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## What Do the Americans Do Abroad, or Saul Bellow and Globalization<sup>1</sup>

Globalization may be considered a popular term used to encapsulate all the vague ideas about the modern world which refer to its internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization and its rising supraterritoriality (Scholte 2000: 42), visible in all spheres of life. Frederic Jameson calls globalization “a communicational concept, which alternately masks and transmits cultural or economic meanings” (Jameson 2003: 55), and whose analysis uncovers democratization of contemporary world culture and growing economic interdependence of particular states. Concluding his investigation of the issue, Roland Robertson observes that “[g]lobalization does not simply refer to the objectiveness of increasing interconnectedness. It also refers to cultural and subjective matters” (Robertson 2000: 183). Bringing together cultural concerns and individual outlook seems to be particularly pertinent in the discussion of Bellow’s work as potentially critical of the non-economic exchange between the United States and the rest of the world.

The majority of Bellow’s novels were published in an age when globalization was not yet a key word for explaining the contemporary state of affairs: the economic interdependence of countries and the setting of Western democratic standards in politics and culture as models for the rest of the world were occurrences widely discussed in the last decade of the twentieth century, while Bellow’s creativity had reached its peak in the sixties and seventies. Yet in his own way Bellow is a global writer inasmuch as his work testifies to his use of the Jewish and Jewish American tradition, against which he tests his anthropological, psychological, sociological, political, historical and metaphysical interests embracing the intellectual and spiritual development of the Western culture. Bellow endows his protagonists with various cultural backgrounds, including Jewish, Irish, and French Huguenot,

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as well as WASP American, which they all seem to transcend in search of a more universal definition of the self. The ideas they derive from their American experience are given a different dimension as the protagonists are allowed glimpses of the foreign: they visit or live in Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, Africa, Rumania, Brazil, and even Japan. Through this ethnic and geographical variety Bellow touches upon issues pertinent to the present understanding of globalization and to the dangers or threats generated by this phenomenon that are only now, in the age of growing terrorist anxiety, publicly identified. One of them is the necessity of cultural transaction between America and the rest of the world. Bellow's novels offer an image of the Americans abroad as tourists or explorers, whose attitude and conduct subvert and negate any possibility of spiritual rather than material exchange. The pattern is clearly visible in *Henderson the Rain King*, a satire upon colonization, that nineteenth-century attempt at globalization.<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Henderson, an heir to the East Coast fortune, goes to Africa as a tourist escaping from his muddled American life, looking for a complete wilderness to purge him of his social and emotional inadequacies, and intending to explore uncharted regions. Henderson initially presents himself as a discoverer, a carrier of civilization and progress among the savages. The natives, however, are either "already discovered" (HRK: 53) or evidently civilized as their use of guns, a police force, palaces, fences, and capital punishment would indicate.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, whenever Henderson displays Western technological achievement, his efforts are either tragic in consequences or simply unrecognized: when he sets a bush on fire to impress the Arnewi or offers them a waterproof coat when their country is ridden with drought, his actions are ineffectual; when he blasts the frogs in the Arnewi cistern, thus destroying the tribe's water supplies, his impact is disastrous; and his gifts to the Wariri – cigarette lighters and magnifying glasses – simply go unnoticed. Stripped of that which links him to the Western world, of his sophisticated gun, his clothes, his tooth bridge, Henderson ceases to be a brave explorer – instead he turns into a seeker of and contender for the truth of life which he hopes will be communicated to him through queen Willatale and king Dahfu. However, it is evident that Henderson's enthusiasm for their philosophy springs from the fact that their views coincide with his, that he is told what he would like to hear. Once Dahfu's theories

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<sup>2</sup> Depending on the definition of the phenomenon, the beginnings of "global consciousness" may be traced to the eighteenth century, while the mid-nineteenth century witnesses the advent of "the means to take globality beyond the imagination into more substantive human relations" (Scholte 2000: 64, 67). One may wonder to what extent colonization facilitated universalization, westernization and supraterritoriality Scholte considers marks of globalization.

<sup>3</sup> For readers' convenience, following abbreviations will be used throughout:

HRK for *Henderson the Rain King*

AAM for *The Adventures of Augie March*

DD for *Dean's December*

HG for *Humboldt's Gift*

MDH for *More Die of Heartbreak*.

move beyond Henderson's scope, the latter immediately checks his trust in the former. Moreover, all that Henderson actually learns in Africa – the importance of love and social awareness – he may have easily learned at home from the constant sermonizing of his wife Lily, had he heeded her. Although upon Dahfu's death Henderson is expected to ascend to the throne, he decides to return to the United States, thus escaping the possible responsibility for the future of the tribe.

If Henderson's offer to the natives is useless or catastrophic, the lessons he is offered by them turn out to be equally irrelevant: Henderson never learns anything from his adventures,<sup>4</sup> and on his way back he carries two symbols of his African experience: a lion cub believed to contain the soul of the dead king Dahfu, and an orphaned American child brought up by Persian servants and speaking no English. The cub is a variant of a lion skin, a trophy of every African explorer; that it contains the king's soul falls into the colonization paradigm – Henderson appropriates, steals a part of the native cultural tradition and deprives the tribe of its cultural continuity. The orphan is part Tarzan, part Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden*, a white child who must inhale the north American air to forget his "orphan troubles ... and get a little color" (HRK: 318), who must be returned to white civilization in order to take his place in white society. The literary analogy is important, because it sends the reader back to the paradigm of nineteenth-century fiction extolling the superiority of the Western culture that allows Tarzan to dominate the apes and fight the natives, or at least of the Western clime that allows for Mary's physical and emotional development, previously hampered by the Indian heat and her servants' overprotectiveness.

Like the nineteenth-century explorers Henderson satirizes, he too may be associated with destruction, deprivation, and loss caused by colonization; his attitude is not that of a quester or student of higher values but rather that of a traveler aiming at pleasure and souvenirs, not any cultural interchange. Henderson's stance is made even more obvious when the analogy between Bellow's protagonist and Hemingway are noted: the former's behavior, soldierly bearing, the sense of fulfillment afforded by the war and the view of the world as a Waste Land savor of the Hemingwayan characters, as does his "vacillat[ion] between violent action and passive suffering – between a desperate need for power and an equally desperate need to feel at one with the world" (Opdahl 1967: 124–125). David D. Anderson points out the similarities between Hemingway's last visit to Africa and Henderson's exploits (Anderson 1989: 68); more importantly, Henderson uses "the heroic rhetoric of the Hemingway hero," his "privileged voice" and "privileged form

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<sup>4</sup> Henderson's questionable development is a source of much critical discussion: some critics note the change, albeit not fundamental, in the protagonist (Kiernan 1989: 78; Fuchs 1984: 118–119), others call it "intensification" (Scheer-Schäzler 1972: 89) or disregard for the lessons he is offered (Wilson 1985: 116). Keith Opdahl writes of the discrepancy between what Henderson professes to learn in the course of his adventures and what the adventures actually demonstrate (Opdahl 1967: 119).

of discourse” (Kuzna 1990: 66) that distances him from his surroundings. Like Hemingway, Henderson considers Africa not as an actual geographical place, but a “metaphysical place and time” in which to search egotistically “for manhood, for trophies, for lost youth, for fulfillment” (Anderson: 68).

What is obvious in the case of *Henderson the Rain King* may be also traced in *The Adventures of Augie March*, whose protagonist seeks for a “good enough fate” all over the world very much in a tourist/explorer fashion. Augie March goes to Mexico to hunt iguanas with a trained eagle, a pastime of the indolent rich, and he associates with the American and European expatriate elite rather than the natives; his experience of Mexico is reduced to local casinos and hotels, tourist attractions such as the exiled Russian politician Trotsky visiting the cathedral, and love affairs with American women. The closest he gets to the indigenous is when his head is hurt in a horse riding accident on the slopes outside Alcatla, but the physical trauma only enables him to delve deeper into books and his own love entanglements.

In the post-World War II Europe, Augie is even more of a tourist: immediately recognized to be an American, he is offered help without which he will “never understand things” connected with European cultural heritage. But Augie does not want to be guided, primarily because he thinks he knows better: when a degenerated Italian aristocrat offers him a guided tour of Florence and tries to explain the meaning of scenes carved on the famous Baptistry door, he comments that “[s]he got everything balled up, for they’re not well up on the Bible in Latin countries” (AAM: 517–518). Secondly, Augie’s predominant interest is his own fate of incorrigible mistakes and willed gaiety. Indeed, faced with postwar conditions he remains a joyful, happy-go-lucky Chicago rogue, indifferent to individual suffering and unable to comprehend the misery of the native population as his offering money instead of attention and sympathy to the Italian would suggest. In fact, his occupation is that of an exploiter: he is involved in black market dealings that are to take advantage of the chaos and confusion of ruined Europe for the benefit of American speculators.

A similar attitude of detachment from the local problems is displayed by Albert Corde of *The Dean’s December*. Although he is married to a Romanian scientist, and thus aware of the country’s history and current situation, Corde is unable to operate in wintry Bucharest without the extensive help of his wife’s family and friends. Half-amused, half-terrified by the deplorable conditions, unresponsive to the ways Romanians have learnt to deal with material shortages and political deficiencies, Corde fails to fully appreciate customs and incidents that must be explained to him. Moreover, he is evidently pampered as a foreigner: he has a separate room, is provided with best food that can be obtained and all possible articles of luxury preserved from the old times. If the explorer’s prize is here ironically comfort and food that is scarce, the explorer’s gifts are even more dubious: Corde’s help in the proceedings surrounding the death of his mother-in-law is limited to the purchase of American cigarettes to bribe inhuman Romanian officials;

when emotional support is required, Corde can offer only overintellectualized lectures, shockingly inadequate to the emotional situation he and his wife are facing.

However, Henderson, Augie and Corde illustrate another aspect of cultural globalization. Arjun Appadurai claims that one of the characteristic features of this process is the creation of “diasporic public spheres”: a Chicago Muslim taxi-driver listening to recorded preaching of a Pakistani mullah is as much a proof of globalization as the WTO, the UN or the Internet. Appadurai considers cultural and imaginative globalization which is the migration of both audiences and mass-mediated images which “often meet unpredictably, outside the certainties of home and the cordon sanitaire of local and national media effects” (Appadurai 1996: 4). And this is the preoccupation characteristic of any Bellovian hero: Henderson, Augie and Corde ponder the American problems outside of the United States. It is in Europe that Augie considers his failure to realize his dream of establishing a home for social outcasts and his brother’s failure to realize the American Dream of financial success leading to personal happiness. It is in Europe that he ponders over the inescapable ties that bind human beings into a network of emotional and economic dependency that frustrates the individual freedom he so much craves. It is in Europe that he has time to complete the account of his American experience, a minute description of his Chicago childhood and youthful wanderings that take him from the Canadian border to Mexico, from the state of poverty to wealth, from confusion about love to marital happiness. And, although the putting down of his story does not necessarily mean understanding it or profiting from it, it definitely serves as a means of circumventing current problems and historical entanglements: driving down the ruined Normandy coast Augie finds it in himself to laugh in the face of destruction and impending death.

Similarly, Corde, alone in the cold Bucharest room, can think back upon the social and political scene of his native Chicago, and, cut off from the distractions of contemporary America, from “urgent calls, decisions, ... hateful letters, ... awkward conferences, infighting, or backbiting – people getting at him one way or another” (DD: 25), he may try to examine his private and public involvements that result in his being unpopular among the students whose dean he is, disliked by the University authorities, and rejected by the audience he tries to reach in his magazine articles. Thus Augie’s and Corde’s vision of the foreign is distorted by their preoccupation with the American. Henderson, too, although escaping from the madness of his life in New England, finds in Africa a reality which he can only describe in the terms he detests, the terms of urban America: for him, the crowded yard in the Wariri village resembles “a summer’s day in New York” and the noise during their religious ritual is “a great release of sound, like Coney Island or Atlantic City or Times Square on New Year’s Eve” (HRK: 156, 159).

Unlike his predecessors, Benn Crader of *More Die of Heartbreak* does not function as an explorer: he is a scientist, a plant morphologist whose knowledge and visionary approach to his subject matter are widely recognized. He receives

invitations to give lectures in the most exotic places, science and the sharing of scientific information being a certain proponent of globalization. But for Benn his visits abroad offer a means of escaping his confused erotic life at home; the reason he accepts the invitations is not a willingness to spread scientific information but a desire to detach himself from the scene of his blunders, to rethink his sentimental involvements, and to regain his emotional balance. Strangely enough, it is through the visits abroad that Benn makes his life more difficult: it is at the airport that he meets one of his lovers, Caroline Bunge; it is during his travels that he is exposed to the instances of the local color which baffle him even more. In Japan Benn is taken to a club in which young girls expose their genitals to “a multitude of what looked to be upper-income, well-dressed Japanese, black-haired, most intense but most restrained” (MDH: 107). Shocked and shaken up by the show, Benn refuses to discuss it implying only that for him it was an indication of how human ingenuity can transform every aspect of life, including the sexual, into “a kind of inferno” (MDH: 109). Unwilling to talk of the incident in terms of anthropology or awkward human curiosity, he immediately relates it to his own personal problems, transforming it into a mirror of his own worries and insecurities.

Benn’s final journey takes him to the North Pole, away from human influence, where he hopes not only to advance his research but primarily to recuperate after a disastrous marriage. His expedition is the ultimate example of globalization – human activity bearing upon or affecting the remotest parts of the globe – and at the same time the ultimate example of the detachment that globalization may lead to, a decisive escape from reality parallel to Augie’s laughter or Corde’s visit to the Mount Palomar observatory, where the latter may admire the perfection of the far-off stars and announce his unwilling return to the world of social entanglements.

Thus, Bellovian heroes represent vernacular globalization, a private foray into the non-American there to examine and solve the American issues, which in turn – because of the protagonists’ contact with a larger world – acquire a universal dimension. Augie March in post-World War II Europe, Henderson in Africa, Corde in Rumania, Benn Crader in Japan are the exponents of the American questions allowed to view them from a different perspective, an angle added on by the foreign land and foreign circumstances. But that is where the globalizing process ends: there is no further cultural transaction, only a retreat to the solipsistic self and to personal problems. To paraphrase David Anderson, for the Bellovian protagonists each country they visit remains primarily “a territory of the mind and the memory and the imagination” rather than an actual geographical place (Anderson: 68).

Contemporary inability to transgress the particular problems generated by immediate material exigencies is illustrated by the plight of Crader’s nephew, Kenneth Trachtenberg. Brought up in Paris, he is soon disappointed with the European cultural and intellectual scene and travels to the United States which he associates with action and opportunity, both intellectual. He hopes he will be able to apply his

extensive education in Russian metaphysics to the American reality, but he soon discovers that America offers only mundane solutions to spiritual questions, and is defeated by financial obligations that are inextricably connected to emotional relationships. Consequently, he too withdraws from his highbrow expectations into ordinary commitments, thus abandoning his ambitious plan of linking two different cultural traditions.

One of the final images of Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* is that of the protagonist, Charlie Citrine, sitting in the bathroom of a Spanish boarding house wrapped in a luxurious Spanish leather coat, reading aloud metaphysical texts to his (American) dead. And I think this image is particularly important because it suggests the condition of modern man who must find but has not yet found a comfortable balance between the material (symbolized by the coat) and the spiritual (symbolized by the esoteric texts Charlie reads), between public demands (sooner or later he will have to leave the bathroom) and private needs (he seeks to reaffirm family continuity and affection). In the UNESCO opening address of October 2001, Jacques Chirac claims that a transcultural dialogue may be carried between those only who "cherish themselves," who fully understand and feel comfortable with their own values and ideals.<sup>5</sup> However, the typical Bellovian protagonist, this modern American everyman, is confused and insecure, definitely not complacent, not self-satisfied, and most evidently only in search of comprehension, which is emphasized by Bellow's choice of the form of his novels – most of them are Bildungsromane, or novels presenting the process of the formation of character, not its outcome.

Moreover, Bellovian protagonists' attitude exposes the danger of forming cultural diasporas: the Muslim taxi driver of Appadurai's example may alienate himself from the society and culture in which he lives, just as Augie, Henderson, Corde and Benn Crader willfully alienate themselves from reality and shut themselves in their inner selves, while their return to the larger social world remains only a tentative promise. Unconfident and vulnerable, they are ultimately unable to face the world on their own and therefore they are not ready to enter a cross-cultural dialogue or take part in a cultural exchange that would endow the evident economic interdependence with human depth allowing for mutual understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> My source is the Polish translation of Chirac's speech by Agnieszka Boudeau published in a slightly modified form in *Gazeta Świąteczna* 20–21 October 2001.

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