles myself—after you look at it and weigh it and turn it over and put it under a microscope, you might say, "What is all the shouting about? A man is nothing, his life is nothing. Or it is even lousy and cheap. But this your royal highness doesn't like, so he hokes it up. With what? With greatness and beauty. <sup>10</sup>

And near the end of the novel Schlossberg says further about the same matter :

You don't remind them of anything. They don't forget. But they're too busy and too smart to die. It's easy to understand. Here I'm sitting here, and my mind can go around the world. Is there

any limit to what I can think? But in another minute I can be dead, on this spot. There's a limit to me. But I have to be myself in full. Which is somebody who dies.<sup>11</sup>

Several years after driving out Allbee from his home, Leventhal moved from a small magazine company to a trade magazine company run by Mr. Harkavy. He holds a stable position as one of the editors there and has somewhat ceased to fear the possibility of losing the position. The following paragraph shows that Leventhal seems to have learned something like a Buddhist sense of mutability now :

It was understandable that a man suffered when he did not have a place. On the other hand, it was pitiful that he should envy the man who had one. In Leventhal's mind, this was not even a true injustice, for how could you call anything so haphazard an injustice? And somewhere, besides, there was a wrong emphasis.... But the error rose out of something very mysterious, namely, a conviction or illusion that at the start of life, and perhaps even before, a promise had been made.<sup>12</sup>

But in reality Leventhal has not yet obtained anything like a sense of mutability. The following conversation between him and Allbee who has appeared before him after several years' separation shows that he has never :

'An actor? No I'm in radio. Advertising. It's a middle-sized job. So you see? I've gotten off the pony—you remember. I said that to you once? I'm on the train.'

'Conductor?'

'Conductor, hell! I'm just a passenger.' His laugh was short and faint. 'Not even first class. I'm not the type that runs things. I never could be. I realized that long ago. I'm the type that comes to terms with whoever runs things. What do I care? The world wasn't exactly for me. What am I to do about it?'

'What?' Leventhal smiled at him.

'Approximately made for me will have to be good enough....'  
The crowd was beginning to return....

'Wait a minute, what's your idea of who runs things?' said Leventhal.<sup>13</sup>

Leventhal's last question "Wait a minute, what's your idea of who runs things?" brings into such clear relief the contrast between Allbee who has gotten something like a Buddhist sense of mutability and Leventhal who has not escaped from his attachment to Jewishness.

Tamkin in *Seize the Day* seems to have something like a Buddhist sense of mutability and mentions the solitude of people in New York :

If you only knew one per cent of what goes on in the city of New York! You see, I understand what it is when the lonely person begins to feel like an animal. When the night comes and he feels like howling from his window like a wolf.<sup>14</sup>

Tamkin inveigles Wilhelm into investing 700 dollars in lard, and Wilhelm worries about his last money because he cannot trust Tamkin. Tamkin talks like a shaman who mutters charm words :

“What art thou?” Nothing. That’s the answer. Nothing. In the heart of hearts—nothing! So of course you can’t stand that and want to be Something, and you try....<sup>15</sup>

Tamkin mentions the suffering of the people :

Wilhelm said, ‘But this means that the world is full of murderers. So it’s not the world. It’s kind of hell.’

‘Sure,’ the doctor [Tamkin] said, ‘At least a kind of purgatory. You walk on the bodies. They are all around. I can hear them cry *de profundis* and wring their hands. I hear them, poor human beasts. I can’t help hearing. And my eyes are open to it. I have to cry, too. This is the human tragedy-comedy.’<sup>16</sup>

In the last part of the novel Tamkin may have brought Wilhelm into confrontation with the corpse in the coffin and then into identification with it because looking for Tamkin who disappeared with his 700 dollars may have caused Wilhelm to find himself in the line of the mourners and enter the chapel. Then follows the most impressive paragraph in which Wilhelm has confronted and then transcended death :

The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm’s blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need.<sup>17</sup>

Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* goes to Africa to satisfy the cry of his heart, “I want, I want....” In Africa he lives with the Arnewi, an African tribe. They suffer from a shortage of drinking water because of the frogs polluting the cistern. He is very anxious to save the Arnewi. He meets with strange women, who are very joyful while the others are very sad at the water shortage. They are Willatale, the Queen of the Arnewi and her sister Mtalba. Willatale is “not only a woman but a man at the same time.” She has “risen above ordinary human limitations.”<sup>18</sup>

Henderson tries to get rid of the frogs polluting the cistern only to destroy the receptacle itself. He and his native companion Romilayu are obliged to leave the Arnewi and find themselves among the Wariri. On the night of their arrival, they are taken to the cottage, where they find a corpse. Fearing they might be accused of murder, he takes the body outside and carries it on his shoulder with the help of Romilayu and throws it into the ravine. This incident foreshadows Henderson's further confrontation with death through King Dahfu. Before coming to Africa he had an experience that presaged his own death :

I drove to a place on the Vermilion Coast called Banyules. They keep a marine station there, and I had a strange experience on 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 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.'<sup>19</sup>

The next day it seems that they are going to have some festival and the village is filled with a strang atmosphere. Several young women are "gilding the horns of cattle and painting and ornamenting one another too, putting on ostrich feathers, vulture feathers, and ornaments." Some of them wear "human jaw bones as neck-pieces under their chins."<sup>20</sup> On the way to the palace he sees "bodies hanging upside down" from a scaffold to the left. Henderson is to see an even stranger scene in the palace :

I approached or blundered forward. Before I could come too close a hand checked me and a stool was placed for me five feet from his green sofa. I sat. Between us in a large wooden bowl lay a couple of human skulls, tilted cheek to cheek. Their foreheads shone jointly at me in the yellow way skulls have, and I was confronted by the united eye sockets and nose holes and the double rows of teeth.<sup>21</sup>

Eusebio L. Rodrigues mentions in his paper entitled "Bellow in Africa" that Bellow borrowed "numerous physical details about King Dahfu, his court, and the Wariri" from Burton's *A Mission to Gelele* :

The Wariri town where most of the action of the novel occurs is based on Abomey, the capital of Dahomey. Many of the sights that Henderson sees in Wariri are the ones Burton saw in Abomey.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding Bellow's description of the corpses hanging upside down from a scaffold, Rodrigues mentions that there is a similar scene in Burton's *A Mission to Gelele*.

It is quite certain, judging from the dead bodies hanging upside down, ear-rings made of human bones, and skulls in wooden bowls, that King Dahfu lives confronted with death all the time. In Medieval times the plague was raging and in some cities half the population died from the plague. Johan Huizinga tells us about memento mori in his famous book entitled *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. People in the Middle Ages had "a sense of the temporariness" through watching many people die from the plague day by day. This sense of mutability arising from the feeling that "I may die tomorrow" makes the king keep a skull by him and think of death all the time. It is clear as well that the king has something like a Buddhistic sense of mutability arising from the uncertainty of life as people in medieval times did.

King Dahfu is destined to be strangled when he "weakens" :

These same ladies, so inordinate of attention, will report me and then the Bunam who is chief priest here, with other priests of the association, will convey me out into the bush and there I will be strangled.<sup>23</sup>

The king, however, does not show any hint of the fear of his death, but takes death like a philosopher. King Dahfu, the protagonist of the scene of death where it seems as if we can hear voices crying "memento mori" and "this gilded woman" play a game with the two skulls, which are the King's father's and grandfather's. Henderson asks him what will be the consequence if either of them misses :

'I can explain to you, Mr. Henderson, why the factor of missing is negligible.' His teeth shone toward me and the panting made him seem to smile, though there was nothing to smile about. 'Some day the ribbons will be tied through here.' With two fingers he pointed to his eyes. 'My own skull will get the air.' He made a gesture of soaring, and, 'Flying.'<sup>24</sup>

The king realizes that when he dies, his own skull will have the ribbons tied through the eye sockets and be used for a game.

Bellow refers to memento mori in *Herzog*. Asphalter, Herzog's friend, says that he uses Tina Zokoly's method to cure depression. Her method is to make a patient pretend that he has died and make him lie in a coffin. Criticizing her method, Herzog states that "Then it's the old *memento mori*, the monk's skull on the table, brought up to date, and what good is that?..."<sup>25</sup> It is uncertain whether Bellow thought of memento mori when he tried to borrow from the manners and customs in Dahomey for the novel, but man-

ners and customs among the Wariri including the ceremony for praying for rain remind us of memento mori.

Henderson succeeds in moving Hummat, the mountain god and Mummah, the goddess of clouds and becomes the Rain King. He is taken to the den by King Dahfu and there sees Atti, a lioness. Hence his strange contact and communication with Atti :

Here he [King Dahfu] sat down, taking her head on his knees, scratching and stroking, while she pretended to box at him. She sat on her haunches while her paws struck. I saw the action of her shoulders while he pulled her ears, which were small and round. Not an inch did I stir from the position I was left in. . . . No, I stood there half dead, half blind, with my throat closing and all the sphincters shut. Meanwhile the king had taken one of those easy positions of his, and was resting on his elbow. He had such a relaxed way about him, and every moment of his earthly life the extra shadow of brilliance was with him—the sign of an intenser gift of being. Atti stood with forepaws on the edge of the trestle, licking his breastbone, her tongue rasped and flexed against his skin and he raised one of his legs and laid it playfully over her back.<sup>26</sup>

Henderson calls Willatale, the queen of the Arnewi and her sister Mtalba Beers because they are “above ordinary human limitations,” and thinks King Dahfu is a Beer too, because he can treat Atti, the fearful lioness like a baby. ‘What is being?’ has been one of the most important questions of Western philosophy and there have been numerous definitions of being. Erich Fromm explains his idea of being, comparing a haiku by Basho, a poem by Goethe and a poem by Tennyson :

Tennyson’s relationship to the flower is in the mode of having, or possession—not material possession but the possession of knowledge. Basho’s and Goethe’s relationship to the flower each sees is in the mode of being. By being I refer to the mode of existence in which one neither has anything nor *craves to have* something, but is joyous, employs one’s faculties productively, is oned to the world.<sup>27</sup>

King Dahfu knows well that he is destined to be strangled when he becomes weak. His surroundings are full of the things associated with death. He is described as a man who has transcended death. Therefore his mode of existence can be called “being.” The further evidence for this is that Bellow describes the behavior of King Dahfu “taking one of those easy positions of his” with Atti’s head on his knee as “an intenser gift of being.” There may be two concepts of being, roughly speaking : one is that being is becoming and the other is that being is the opposite of becoming. Henderson mentions that King Dahfu is a Beer and he himself is a Becomer. Bellow may mean



that a Becomer is just a man who wants to be something, but it is clear that Bellow means a Beer as a man with the mode of existence Erich Fromm refers to as being. Entai Tomomatsu says in his book entitled *A Talk About Prajna-pāramitā-hridaya-sūtra* that everything in the world is not "being" but "becoming" and that everything is changing constantly and does not last forever. From the realization that everything is becoming arises a Buddhistic sense of mutability. From the transcendence of that realization itself come a detachment from everything and a oneness to the world. This is the state Basho and Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* have reached.

Joseph in *Dangling Man*, who realizes the temporariness of life and decides to submit himself to the situation of death by volunteering for army service, is said to have almost reached the state of "being," and Allbee in *The Victim* and Tamkin in *Seize the Day* may be said to be almost Beers.

Henderson receives "therapeutic methods of Wilhelm Reich" from King Dahfu.<sup>28</sup> He is made to copy the lioness, get on all fours and roar. Dahfu says that Henderson can recover humanity by being the beast. Henderson gradually gets something like a sense of mutability by recovering what he is and believing he has to perish.

Henderson tells his native companion Romilayu about the importance of knowing how to encounter death and going out in the world to find the wisdom of life :

You have to think about white Protestantism and the Constitution and the Civil War and winning the West. All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time. That left the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death. We've just got to do something about it. It isn't just me. Millions of Americans swear to you, Romilayu, there are guys exactly like me in India and in China and South America and all over the place. Just before I left home I saw an interview in the paper with a piano teacher from Muncie who became a Buddhist monk in Burma.... And it's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life.<sup>29</sup>

Judging from the context of what Henderson says above, the wisdom Henderson tries to find may be the Buddhistic Wisdom in the center of which is to know how to encounter death.

I have examined how *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *Seize the Day* and *Henderson the Rain King* deal with the question of death. Joseph in *Dangling Man* is a man with something close to a Buddhistic sense of mutability who almost realizes that a human being is mortal and lives only within a limitation. Leventhal in *The Victim* and Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* learn much about the sense of mutability from Allbee, Schlossberg and Tamkin. Even some critics who criticize Bellow's long novels admire his novella *Seize the Day*. Wilhelm, the protagonist of the novella, realizes that "form is empti-

ness" by being forsaken by all and reaches the stage where he realizes that "the very emptiness is form" by identifying himself with the corpse lying in a coffin at the chapel.<sup>30</sup> Written so excellently and compactly like a piece of poetry, this novella may fascinate even his fastidious critics. King Dahfu in *Henderson the Rain King* is described as a man who is destined to be strangled sooner or later and Henderson who has been attached to things because of his heart's demand "I want, I want," returns to America as a man who has almost realized the human limitation and reached the stage where he can become "oned to the world" through the contact with death provided by King Dahfu.

The last paragraph of *Seize the Day* evokes in the reader a spiritual exaltation resulting from the realization that "the very emptiness is form." It may not be *The Heart Sutra* but the writings of Meister Eckhart that influence Saul Bellow in writing this novel. Sammler, the protagonist of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, says that "in his seventies he was interested in little more than Meister Eckhart and the Bible." It is clear that Bellow is much interested in Meister Eckhart. Erich Fromm indicates that the writings of Meister Eckhart are Buddhistic :

Indeed, the writings of Master Eckhart (as difficult to understand as Basho or Zen) and the Buddhistic writings are only two dialects of the same language.<sup>31</sup>

F. C. Happold mentions the similarity between *The Heart Sutra* and the writings of Master Eckhart :

Perhaps the most important Buddhist scripture in which the doctrine of Emptiness is set out is the Mahayana Heart Sutra, the quintessence of the vast Prajna-Paramita literature, which is concerned with 'the wisdom which has gone beyond'. If, on his first reading of it the reader finds himself lost and bewildered, his puzzlement is understandable. It is strange reading. Its meaning may perhaps become clearer if one compares the thought and mode of expression of The Heart Sutra with those of Meister Eckhart.<sup>32</sup>

It seems that these four novels by Saul Bellow unfold something close to the Buddhistic sense of mutability and deal with how to confront and transcend death. Bellow is thought to be much interested in Shamanism, Hinduism and Hasidism besides Meister Eckhart's writings. He suggests in his essay entitled "Skepticism and the Depth of life" that writers should be more shamanistic." He lets Dr. Lal, a Hindu, appear in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. He may know much about Hasidism because he is a Jewish American. It may be perhaps because of his great interest in Mysticism that Saul Bellow wrote these four novels containing a mode of thought close to the Buddhistic sense of mutability.

## Notes

- 1 Stanley Trachterberg, ed., *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow* (Boston : G. K. Hall & Co., 1975), p. 49.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 3 Saul Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 32.
- 4 Edward Conze, *Buddhistic Scriptures* (Penguin Books, 1959), p. 162.
- 5 Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 32.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 8 Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 67.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.
- 14 Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 72.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
- 18 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 72.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 22 Eusebio L. Rodrigues, "Bellow's Africa" in *American Literature*, 43 (May, 1971), 250.
- 23 *Henderson the Rain King*, p. 147.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 25 Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 278.
- 26 *Henderson the Rain King*, pp. 209-210.
- 27 Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (London : Sphere Books Ltd, 1979), p. 28.
- 28 Eusebio L. Rodrigues, *Quest for the Human*, (London and Toronto : Associated University Press, 1981), p. 119.
- 29 *Henderson the Rain King*, p. 258.
- 30 Edward Conze, p. 162.
- 31 Erich Fromm, p. 29.
- 32 F. C. Happold, *Mysticism* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 160.