HENDERSON THE RAIN KING: THE HERO SURRENDERED

Those however who aspire not to guess and divine, but to discover and know; who propose not to devise mimic and fabulous worlds of their own, but to examine and dissect the nature of this very world itself; must go to facts themselves for everything.

Francis Bacon, *Magna Instauratio* 259

The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest.

Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* 1

The Novel and its Hero

By the time that Saul Bellow published *Henderson the Rain King* in 1959, the American hero as literary character had been drawn into several distinct camps, all of which were deficient in defining the American ethos. The code heroes of Hemingway no longer seemed to reflect the American experience, and the wasteland motif seemed foreign, European. Similarly, the absurd hero, although still willing to set out on a myriad of different journeys, had lost tragic intensity. Bellow states in his essay “The Writer as Moralist”: “There is grandeur in cursing the heavens, but when we curse our socks we should not expect to be taken seriously” (61). Literature in the 1950s continued to follow modernist antecedents in portraying the hero as a victim of the mechanizing forces of society in a spiritually exhausted world, but the events of World War II denied the nobility necessary for a tragic hero to exist. As Sarah Cohen writes, the tragic mode “assumes that man has an exalted nature which, though sorely tested, will ultimately reassert itself” (6), and this assumption was no longer valid in the eyes of the intelligentsia. However, this was not the
pervading sense of self in the popular imagination where America was an icon of prosperity, and practical heroism was rewarded with political and economic power, and moral superiority. Thus, the literary establishment not only found itself struggling with the loss of an exalted human nature and consequently the humanistic foundations of a subjective self, but also found itself in opposition to the popular myths of America, which denied that the 1950s was a period of spiritual absence and increasingly a mechanistic “age of conformity” (Podhoretz 215) with the “organization man” unknowingly surrendering his place as a self-reliant individual. Norman Podhoretz remembers,

To be sure the old idea [pre-WWII] that the modern world was suffering from a “loss of values” came back again, but even that idea soon began to seem inadequate to account for the dimensions of the spiritual vacuum that many intellectuals saw lying beneath the surface prosperity and apparent confidence of the Eisenhower age . . . (220)

Or, as Von Humboldt Fleisher aphoristically states in Saul Bellow’s *Humbolt’s Gift* (1975): “Mankind’s old greatness was created in scarcity. But what may we expect from plenitude?” (162).

Bellow’s imaginative power came of age in this climate, and the chasm that exists between surface prosperity and subjective worth is one of Bellow’s major themes in his writing. He suggests that this split between the world of subjects and the world of objects can be brought together only through a state of grace. At the same time, he faces the possibility that grace within the imagination of postwar America is naïve. The possibility of a spiritual component within the scientific perfectibility of man was not taken seriously in the higher intellectual debates. Ironically, the result of a scientific focus was an upsurge in often spurious scientific theories that sought to explain irrational human behavior by assigning it to rational systems. One of these rational systems was a return to “primitive” values as a way of wiping the slate of civilization clean in order to find a lost authenticity of self:

It is against this background, I think, that the upsurge during the late 50’s of various forms of anti-rationalism must be understood. The sudden popularity of Zen, Reichianism, and existentialism reflected the growth of a conviction that the source of our trouble lay deep in the foundations of Western civilization—deeper than politics could reach, deeper than a mere opposition to capitalist society or middle-class values could cure. We were a people so far removed from nature, so lost