Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* and the Zany Postwar Novel

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues for understanding Saul Bellow's 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King* as an instance of the zany, a writing style of 'desperate playfulness' that is characterized by its ludicrous imitation. While the novel's formal unevenness, peculiar affective mix of exhaustion and comedy and seemingly unending intertextual references has long occupied critics and scholars alike, approaching the novel as zany not only allows us to piece together these seemingly unrelated elements of the novel but also to shed light on the novel's negotiation of the changing role of American literature abroad anchored in its satirizing of the Hemingway code here.

KEYWORDS: Postwar, Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King, zany, imitation, style, transnational

Introduction

In a 2015 installment of the *New York Times'* "Bookends" section, in which two reviewers each tackle a question on literature, James Parker and Francine Prose were asked: 'What's it like reading Saul Bellow's 'Henderson the Rain King' today'? The question is a fair one given both the novel's initial contested reception after its publication in 1959 and its relatively neglected position in Bellow scholarship since.[1] *Henderson the Rain King* is, however you look at it, a strange book. Like its eponymous protagonist, the novel seems to come apart at the seams. Living up in all the best and worst ways to the Jamesian definition of the novel as a 'loose baggy monster,' *Henderson the Rain King* consists of seemingly endless, meandering plot lines leading nowhere, interspersed with detour after detour, constant mood swings, mixed registers, and detail after detail. As James Parker astutely summarizes, one "could go on. 'Henderson the Rain King' does. On and on and on," leaving the reader, as Francine Prose puts it, "at once admiring, confused and disturbed." And Parker and Prose are far from being the only critics with this opinion: Right after the novel's publication, Orville Prescott, then the chief book critic of the same newspaper, had already criticized *Henderson* in a similar vein for being "peculiar, prolix and exasperating," – to quote only one instance of the general critical consensus that the novel is deeply flawed aesthetically, especially in contrast to the earlier *Augie March* and the later *Herzog*. What is more, with *Henderson*, as critics bemoaned, Bellow had 'descended' to "farce, […] melodrama and fantasy" (Chase 327). In short, as Richard Chase observes, Bellow had traded in some of the qualities we associate with the modern novel for "some of the virtues of romance" (323).

[1] For an overview of the early critical reception, see Kiernan 76-77. A particularly telling example of the divisive nature of the novel's reception is its recommendation by the Pulitzer Prize committee for fiction in 1960 and the subsequent rejection of the Pulitzer board to award the prize to Bellow.

Yet in contrast to (post-)modernist encyclopedic or other forms of 'maximalist' novels, *Henderson the Rain King* is not actually overly long, clocking in at a bit over three hundred pages in most editions. This tension between perceived and actual length leaves us with the question as to why, then, the judgment of the book as coming dangerously close to exhausting its readers has been held up for over sixty years of critical attention. One possible and often held opinion, as already mentioned, is that *Henderson the Rain King* is simply a badly written novel, which—if accepted—would add it to the short list of Bellow novels generally considered less than stellar, which so far has mainly included his first two books, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*. While literary studies need not necessarily concern itself with the merit (or lack thereof) of its objects of study, the following article posits, in agreement with Robert Kiernan and Bruce Michelson, that the book's effect of being unbalanced is better understood as an inherent part of its aesthetic project. This aesthetic is, thus, important to adequately identify and describe as basis for further analysis of the novel.

While Kiernan reads the novel's "rhetorical rope dancing" as primarily a way "to keep easy categorization at bay" (89), Bruce Michelson adds to this understanding by connecting it to the entrapments of "modern identity" by "ideas, ideologies, cosmologies, isms of all kinds" (311).[2] Whereas I do not necessarily disagree with either of these interpretations as to what the novel may mean, the following article aims, first and foremost, to add to a better understanding of the novel's logic—what Michelson calls "the heart of its order and its purpose" (310)—and its relation to specific institutional contexts. In so doing, I argue for understanding the novel's logic and its aesthetics as an instance of the zany, an aesthetic style centrally characterized by its "desperate playfulness" (Ngai 235) and, as I will show, by its relation to questions of comically failed imitation. Understanding the novel as an instance of the zany allows us to examine more adequately the novel's negotiation of American postwar literature's self-fashioning regarding its changing relationship in the transatlantic literary field.

This means that the following article has a twofold argument. I will mainly argue for conceptualizing the novel's style as zany, which allows us to not only understand the novel's unevenness as an aesthetic choice in contrast to reading it as 'failed' but also how the novel's multi-level engagement with imitation fits with this aesthetic project. I will, secondly, suggest how this aesthetic connects to negotiation of the changing role and self-fashioning of the American literary field post-1945, primarily in its satirical engagement with Hemingway as a stand-in for a specific kind of modernist authorial persona.[3] I will begin by showing just how

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[2] This perspective is often made plausible by referring to an essay published by Bellow shortly before the publication of *Henderson the Rain King*, in which he jokingly warns the 'deep readers of the world' always in search of underlying meanings and symbols, asking, "Is modern literature Scripture? Is criticism Talmud, theology?" ("Deep" 120).

[3] The following article is part of a larger project on zany novels written roughly during the first two decades after the Second World War. The project identifies a trend in novel writing toward an excessive yet realist style of writing and argues to understand this trend as an instance of the zany. In so doing, the project aims at a descriptive account of this style as well as situating it in its institutional contexts of emergence in the literary field of its time.

far the novel can be understood as zany. In a second step, I will tease out manifold ways in which the novel addresses imitation. Finally, I will connect these concerns to the novel's institutional contexts, highlighting their close engagement with artistic discourses surrounding the changing role and reception of American literature—and authors—in the global arena.

The Zaniness of Henderson the Rain King

Henderson the Rain King tells the story of first-person narrator Eugene Henderson traveling to Africa to resolve what the modern reader may be inclined to call a midlife crisis. In the opening pages of the novel, we are introduced to Henderson as a WASP-y American aristocrat and pig farmer, who had become rich by finding money his father had left behind in books while failing to read them. Already married a second time, Henderson reaches a perceived mental and spiritual breaking point at age fifty-five, which leads him, for reasons not entirely clear to either himself or the reader, to join a friend's honeymoon to Africa, trying to still a longing inside of him, manifesting itself in the form of an inner voice demanding "*I want, I want, I want!*" (Bellow 24). In short, Henderson seems by and large, to quote Prescott once more, to be "a multimillionaire by trade and a pathetic, swaggering clown by nature."

The unfolding plot can be subdivided into three parts of noticeably differing lengths that do not map neatly onto the book's chapters. In the first part, Henderson tells the story of his life up to the point of his departure to Africa and his subsequent decision to part ways with his friends during the safari, taking off with the African tour guide Romilayu in search of the 'real' Africa. The second and third parts have him meet with two fictitious African tribes, the Arnewi and the Wariri, respectively. While his stay with the Arnewi ends in disaster, with Henderson blowing up their cistern to help them get rid of their frog infestation and thus cutting their water supply, his longer stay with the Wariri is more ambiguous in its results. Here, Henderson befriends the Wariri's king Dahfu, accidentally becomes the tribe's new rain king, and, finally, after a period of imitating a lion in an attempt to change his own personality under the guidance of Dahfu, he becomes the heir to the Wariri throne after Dahfu has been killed by another lion. Faced with this responsibility at the end of the novel, Henderson once more decides to flee and flies back to the United States, depending on the critic asked,[4] a changed or unchanged man.

The question of success or failure is thus, arguably, a central concern of critics both regarding the novel's form, as already mentioned, and regarding its central plot, namely Henderson's quest to Africa in search of (spiritual) renewal. Tightly connected to this is the question whether we read the central thrust of the novel as satirical.[5] As Michelson points out,

[4] For examples of critics who understand the novel's quest as successful, see Chavkin or Quayum. For critics arguing that Henderson's quest is unsuccessful, see, for example, Halldorson or Emre.

[5] One issue centrally connected to the question of whether the novel is a satire is the depiction of Africa and Africans. Starting with the parenthetical inclusion of the book in Toni Morrison's discussion of Africanist othering in American literature (59), there is an extensive scholarly debate on the role of race and colonialism

Henderson "has been ably read as a modern adaptation of the classic adventure tale, a redevelopment, in contemporary form, of the essential American hero—but we could just as easily read it as a travesty on adventures and heroes both" (309). Yet this is not where the uncertainty stops. The novel is indebted to an almost comical degree to a variety of other authors from Cervantes to Twain and to Blake, other thinkers from Wilhelm Reich to Nietzsche to William James, and other literary forms from the picaresque to the (colonial) travel narrative to the allegory (Cronin, "Saul" 94). But the novel continually undermines, shifts, and turns when it comes to the question as to which of the traditions it alludes to are celebrated and which are mocked. Michelson is thus right to demand that an adequate understanding of the novel needs to account for its "essential paradox" instead of "pumping any one of these themes into full-blown and misleading interpretation" (310).[6]

Thus, instead of trying to pin down any of these possible avenues of interpreting the novel, I want to suggest that the ambivalent mix observable in the novel's critical and scholarly reception should be taken seriously in its own right, namely as pointing us to an understanding of the novel as an instance of a particular literary style I identify as zany. Zany, a term that goes back to an Early Modern clown figure, is commonly used to characterize something or someone as particularly eccentric or absurd. Yet more recently zaniness has also been conceptualized by Sianne Ngai as an aesthetic category that is marked by, among other things, (a sense of) frantic activity creating "a stressed-out, even desperate quality" (Ngai 185) that blurs labor and play, despair and fun (185-86). Using zaniness as a lens to categorize and analyze the novel allows us, I argue, to better grasp its peculiar and ambivalent affect as well as its overall form. I therefore do not argue that Bellow consciously chose to write the novel as zany—understood as, for example, a genre or mode—but that calling the novel zany allows us to better understand how the novel works. Due to this, it might not be the most productive approach to understand zaniness as necessarily excluding other descriptions. Instead, I

in the novel (see, for example, Muhlenstein for a reading of the novel as satirizing colonialism or Lamont for a reading of the novel as contributing to colonial fantasies). What is clear in this context is that Bellow makes use of anthropological material he encountered as a graduate student and extensively alludes to what Muhlenstein summarizes as "colonial library narratives" (82). When asked about the importance of environment for his writing in an interview from 1967, Bellow characterized his depiction of Africa in the novel as 'serious fooling' in contrast to a realist, or what he calls, "factualist" depiction (Bellow qtd. in Harper 13). While a thorough discussion of this would go well beyond the scope of this article, in reading the book as zany I build on scholars such as Merve Emre, who points to the novel as, "in part, a subversive comedy" (204), and Eric Strand, who reads Henderson-the-character as "playing out a touristic fantasy," such as "the role of a Lord Jim-style savior," and thus Henderson-the-novel as lampooning this fantasy (291). The larger question of race and racism in Bellow's oeuvre and person is a much more complex matter than can be treated here in an adequate manner, not least due to the complex and changing relationship of the (Ashkenazi) Jewish and Black communities in the postwar decades (on the latter, see, for example, Salzman and West). For a recent attempt at working through these issues, see Ravinthiran.

[6] It may be interesting to note here that Saul Bellow himself seems to show a similar confusion about this issue. While he repeatedly complained about critics and readers alike not catching on to the humorous tone of the novel, he nevertheless stressed at times that the writing of the novel surprisingly touched him, not least due to his own identification with Henderson as a character. For a recent reading of the novel as a parody, see, for example, Collado-Rodríguez.

suggest that we understand zaniness as a particular style that can be described both formally and affectively and takes as its primary characteristic failed, bad, or ridiculous imitation. It is thus linked to both comedy and performance.

While the zany transverses different modes, genres, and media (Ngai 182), I want to suggest that in literary texts it can be described most generally as a realism that seems 'overactive' in its excessive use of, among other literary devices, parataxis, descriptive details, subplots, and characters. This sense of 'too-muchness' becomes clear already in the opening paragraph of the novel. The novel opens with what seems like a reasonable enough question: "What made me take this trip to Africa?" (Bellow 3). But instead of answering the question in a straightforward manner, Henderson—and with him the reader—is carried away by a barrage of possibilities:

> There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated. When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, 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! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos. (3)

Thus, although the opening question echoes traditional ways of novel openings—one of the many instances in which the novel 'self-identifies' as a novel—it takes Henderson only another sentence to backtrack already. After about three sentences the narrative gets off the rails, setting off a sheer endless use of parataxis, parallelism, and catalogs, both on the level of syntax and on the level of plot development. Throughout the next forty pages, the reader is presented with all kinds of anecdotes and memories from Henderson's life so far as well as with a multiplicity of possible reasons for Henderson's trip to Africa, summarized succinctly by Daniel Muhlenstein in the following way: "the death of his brother and his parents, his dysfunctional family, his bizarre collection of pigs, his temperament, and his general sense of uselessness" (72), and, finally, "a disturbance in [his] heart, a voice that spoke there and said *I want, I want, I want!"* (Bellow 24). Even Henderson's heart apparently expresses itself in the repetitive use of paratactic listing. Strikingly, after going on about all those possible reasons, Henderson finally settles on what basically amounts to a whim—he goes to Africa, as he says, to "do something" (40), boiling down all possibilities to the mere fact of acting.

The term zany comes into the English lexicon by way of the world of theater. Here, we first meet the *zanni* as a character type in the Early Modern Italian *commedia dell'arte* where he is a servant figure that badly mimics his master for comic effect. While the *zanni* can appear "sometimes clever [and] sometimes foolish," he is noticeable from the frantic activity surrounding him: "too many tasks, too many contradictory rules, too many masters shouting too many commands" (Archambeau 98). As a character marked by precariousness, the zany usually values "resourcefulness and flexibility" (Levin 91) and thus tends to eschew (social)

form (see also Ngai 194). From here, the *zanni* first becomes known in the Anglophone world still as a character type—and thus a noun—through Shakespeare and only later also as an adjective, which is how it is mainly used today.

So far, the only extensive theorization of the term as an aesthetic category—that is, as both a description of an object's form and an audience's affective reaction (Ngai 2)—is Sianne Ngai's 2012 monograph *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Ngai proposes 'the zany' as one of three aesthetic categories that are, while 'minor,' also central to postmodern high and popular culture, cutting across a variety of genres and media. While she anchors her conceptualization of the zany in both the common usage of the term–referring to a specific kind of humor steeped in ridiculousness and exaggerated activity–and its historical emergence as a character type in theater–Ngai is especially interested in the zany's relationship to labor, focusing on the character's precarious status as a servant. Taking the character of Lucy Ricardo from the TV sitcom *I Love Lucy* as her prime example, Ngai reads the zany (as an aesthetic and as a character) as indexing the "politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring" (182). The zany, she argues, is the central aesthetic category used in post-Fordist America to negotiate the increasingly blurred line between labor and play.

Strikingly, the zany as a source of "incessant flow or stream of activity" (Ngai 9) tends to create an ambivalent affective response in the audience: it is both funny and stressful to watch. As Ngai points out, while the zany is an aesthetic of play, it is simultaneously a performance of strenuousness, where "the potential for injury always seems right around the corner" (7). It is because of this ambivalent affect mix of "playfulness and desperation" (188) that, in contrast to the cute, one of the other categories examined by Ngai, the zany does not call for identification—a surprising element given its "unique history as a style explicitly *about* mimetic behavior" (8). On the contrary, the zany "often seems designed to block sympathy or identification," "activat[ing] the spectator's desire for distance" (8). As Archambeau observes, zany comedy "demands and cultivates […] a distance that implies a suspension not of disbelief but of empathy" (108).[7]

While Ngai largely focuses on these mentioned economic entanglements of the zany, I want to add to her work by expanding on another element of the aesthetic, which becomes especially prevalent during the postwar years: the zany's relation to (bad) imitation. Although

[7] While Ngai is more interested in the gendered politics of the zany, it might also be productive to analyze the zany's relationship to other American imitative practices, especially racial mimicry such as minstrelsy, which so far, only Eleanor Massie has touched on in her essay on 'ham acting.' Ngai herself convincingly argues for a difference between the (often racialized) aesthetic she calls 'animatedness' and the zany: The former "suggests impersonal and standardizing forces acting on a body from the outside [while the latter suggests] a body driven passionately from within" (306n90). Whereas in Bellow's case the zany is most likely connected to Yiddish vernacular culture and the figure or the schlemiel (see Sutherland or Wisse), the *commedia dell'arte* has a complex relationship to blackfacing, especially in the figure of the harlequin (see, for example, Rehin). For the role of cross-racial mimicry for the emergence of a distinct American national identity in the 19th century, see Richards.

Ngai mentions this aspect of the zany a few times, it remains underexplored due to her focus on the specific ways this aesthetic is actualized under the conditions of late capitalism after the 1970s. Like her other two categories, the cute and the interesting, Ngai describes the zany as "[h]aunted by an image of failure" (25), which is inscribed into the term's very definition. She quotes the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for instance, as describing the zany "as a 'ludicrous' character who 'attempts feebly' (that is, poorly) to 'mimic the tricks of the clown' in 'old comedies'" (25). Similarly, the *OED* gives us a definition of the term as "a poor, bad, feeble, or ludicrous imitator" ("zany"). Herein lies what may be the central paradox of the aesthetic: the zany is, at the same time, failing and too good (Ngai 179)—a "failed mimic" who is "a virtuoso actor while remaining a dupe" (Barker 82). We thus find in the zany an aesthetic that is structured around the successful performance of a bad imitation for comedic effect, an effect that is largely created by a sense of too-muchness in this imitative performance.

Henderson as a 'Failed Mimic': Practices of Imitation in and out of the Novel

Whereas the previous section introduced the zany as a possible way of capturing *Henderson the Rain King*'s uneven form and ambivalent affect, the following section sketches the novel's multilevel concern with questions of imitation. As both Ngai and Levin point out, mimetic practices are not simply a part of zaniness as an aesthetic, but the very thing foregrounded or circumscribed by it. As Ngai underscores, although the zany has always been a figure characterized by mimetic performance—usually a servant figure that mimics its master—in later developments of the type, the zany also becomes "the assistant of a more skilled or experienced clown" (195). This "second-degree […] mimicking" (195) not only shows the zany's relation to 'doubling' as a comedic practice (Levin 84) but also highlights the self-reflective quality inscribed in the aesthetic: the zany "is the comedian's comedian," "committed to the mimicry of their mimesis at large" (84). Thus, while Ngai is right in drawing out the zany's connection to questions of precarity and labor, especially in post-1970s culture, the importance of imitation to zaniness as a performance-based aesthetic remains underexplored in her writing.

Imitation, most straightforwardly, becomes a topic in the novel during Henderson's stay with the second African tribe, the Wariri, which makes up the third and by far the longest part of the novel. The novel's narrator-protagonist Eugene Henderson, as already mentioned, sees himself as on a quest that is aimed at his attempt to transform himself—in his own words—from "a Becomer" to "a Be-er" (Bellow 191). Under the Wariri king Dahfu's guidance, Henderson then proceeds to undergo a form of therapy Dahfu has developed based on a mix of Western medical knowledge and his own tribal spiritual practices. Central to Dahfu's philosophy of the self and its possible transformation, in which he tries to instruct Henderson, is a practice of imitation.

The idea that humans are a product of what they do is a very old idea. Becoming a virtuous person is according to Aristotle, for example, achieved by acting virtuously, similar to how

"lyre-players [become lyre-players] by playing the lyre" (Book I, section 7). Yet Dahfu takes things a bit further, suggesting a fully mimetic theory of self-development, in which the active imitation of an external force allows humans to become their true inner selves. In turn, the mind, in his theory, is what actively shapes the exterior, i.e., the body:

> He had some kind of conviction about the connection between insides and outsides, especially as applied to human beings. […] And what he was engrossed by was a belief in the transformation of human material, that you could work either way, either from the rind to the core or from the core to the rind; the flesh influencing the mind, the mind influencing the flesh, back again to the mind, back once more to the flesh. The process as he saw it was utterly dynamic. (Bellow 236)

As becomes clear in the quote, the human self, according to Dahfu, seems to run on a process not so much of osmosis but of reverberation between body and mind. Notice how Henderson slips into the language of material and form when he shifts from a mind-body dualism to the 'flesh.' The body-as-flesh thus appears as clay to be formed either from the outside (via imitation in the form of gestures, movements, noises), or from the inside (via the mind), and not as an integral part of an embodied subject. Dahfu "had a full scientific explanation of the way in which people were shaped. For him it was not enough that there might be disorders of the body that originated in the brain," from where according to Dahfu's theories, "[e]verything originated"—even something as mundane as a pimple (237): "The spirit of the person is in a sense is the author of his body," explains Dahfu (238). Centrally, the way in which this changing of the self is achieved, according to Dahfu, is by imitating an animal that possesses the desired qualities—in Henderson's case a lion.

It is this imitating of the lion—and crucially Henderson's failure to do so well—that creates the humor of the novel's third part to a large extent. Henderson's failure—and eventually also Dahfu's theory—is drawn out over the course of the novel, making the whole story line work like an extended practical joke.[8] While a thorough analysis of Dahfu's therapy would go beyond the scope of this article, it is still possible to sketch the rough workings of it. On its most basic level Dahfu's therapy is in itself a literalizing of Reichianist psychoanalysis—then fashionable among intellectuals and artists—and its belief in humans' 'animal self' (see, for example, Shechner 122-23). Yet whereas Reichianism meant the animal self to refer to a sort of pre-rational *Id* governed by drives and pure energy that needs to be liberated from the shackles of decorum, 'civilization,' and bourgeois morality, *Henderson* stages actual animals as a means to become someone else (or his true self, depending on your reading), thus making use of a classic technique from the comedic repertoire where the clown takes something too

[8] Larissa Sutherland points out in her discussion of the novel that this humoristic strategy also shows Bellow's indebtedness to Yiddish folk stories (112-13). These stories tend to consist of jokes "that feature recurrent 'punch lines,' which are drawn out 'as a kind of Chinese box, embedding one joke, whose punch line 'tricks' one into thinking the joke over, into another'" (113). Similarly, *Henderson* has a structure "in which each joke scenario refers to the previous and adds momentum to the next" (113).

literally.[9] Additionally, Dahfu's therapy already undermines Henderson's own wish to attain what he perceives as 'untainted' wisdom and, instead presents him with a mix of Western ideas ranging from medical texts (238) to William James's psychology (236) and to Montesquieu (237). What is more, Dahfu himself is portrayed as a product of the international education he largely received in Syria (236). Intertwined with this destabilizing of the primitivist trope underlying Henderson's quest are Henderson's own suspicions. Not only does he worry repeatedly that Dahfu "might be a crank" (243), but when he realizes the king may be right after all, the punch line is that he discovers that he might not be able to imitate the lion due to his lifelong previous imitation of pigs (268-69). Yet this is not where the novel stops. Instead, the reader is presented with yet another twist regarding imitation by Bellow ending the novel with Henderson's true mimetic double—an old circus bear called Smolak (338-39).[10]

The narrative ending with Henderson's self-understanding as the double of the "long-suffering" circus bear is noteworthy for several reasons. First, Henderson's affinity with the circus bear reiterates performance and suffering as central to his characterization, marking him not just as the protagonist of a zany novel, but also as a zany character himself. What is more, by ending the novel in Henderson's belated epiphany of his true double, Bellow further underscores the inconsequentiality of Henderson's quest and thus, in turn, the quest's frantic yet futile nature. Finally, the bear-as-other functions as a link to the second level of imitation in the novel, namely the novel's own comically bad imitation of those parts of the American literary canon which played a crucial role for the postwar performance of American national identity, an aspect of the novel that will be further explored in the subsequent section of this article. This link to the literature of Americanness is, at this point, established by the novel via a dual allusion: Henderson not only explicitly links himself (and the bear) to *Moby-Dick*'s Ishmael—"Smolak was cast off and I am an Ishmael, too" (338, see also Knight)—but the novel also picks up again on Henderson's echoing of Isaac McCaslin, the protagonist of William Faulkner's "The Bear," earlier in the book (Campbell 325, 327). However, in this case, the bear hunt of Faulkner's famous American modernist narrative of antagonistic self-discovery is replaced by the tragicomic embrace of two "outcasts together, two humorists before the crowd, but brothers in our souls—I enbeared by him, and he probably humanized by me" (Bellow, *Henderson* 338).[11]

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[9] In addition to his Reichianism, Dahfu also fits right in with American midcentury culture's growing interest in the social construction of the self as popularized by authors such as Erving Goffman, David Riesman, or C. Wright Mills. For an in-depth treatment of the changing understanding of selfhood and authenticity at the mid-century and its influence on the writing of the time, see Cheever.

[10] As Kiernan argues, the final scene of Henderson running across an icy landscape also draws attention to mimicking by alluding to the final scene of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in which Frankenstein is "pursuing his monstrous doppelgänger over icy wastes" (84).

[11] It might be noteworthy that Faulkner's "The Bear" was one of the texts Bellow chose for his teaching as a central text for understanding America during his time at the Salzburg Seminar (Atlas 258).

This connection to literature itself is the second major and arguably most important way in which the novel engages with questions of imitation. This connection is not only realized vis-à-vis the novel's reliance on other literary texts as source material—as Kiernan points out, for example, "Bellow's Africa is […] the Africa of books" (79)—but the novel generally brims with intertextual references ranging from Romanticism to the Bible. Regarding the sheer quantity of *Henderson*'s borrowing from other texts, Kiernan rightfully concludes that "[t]he constant reference to the literature of quest (and particularly spiritual quest) suggests that Henderson's journey transpires in the world mapped by such literature" (80). Whereas these many allusions are too numerous to list individually, two stand out as being particularly influential for the overall form and structure of the novel and draw attention to the novel's own status as a comical imitation of literary traditions—*Don Quixote* and the 'Hemingway code hero.'

It is difficult to overlook the similarity between Henderson and Hemingway—or Hemingway's public persona, to be more precise: "With his initials E. H., his drinking, his .375 magnum rifle, his private firing range, his fascination with African safaris, and his participation in a foreign war, he is Bellow's response to the literary giant, Hemingway, whose reputation and literary formulas continued to dominate the literary world" (Cronin, "Saul" 93). Whereas the many allusions to Henderson as a quixotic character largely function to create another instance of the novel self-reflectively foregrounding both imitation and failure—*Don Quixote* itself, of course, being a novel intimately concerned with the relationship between literature and these two themes—the fashioning of Henderson as being reminiscent of the Hemingway hero is worth exploring in more depth for the aims of this article. That is, although the novel alludes to many different ideas, theories, and literary texts, it is arguably Hemingway—his writing, persona, and position in the literary field—that the novel not only engages with the most closely, but who is also the 'master' this zany novel most directly imitates for comic effect.

It is Hemingway specifically who, for Bellow, stands-in for many of the faults the author sees both in American society at large and in American literature in particular, flaws that Bellow connects to the celebration of social alienation, on the one hand, and what he calls 'hardboiled-dom,' on the other. As Ellen Pifer notes, "[t]he role that 'hardboiled-dom' plays […] in Bellow's depiction of America in the forties […] can hardly be overemphasized" (27). 'Hardboiled-dom,' as we learn from the opening pages of Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, works according to "the code of the athlete, of the tough boy," leaving people "badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring" (9). It thus refers both to a specific ideal of (hyper-)masculinity—one that is marked by a substitution of introspection for decisive action—and, more importantly, to an ideal of the American author as going abroad to "fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon" (10).[12] As Gordon

[12] Bellow has commented on Hemingway as a figure several times. To quote just two especially telling examples, Bellow at one point describes Hemingway as having "created a lifestyle […] that pathetic old gentlemen are still found clinging to" ("The Art" 61) and, in a letter to Ralph Ellison from around the time of the writing of *Henderson the Rain King*, he jokes about going fishing only to assure Ellison that "this doesn't mean any Hemingway conversion. I like fish, but after you've pitted your brain against theirs for an afternoon, the

Hutner points out, "Hemingway looms as the nation's media vision of a novelist of broad experience," whereas "Faulkner becomes the country's image of the writer as artist [...], the secretary of the American inner state" (279). It is this opposition of the artist-as-thinker and the artist-as-doer that we also see in Bellow's own conceptualization of Hemingway's authorial persona.

Americans Abroad: American Literature in a Global World

While the literary allusions contained in *Henderson the Rain King* are varied and many, surveying the scholarship on these allusions show a prevalence of allusions to literature that is part of the then-emerging dual canon of American literature: the so-called 'American Renaissance' with the novel's references to Whitman, Twain, Melville, and Emerson, on the one hand, and American Modernism with the novel's references to Eliot, Faulkner, and Hemingway, on the other.[13] The novel's satirical take on Hemingway is thus perhaps better understood in a larger context of an emerging body of literature that was considered representative of the spirit of 'Americanness' at the time. Yet the specific symbolism and position of Hemingway in the literary field of the time is often missed in Bellow's allusions to the author, which are most often read as merely a repudiation of modernism's nihilism and sense of alienation more generally.

Although post-1945 literature has recently seen more scholarly work that has placed its central authors and texts in a variety of institutional contexts, most influentially Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, Bellow is rarely if ever placed in these contexts—and seemingly for good reasons.[14] Few other authors at the time were so outspoken about their antipathy for institutions of literature as Bellow. His animosity toward the university—and academic literary studies—is especially well documented (see, for example, Siegel), although he worked in universities for long stretches of his career. As Andrew Hoberek notes, Bellow had a bone to pick with both "'the literary intelligentsia' of the university and the 'cultural bureaucrats' of the publishing industry" (18), making him desire popular success as a way to escape these two. Strikingly, Bellow's desire to free himself from these institutions went hand in hand with his attempts to shake himself free from previous ways of writing, especially those inherited from modernism, "understand[ing] literary forms as deindividualizing embodiments of institutional

interest begins to give out. I'm fonder of horses. But you can't kid yourself. The jets go over the sky with a clap of air after them, and there goes your primitive moment" (*Letters* 335)—drawing a connection between the Hemingway type and fantasies of primitivism.

[13] For articles drawing attention to the relationship between the novel and these authors and traditions, see, for example, Knight, Campbell, Quayum, Rodrigues, Detweiler, Fuchs, Leach, Cronin, "*Henderson*," and Collado-Rodríguez.

[14] The exception to this is Saul Bellow's political contexts, especially his post 1970 turn to conservatism, which, not incidentally, was largely fueled by this very distaste for institutions of higher education.

logics" (23). Thus, modernism and the literary establishment were, to Bellow, basically two sides of the same coin.

As already mentioned, Bellow is often taken at his word when it comes to his rejection of these institutional settings for his writing. Yet as Andrew Goldstone has shown regarding modernism's 'fictions of autonomy,' we can understand attempts at "pursuing relative autonomy [from specific contexts] as a mode of relation" (5) itself. This is to say that while Bellow had an investment in being seen as outside of the literary establishment, it is still productive and enlightening to place his writing into these institutional settings from which he tried to escape. In fact, Bellow—while not himself a product of 'the program'—is at the center of the changing landscape of the postwar American literary field: through his connection to fellowship programs such as the Guggenheim, the Salzburg Seminar, or Yaddo but also by being one of the first writers to make his living primarily by working at universities.

Like many writers that early on in their career found themselves outside of the mainstream of American literary writing—in his case his status as a Russian-Canadian immigrant and a Jew—Bellow had a keen sense of how the literary field was ticking. We can see this time and again in his essays and letters where he shows a profound knowledge of what certain names signify, especially when it comes to cultural capital and other forms of prestige, such as his repeated mention of the specific edition of the books he is reading. Bellow's awareness of the nuts and bolts of making a career as a writer in America at the time is further visible in his decision to switch to another publishing house for his third book, *The Adventures of Augie March*. Whereas his previous two books were published by Vanguard Press, *Augie* would be issued by Viking Press. This switch is telling for several reasons. Vanguard was not only known at this point for its early connection with radical left-wing politics but was, more importantly, considered a small albeit high quality publishing house (Tebbel 269). Viking, in contrast, married an emphasis on capital-L literature with a promise of financial stability, serving as a vehicle to legitimize new styles of writing for a broader audience but also as an insurance of at least a certain profitability. While Bellow's reasons for choosing Viking are never stated explicitly in his letters, the fact that he turned down the more commercially successful Random House, who also courted him at the time, makes Viking's particular mix of high-culture ambition and commercial success a likely contender.[15]

While most of his writing bears the traces of these institutional entanglements, *Henderson the Rain King* is an especially telling example in at least two ways. First, as already mentioned, the zany aesthetics of the novel are crucially structured around a comically mimicking of the 'master' of American postwar literature, namely Ernest Hemingway. Although Bellow admired Hemingway's writing, he crucially associated the Hemingway persona with what he despised

[15] In his biography, Atlas mentions that Bellow's given explanation for the change is "notable for its comically passive and convoluted syntax," amounting to the suggestion that "Viking had claimed him […] and he had gone" (226). Leader, similarly, characterizes Bellow's reasons as "vague," additionally quoting his referencing of "'an unlaid prejudice having to do with large houses and small'" (475).

in American literature and society—from hardboiled anti-intellectualism to a philosophically nihilist outlook and antisemitism. Yet Hemingway was to Bellow also "the quintessential tourist, the one who believed that he alone was the American whom Europeans took to their hearts as one of their own" (Bellow, "My Paris"). Second, Bellow's critique of the self-fashioning of American modernism abroad becomes even more pressing when including the novel's genesis. Bellow's writing of the novel coincided with his involvement with the short-lived literary subdivision of the larger 'People-to-People program' initiated by Eisenhower.

Eisenhower had started the People-to-People program in 1956 as "an effort to stimulate private citizens in many fields … to organize themselves to reach across the seas and national boundaries to their counterparts in other lands" (Eisenhower qtd in. Bosha 249), attempting to "promote international understandings of this country's values and aspirations" (Bosha 249). Part of this larger umbrella program was a unit that was supposed to be formed from American writers and spearheaded by William Faulkner. One of the fifty writers Faulkner asked to join him in this effort of promoting America unofficially abroad was Saul Bellow. While Bellow was from the beginning critical about both the program as such and many of its specific endeavors—most noticeably his outspoken rejection of the unit's attempts to 'free Ezra Pound'[16]—he stuck with it until the unsuccessful dissolving of the unit around half a year after its launch.

Bellow's involvement with the P.P.P. during the composition of *Henderson the Rain King* is not only interesting because of the shared concern of the program and the novel with the role of literature in the representation of America abroad. The program itself marks a divisive change in the composition process itself. As Merve Emre highlights, Bellow mentions in a letter to John Berryman after the program failed "that the experience had motivated him to scrap his first draft of *Henderson*," "rewrit[ing the novel] at a breakneck speed [of] six months" (201).[17] While Emre reads the novel against this backdrop as "register[ing] the fraught conditions of bureaucratic work and person-to-person communication" (201), I suggest a simultaneously more specific and broader way to understand the novel. Approaching the novel as steeped in questions of imitative performance and satire allows us not only to understand the uneven aesthetics of the novel as an instance of the zany but also to ask what it is exactly the novel

[16] Bellow wrote to Faulkner after a meeting in the early days of the program protesting this suggestion, stating that "Pound is not in prison but in an insane asylum. If sane he should be tried again as a traitor; if insane he ought not to be released merely because he is a poet. Pound advocated in his poems and in his broadcasts enmity to the Jews and preached hatred and murder. Do you mean to ask me to join you in honoring a man who called for the destruction of my kinsmen? I can take no part in such a thing even if it makes effective propaganda abroad, which I doubt. Europeans will take it instead as a symptom of reaction. In France, Pound would have been shot. Free him because he is a poet? Why, better poets than he were exterminated perhaps. Shall we say nothing in their behalf?" (*Letters* 325-26).

[17] Part of the many failures of Faulkner's attempt to organize American writers to positively influence America's reputation abroad was Bellow's own behavior at the time. As he recounts in a 1964 interview, while working on the novel he "imitated Henderson around the farm. I went roaring at people, making scenes. It was one of the more trying periods" ("Successor to Faulkner" 34).

comically and ludicrously imitates—namely a specific self-fashioning of American literature on the global scene that, to Bellow, is most closely linked to the cipher 'Hemingway.'

Conclusion

As Merve Emre notes, it is deeply ironic and testament to the inscrutable ways of influence that it was allegedly *Henderson the Rain King*, of all books, that would inspire one John F. Kennedy to establish the Peace Corps in 1960-61, one of several attempts to counter the image of 'the ugly American' abroad (205-06). While it is probably impossible to verify this specific instance of the successes and failures of the entanglements of postwar literature, global politics, and imitative role playing, *Henderson the Rain King* nevertheless speaks to an (at the time) acutely perceived crisis of the changing role and nature of American literary writing at home and abroad. At this point, American authors' self-fashioning as writing 'home' from a chosen European 'exile' or supposedly exotic foreign lands has been made superfluous with European and global audiences now desiring to learn about America from literary texts of all sorts. Bellow marks an especially interesting case in this changing role and makeup of the American literary field, insofar as he is both a central player in these debates, and a proponent of a very different 'solution' to the question of American literature's relationship with the wider world than many of his contemporaries. As Saul Noam Zaritt has recently argued, "[b]y portraying and then rejecting European havens and exotic colonial outposts, Bellow admits that the noise of globalization is constitutive of modern consciousness but that the true artists should seek to overcome its demands to gain a more accurate and internally motivated view of the world" (134). Like Henderson, who needs his futile quest to find out what he had already known, Bellow's "Chicago is only legible through the failed geographies that surround it. Chicago exists in opposition to the *global* but in direct contact with *world* of the soul" (Zaritt 134).

This article has demonstrated that reading the novel as an instance of the zany allows us to connect a variety of the puzzle pieces we have regarding this still understudied novel of Bellow's. Understanding *Henderson the Rain King* as 'zany' not only sheds light on the perceived formal unevenness and peculiar mix of comedy and exhaustion that characterize the novel aesthetically, but it also helps us the see more clearly how the novel negotiates prominent self-images of American literature in the global field through its comical imitation of the Hemingway code hero. Finally, seeing this imitation as being at the heart of the novel's artistic project allows us to locate the novel in its specific institutional contexts of emergence and thus, in turn, helps us to better understand the minute changes of American literary writing in the aftermath of modernism.

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