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Notes

- 1) "The possibility for the home to open to the Other," says Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, "is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows." Cited in Derrida (96).
- 2) According to Frederick Karl, the schlemiel is "the fool or passive individual whose very resistance and fixedness become a threat to the status quo" (84). He cites such literary examples as Singer's "Gimpel the Fool," Isaac Rosenfeld's "The Hand That Fed Me," and Malamud's *The Fixer*.
- 3) "When you have encountered a human being, you cannot drop him. Most often we do so, saying 'I have done all I could!' We haven't done anything!" (Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* 106)
- 4) In his interpretation of Spinoza, Deleuze says "beings will be defined by their capacity for being affected, by the affections of which they are capable, the excitations to which they react..." (45) He goes on to say that humans as well as other creatures "are distinguished from one another by their capacity for being affected, and first of all by the way in which they fulfill and satisfy their life..." (46). In this context, the growth of Yakov Bok's capacity to be affected by the suffering of other people, a fallen man, an old Jew, Bok's estranged wife, and the Jews of Russia, can be seen as the realization of his vocation, which is no longer focused on fixing things but caring for others in distress. He no longer needs to lament, "I fix what's broken — except in the heart."

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Conclusion

The present study has shown through its philosophical approach to literary texts how the phenomenon of evasion can have both debilitating and positive effects in the social world. Richard Yates and Robert Stone suspect that bare life may be always already mediated by forces of ideology and commercialism, bewildering efforts of sincerity. Earnestness, however enthusiastically expressed by certain characters, has a hollow sound and often does not correspond to reality. Even one's conscience cannot be trusted to protect one from hype; the same is true for religion and philosophy. These authors inquire as to the degree to which non-conformity, the spirit of the 1950s' bohemians and 1960s' hippies, becomes conformity and self-betrayal. With both public space and their instincts befouled by hypocrisy, characters like Frank Wheeler and Rheinhardt dangerously retreat into personal enclaves of cynicism and chagrin protected only by the bare comforts of alcohol and sexual gratification. The intimate lives of those who need them are sacrificed in the withdrawal. Malamud's Yakov Bok, whose evasiveness characterizes him as strongly as it does Rheinhardt and Frank Wheeler, has no recourse to their creature comforts (addictions) in prison. His powerful evasiveness, which had caused many of his former troubles, takes on a positive meaning insofar as it finds its last stubborn recourse to save itself in a claim to freedom. Perhaps his casual reading of Spinoza, which put a "whirlwind" at his back and changed his life, emboldened his "secret inner impulse" towards freedom (Deleuze 129). Gradually Yakov Bok realizes that he has no place to hide and nothing to hide him. Everything is stripped away until, in his painful exposure to the injustice that is as much that of the Jews in Russia as his own, his exclusiveness becomes inclusive, his craving for freedom an intersubjective claim for social justice. In this way the growth of his capacity for being affected becomes his greatest accomplishment. ⁴⁾

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He resolved to take no librium or sedative that night, to stay awake and write if he could, or simply consider things. He felt confronted with the effort of his life. It seemed to him that many times before he had been raised up with a terrible clearness of vision and each time the abrasion of formless time had robbed him of any capacity for action. He was determined that this should not happen again. (267)

Rainey decides to attack the jubilee in the stadium planned by the right-wingers who seek to incite a race-riot and subsequently embarrass and suppress the Negro protesters. Action and initiative are often called for in turbulent times, but as was suggested at the start of this study, their purpose and consequences are often confused by naive righteousness. For this reason alone Rheinhardt despises Rainey's born-again humanist idealism, which leads first to disillusionment and then violent impulses. But as the novel draws to an end, Rheinhardt's hipness cannot fully shield him or Geraldine from violence any more or less than Rainey's idealism can save him. Although Rheinhardt saves his own skin at the stadium riot, Geraldine falls outside his protection. When he discovers that Geraldine has killed herself in jail after being picked up during the riot, he storms into a tavern and chants a refrain of retaliation against the Box, the Street, the power system that he hates but hideously compromised himself within. "They killed my girl," he says over and over as he heads out to the Street, "I'm gonna bust up the bar" (409). Here, as with Malamud's Yakov Bok, passively disposed figures like Rainey and Rheinhardt move out of bare life to contest sovereign power, however hopelessly or idiosyncratically. Rheinhardt's resolve to even the score, like Rainey's, is belated and inchoate, empowered as much by self-loathing as hatred of the political system. But Robert Stone's interpretation of the ambiguous alignment of power and life, enacted in the 1960s and not turn-of-the-century Russia and therefore interpenetrated by media forces that put subjectivity more radically at risk, shows no one getting the upper hand — or transcending — the coercion of promotional culture.

without much of a context that we can be sure of" (121). The trouble of which Stone speaks, as he himself has confessed, is that of initiative and dignity of achievement complicated by turbulent times and personal weakness: In his own life, he admits, "I often feel like I'm not measuring up, or that I'm getting it wrong. That's my basic attitude. It's an underlying attitude and I'm rather stuck with it, though it's not without its positive side. If you work for yourself and you have to get yourself started and you're as lazy as I am, you really require some kind of internal mechanism to get you going" (*Salmagundi* 260). It is striking that these personal remarks by Stone, published in 1993, echo the troubles of his considerably earlier character Morgan Rainey in *A Hall of Mirrors*, underlining the chronic nature of the *initiative problem* and its endurance as a philosophical aporia in Stone's thought. The aporetic nature of this theme is exemplified in the behavior of Rainey, who decides to support the liberal causes being undermined by the right-wing ideologues who own Rheinhardt's radio station. Rainey, who used to be a sort of Peace Corps volunteer serving the underprivileged, feels that since that time he fell out of touch with the "people" and only now, after battling his own indolence, wants to once more "opt for life" (175) by administering welfare interviews in his role as a caseworker. But Rainey soon discovers that the Black official Lester Clotho that seemed to be his ally as he went about his rounds of interviewing welfare recipients, secretly works for the racists, and the interview project is a sham. In response to Rainey's quandry, Rheinhardt offers a piece of his cynical wisdom: "You thought you were free and that you had all creation to act in. You never knew about the Box. You thought you could move into what isn't yours and mess around and then go back" (316). Rheinhardt's cool insight reveals his experience of the workings of bureaucratic power. Rainey's response is to accuse Rheinhardt's "Jack Frost" persona of being a supreme expression of nihilism and inhumanity. Back in his room, Rainey self-critically reflects on his next course of action in a passage redolent of Robert Stone's own thoughts about initiative:

respect. Respect — self-respect or any other kind of respect — is not the issue; survival is the only issue. His destructive survivalism of course reveals its toxicity when he drinks himself into a phantasmagoric state such that he loses all of his bearings in an abandoned lot of New Orleans. But it is when an intimate relation evolves, testing his armor, that Rheinhardt's toxicity appears sinister. Geraldine, a street-tough Texan reflecting a history of abuse in the scars on her face, falls in love with Rheinhardt but gradually loses her grip on the slippery surface of his self-evasive persona. She is a survivor who cannot survive Rheinhardt's non-committal survivalism based on movement and non-belonging. He has moved before and will escape again after the novel's violent climax, following a race-riot at a stadium ignited by the firm that employs him. It is Geraldine's tragedy that her wish to finally stop escaping and settle down with a man she truly loves is not shared by Rheinhardt, who remains true only to his mode of destructive survival.

As in the other novels taken up by the present study, it seems that although the narrative events in *A Hall of Mirrors* consistently reflect an inner relation to cultural-political historicity, the abiding concern of Robert Stone is the psychological tension of the individual trying to sustain an ethos, a way to live, derived inevitably from the obscure and almost microscopic dynamics of initiative and effort. It is phenomenology, as we saw in the analyses of Levinas, that has established itself as the most prescient and thorough vanguard in uncovering this tension of effort. Another philosopher of that school, Paul Ricouer, influenced by Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, has written brilliantly about initiative in terms of the "I can" stirring at the heart of existential lived time. But people become masters of evading their potential. Robert Stone might as well be speaking for the characters in the novels of Yates and Malamud when he says in an interview, "People have a lot of trouble. I don't feel particularly depressed or despairing, but philosophically I'm sort of on the pessimistic side, meaning that I think it's a lot tougher to behave well than most people think, and life at the best of times is often lonely and dangerous, and we're just out here in this phenomenology

already evinces his cynical understanding of how morally righteous causes are underpinned by profit-seekers. Drinking keeps him in a haze just above the swamp of hypocrisy whose grosser details remain blurred to his conscience, keeping him equally buffered from both conviction and commitment. In this use of alcohol as a tool of evasion, Stone's characters are similar to the drinkers in Richard Yates' novels. The self-insight and social observation skills of such characters press them into an intensity of awareness that requires something to dull its edges. The bourbon takes the sting out of their self-betrayal, relieves the pressure they feel to become who they know they should be and can be if they sincerely make the effort — an intellectual living in Paris in the case of Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, a professional classical musician in Rheinhardt's case. The reasons for Rheinhardt's evasion of his musical vocation remain unclear; but the consequences are destructive when a person fails to use his talent, as Robert Stone has pointed out:

Rheinhardt...believes in his talent as a musician as a kind of God-given thing and he really believes that it's going to destroy him if he doesn't use it. But out of a kind of spite he's not using it. He's going through enormous amounts of trouble in order to not be an artist. In order to not be a musician. Out of a spite that he can't even understand. (*Writers Dreaming* 264)

The spite that drives Rheinhardt and endangers his inner life is also the shield of his survival in society. He projects a sort of hard-boiled persona, quick to jest but also quickly cutting others off from any glimpses of whatever sincerity hides in his inner life. It seems like any exposure to sincerity would endanger his survival. His mode of survival, insofar as he continues to allow spite to deprive him of genuine fulfillment, is destructive survival. The underlying irony of Stone's narrative is that Rheinhardt's inebriated coolness enables him to survive, which is the only game after all is said and done. Just survival. He is a survivor at the end, but not a figure commanding

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more elusive, dispersed by irony and cynicism. The radical atmosphere of the 1960s begs commitment from individuals, but it is not clear to which cause one should commit oneself: human and civil rights, peace activism, ecologism, and so on. In many cases it seems emotion and hype prevail, leading to commitment for the sake of commitment, commitment without a cause. New Orleans, the setting of Stone's novel, is a boiling cauldron of social issues and serves to epitomize the more extreme and murky conflicts of 1960s' ideologies and issues. But Stone's particular lens angle, common to most of his fiction, is to mesh this ideological matrix with the coercive rhetoric of promotional culture that streams from the American media — the hype of making a buck and its attendant hypocrisy, which requires its own powers of allegiance. One must be loyal to oneself and the forces that serve one's self-interest, however much they contradict one's philosophical convictions. Such self-interest, the force that constrained Yakov Bok's marriage and put him at risk in Kiev, takes on an even more dangerous, mercenary tone in Stone's narrative.

Like Yakov Bok, Rheinhardt is weighed down by his past — he is a failed musician — and the botched relationships he left behind. Bok is anxious about what he doesn't know about himself as a Jew; Rheinhardt is cynically animated by his self-knowledge and his hip survey of the times in which he lives. For this washed-out disk jockey who has worked radio stations all over the place from Chicago to small town USA, political and moral issues are always already infected by promotional culture; and since such promotionalism and hypocrisy are inescapable, he has decided not to resist them but rather live off them parasitically. He plays both sides of the "Street," his term for promotional culture. "The Street — there was no end to it" (5). On one side he maintains friendships with Beat drug-ingesting types who are clearly counter-cultural; on the other hand, he is employed by a conservative radio station, WUSA, subsidized by racist ideologues who preach Christian evangelism on the air while secretly plotting to incite hatred for black people in their listening audience. Drinking is Rheinhardt's anodyne from the first page, when, sharing his bourbon while riding on a bus with a young Bible salesman, he

selfhood, mandated neither by the suffering crowds or the legal system. Is he really a newly converted political man, or a more engaged — and therefore ethical — person, but Bok nevertheless? Back in the village, he felt he couldn't give anymore because he had nothing to give. But as he left, Bok felt the yearning of some capacity that could not be easily satisfied. The entire ethical impulse for Levinas resides in the feeling that one can *do more*, that one can never do enough for others in need.³⁾ It seems this *doing more* is precisely what characterizes Bok's achievement or "additional capacity." If one could guess Malamud's final aims for Bok, it would be that he become a person who does more for people on a daily basis, living less for himself and more for others: "so deeply engaged with life that he could not fail to offer it anything less than the fullest selfhood" (*Talking Horse* 189). But where does this full selfhood go at the end of the novel? Caught up in events, Yakov's concreteness seems to dissolve, and this contributes to the unresolved tension of the novel between the political drama to which it aspires and Malamud's focus on individual psychology. Frederick Karl correctly notes that Malamud "is unable to make the transition from individual to society and back again. He stresses a man and yet reaches towards allegory... Triumph over oppression supercedes Bok's individual suffering. The novel begins to fall apart" (273).

Destructive Survival

The circumstantial pressure of political events that gradually makes Yakov Bok abandon his own needs for the larger purpose of social justice in turn of the century Russia, finds a modern correlate in the politically and ideologically charged atmosphere of the 1960s, the setting of Robert Stone's first novel *A Hall of Mirrors* (1966). As in Malamud's *The Fixer*, the focal points of this pressure are represented as disturbances in the lives of a few individuals. But whereas in Malamud's novel the exigency and associated sentiments of ethnic belonging (and loyalty) helps recruit a recalcitrant Bok out of his circle of self-pity to support the Jewish cause, in the case of Stone's main character a sense of belonging or allegiance remains

evasive persona that craves freedom and not some grandiose idea, that his very recalcitrance has an inner relation to his political transformation. This point would allow for Yakov's passivity and the persistence of his self-absorbed or secretive persona, which presuppose an inner freedom out of which good acts can be achieved. "I'll live," Bok screams in his cell; "I'll wait, I'll come to my trial" (247). Yes, he rises to the occasion of justice, but this outcome does not mean he has a conversion experience or becomes a Saint. Bok's accomplishment is more prosaic: his tendency to inner emigration, so long a character fault, becomes an anarchic force capable of refuting State coercion.

Levinas makes the provocative claim that the responsibility one might attribute to someone like Yakov is "prior to all initiative," that it is not Yakov who chooses the Good but the Good that chooses him (*Talmudic* 135; 171). True enough, but the Good moves Bok in *Bok's own way, in accordance with his innermost imperative to be free*. When his pain and exposure become so wide as to somehow encompass the pain of the Jews outside his prison cell, as if intersubjectivity presupposes such bare exposure, his craving for freedom becomes theirs, theirs becomes his. It is at this point, when Bok has visions of shooting the Czar and welcoming anarchy, that one can speak carefully of a certain political moment.

As the novel closes, we assume he is still a recalcitrant "Bok," a goat as well as a schmiel, whose traits both precede and outlast his exposure to Kiev politics. We were surprised by the altruistic traits that emerged in the narrative; but goats can leap, and are insatiable. These "additional capacities" (Agamben) were brought out by circumstances in Kiev. But the question remains of whether these capacities of Bok's were political or *ethical* in Levinas's sense of the word, that is, *before politics*. It is not insignificant that each of Bok's gestures towards assisting others were acts of private morality on the hither side of the larger political intrigue in which he gets ensnared: helping a fallen man; giving shelter to an old Jew; signing his name to the birth papers of his wife's baby conceived with another man. These are gestures coming from the depths of his

act of resistance by which he realizes his “additional capacity” to be political is his refusal to confess to murder, thereby depriving the anti-Semites of a reason to initiate a pogrom against Russian Jews. But Bok’s personal revolution is less a political than a *moral development* as he begins to put others before himself, as when he signs a birth paper (thereby lending his name) that forgives his wife Raisl by legitimizing her child with another man. In this simple act we see an overcoming of his longstanding grudge, a hypostasis by which Bok moves from being a reactive type to an active subject.

But Bok does not speak of “hypostasis” or “transcendence” and insists that suffering is useless. In his case Levinas would argue that until his incarceration, Bok’s suffering was over his own troubles and hence useless. The “congenital uselessness” of such a man’s suffering, he would say, “can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering of someone else” (*Entre Nous* 94). Thus Bok’s suffering comes to represent a resolution of his initial ambiguity upon leaving his village; his freedom in prison (an oxymoron which could only pertain to a fan of Spinoza) is poignantly engaged in suffering for others. Childless Bok gives birth to a vocation engaged with human lives outside his prison. Giorgio Agamben provides a passage that, although serving a different argument, aptly summarizes the developments we have just described:

Everything happens as if, along with the disciplinary process by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific object, another process is set in motion that in large measure corresponds to the birth of democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an object but as the subject of political power. (9)

Nevertheless, the generality with which such philosophical discourse treats political action can easily lead us to overlook the persistence of Yakov Bok’s evasive personality. It can be argued that his stubborn refusal to cooperate with authorities is *consistent with his*

humanity, reduced like flesh in a famine. How can we expect someone who has suffered greatly to be charitable? To sacrifice more than they have *already* sacrificed? Bok himself used this *already* reasoning to evade charity when Shmuel solicited it out of dire need. Since he was already poor, he reasoned, he had nothing to give. But the demand for Bok to stay in prison and maintain his innocence, to uphold and embody justice, and not incriminate the Jews at a time of inflammatory anti-Semitism in Russia, is of a different scale... grandiose and abstract, for Bok's self-understanding as a Jew has never been secure. It is the demand for more time that we find so striking, so excessive in the fate of Malamud's Yakov. The time of waiting is prolonged unto the brink of madness. Here is where the common sense of the reader founders, recognizing its tacit complicity with Bok's own personal shortcoming. Malamud, so measured and carpenter-like in his prose, moves us who are reasonable to interpret a moral situation that is apparently beyond understanding and terribly inconvenient. As if practical sense — the economics of good reasons — were itself an evasion every time self-sacrifice is asked of one, excusing itself with the refrain "enough is enough" or "enough is enough already"...the already accentuating the impatience with all requests, a certain irritability, as if from the start, even before something is asked of us, we are already retreating to the substance and property of our autonomy, having *already* shouldered many burdens. Practical sense, with its ethics of preservation and accumulation, protects the sovereignty of the individual and does not put us at risk; we become less, not more exposed or vulnerable. We build our moats and "gated communities." But this traps us inside ourselves and makes us resistant to change, makes us deaf to appeals coming from outside.

When Yakov Bok finally achieves a certain transcendence, it is the kind Lyotard, taking over Levinas's term, describes as an obligation "absolutely beyond our intelligence" (71) since although Bok resists the ethical subversion of justice being carried out against himself as a Jew, he does not have a sound understanding of what it means to be a Jew or belong to the Jews, or represent them. The

only to quickly transgress its boundaries by taking a job in an area forbidden to Jews, unwittingly becoming an object of political scrutiny and controversy when he is falsely accused of murdering a Russian boy. In this context the thought of Giorgio Agamben proves instructive. "Bare life, which dwells in the no-man's land between home and the city...is, from the point of view of sovereignty, the originary political element" (90). As a stranger to the city, Bok's incarcerated body becomes politicized by both the extremist Russian anti-Semites tolerated by the Czar, and by the Jews who take up Bok's situation as a test case of political justice. Suddenly a man who evaded not only politics but charity and marital forgiveness finds himself steeped in the *bios politikos*, political life. As his suffering increases and thus his own personal danger, so does he become more dangerous to the State juridical apparatus; the controversy surrounding his situation can only bring a spotlight on the bureaucracy at a time when it is trying to deflect public awareness of its inadequacies. Agamben, citing Foucault's analysis of Aristotle, underlines the important distinction that politics is not so much inborn in man, as an "additional capacity" of which he is capable in a transition from bare life to political life (7). At a certain point the object of subjection becomes a subject of action. But in Bok's case this metamorphosis is long in coming and barely discernible, for it emerges from the new sufferings of a long-suffering persona. "The Russian state," Malamud tells us, "denies Yakov Bok the most elemental justice, and to show its fear and contempt of humankind has chained him to the wall like an animal" (246).

In this regard surely Yakov's prison ordeal is exasperating for all parties involved, including the reader. When Malamud shaped his narrative to suggest "the quality of the afflictions of the Jews under Hitler" he produced the inner tension of the text, origin of its audacity (*Talking Horse* 89). Readers know that the setting of *The Fixer* is turn-of-the-century Russia; but this historicity doesn't lessen but instead intensifies and complicates our impatience with Yakov's fate, for we know what is *yet to come* in his prison suffering. He must sacrifice more of himself, his time, the substance of his

knowing what was where, unable to predict or clearly visualize”:

A crow flew slowly over the stubble of a wheatfield. The fixer found himself counting sheep and goats grazing in the communal meadows under lazy thick clouds. It had been a dank and dreary autumn, the dead leaves still hanging on half the trees in the woods around the fields. Last year at this time it had already snowed. Though as a rule he enjoyed the landscape, Yakov felt a weight on him. The buzz and sparkle of the summer were gone. In the violet distance the steppe seemed melancholy, endless. (21)

The materiality of the setting asserts pressure on this handyman's body, contesting its ambiguity; Yakov no longer works for the village and is not yet employed by the city. His response of counting grazing animals comes from his practical orientation, which silently seeks initiative — what he as a fixer can do, or should do, in terms of work, not moral behavior. Yet his feelings of guilt and unworthiness shunt his practical impulses into an obscure inquiry for a *different kind of initiative and vocation* evolving out of precisely what he *can't do, not what he can do*. He has already confessed to his father-in-law that “I fix what's broken, except in the heart “ (10) and this shortcoming weighs on him as much as the indefinite horizon before him, as if they were the same, the horizon being the very question of his uncommitted humanity. “Jobs for him were always scarce. With just the few roubles in his pocket how long would he last before starving? Why should tomorrow be better than today? Had he earned the privilege?” (22). When he reaches Kiev, no sooner does he “earn the privilege” (that of moral worthiness) by helping a fallen man and receiving a job in thankful return, than does the State assert its absolute privilege to impose its law upon his body. The ambiguity Bok felt as he departed his village for Kiev was also a vulnerability, for he was henceforth exposed to a new kind of danger. Kiev, unlike the quiet village left behind, enforces strict juridical lines by which Jew and Russian are kept separate, and Bok enters this juridical zone

self-described bad luck. It is not that Bok is indolent so much as *inaccessible*, ensconced in the obscurity of his sentiments; this is both a serious character flaw and a *source of his stamina*. In any case, the shame he feels, which determines his entire life as “fruitless,” drives him out of his home village for the city of Kiev. On the way he carries his fate and bad luck personally such that it is difficult to see beyond his own pain, expressing no sympathy with the needs of others. His father-in-law, Shmuel, lends his wagon to Bok to assist him in his exodus to Kiev. Yet Bok does not lend him any money when Shmuel asks, “Lend me a kopeck or two” (16). Generosity is not reciprocated; Shmuel lends his wagon and gets nothing in return. But Shmuel’s own humanity enables him to see the key to Bok’s malaise: “Charity you were always short of,” he says, “I don’t mean money. I meant for my daughter” (4). Bok’s personal shortcoming is something he has in common with Professor Cronin in Malamud’s story “A Choice of Profession,” for although Cronin chose the teaching profession in order to give himself to others in a way he had failed to do in his marriage, he ends up humiliating and betraying an older student who confides her pitiful background to him. Cronin can’t put away his troubles to foreground those of his student. Clearly, even a carefully chosen profession does not guarantee moral behavior. In Bok’s case this truth raises the question of whether a change of location alone will bring about the change he seeks. Something inside him remains unsatisfied. “The truth of it is I’m a man full of wants I’ll never satisfy, at least not here,” Yakov says to Shmuel. “It’s time to get out and take a chance. Change your place, change your luck, people say” (15). As we noted earlier, it is his bag of tools that he carries closest to himself, but these tools do not necessarily correlate with his yearnings. It will not be his tools that serve him when he decides to endure his prison sentence for the sake of justice. Another vocation develops in prison, that of spiritual endurance: and his body will patiently serve this vocation in upholding justice.

In the landscape of bare peasant life that Yakov Bok enters as he heads towards Kiev, he feels “the discontent of strangeness, of not

day at the office — wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves — coming home and finding him hunched in an egg-stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose. (109)

This picture epitomizes Frank's evasion of time, his aversion to the kind of effort the sociality of a genuine relationship requires. His existence in Paris would place him passively *someplace, like an object*, rather than as *someone* who makes decisions about where to be, what to do, whom to help. It is not really Paris that he dreads, but life outside of scheduled time, that is, freedom.

From Bare Life to Political Life

When we first encounter Yakov Bok's muted displays of self-pity and surliness in Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer*, his suffering has already begun and is in fact longstanding. Frequent expressions like "I'm frankly in a foul mood" (10) belong not merely to a mood but his persona as a *schlemiel*, in this case a secretive one who carries his troubles and poverty as close to himself as his fixer's bag of tools²⁾. From the start, this persona exceeds its typification due to Malamud's craft as a writer; as Frederick Karl perceptively notes, "Bok is far more of an individual than is a Kafka protagonist" (273). The fixer's (or handyman's) poverty and loathed status as a Jew in Russia constitute the sediments of his depression, but it was the unfaithfulness of his wife, Raisl, that seems to have stirred the sediments into an isolating, mephitic mood of self-absorbed pessimism. She left him for another man, and Bok now conceives of himself as a "childless husband — 'alive but dead' the Talmud described such a man —" (21). Yet it is not plain misfortune from which Bok has suffered. Years before his wife's transgressions, she had suggested that they move to America and seek opportunity there. Bok resisted her appeals; he dragged his feet so to speak, arguing that he should first seek to enlarge his possibilities in Russia. His lack of initiative and enthusiasm for Raisl's idea soured their marriage as much as anything else, and is the secret key to his

traced back? Their marriage dissolving by the day, April sees a move to Europe as a salvational opportunity to begin anew. From Frank and April's discussions, it is clear that Europe represents an ideal place for freedom of personal time and creative self-development, that it will give them back everything that corporate and suburban life had taken away: But as we mentioned above, when April gets closer to finalizing the plan, Frank becomes anything but frank, equivocating by recourse to affirming the necessity of a job. "Look, baby. In the first place, what kind of job could I possibly —" (108). When April insists that the whole point of their move was to escape mere "jobs" for more suitable vocations, Frank laughs and repeats his refrain about the lack of jobs for Americans. But he is secretly terrified:

This laughter of his was not quite genuine, nor was the way he kept squeezing her shoulder as if to dismiss the whole thing as an endearing whimsy. He was trying to conceal from her, if not from himself, that the plan had instantly frightened him. (109)

Then Frank asks his wife exactly what he is supposed to do in Paris. She replies:

"You'll be finding yourself. You'll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You'll have *time*. For the first time in your life you'll have time to find out what it is you want to do, and when you find it you'll have the time and the freedom to start doing it" (109).

But immediately after April offers this gift of time — she is even willing to work part-time in Paris to support their family — Frank envisions his own Oblomov-like picture of not finding himself but *being found*:

He had a quick disquieting vision of her coming home from a

his day full, discovery or chance can't menace his security.

Frank's change of heart, his self-serving turn against the Parisian escape, began with the sudden possibility that he could be promoted at work. Never mind that this would be only a deeper instantiation within an environment he had already proclaimed as poisonous to the spirit — "the dullest job you can possibly imagine." Also, an affair develops between Frank and a secretary at his office. Suddenly the horizon of romantic adventure shifts from Paris to the workplace. The vigor with which Frank recruited his wife, April, to support his fantasy of a new life in Europe, just as suddenly softens into a hedging complacency; the harsh critique of suburban conformity was, well, too harsh. To Frank this peripety is negligible, merely a redistribution of verbal energy and emphasis to a different theme. There never was a heartfelt commitment on his part to adopting a bohemian lifestyle. But the cherished dream of his wife — "April in Paris" — has been excluded from the horizon. Thus for April, the shift of focus from Paris back to domestic conformity is absolutely catastrophic — the collapse of sincerity, and the exposure of their hopes as a mere language game. Her own enthusiasm for a move overseas had translated into a fury of preparation and emotional commitment. And now her husband backs away from their dream with his spineless back peddling. "Are you still talking?" she says to Frank. "Isn't there any way to stop your talking?" (293). It seems that their innermost longing for metamorphosis was just talk, utterly lacking in substance; this desperate loquacity contributes to the atmosphere of claustrophobia remarked by Jerome Klinkowitz (19). In a bitter blow, April subsequently becomes pregnant just as their plans crystallize. Conscience insincerely provides the seal of gravity, morality of infant care and good housekeeping, pressing their destiny back into the American suburbs — "for the sake of the baby, it would be better not to move around..." Even one's conscience only offers cliches. Ensnared in a web of insincerity she can't escape, April tries to abort her own baby at home and bleeds to death.

To what insecurity or false consciousness can their failure to expatriate themselves (and thereby transcend their inauthenticity) be

the inversion of all rebelliousness. For months Frank has been planning with his wife to escape the vapid domesticity to which he now looks forward with lip-smacking relish. They had gradually convinced themselves of the bohemian truth of the dream they coveted in college: Paris is the most suitable place for artistically inclined intellectuals like themselves. Yates' narrative, set in 1955, captures the abiding tension felt by many college graduates between the allure of the Beat lifestyle represented by Jack Kerouac and his nomadic cohorts, and the pressure to settle down and enjoy the prosperity of post-war America. The dramatic action progresses in heightened spells of determination and self-righteous persuasion — of seeming frankness — concerning the truth of the Wheeler's predicament that they don't really belong in conformist suburbia: their destiny lies elsewhere, among philosophers and artists. But the time of sherry sipping is one among other such times that break the tension of focus and will power that has marked the ascent of their idealism; it is a scheduled time of comfort, like his work at Knox Corporation, that protects Frank from the actual tension of effort required to take charge of the future. In the following passage Yates moves from scene to summary, offering an effective anisochrony itself devoted to the problem of time:

Our ability to measure and apportion time affords an almost endless source of comfort... "I'm afraid I'm booked solid through the end of the month," says the executive, voluptuously nestling the phone at his cheek as he thumbs the leaves of his appointment calendar, and his mouth and eyes at that moment betray a sense of deep security. The crisp, plentiful, day-sized pages before him prove that nothing unforeseen, no calamity of chance or fate can overtake him between now and the end of the month. Ruin and pestilence have been held at bay, and death itself will have to wait; he is booked solid.
(213)

Scheduled time displaces individual initiative; while Frank's job keeps

possible “before, beyond, outside the State” (Derrida 93). But there are two horizons conditioning this accomplishment, and one cannot be realized without the other. There is the possibility of *hospitality*, responsibility for the Other, whether as *substitution*, of putting oneself in the place of the other person (e.g., being taken hostage instead of him), or *deference* (“Please take my seat by the fire to get warm.”). The second possibility presupposes my own alterity, my separation and solitude, that is, my inviolable privacy and right to stay in my idiosyncratic niche — the ability to, as Levinas says, “close my windows and doors” if I need to do so ¹⁾. Derrida cites the following passage from Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*: “Separation is not only dialectically correlative with transcendence, as its reverse; it is accomplished as a positive event” (96). Being outside the juridical and political realms, transcendence cannot be mandated as a law: my reaching out to the Other *presupposes my evasion, the enclave from which I reach out*. Interestingly in this regard, Oblomov’s right to stay in bed in the privacy of his home is as much a distinguishing aspect of his humanity as the moment he gets out of bed for the sake of the woman he loves.

Sipping Sherry on Revolutionary Road

The promising place-name of Richard Yates’ novel, which evokes both the historical spirit of Americans and the nascent activism of the early 1960s in which *Revolutionary Road* was published, belongs to the New England suburbia of his characters that live in “Revolutionary Estates.” But this promise is postponed and mocked by the almost trite self-satisfaction of a commuter husband, Frank Wheeler, as he comes home from work: “Now, rolling home, he could look forward to the refreshment of taking a shower and getting into clean clothes; then he would sip sherry (his lips puckered pleasurably at the thought of it) and drowse over the *Times* for the rest of the afternoon” (274). For the reader, this snapshot of smugness is overwrought with hypocrisy; the character, Frank, has previously expressed a strong dislike both for his job and his petite bourgeois suburban existence in western Connecticut. Thus his homecoming is

spoiled or privileged ones that seek such satisfaction — “the condemned man still drinks his last glass of rum” (45). Is Levinas’s thesis only seeking to find phenomenological “proof” that we are selfish and incapable of change? Hardly. His main pursuit is the outside, what lies *beyond the subject* — the others, from family members to strangers in need. He wants to find the moments when we abandon our own projects to reach others, even substitute ourselves for them. Such moments don’t have to be heroic, as in the simple gesture of opening the door and saying “You first” or other such moments of deferring to another. Yet for Levinas such gestures can incite a personal revolution. Through those simple words and physical effort time fulgurates, the future appears. This personal revolution had wide implications in its insertion of ethics before politics. The danger that Levinas saw early in his writings was the vulnerability of impersonal existence, or bare life, in which the subject’s own power to be a subject sleeps inside it such that the subject only appears in the landscape like an object. Such an object-like personhood might become the property of the bureaucratic State, or totality, rather than resist its encroachments. In this regard Levinas’s work focusing on the transformative intimacy of personal relations indirectly preceded Foucault’s turn to biopolitics, however much Foucault refused the rubric of ethics and Levinas the discourse of biology. All of Levinas’s diverse analyses of effort, fatigue, and the “hypostasis” by which the subject moves out of its object-like givenness to take up its humanity after being aroused by the appeals of the Other, are a contribution to a philosophy of modern democracy and the revolutionary potential of a sovereign body that refuses to be a passive object subjected to State domination. This remains true insofar as radical freedom outside of disciplinary control can be discerned in the very event of transcendence by which the embodied ethical gesture is achieved in the “You first” or “I will substitute myself for you and carry your burden.” Here the self takes back, however momentarily or on the brink of death, its dignity from the power of the bureaucracy that had usurped it, and it does so by recognizing the alterity of the Other. Transcendence becomes

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evasion cannot itself be condemned, for the modes of withdrawal and privacy associated with it presuppose the *freedom to be different* that is an indispensable condition of transcendence and hence, justice. It is with this phenomenological problem of evasion in mind that we approach the novels *Revolutionary Road* (1961), by Richard Yates; *The Fixer* (1966) by Bernard Malamud, and Robert Stone's *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967).

In Oblomov's Shadow

There is a time-lag that Emmanuel Levinas has described as a hesitation before effort, when a person does not coincide with himself in the instant of action because life feels like a heavy task to be undertaken. This delay with respect to oneself in time is not a pathological exception; the future fatigues us, some of course more than others, as in the case of indolence:

Indolence is an impotent and joyless aversion to the burden of existence itself. It is a being afraid to live which is nevertheless a life, in which the fear of the unaccustomed, adventure, the unknown is a repugnance devolving from the aversion for the enterprise of existence. Such is Oblomov's, a radical and tragic indolence before existing told in the famous work of the Russian novelist. From the first page of the novel Goncharov presents his hero supine, and this existential *decubitus* will be the dominant image of the tale. (*Existence and Existents* 29)

The extreme cases suffer from such indolence, but few of us entirely escape Oblomov's shadow. To be human is to be challenged by the instant of becoming, to take charge or fall back into oblivion. People are stuck with themselves and their habits and creature comforts for many reasons besides laziness. Self-contentment is a major factor; we call it complacency when we seek to judge. But Levinas would speak of a circle of satisfaction called the *world* where bare life is univocally immersed in the sincerity of its thirst and hunger, the levels of shelter, warmth, nourishment, being together. It is not only the

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C. S. Schreiner

Dread of life drives the creature from its center. -F. W. J. Schelling

Revolutions Cultural and Personal

Although Hollywood has almost convinced the world that America is a land of action figures, the novels produced by American writers have surely offered a more subtle characterization. Common knowledge would especially assume that the 1960s was a decade of civil action and social change—a time of revolution. To which the authors taken up in the present study would oppose the claim: it was not so simple. Yes, the cultural atmosphere was often revolutionary, but also confusing; as the Buffalo Springfield song said, “There is something happening here/What it is ain’t exactly clear.” The passionate critiques exposing the establishment’s complicity with oppressive power sometimes inspired feelings of righteousness without correlative responsibilities, resulting in mayhem or violence. At the level of individual initiative, where each person has to decide for himself at what point non-conformity becomes only a new consensus, there were harrowing narratives of the gray area in which heroism and action, or decisive behavior based on conviction, became obscured by often painful struggles between self-interest and social commitment, indolence and self-renewal. The time of the gray area can be a time of evasion of self-scrutiny and one’s true vocation, of life’s often shameful sincerity and the heartfelt social initiatives which propel us outside ourselves, our own sphere of interests. Yet the possibility of