

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

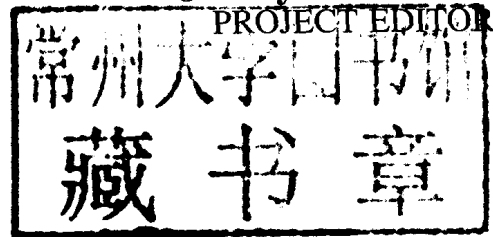
CLC 284

Volume 284

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of CLC in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. CLC, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in CLC inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each CLC volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in CLC provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A CLC entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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T. Coraghessan Boyle

1948-

(Born Thomas John Boyle; also known as T. C. Boyle; middle name is pronounced “kuh-ragg-issun”) American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry provides criticism on Boyle’s career through 2007. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 36 and 90; for discussion of the novel *World’s End*, see *CLC*, Volume 55.

INTRODUCTION

The author of irreverent comic fiction, Boyle is well-known for using witty, erudite, and highly stylized prose to satirize the ills and foibles of society—both in contemporary America and in settings of varied historical epochs. Often compared to absurdist writers such as John Barth, Evelyn Waugh, and Thomas Pynchon, Boyle rose to popularity during the 1980s, becoming a bestselling novelist and short fiction writer whose widely imaginative stories are lauded for their quirky characters, lush descriptions, and cynical, black humor. His fiction often exposes human tendencies toward hypocrisy, self-indulgent materialism, racism, and self-importance and lays bare the contradictory nature of human impulses and emotions. Though critical reaction to his body of work has been mixed, Boyle is almost universally praised for his unique humorous style, considered virtually unsurpassed in contemporary fiction, and his talent as a storyteller who possesses a distinct gift for skewering the faults of American culture with imagination and satiric effect.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

A second-generation descendant of Irish immigrants, Boyle was born on December 2, 1948, in Peekskill, New York, to working-class parents. A self-described “pampered punk” of the 1960s, Boyle enrolled in the music department at the State University of New York at Potsdam, earning a B.A. in English and history in 1968 despite what he has described as a half-hearted and lackluster academic effort. He began writing short fiction and plays during his time as a undergraduate student, and by 1972, while working as a high school teacher, he had his short story “The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust” published in the *North American*

Review. He subsequently applied to and was accepted at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, earning an M.F.A. in 1974. Additionally, though his declared specialty was Victorian literature, he completed a Ph.D. in 1977 for a collection of short fiction that was eventually published as *Descent of Man, and Other Stories* (1979). In 1977 he also received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and was invited to establish a writing program at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, where he continues to teach English and creative writing.

During the 1980s, Boyle issued two novels—*Water Music* (1981) and *Budding Prospects* (1984)—and a second short story collection, *Greasy Lake & Other Stories* (1985). However, it was the publication of *World’s End* (1987), a sprawling saga involving three families over ten generations, that garnered Boyle widespread critical attention. Set in the Hudson River Valley in the fictional town of Peterskill, New York, *World’s End* has been called ambitious as well as semi-autobiographical and earned Boyle his first PEN/Faulkner Award in American fiction in 1988. He was awarded a second PEN/Faulkner Award two years later for the title story of his third short story collection, *If the River Was Whiskey* (1989). Since then he has continued to produce fiction at a prolific rate, publishing several more novels and short fiction anthologies. He continues to garner literary honors for his work, including the 1997 Prix Médicis étranger for best foreign novel published in France for *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), and a National Book Award nomination in 2003 for the novel *Drop City* (2003).

MAJOR WORKS

Boyle’s short fiction, which covers a wide range of subjects, has been described as being infused with a manic energy that can quickly move between satirizing the absurdities of modern life and revealing the private anxieties of his characters. In these humorous and ironic works, Boyle examines the vagaries of American culture and the peculiarities of worlds not unlike the one in which he grew up, always with an eye for the bizarre, the comically unexpected, or the outlandish. Many of his novels take as their focus historical personages or true-to-life historical events. For example, his first novel, *Water Music*, is set in

Africa in the early-nineteenth century. Revolving around two men, Mungo Park, the noted Scottish surgeon and explorer who led two expeditions along the Niger River, and the fictional Ned Rise, a drunken con man from the London slums, much of *Water Music* is concerned with Park's African excursions, offering vivid accounts of his adventures with curious natives. Rise, meanwhile, is involved in such dubious activities as running a sex show, robbing graves, and peddling fake caviar. Together the two protagonists travel down the Niger on the 1805 expedition, from which the real Park never returned. Detailing the tangled associations between seventeenth-century Dutch settlers and their twenty-first century descendants, *World's End* centers on the rich, tyrannical Van Warts and the oppressed, peasant Van Brunts, whose intertwined stories are connected with the Mohonk family of Indians, who occupied the Hudson River Valley land prior to the arrival of the Van Warts. Themes include the intersecting of past and present, inter-generational conflicts, revenge, betrayal, social rankings and the abuse of power, and left-wing versus right-wing politics and loyalties.

Boyle's 1990 novel, *East Is East*, satirizes racism in general and the United States' (and Japan's) failure to embrace and sustain a genuinely multicultural society in particular. In the novel, Hiro Tanaka is a twenty-year-old sailor, outcast from his native Japan because of his status as half-American and half-Japanese. Envisioning the United States as an idealized "melting pot" of nationalities and cultures, Hiro jumps off a Japanese merchant freighter as it nears the coast of Georgia, intent on finding his long-absent American father. He misses the mainland, though, landing instead on a soggy, insect-and-reptile-infested morass of an off-shore island with little to offer in the way of food or shelter. Dodging agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, he is aided for a time by Ruth Dershowitz, an ambitious though untalented writer residing at an artists' colony on the far end of the island. The novel satirizes supposed cultural homogeneity (both of the Old South and of Japan), the distrust of foreigners, fears of miscegenation, outright racism (with echoes of the racism against blacks in the Old South), and worries over the "contamination" of a "superior" American society.

Boyle tackles the subject of immigration for a second time in *The Tortilla Curtain*, a novel set in southern California and centering on the borders—both physical and psychological—between wealthy American liberals and illegal Mexican immigrants. In the novel the lives of two couples, the yuppie environmentalists Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher and the impoverished illegal aliens Cándido and América Rincón, intersect following an automobile crash. The ensuing narrative traces Delaney's growing mistrust and hatred of

Mexican illegals, whom the suburbanites employ to build the gated entrance and walled enclosure—designed to ward off intrusion by the illegals—that surround their private community. Poking fun at extreme environmentalism, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) takes place in the near future, in 2025 to 2026, on an ecologically destroyed Earth. Seventy-five-year-old Tyrone Tierwater tells of his involvement during the late twentieth century with the radical vigilante group Earth Forever!, which uses whatever means necessary to thwart any events they view as being environmentally destructive. Taking on consumerism, the quest for spirituality, and the idea of free love, *Drop City* features a 1970s hippie commune that relocates to the wilds of Alaska only to become weighed down by their excessive materialism and the harsh reality of a brutal Arctic winter. Featuring real-life historical persons, *The Inner Circle* (2004) takes a fictional approach to the views of the infamous sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey, while *The Women* (2009) details the romantic liaisons of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Boyle's interest in history, which he views as a channel to understanding the present, continues to evoke discussion among critics. Arguing that Boyle uses history in *World's End* to draw attention to notions of fatalism and genetic predisposition, Miriam Hardin contends that, in particular, the characters of Walter and Truman Van Brunt use the idea of determinism to rationalize their behavior. Other scholars examine Boyle's use of comic elements to satirize tensions in American society—particularly involving race relations. Focusing on *East Is East*, Daniel Schenker points out Boyle's use of "humor to convey a message of almost savage indignation," one reflecting the author's dismay and sense of hopelessness at modern society's apparent inability to establish and accept a truly ethnically diverse society. The critic further emphasizes Boyle's satirical approach to the mythical construct of cultural homogeneity or exclusivity, which exists in many national histories (in this case in those of the United States and Japan). Focusing on how *East Is East* and *The Tortilla Curtain* treat the notion of a specifically American white identity, Heather J. Hicks views the former novel as equating whiteness with violence, an attitude of bigotry, superiority, and dominance. In addition, the critic finds a profusion of white images in *The Tortilla Curtain* and elucidates the ways in which the novel satirizes white fear about Mexicans (those of "color"). According to Hicks, Mexicans are viewed as dangerous by white characters in the book, and their presence upsets racial status quo and control, disrupting the life of privilege led by the white characters in the book. At the same time,

however, the critic maintains that Boyle satirizes whites' contradictory impulses: while fearing and abhorring the incursion of the ethnic "other," whites at the same time envy and desire to experience the affinity with nature (or the "wild") that they associate with the illegals.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- "The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust" (short story) 1972
Descent of Man, and Other Stories (short stories) 1979
Water Music (novel) 1981
Budding Prospects: A Pastoral (novel) 1984
Greasy Lake & Other Stories (short stories) 1985
World's End (novel) 1987
If the River Was Whiskey (short stories) 1989
East Is East (novel) 1990
The Collected Stories of T. Coraghessan Boyle (short stories) 1993
The Road to Wellville (novel) 1993
Without a Hero: Stories (short stories) 1994
The Tortilla Curtain (novel) 1995
Riven Rock (novel) 1998
T. C. Boyle Stories: The Collected Stories of T. Coraghessan Boyle (short stories) 1998
A Friend of the Earth (novel) 2000
After the Plague: And Other Stories (short stories) 2001
Drop City (novel) 2003
Doubletakes: Pairs of Contemporary Short Stories [editor, with daughter, Kerrie Kvashay-Boyle] (stories) 2004
The Inner Circle (novel) 2004
The Human Fly and Other Stories [as T. C. Boyle] (short stories) 2005
Tooth and Claw (short stories) 2005
Talk Talk (novel) 2006
The Women: A Novel (novel) 2009
Wild Child, and Other Stories (short stories) 2010

CRITICISM

Daniel Schenker (essay date fall 1995)

SOURCE: Schenker, Daniel. "A Samurai in the South: Cross-Cultural Disaster in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *East Is East*." *Southern Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (fall 1995): 70-80.

[In the following essay, Schenker explores the ways in which Boyle uses the setting of the Deep South in *East Is East* to satirize themes relating to American and

Japanese racial and cultural identities, including myths of ethnic or native exclusivity, violence, rigidly defined class structures, and latent hostility toward foreigners/outsiders.]

Since the end of World War II relations between the United States and Japan have been characterized by a certain one-sidedness. Material goods—first textiles, then consumer electronics, now autos and computers—have moved from Japan to the US, while cultural commodities—fashions, movies, even the English language itself—have traveled from the US to Japan. Recently, both parties have come to acknowledge this situation as untenable. America's trade imbalance with Japan has become such a national preoccupation as to require little comment here. Of greater concern to us as students of culture should be the fact that while Americans have increasingly inhabited a material world made in Japan, they understand very little about this nation (and our relationship to it) which now has such a major impact on our day-to-day lives.

Ihab Hassan, a scholar who for many years has been studying the experience of postmodernism, notes in a recent essay on Japan and the US that in a world of shifting geopolitical arrangements, where Occident and Orient endlessly contaminate one another, and kitsch and cargo cults have become the norm, what becomes necessary is "a transcultural discourse, not simply intercultural—that is, not simply situated in one culture looking at the other—but also moving across cultures, moving beneath or above, between or beside cultures" (74).

Over the past decade or so, a number of younger American writers have been demonstrating the truth of Ezra Pound's dictum that "artists are the antennae of the race" by creating such a transcultural discourse that tries to confront the meaning of Japan to America. The results of this work include Jay McInerney's *Ransom*, Richard Wiley's *Soldiers in Hiding* and John Burnham Schwartz's *Bicycle Days*. At their best, these novels accomplish a subtle double movement by which American readers learn not only something about Japan, but equally important, something about themselves.

A significant recent contribution to this literature is the 1990 novel, *East Is East*, by T. Coraghessan Boyle. Boyle's career began in the early 1970s and has developed through five novels and three short story collections. Although for some time now critics have compared his work to that of William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez (much to Boyle's satisfaction), a more accurate description of Boyle's literary genealogy would probably lead us back to Mark Twain. Like Twain, Boyle is basically a teller of tall tales with a

gift for social satire who wants to be taken seriously as a major novelist and man of letters. His usual mode of operation employs comic exaggeration and impossible juxtaposition to reveal the pretentiousness of what passes for civilized behavior. A good example of Boyle's methods can be seen in the early story, "**Descent of Man**," in which a woman studying primates becomes so enamoured of her subject that she jilts her human lover for a chimpanzee who, disabusing us of our evolutionary snobbery, wears stylish clothes and composes epic verse. In a more recent story, "**Hard Sell**," an imagined meeting between a Madison Avenue marketing consultant and the Ayatollah Khomeini, exposes the crass materialism of one nationality and the moral hypocrisy of the other.

Boyle began to make the transition from off-beat virtuoso to serious novelist with the 1987 publication of *World's End*, a sprawling "historical fugue," as he called it in an author's note, which does for Boyle's native Hudson Valley what *Absalom! Absalom!* did for Oxford, Mississippi. The novel follows the tangled fates of three Dutch and Native American families as it attempts a retelling of three hundred years of American history in microcosm. *East Is East* is similarly ambitious, though here the comparisons and contrasts reach across cultures rather than historical epochs.

While the action of *East Is East* takes place almost entirely within the United States, the novel's protagonist is a young Japanese merchant sailor named Hiro Tanaka. Hiro (a common Japanese name which acquires comic and pathetic irony as the narrative proceeds) is actually one-half American. His father was a California hippie who had gone to Japan in the late sixties to study Zen and to learn the *koto*. But like all Americans, according to the stereotype that has lately taken hold in Japan, he was "lazy, stoned, and undisciplined" (16), and abandoned Hiro's mother six months before he was born. Tired of always being called *gaijin* (foreigner) in his own country, Hiro decides to jump ship off the Georgia coast which he literally does when his freighter is a day or two out of Savannah. With a copy of Yukio Mishima's *The Way of the Samurai* in a ziploc bag strapped to his chest, he swims ashore only to discover in the first of many tragicomical turns that he hasn't reached the mainland, but instead, one of the swampy sea islands just off the coast.

Over the next several chapters Hiro manages to elude the combined forces of the local sheriff and two special agents from the Immigration and Naturalization Service who hunt him down with a vengeance far out of proportion to any actual threat he represents. Their inability to catch him in a timely way suggests that

there may after all be something to the image of Americans as lazy and incompetent. Even a wall that at one point almost cuts off Hiro's escape proves to be no impediment, for it was "an American wall, big but shoddy," which he scales easily (147).

While a fugitive, Hiro receives assistance from the novel's other main character, Ruth Dershowitz, a thirty-four-year-old writer of dubious talent who boasts four short stories in obscure little magazines to her credit. Despite her lack of renown she currently enjoys residence at Thanatopsis House, a famous artists' colony on the island, whose founder, Septima Light, happens to be the mother of her current boyfriend, Saxby Light. Thanatopsis House itself, seen as a mirror of contemporary American culture, suggests a land on which the sun has gone down. The name suggests a house of the dead, and indeed, the colony was founded in memory of Septima's industrialist husband who went insane and killed himself. In a macabre touch illustrative of Boyle's comic wit, all the cottages in which the writers spend their work days are thus called after famous literary suicides. Ruth Dershowitz occupies "Hart Crane," named for the poet whose failure to complete *The Bridge*, an epic for twentieth-century America, re-enforces the sense of an American dream unfulfilled and gone awry.

Ruth continues to aid Hiro until Saxby becomes suspicious of her suddenly acquired taste for bamboo shoots and fried dace. He alerts the authorities who finally manage to capture Hiro and incarcerate him in an old slaveholding cell on the grounds of the estate. But Hiro is once again saved by the same mixture of American arrogance and stupidity that in his mind has brought us two decades of factory closings and industrial decline. Hiro is able to remove the rusty bars from a window in his cell just before the sheriff arrives to interrogate him. For four hours three professional investigators sit with him in this tiny room, asking all sorts of irrelevant questions ("Was he familiar with the Red Brigades? Did the name Abu Nidal mean anything to him?" [223]), but never once notice that bars from the only window in the place have been pried loose.

When they leave, he exits the cell and escapes the grounds by hiding in the trunk of a car. But by a stroke of incredible bad luck, the car he climbs into belongs to Saxby Light who takes it on a trip to the Okefenokee swamp in search of a rare species of fish. When Saxby finally opens the trunk, Hiro flies out, only to find himself in a wilderness that makes the sea island look like an amusement park. With the assistance of Ruth Dershowitz (who is now under threat of prosecution for harboring a fugitive), he is captured again and taken to a hospital in Savannah to recover and await

deportation. Feeling betrayed and disillusioned, he fashions a hospital spoon into a dagger and, in obedience to his hero Mishima, commits ritual suicide.

The use of the rural South as a venue for a novel about Japanese-American relations is certainly unexpected, as the 1980 census shows that a minuscule six percent of ethnic Japanese live in the South (Wilson 419). California or some large American city would seem more probable locales, and indeed, Ruth Dershowitz, Boyle's writer *manqué*, is trying to compose a story about a Japanese housewife who attempts to drown herself and her children in Santa Monica Bay after being deserted by her husband. Because the setting is so peculiar we have to ask ourselves, why? What purpose does the South serve in Boyle's transcultural narrative?

Some kind of relationship between Japan and the South is implicit in Boyle's use of two epigraphs for his book. The first of these comes from *The Way of the Samurai*, actually a commentary by Mishima on the *Hagakure*, the teachings of an eighteenth-century samurai-turned-monk named Jōchō Yamamoto; it reads: "Those who wish to live horribly and die horribly are choosing a beautiful way of life." The other is from the well-known story of Joel Chandler Harris, more familiar as Uncle Remus: "Bred and bawn in de briar patch, Br'er Fox, bred and bawn."

While on first impression it seems hard to imagine two books less alike than *The Way of the Samurai* and *Uncle Remus*, both works share a fundamentally pessimistic, even nihilistic outlook on life. For the retired samurai Jōchō as for generations of Japanese artists and thinkers, the beauty of life was a function of its brevity. (Even today the most prized flowering cherry trees are the ones whose blossoms last the shortest time.) To the degree that an attachment to life and its pleasures distances one from death, it also takes one away from beauty, and so in this sense a horrible life leading to a horrible death is potentially the most beautiful. Yet even beauty is not an absolute value, and certainly it does not function as a redemptive force, since human beings are merely "cleverly devised puppets" and human existence itself is "futile" (Mishima 83-84). On several occasions in *The Way of the Samurai* Mishima draws the readers attention to Jōchō's "nihilism" (Mishima uses the English word), remarking one time that while Jōchō "scrutinizes each moment to extract the meaning of life . . . at heart he is convinced that life itself is nothing more than a dream" (52). In a meaningless universe death becomes a trivial matter, an awareness of which facilitates the warrior's devotion to his calling. "The Way of the Samurai is death," Jōchō announces, and he adds matter-of-factly, "In a life or death crisis, simply settle

it by deciding on immediate death. There is nothing complicated about it. Just brace yourself and proceed" (22).

The absence of trustworthy values in life and the prospect of immediate death for no reason also characterize the American South of the Uncle Remus tales. Under the slave system obliquely recalled here, the only certain thing is the rule of brute force, which as writers from Thomas Jefferson through Frederick Douglass warned, wounded and corrupted both master and slave. Noting the occasionally sadistic actions of the putative hero of the tales, Robert Hemenway explains that "Brer Rabbit can hardly be blamed for his violence, since the world he inhabits is one of unrelieved hostility. He must be constantly on guard, never trusting, always watching. Danger is everywhere; an assault lurks behind every bush" (Harris 26). These are the same assumptions that the samurai must operate under, which is why Hiro, who as an outsider in his own country was "bred and bawn in de briar patch," achieves temporary success in eluding his fox-like pursuers. Slavery is long gone, but its legacy of violence lingers on, not only in the South, of course, but wherever the racist attitudes that underpinned it persist.

Various other parallels between the two places can be noted. Both Japan and the South have been home to essentially feudal societies that affirmed a rigid separation of classes, a system of intense personal loyalties and the legitimate use of force whenever class or personal relations seemed threatened. Partly because of the romantic element in feudalism, both have also thrown themselves into war with logistically superior adversaries, and have known the experience of defeat. Boyle comments directly upon this aspect of the relationship when a hitchhiking Hiro Tanaka is picked up by a gracious, if somewhat senile southern lady named Ambly Wooster who thinks that he is the conductor Seiji Ozawa. She seems to have no end of good things to say about the Japanese:

"You know, sometimes I almost wish you *had* won the war—I just think it would shake this spineless society up, muggings in the street, millions of homeless, AIDS, but of course you have no crime whatsoever, do you? I've walked the streets of Tokyo myself, at the witching hour and past it, well past it"—and here the old lady gave him an exaggerated wink—"helpless as I am, and nothing, nothing did I find but courtesy, courtesy, courtesy—manners, that's what you people are all about. It's manners that make a society. But you must think me terribly unpatriotic to say things like this, and yet still, as a Southerner, I think I can appreciate how you must feel, a defeated nation, after all."

(133)

While it's true that street crime is relatively unknown in Japan (to a degree almost embarrassing to American

visitors), we might pause to consider why Boyle puts this speech into the mouth of a woman who is slightly out of her mind. Perhaps the Japanese and southerners are more polite than Americans generally, but can a people's outward manners be taken as an accurate index of their collective happiness and well-being? Violent past histories suggest that neither Japan nor the South have been utopias. Indeed, excessive concern with appearances points to a society where people have been forced to mask their true feelings. We might recall that for about ten years after their respective wars with the United States, both Japan and the South were ruled by occupying armies. Under these circumstances courtesy becomes a strategy for survival as hostility toward the conqueror must somehow be sublimated. By mentioning her sympathy with the defeated, Ambly Wooster acknowledges the common catastrophe—and lingering resentment—that lies behind the civilized demeanor of both groups.

Another major point of similarity, possibly related to their feudal pasts, is that both places have historically seen themselves as unique and exclusive societies. Addressing the recent round of "America bashing" in Japan, the Japanese-American literary critic Masao Miyoshi has written:

The Japanese who like to think of themselves as "we Japanese" continually repeat and reinforce the myth of homogeneity and uniqueness: "We Japanese are united," "we Japanese love simplicity," "we are harmonious in Japan," "rice is our soul (not soul food)," "we work harder in Japan," "we Japanese are moral," or even "Japanese cuisine is the best in the world." Such innocuous-sounding statements are gathered together to construct an exclusivist myth of Japanese culture, changeless and pure.

(88)

While the South today is certainly not changeless and pure, it does have a long tradition of inhospitality toward outsiders who seek to relocate. In antebellum times few immigrants chose the South because of competition from slave labor. After the war, while southern state governments sought foreigners to replace ex-slaves, resentment toward aliens on the part of both working-class whites and blacks resulted in the rise of a virulent nativist movement. Interestingly, southern congressman figured prominently in the passage of the restrictive laws of the 1920s which drastically reduced the flow of immigration into the US until the 1960s (Wilson 415-18). Today the South still takes in a disproportionately small number of immigrants, especially if we exclude south Texas and south Florida. Even the prospects for Americans from other regions assimilating into the South seem to be limited. As the eminent sociologist John Shelton Reed observes, most people born outside the South who

eventually settle in the region never come to think of themselves as southerners. This simply mirrors the attitudes of the native population toward them, for as Reed goes on to note, "many Southerners doubt that migrants can ever become Southerners" (19).

Not surprisingly, southern literature rarely deals with the issue of foreigners in the South, as it has not been an important part of the regional experience. An infrequent exception to the rule is Flannery O'Connor's story, "The Displaced Person," which concerns a Polish refugee and his family who come to work on a Georgia farm in the aftermath of World War II. On one occasion, the hired man who was already working on the farm when the displaced person arrived makes his views known to his employer:

Mr. Shortley said he never had cared for foreigners since he had been in the first world's war and seen what they were like. He said he had seen all kinds then but that none of them were like us. He said he recalled the face of one man who had thrown a hand-grenade at him and that the man had had little round eyeglasses exactly like Mr. Guizac's.

"But Mr. Guizac is a Pole, he's not a German," Mrs. McIntyre said.

"It ain't a great deal of difference in them two kinds," Mr. Shortley had explained.

(240-41)

Mr. Shortley's xenophobia soon infects Mrs. McIntyre who tacitly conspires with him to arrange an accident that crushes Mr. Guizac under a tractor and kills him.

In *East Is East* Boyle ridicules such myths of cultural exclusivity, while at the same time questioning our power to transcend them. Consider, for example, the family background of the novel's protagonist. Hiro's mother was a highly unconventional Japanese woman who in 1969 wanted to play American rock 'n' roll onstage with her own band instead of going to Tokyo University or becoming a housewife. His father was an American who dreamed of revolutionizing popular music at home by learning and then electrifying the *koto*, the most traditional of Japanese instruments. Yet as soon as Hiro's mother became pregnant, "rice suddenly tasted odd" to his father and he disappeared back to America. The product of their union was a boy, "a half-breed, a *happa*, a high-nose and butter-stinker . . . forever a foreigner in his own society" (17). As she went around Kyoto carrying her half-breed son on her back, people stopped and stared, and she knew that neither she nor her son had any future in Japan. Shut out of her parents' house and lacking the financial resources to emigrate, she at last did, according to Hiro's grandfather, "what she had to do" (340). She attempted *oyako-shinju*, parent-child

suicide, by throwing herself and her son into the pond of a famous Kyoto shrine, and only by chance of having been torn from his mother's arms as they struck the water did Hiro survive. Still, Hiro's prospects remained unchanged. Throughout childhood and adolescence, it seems that everyone in Japan from his schoolmates to passersby on the street impress upon him the fact of his ostracism.

But that was Japan. America, the nation of immigrants, would certainly be different:

If the Japanese were a pure race, intolerant of miscegenation to the point of fanaticism, the Americans, he knew, were a polyglot tribe, mutts and mulattoes and worse—or better, depending on your point of view. In America you could be one part Negro, two parts Serbo-Croatian and three parts Eskimo and walk down the street with your head held high. If his own society was closed, the American was wide open—he knew it, he'd seen the films, read the books, listened to the LPs—and anyone could do anything he pleased there.

(17-18)

Interestingly, certain aspects of the lives of Hiro's compatriots suggest ways that the Japanese might *not* be such a pure race. For example, on the day that Hiro decides to jump ship most of the crew is in the mess hall eating a Western-style lunch that consists of "corned beef hash, sardines in oil, scrambled eggs and home fries, all wedded in a single pot, and seasoned with A.1. sauce and Gulden's mustard" (11). The meal has been prepared by first Cook Hideo Chiba who likes to show off the fact that he had once shipped on an American freighter. Hiro, the ship's Third Cook, is not with the rest of the crew on this occasion because he is in the brig, having gotten into a fight with this same Chiba over the preparation of a certain kind of egg dish. Having been allowed to make this on his own, he sprinkled black sesame seeds atop each portion as a finishing touch. When Chiba saw this he flew into a rage, wondering aloud where he ever learned to do such a thing, and answering, "maybe among foreigners. Among *gaijin*" (14). A fistfight ensues which ends with Hiro's imprisonment. Added to the irony of Chiba of all people criticizing Hiro's culinary ethnic purity is the fact that Hiro added the sesame seed "just as his grandmother had taught him" (13). Although a half-breed, on this occasion, at least, he was being more Japanese than the Japanese. Alternatively, the episode suggests that the defining characteristic of the Japanese is not the presence of an absolute racial essence, but rather a certain lack of essence that facilitates the assimilation of various aspects of "*gaijin*" culture.

Another fine irony emerges in Hiro's choice of role models. As a schoolboy, Hiro's only satisfaction had come on the baseball field where his larger size gave

him an advantage at the plate. Then one day when he was seventeen, he noticed a sensational poster in the window of a bookstore:

The poster—it was a blown-up photo, in black and white—showed a nearly naked man in the throes of death. He'd been lashed to a tree, his hands bound over his head, and three stark black arrows protruded from his flesh. . . . His eyes were half open, staring off toward the heavens in glazed rapture, and his mouth was a fierce dark slash of agony and release. He had the musculature of a hero.

(91-92)

This famous picture motivates Hiro to make an inquiry of the bookseller who tells him that the figure is Mishima and directs him to an extensive display of his books, from which Hiro, as if directed by fate, chooses *The Way of the Samurai*. Under Mishima's influence, Hiro comes to see the decadence of modern Japan and decides to become a latter-day samurai; never again would he feel inferior to his schoolmates: "To live by the code of *Hagakure* made him more Japanese than they, made him purer, better" (95).

But again, a moment's reflection suggests the ambiguity of Hiro's position, since his champion, Mishima, is arguably the most Westernized Japanese writer of his generation. As Masao Miyoshi notes, "Mishima knew he was an unashamed commodity fetishist. He liked to talk about Tiffany and Jaeger. He bought and displayed brand-name goods. His bizarre 'Western' house was his own design, in which he took unrestrained pride" (157). Mishima's contemporary, the Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Oe, adds that Mishima's Japanese-ness really amounted to his cultivation of certain Western preconceptions about Japan:

[Mishima's] was the superficial image of a Japanese as seen from a European point of view, a fantasy. . . . [Mishima] said that [the European] image of the Japanese is me. I think he wanted to show something by living and dying in exact accordance with the image. That was the kind of man he was and why he gained literary glory in Europe and the world.

(Miyoshi 151)

Indeed, Boyle's narrator goes on to say that eventually even Hiro came to understand that the poster which first drew him to Mishima was in fact only a pose, "Mishima's masochistic homage to an Italian painting of a martyred saint" (94).

Despite these ironies of racial and cultural impurity, Japan invariably functions for Hiro as a closed society. Thus Hiro's hopes and dreams condense into an image of America that haunts his consciousness throughout the novel, an image that his inner voice, not referring to any place in particular, sometimes calls the "City of