

Man Thinking the World: Contemporary American Authors and the Nobel Prize in Literature

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by  
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To Anna, who is (to loosely borrow from Nabokov) the “light of my life,” passion of my heart.

My love, my joy. She whose name begins where mine ends.

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*“Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu.”*

(“A human is human because of other humans.”)

A traditional Bantu saying

“Love of *one* is a barbarism; for it is exercised at the expense of all others.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

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## Chapter 1

## “A Stepping-Stone to Future Bliss”: Shelley, Nobel and the Nobel Prize in Literature

In his final will (he wrote three, canceling the previous will with each superseding draft) Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) stipulated that one-fifth of the Nobel Prize fund should go to “the person who shall have produced in the field of Literature the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency” (qtd. in Marble 10-11). The Swedish Royal Academy quickly abandoned the former stipulation—presenting the prize to the author of “the most distinguished work,” instead awarding to authors for their collective authorship. The committee has not abandoned its attempt to bestow the prize to authors based on their “idealistic tendency”; however, the Swedish Academy has steadily evolved the ideals toward which writers must tend based on the growing shift toward cosmopolitanism in literature. The evolution of the Swedish Academy’s understanding of Nobel’s conception of an “idealistic tendency” responds to the actualization of the concerns Percy Bysshe Shelley expressed about the rise of nationalism and the humane idealism he posed in response to nationalism in the period later classified as Romantic; the development also reflects a need for nations to disarm and opt for peace rather than expecting, as Nobel did for years, that men would soon become terrified by the power of weaponry, improved by inventors such as Nobel himself, and lay down their weapons out of fear.

## I. Nation/Nationalism, Shelley and Nobel

A brief establishment of what a nation is must first be laid before advancing into a discussion of nationalism. Konstantin Symmons-Symonolewicz defines a nation as “a territorially-based community of human beings sharing a distinct variant of modern culture, bound together by a strong sentiment of unity and solidarity, marked by a clear historically-rooted consciousness of national identity, and possessing, or striving to possess, a genuine

political self-government” (qtd. in White 16). Benedict Anderson concisely defines a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Both Symmons-Symonolewicz and Anderson recognize that a nation does not exist inherently, but its existence is agreed upon by those comprising the political body that becomes designated as a nation; as H. Ernest Lewald explains, nationalism is the “consequence of fundamental social relations within a community of material and spiritual interests” (3). People collectively make such an agreement because they, through their shared localities, experience, and language, have kindled a desire for a political identity, and the identity which the people, in concordance, agree upon for themselves becomes sovereign in the extent to which the collectivized people are willing to defend or assert that identity when something threatens that identity.

As John P. McKay and his co-authors explain, nationalism resulted from the fusion of the “love of liberty” with the “love of nation” (807). As Homi K. Bhabha explains in his introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (1). The love of a people’s nation morphs into an operative mythology which encompasses the “common traditions and common loyalties” developed over time (McKay et al. 807). While nationalism superficially complements the unique characteristics of each nation, the differences between people nonetheless divide nations, thus creating “a strong sense of ‘we’ and ‘they,’” and “they” are, all too often, mutated into antagonists; while nationalism’s “main thrust was liberal and democratic,” the “ideas of national superiority and national mission, which could lead to aggressive crusades and counter-crusades” inhibit the benevolent aspects (McKay et al. 808).

Shelley rebels against the empiricization (the advancement of a nation into an empire) and the religiosity of his day by concentrating his attention upon “life itself,” upon the

foundational issue of the human condition. Michael Henry Scrivener locates Shelley within the millennial anarchism, which is “a tradition of mass movements of religious heretics who wanted a paradise on earth with direct democracy and the abolition of secular and spiritual hierarchies” (35). Shelley’s millennial anarchism and the idealism stemming from his anarchism effectively distance individuals from international conflicts. As Shelley’s speaker of “The Mask of Anarchy” (1832) repeatedly postulates, individuals should “let” the empire do what it will, for individuals who “let” liberate themselves from being directly subject to the repercussions of violent events and international disputes; their stability is in themselves.

The value of Shelley’s idealism is in its ability to critique and to counteract nationalism, which was budding across Europe toward the end of Shelley’s life, so as to preserve the fundamental connection between men: their shared humanity. As demonstrated in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley understands “Man” to be “a chain of linked thought” (394), and he calls “Man” “one harmonious soul of many a soul” (400). Each man is, in Shelley’s mind, interconnected by the singular nature of their humanity, and they have the power to deepen that interconnection through voluntary acts of charity for one another rather than on national motives for communal interaction and assistance. Also, men discover a sense of commonality through their shared individuality. Charitable acts create community amongst men, who are then united not only by their suffering, but also their longsuffering, their longing to overcome their suffering. “Liberation,” Stuart Curran speculates, “was the driving passion of Shelley’s life” (600), and the harmony of souls could not be sounded until man broke from his reliance upon institutional orders such as government (namely, nationalism) and religion (namely, Christianity). Shelley’s idealism is a deterritorialized celebration of men’s “common traditions and common loyalties” in

a much broader scope, a scope which disavows geographic encroachment and rejects any threat made upon the identity of nations by other aggressive nations.

As a sickly child who was often depressed, Nobel exhibited great interest in literature and, by extension, the humanities, but, as numerous biographers have noted, Nobel's primary interest was particularly in Shelley, whose radical conception of life and humanity attracted him greatly. Ragnar Sohlman and Henrick Schück write, "There was a strong bond of sympathy between him [Nobel] and the English poet, and Nobel readily adopted Shelley's attitude toward life as well as his extravagant idealism, his all-embracing love of mankind, his pacifism, his radicalism, and his somewhat confused and fanatical 'atheism,' which actually was not very foreign to Christianity and Platonism" (204). One suspects that Shelley's idealism was particularly effective in redirecting Nobel's attention from his ailing body.

Nobel did not forget the impression Shelley made on him early in his life, and he did not forsake Shelley's ideals through the course of his life; his creation of the Nobel prizes marks a return to Shelley's idealism against nationalism and the frequently violent problems which ensue from nationalism. Sohlman and Schück note that, though Nobel did not become a poet as he wished, "he always retained an attitude toward life which was that of a poet, and no presentment of him would be complete that did not take this side of his nature into account" (204). Nobel found it impossible, however, to abide by Shelley's pacifism since his inventions, which were a continuance of Immanuel's work, were primarily employed in war. Between Shelley's death and Nobel's rise to prominence through his brilliant innovative work and his entrepreneurial talents, nations under the spell of nationalism's brutal and conceited side were becoming increasingly involved in wars, and all sides requested improvements in weaponry to empower their nation over the others. Though Nobel originally invented dynamite for the demolition of frontiers so

countries could construct whatever they wished, Russia and France both implemented Nobel's technology in the Crimean War to slay one another's forces far more swiftly than with cannons and bullets, both of which were still not very accurate at the time. Nobel was undoubtedly troubled by existing "thanks" to war, the antithesis of his Shelleyan, idealistic belief in pacifism. He tried to differentiate between his occupation of first inventing dynamite, as well as of fine-tuning cannon- and rifle-fire, and his pacifist ideals derived primarily from Shelley, and his attempts to use his inventions in service of peace failed (Pauli 224). Though Nobel believed his inventions would work for the best because their exponentially-increased power would convince people to lay down their arms, the exponential increase in casualties of war disproved Nobel's belief that "war would kill itself" (Nobel qtd. in Fant 269).

As he entered the final decade of his life, Nobel began to seriously reconsider his strategy toward achieving international peace, for he steadily realized that scientific inventions cannot perfect man, and he will not cease waging war even after he has discovered the absurdity of international struggles for domination and hegemony. In 1888, Nobel's brother Ludwig died; Nobel underwent the Kafka-esque experience of reading his own obituary, written by a then-unattentive French reporter who heard a certain "Nobel" died and falsely assumed it was the most famous of the Nobels, Alfred, who died (Halasz 3). Halasz explains the refreshed and startling self-perspective Nobel gained through the surreal experience:

He saw himself as the world saw him—"the dynamite king," the great industrialist who had made an immense fortune from weapons for destruction. This—as far as the general public was concerned—was the entire purpose of his life. None of his true intentions—to break down the barriers that separated men and ideas—were

recognized or given serious consideration. He was quite simply a merchant of death, and for that alone would he be remembered. (3-4)

Though Nobel treasured Percy Bysshe Shelley's idealism and pacifist views in his heart, the hasty journalist nonetheless managed to remind Nobel of how far from his youthful idealism he strayed during the course of his life and his inventive career. Nobel saw himself as a man who cared nothing for others, who cared nothing for the lives lost as a result of the advancements in weaponry he implemented during his career.

At the end of his life, Nobel chose to return to his Shelleyan idealism, and he did so by including a prize in literature as (to use a phrase from Nobel's poem "A Riddle") "a stepping-stone to future bliss" (5). (This is not to suggest that Nobel sought to promote literature above all other fields; there are, after all, prizes in scientific fields [namely, chemistry and medicine], so he did not renounce or seek to invalidate his lifelong career in innovation. He simply sought to give ideal literature its proper due, for literature is able to reach into realms science may never traverse.) The increasing number of wars in the nineteenth century, which were becoming increasingly ferocious because of Nobel's advancement in the technology of weaponry, suggested that Nobel was wrong in believing human perfection would follow the perfection of man's tools. As Shelley—and, by extension, Nobel—was well aware, literature offers the best deterritorialized arena in which man may identify what ideals are necessary for life and attempt to transport those ideas into reality. It is no surprise, then, that Nobel returned to literature again at the end of his life (he reread Shelley's *The Cenci*, the play of Shelley's which he most admired and based upon which he wrote the same story, titling his play *Nemesis*), for he returned to an early belief that literature was far more likely to counteract war than improved weapons were.

## II. The Progression of the Nobel Prize in Literature

What precisely Nobel meant by “idealistic tendency” has been the subject of much debate. Nobel did specify that the idealism be a tendency; he did not explicitly stipulate that every work in an author’s oeuvre exhibit the same idealism. Furthermore, whose idealism should authors express—their own or a Shelleyan idealism toward which Nobel would have been favorably disposed? The Swedish Academy has had to base its rigorous annual task on one ambiguously-worded phrase, and their handling of the task annually invokes criticism from various directions. Anders Österling speculates that what Nobel “really meant by this term [‘idealistic tendency’] was probably works of a humanitarian and constructive character, which, like scientific discoveries, could be regarded as of benefit to mankind” (79). The authors who write works which the Swedish Academy considers humane and upbuilding are not always the same authors others around the world would select. This discrepancy leads Österling to conclude that

the history of the Nobel Prizes in Literature is also a history of inexpressible sins of omission. But even so, it may perhaps be said that the mistakes have been comparatively few, that no truly unworthy candidate has been crowned, and that, if allowances are made for legitimate criticism, the results have reasonably matched the requirements and difficulties of an almost paradoxical assignment.

(136)

(Espmark would partially disagree; he offers a rational explanation for why certain oft-cited “omissions” happened in *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study of the Criteria behind the Choices*; readers concerned with this matter should consult Espmark’s definitive study.) The Swedish Academy has the doubly-difficult task of interpreting a vague phrase that was, most

likely, hastily written as well as having to endure the oftentimes-volatile criticism of critics all over the globe for laureates it selects.

Even at the time Nobel penned his final will, his close friends and associates were not sure what precisely he meant by “idealistic tendency”; at best, they could only speculate amongst themselves. One unnamed individual who signed Nobel’s will as a credible document made the following statement during a discussion upon the issue of Nobel’s meaning: “. . . I have come to the conclusion that he wished to leave to the trustees all possible liberty consistent with due regard for the spirit and principal intention of the will” (qtd. in Sohlman and Schück 250). While this proposal sounds reasonable enough at first, it quickly relegates interpretations of what Nobel meant rather into personal speculation, which is always relative. It would have been better for this individual to propose that his friends research Nobel’s educational background, research preferences, and so forth in order to ascertain the most probable understanding of Nobel’s intention.

Kjell Espmark has masterfully traced the progression of interpretations of “idealistic tendency” in *The Nobel Prize in Literature*, but a simplified description shall be briefly presented here. As Espmark explains, Carl David af Wirsén, the first permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy to preside over the Nobel Prize in Literature (1883-1912), took a conservative position in his selection of laureates who exhibited “an idealistic view of the nature of reality, particularly of the Christian concept of reality” (12). Erik Axel Karlfeldt was the next permanent secretary (1913-1931), and he is remembered for facilitating the Academy’s shift toward literary neutralism, a position which valued “the literature of common humanity” (Espmark 31). Per Hallström (P.S. 1931-1941) and Anders Österling (P.S. 1941-1964) superseded Karlfeldt, and they pushed for the Swedish Academy to award pioneering authors whose “idealistic tendency”

included “a well-considered worldview” and “humanity” (Espmark 37). The next major permanent secretary, Lars Gyllensten (P.S. 1977-1986), facilitated the pragmatization and increased cosmopolitanization of the Nobel Prize in Literature by seeking to support promising writers with financial support to continue their yet-unrecognized work. Paul Rabinow insightfully characterizes cosmopolitanism as “an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates” (qtd. in Robbins 1). Cosmopolitanization, then, is the conscientious effort to implement the ethos expounded upon by Rabinow as a way of opposing the antagonisms generated by nationalism. All too often, nationalism brings a civilization “full-circle”—that is, those adhering to nationalism frequently use barbaric means to preserve their respective civilization, and the barbaric means consequently define the people more than their civility. As Friedrich Nietzsche warns in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster” (279). Nationalism offers explanations for barbaric acts, but it does not sufficiently justify those acts or protect men from becoming monstrous.

In order to ensure that the Nobel Prize in Literature is universally relevant, the Swedish Academy has had to search for idealistic tendencies as modernist ideals have developed as a result of the two world wars of the twentieth century—that is, as a result of nationalism’s brutal side becoming unavoidably visible. These modernist ideals correspond negatively and inversely to the rise of nationalism, which began at the end of Shelley’s life and increased as Nobel aged. As international cultural and literary trends have increasingly dismissed the industrial notion of progress, the ideal toward which literature has, by default, had to tend is toward man himself: not as a creature evolving or stepping toward perfection, but one whose vitality and worthiness to

exist is inherent. In a century such as the twentieth century which has seemingly forgotten what it means to be human, the recognition of man is of crucial importance.

During his time as permanent secretary from 1999 to 2009, Horace Engdahl sought to continue Gyllensten's pragmatic and existential shift (which Sture Allén, who served as permanent secretary between Gyllensten and Engdahl, also did, facilitating the laurelling of Naguib Mahfouz, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott, among others). In response to one question about the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008, Horace Engdahl explained that the Swedish Academy searched for "great precursors": "Our goal," he also said, "is to award writers that will still be read a hundred years from now" (n. pag.). Here, Engdahl does not specify that the writers be canonized, but read as significant works of the author's respective century.

That Engdahl suggests that Nobel laureates be read but not necessarily studied implies his literary interest and standard for contemporary literature, which is witness literature. In his lecture "Philomena's Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature" (2001), Engdahl explains, "Testimony in literature, then, is more than a simple act of disclosure. To start with, it differs in two decisive impulses: *in giving voice to the silenced*, and *in preserving the victims' names*" (4). Engdahl realizes that, in the twentieth century, millions of voices have been silenced and millions of lives ended—oftentimes in horrifically-violent ways—across the globe. Thus, the broad-hearted humanity in literature has had to address and encapsulate the struggles of the twentieth century; writers have had to express their idealism against the backdrop of wars, oppression, and nihilistic philosophy, which all gave the century its saturnine tint. For writers, the primary struggle in the twentieth century has been the genuine and unconditional affirmation of civilization in the face of looming barbarism.

Peter Englund, who became the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy in 2009, explains in his lecture “The Bedazzled Gaze: On Perspective and Paradoxes in Witness Literature” (2001) the exciting yet startling way in which writers of witness literature transcribe experience into “something half-way between memoir and history” (47). Englund characterizes witness literature as “the completion of a process of remembrance that had begun much earlier” (48). However, Englund expresses uncertainty regarding how far one may remember—or should remember—things witnessed; he is aware that narratives begin after history has begun and end before history, and he writes, “What happens when we turn the past into a narrative? We gain of course, coherence, totality, and flow but at the risk of forcing narrative and teleological unity on to something that in reality is diverse, confused, and contradictory. The very form of narrative tempts us to tidy things up” (51).

Even with their current interest in witness literature, Engdahl, Englund, and their fellow Academy members still demand technical excellence in writing, and they look for innovative narratives of things witnessed as writers undergo this “process of remembrance.” After Engdahl addresses Elie Wiesel’s belief that witness literature is the literary invention of the twentieth century in his lecture on witness literature, Engdahl says, “He [Wiesel] exaggerates the novelty of the thing, but I believe he puts his finger on the most profound change in literature since the breakthrough of modernism. Perhaps it is not the scale of the twentieth-century misdeeds that has placed testimony in the centre; but rather our horror over the systematic erasure of memory of totalitarian societies” (5-6). For Engdahl, fictionalization, which here means the creation of a testimony through the recreation of reality itself (which cannot literally be transcribed onto a page, but only represented) requires skilful wielding of literary techniques such as (as he states in his 2008 interview) “force, complexity, emotional impact, originality etc etc” (n. pag.). Because

literature, as Engdahl argues, “is rooted in a cultural code with language as its most important expression” (n. pag.), language must consequently be used in extraordinary ways to harbor the elements of reality necessary to speak for the silent and remember the lost.

### III. A Critical Approach to Evaluating Contemporary American Authors

Those who are concerned about the lack of American authors among the most recent Nobel laureates (nearly twenty years have elapsed since Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993) must ask what this trend toward cosmopolitanization and this particular concentration on writers of witness literature signify. If the Academy’s current fascination with witness literature is controversially accepted as the greatest expression of “broad-hearted humanity,” the Academy risks the questionable assumption that one must suffer external oppression in order to commiserate with his fellow man; victimization could become an unintentional requirement for compassion for the human condition, for the expression of shared humanity. As a result of the Swedish Academy’s pragmatization of the Nobel Prize in Literature into a ecumenical tool for cosmopolitanization and as praise for authors who have witnessed the struggles of their countries and turned that struggle into art which affirms the human condition, American authors have been increasingly overlooked by the Academy since the end of the Cold War (1991) when America confirmed itself as the global superpower, for Americans have witnessed relatively little on their own soil and have not recently experienced any prolonged oppression from an outside invader; unless the Academy recognizes that one may witness from within the nation of the oppressor, the “broad-hearted” humanity of contemporary American authors will be ideologically disqualified for the prize because of America’s contemporary imperial position in international affairs, and the Swedish Academy will not encourage the dialogue between writers in various nations through the exchange of their documentation of

civilization and barbarism, a dialogue which is consistent with Nobel's original intentions for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The controversy over Engdahl's comments about American literature after announcing Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio is well-known. In an interview with *Associated Press*, Engdahl said, "The US is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature . . . That ignorance is restraining" (qtd. in Derbyshire 84). In his 2008 interview, Engdahl demonstrates the foundation of his opinion when, in response to one question about the state of American literature, he implies that American literature suffers from its regionally-based parochialism:

There is no lack of talent in American literature, and certainly a number of great writers. . . . Literature is highly regarded in our part of the world [Europe]. Being an important writer often ranks above having success in economic or political activity. Furthermore, Europe has the advantage of a great variety of languages and longstanding national traditions of learning, in which translation has been a central element. This has counteracted the tendency to self-sufficient notions and parochial taste that is inherent in all societies. (n. pag.)

Engdahl sidesteps the central criticism he has of American literature: it does not give voice to the silent or remember the names of those lost as writers of witness literature do, for American authors have generally had very little to witness on their own soil beyond their own relatively prosperous lives and those of their family and neighbors, near or far.

America has been accused of hegemony and imperialism (both ideological offshoots of nationalism) as a result of its increasing global—and oftentimes militant—involvement with the affairs of other nations, and this fair and deserved classification can, unfortunately, allow

organizations such as the Swedish Academy to exclude American writers from consideration for prizes such as the Nobel Prize in Literature because of their national origins. In “American Ascendancy: The Public Space at War” (284), Edward Said briefly traces the way in which American ascendancy has developed throughout the nation’s history:

. . . The idea of American leadership and exceptionalism is never absent; no matter what the United States does, these authorities often do not want to be an imperial power like the others that followed it, preferring instead the notion of ‘world responsibility’ as a rationale for what it does. Earlier rationales—the Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, and so forth—lead to ‘world responsibility,’ which exactly corresponds to the growth in the United States’ global interests after World War Two and to the conception of its enormous power as formulated by the foreign policy and intellectual elite. (285)

In Said’s eyes, Americans intervene with good intentions, but those good intentions unfortunately spoil, and “world responsibility” steadily devolves into world domination, a goal not far from that of the colonial powers American leaders sought to avoid in their diplomatic endeavors. In *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*, Noam Chomsky repeatedly emphasizes that American leaders like former President George W. Bush subjectively interpret America’s “world responsibility” in a narrow fashion which often necessitates (in the minds of those American leaders, at least) military intervention and imposition upon other countries. Chomsky best demonstrates his point with the notion of “preventative war,” a political doctrine which equips those in power with “the use of military force to eliminate an imagined or invented threat” (12).

American authors have, among other things, the task of understanding their actual responsibility to the world by separating a proper understanding of man from “articulated realities” or discursive relations, as Michel Foucault calls them, social and international relations between people that are based on discussed evaluations and understandings of geographical, economical, and political factors rather than on the fundamental basis of people’s shared humanity. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault explains how discursive formation transpires, which leads to the discursive relations that deeply trouble Chomsky. Any formation first necessitates separate entities which are not inherently related to one another (44). Foucault implies that men discourse with one another as if the established discursive relations were original and not formatted through their knowledge, their comparison of two entities, and the imposition of power into that relation; by accepting discursive relations as reality, men lose a proper understanding of their shared humanity which Shelley and Nobel deem crucial to counteracting nationalism’s negative effects. To protect themselves from the imperialist ideology embedded into Americans through education and the wide-spread patriotic reinforcement of collective national identity, many serious contemporary American writers distance themselves and cast an eye upon their surrounding national mythological systems.

In his seminal *Orientalism*, Said, applying Foucault’s connection of knowledge and power in discourse, argues that “without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Oriental politically sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (3). Said also argues that European cultures developed an understanding of themselves by “setting [themselves] off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3). As Said understands it, the

Orient is the consequence of an Occidental “self/other” binary imposed to reinforce the identity of Westerners through perceived or believed difference from the Oriental other. One of the primary tasks of notable contemporary American writers is the exploration and exposure of these “self/other” and “us/them” binaries all too often generated when people collectivize into nations and evaluate themselves alongside others.

As a means of demonstrating the absurdity of these processes of ambivalence and subjectification, American authors redirect these processes upon Americans themselves, and the discomfort American readers feel upon being “processed” enables them to conceive of the discomfort those whom they force into the role of other also feel. Homi K. Bhabha’s description of the processes of ambivalence and subjectification, as well as his definitions of fixity and the mode of representation of others, help to pinpoint how the self manufactures and propagates the stereotyped view of the other it wishes to be the case. Early in “The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism” (1994), Bhabha defines fixity as “the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism” and argues that it “is a paradoxical mode of representation” (94), for it manipulates an objective element of another’s existence (one’s skin color, genitalia, etc.) and transforms it into a “lack”: a lack of the self’s objective elements (a lack of the self’s skin tone, the self’s genitalia, etc.) (106-07). The accumulation of “lacks” marks what Bhabha calls a “process of *ambivalence*,” an increasing distaste for the other as the self recognizes its “possession” through the binary, and eventually the “*process of subjectification*,” the period in which the self derives a sense of power for possessing what the other lacks (95). Once the self’s sense of power has culminated, the Self systematizes the other’s lacks into a discursive relation, and the self maintains this image of the

other in the “*mode of representation of otherness*,” which nearly always is the representation of a “limited being” who is inferior because of his or her lack (97).

Another sizable task of cosmopolitan-minded contemporary American authors is the revelation of the arbitrariness of America’s arbitration (or any nation’s arbitration, for that matter). The processes of ambivalence and subjectification to which Bhabha calls attention are hazardous because they damage one’s sense of shared humanity and the possibility of Shelley’s “one harmonious soul of many a soul” with the other in the process of differentiation (*Prometheus Unbound* 400); furthermore, this differentiation all too often leads to the development of nationalism, for the self/other binary leads to the collectivized—and incisive—“us/them” binary of nations, binaries which almost always have violent outcomes. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that “this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary” (54). This process of subjectification on a national level may be called the *arbitration of the arbitrary*, for it politically manipulates fixities and makes the nation of the other a mode of representation of otherness through the agent of the self’s government, or self-government. The self-nation kindles its sense of power through its manufactured understanding of a collective people all categorized as other and all lacking something crucial to the self’s distinguished sense of self.

Many mindful contemporary American authors distrust the presentation of others in the media, for the means through which media present the other is, far too often, dehumanizing; the mediated arbitrary arbitrations and the general acceptance of those arbitrations trouble many American authors. While the American government does not regulate American media in the propagandistic way a totalitarian regime would, it does profit from the nationalism created

through media, especially the news. Reports of seemingly-anarchic clashes between Middle Eastern countries, images of starving people in third world countries, rumors of political instability and the possibility of revolution: these types of representations of others in the world reinforce American nationalism; the public's knowledge of these unfortunate affairs and its belief in its "world responsibility" empower the nation, through its knowledge, to take action as it sees fit, based on its discursive relations and its modes of representation of otherness. Various media unite the will of the people to act on behalf of the other.

Well aware of the dangers inherent in nationalism, a number of contemporary American authors—generally those known as serious writers, ones literati suspect may well be canonized as major American writers—strive to *unmediate* their conception of the other and to identify shared humanity. This concept of unmediation has two functional connotations: it signifies both the resistance to the simplified representations of the other in the media and the corrective act of mediating between American media—and culture at large—and the other, who is, as American authors understand, really a parallel self. American authors utilize the international stature of America as a global figure to disseminate a "broad-hearted humanity"; the authors, because of America's power and because of the international vision of the media, are perched in a place where they may speak on behalf of all selves. One may argue that, though American authors witness nothing on their own soil, they paradoxically witness everything and must utilize their country's affluence to depict a ubiquitous self.

In the following three chapters, the way in which three American authors—John Updike, Edward Albee, and Charles Simic—participate in contemporary international literature by unmediating the other and divulging the ubiquitous self as seen in the human condition will be discussed. The works of these authors are understood to be, among other things, response letters

from the oppressor to the oppressed in which discursive relations are exposed, admitted, and discussed. These authors have identified the parallel humanity between themselves and the self falsely pigeonholed as the other, and they seek to disseminate their “broad-hearted humanity” and their knowledge of the shared human condition, the “one harmonious soul of many a soul,” so as to encourage America to utilize its international power in a responsible manner.

Contra Engdahl, it is appropriate to argue and accept the notion that American authors are not products of their culture, but reformers of it through their acts of unmediation. Chapters two through four collectively challenge and evaluate the legitimacy of Engdahl’s accusations of contemporary American literature. Chapter two focuses on *The Coup* (1978), a novel by John Updike, who traces the demise of the president of the fictional African nation named Kush, Colonel Felix Elleilloû, a president who nonetheless manages to reverse the processes of ambivalence and subjectification back at Americans as a way of defusing such processes. Chapter three reflects upon Edward Albee and his inter-related plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), plays which “box” in Chairman Mao with three Westerners, thus occasioning indirect, contrapuntal dialogue between characters who would, many would assume, have nothing in common which they could discuss. Chapter four concerns *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.: Selected Late and New Poems* (2003) by Charles Simic, an American poet who immigrated with his family from Belgrade; the chapter demonstrates the ways in which Simic deterritorializes his poems so as to reflect the shiftiness of geographic delineations and to make similar horrors as those witnessed in Europe conceivable—and possible—to American readers. Finally, chapter five assesses the interaction (or possibility for interaction) between contemporary American authors and writers of witness literature across the globe, and it

encourages the exchange of efforts at the documentation of man as a civil creature who must constantly confront barbarism in its various forms and manifestations.

## Chapter 2

A Needed Otherness: John Updike's *The Coup*

“We are all of mixed blood” as John Updike (1932-2009) says to begin “A Letter to My Grandsons” (171). He directs this comment, and the letter which develops from it, to his grandsons, Michael Anoff Cobblah and John Kwame Cobblah, who are of interracial parenthood; Updike, as a well-informed and observant American, is well-aware of the difficulties his descendants will encounter in America as a result of their appearance and parentage. Updike recounts the day of Anoff Cobblah’s birth and admits that his “instinctive thought was that he [Cobblah] would do better if his parents settled in Ghana; that is, I [Updike] trusted an African country to treat a half-white person better than my own country would treat a half-black” (204). Soon thereafter, Updike expresses optimism about America’s future to his grandsons: “America is slowly becoming yours, I want to think, as much as it is anyone’s; already, out of the deepest disadvantage, black Americans have contributed heavily to what makes the United States a real country, with a style and a soulfulness no purely white country has.” America is “a real country” because “an American is aware of his or her color as one color among many, as one site in a web of racial tension and mutual ethnic watchfulness” (205).

Jay Prosser faults Updike for his view of skin and race. In “Under the Skin of John Updike: *Self-Consciousness* and the Racial Unconscious” (2001), Prosser argues that, “[i]f Updike was ever America’s literary consciousness, it was a white consciousness. His fictional work has consistently made of blackness an Other. Tellingly, Updike has represented blackness most substantially outside America, and he has represented it in antithesis to whiteness” (579). In “Updike, race, and the postcolonial project” (2006), he argues that, for Updike, “blackness stands as the other, love or hatred, guilt or fear, a measure of white American consciousness” (76). In

this later essay, Prosser discusses the most oft-debated character, Skeeter of *Rabbit Redux* (1971), a character who is a “threat to technocratic order” and “an agent for political change” in Rabbit’s eyes (78), as an example of Updike’s projection of African-Americans as others. In both essays, Prosser draws from Toni Morrison, who argues in “Black Matter(s)” (2000) (among other places) that a “real or fabricated Africanistic presence has been crucial to writers’ sense of their Americanness. And it shows: through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, and the way their work is peopled with the signs and bodies of this presence” (310).

Prosser is not the only critic to call attention to Updike’s questionable use of race. AnnLouise Keating names Updike as a representative of white contemporary American authors who “have made . . . a ‘white’ literary tradition” (904). Marshall Boswell is concerned with Updike’s *Rabbit Redux*, a novel which “makes a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue about race in America but expresses its concerns in so ambiguous a way as to invite misreadings” as a result of the “novel’s deceptive, dialectical structure” (99). Boswell traces this dialectic structure to Updike’s primary theological influences, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Karl Barth (1886-1968), both of whom resist the Hegelian impulse for the synthesis of thesis and antithesis and instead accept “Mastered irony,” which Boswell explains is a “strategy of deliberate irresolution—that is, of setting thesis and antithesis against one another in a state of perpetual tension—the main purpose of which is to inspire in the reader the process of existential self-questioning” (100).

Prosser, Keating, and Boswell all raise worthwhile questions, but they pay insufficient attention to the historical period in which Updike lived and of which he wrote. While Updike indeed concentrates upon white American males in his fiction, he does so because they undergo

one of the most difficult philosophical tasks of any twentieth century American: the task of discovering (or rediscovering) what constitutes man's humanity. While white Americans in the latter half of the twentieth century certainly understood man's shared humanity, they struggled to accept its implications because of the unavoidable changes that would follow upon rupturing the constructed discursive relation with Africans and, in time, African-Americans: the decline in agrarianism, competition for labor, shared educational facilities, equality at voting polls, etc. Men cannot correct existential and racial presuppositions overnight; as the writing of many contemporary post-war German novelists has demonstrated, these presuppositions take a great deal of time to be reformed.

The shift from "separate but equal" to "together and equal" in America, with which Updike is often concerned, should not remain in a strictly national context. As an increasing amount of scholarship on imperialism and colonialism demonstrates, questions of the equality of races and ethnicities are, of course, not restricted to America. While he does not frequently venture beyond New England settings in his fiction, Updike nonetheless seeks to identify parallel selves in individuals of other nations, individuals whom one would typically categorize as others; to accomplish this, Updike halts and reverses the processes of ambivalence and subjectification by aiming them at the self in addition to the other, and this maneuver reveals the arbitrariness of the self's arbitrations. For Updike, every self struggles in vain to establish an autonomous self, yet the individual incessantly encounters obstacles while establishing the desired self. In "On Becoming a Self Forever," Updike notes that, "in attempting to depict the *self* unrelated to others, . . . it [the self] exists only intermittently and, when all is said, comparatively seldom" (230). In one of his most audacious literary efforts, Updike selects a deluded and sometimes-fanatical military dictator, Colonel Hakim Félix Ellelloû, as the figure to whom he will stretch

his understanding of the self's difficulties establishing itself against the resistance of others. In *The Coup* (1978), John Updike depoliticizes Colonel Elleilloû by realistically depicting him as a base and conflicted example of a self struggling for selfhood and identity as does any person in New England or America as a means of desubjectifying the other; what is more, Updike's experimental strategy unmediates American discursive relations with Africans who are allegedly Others in an attempt to affirm shared humanity, a harmony of souls, despite vast geographic distances, environmental conditions, political infrastructures, and temporary economic situations.

Updike wrote published *The Coup* five years after travelling to Africa as a Fulbright lecturer in 1973. William H. Pritchard recounts that Updike spent the majority of his time in Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia, and Pritchard explains that "three weeks of observation, even for such a remarkable observer, is incommensurate with the wealth of specification on every page of *The Coup*" (199). While Updike undoubtedly drew a great deal from his travels and set *The Coup* in the Sahel region (a northern "row" of countries: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia), Updike found the trip too goal-oriented to take detailed notes that would find their way into *The Coup*: "Things [events in his travels and lectures] were just too structured. I had to worry about the lectures, about American wives asking, 'What did you mean in *Couples*?' It was too official a visit" (qtd. in Waite 72). Updike notes in the pages before *The Coup* begins the sources upon which he relied for necessary details. In an interview with Iwao Iwamoto (1978), Updike explained that he took around a year and a half to complete the research necessary for him to write *The Coup* (117). In the same year, Updike told Charlie Reilly that he fashioned his ignorance of Africa into "a kind of veil" (127) which enhanced Kush rather than detracting from the fictional country.

Updike allows Americans visiting Kush with even more official goals than Updike himself was assigned to divulge their media-conditioned fixities and discursive relations between themselves and Kushites, fixities turned into inhibitions through the process of subjectification in order to maintain the established difference between nations and citizens of each nation. These Americans (Donald and, later, his wife Angelica Gibbs, as well as Klipspringer, another American ambassador) exhibit the American exceptionalism which, in the minds of American government figures, sanctions international intervention. Because it has advanced medicinal and agricultural technology, America morphs these humanitarian contributions into tools furthering the subjectification of those receiving the external aid. What is more, these characters exude proud self-fulfillment because of their eagerness to intervene and the perceived relief they offer to an impoverished nation such as Kush.

False assumptions drive the process of subjectification; in reality, democracy and technological advancements cannot eradicate natural, political, religious, and existential dilemmas in other countries unless nearly all the people agree to accept and implement democratic order. Updike grounds *The Coup* in the 1970s, a terribly difficult period for many African nations because of severe droughts as well as struggles for independence and autonomy, and, though seemingly exaggerated, he bases his American visitors mentioned above on the response of America to Africa's struggle during this period, a response built on false assumptions and a skewed discursive relation. Toyin Falola describes the mediated presentation of African nations' struggle: "Judging from news of AIDS and famine, political turmoil and wars, the media image of Africa in the West is troubling. The reality is equally terrible. Notorious leaders have combined with outrageous policies to produce devastating conditions, creating a continent in a permanent state of crisis" (3). Though Falola's analysis is of the

contemporary African situation, his relayed blame upon African leaders from the 1970s implies that the state of crisis has not altered as a result of poor leadership. Falola explains that the African leaders of the 1970s wrongly replicated the centralized rule of “colonial autocrats” and thus “[n]on-democratic options emerged, all damaging the political landscape” (16).

Early in the novel, Donald Gibbs exemplifies the ambivalent discursive relation between America and Kush as constructed and understood by American media and government officials based primarily upon America’s inestimable wealth and Kush’s politically- and environmentally-downtrodden situation. Gibbs appears as the questionably Good Samaritan amidst what Colonel Ellelloû describes as “a pyramid of crates, sacks, and barbarically trademarked boxes” which unanimously state “USA USA USA” (36). When Colonel Ellelloû confronts Gibbs about “this mountain of refuse” (38), Gibbs’ coarse reply (he does not yet know he is speaking with Colonel Ellelloû, Kush’s political figurehead) derives from his acceptance of American exceptionalism and the alleged nationwide goodwill of American citizens:

These cats [Kushites] are *starving*. The whole world knows it, you can see ’em starve on the six o’clock news every night. The American people want to help. We know this country’s socialist and xenophobic, we know Ellelloû’s a schizoid paranoid; we don’t give a f\*\*\*. This kind of humanitarian catastrophe cuts across the political lines, as far as my government’s concerned. (39)

Gibbs’ explicit declaration of American apathy raises questions regarding the motivating purpose for America’s humanitarian intervention in Kush; his expression of America’s ambivalence suggests that his country is more concerned with getting a political foothold in Kush than aiding the country amidst its frightful plight. America’s world responsibility, established as an outcome of World War Two, created an internationally-held expectation that America would use its

prominence to carry out benevolent actions on behalf of other countries in need of outside support. Such responsibility is costly, and Gibbs' foul expression implies bitterness at even having to intervene on behalf of another country.

Gibbs' preoccupation with the name brands and quick dismissal of Colonel Elleilloû's objection suggests that he mistakenly believes the donated food will relieve Kush's starvation and, what is more, democratize Kush, whose gratitude to America subjugates it into an adopted beneficiary, an American territory in a certain sense. Colonel Elleilloû rightly comprehends the astounding ignorance necessary to enact an ill-informed discursive relation with a country such as Kush. Readers become aware that the American humanitarian aid workers obviously do not consider the fact that Kush has suffered from a long drought. Gibbs eventually climbs up the mountain of donated food to read off the brand names; he comes across Carnations, which, as he reads aloud, require "three parts water." Colonel Elleilloû quickly interrupts him and shouts, "But we have no water! . . . In Kush, water is more precious than blood!" Colonel Elleilloû scorns the brashness of Gibbs and the food present, which Kushites cannot even consume to relieve their starvation because of the lack of the primary preparatory ingredient, water. Gibbs, however, remains confident in his country: "No problem," he shouts from the food pyramid, "We'll bring in teams . . . green revolution . . . systems of portable trenching . . . a lily pond right where you're standing . . . here we go . . . no, that's a cream of celery soup" (42).

Klipspringer, another American ambassador to Kush, arrives with Gibbs' wife, Angelica, to inquire regarding the death of Gibbs (as an act of rejecting international aid from capitalist countries, Colonel Elleilloû, an Islamic Marxist, ordered his men to torch the tower of food—and Gibbs, who was still searching through the brand names); Klipspringer's comments also reveal his belief in American exceptionalism and the discursive relation between technologically-

advanced America and Kush, which seems primitive to Klipspringer because of Kush's lack of modern technology. While Colonel Ellelloû is away trying to solve the drought, Michaelis Ezana, Kush's Minister of the Interior, acts as the standing president of Kush in lieu of Colonel Ellelloû's prolonged absence and meets with Klipspringer, who disrespectfully Americanizes Ezana's name and thenceforth calls the acting president of Kush "Mike." Klipspringer's brash statements suggest that America's humanitarian intervention is merely a problem-solving exercise: "Mike, you tell the man [Colonel Ellelloû] for me, No problem. Our technical boys can mop up any mess technology creates. . . . Miracles are an everyday business for our boys" (230-31). Klipspringer's notion of American intervention being a miracle corresponds with Donald Gibbs' belief that the delivered food was manna "[d]onated to your [Colonel Ellelloû's] stricken area by the generosity of the American government and the American people acting in conjunction with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations" (39). Gibbs and Klipspringer do not account for the latent curses which often come with "miracles," such as how "deep wells drilled by foreign governments disrupted nomadic grazing patterns so that deserts have been created with the wells at their center" (40), a problem Colonel Ellelloû reminds Gibbs of before incinerating him along with the "USA USA USA" pyramid (36).

Donald Gibbs and Klipspringer do not comprehend the imperial nature of their proposed aid. As George Nadel and Perry Curtis explain, those who, like Gibbs and Klipspringer, propose international involvement often lack the ability "to analyze their real motives for territorial or cultural expansion and to separate them from rationalizations devised after the fact" (1). Good motives all too often turn into opportunities for exploitation, which are then falsely justified through the discursive relation. Hasty and superficial analyses lead those desiring to intervene to act improperly. As Mohamed El-Khawas notes, American food donations during the 1970s to the

drought-ridden Sahel region comprised forty-six percent of world donations to the region (82), but the likelihood that America would continue to offer aid is unlikely since “these projects require substantial financial contributions and multiyear commitments” (92). Laurie Wiseberg’s explanation of the American agricultural market also illustrates the reliance of world aid—particularly in situations of droughts and famines—upon agricultural prosperity in America; if there is a shortage of crop any given year, America will, therefore, cut its international food aid in order to prioritize its own citizens (104). When America is prosperous enough to donate food, its donations are never made without expectations; as Colonel Ellelou explains to Edumu, “Gifts bring men, men bring bullets, bullets bring oppression. Africa has undergone this cycle often enough” (16).

Angela Gibbs’ expressed anticipation to witness poverty betrays a desire to continue the process of subjectification of Kushites and to strengthen her instilled discursive relation by witnessing scenes of poverty. Her witnessing poverty would reinforce her fixated representation of underprivileged Kushites. When Ms. Gibbs arrives to Kush with Klipspringer, Ezana explains the changed meteorological patterns which devastate Kush: “In my country, there once were two seasons, wet and dry. Now there is one.” Mrs. Gibbs does not enquire into this unusual change in annual climactic patterns, but rudely asks, “Where is the poverty?” (206). She reveals that her conception of the country is strictly economic and evaluated in contrast to the wealthy and affluent state of her own country. Like the changing poor meteorological conditions Kush currently endures, poverty spreads and recedes, but never remains the same. Yet the discursive relation between America and Kush, constructed according to economic standards, becomes a fixated means of defining the country in which Mrs. Gibbs has entered.

While the fixities they hold and the discursive relations in which they participate are not entirely accurate, the visiting Americans above-described are not entirely unjustified; Colonel Ellelloû's rash behavior and irresponsible presidency certainly fuel and negatively reinforce these unwanted fixities and the subjectifications which he finds so perverse. Early in the novel, Colonel Ellelloû pays little heed to the inevitable consequences of murdering an American ambassador; he aggravates a nation against whom he stands no chance and sets himself up for renewed press covering his misguided and tyrannical rule. Soon thereafter, Colonel Ellelloû finally executes King Edumu with a mystical hope that the beheading of the deposed king will bring the much-needed rain to Kush. As he correctly perceives his power quickly dissipating, Colonel Ellelloû orders his bodyguard, Opuku, to gun down innocent tourists (a command which Opuku disobeys) and fails to rally a group of Kushites to his cause in a Westernized city built without his approval. Colonel Ellelloû's behavior as president throughout the novel ironically affirms Donald Gibbs' assertion that Colonel Ellelloû is "a schizoid paranoid" (39).

While Gibbs' description of Colonel Ellelloû in psychological terms is spoken haphazardly, he nevertheless manages to notice the conflicted character of Kush's president. At the beginning of *The Coup*, Colonel Ellelloû admits the difficulty he has with understanding his own identity, seeing a schism between his actual self, who attempts (both consciously and subconsciously) to establish a stable identity, and his political self, which must act boldly and swiftly since he is the president of Kush: "Yet a soldier's disciplined self-effacement, my Cartesian schooling, and the African's traditional abjuration of ego all constrain this account to keep to the third person. There are two selves: the one who acts, and the 'I' who experiences. . . . Ellelloû's body and career carried me here, there, and I never knew why, but submitted" (7). Colonel Ellelloû expresses here a duality of being: he exists as both an individual self, yet he also

feels swept up by tides of political responsibility appointed to him, and he must continually fulfill those responsibilities. Colonel Elleilloû discovers that the political self continually obstructs his efforts to situate his actual self; Updike's American characters experience a similar difficulty, though they typically struggle with social selves rather than political selves. Joyce Markle finds the schismatic voice of Colonel Elleilloû's selves troubling and argues that "the narrator's voice . . . never defines itself in a meaningful way" (300). When Americans intervene in his country, Colonel Elleilloû has the added difficulty of combating the fixities imposed upon him and Kush, and he struggles to counteract the discursive relations which arrive with the visiting Americans. Colonel Elleilloû cannot define himself in a meaningful way because of the discursive relation's definition of him, a definition against which he must struggle.

Because of the demanding nature of the present crisis for water in his land, Colonel Elleilloû suppresses his individual self and attempts to act solely as the political self throughout *The Coup*; this suppression leads to the loss of the personal self. Kushites have little, if any, faith in Colonel Elleilloû; as one Kushite describes Colonel Elleilloû, "He is the wind, he is the air between the mountains" (32). To assert that Colonel Elleilloû, as Kush's president, acts is questionable, for he more often than not *reacts* to criticism and the insights of others; his decisions are almost always contingent upon the feedback of Ezana, Kutunda, Edumu, and other prominent Kushites. Colonel Elleilloû's individual self often wavers in confidence, but his perceived political responsibilities drive Colonel Elleilloû to continue attempting to rule Kush as a strong leader. In actuality, Colonel Elleilloû, who is ultimately unfit for the political role into which he was thrust by situations, must react to the admonitions of those around him. His impulse to react confuses his personal self and his political self. His attempts at governing according to his Islamic Marxist ideology only further complicate his actions to relieve Kush's

drought. What is more, even if he were to miraculously assuage the drought, his people would hardly credit him for doing so, for their president is an unreliable and largely absent leader. In the end, Colonel Ellelloû forfeits both his political and private selves, for one has been closeted and the other drowned out by the counsel of those around him.

Once he is deposed from his position as president of Kush, Colonel Ellelloû, living as an exile in France, sets out to write his memoir in an attempt to reestablish his individual self now that he no longer has to maintain the political Colonel Ellelloû self. Though he nonetheless writes in the third person at the end of *The Coup* when he casually describes his exiled state, he still exhibits an obvious relief to have rid himself of the political Colonel Ellelloû: “The man with her [Sittina] is relatively unprepossessing, insignificant even, shorter than she, half his face masked in NoIR sunglasses” (297). After he expresses concern for the future of Sittina’s children, he still finds satisfaction in his exiled state and his ability to reconstruct his self: “The small black man [Colonel Ellelloû] can be seen sitting at round white tables along the Quai, or a few blocks inland from the distracting, sail-speckled Mediterranean, at open-air cafes beside the river of traffic along the Esplanade de Général de Gaulle. His . . . elbow pins down a sheaf of papers. He is writing something, dreaming behind his sunglasses, among the clouds of Vespa exhaust, trying to remember, to relive” (298). Like the street dedicated to the renowned French general and president, Colonel Ellelloû now has the opportunity to historicize his presidency, which is a way of both reliving his own life during an awful period and laying a past self forced upon him to rest in history. “The man,” Colonel Ellelloû writes, “is happy, hidden. The sea breeze blows, the waiters ignore him. He is writing his memoirs. No, I should put it more precisely: Colonel Ellelloû is rumored to be working on his memoirs” (299).

*The Coup* is Updike's boldest effort at unmediation in fiction, for the publicized brutality of dictators (like Idi Amin, upon whom Updike may have modeled Colonel Ellelloû) places a vast gap in experience between typical American citizens and the dictators, and Updike surely encountered fixated opposition to an African dictator from his American readers. Like Kierkegaard, however, Updike unflinchingly probes man's depravity as a way of establishing the fundamental connection between men, even with debased men such as Colonel Ellelloû. Updike understands that depravity is the starting point of commonality for all men, the definitive characteristic of the human condition. Jack B. Moore criticizes Updike for shrinking an African nation and its people to "the diminished size of a parody" (64). Moore does not, however, devote careful attention to the Nabokovian vein in which Updike softens a serious existential endeavor to establish a sense of self, an endeavor lightened with Updike's nearly-photographic prose and his witty humor. The humor injects anesthesia into readers before Updike relentlessly exorcises the ambivalences and subjectifications arbitrated by the self by imposing absurd depictions of Americans as a way of revealing the absurdity of the mediated ambivalences and subjectifications forced upon others.

In his investigation of Colonel Ellelloû's depravity, Updike demonstrates that, despite the political atrocities he committed, Colonel Ellelloû is nonetheless just as much a self as American characters such as Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom or Ahmad Ashmay Mulloy, the central character of *Terrorist* (2006). Rabbit Angstrom struggles to establish a sense of self amidst the familial, social, and economic demands which all distract or crumble his efforts. Mulloy, like Colonel Ellelloû, attempts to be a devout Muslim, but his sense of God's absence, coupled with the (as he perceives it) pagan American culture in which he must live, makes his faith nearly impossible to

adhere to in a strict manner. Both characters strive for a desired sense of self, but merely acquire fragments as the small reward for their efforts.

As Updike rightly understands, one's self derives as one's accumulation of reactions to every other, every parallel self, throughout one's existence. Man conceives of his self against the backdrop of a universe of selves. In "On Being a Self Forever," Updike writes, "Being human cannot be borne alone. We need other presences. We need soft night noises—a mother speaking downstairs, a grandfather rumbling in response, cars swishing past on Philadelphia Avenue and their headlights wheeling about the room. We need the little clicks and sighs of a sustaining otherness. We need the gods" (245). As Updike demonstrates in *The Coup*, Colonel Ellelloû is no exception; he continually draws his sense of self from those around him: Michaelis Ezana, Candace "Candy" Cunningham (Colonel Ellelloû's college girlfriend whom he marries and takes back to Africa with him), Kadongolimi, Sittina, Kutunda, King Edumu, Allah, and so forth. Even a tyrannical dictator constantly requires the presence of others around him. Even as he reconstitutes his self through the writing of his memoirs, he makes frequent mention to the children (not necessarily even his own) and his wife around him as he sorts through the past to rediscover himself.

The constitution of the self is not merely a theme in Updike's oeuvre, but a standard for literature as is reflected in Updike's reviews of other writers' work. James A. Schiff explains that Updike writes book reviews of international authors in order to "[redraw] the global literary map by introducing foreign writers to American readers and contextualizing them within the international literary scene" (540-41). While he draws from the rich tradition of European literature, Updike, as Schiff notes, stretches "his concern beyond Europe to Asia, Africa, and South America" (548). Because Updike senses the instinctive need for man to establish a sense

of self, Updike finds confirmation in his own theme by identifying it in the work of other writers across the globe. In “Polish Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Penguin Edition of *Sanitorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, by Bruno Schulz,” Updike details the masterful ways in which Schulz chronicles the difficulties of existence. To conclude his review, Updike writes, “Personal experience taken cabilistically: this formula fits much modern fiction and, complain though we will, is hard to transcend. Being ourselves is the one religious experience we all have, an experience sharable only partially, through the exertions of talk and art” (497). The degree to which people experiences their being or self depends upon the extent to which they interact with and reacts to others. Updike identifies an international concern for the establishment of one’s self.

In his late novel *Villages* (2004), Updike identifies a village as the central motif of community for the human experience. Regardless of where villages appear—in small African backlands, in the Brazilian wilderness, in modern New England towns, which are but enlarged villages cluttered with the products of commercialism—they nonetheless represent the place where every self develops against the backdrop of the other. In his fiction, Updike’s characters leave their villages infrequently because their staying in one place affords Updike the opportunity to delve into the depravity of man and the discovery of his self. To conclude *Villages*, Updike muses, “It is a mad thing, to be alive. Villages exist to moderate this madness—to hide it from children, to bottle it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within” (321). As Updike’s unmediated depiction of Colonel Ellelloû suggests, the location of one’s village hardly matters, for every Self struggles to understand itself against the backdrop of a village of others, other parallel selves. The ambivalent imposition of arbitrations by one village member upon another, as the Swedish

Academy is well aware, unnecessarily threatens the unity of the delicate cosmopolitan community of village residents. The renunciation of the impulse toward arbitration, as seen with Updike in *The Coup*, is a beneficial step toward reversing processes which obstruct the unity that is possible amongst community members.

## Chapter 3

“Time to Look Around”: Edward Albee’s *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*:

*Two Inter-related Plays*

Readers of John Updike’s *The Coup* (1978) never have evidence enough that Americans and Kushites are able to communicate and to understand one another. Though Colonel Ellelloû literally speaks with Americans like Donald Gibbs and Klipspringer, none of them receive the words and perspective of the other side, for the discursive relation between them interferes with the attempts at communication. As is the case with many of Edward Albee’s plays, the characters in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, accompanied by the Voice from *Box*, the prefatory portion of the two inter-related plays (1968), still have the ability to communicate with one another if they choose to (none of the characters in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* speak to one another, save the Long-Winded Lady; she speaks to the Minister, but receives no reply). The Western characters themselves demonstrate no discursive relation prohibiting them from speaking with Chairman Mao; rather, it is the *audience* whose discursive relation with the late Chinese Chairman discourages communication between those present on the stage. Such an indictment of the audience is surely painful.

Through his *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Albee advances the notion that when a proper conception of man as a communal being is corrupted and lost, people’s sense of self suffers when they fail to adequately conceive of and address their fellow man, their other. The Voice which speaks during Albee’s *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* makes two tremendously curious statements about art and corruption. After she—Albee specifies that the Voice belongs to that of an unseen woman, “not young, but not ancient either: fiftyish. Neither a sharp, crone’s voice, but not refined” (263)—says that people essentially cry

over people and things they have lost, the Voice makes her first assertion about art and pain:

“When art begins to hurt . . . when art begins to hurt, it’s time to look around. Yes it is” (265).

The Voice, in a fragmented and an indirect manner, also says, “When art hurts. That is what to remember. (Two-second silence) What to look for. Then the corruption . . . (Three-second silence) Then the corruption is complete” (267). Corruption completes when a self ignores the other, thus eliminating an external perspective on his or her own situation.

Like many of the statements the Voice speaks in *Box*, these lines are unspecific, rather uncontextualized, and inconclusive, yet they comfortably situate themselves within Albee’s poetics, and they do justice to his approach to and aspirations for drama specifically, but also to all the arts. In his “Speech to the American Council for the Arts” (1998), Albee posits that the arts exist to facilitate “absolute communication” and to “put us in greater contact with ourselves and with each other, to question our values, to question the status quo, to make us rethink that which we believe we believe” (193). On a number of occasions—at Vanderbilt University while participating in the Chancellor’s Lecture Series in 2007, for instance—Albee has explained his mimetic belief in the arts to represent their audience: “The arts are there to hold a mirror up to us, are they not, to say, Look, this is how you are, this is how you behave. If you don’t like what you see in the arts, if you don’t like what you are, *change*. Don’t turn your back” (“Edward Albee”). Perhaps no art form allows artists to reflect people around them as drama, for a person’s others, through the mimetic nature of drama, visually become parallel selves, and the behavior displayed on the stage is the self’s behavior, however painful that behavior may be to the audience-self.

Both the characters in Albee’s plays as well as Albee’s audience are always tempted to turn their backs, for the mirrored image of themselves which they glimpse is painful and uncomfortable. In 2005, Christopher Bigsby posits that Albee “is prepared to settle for ‘a little

bit of light' generated by an acknowledgement of the truth of the human condition, and acceptance of pain as well as pleasure (this being part of the contract), and recognition that art is evident of transcendence" (163). Once Albee's characters take the stage—once Martha and George of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) appear and Martha tells George, "I swear . . . if you existed I'd divorce you. . . ." (164); once Tobias of *A Delicate Balance* (1966), distraught with the commotion in his house and the visitors who become more like invaders, shouts to Harry, "I WANT YOUR PLAGUE! . . . BRING IT IN!" (115); once Martin tells his best friend Ross in *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (2002) who—or, rather, what—Sylvia is and Ross thunders, "THIS IS A GOAT! YOU'RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT!" (570)—people witness a great deal that they despise, a great deal that deeply *hurts*. Through their oftentimes virulent communication, Albee's characters struggle to acknowledge the presence and worthiness of the others around them, the others who place responsibility on each self to behave amicably, honorably, respectfully, and, most of all, humanely.

The mimetic function of drama cannot properly function without two forms of communication transpiring during the play. Within the play itself, characters mirror one another, and their dialogue reveals unsightly blemishes in each character. Characters' recognitions of their blemishes certainly hurts, but they nonetheless have the opportunity to reform. On a broader level, the actors performing mirror the audience, and audience members must decide whether they will change, even if the actors themselves do not change in response to one another. The extent to which audience members choose to change reflects the degree to which they have meaningfully dialogued with the characters on stage, the audience's others. The failure to communicate with the other is also a self's failure to maintain selfhood.

As with any of his other plays, Albee intends for his experimental inter-related plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* to hurt—in the case of these plays, to challenge the discursive relation imposed upon Chairman Mao Tse-Tung by American media for Americans with the notion that their personal beliefs and ideologies, while not bound in red books and given to the masses, sound equally empty when read aloud outside the necessary national context. In an innovative manner, Albee allows typical Western individuals—an overly-disclosing and presumably American woman designated the Long-Winded Lady, the Old Woman with an old poem which she recites for limited consolation, and the Minister who does not minister, but remains silent and seated throughout the play—to untraditionally share the stage with Chairman Tse-Tung. In *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, then, Albee unmediates Chairman Mao in order to allow the Chairman to tyrannize himself on his own terms—that is, through the increasingly aggressive quotes he recites before audiences—and his quotations demonstrate his conscious effort to mediate China’s perception of Americans; this paralleled process of subjectification pushes audiences to rediscover the basic humanity they share and to resist the tendency of nations to obscure this shared humanity for political—and often propagandistic—purposes.

*Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* are not Albee’s first attempts at obviously political plays, but they are Albee’s first contemporary political plays. Albee wrote *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) decades after the popular African-American blues singer died back in 1937 because she was not admitted into a white hospital and died while being transported to a black hospital. Albee completed the writing of *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* and permitted Alan Schneider to direct the world premier of the plays amidst Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution, which spanned from 1966 to 1969 (Kuo-sin 110). As Stanley

Karnow notes, “Not once during the Cultural Revolution . . . did Mao outline a clear-cut, practical program aimed at precise objectives. Instead, he exhorted his followers to destroy his opponents so that an undefined utopia might emerge at some unspecified point in a faraway future” (qtd. in Pye 41). Both Chinese citizens and Americans (among others) wondered whether they were numbered among Chairman Mao’s enemies; the “public appearance” of Chairman Mao on stage suggests that the “threat” directly concerns audience members, who must personally respond to Chairman Mao’s address. The unguided Revolution continued to rage when the first staging of *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* occurred.

Obviously, the vast geographic separation coupled with the significant differences in culture pose sizeable barriers to Albee; to accommodate these difficulties, Albee literally “boxes” the four characters in—that is, he keeps them on the “deck of an ocean liner” (271) that appears inside the “outline of a large cube” originally viewed in *Box* (263), the play which immediately precedes and segues into *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. Although the characters do not take advantage of the unusual situation, Albee’s boxing his characters in together enables them to have important conversations with one another; in a box, they are better able to understand that the world they share is a box with rounded edges. A few critics have written insightfully regarding Albee’s use of a box as the “container” of the unembodied words of the Voice and the drama which ensue. In “*Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung: Albee’s Diptych*” (1975), C. W. E. Bigsby (Christopher Bigsby’s early pen name) argues that “the box, which dominates the stage, becomes a *tabula rasa* to be interpreted variously as the artificial construction of the artist, . . . a paradigm of the theatre, an image of the restricted world in which the individual exists or the empty shell of the body whose voice lingers on as a warning and an epitaph” (156). In a similar vein to Bigsby’s conception of Albee’s box as a *tabula rasa*,

Anne Paolucci describes the box as “visual symbolism at its best, which is to say, completely transparent” (125). Michael E. Rutenburg agrees with Jack Kroll, whose interpretation of the box Rutenburg describes as a “symbolic coffin of a decimated civilization” (204). Though they differ regarding the contemporaneous or apocalyptic and anachronistic nature of the box, these critics do all unanimously acknowledge that Albee’s strategy of boxing these diverse characters in successfully enables the play to proceed, and the overarching presence of the box allows audiences to suspend their disbelief of this otherwise-impossible scenario. For the duration of the two plays, these characters who would not normally be in a close proximity to one another are, and, because of their nearness, they have the possibility of communication, a possibility they do not act upon. The responsibility for the communication, then, falls upon the audience; they must either connect the characters in their minds or also reject the possibility of communication as have the actors present in the play.

It should be noted that the shape of a box and the appearance of Chairman Mao, a political figure frequently discussed in the news, in that box mirrors the mediation of the Chinese leader on television, and the screen of a television is likewise shaped like a box. The actuality of Albee’s plays, their live transpiration and the animation of actors performing directly for audience members, unmediates the characters—specifically Chairman Mao—by stepping beyond the flat dimensions of the television itself. Though Chairman Mao does not move about the stage continuously, the other characters shifting about behind or around him remind audiences of Chairman Mao’s actual existence as a person and not a political icon on a television. Audiences must acknowledge Chairman Mao’s personhood, which is a difficult yet fundamental step toward communication with the other.

Even in the confines of a box, the inevitability of loss—most noticeably, the loss of communication—persists throughout *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, and loss affects none of the four so noticeably as Chairman Mao. Albee specifies precisely how Chairman Mao speaks, appears, and behaves: “Mao speaks rather like a teacher. He does not raise his voice; he is not given to histrionics. His tone is always reasonable, sometimes a little sad; occasionally a half-smile will appear” (269). Albee desubjectifies Chairman Mao by dramatizing the character as a man rather than as a volatile dictator. Since he remains the most emotionally-controlled of the three characters who speak in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Chairman Mao, then, becomes a continuation of the Voice, for both exemplify the distance from life which is a recurrent concern in Albee’s plays. The quotations which Chairman Mao recites are dense with Marxist-Leninist ideology, and they require anyone reading them to hear the words passionately read in their heads or aloud. Take the following quotation (from section two of Chairman Mao’s actual *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*) used in Albee’s play as an example: “Whoever sides with the revolutionary people in deed as well as in word is a revolutionary in the full sense” (285). Mao’s words here require him—and, furthermore, those reading his published *Quotations*—to read the words with power, assurance, and conviction. If, however, the actor playing Chairman Mao reads this quotation with a calm voice, a “reasonable tone,” a “half-smile,” the revolutionary momentum of the quotation becomes winded and inhibited. Just when Chairman Mao needs to recite his quotations with ardor, he fails to do so; he has, in a sense, lost the original spirit of his passionate political phrases, and he merely recites them as a living history book explaining his old vigor. Albee may well have based his representation of Chairman Mao on Krapp of Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958); Chairman Mao and Krapp each reflect on their concluding lives. Interestingly, Krapp’s last

words are these: “Here I end this reel. Box—(pause)—three, spool—(pause)-five. (Pause.)

Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back” (28). Chairman Mao’s inability to maintain his posture amidst the pressures of life in Albee’s plays nonetheless affirms his humanity, for his ideology—as well as the fixated identity supplied for him through mediated representations of him—escapes him, and he is left with little but his humanity.

In addition to losing the impact of his quotations, Chairman Mao also loses his power as a major political figure; in this regard, he joins Albee’s dramatis personae, who cannot pursue the hopes they express and of which they dream. Albee was surely aware of Chairman Mao’s actual struggle to maintain his power, a struggle which played a significant role in convincing Chairman Mao to execute the Cultural Revolution. As Jonathan Spence notes, Chairman Mao, before launching the Cultural Revolution, became increasingly suspicious of dissenting members of his governing bureaucracy who were troubled by the Chairman’s unbridled idealism and theories (159). Chairman Mao sensed the questioning of his Marxist-Leninist doctrines, and sought to revitalize national belief in those doctrines which he disseminated. Whereas the historical Chairman Mao acted in his failing health to reassert his power in China, Albee’s Chairman Mao accepts the inevitable decline of his quotations, and he knows his power will wilt once someone either overtakes him or takes over for him. Late in the play, Chairman Mao proclaims, “Whoever sides with the revolutionary people is a revolutionary. Whoever sides with imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism is a counter-revolutionary” (284). There are, however, no sides on the stage; there are only individuals who express no concern about the political classifications which (verbally, at least) greatly concern Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao himself speaks these words in isolation, as an exile from his country aboard the ocean-liner

present in Albee's plays, and his proclamation reaches audiences' ears more as an afterthought than a relevant and contemporary political analysis. Though he tries to resist the failure of his ideology, Chairman Mao cannot resist its collapse, and audiences feel inclined to sympathize with Chairman Mao, who appears before them and convinces them to reject the previous ambivalences and subjectifications held discursively in relation to him.

Though Albee does not direct Chairman Mao to do so in his play, Glenn Loney notes in his review of the first Broadway production of Albee's play at Billy Rose Theatre that "Chairman Mao appears, wearing an inscrutable Asian mask. He promptly rips this off, revealing another one exactly like it underneath—his own face" (595-96). Albee and Alan Schneider, the first director to orchestrate the production of Albee's *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, had a good working relationship; as recorded in Mel Gussow's biography of Albee, Albee said to the actors playing in his adaptation of Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) that "Alan's a good director" (199)—high praise from Albee, who insists in "Ad Libs on Theater" (1965) that "the director must speak *for* the author, must speak *to* the actors in a very special way—in a way that will accomplish the author's intention in terms that perhaps are very far from the author's intention" (31). Albee, then, either approved of or did not object to Schneider's decision to have Chairman Mao efface himself, for Chairman Mao's doing so initially visualizes the loss of power implicit in the Chairman's words at the start of the play. The removal of Chairman Mao's mask is an early symbolic removal of a fixity exploited by media. While Chairman Mao asserts that the "communist ideological and social system alone is full of youth and vitality, sweeping the world with the momentum of an avalanche and the force of a thunderbolt" (273), the ocean-liner ferrying him moves forward calmly, unhurriedly, and unconcerned with Chairman Mao's lofty talk of ideology.

Though his dramatized Chairman Mao implicitly admits his lost power, Albee nonetheless allows Chairman Mao to do so on his own—that is, Albee does not superimpose mediated words upon Chairman Mao, and he unmediates Chairman Mao’s tyrannical subjectification so that Chairman Mao may become a tyrant on his own initiative. As an *exordium* of sorts, Chairman Mao begins the play with a retelling of the “ancient Chinese fable called ‘The foolish old man who removed the mountains’” (271). This fable, and the quotations which immediately follow it, indicate an attempt to gain credibility from his audience. Unlike the other characters, Mao alone “always speaks to the audience” as Albee instructs in his character description of Chairman Mao (269). Chairman Mao establishes rapport with his American audience, and he seeks to appear as credible before them in order to opportune communication with them. Chairman Mao proceeds with statements of facts; he looks both to history and to contemporary international politics for objective—or allegedly objective—facts. These facts oftentimes drift into subjectivity, such as when Chairman Mao asserts, “If the U.S. monopoly capitalist groups persist in pushing their policies of aggression and war, the day is bound to come when they will be hanged by the people of the whole world” (276). While other nations nearly as powerful as the United States may band together to oust an America still tangled in its notion of American exceptionalism, it is highly unlikely that remote tribal groups and long-time neutral nations (Sweden, for instance) would suddenly take up arms and join in an attack against America. By the end of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Chairman Mao recites quotes which perorate his conclusion, but his audience, if they have paid any attention to the blatant logical fallacies throughout his argument’s development, recognize the unacceptability of his conclusions and the shrewd process of subjectification which America undergoes while he speaks.

While other critics have not discussed the discursive relation to America which Chairman Mao ironically proposes to his (more often than not) American and Western theater audiences, they have noted the confrontational nature of his orations. Brenda Murphy observes that “Mao’s statements become increasingly bellicose throughout the play . . .”; she also argues that “[t]his degeneration from the claim to value peace to the active pursuit of war [which Chairman Mao follows] reflects geopolitical conditions in the twentieth century” (93). While his quotations indeed increase in volatility, they also distance themselves further and further from reality, becoming nebulous, aimless, and hollow. Toward the end of the play, for instance, Chairman Mao theorizes, “Revolutionary war is an antitoxin which not only eliminates the enemy’s poison but also purges us of our own filth” (289). While war does call upon citizens of nations to unite, it hardly expurgates them; if anything, war forces them to find a dangerous unity in everyone having blood on their hands. In his reflection upon Chairman Mao’s harsh words, Rutenberg suggests that “Mr. Albee is forcing us to take a good long look at this Communist leader. We [audience members] are compelled to recognize his existence because he is the only one in the play who talks directly to us” (208-09). Rutenberg also theorizes that “Albee plops the despot in our laps, making it impossible to ignore his intentions” (209). At the end of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Chairman Mao faintly echoes the conclusion of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and adapts their call into one for unity against the United States: “People of the world, unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs! People of the world, be courageous, dare to fight, defy difficulties and advance wave upon wave. Then the whole world will belong to the people. Monsters of all kinds shall be destroyed” (297). The monsters whom Chairman Mao calls to be destroyed are the very people into whose laps Albee has sat Chairman Mao. Albee’s art, once again, hurts.

While he forces audiences to “take a look around” as the Voice in *Box* says people must when art hurts (265), Albee allows the Long-Winded Lady, the Old Woman, and the Minister either to ignore or to pay insufficient attention to Chairman Mao and his belligerent quotations. If they would consider their surroundings and their unusual fellow passenger, they would be able to establish surprising camaraderie with the Chairman, for all experience similar difficulties and existential pangs. The self-absorption of the Western passengers, however, foregoes the possibility of communication. The insufficient attention Chairman Mao’s fellow passengers devote to him mirrors—and thus criticizes—audiences who are also normally oblivious and blinded by mediated subjectifications of others; these audiences see the rejection of communication which occurs because they normally choose to encounter others with biased presuppositions and with degrading ambivalence.

The alignment of words, the placement of specific quotations and sentences together which correlate in subject or significance, is, as Albee described it in a letter to John Steinbeck in August 1967, “an experiment in counterpoint” (qtd. in Gussow 273). Albee’s use of the different yet interconnected musical “voices” provides a musical means for demonstrating the possibility of communication between characters and the audience, a communication that could transpire between those on the ocean-liner if only they would address one another. Ernst Kurth says that the “essence of the theory of counterpoint is how two or more lines can unfold simultaneously in the most unrestrained melodic development, not by means of the chords but in spite of them” (qtd. in Jeppensen xi). In his preface to *Counterpoint* (1972), Kent Wheeler Kennan explains that counterpoint helps students become “sensitive to the forces of opposition and agreement, tension and relaxation, direction, climax, and the like, that operate whenever two or more voices are sounded simultaneously” (ix). Bigsby (1975) argues that Albee “allows the play to generate its

own meaning through association, implicit irony, and the careful modulation of tempo and tone” (158). Because they pay little or not attention to one another, the characters do not recognize the harmony they create through the similitude of their monologues. A long-time aficionado of classical music—particularly Bach’s *Fugues*, paradigmatic counterpoint pieces to which he tries to listen every morning (“Edward Albee”)—Albee is well-aware of the possibility for unity of seemingly-unrelated entities through their coterminous speaking, and he harnesses counterpoint’s capacity to create such relationships between seemingly-unassociated characters.

While the verbal relationship based in counterpoint between Chairman Mao and the Old Woman is relatively minor, it nonetheless finds a commonality of loss which they, in their advanced age, share. After Chairman Mao says that “[i]mperialism will not last long because it always does evil things,” the Old Woman immediately repeats the title of Carleton’s poem for the third time: “Over the Hill to the Poor-House” (273). The combination of these two lines confirms the deterioration of colonial imperialism in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. Though imperial nations import great wealth, they nonetheless often become corrupt and almost always abuse their power as a result of misconstrued discursive relations with less fortunate countries toward which the empire becomes ambivalent. The “Poor-House” for imperial nations becomes a state of metaphysical poverty. This immaterial poverty of individuals is later expressed when Chairman Mao asserts that the world shall unite to hang the “U.S. monopoly capitalist groups” and the Old Woman expresses lines which convey the isolation she experiences in her abandonment:

I am ready and willin’ an’ anxious any day  
 To work for a decent livin’, an’ pay my honest way;  
 For I can earn my victuals, an’ more too, I’ll be bound,

If anybody is willin' to only have me 'round. (276)

The counterpoint here generates commonality between those who live within and outside of the capitalist groups which Chairman Mao mentions; essentially, both groups are simply trying to survive among the fittest, and are hardly concerned with others beyond themselves. The Old Woman's quoted lines debunk the easily-acquired false belief that all Americans accept, even support, monopolies which dominate the economic market.

The Long-Winded Lady is the character in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* who most pointedly defuses the would-be passionate appeals to overthrow America and dismantle its hegemonic international position. Early in the play, Chairman Mao expresses a desire for "a lasting world peace" and asserts that China "must endeavor to establish normal diplomatic relations, on the basis of mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty and of equality and mutual benefit, with all countries willing to live together with us in peace" (276). The irony is that the Long-Winded Lady has just finished describing a horrific car accident she witnessed, an event which claimed the lives of passersby who happened to be struck by an out-of-control vehicle. She asks, "How many dead? Ten? Twelve?" (275). She then explains that the mind creates illusions in order to help individuals cope with reality: "The mind does that: it helps" (276). That she repeats these words about the mind after Chairman Mao's declaration of his desire for international peace suggests that such a desire is merely an illusion, a masking of violence; Chairman Mao does, late in the play, speculate that "in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun" (295).

The Long-Winded Lady also unknowingly contests Chairman Mao's comprehension of class struggle. In a Darwinist vein, Chairman Mao, repeating himself, says, "Classes struggle; some classes triumph, others are eliminated" (283). Albee composes this portion of the play in

such a way that Chairman Mao's assertion interrupts a story the Long-Winded Lady shares about her curiosity with her husband's genitalia. She does not consider her husband's genitals a tool for sexual oppression, but rather a complementary component of her being, an other which completes the void of which Jean-Paul Sartre speaks (86). The Long-Winded Lady's story engenders Chairman Mao's notion of class and finds the Chairman's antagonistic doctrine insufficient. While there is a struggle between her and her husband, the struggle is one for unity through difference.

The Voice from *Box* counterpoints—and consequently corrects—Chairman Mao's quotations most straightforwardly and unrelentingly. After he calls reactionaries (presumably bourgeois capitalists) “reactionaries,” Chairman Mao says, “From a long-term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are really powerful.” The Voice then flatly says, “Apathy, I think” (279). The Voice's words, audiences will recall, are the same words she speaks in *Box* three seconds after she describes the “[s]even hundred million babies dead in the time it takes, took, to knead the dough to make a proper loaf” (264). In both cases, the Voice conveys the futility of any belief in power through numbers, for numbers, however large, can be quickly erased. The response of the Voice issues a seemingly absolute statement; as a result, the Voice defuses the question of power, and she focuses instead on the disconnection both reactionaries and the people feel in their lives, however much they, like Chairman Mao, try to politicize struggle in an attempt to create meaning—or to “help” (276), as the Long-Winded Lady calls it. As they do to Chairman Mao, ideologies leave most people still unsettled, and they eventually leave those ideologies because of their dissatisfaction. The Voice from *Box* also disarms Chairman Mao's assertion that “[w]ar is the continuation of politics” when she says, “Something for something” (294). The Voice originally speaks this line in *Box* to conclude her musing about

people's habit of exchanging things remembered for the "memory of what we have not known" (266). Placed alongside Chairman Mao's discussion of war and politics and applied to that discussion, Albee stealthily propounds that war always exchanges things known for "memory of what we have not known" (266)—that is, what the outcome, which is estimable but uncertain, of war shall be. The Voice from *Box* offers criticism to Chairman Mao's misguided idealism that is perhaps more incisive than the warnings of dissenting politicians whose distrust of Chairman Mao's doctrines spurred Chairman Mao to launch the Cultural Revolution.

While these two characters, accompanied by the Voice from *Box*, challenge Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, they also collectively unmediate the discursive relation created for him and, by the contrapuntal arrangement of statements, help reconstitute his humanity as a man who, like any other, has created for himself ideological illusions by which he may live; his possession of a reason to live challenges those in the box with him to discover the same. The ramifications of Chairman Mao's illusions reach infinitely farther than, for instance, those of the Long-Winded Lady who, after being asked by a fellow traveler whether she had tried to commit suicide when she fell over the rail, says, "Good heavens, no; *I* have nothing to die for" (297). What the Long-Winded Lady means is that her death would accomplish nothing, not even for herself (the cessation in being is, for her, outside the point she makes here). The Voice in *Box* admires a single seagull which flies in the opposite direction of its kin: "And just one . . . moving beneath . . . in the opposite way" (267). While the death of millions in China as a result of Chairman Mao's insidious ideology is repulsive, Chairman Mao's activism and rejection of oppressive imperialism are, strangely, admirable, though admiration quickly dissipates once these admirable behaviors manifest themselves in troubling ways. Chairman Mao says at the beginning of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* that "we must proceed from the fact that China has

six hundred million people, and we must never forget this fact” (272). Rather than passively allowing China to suffer from outside forces as it had for decades, Chairman Mao chooses to “fly” against oppression and to carry all of China under his wings as he opposes external hegemonic interference. In Chairman Mao’s mind, those who died amidst his flight are unavoidable casualties.

Though experiments do not always succeed, Albee’s experimental plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* function very well. Toby Zinman reflects on the power of these two inter-related plays and writes, “Much of the intertextual resonance created by the two plays and by their isolated voice is oblique, but the ultimate effect is that these characters, oblivious of each other’s presence, are linked by the play itself” (72). In 1975, Bigsby propounds that Albee “attempts to bring together the whole meta-structure of illusions which link together the fabric of the private and public world” (152), and Bigsby later posits that “Albee is less concerned with differences than with similarities. All are united in their insistence on the imperfections of life and their awareness of impending crisis” (159). Paolucci describes the players in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* as “the varieties of total experience, each trapped in his own consciousness (or box)” (126). For Albee, all the world is a box in which those who inhabit it must generate for themselves illusions strong enough to keep them alive.

The foremost reason why Albee’s plays succeed as they do is that they demonstrate the ease in which people constructs oppressive discursive relations to others, and the horrendous effects in which these relations can result. Though discursive relations with an individual other are relatively harmless, the nationalization and politicization of discursive relations inevitably leads to terribly skewed logic and, ultimately, a lost sense of shared humanity. If Chairman Mao actually had the power and support to enact the calls which he issues in *Quotations from*

*Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, he would have wrought great havoc. Likewise, America, because of its inordinate international power, risks decimating other civilizations in its attempt to spread democracy across the globe, and it jeopardizes the survival of those whom it initially tries to help. Albee recognizes this and allows *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* to hurt deeply because they must defuse the notion of American exceptionalism—or any notion of exceptionalism for that matter, for all potentially threaten the well-being and survival of man. The cosmopolitan-minded nature of Albee’s play aligns well with the Swedish Academy’s search for a humane “idealistic tendency” and a global-mindedness that defends the other instead of oppressing the other.

## Chapter 4

Orphans in a Surreal World: Charles Simic's *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.: Selected Late and New Poems*

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi K. Bhabha calls for the affirmation of Frantz Fanon's notion of "national consciousness," which Fanon develops in his *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and Bhabha argues that national consciousness supplies an "international dimension both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples" that is crucial to the postcolonial world (4). Fanon himself explains that "national consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty, fragile shell" and that the "cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe – a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity" (97). As Bhabha understands it, national consciousness is indeed "empty" by itself, but it serves as a portal toward the liminal zones of overlapping nation-spaces. Bhabha, in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994), recognizes that the movement beyond cultural "nationness" is a step into "'in-between' places" which "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). In this "in-between" region, individuals' sense of self encounters and is clarified by the other selves in the same liminal space; the possibility of transition between nationality's communal identities deemphasizes a narrow national identity, favoring instead identities fashioned out of a matrix of influences.

Charles Simic, a poet born in Belgrade in 1938 who immigrated with his mother and younger brother to the United States in 1954 ("In the Beginning . . ." 38), is undoubtedly a poet

who transgresses any specific nationness, opting instead for the liminal, “in-between” places Bhabha considers so crucial (“Introduction: Locations of culture” 2). Tomislav Longinovic, like other critics, identifies elements of “separation and exile” in Simic’s poetry, elements which seem to be “almost necessary conditions for this kind of insight [which Simic gives], in which translation is not simply a process of transformation of one set of signs to another, but an almost alchemical transfiguration of one’s linguistic and cultural origin into a medium for communicating with the world of actuality” (151). As Simic says in “Notes on Poetry and History” (1984), “We are orphans of ideologies. Everyone who made history in this century in our name believed that the massacre of the innocents was permissible for the sake of the future” (125). For Simic, the world becomes a large orphanage when powerful figures or organizations manipulate national consciousnesses with ideologies, sanctioning otherwise-unimaginable travesties. Simic’s dwelling in the “in-between” zone, as well as his demonstration to readers of the transitory nature national consciousness, protect Simic from the processes of ambivalence and subjectification; to him, everyone is an orphan. In *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.: Selected New and Late Poems* (2003) as well as throughout his authorship, Simic participates in the act of unmediation by surrealistically transporting readers into unmarked territories, thereby locating the Self and the Other in the same liminal country where the two discover their shared humanity, and he utilizes this shared zone of liminality to demonstrate that all men live in horrific and absurd conditions, regardless of their actual geographic location and the temporary social conditions of that respective location.

As Simic understands quite well since he is from Belgrade, geographic locations are, by and large, arbitrary and subject to change, and, in turbulent regions such as Eastern Europe, they have been in flux continually throughout history because of numerous factors. As Sima M.

Ćirković eloquently details in *The Serbs* (2004), the history of Serbia can be characterized as “long, complex, changeable, and visibly unfinished” (xvi). While pride in a community’s nation is not inherently wrong, that pride often leads to violent outcomes, for people fiercely defend their nations when they sense their nation is in danger; as a result, people become fiercely defensive of arbitrarily-designated areas designated as nations. Shaken by German occupation (1941-1945), the Serbs, as Branimir Anzulovic explains in *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (1999), “were gripped by an intense fear,” a fear of “being massacred again” which was “intensified by huge exaggerations of Serbian victims during the Second World War and by the depiction of some of their neighbors as inherently genocidal” (109). Anzulovic’s insights lead to the conclusion that Serbs, out of their fear, projected antagonistic discursive relations between themselves and their neighbors (which was neither justified nor unjustified, merely inconclusive and presumptive); these discursive relations, in turn, aggravated and theatricalized the Balkan conflict. When a nation such as Serbia acts viciously against others, people outside the region(s) in conflict take interest and demand an explanation, yet the explanations offered are all too often oversimplified and misleading. To resist manipulations of national consciousness and ambivalent attempts at subjectifying neighbors, individuals must find a stable identity in themselves rather than tangled borderlines between nations.

Because of his ability to distance himself from the manipulation of national consciousness, Simic considers himself relatively free from the effects of nationalism. In his memoir “In the Beginning . . .” (1990), Simic recounts his memories of living in Serbia during World War Two when Nazi Germany attacked and occupied Belgrade starting in 1941 (4), and Simic also recalls the post-war years in which the Communists exercised control of the country (14). In a 1975 interview with George Starbuck, Simic casually dismisses the effects of the war

and occupations upon him: “. . . I don’t wish to come out and say ‘I’ve seen this and that.’ I’ve seen terrifying sights. But on the other hand, I wasn’t very unique in that. Everyone else was there. They saw the same thing. Men hung from lampposts, whatever. There would be another falseness. All those things did not really astonish me at the time” (35). After making this comment, Simic goes on to describe how he and his friends took war gear from dead German soldiers, a memory which Simic literalizes in *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth: Notebooks* (2008) and calls “the story of the helmet full of lice” (3-4). Simic is able to depersonalize his own experiences and find that they are different from others’ around the world only in specific details; people have, like Simic, had to find identity elsewhere since identities loaned to them through nationalism have inadequately supported them.

Simic does not only look to those in the twentieth century for similar experiences of destructive ideologies; in many of his poems, Simic turns to history for examples in previous centuries of nations and individuals who have also endured similar difficulties as those of now-Serbia. In “Frightening Toys” (1990), Simic demonstrates the way in which history and its innumerable instances of violence inevitably affect a wide range of people:

History practicing its scissor-clips  
 In the dark,  
 So everything comes out in the end  
 Missing an arm or a leg.  
 Still, if that’s all you’ve got  
 To play with today . . .  
 This doll at least had a head,  
 And its lips were red! (1-8)

The deformities emerging from history, then, should be expected based on these lines of Simic's; very few escape unscathed. That the doll described still possesses its head is small consolation for a young child interested in playing with the stumped toy, but for Simic, who has witnessed the homicidal results of unrestrained nationalism, the keeping of one's head amidst barbarism is, in more ways than one, something worthy of celebration. The retention of one's head amidst the chaos of history suggests that the doll—and, by extension, people—may preserve the central symbol of their rationality amidst the turmoil in which they live.

Despite the deformities history often inflicts upon people, Simic, having witnessed such deformation first-hand in his homeland, nonetheless realizes that people carry on with their lives despite the presence of brutal dictators and regimes in their homeland, even if their lives are limited by the threatening presence. In "Empires" (1994), Simic transposes an everyday task with groundbreaking history:

My grandmother prophesied the end

Of your empires, O fools!

She was ironing. The radio was on.

The earth trembled beneath our feet. (1-4)

The fact that the speaker's grandmother continues performing the necessary task of laundering clothes amidst revolutionary quaking in their terrain indicates that she has prophetic foresight and may carry on with her life, unaffected by the political situation the broadcasters discuss on the radio in her home. In the next stanza, the speaker says, "There were cheers and gun salutes for the monster [on the radio]. / 'I could kill him with my bare hands,' / She announced to me" (7-9). Here the grandmother sheds the notion that, because of her advanced age, she is impotent

and unable to protect herself, and she undermines the “monster’s” elevated position through her dissident threat to slay him without even having to rely on a weapon for added force.

The fall of an empire, which the speaker’s grandmother foretells in “Empires,” is not a single historical event, but a regular occurrence in history. As if he keeps a copy of Edward Gibbon’s renowned books on Rome open at his desk at all times, Simic regularly looks to the fall of the Roman Empire as a lesson from which men have yet to successfully learn the unavoidable decline of any expansive territory. The speaker of “Paradise” (1990) begins the poem in a neighborhood called “Hell’s Kitchen” in which “a beggar claimed to be playing Nero’s fiddle / While the city burned in midsummer heat” (2-3). The image, one of a man distracted from a pressing disaster by a ditty on a fiddle, suggests that emperors, even those as brutal and protective of their Roman empire as was Nero, nonetheless cannot correctly perceive imminent danger; rather, it is the Shakespearean jester-like figure who acknowledges the danger, and who does so in a jubilant manner. In “Cherry Blossom Time” (2001), the speaker describes a run-down Washington, DC with “[g]ray sewage bubbling up out of street sewers” (1) and people “[s]warming on the Capitol steps” (4). After he or she reflects on this troubling and bizarre scene for a couple stanzas, the speaker then thinks on the fallen Roman empire:

As if this were a 1950s Fall of the Roman Empire movie set,  
 And we the bewildered,  
 Absurdly costumed, milling extras  
 Among the pink cherry blossoms. (13-16)

Though the “extra” people on the movie set appear out of place and ill-suited for the setting, they still find an explanation in the historical back-story which they are, by their presence and

participation, loosely recreating. The decline of an imperial territory—America, in the case of this poem—does not surprise those present and witnessing physical evidences of such a decline.

For Simic, the liminality of national boundaries as a result of the temporal power of empires has two primary effects: it challenges people to envision similar horrors of an empire in their own land, and it drives people away from finding identity in their own nation, a nation whose nationness fluctuates, and toward a stable individualism, like that of the grandmother in “Empires,” which may endure an even survive empires. In her discussion of Simic’s *Walking the Black Cat* (1996), Tina Barr posits that Simic challenges his readers “to submit the world to a ‘phenomenological interrogation,’ to see reality as being subject to and taking place within the active process of change and chance, with all possibilities open” (85). The changes, which are propelled by chance, manifest themselves particularly in terms of geographical location (usually degradations and entropic devolutions into absurdity) and personal irrationality (the reader must make some form of amends with the inexplicable and unnatural behavior of the characters who appear in Simic’s poems). Furthermore, a country’s fate is seemingly left to chance since it will, in time, have tyrannical leaders who will cause terror amongst the people. This inevitability capsizes democratic values; while the people may vote or try to oust a malicious leader, that leader may ignore their voice and overpower their communal attempts to rid themselves of him or her. People can only hope for good leaders and live as disaffectedly as possible while poor leaders have power. Barr also argues that “Simic’s work reflects a consciousness of being at the whim of change and chance; cards, like augury or dice made from knucklebones, represent the agency of chance, and Simic’s poetry itself reflects this acute awareness; it is positioned at that fulcrum” (92). People only survive Simic’s poems by expecting life to crawl forth from chance and absurdity.

Since people are “orphans of ideology” in Simic’s mind (“Notes on Poetry” 125), they must be able to perceive their land being possessed and ruined by the oppressor, for they have seen the misguided efforts and eventual failure of ideologies in the twentieth century. People’s ability to conceive of their land possessed by an outside imperial force better prepares them for the ever-possible reality that such a scenario may someday become a temporary reality. In “Two Dogs” (1990), an unusually autobiographical poem for Simic which closely resembles an experience Simic recalls in “In the Beginning . . .” (8-9), Simic allows the speaker to muse upon a tense time during World War Two:

It made me remember the Germans marching  
 Past our house in 1944.  
 The way everybody stood on the sidewalk  
 Watching them out of the corner of the eye,  
 The earth trembling, death going by . . . (11-15)

This memory of Germans, or death, approaching and eventually passing helps the speaker better understand the aged dog in New Hampshire who is “afraid of his own shadow / In some Southern town” (1-2). The dog in New Hampshire reminds him of the “little white dog” that “ran into the street / And got entangled with the soldiers’ feet” (16-17). The dog in New Hampshire intuitively senses death nearing as the Germans did toward the speaker’s home in 1944, and the speaker’s consciousness of death’s imminence makes the approaching force more bearable; should the speaker’s America be invaded, death would merely be personified in the personas of the invaders rather than abstract and unembodied.

The possibility of desolation coming to a prosperous land such as America is not easy to conceive of, so Simic relies upon history as well as contemporary examples of atrocities

elsewhere to remind readers of this possibility. In “Sunday Papers” (2001), Simic begins the poem with a stark reminder of the possibility of desolation:

The butchery of the innocent  
 Never stops. That’s about all  
 We can ever be sure of, love,  
 Even more sure than the roast  
 You are bringing out of the oven. (1-5)

The roast (perhaps a symbol of the crematoria at concentration camps) which the speaker’s significant other retrieves from the oven is, of course, a certain reality; in this poem, Simic does not challenge reality as does Eugène Ionesco in *The Bald Soprano* (1950), with the question debated between Mr. and Mrs. Smith regarding whether or not someone was present to ring the doorbell. Massacres are undeniable and overwhelming components of reality. This harsh reality contrasts the members of the church congregation:

The vague desire for truth  
 And the mighty fear of it  
 . . . makes them turn up  
 Despite the glorious spring weather. (10-13)

The churchgoers in these lines are twice-removed from reality; the truth of magnificent weather in spring and the provision of baked meat are not enough for them, much less the most basic fact of life, that of incessant bloodshed. Simic’s poetry begins to assuage any “mighty fear” (11) of the truth of never-ending butcheries (1-2) by universalizing suffering and by implying that such suffering is bound to come at some point to any given group of people. Those who accept the imminence of suffering are able to stoically bear the suffering whenever it arrives. As those who

acknowledge their mortality typically enter old age less fearfully, so those who admit that national consciousness is easily manipulated and used as a tool for brutality by an outside nation or even their own nation against the people. The hard truth removes the surprise from the suffering, which would otherwise intensify the suffering all the more.

Those who, unlike the congregation in “Sunday Papers,” are able to acknowledge yet remain uncommitted to ideologically-driven political forces withstand the pressures of reality better. The uncommitted individual’s ability to stand apart from the political force does not have utilitarian or altruistic results; rather, it merely equips one to survive. In “Cameo Appearance” (1996), the speaker recalls a part he played in a film:

I had a small, nonspeaking part  
 In a bloody epic. I was one of the  
 Bombed and fleeing humanity.  
 In the distance our great leader  
 Crowed like a rooster from a balcony,  
 Or was it a great actor  
 Impersonating our great leader? (1-7)

The likening of the “great leader” (4) unto a rooster on a balcony has a similar effect as the grandmother has in “Empires” when she threatens to kill the “monster” (7): both downsize major political figures, thereby mocking what power they temporarily possess. The violence from which the speaker and the multitude around him flee seems to come independently of the ineffective leader who cannot overcome the distance between himself and the terrified people. The leader, seemingly nothing more than a cuckold, simply squawks—or rambles—from afar, seemingly unaware of the absurdities of his respective ideology.

Though people may flee or be thrown about by the turbulent twentieth century (or any century for that matter, though the twentieth is a case-in-point example), Simic knows that people ultimately cannot escape and must merely look on stoically at reality and even the possibility of reality worsening. Simic's speaker likens the world to a prison in "Serving Time" (2003), a ward in which everyone will, in due time, die:

Here on death row, I read a lot of books.  
 First it was law, as you'd expect.  
 Then came history, ancient and modern.  
 Finally philosophy—all that being and nothingness stuff.  
 The more I read, the less I understand.  
 Still, other inmates call me professor. (7-12)

Though Simic's speaker is familiar enough with Jean-Paul Sartre, Gibbon, and legal handbooks, the only thing he *must* understand without fail is that the world is a prison. Simic's speaker then divulges that they "had no guards" (13) and that

Even the executions we carry out  
 By ourselves, attaching the wires,  
 Playing warden, playing chaplain,  
 All because a little voice in our head  
 Whispers something about our last appeal  
 Being denied by God himself. (16-21)

The inmates in Simic's prison, which is but a metaphor for the world, willingly subject themselves to such an existence, for their century has led them to believe that such absurdities are the norm and encapsulate the complete extent of man's existence. The simple awareness of

this absurdity which Simic's speaker obtains primarily through reading best prepares him to endure, and his knowledge makes him into a sage of sorts, one whom his neighboring inmates consult for wisdom. As Simic records in *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*, "I still think Camus is right. Heroic lucidity in the face of the absurd is about all we really have" (71).

While Simic's existential worldview, influenced by the works of Camus and Sartre as well as Friedrich Nietzsche and Emil Cioran as evidenced by *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*, is quite obvious in his poetry, the way in which it manifests itself into his poetics and, by extension, his poetry is difficult to describe, as is the way in which national consciousnesses collapse, thus forcing individuals to look into themselves for identity. The philosophical underpinnings of Simic's poetry often dizzy and confound readers approaching his work; Simic reaches his individualized form of existentialism through the deterritorialization of identity and through the unmarked boundaries of the "in-between." In response to a question Rod Steier asks about philosophy in Simic's poetry, Simic answers, "Ideally, if there's any kind of intellectual content or thought in my work, I have attempted to digest it and absorb it into the experience the poem is describing. . . . Poetry doesn't state ideas. At best, it causes them. It's thought-provoking" (qtd. in Hart 202). Of course, the experiences Simic articulates in his poems is that of the orphan trying to make sense of things in an undistinguished territory which may be located anywhere. Simic's poems do not proclaim conclusions after systematically probing *problemata*, but instead offer thumbnail-sized pictures of reality from which readers, in turn, may deduce what conclusions they will.

The landscapes, which appear in the background of these miniature picture-poems of Simic's, are unspecific so that they may, in a sense, occur anywhere readers encounter Simic's poems. Diana Engelmann reflects on one of Simic's early poems and observes, "The setting and

the time depicted in the poem are not specified because the suffering and displacement of the lonely widow are too common for the twentieth century. She exists in each decade and at any location: a Warsaw ghetto to a border village somewhere in the Middle East” (47). The universality of suffering cancels any need for a specific geographic context. Barr links the style of Simic’s poetic landscapes to the artist Joseph Cornell’s boxes (Simic admires Cornell’s art and even wrote a book titled *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* [2006] in which he reflected on the artist’s work), for both the poet and the artist draw from ubiquitous sources and converge their materials onto shared universal terrain (88). Bruce Weigl explains that, in Simic’s poetry, “an entire universe is projected, as in Klee and Matisse, a mental and concrete landscape of ideas and the technological implements of our own undoing that take shape in real people’s lives dramatized in Simic’s haunting minimalist vignettes” (2). In a similar vein, Chard deNiord correlates Simic with the Grimm brothers and asserts that “Simic appeals directly to the curious child in his reader for the purpose of revealing some new laconic terror about those very places we thought were most safe and familiar. By arresting our attention with dream-like vignettes, Simic converts his private myths into universal narratives” (81). For Simic, landscapes and geographic terrains give way to the ideas and ideologies possessed by the individuals who dwell there, and he implicitly advances the notion that people should not be surprised when ideologies finally arrive and possess their nations.

Simic’s terrains and landscapes are not the only component of his poetry which critics find surreal; the people who appear in Simic’s poems are equally, if not more, befuddling. Victor Contoski asserts that “Simic’s human actors seem somehow incomplete, bit players who appear swiftly, say their line or make their gesture, then disappear before their characters can begin to develop. We know them from the outside only, strangers in every sense of the word” (56). The

characters most likely seem unfinished to Contoski because they bear no distinct national allegiance or identity; having been orphaned from ideologies, they migrate as vagabonds through Simic's poems and elsewhere, searching for identity. They cannot remain in one place because their former "one" place—the nation—has collapsed or will do so sooner or later. Because of the brevity of Simic's poem and their collage-like style, the characters are merely extras to the overall impression which Simic means to evoke in each poem. K. E. Duffin finds that the "speaker in a Simic poem is often looking into a realm from which he is excluded, and discovering, in a ruptive sequence of windows, an inscrutable film" (65). Duffin later observes that the exile experienced by two of Simic's reappearing character types, the prisoner and the voyeur, are unavoidable because of their universality in the twentieth century (66). Since everyone has been orphaned by ideologies in Simic's mind, they each possess a strange, inexplicable individuality which protects them and distances them from external forces by teaching them indifference to the events transpiring. While this individuality alienates the individual from his or her peers in the poem and from readers, it nonetheless serves as a protective hedge against oppressive forces. The individuality advanced by Simic also discourages discursive formation and the processes of ambivalence and subjectification by finding commonality in men.

The rigorous maintenance of people's individualism defends them from sweeping cults of nationalism. Simic may very well claim to define himself as an American poet not because he has written in English, but to distance himself from the Yugoslavian and Serbian writers whose work provoked the Balkan conflicts in the late twentieth century (Anzulovic 145). Simic's self-imposed sense of exile, a trait common amongst twentieth century writers, has, as deNiord propounds, "only deepened his solitary sense of the poet's role as an individual who stands

heroically alone against the self-justifying, 'religious' tenets of nationalism" (78). In *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*, Simic coarsely expresses his distaste for nationalism (64).

Longinovic writes, "Simic does not mourn the departure from the native country, since it is a getaway. Life in exile is experienced as salvation, and America is the place of happiness for the boy. But at the same time, humans are likened to puppets unable to know or control their own destiny. The horrific power of history often makes choices and decisions for them" (150).

Though men may not control their destiny, they may control their responses to their destiny once history hurls them about as it hurled Simic's speaker's bed in "Talking to the Ceiling" (1999) (43).

Dark as his poems often are, Simic nonetheless values the solidarity of orphaned men which results from their shared experiences of twentieth century horrors. The "idealistic tendency" of Simic's work—the rejection of nationalism and the ideologies which are inextricably bound to nationalism and through which nationalism functions, favoring instead an understanding of self as exiled and independent of such ideological frameworks which nations construct—strikingly aligns with Shelley's idealism (Simic's speaker finds Shelley's poems helpful in explaining his strange surroundings in New York City in the poem "Shelley" [1990]). Furthermore, the nomadic, deterritorialized nature of Simic's poems should appeal to the Swedish Academy, who exhibit a clear interest in exile, diaspora, and similar themes of human displacement.

## Chapter 5

Civil Barbarity and Barbaric Civility: Contemporary American Writers, Witness Literature, and  
Cosmopolitanism

The literary careers of John Updike, Edward Albee, and Charles Simic—three authors mindful of the national and international contexts in which they write—pose a worthy retort to Horace Engdahl’s criticism that America is “too isolated, too insular,” that it does not “translate enough” and really participate in the “big dialogue of literature” (qtd. in Derbyshire 84), and that its writers are “too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture” (qtd. in McGrath 3). In their writing, the American authors studied in this thesis evince a strong awareness of international affairs, as well as of literature around the world. Though they oftentimes set their work against the backdrop of America, these writers compose their work in a polysemous manner which allows readers to move between a strictly national context and an international context. Each author’s observations are not limited to modern Americans, but may be extended to the world at large, for each author primarily explores and comments upon the human condition, a condition ubiquitously relevant.

Out of the three authors examined in this study, Engdahl’s criticism of Americans regarding translation would apply primarily to Albee. In his lifetime, Updike, in addition to publishing original works prolifically, also contributed translations of the contemporary Russian poet Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Yevtushenko’s *Stolen Apples* (1971), a collection with poems also translated by James Dickey and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In 1986, Updike also contributed a translation of Ionnes Secundus’ Renaissance Latin poem titled “Basium XVI,” or “Kiss Sixteen” for a translation project commissioned by the Houghton Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts titled *Poemata Humanistica Decem: Renaissance Latin Poems with English Translations*. Simic

has published *Four Yugoslav Poets; Ivan V. Lalic, Branko Miljkovic, Milorad Pavic, and Ljubomir Simovic* in 1970 and *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry* in 1992. Additionally, Simic has completed book-length translations of works by Vasko Popa, Ivan V. Lalic, Tomaz Salamun, and Radmila Lazic.

Though the extent to which American writers and publishers should provide volumes of work from writers outside America is relative and inconclusive, Engdahl did not make a completely unfounded accusation when he complained that America does not produce and read enough translated works. Charles McGrath rather bluntly cedes Engdahl's criticism regarding translation: "It's true. We don't [translate enough]. Publishers are always claiming that translations just don't sell here, and they no longer even try anymore" (3). Mokoto Rich offers a much more cogent analysis of America's involvement in translation in "Translation is Foreign to U.S. Publishers" (2008). Rich discusses the trends at the annual Frankfurt Book Fair held in October. Rich notes that "American publishers spend most of the week in Hall 8, the enormous exhibit space where English-language publishers hold court" (3) Rich explains that the American publishers who do express interest in translating works from internationally-reputable writers outside America tend to be independent publishers who are stunned that the cost for purchasing rights to the works is, compared to the cost of acquiring rights for an undistinguished writer in America, surprisingly inexpensive; the rights to mediocre American literature cost far more than those to excellent volumes from abroad (3). Some prominent agencies, Rich says, even agree to pay the fees for acquiring rights to publication in order to help these smaller American publishers financially (3). The small presses are, however, only pleasant exceptions to the fact that American publishers generally neglect the task of translation; Anne-Solange Noble, foreign-rights director at the French Gallimard, offers sharp criticism of the situation: "American

publishers are depriving the American readership of the cultural diversity through translation to which they are entitled. . . . It is what I call the poverty of the rich” (qtd. in Rich 3).

Besides Engdahl’s criticism, formidable factors detract from the likelihood of these American authors—and many American authors—receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. The position of literary neutrality (discussed in the second section of chapter one) during wartime, established during Erik Axel Karlfeldt’s career as permanent secretary to the Swedish Academy, poses an obvious difficulty. The United States has, in the Post-Cold War Era (1991- ), been aggressively involved in a number of conflicts: the Gulf War (1990-1991), the Battle of Mogadishu (1993), the Kosovo War (1998-1999), and, most recently, the War on Terrorism (2001- ), directed specifically against Afghanistan and Iraq. There has been little time between conflicts for the Swedish Academy to squeeze in an American laureate such as Updike, Albee, or Simic. The pragmatic shift during Lars Gyllensten’s time as permanent secretary (1977-1986) also poses two significant deterrents to American authors. The wide variety of literary awards and honors available to American authors—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medals, and many more—make the Nobel Prize in Literature merely the brightest gem rather than a crucial support to “an original or innovative *author*” who “can be given means to continue” because of the Nobel Prize in Literature (Gyllensten qtd. in Espmark 89). Also, race and gender include these three authors into “majority” literature, thus excluding them from the attempt of the Swedish Academy, beginning during Gyllensten’s time as permanent secretary, to extend the Nobel Prize in Literature toward minority literatures and to women since both groups had been neglected for decades.

Regardless of the seriousness or accuracy of Engdahl’s statements about American literature, the virulent response from Americans to the statements clearly indicates that the issue

of America's debatable place in contemporary international literature is pressing, and critics across the globe should accept this opportunity to dialogue about America's place in the contemporary global literary context. Though such a dialogue is initiated from a conflict, the reward of such discussion is certainly promising, for Americans and critics in various nations have the opportunity to reach a better understanding of each other, to offer constructive criticism, and to make necessary changes. Failure to gather on such a timely occasion risks the solidification of misunderstandings between nations, as well as the writers and critics in each nation; the foregoing of such an occasion to dialogue is nothing short of foolish.

Based on the exposition of Updike, Albee, and Simic presented in the three preceding chapters, Engdahl's notion that contemporary American authors are withdrawn from an international context and that they merely react to their culture is a significantly flawed estimation and notable misrepresentation of criticized Americans. Quite simply, American authors have a vastly different yet equally important task from that of witness literature writers: the task of debunking myths and misconceptions which fuel an empire (specifically for American authors, demonstrating the arbitrariness of American exceptionalism and unmediating the other from mediated fixities and attempting to reverse the processes of ambivalence and subjectification). They expose these myths and misconceptions because they are aware of the possible mutation of their civilization into a barbaric nation if these myths and misconceptions go unaddressed. The effort of writers such as Updike, Albee, and Simic to accomplish these things should merit serious attention, for they have an internal perspective of empires, whereas writers of witness literature almost always have an external perspective because of their suffering. Writers of witness literature hurl stones back at empires; writers critical of the empire send a Trojan horse of sorts into the heart of the empire.

Walter Benjamin's observations about the dialectic relationship between civilization and barbarism in documents merits attention here, for they precipitate a mode of understanding the crucial relationship between allegedly "imperial" writers like contemporary American authors and writers of witness literature. In this mode of understanding, civilization connotes a society or nation enjoying relative degrees of peace and prosperity, whereas barbarism connotes a society or nation struggling to survive against calamitous conditions; each exists against the backdrop of the other, and each possesses underlying elements of the other. Benjamin insightfully explores the barbarity of what he calls "documents of civilization," yet he does not explicate the reciprocity of civilization and barbarism in the shared field of documents, or literature in the case of this study. Benjamin rightly hears the groans of the oppressed, whose labor has enabled prominent individuals or cultures to enjoy rewards they themselves did little or nothing to earn. Because of this, Benjamin argues, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" (258). The wealth, luxury, and preeminence of "civilizations" known for their civility are but distractions from the barbarism necessary to construct a civilization. The predominance of barbarism in witness literature, placed there in order to recreate the immediacy and the moment of the atrocities for readers, necessitates a reciprocation of Benjamin's brilliant statement: there is no document of *barbarism* which is not at the same time a document of *civilization*. And just as such a document is free of civilization, *civilization* also taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. Such a statement is obviously uncomfortable and inherently requests slight alterations. Nihilist as the modern age is, few would disagree that civilization taints documents of barbarism, arguing instead that it *redeems* barbaric documents, that civilization recreates the

glimmer of hope for readers which those who witnessed the events themselves had to either spot or imagine.

Walt Whitman, who calls America “a teeming nation of nations” in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (616), sees America as the zenith of nations up to which other nations have collectively built; the plurality of citizens leads to the mistaken assumption that exceptionalism results from diversity. As the apprenticeship of America concludes, America’s ability to study itself as a “world-nation” and its citizens as representatives of the world indeed leads to a certain form of isolation and insularity which troubles Engdahl; to those outside America, America’s newness has obviously aged and solidified into a nation with a great deal of experiences behind it which coalesce it into a distinct natural entity. Few nations have had a historical precedent for diversity amidst their populations until the twentieth century—the century of cosmopolitanization and historic amounts of travel, expatriation, exile, and immigration. America has uniquely established itself as a nation-world from its conception.

The mythic origins of America as a New World embodied by “new people” (Emerson qtd. in Levine 106), people “made” new by their entrance into America and their acquired citizenship there (which continued in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century), is not the only force which insulates America, thus making it vulnerable to barbarism; its media, the product of America’s industrial capabilities and its technological advances, also insulate America from the rest of the world. Though its tutelage under Europe, arguably, concluded, America’s connection with the world and the events transpiring about the globe has not concluded; rather, America is still informed about global events. The problem, as Neil Postman explains, is the manner, or the *medium*, through which America receives its global information. The selectivity and editing of news pieces fragments reality for those receiving the

news, which creates what Postman calls “disinformation” (107): information which cannot properly affect its receivers because of the inadequate medium through which viewers must receive it. In a similar vein to Postman, Marshall McLuhan describes the inability of viewers to properly sympathize with news presented because of the medium through which that information is presented (61). The “disinformation” described by Postman (107) signals what Jean Baudrillard identifies as “the era of simulation,” which “is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials . . . (2). In the era of simulation, news consequently distorts the individuals whom it seeks to represent; the simulation of news allows those not present in the event itself to experience what Baudrillard calls “a fantastic telescoping,” a view of the “implosion of meaning” (31) where, because of the ineffective means of communication, the events blur into a poor representation of reality, poor insofar as the simulation’s conclusion distances viewers from the event and creates the false illusion that the event has concluded because it has ceased to be simulated. This distancing and the “telescoping” required to see from afar lead to the processes of ambivalence and subjectification; those telescoping must order the horrors in order to bear what is otherwise unbearable to witness what those afar experience.

Baudrillard argues that “[t]he only real weapon of power, its [reality’s] only strategy against this defection, is to inject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production” (22). The “real” which American authors, through their literature, inject into their culture is, as Stacey Michele Olster argues, a “recycled” realism. She describes contemporary American literature as “intertextual,” for it assimilates the words and characters of “popular trash” in order to counteract the monopoly simulation holds upon American culture (10). Updike makes countless cultural references in his fiction as a way of unmasking the simulations, a reversal of what

Baudrillard identifies as the second “successive phase of the image,” the “re-facing” of reality with a representative image (6). Albee sets Chairman Mao himself in front of theater audiences in order to hear the emptiness of his lofty quotations *for themselves* rather than through a short segment mentioning them on a news broadcast. Simic relocates horrors happening elsewhere in settings of which Americans may easily conceive in order to allow the horror to have its proper sobering effect, an effect made impossible through the medium of simulation. The recycling of simulation, the crumpling of the image to restore reality to its proper place, is one of the most important means of unmediation which contemporary American authors employ. When they challenge simulated realities, they do not merely respond to trends in their mass culture; they actively defend reality. Furthermore, American writers are not alone in their defense of reality and resistance against the simulation; as Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel observe, “Novels of the contemporary extreme – from North and South America, from Europe and the Middle East – are set in a world both similar to and different from our own: a hyper-real [a term Baudrillard uses], often apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction” (1). The collapse of reality through simulation is no longer a distinctly American problem or one with which only American authors are concerned.

Since the simulations of reality in other countries leads to the formation of hierarchical discursive relations with those who suffer, American authors also question the notion of American exceptionalism. William Blazek and Michael K. Glenday perceive an increasing number of scholars who, following the lead of American authors, recognize “a genuine transition in the nation’s mythic life” which exposes the existence of these myths and examines “the legacy of that corruption” (4). Regarding contemporary American literature, Blazek and Glenday assert

that “American writing has incorporated stories of defeat, stories of the land and its people, within a revised concept of national exceptionalism and human possibility, written from both international and transcultural perspectives” (6). It is this international and transcultural perspective of American authors which leads Jay Clayton to propound that “[t]he inability of any writer or style to hold sway is a defining characteristic of the times, the result . . . of an increasing multicultural society, postindustrial economy, and interdisciplinary conception of writing. It is certainly *not* the result of some decline in the imaginative energy of the nation’s culture, or of the lack of dedication and talent of writers” (148). Contemporary American writers strip their work of any pomp and exceptionalism, favoring instead modest and humble celebrations of the diversity of America.

While Durand and Mandel properly document the widening struggle against the hazards of simulation replacing reality, many people have, in the latter half of the twentieth century, faced brutal totalitarian regimes, and these individuals have had to grasp for charred remains of civilization amidst the barbarism imposed upon them. The actuality of these struggles, as opposed to the cognitive or intellectual resistance to simulations (physical in form yet abstract in their immaterial devaluation of reality), creates an immediate need for the horrors to be addressed. The Swedish Academy is well aware of the need to witness the atrocities of the twentieth century, to remember those things witnessed, and, in that act of remembrance, to discover the survival of civilization despite the looming nature of barbarism. The Hungarian novelist Imre Kertész explains that “the hapless victim is bent on proving his own humanity” in the face of barbarism (38)—hence witness literature as a barbaric document of civilization.

In his discussion of the Holocaust, Baudrillard writes, “Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc.”

(49). Thus, writers of witness literature aim to recreate the barbarism and to depict the impulse for civilization which nonetheless thrives in people, and they recreate their respective situations in order to make the catastrophe imaginable for outsiders. Those who forget exterminate those who endure trauma because they willingly plug their ears as if those suffering were ill-intentioned individuals set on destruction. In “The Home and the Reader” (2003), Bhabha argues that the recreation of endured events through the act of witnessing enables witnesses and readers alike to perceive “the image of our solidarity and survival” (378). This solidarity rallies against extermination through thoughtlessness, through forgetfulness.

The Swedish Academy members are aware of the difficulty with perspective in witness literature. Peter Englund wonders whether the insertion of facts and reality into the organizational form of narrative in the penning of witness literature latently misrepresents reality, which is “diverse, confused, and contradictory” (51). Englund also expresses concern about the contemporaneousness of witness literature:

A work of witness literature is an imprint of its contemporary time, and the problem with contemporarity is that it is ongoing: it lacks scale. We have no choice but to be possessed, swept along by the period in which we live and, in this current, it is of course difficult to separate the trivial from the decisive. With no yardstick, everything seems the same size. Only when something has been brought to fruition is it possible to measure it. (54)

Generally, things come to fruition when individuals reach the end of the normal life expectancy, a point at which they have little time remaining to properly measure the events of their lives. The surging immediacy of history as it transpires in individuals’ lives defies narratives and resists being straightjacketed into coherent stories.

With the reciprocation of Benjamin's assertion in mind about documents (that there is no document of barbarism that is not also a document of civilization), Englund's concern about the absence of dimension or scale in witness literature intensifies significantly. The Swedish Academy lauds laureates who have written witness literature for maintaining their dedication to the preservation of civilization amidst barbarism. Take, for example, the Swedish Academy's bestowing the Nobel Prize in Literature to Imre Kertész in 2002 "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 2002" n. pag.). While Kertész himself possesses enough strength to clutch civilization as he recreates the barbarity witnessed for readers, readers suddenly confronted with barbarism may not also clutch the civility in Kertész's novels in time, and thus be overcome by the barbarism. The stark details, the barren landscapes, the brutal violence and premature demise of life, and the flight of (or attempts at flight by) the dispossessed collectively overwhelm one's perspective, and this characteristic of witness literature classifies the genre as one producing barbaric documents. With hardly a breath between, however, those who discuss witness literature must also assert that witness literature never becomes devoid of traces of civilization just as documents of civilization cannot extricate barbarism from the margins of their pages. Quite frankly, readers need civil documents of barbarism, such as those by American authors trying to rescue the other from civil barbarism, and barbaric documents of civilization; these two forms of documents must be read simultaneously in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the human condition.

The dialectic of civilization and barbarism derived from Benjamin's thought (and explored by prominent writers throughout the twentieth century) indicates that both forms of documents—civil documents of barbarism and barbaric documents of civilization—must be read

conterminously, for each document contextualizes the other; the two exist in a difficult yet insoluble relationship with the world, which contains them both, as a giant ring binding them together. Both documents chronicle the work of authors (serious authors, at least) to re-establish man's humanity: in the case of American authors, against the serpentine wires of simulation, and in the case of witness literature writers, against looming barbarism. Aware that others could, in time, just as easily become ambivalent and subjectificate them, Updike, Albee and Simic (as well as other cosmopolitan-minded American writers) labor to reveal the arbitrariness of arbitration—that is, the use of fixities as a means to ambivalence toward and subjectification of the other. What is more, the writers composing “civil documents of barbarism” stand as lighthouses to those who, distraught from works of witness literature, question the possibility of civilization and whether they should even return to it. American authors and authors who live in countries who have not experienced prolonged traumatizing events have the responsibility of upholding civilization while simultaneously exposing and critiquing the tendency to formulate discursive relations with others.

Man's humanity is not safe when it survives barbarism; as Updike, Albee, and Simic's oeuvres demonstrate, man must then survive civil barbarism against others, and he must resist the tendency to subjectificate and become ambivalent toward others lest he devolve into barbaric discursive relations with his other. The simultaneous examination of civil documents of barbarism and barbaric documents of civilization enables men to rediscover their humanity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson explains in *The American Scholar* (1837), Man, the generalized term for human beings, “is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier” (Emerson was addressing a pre-Radcliffe University class of men at Harvard University, and he tailored his examples of Man's occupations to his audience); the objectification of man into

“many things,” into a variety of vocations, oftentimes causes a man to mistake his vocation as the crux of his identity (44). Emerson later postulates that “[t]he world—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*—lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself” (49). Yi-Fu Tuan reminds readers that the etymological root of the word “world,” *wer*, means “man,” which leads Tuan to argue that “[m]an and world denote complex ideas. . . . Body is ‘lived space’ and space is humanly constructed space” (34-35). The exchange of these two documents reduces the spatial and situational barriers separating cultures of men, thereby allowing them to establish a sense of self in the mirror of the other, a parallel and an equal self.

American authors like Updike, Albee, and Simic sense—and resist—the politicization of communal identity in America (a strategy for uniting people under nationalist ideals) and the ways in which Americans defend and reinforce their communal identity, for they perceive American nationalism as dangerous to others. If America’s discursive relations with others are built on arbitrary arbitrations of the others’ fixities, its identity is contingent upon unverifiable theoretical projections. History demonstrates the frequency with which the alleged “common destiny” of nations encroaches upon other nations (Lewald 3), thus initiating conflict; each nation senses the identity of its community of people threatened by the limitations posed by the other nation, and these conflicts far too often turn militant—barbaric, even, for men forget the “speech” of Man, the commonality of their being, opting instead for the nationalized senses of self. Updike depicts the way in which American intervention in Kush threatens the identity of Kushites, who need more substantial aid than the pyramid of boxed food which America sends. Albee allows American audiences to hear Chairman Mao establish a shared Chinese identity by trying to rally his people to his Marxist-Leninist doctrines, doctrines that create a sense of

“Chinese exceptionalism,” thus exposing that any notion of exceptionalism is but a national construct. Simic’s deterritorialized poems suggest the arbitrariness of clutching territorial boundaries, boundaries which inevitably bend or disappear through time, and the way in which nationalism convinces people to believe their nation is an everlasting place of supremacy.

Updike and Albee enter the deterritorialized meeting ground of literature in order to reacquaint themselves with the others from whom America has distanced them. Aware that America’s values are incomplete, these American authors wish to obtain lost lessons of human values that can only be learned through enduring barbarism, lessons which writers of witness literature have to share. Similarly, Simic enters as a translator between documents; his poetry establishes the common ground between countries and explores the inter-relatedness of men as a result of the inextricable dialectic of civilization and barbarism. All three authors bring civil documents of barbarism to demonstrate difficulties with simulation writers of witness literature will probably experience in due time (if they have not already started to do so). The extent authors use their writing to distinguish between fixities and fundamental characteristics of Man determines how safe men will feel in literature and how well-prepared they are to identify and counteract nationalism and ideology when they close a book.

The authors studied in this thesis recall that America is but a nation of immigrants, a land of others who discover a sense of self in America, and this restored sense of American migrancy allows these writers to dialogue with others more easily. Salman Rushdie rejects “the absolutism of the Pure” since men are all “mongrels,” “bastard [children] of history” (394). As mongrels themselves, Updike, Albee and Simic wish to communicate with other mongrels. Writers around the world are able to pose what Rushdie describes as “a migrant’s-eye view of the world,” a view understandable to all men because the “migrant condition” is “a metaphor for all humanity”

(394). The Pure would discourage the exchange of civil and barbaric documents between individuals, yet an acceptance of the hybridization of Man implies that, because of man's migrancy, his varying identities, he possesses the capacity to conceive of other selves who would otherwise be classified as distant others.

The Swedish Academy may contribute to the celebration of migrancy and mongrelization which Rushdie calls for (394) by granting the Nobel Prize in Literature to writers of civil documents of barbarism (Benjamin 258), such as many contemporary American writers as well as West European writers, as well as continuing to bestow the Nobel Prize in Literature to writers of witness literature, of barbaric documents of civilization. Because of the inevitability of horizons, of perspective, of identity, neither document presents a proper balance of civilization and barbarism. The dissemination of the prize in this manner will promulgate an even stronger "idealistic tendency," one which Alfred Nobel would surely celebrate: a collective ideal (rather than singular and individually-based) jointly celebrating Man in spite of the barbarism which he may never completely escape but always has strength enough to resist, and as long as he has strength enough to reside in the realm of literature to gather his strength before returning to face barbarism in its various forms. The proposed wider distribution of the Nobel Prize in Literature would encourage dialogue not only between writers from various nations, but also between readers all over the globe, which is just as important (if not more important) than the dialogue between authors.

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