

Inside the Box: Ambiguity and Cold War Culture in *The Man in the High Castle*

Elif Somnez

Writer's comment: Joshua Clover's English 147, American Literature 1945–present, was fantastically demanding. I pushed myself in a rush of discovery and creation and terror and fatigue. It was maddening. It was intensely satisfying. *In the Box* was the last assignment of the course. I had not yet written a paper that allowed me to build my own theory nor integrate seemingly incongruous material into a unified whole. The essay was like the class: maddening and satisfying. It was fun and empowering, too, to decide how Ouija boards and the Rosenberg trial fit together—serious in their own ways, relegated to a fuzzy history, and, simultaneously, pop culture catchphrases. I built the essay like a layer cake. It reminded me of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories and unfolding flowers and equations. The assignment had been to show how the text's structure reflected the times it was written in, without reference to the content, a puzzle in itself as we looked into the architecture of our texts and traced labyrinthine paths to our answers.

—*Elif Somnez*

Instructor's comment: Reading for content tends to be either largely interior, as in accounts of a book as offering a self-consistent world—or largely exterior, as in readings that take texts as commentaries on, allegories for, or vague falsifications of the actual / historical world. The goal of the assignment was to avoid these unidirectional readings by looking at form as the limit where the book and the world leak into each other. Elif handled this with verve and grace, sweeping into and out of the source text, out of and into history, using what might seem like digressions to gather in extraordinary amounts of social and cultural information, in a way that makes a strong argument but doesn't insist art or reality be more organized and rigorous than they are. I knew more about Dick's novel and his moment when I finished the paper—and had as well the thrill of encountering Elif's writerly intelligence as it taught itself to reach further, read deeper.

—*Joshua Clover, English Department*

Adorno's decree that "to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric" was meant to exile literature from a world too complicated to talk about in poetic metaphor. However, after the introduction of the atomic bomb and the creation of a new global power structure, someone had to continue looking at the world, if only through parted fingers. If Adorno ordered metaphor out of literature, he could not prevent metaphoric speech from appearing in the writing of the public sphere, the government, and official channels. During the diplomatic, militaristic, ideological standoff of the Cold War events and capabilities could not be directly discussed because of the magnitude of the subjects. Threats could not be made openly, nor actual plans discussed. The American government, and its culture in turn, developed a language that used euphemism to point to outlines of events or intentions, and insinuate their existence. The reality of potential annihilation was too big—too big for poetry and certainly too big for diplomacy—to be discussed directly, without the bureaucratic pretense of détente. If ambiguity was ever relaxed on the official level, the ambiguous Cold War would no longer be so, and a more apparent war would have begun. The two nations existed in a state of ambiguity in order to exist at all. The Cold War atmosphere created and cultivated a heightened sensitivity to randomness, euphemism, ambiguity, and spy-plot duality, which gave rise to acceptance of multiple and simultaneously subjective Truths and divinities, quantum theory, pulp-fiction spy novels, the execution of the Rosenbergs, and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in The High Castle*.

An equation is drawn in *The Man in The High Castle* between "formal" and "euphemistic" (Dick 197). Euphemism, indirect indication, using words to hide reality, is usually considered negative and dishonest. Yet linking it with formality gives the verbal tactic credibility, as formal is synonymous with officially sanctioned and expected behavior. In the book, this formal stance is struck between Japanese and German officials. Outside the book, America and Russia took these diplomatic poses for the Cold War. Diplomacy in this case becomes a euphemism for détente—a mutually agreed upon perpetual stand off. "They will deny complicity. Standard procedure," says Dick's double agent, Baynes (199). Thus, official peace is retained by denying official involvement. The characters engaged in this behavior know to call it a performance. Mr. Tagomi's planned tantrum is an example of this; he says he will "Vituperate in high-pitched hysteria" (198). Because of the expectations of diplomacy he could not say "I'm going to scream and

cuss at someone," because in following his official tack, he even screams and curses euphemistically. He uses a string of insulting adjectives but retains officially terse language. Formal vocabulary is drafted into euphemistic speech; the denotative meaning of the word is obscured. The audience must rely on connotation, getting a fuzzy picture of what is meant, adding a sense of foreboding and fear of the unknown, the feeling of standing next to a greater power, something officious and cold. Officials know how to script their speeches to reflect codified sentiments of outrage and scorn. Yet the performer attaches no real weight to his performance. "It is no doubt merely a gesture," Mr. Tagomi says of his apparent rage, but he performs it anyway because it is the expected reaction to diplomatic rules being broken (198). "Civilized" business does not involve the personal, but rather the performative ego; the personal 'I' is subsumed by the official "I."

In this impersonal performative style, the active voice tends to drop out. The agent of action is absent since all actions are part of an official interface and not indicative of a singular personality. This absence is reflected in language. The passive voice came into use during the Cold War to disguise tangible agents of action—spies and pen-wielding officials alike—and distance the governments directing those agents from unsavory occurrences. "Bombs were dropped," is a phrase that removes the agent of the action, leaving all hands apparently clean. The sentence the movement of certain objects just happened; the bombs apparently came from nowhere. The diplomatic *détente* can remain if this sense of mutual innocence is maintained. Use of the passive voice causes ambiguity of action and intended action—nothing is definitely happening, no one is acting, until it falls into the realm of a historical occurrence. Truman utilized euphemistic language in his speech to the nation after the bombing of Hiroshima, "a military town," saying that "we will continue to use it until we have completely destroyed Japan's power to make war." The conditions of a cease fire are undefined, military action holds no inherent end date. Events in the past were undeniable; events in the future remained threateningly ambiguous.

This air of ambiguity in the official realm manifests itself in private lives. Often in history, there is a difference in what the official, impersonal account is, and what an individual involved in the same event says is actual. This is shown by Mr. Tagomi speaking from his personal ego, calling his actions as an official agent "just a gesture" (Dick 198). Yet the discord between official and private accounts of reality is illustrated

in the text when Frank Frink says "I'm an American," and the officer says "You're a Jew" (196). The official's account of the truth prevails due to superior force. The Rosenberg trial of 1951, only a decade before *The Man in The High Castle* was published, serves as a historical example of competing versions of reality. The American government, backed by the testimony of private citizens trying to avoid prosecution, charged Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as Russian spies. They denied any treasonous activity, but were declared guilty and executed despite much public protest (Bailey 887). In 2001, David Greenglass, who implicated his sister Ethel and her husband, admitted that he was pressured by the prosecution to protect his wife and perjure himself regarding Ethel's involvement. Ethel's arrest was classified by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover as "a lever in this matter" (Milton 99). When individuals are acting on fear for their lives and officials are acting to further political ends, two stories emerge fighting for authenticity.

Language existing like this between nations, with two stories claiming to be the Truth, requires the up-keep of an agreement to disagree and to exist in an ambiguous state of mutual supremacy. In ambiguity, there is no direct threat to act against, and so neither side can act without becoming blameful agents and entering into an unambiguous relationship. Yet even the idea of an authentic history can exist in subjective ambiguity. As Wyndam-Matson explains, authenticity "Is in the mind, not the gun" (Dick 64). There is a historical significance soaked into the carpet, covering the .44 Colt, that is individual to Mr. Tagomi. History itself, that intangible aura of past occurrence, is reliant on the subjective consciousness. Between the US and Russia, there existed opposing versions of what constituted historical accuracy. As Mr. Tagomi thought of the German mind as "the monstrous schizophrenic morass of Nazi internecine intrigue" so different from his own, the American viewed Communism as a system of the weak, governed by masters (Dick 191). The same view was held in reverse by the Russian. Like Dick's world powers, the US and Russia were trying to spread the political doctrines that had emerged from their respective revolutionary origins. The duplicity of "correct" ideology and perceived supremacy is what ultimately led to the nuclear standoff of Mutually Assured Destruction. While school children practiced duck and cover maneuvers, the two powers tried to hide the pretense of being MAD behind performances of diplomacy.

The official and the individual are inextricably linked, yet always in conflict. In the novel, the blurred edge between the official and the

individual is exemplified in the ambiguity over whom to credit with Frank's "fluke" release from almost certain death. In the same breath, he calls it a miracle, an act of purposeful divine intervention, and a fluke, a random occurrence generated by the universe. He might have been more correct to call his release a byproduct of the political flourish Mr. Tagomi executes in a diplomatic performance. Perhaps he should thank the German official for agitating Mr. Tagomi or the secretary for bringing the paperwork in at a particular moment. The uncertainty over what to credit for Frank's release—the miracle or fluke—makes it impossible to know who is wielding power over whom. An ambiguity is created concerning the divine. The lack of an absolute causes ambiguity in the moral schemas people follow. Listening to General Tedeki and Baynes discuss German power structures, Tagomi thinks, "I cannot face...that man should have to act in such moral ambiguity" (Dick 190). The amorality of politics causes distress in both Tagomi and Baynes over the duality and ambivalence of official structures. The I Ching, the spiritual guiding device used by the majority of the characters including Tagomi, contains a designed randomness. Its formal and euphemistic language needs to be interpreted by a second source, as a Roman oracle had to be interpreted by a priest. The message arrives third-hand from the divine source and then must be interpreted by the inquisitor. The process of constructing the oracle's message through the selection of sticks creates a subjective, self-interpreted, self-formed religion. The way Juliana addresses the text, directly, calling it "Oracle" in the Abendsen's living room, is reminiscent of an address to an Ouija board. Though Parker Brothers would not buy the rights to its production until 1966, boards to communicate with the paranormal were commercially produced since 1886 by the Kennard Novelty Company (Taylor). The parallel in address of these two objects serves to highlight the multiplicity of voices any fortune-telling source entails. As the Ouija board would have been used by teenagers in the 1960s, the I Ching, "the oracle enigmatic," a compiled text created by multiple sources, becomes a personalized "field of reference" in the hands of the individual interpreting its messages (Dick 222, 201).

Although *The Man In the High Castle* was published four years before Deconstruction would discuss culture's multiplicity, structuralism had introduced the idea of the individual subject to cultural forces (Norton 20). The subjective *ilf* was also an aspect of the more individualistic Eastern religions that members of the 1950s Beat generation had

explored. It could also be argued that Dick was anticipating the late-60s counterculture, and its rejection of accepted Western practice under the tension of the Cold War. Abendsen serves as the embodiment of this future movement. He used accepted sources to establish an alternate system, yet maintains a trepidation regarding the stability of even his own creation, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*: "It [the I Ching's hexagram] means that my book is true?...I'm not sure" (Dick 257).

The ambiguity of "divine" texts allows the definition of spiritual guides to multiply. Juliana adopts the revolutionary *Grasshopper* as her personal guide book existing alongside the ancient and accepted I Ching. Even when the creator rejects it as his own guide, Juliana maintains that "Nobody else understands [it] but me" (Dick 248). This adoption of *Grasshopper* is in ironic contrast to Abendsen's rejection of Jesus as a man of prophesy because he is now someone's prophet, someone's divine source. If the I Ching is to be believed, then so is *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the novel it apparently brought into being. The I Ching, usually the primary source of guidance, has become secondary to the novel. The complement of these two texts creates a duality of Truth, creates an ambiguous source of Truth.

Parallel to the ambiguity about what is divine is ambiguity regarding evil, which leads to a dependence upon the formal system for guidance. There is an ambiguity about where the moral boundaries lie. In a system of amorality, where good and evil are not defined, people are forced to fall back into an officious way of pursuing private Truths. Using the capitalist system, Tagomi not only tries to buy a new faith via the charm, but asks for a guarantee on its divinity. While trying to derive enlightenment from it, he treats the encounter as he would a diplomatic meeting, using force and euphemistic verbal threats to "frighten it," in an attempt to "awaken the deity inside" (Dick 228). Just as the blurred line between the official and the private lead to ambiguous accounts of history, so too is the system of private faith confused with the negotiating table. Some characters forego an outside source of guidance and rely on the official system entirely for guidance on the Truth. Childan allows his perception of the situation between himself and Frank, as well as his own memory of what the man looked like, to be affected by what an official says. Similarly, David Greenglass put his faith in a system he could not surmount in hopes that complacency would protect him and his wife. For post-WWII America, faith in a stable truth could be found in homogeneity, in the structure of the

suburbs, and in American economic prosperity. Yet faith in the system was faith in a multiplicatus guide speaking “formally” in sentences missing agents of action.

The post-war world resided in a state of nuclear threat made possible through the science of Einstein’s era. Many military minds were skeptical of the “damned professor’s nonsense,” and the atomic science intrinsic in the development of the atomic bomb (Bailey 861). It is possible that in the ensuing arms race, Americans developed a similar leeriness of science’s capabilities. Quantum physics, introduced to the scientific community in the 1930s, was an alternative to the science of a relativistic universe. The tenants of quantum asserted that the universe was fundamentally unknowable, existing in ambiguous states dependant upon human cognition. In a world gone literally and figuratively MAD, quantum must have provided an interesting theory of the universe. Along with the more math- and physics- intensive principles of Heisenberg and Bohr was Schrodinger’s cat. Not a theory unto itself, it was a more readily understandable “thought experiment” used to explain the quantum principle of superposition to physics students. In the experiment, a cat is put in a box with a radioactive atom and a Geiger-counter. If the Geiger-counter registers that the atom, by random chance, has decayed, a hammer will hit a flask of acid and kill the cat. While the box is closed and the state of the atom is unobserved, it exists in a state of superposition, wherein it is both decayed and undecayed. Thus because the cat is also unobserved, the cat is simultaneously dead *and* alive. It is not until the observer opens the box that one of the two configurations collapses into reality, and either the cat has been spared or has fallen victim to a homicidal atom. As Baynes put it, “The crucial point lies...in the future” (Dick 201). The reality of both cat and atom is unknown until it becomes a historically witnessed fact.

The position of the cat, his life contingent on randomly determined forces outside of his control, may have sounded familiar to the citizens of two countries peering at each other over nuclear stockpiles and red launch buttons. But, says quantum theory, until a state is clearly observed, the state of existence is ambiguous—it is alive and dead. Or, in terms of political situations, if observations were kept wrapped in the passive voice and euphemistic phrasing, the US and Russia were in a superposition of war *and* peace, and the bombs were kept in place. This is the system the Japanese and Germans maintain in the novel, until Baynes unveils the truth about Germany’s militaristic plans for domi-

nation. At that point, to those who observed the collapse of ambiguity into fact, Japan and Germany are enemies, rather than antagonistic allies or any other duplicitous configuration. Without the tension of détente, Tagomi is without the formalizing structure that he relies on. He seeks guidance in the ambiguity of the I Ching to “protect them, warn them, shield them, with its advice,” as if a new ambiguous insight will reestablish the duality (Dick 200). Frank also retains a quantum-like superstition of the messages he derives from the I Ching, believing that his knowledge of the message will precipitate its fulfillment. By virtue of knowing his fortune, he has brought his possible fate into the realm of certainty.

Both the public sphere of diplomacy and the sphere of private guidance systems reflect in the sphere of interpersonal relationships in the novel. The diplomatic world of double speak bleeds out onto the street. The figure of Cold War spy games exists in Baynes: his double agent status, the German assassins, his multiplicity of identities, and microfilm disguised as cigarettes. These are the trappings of Ian Fleming’s James Bond in *Casino Royal*, published in 1952, or *Dr. No*, the popular Bond film released the same year as *Man in the High Castle*. As the novel’s official spy, the man calling himself Baynes exists is plural. The Japanese student informs Tagomi that Baynes is not Swiss but German, and he reveals he is not German but Jewish. The last the reader sees him, he is being led off by German officials to an unspecified fate—into the box with Schroedinger’s cat, so to speak. Ambiguity exists in the relationship he has with the armed SS men who drive him off—his own “Volk,” his people, who he knows could either be deceiving or aiding him (Dick 246). Suspicion regarding others’ true intentions interrupts Baynes’ relationship with his countrymen because of striated political ties.

This tension exists in less official relationships as well, although political agendas are tied into nearly every relationship. Juliana, once pursuing a pretense of frivolity, ends up becoming an impromptu femme-Bond figure, using her guile and martial artistry to foil a lover with an ambiguous agenda and thwarting the German political agenda. Frank becomes a very low-tech one time double agent, just a liar really, when he poses as a naval official in Childan’s boutique. However, under this guise, he reveals the truth about a counterfeit, confusing Childan’s relationship to him. He is either a friend or an adversary, or both. Childan, however, gets the relationship defined for him by a

“real” official who involves him in a political agenda without his knowledge of it. “I guess they got him,” he says, locating action and responsibility away from himself. By removing himself in language from the action, he remains innocent of the results (Dick 117).

With the real presence of Cold War counterintelligence and the fictional presence of James Bond, the American populous developed a heightened spy-consciousness. Amid the fear and suspicion of the Cold War, Senator Joseph McCarthy was able to effect anti-Communist sweeps of the State Department in the 1950s, and went so far as to implicate the Pentagon as well. McCarthy’s accusations, the rehighlighted presence of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the McCarthy hearings, which targeted the film industry, created a feeling that even the most high profile citizen might be harboring divergent alliances. McCarthy’s tactics of forcing absolutes were intriguing in the ambiguous Cold War atmosphere, and he enjoyed public approval for a time. In that search for absolutes in an era of ambiguity, it was discovered that Russia had built an atomic bomb, apparently with information leaked by communist spies (Bailey). The allegations levied against the Rosenbergs in the ensuing trial were at once plausible within the Cold War context and yet, simultaneously, resembled pulp spy-fiction. It was alleged that they used secret signals—a Jell-o box and the word “family” to indicate fellow agents. A device to view microfilm masqueraded as a table in their apartment, film canisters were dropped off on midnight drives, and others were approached to join the espionage (Milton). The militaristic stand off between the US and Russia allowed the ambiguous political climate wherein official agendas effected and were affected by public perception. Nothing was certain; everyone was subject to suspicion.

Engaged in a novel written in a time of fear over ambiguity, the reader becomes suspicious with the author for either leaving characters and situations in ambiguous states or revealing multiplicities within characters once presented as certain. Even the prophetic author, Abendsen, is caught in a duplicity, ironically lying about how much he values unambiguous presentation. This reader-text relationship of second-guessing is also reflected in the way the text jumps around from scene to scene. Cutting away from a scene leaves the reader wondering about the character, still acting while the narrative is not looking. This spliced, filmic quality to the narrative would only be recognizable by an audience already familiar with modern, suspenseful movies, such as

Dr. No. However, an audience knows what expectations to have of a Bond film. Readers are unsure if they've entered into a dubious business deal by reading the novel. There are certain conditions a reader expects to find in a text that looks like a novel. But in many ways, this particular text holds off on fulfilling the reader's expectations about what kind of novel *The Man in the High Castle* is. In quantum terms, the reader-text agreement is left ambiguous until the end. The superposition of the text—whether spy novel, science fiction, alterna-history, or any other label concoction—is collapsed when the entire state of text is observed and not until.

There is a systematic toppling of sources that are unambiguous, absolute, unquestionable, divine in both this text and the cultural climate from which it arose. If the I Ching is to be believed, then *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is to be believed as well, and the reality the characters perceive becomes untrue. According to quantum theory, however, reality is created by subjective perception. Cold War perception was formed amid nation-wide feelings of impending doom, duck and cover tactics, theories of universal randomness, and spy-plots. The concept, even in a novel, that at one moment a character could be on a pleasure trip to Denver and then have to thwart an assassination attempt, or that an unassuming couple from New York could be the source for Russia's atomic bomb, is indicative of a society with ambiguity on its mind. The system operates on ambiguity, a crisis of faith, distrust of others, blind belief in the system, and a break between the personal and official ego. Alternately, it creates a resignation to destruction experienced by both Baynes and Tagomi. It engenders a surrender to being Schrodinger's cat, existing dependent upon the random decay of an outside force, whether the an atom or an international agreement. Reality is actuated only by an official observation that may never come. This type of waiting creates hypertension within a society and an increased expectancy of duality in every aspect of existence. Belief lies in ambiguity; there is a faith in having no answer; reality is subjective, multiple. Authenticity, as George Harrison would intone in *Yellow Submarine* four years after *The Man in the High Castle's* publication, is all in the mind. The reader, by reaching the end of the novel, is able to see the text's multiple states of being collapse into one ending at least. However, Dick was not afforded the same luxury of a single-state existence while writing the novel. The Cold War would not end for another 30 years. Dick, reflecting on the incomplete state he existing in,

could not complete his characters' existences within their own ambiguous universe. The novel is left in flux, in relation to the inconsistent world that formed it.

Works Cited

Bailey, Thomas, and David Kennedy, eds. *The American Pageant*. Lexington: D.C. Heath. 1991.

Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. New York: Random House. 1962.

Milton, Joyce, and Ronald Radosh. *The Rosenberg File*. 1983. Accessed via www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/rosenb/ROS_TETH.HTM (Last accessed 12/10/03).

Taylor, Troy. *Ouija and Talking Boards: Myth and Mystery of Spirit Communication*. <http://www.prairieghosts.com/ouija.html> (Last accessed 12/10/03).

Truman, Harry. August 6, 1945. *When Radio Was King*. RCA, Reader's Digest, RD4-188, BIRS-9526. 1972.