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Eric Packer and Eugene Henderson: Seeking Transcendence Across the Void

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Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer:
Seeking Transcendence Across the Void
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Why does a man who’s tumbling into the void
Want to tumble in silence, without a cry?
--Carl Dennis, “Audience”

Introduction

Were we to address the question in Carl Dennis’s poem to Eugene Henderson of Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King (1958), or Eric Packer of Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis (2003) —those two overwrought, probing petitioners so in need of answers to life’s most pressing doubts and questions—they would no doubt defiantly answer, “I don’t! I don’t!” mirroring Henderson’s corrosively self-absorbed, compulsively acquisitive spur to his own tortured psyche: “I want, I want!” But we might suspect a hint of doubt in their anguished cries, and intuit that they were covering up some essential truth. And then perhaps with additional prodding we might find them amending their disavowal,
maintaining Henderson’s affirmative urgency, but reinscribing it into a plea for help: “But I do, I do…want answers to the questions that torment me: Why am I dissatisfied in a world of plenty? Where can I find meaning, relevance and order in an insecure world?”

On the surface Henderson and Packer seem as different as night and day—one a forty-something, Ivy League, blue-blood Brahmin who inherited his fortune, a traditional American he-man in an era in which such men were venerated, on the cusp of a new age the essential thrust of which he seems to sense, but which will probably see the likes of him relegated to the dust-heap of history; the other little more than an adolescent, a self-made Internet-boom parvenu, a post-generation-Y boy-man with no appreciable life experience outside his hermetic Wall Street tycoon existence and the go-go world of IPO millionaires and many another get-rich-quick wannabe, the fêted vanguard of a new age of gluttonous materialism that is itself on the verge of being history.

Different as these two seekers appear, however, in a most important sense they have identical concerns, which have long emerged out of a haunting contradiction in American life: the desire to harmonize material comfort and worldly gain with a spiritually rewarding existence and sense of psychological completeness. These conflicting aims, complicated by life in the nation’s outsized culture and political economy (itself complicatedly emplaced within an ever-metastasizing global environment that serves up both threat and opportunity), have vexed Americans for decades and decades, leaving many of the nation’s citizens adrift between poles of experience and understanding.

In this paper I will review Eugene Henderson’s and Eric Packer’s cries across an expanse of time from the 1950s to the early 21st century, their quests for peace, wholeness and well-being in the midst of fractious social, economic and spiritual conditions in American life. In my examination, I will refer to certain key earlier analyses that
have recognized these disputatious conditions, as well as philosophical frameworks long-embraced by Americans in their search for answers to what amounts to a permanent clash of ideals and values that has colored American culture for generations—as we witness with Eugene Henderson—a conflicted figure from a relatively comfortable and hopeful recent past—and Eric Parker—a dispirited denizen of the postmodern age. Severely distressed Henderson and Packer may be, but we will find that they are up to the task of constructing new belief systems to provide them guidance in their anxious, smarting lives. Ultimately these systems become unifying philosophies that seek no less than the integration of their lived experience and beliefs, and the very constitution of the natural world and the cosmos, yielding a vast concord of conscious physical and spiritual existence.

Problems

Having seen an America that had experienced the very heights and depths of political and economic success, Eugene Henderson finds himself living with the good fortune of growing up in and then inheriting comfortable wealth, which in the time of Henderson the Rain King is further augmented in the economic up-cycle of post-war Eisenhower America. In spite of these advantages, however, Henderson finds that “from earliest times I have struggled without rest” (61).

Eric Packer, meanwhile, appears to be even richer than Eugene Henderson, but he wanders aimlessly through his huge New York apartment, finding only “the briefest of easings, a small pause in the stir of restless identities” (6). Both men live lives infused with “trials, ordeals, and suffering” (Bellow 45), and are clearly overdue for personal and spiritual exploration!

Henderson and Packer find themselves facing a problem that has dogged Americans for virtually hundreds of years—how to find spiritual comfort and belonging amidst an avowedly materialistic culture that
dangles before its citizens not only the possibility of real comfort and economic security, but even the chance of dazzling wealth. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrestled with this conflict in the early 19th century, and his response can be seen in his Transcendental philosophy, a philosophy that has influenced American life and culture from Emerson’s time into the 21st century. Emerson saw the value of a carefully-attended calling, which can yield economic security:

Wealth is in applications of mind to nature; and the art of getting rich consists not in industry, much less in saving, but in a better order, in timeliness, in being at the right spot. One man has stronger arms, or longer legs; another sees by the course of streams, and growth of markets, where land will be wanted, makes a clearing to the river, goes to sleep, wakes up rich. (“Wealth”)

But also reminded his readers of a dark side to this pursuit:

The merchant’s economy is a coarse symbol of the soul’s economy. (“Wealth”)

In his effort to make peace between these discordant views, Emerson embraced a world view that discarded the trivial, and built a life on authentic experience:

Nothing can pass there, or make you one of the circle, but the casting aside your trappings, and dealing man to man in naked truth, plain confession, and omniscient affirmation. (“Oversoul”)

Emerson—a man searching for “naked truth, plain confession, and omniscient affirmation” amidst superficial “trappings.” These thoughts are more than applicable to our protagonists’ experience:

“. . . you are very sore, oh sir! Mistah Henderson. You heart is barking,” Willatale, the tribal queen, tells Henderson during his sojourn in Africa (72). The relentlessly self-examining Henderson responds, “Yes, yes, I’ll
confirm that …. Tell me, tell me, Queen Willatale! I want the truth. I don’t want you to spare me” (72). Packer, meanwhile, simply desires a slice of valid experience and integrity to provide some backbone to his life: “I’m hungry for something thick and chewy” he tells his wife (19), and later as he looks onto a crowd immersed in music and camaraderie in New York City, he savors how the experience “brought a clear emotion to the night, a joy of intoxicating wholeness” (155).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, of course, came from a long line of Protestant Christians in the United States, but his Transcendentalism was a free-thinking, rebellious response to his Puritan forebears and colleagues. Elements of the doctrinaire religious conservatism that Emerson rejected emerged from Puritan doctrine developed from the 17th century onward, which blossomed in American life during this time, and which in key senses endorsed for its devotees: 1) belief in the value of a disciplined, ascetic life and an emphasis on hard work; 2) the importance of finding one’s “calling” and according it with God’s mission—“Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings” (Proverbs, 22:29); and 3) the spirit of entrepreneurial individualism (combined with the “calling,” and to some extent with Enlightenment rationalism). Observing these religious and cultural factors in American life, Max Weber wrote in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism that there was a markedly “greater participation of Protestants in the positions of ownership and management in modern economic life” (37), but he also ominously observed that elements of Puritan doctrine result in “a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual” (104) and an economic life lived in “an iron cage” (181).

We can extend our analysis of the internal contradictions of capitalism, materialism and the search for emotional and spiritual health, and link them back to Puritan doctrine, with a look at another
piece of this American puzzle. Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer find themselves in a crisis of identity that sees them seeking security and satisfaction through an ambiguous amalgam of community belonging and individual independence. Belonging in American society can be sought in various ways—membership in churches or civic organizations is the classic de Tocquevillian way, but for our discussion, participation in the over-arching American economic ideology is salient. This ideology offers up a veiled paradox that includes the prominent conception of independence—and here I don’t mean political independence, proper, but economic independence stemming from worldly success—realized through a given belonging in the laissez-faire economic order. In sum, these dualistic pursuits create an insoluble contradiction in American society: the existence of a given economic cooperative ethic contrasted by a no-less-than-rapacious pursuit of individual gain. The economic side of this contrariety is crystal clear in terms of our two extravagantly wealthy protagonists, and so to ease their discomfort—as de Tocqueville reported many Americans do—they seek stable and fulfilling membership in reciprocal communities. We find Eugene Henderson searching for communality among rural African peoples, while Eric Packer returns to his childhood home, noting that “people used to live here in loud close company . . . and happy as anywhere . . . and still did, and still were” (181).

And yet there is another facet to Eugene Henderson’s and Eric Packer’s predicament. For the individual/community, spiritual/material conundrum in America is further complicated by the fact that the country has long embraced deep interaction and various roles in the milieu of a global economy-cum-“global casino” (Castells 363). Life in this economic house can dismay with its perplexing ability to at once provide and deplete, foster and diminish, justly reward and wickedly pilfer. Taken to the global scale—obvious in Eric Packer’s world, but to
be sure emergent in Henderson’s—these contradictions wax, mutate, oscillate and transform, complicating matters for our protagonists. In short, Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer find themselves enmeshed in a modern, capitalist economic order with global reach, which not only results in the birth throes of “a new society” but also in the “structural transformation” of “the relationships of experience” (Castells 360). Both of our protagonists face such a metamorphosis—with the results in both cases the same as they ever were. For, simply put, Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer—those two “scavengers with ravenous hearts”—have, materially, more than they could ever wish for, but spiritually, they are vacuums.\(^3\) In the end they are faced with the essence of Ranier Maria Rilke’s unstinting demand in “Archaic Torso of Apollo”: they must change their lives. And set out to do this they do. In the course of their search for unity, meaning, autonomy and belonging they craft personal philosophies that, first, hark to Emersonian Transcendental philosophy. That is, Henderson and Packer, in the vein of many another eminently American self-help, “find your true self” philosophy since Emerson, seek to “walk on our own feet … work with our own hands … speak our own minds” (Emerson, “The American Scholar”). At the same time our two protagonists seek a unified Emersonian admixture of “infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one” (“Divinity School Address”). Tall order, these approaches, but Henderson and Packer go yet further, with each adjoining these Emersonian elements with various new responses that emerge from the ages and conditions in which they live—Henderson’s booming 1950s America—a brave new world with not a little brooding, existential angst lurking between the floorboards of the new tract houses that were springing up in suburbs across America like flowers in a hothouse; and Packer’s booming, high-tech Internet age at the dawn of the millennium—with its own decentered, postmodern angst wafting through the newly-built bastions.
of shockingly opulent wealth in hot spots in America including New York, Boston, Houston, Seattle and San Francisco. Broadly, I will term these mutative philosophies two versions of a naturalistic positivism. At a fundamental level, this philosophy attempts to perceive coherence between the natural cosmology and the human polis, seeking—to refer to myself from above—the integration of psychic experience and the cosmos, yielding a limitless concord of spiritual and physical existence.  

To these philosophies, I now turn.

**Solutions: Eugene Henderson**

Eugene Henderson finds himself in a culture comprised at once of bland Eisenhower-era capitalism and economic growth, and an age of global conflict and antagonism (just emerged, after WWII, and just entering, with the Cold War) that was getting “worse and worse” (7). Henderson’s life is a dyspeptic cul de sac of unfulfillment, in which he compulsively bolts from one fruitless experience to another, with his pantingly avaricious “I want, I want!” (16 and elsewhere) hounding his psyche. His beliefs and feelings a confused mass, the frenzied Henderson finds that life “pile[s] into me from all sides,” and “turns into chaos” (7). In such a life, as we might expect, “there always comes a day of tears and madness” (30), and with the death of his housekeeper—who he had terrorized to the point of stopping her heart during one of his rages—that day came for Henderson. “Oh shame, shame!” he wails after he finds his housekeeper’s body. “You too will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain” (37). Obviously, only drastic action will jolt Henderson away from his pent-up, self-centered life, and he orders himself, “[w]hile something still is—now! For the sake of all, get out” (37). We thus find him boarding a plane for Africa in search of unity, belonging and personal healing in rural, unspoiled communities and environments in Africa.

Henderson’s essential hopes will be familiar to many Americans,
for stemming out of Emersonianism is the unity I have referred to, a spirited (that is, transcendental) impulse to personal, social and universal union, linking life upward from its basic elements, through the myriad of human experience, toward pure godliness and sanctification. From the 19th and into the 21st centuries in the United States this impulse—called by Roger Asselineau a “fertilizing undercurrent” in American life and letters (5)—has underpinned many a social and personal quest for greater personal freedom, free-form spiritual growth, a return to nature and natural sensibilities, and rebellion against social and political regimentation.

Soon after he arrives in Africa, Henderson hints at his essential desire for unity when he ponders that “[t]he earth is a huge ball which nothing holds up in space except its own motion and magnetism, and we conscious things who occupy it believe we have to move too, in our own space” (69). Such a spatial conception will unfold into Henderson’s positivistic philosophy—an understanding of the linked relations of the human and natural will and worlds—that will, ultimately, provide him with the safe harbor he seeks. This overall picture of unity also fits neatly back into the transcendental impulse, proper. Wrote Emerson in his famed “Divinity School Address”:

But when the mind opens, and reveals the laws which traverse the universe, and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of this mind. What am I? and What is? asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never to be quenched. Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle. Behold these infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one.

Henderson is given a description of his inner craving for
coherence and unity when he is living with the second African tribe he encounters. In the nether regions of the tribe’s King Dahfu’s dwelling, the king forces Henderson to face his fears by facing death in the guise of the lioness, Atti. King Dahfu reassures the terrified Henderson, “[a]ll the pieces fit properly. It will presently be clear. But first by means of the lion try to distinguish the states that are given and the states that are made. Observe that Atti is all lion. Does not take issue with the inherent. Is one hundred per cent within the given” (221). To be “one hundred percent within the given” is no doubt a conception of congruence that is Henderson’s principle aim, a conception noted earlier in the narrative when he had told readers, “believe me, the world is a mind” (142). His thoughts again mirror Emerson’s philosophy:

Behold, it saith, I am born into the great, the universal mind.

I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect. I am somehow receptive of the great soul . . . . (“Oversoul”)

Later, after he has passed many a test of judgment and character, Henderson’s philosophy appears complete and coherent, and he informs his friend,

Oh you can’t get away from rhythm, Romilayu,’…. ‘You just can’t get away from it. The left hand shakes with the right hand, the inhale follows the exhale, the systole talks back to the diastole, the hands play patty-cake, and the feet dance with each other. And the seasons. And the stars, and all of that. And the tides, and all that junk. You’ve got to live at peace with it…you can’t get away from the regularity. (276)

These various parameters of Henderson’s homespun positivist philosophy create a world in which “[t]he spirit of a person in a sense is the author of his body” (200), and here the door opens for Henderson to move away from his “day of tears and madness,” to his
“hour that bursts the spirit’s sleep” (67, emphasis in original). Henderson now embraces a warm solution that will, again, ring familiar to many Americans—for he finds that love is “a natural force, irresistible” (217). “Whatever gains I made were always due to love and nothing else” (284) Henderson reminds himself as he escorts the nameless orphan boy to the United States on his return home at the end of the tale, and then, reaching toward a linked history extending beyond his experience and imagination, he ponders a world that is “new to life, altogether” but that “had that ancient power, too” (285). For Henderson, his epiphany will no less than allow him to “leave the body of this death” (239, emphasis in original), and, whole at last, he will find “Life anew!” (164).

**Solutions: Eric Packer**

Eric Packer: a tortured man, driven by doubt into any number of nooks and crannies of history and philosophy in his search for coherence and substance. Eric Packer: a man who, like Eugene Henderson, felt that “[n]othing existed around him” (DeLillo 6). Eric Packer: a 21st century mirror image of Eugene Henderson, a man who has it all and yet finds himself indifferent, even hostile to his wealth, and instead treads a demanding path toward spiritual fulfillment. It’s *déjà vu* all over again, indeed…

Eric Packer finds himself in a “new and fluid reality” (97), at “the point, the thrust, the future” (93)—that is, the crazed late-20th century Internet economic boom that created and destroyed lives and billions of dollars worth of wealth. Something of a self-made master of the universe on the one hand, deep inside Packer suspects that the control he exercised to amass his huge fortune was only an exception to the true norm of existence. From the outset of the narrative he is restless and disturbed, “unworthy and pathetic” (156), pondering various ways he can patch up his wavering psyche. Packer’s essential belief is in order,
a positivist order that, as noted, unifies the *cosmos* and the *polis* with “balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides” (229). His is no less than a search for “a pattern latent in nature itself” (73), a veritable “affinity between market movements and the natural world” (99). His view eerily echoes that of that great theorist of society, Max Weber:

The capitalist economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action. (54)

But Packer’s search won’t be easy. His is a world wracked by dangerously out-of-control *laissez-faire* economics that is leeching the very life out of existence, creating a world of people that hate themselves: people, he ponders

“don’t exist outside the market . . . there is no outside . . .

The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system” (104; the fascinating concordance with the quote by Weber, above, goes without saying).

Further, Packer’s world is structured on brittle digital datametrics, “information made sacred” (93), a structure that menacingly results in the irruption of random all-purpose interrogatives in search of something, anything to identify, quantify, signify—”You do this *what*”; “*What*. Do nothing”; “The situation is *what*”; “When in fact, *what*” (50, 52, 76, 98; emphasis added). And yet if the disposition of Packer’s
existence and interaction seems to lack essential coherence and genuine significance, it also mysteriously evinces an elegant harmony—“market cycles can be interchangeable with the time cycles of grasshopper breeding, wheat harvesting” (228), and embodies an alluringly sensual vitality—data “was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process” (27), and the veritable “heave of the biosphere” (27). We see a hint of the positivist unity that Packer seeks—if embedded within a contradiction that threatens the very unity of life itself.

I noted above that Eric Packer was “hungry for something thick and chewy,” a slice of real life and experience. Indeed, we have detected that Packer is more than the soulless, money-grubbing Wall Street broker we typically visualize when we think of the Internet bubble years. Indeed, he is “visionary” (21), and is subtly “receptive to mysteries” (34), as his journey through a range of world philosophies indicates. Ultimately, however, none of his detours are enough, and Packer, like Eugene Henderson, must return to the very roots of existence as the ultimate move into real meaning and order. He turns toward history, and the importance of time and change in life (unevenly pondering a negative “coldest possible prospect” of “no culminating moment ahead” (193), a positive experience of “two lovers…free of memory and time” (202), and then outwardly to “a story…a brooding folklore of time and fate” (194); belief in the value of a single person’s autonomy, and self-estimation—“He was alert, eager for action, for resolution. Something had to happen soon, a dispelling of doubt and the emergence of some design, the subject’s plan of action, visible and distinct” (196); and communitarian connection to family and neighbors—“feeling what his father would feel, standing in this place” (182). During his transition across this mindful terrain, while an old order collapses around him, Packer at times rises above it all, and he placidly “watched the major issues breeze by and felt purified in
nameless ways to see prices spiral into lubricious plunge” (123). With this recognition he is able to “let his head fall back and [open] his mouth to the sky and rain” (123). But there is threat afoot, and Packer feels not a little uneasiness about his search for meaning, for in spite of his hard-won grip on the universe’s functioning, his place within it may not, after all, accord with his beliefs. Packer finds with a hint of disappointment near the end of the tale that, “the things that made him who he was…[were] not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end” (238). Is his philosophy failing to link him down to the elemental, and then up to the universal, in an Emersonian/positivist imbrication of the human and the natural? In fact not, for in the end, after flirting with nihilism and chaos—a stab at assigning a kind of flattening, inanimate order and significance to febrile economic melt-down conditions: “Have all the worlds conflated, all possible states become present at once?” (235)—Packer finds the peace, the unity, the ultimate order he seeks…in death. This should not surprise us, for DeLillo (or Packer) had predicted this destination early in the novel when he said explicitly, “[w]hen he [Packer] died he would not end” (6). With this realization made concrete at the end of the novel, Packer finds that his “situation ha[d] changed in the course of a day” (231)—just as Eugene Henderson’s experience was reduced to a single “hour that bursts the spirit’s sleep.” “[M]y thoughts have evolved,” Packer tells his murderer late in the evening (232), and he feels a reassuring “blood hush, a pause in midbeing” (234). In a word, Eric Packer has found what he wants, and for him, now and always, “[t]he idea was to live outside the given limits . . . a consciousness saved from void” (236), and although he is “already dead” (232), he is “still alive in original space” (240) and for him, “this is not the end” (240).

Conclusion: “This is the end, my only friend, the end”

Throughout this essay I have posited that the incessant command
of *I want, I want!* figures and conditions both Eugene Henderson’s and Eric Packer’s lives. Their *want*, their heartfelt desire, has proven to be an unruly combination of hope and despair, of desire for both material gain and spiritual contentment, and a divided urge toward individual autonomy and community involvement. Such a quest is rooted in American philosophical and social traditions that compete cantankerously—some encouraging celebration of community life and a fulfilling place in the cosmos; some glorifying the rabid pursuit of individual gain, and shallow materialism. Navigating such desires in a political and economic environment that is global to the extreme, often a mire of conflicting aims, intractable problems and a seemingly endless series of built-in contradictions, has been an ongoing quest for Americans for a long, long time. Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer find themselves on this quest. And if Henderson’s final outcome seems more encouraging, utopian—he announces that “[t]here are reasons for it all” (279), and he is last seen “leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence” (Bellow 286)—perhaps Eric Packer’s somber denouement is simply the reverse side of this coin of the realm.8 For, more encouragingly, and more in accord with Eugene Henderson’s own peroration, Eric Packer finds that in the end his life is “fine, it’s nothing, it’s normal” (DeLillo 239), and even the losses that destroy him make him “feel free in a way I have never known” (139).

Notes

1 The quote from Proverbs is also cited by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 53.

2 My argument here further echoes that of de Tocqueville, who worried that Americans in pursuit of economic independence disconnected themselves from community by “thinking of themselves in isolation,” with each “shut up in the solitude of his own heart” (508).
3 Quote based on DeLillo 7.

4 Note that this conception of positivism is essentially different from other “rational” positivisms, such as that of the 1920s Vienna Circle, or a Cartesian/Newtonian view of the reciprocal structures of the natural and human worlds. In contrast to this “hard” positivistic approach, Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer create a “soft” Emersonian-based positivism. Note that both these “hard” and “soft” positivisms often seek to provide comfort and security in threatening, dehumanizing worlds.

5 Hats off, of course, to Mr. Yogi Berra.

6 During his quest Packer explores no less than: Sufi beliefs, Zen Buddhism, the Dao de Ching, Plato, futurism, chaos theory, Nietzsche, Marxism, anarchy, hedonism, palm reading, aestheticism, ancient/pre-modern philosophy and folklore, Freud, astrology, and St. Augustine (forgive me if I’ve missed one).


8 In short, it is dystopian. My discussion here could be linked to Emersonian thinking, for its many optimistic, buoyant elements have often been interpreted in a utopian vein with opposing negative, dystopian elements. I think, however, it is clear that the conditions and experiences of Eugene Henderson and Eric Packer—the existential and the postmodern, if you will—in many ways exclude this approach.

Works Cited


