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CREATING A SELF, PERSONAL AND NATIONAL, IN RICHARD NELSON'S TRILOGY

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In *The Innocent Eye*, Roger Shattuck explores some of the developments that followed from the shift, occurring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, away from the belief that birth determined a person's station in life. Asking one sweeping question raised by the revolution in attitude—"How then were citizens to find their place in the world? their role in life?"—he offers a tentative answer: "Citizens of the modern world have sought not so much a station as a self, a personal identity or individuality, a self which also gradually displaced the earlier term, soul,"[1] Shattuck goes on to suggest four directions the search for self-discovery has taken in the past two centuries. For citizens of the modern theatre, the two most interesting are the third and fourth, undertaking to create a self from subjective processes and in the histrionic sensibility. They offer more possibilities for the theatre than the other two, making money and pursuing amorous adventures, because the third enacts an experimental, non-naturalistic drama and the fourth requires an audience to validate the creation.

The two directions shape a group of three plays by Richard Nelson. Whether or not they were conceived as a trilogy, they can be thought of as forming one. They share the same metaphors and imagery. Furthermore, the three were produced in New York in a ten-month period from March 1978 to January 1979. Two had been produced before, yet the fact remains that their author was to some degree involved in the staging of the three within three months of one another, a fact that prompts Andre Bishop, then Playwrights Horizons' artistic director, to link them in the introduction to the volume in which the second is anthologized: "*Jungle Coup* was the second of three plays (after *Conjuring an Event* and before *The Vienna Notes*) in which Richard explored his obsession with the written word and with the possibilities of remaking history when the writing or reporting of it all but obliterates the truth." [2]

This article examines the three plays as linked, but the link that can be thought of as forming them into a trilogy is the creation of a self. The first dramatizes the creation; the second, the challenge to the creation from the depths of the jungle (Shattuck's third direction); the

third, the challenge from the heights of civilization (Shattuck's fourth direction).

Conjuring an Event opens in the Pen and Pencil Club. Of the four characters seated at the large wooden table, the first to speak is Charlie, the play's protagonist. From the table he lifts the plate over which his face with blindfolded eyes has been hovering and smashes it while yelling, *"Why can't I smell this!!"*[3] None of the other three characters at the table reacts, although a fifth character, seated apart from the group, looks up from the newspaper he has been reading.

Charlie's soliloquies supply the exposition. Having proven himself as a reporter of sporting events, having exhausted the thrill of accounting for them, he wants to conjure one. Instead of in-depth reporting, he wants to "press unrestrained into absolute depth-reporting!" Instead of being outside an event looking at it after it happened, he wants to be "*inside looking out*" as it is happening (140). That is, he wants to be so sensitive to breaking news that he can cross the boundary separating the reporter from the event he reports by summoning the energy at life's core into an event. Not to summon the energy outside of himself into an event which he then can objectively report in a news story—by starting a fire, for example—but to summon the energy within himself so that he can report its flowing as an event.

Because the human being perceives events through the senses, Charlie primes his "to touch, taste, smell" the story out of himself. "To flush it out!" (140) He has his eyes blindfolded and his girlfriend seated next to him to ensure that he has a selection of plates, each of which contains an everyday item like salt, which by sniffing he tries to identify. That no one at the table reacts to the plate-smashing indicates that his companions are inured to his lack of success and frustration. Not only can he not conjure, he cannot report either.

The two modes of experiencing life are the play's two poles because they are two metaphors for two activities of the human mind. Conjuring, which is intuiting the world, is rooted in imagination. Reporting, which is analyzing the world, is rooted in apprehension. The play locates the first activity in the undifferentiating unconscious, which collects images, and the second activity in consciousness, which differentiates images into events and composes them into reports.[4] They are the two poles because the development of consciousness from the unconscious has separated the mind into two halves, each forming a self and thereby separating the human being into a divided self.

Yet the division is not irreconcilable. In a reminiscence that recalls passages in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and *Long Day's Journey into*

Night, one of the four characters at the table, a publisher, deplores the passing of the time when a reporter was so in harmony with life that he was a medium through whom the universe's energy flowed. That was before he was lured away from reporting by Hollywood's glitter and money. Although he is opposed to priming the senses to conjure because it is an attempt to induce an experience that he believes should occur naturally, from his description of reporting's golden age as an age of "magic" (143-44), a term associated with conjuring, reporting and conjuring were the same experience.

Charlie is too ambitious to be satisfied with nostalgia. He wants to reunite the two activities, as he states emphatically in the first soliloquy. Although he wants to go beyond "just facts and figures" and "natural observation," he also wants to "compile beyond understanding" (140). The verb is an activity of the conscious mind; the prepositional phrase is a location in the subconscious mind. With his reputation as a reporter of sporting events secure, he feels that he can give the "total involvement" (148) required to summon one, despite the danger. The publisher, who bolts from the room when he realizes that the reporter is priming to conjure, explains. Other reporters have attempted the feat, but invariably they came too close to the energy and either were singed by the surge of current and are no longer effective reporters or were burned and driven mad.

Charlie is well aware of the risk. To flush the story out of himself, he must activate his divided psyche, which means activating energy in a surge that could upset the psyche's equilibrium and thereby threaten his sanity. The audience hears the division from the moment the play begins. "Listen to the prep, Charlie" (139), begins the first of the play's many soliloquies in which the protagonist talks to himself as if he were two separate persons. In a sense, he is because his personality is split between an ego determined to expand consciousness and unknown nature hidden in the silent recesses of his being. So absorbed in his soliloquies that he unlocks his unconscious, he releases his hidden self, whose appearance is prefigured in the fifth character in the room, who leaves his seat apart from the group to confront the vacillating reporter as Act 1 ends, and who returns in Act 2 in the guises of old reporter and coach to appeal to his ego to continue pressing.

He does continue until the audience hears and sees the division healed in Act 2. The actor playing Charlie must be able to alternate voices and mannerisms to enact, as if in a boxing ring, the protagonist's two selves as they contest for dominance of him. As his conscious mind, or self, falls asleep, his flushed-out subconscious

mind, or self, takes possession of him and conjures with the repeated invocation, "Shapes arise!" (169) In the dialectics of the internal conflict externalized as a boxing match, his awakened consciousness takes possession of him with the repeated declaration, "I consume" (171), followed by a list of the shapes he incorporates into his story, his report of the event.

Even though the surge of the unconscious bloodies his mouth, consciousness wins the match. Before the unconscious can overwhelm the mind, driving Charlie mad by surging unchecked, consciousness assimilates its energy, as symbolized by the imagery of consuming. In the language of psychological growth, in the individual's process of creating a self, his ego-centered conscious personality acquires greater reality as it consumes contents of his unconscious.[5]

Act 2 is the creation, both of the new, whole self and the new, whole story. Charlie conjures an event in which he is the center looking out through his expanding consciousness. The first released shapes are rushing images of phrases in the physical making of a newspaper, but as the new self takes control, he focuses the rising shapes as reported images of specific historical events, such as Sadat's visit to Israel and Ali's whipping of Forman, until he reaches the crowning event: the creation of himself. An integrated self speaking in a new, assertive, voice, he transforms his energy into a story that merges conjuring and reporting. He begins his report by confessing to the audience that he always wanted to be a reporter, but as he assimilates conjured images to publish himself as a newspaper, he creates a new form: the news story as prose poem.

The new form manifests the new self creating it: and expanding "I" that is itself being created by an enormous ego that by turning inward for the newsworthy story activates the division in Charlie's psyche that the audience hears and sees. It is this enormous ego that opens the olfactory organ and releases the subconscious mind, surging in a "*flash powder explosion*" (164) into the protagonist's conscious mind. In the normal process of psychological growth, as consciousness assimilates contents of the unconscious, the individual's psychological center shifts from ego to created self. In *Conjuring an Event*, the surge is so powerful that assimilating consciousness cannot arrest the expansion. Ego creates a self that devours everything conjured in a Whitmanesque free verse that runs for pages in lines such as these: "I am the buyer, and I am the seller. The consumer and the consumed. I am the one and I am the many!!" (173)

Even if the new self wanted to curb the ego's appetite, the attempt would be thwarted by the audience's applause. Whenever Charlie wavers, the coach spurs him on by playing a tape of a cheering crowd and at one point by turning up the house lights so that he can see the spectators. Their presence activates in him a susceptibility as potentially dangerous as the susceptibility to his subjective processes. They activate the histrionic sensibility, further inflating his ego.

Creating a self can be, and frequently is, tragic. One must have an ego to want to create, yet the greater the ego the more monstrous the self created. In *Conjuring an Event*, however, the new self is described only as a "*bit monstrous*" (173) as it begins to emerge because Nelson forgoes tragedy for satire in a tone set early by the absurdity of sniffing salt as a preparation for enhancing one's involvement in life. By Act 2 the absurdity of comedy becomes the exaggeration of satire.

Voracious Charlie presses beyond the normal assimilating stage in the individual's development to assume national and epic proportions. The voice that begins the transformation scene as the autobiographical "I" of the reporter recounting his early experiences becomes the mythic "I" of the Whitmanesque seer whose *Song of Myself* is a celebration of the one in the many and the many in the one—a vision both personal and cosmic. With a difference, however. The birth is a parody of the bard's discovery of his role as poet of an America which embraces all forms of life. Charlie's uncovered self conjures a catalogue of Americana to be consumed by the reporting self until the new self is hypertrophied but not imperial.[6]

There is no dignity to this act of gluttony. In his desire to expand consciousness so that he can be the best reporter, Charlie assimilates every image that the undifferentiated unconscious releases until his consciousness becomes undifferentiated but only because it is indiscriminate. "I consume every shitful act imaginable," he boasts, "every act of true love believable and sift out the hits from the flops" (171). A satire of self-creation, *Conjuring an Event* ends with him, bouncing and dancing, victorious in the boxing ring. "*I said, Meeeeeeeeeeeeeee! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !*" he chants, giving the "*all-familiar #1 sign*" (174) to an applauding audience as the coach snaps his photo.

I wish that we could pursue the creation of mythic and national selves in such plays as *Rip Van Winkle*, *Some Americans Abroad*, and *Two Shakespearean Actors*, but the trilogy takes us deeper into the creation of a personal self, the crucial event in Nelson's imaginative world, the event from which all other events follow, including the creation of a national self.

Jungle Coup, the second play, opens with the protagonists priming, not for conjuring but for reporting. The locale is a village in the African jungle. While his assistant, Mott, cranks the transmitter for his radio broadcast to editorial headquarters, the reporter, Hopper paces about "*mentally...readying himself.*"[7] Within moments of broadcasting, though, he becomes unhappy with the report, an unhappiness aggravated by Mott's failure to have ready a tape of recorded screams to simulate panic in support of his analysis. When the assistant, in answer to his request for a critique after he slams off the transmitter, tells the broadcaster that he thought the story "pretty smooth," Hopper directs his disgust at him, reminding the radio operator that a story is not supposed to be smooth, but is "supposed to grab" the audience. The kind of story does not matter. What does is that it release the energy at life's core so that it can "combust and explode and rage out of control." Only this kind of story will, in one of the trilogy's iterative images, "burn" the audience. Knowing that his "stale...tired...emotionless hackneyed canned shit" was not burning anyone, he slammed off the transmitter (243-44). On Mott's advice he leaves to take a break by walking around the village.

When he returns, he gives the kind of news story he has just described, one that rages out of control. He smells the "stench of confusion" and tastes a "madness" as he conjures the chaos overrunning the village. "I no longer see any reason," he reaches the climax in the image of unleashed energy burning everything in its path, "but an instinct, a gut without its shell, without skin, without clothes, bare AND BURNING ALIVE!!" Though his assistant plays the panic tape and he looks toward the village, Hopper, like Charlie in *Conjuring an Event*, is turned inward, feeling within himself "emotions running wild" and "foaming at the mouth" (250-51). No critique is necessary for this story because he felt the panic grab him.

Jungle Coup carries over from the earlier play the image of explosively surging energy and the tape of a cheering stadium crowd, which Mott comes across while searching for the panic tape. For the mind's two activities, the second play adds new terms to replace report and conjure. When Hopper returns from the break, he explains to Mott what he did wrong in his first broadcast. "I was trying to construct the touch—not present one. I was plotting, not feeling. So nothing was coming off gut-level. Now I know better"(247-48).

By separating the two activities, Hopper reveals his divided self. In the first instance, he builds a structure; in the second, he feels the collapse of the structure. Addressed by him as distinct activities, the

poles are manifested as separate experiences, each the subject of it own news story. When constructing, he composes verbal images to build a news story; recorded sound effects supply any needed emotional coloring. He does not integrate his verbal images with his feelings because they express separate realities. Intellectual reality, or activity, is expressed verbally as a report devoid of feeling. Emotional reality is expressed aurally as a conjuring of sounds from within himself devoid of composure.

Neither does he assimilate constructed verbal images or presented aural images with apprehended images from the sensory world. In his divided self, consciousness exerts control only in matters involving its own activity. When it attempts to structure other experiences—irrational emotional ones, for example—it inhibits their expression, and for panic to be genuine, it must rage. The sensory world is excluded from conscious assimilation for the same reason. The broadcaster disregards apprehended reality for imagined reality because if he reported what he saw in the jungle, he would be out of a job. There is no revolution outside himself. He has, in effect, increased the surge of energy in *Conjuring an Event* by asking and answering in the affirmative the following questions: If one can conjure his unconscious with its repository of archetypal images that fit all situations, why bother with apprehended images of an event? Why not simply imagine the event, in this case a jungle coup?

Hopper is not mad when the play opens. He broadcasts the ongoing coverage because a revolution is hot copy, and he maintains the equilibrium in his psyche by alternating the currents. Yet by maintaining the division between the two activities, he allows each to expand unchecked by the dialectical corrective that merging them creates. And they continue to expand until they generate a check, not from an uncritical public, but from rival media companies. If his media company devotes ongoing coverage to a revolution because there is an audience for it, competing companies want their own coverage. The play's third character, Bellows, is a reporter sent by his editors into the African jungle to report back the story to them.

Bellows is the agent that sparks the play's action. When Hopper realizes that the rival reporter will expose the deception that he has been perpetrating, he moves the transmitting station to another village, a location he plans to establish as the coup's new front. Claiming that both his editors and the rival editors will believe him and not Bellows because they will want to believe him—because a revolution is more newsworthy than a non-revolution—he sets off into a jungle to meet Mott, who will transport the supplies by jeep, at the new station.

Even though the electricity metaphor is developed comically, Charlie's ego alternates his conscious and subconscious currents until he can direct the flow into a unified flow—egomaniacal and gluttonous—but a sustained self nonetheless. Hopper alternates the currents within himself that build and collapse structures. He does not direct them into a unified flow that creates a sustained self; he transmits them. These currents, or activities of his conscious and subconscious mind, are the imagined stories that he broadcasts as ongoing coverage. Since in Nelson's trilogy the story created manifests the self that creates it, Hopper's can be called an imagined self. So long as his revolution is not challenged, he can continue transmitting it because it is ongoing within himself. Inevitable, however, as we have seen, the story will be challenged, and when that happens, he retreats into the jungle in search of a station from which to transmit unchallenged again.

The play's scenic design also reflects the self. The jungle into which Hopper flees is a stage analogue to his psyche, where the threatening external reality cannot flow. The map proves unreliable as a guide through the uncharted landscape. His watch stops, leaving him in suspended time. And Bellows removes the transmitter battery, breaking off his communication with the outside world.

The pattern of psychological growth is the same throughout the trilogy. Before he can create a self, each protagonist must release the energy within himself with which to create. This discovery is the third of the four directions that Shattuck suggests modern man has taken in his search for self-discovery. The direction is inward to the subjective process, and the journey is perilous, for the quester can get lost in the interior. Charlie has a girlfriend, a brother, and finally a coach standing by him. Hopper has no one because he chooses to be alone. His sole connection with external reality is his assumption that there is an audience to whom he transmits his subjective processes, or alternating currents: the energy that is his imagined story and self. Once Bellows prevents transmission by removing the battery, he loses his one outlet, and the energy can only intensify within him. He is trapped in his imagination.

To stay "hot" (259) as he treks through the jungle, Hopper practices for his next broadcast. He constructs an account of a political assassination, with a description borrowed from the the Kennedy motorcade assassination, and then presents panic, which for him is screaming. Neither verbal nor aural reality can sustain him, however. Without audience approval, he cannot be sure how the broadcast plays.

With the jungle sounds getting louder, he loses confidence in his judgement about what constitutes a good report, so that with each

attempt he imagines a more sensational happening until he is broadcasting a massacre of civilians and a cannibalistic ceremony. Trapped, his energy so increases in alternating currents that one short-circuits the other. Never having been called upon to assimilate contents of the unconscious or apprehended images, his consciousness is inadequate to the task of seizing the rushing images, and his control breaks down.

He has fallen victim to the danger Charlie is warned about. Having released the irrational in himself, his imagined self unravels as the encroaching sounds become "*very much like gales of laughter*" (259). They are both a comment on his deteriorating mental state and his progressively fantastic reports, for he is lost. In a scene parodying Marlow's vision of the bonfire ceremony the night he wrestles with his and Kurtz's soul in *Heart of Darkness*, Hopper cannot tell whether or not he is imagining, and he jumps or falls from what he sees as a waterfall onto rocks below, where he imagines that in a gorge he is rescued by Mott and Bellows, who have been scouring the jungle for him.

Like the transformation scene in *Conjuring an Event*, this too could be the stuff of tragedy: a parable of the artist, who must pay a terrible price for mining his subconscious mind for his art. But Nelson is not writing tragedy. In fact, *Jungle Coup* goes beyond the satire of the first play to become farce.

In the depths of the interior, Hopper turns and confronts the theatre audience, soliciting its help in regaining control of himself by communicating with him. Taking centerstage and shouting down the sounds of encroaching madness—"Go ahead you noisy fuckers! I'm ready for you!" (265)—he lists the events he can invoke, asking the audience to indicate its preference. His repertory is mad: interviews with Amelia Earheart,[8] the Lindberg baby, Hitler in a secret bomb shelter, Jimmy Hoffa with Mary Jo Kopeckne; scenes from nature, spoiled or unspoiled; starving children, lepers, and so on. When his trump card, conjured panic, fails to excite the house, he is in despair until he imagines himself playing with children and hitting a home run. As he presents the event, the spectators go crazy, "dancing on their seats" until the "stands are vibrating!" (269) The scene ends as he, seated onstage, puts down the microphone in front of the seated audience.

Burned-out, he quits broadcasting, leaving behind him the transmitting equipment for which he no longer has any use. In the play's closing scene, he tells an amazed Mott and Bellows that Hopper

died of a football injury as sixty thousand silent spectators in the stadium watched. But, they asked, "If Hopper is dead, then who are you?" Unable to chant Charlie's victorious self-assertion, he answers as he exits, "Nobody. (*Pause*) Nobody important" (272). He has failed to create a sustained self.

The trilogy is most satirical when an audience is introduced. Bellows learns what Hopper knows: that editors want coverage of a revolution, whether it exists in the sensory world or in the mind. When the protagonist exits, his former rival picks up the microphone and while cranking the transmitter broadcasts a story how reporter Hopper has been found alive after being kidnapped and tortured by the rebels. It is fitting therefore that the trilogy's concluding play creates a self that Hopper fails to. This undertaking is the fourth of the four directions that Shattuck suggests modern man has taken for self-discovery: in his histrionic sensibility.

When the protagonist of *The Vienna Notes* says in the play's opening scene, "See if it plays....Get yourself ready. 'Cause this kinda thing you gotta get while it's hot,"[9] he sounds like reporters Charlie and Hopper. He does not look like them, though. Nor does he act like them. He is one of civilization's finest who write, not for a newspaper, but in a form reserved for the privileged. A U.S. Senator who lost the presidential election in a close contest, he is in Vienna at the invitation of a committee to give a lecture. He is accompanied, as always, by his secretary, whose primary responsibility is to write, as he verbalizes, his memoirs. "Entry" (74) and "story" (77) are the play's terms for a unit of dictation.

Senator Stubbs; secretary Rivers; and a second women, Georgia, the committee chairwoman, are in the hotel suite booked for him by the chairwoman, who becomes progressively more upset that neither he nor is secretary responds to the preparations she has gone through to make his stay in Vienna enjoyable. Just before leaving, she explodes, cursing his lack of courtesy and sensitivity. Once she leaves, Stubbs dictates the entry while Rivers records. He became aware of Georgia's presence when he felt the anger rising in her voice. Likening it to a spreading rash, he resigned himself to suffering through it because a Senator is accustomed to intrusions wherever he goes, although he wanted to yell at her to shut up.

This first entry, which sets the pattern for all subsequent ones, reveals the memoirs' theme. Petty as it is, Georgia's outburst is nonetheless one more instance of the sudden surge of the irrational in life, transformed by the Senator revealed in the memoirs as a calm,

deliberate man for whom the irrational is that which, intruding upon his consciousness, is brought under control by his consciousness. He apprehends images in the external world but as impressions and sensations which trigger feelings in him, which he controls and transforms through his expression of them in the memoirs. His self is the measure of reality, and his expression, his verbal images, is the means of creating the self.

The opening scene functions as a prologue, and the closing scene as an epilogue. The six intervening scenes of *The Vienna Notes* take place at Georgia's farmhouse outside the city to which the chairwomen invites Stubbs and Rivers for dinner. These six scenes should be thought of as the play proper. As Scene 2 opens, the three characters enter the farmhouse. Stubbs dictates his impressions and sensations experienced during the car ride from the hotel, Rivers writes, and Georgia calls for her husband to come greet the guest. Within minutes the house is attacked by masked terrorists who have killed the husband. Rivers firing of Georgia's handgun repulses them temporarily.

There is a logic to Hopper's journey in *Jungle Coup*. When he releases panic in himself to present to his audience, he initiates his fate. Since he relies on subjective processes as the sole source of reality, it is only just that he confront by himself the terror of the encroaching irrational. Stubbs, on the other hand, is attacked by the irrational in life in the persons of terrorists who, in a phone call in Scene 3, give their demand. They will allow Rivers and Georgia to leave unharmed if he surrenders to them, for they want him and not the women. In each subsequent scene the terror comes closer, climaxing in Scene 7 with the blasting of the door off its hinges. What the Senator does to withstand the siege is the play's plot.

The most civilized of Nelson's three protagonists dictates, except that is not the right term. *The Vienna Notes* does not add new specialized terms for the two activities. The terms most often used are *think* and *feel.* Stubbs thinks before he verbalizes the entry, which in a series of impressions and sensations transformed into a story of an event, and he feels the event while verbalizing it. Although he uses the same process throughout, it is most clear at the opening of Scene 3, where he is "*standing* and *thinking:* ...Okay. Maybe. Then: door. Then: duck. Then: bang. Then: okay. Right." When he has the correct sequence of impressions and sensations set in his mind and " *'envisions'* " the scene in his imagination, he begins (82). If he feels the event, in this or any entry, as he did at the time of the experience, he is "*into*" it (74). The story is playing; grabbing him, it will "grab" the audience (79). Thus he neither reports-constructs as a separate

activity nor cojnjures-presents as a separate activity but integrates the two in his verbally expressed histrionic sensibility.

Acting or preforming is the most accurate description of what Stubbs does. In an author's note appended to the text, which complements Shattuck's discussion of the histrionic sensibility, Nelson defends the Senator's acting as being consistent with man's instinctive need to express himself: "The dramatic, or the art of acting our feelings, is a civilized means of getting ourselves across, understood, and empathized with" (102).

In Scene 3, Stubbs acts out for Rivers how Georgia should have revealed her discovery of her husband's body. He criticizes her sudden scream of panic (and by implication Hopper's screaming) because it lacks control. He does not use Hopper's term *construct*, but he argues for structure in drama. If the series of impressions and sensations has a "built in thing" (79), it lends itself to story transformation. If not, he must build the structure into it in the transformation. "Where's the build in that?" he criticizes Georgia's scream (81). At the same time, though he does not use Hopper's term *present*, he faults structure at the expense of feeling. At one point encouraging Rivers to express her feelings, he tells her to start again. "More...immediacy, I think. Know what I mean? It sounds like you have it all figured out" (93). In the same scene he snaps off Georgia's expression for "faking the emotion" (94).

What is wrong, then, with the spontaneous scream of panic is that it lacks the control of drama. A dramatic event implies actors and an audience, and as we have seen in the trilogy, an audience expects appearance rather than raw reality and the more conspicuous the better, for in a media-programmed society, power resides in the image rather than in the thing itself. The three characters lose their tempers during the siege, scream to relieve the tension, and even get physical with one another, but by performing control, they create the appearance of control, deterring the terror's advance.

Panic also lacks the control of civilization. Since civilized man controls his environment, creating a civilized self is the mission of every man who wants to control the emotions and feelings triggered in him by life's sudden attacks of irrational terror. His civilized consciousness must assimilate the incursions of the savage unconscious id. To accomplish that, he must transform unleashed panic and encroaching madness by integrating reporting and conjuring, constructing and presenting, thinking and feeling in his verbally expressed histrionic sensibility.

Of Nelson's three protagonists, Stubb's would appear to be the most integrated. Yes, but only *appear to be.* In reality, he is not. He too stands exposed by the satire. Scene 8 occurs two years after the blasting of the door off its hinges. He and his secretary are again visiting Vienna, but the audience never learns what finally happened at the farmhouse. He does not want to talk about that day because he is tired of the story.

Nelson's third protagonist is not defeated, but his triumph is hollow, the consequence of his strategy of trivializing his encounter with the irrational by detaching himself from its power. The play's epilogue, Scene 8 is a reading of the memoirs' entry in which the Senator on election night learned that the initial reporting of Ohio in his column was a mistake and that by losing the state, he had lost the presidency. But he would not break down and cry as others at the campaign headquarters were doing. He would lose with dignity, a man in control of himself.

That is a description not of the protagonist, but of the personality the protagonist's performance created for the memoirs. It is a persona: a stage or public self. Aware throughout of the strain caused by acting a role for posterity, Stubbs relaxes and asks Rivers to read the election night story, which he considers giving that night for his lecture. He will imagine himself among the listeners so that he can gauge audience reaction. About himself Charlie can say, *"I am!...Me!"* while about himself Hopper has to say that he is "Nobody." The trilogy closes with Stubbs' response to a self manifested apart from himself. "I really do feel for that man. And so will they. It will play. It will play. It will play" (101).

The author's note appended to the text contains a paragraph on the "notion of HISTORY" as it supplants the traditional "notion of HEAVEN." In an age which renders the soul and its struggle for immortality irrelevant, the citizen of the modern world achieves immortality with future generations by "attempting to create as good, exciting, and empathetic a personality as he can" (102). The irony is that in securing a place in history, he may have to ignore history.

During the Astor Place riot that erupted in New York City in 1849, 34 people died and over 100 more were injured. That historical event is the basis of Nelson's *Two Shakespearean Actors.* At the height of the riot, the playwright has the American actor, who is discussing the art of acting with his British counterpart, scream at the rioters, "I told you before, to just leave us alone!!!!!"[10]

Like the riot, the revolution in *The Vienna Notes* is real, but whether real or not, the end result is the same as in *Jungle Coup,* where the revolution is imagined. Though each play's protagonist is more susceptible to the stimulus flowing from one part of his nature than from the other—the artist to his subjective processes and the Senator to his histrionic sensibility—for both, internal events take precedence over external ones. Now we can appreciate Nelson's forgoing tragedy for satire in creating a personal self. It is the American measure of reality. Even the one protagonist who embraces the world does so to absorb it. Charlie inflates the personal self into a national self: a figure of conspicuous consumption.

In the clarity of its metaphors and images, of its creation of a self and challenges to that creation, I know of no better introduction than Nelson's trilogy to the overriding concern with the creation of a self, personal or national, in the contemporary American theatre.

NOTES

[1]*The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature & the Arts* (New York: Farrar, 1984), p. 114.

[2]Introduction, *Plays from Playwrights Horizons* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1987), p. vi.

[3]*Conjuring an Event, An American Comedy and Other Plays* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1984), p. 139. Hereafter to be cited in the text. I have retained Nelson's eccentric punctuation throughout, even when a line is followed by ten exclamation points.

[4]The reporter as a figure of consciousness is not unique to Nelson's plays. He/She is the voice of consciousness in Len Jenkin's *Kid Twist* and Susan Yankowitz's *Night Sky,* for example.

[5]For a succinct analysis of the imagery of eating and digesting, see Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Bolligen Series XLII (1954; Princeton: Princeton/Bolligen Paperbacks-Princeton UP, 1973), pp. 30 and 336.

[6]The references are to Quentin Anderson's studies of the creation of self in classic American literature. See, for example, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

[7]*Jungle Coup, Plays from Playwrights Horizons* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1987), p. 240. Hereafter to be cited in the text.

[8]I cannot tell whether the misspelling of Earhart is intentional or a typographical error.

[9]*The Vienna Notes, Word Plays: An Anthology of New American Drama* (New York: PAJ Publications, n.d.), p. 74. Hereafter to be cited in the text.

[10]*Two Shakespearean Actors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 102.