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Raising *The Wild Flag*: E. B. White, World Government, and Local Cosmopolitanism in the Postwar Moment

SAMUEL ZIPP

I

E. B. White was not much interested in "big ideas." He was at heart a noticer, concerned in his essays for the *New Yorker* and *Harper's*, and in his series of children's books, with observation, humor, and pathos—the dailyness of people and places, language, nature, city life, and the meadows and avenues of the self. He professed to be by turns overawed and impatient with those he called, writing about a group of well-known liberal writers, "intellectual idealists," and with their propensity to "live in a realm of their own, making their plans for the world in much the same way that any common tyrant does."[1] He was a humorist and a practitioner of light verse, but finally White was a skeptic; he tended to steer shy of faith or political commitment and head for a more encompassing and aggregate morality grounded in basic notions of freedom and individualism.

And yet here he was in the 1950s, waxing poetic about the United Nations and its headquarters building—of all things—which he playfully called "the little green shebang on the East River":

> Even the building itself leaks; it has weep-holes in the spandrels, and is open to the rains and the winds of the world. Confronted with its unsuccess, confronted with its frauds and its trickeries and its interminable debates, we yet stand inside the place and feel the winds of the world weeping into our own body, feel the force underlying the United Nations, the force that is beyond question and

> beyond compare and not beyond the understanding of children. It will be their task (as it is ours) to plug the weep-holes in the spandrels.[2]

This sentimental reverie, bordering on the mawkish, for a renowned architectural icon and the mission of world peace it symbolized reflected White's attachment to at least one "big idea." Oddly, however, this particular idea involved a great deal of planning for the world, planning that for many—intellectuals and others—required too much faith in human nature and too much imposition on the freedom of individuals and the autonomy of nations. Still, during World War II and those heady few years just after the peace, that postwar moment in which visions of cosmopolitan connection and possible world peace contended with the perils and promises of rejuvenated American capitalism and gathering Cold War, White often found himself calling in print for the establishment of a "federal world government."[3]

In 1946, in fact, he published a volume on world government called *The Wild Flag*.[4] This small book, long out of print and almost forgotten now, collected a number of anonymous editorials that White had written between April of 1943 and April of 1946 for the "Notes and Comment" section of the *New Yorker*. The book advocates bringing all the world's peoples together under one world government—one "wild flag"—but its primary appeal now is its unexpected meditations on other, less organizational concerns: nationalism, loyalty, allegiance, sovereignty, locality, urbanity, and the possibility of global fellowship. In fact, if White's brief for "federal world government," or "supranationalism" as he sometimes called it, went unheeded—as he suspected it would—the modest literary success he enjoyed in championing such a procedural and bureaucratic ideal lay in his ability to treat it *not* as a "big idea," but as the outcome of an almost routine, common-sense attempt to express intimate connections through the formal order of law and government.

In fact, what's most intriguing about *The Wild Flag* and his other writings on world government is the way they make the abstract concrete. White continually treats world government as something both more and less than an idea or a political platform. He casts it as primarily a sentiment, a connective tissue needing constant care and nourishment. In his hands, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and loyalty become *felt* conditions, questions of attachment to place, people, and lived experience. Throughout the book he offers metaphors of daily life as models for international connection: the patterns of rules in baseball and basketball; the structure of the federal school lunch program; the propensity of children to solve problems "directly, easily, and sometimes brilliantly" (66); or the blueprint for global citizenship in the daily back and forth of the world's foremost already existing cosmopolitan form: the great city. While opining on world events—World War II, the founding conferences of the United Nations (on which he reported for the *New Yorker* from the Charter Conference in San Francisco), Hiroshima, and Bikini Atoll—White consistently brushes past the details of politics and international affairs and

drills down to daily, local minutiae, seeking to enumerate and uncover the structure of feeling from which global relation might grow.

Alongside—or maybe *beneath* would be a better way to put it—White's advocacy for planetary law, government, and police power runs a current of concern for local particularity. Ultimately, he suggests that in order to bring about a truly representative and successful sense of global fellowship, local attachments must be both superseded and fulfilled. All humans must be encouraged, or challenged, to imagine that everyone else out there in the world loves their own place as much as anyone else and that mutual respect for such love might become the basis for the international brotherhood on which "federal world government" could take shape.

Despite his distrust of political advocacy—and the sense that he was "in over my depth," as he later put it—this brand of rumination on world government advances a concerted and precise political idea presented in an original conceptual frame.[5] Cutting against the grain of contemporary liberal opinion—as well as his own propensity to simply "keep the minutes of his own meeting"—White advocated a vision of internationalism that enlarged the scope of the United Nations beyond its base in a New Deal–inspired program of multilateral institutions and international order based on American power and kept conventional Cold War belligerence at arm's length. Resisting an easy slide into "nationalist globalism"—the term historian John Fousek has used to describe the mindset that provided a rationale for deepening confrontation with the Soviet Union—White simultaneously upended then-current ideas about world government with a model of cosmopolitanism that stressed global connection *through* rather than over and against local particularity.[6]

What was at stake here was a new kind of public, a rearranged global compact for transnational solidarity around which world government might grow. Such claims are never without their difficulties, even when they issue from tribunes less skeptical about "big ideas" than White. They are always contingent and internally conflicted, and White's vision of an "intimate public sphere"—to borrow for different ends a concept from critic Lauren Berlant—was no less fraught.[7] The ideal of this new public founded in global realization of shared feeling for locality initially stumbled on his own reluctance to fully advocate for *any* political ideal. White never fully reconciled the two halves of an ideal that sought to meld love for place and consensual coercion through governance, and his vision was eventually diluted by the polarizing power of the Cold War. But if his individualist skepticism and his fondness for world federation were sometimes at odds, the tension also gave his attempts to conjure up a new world public a productive charge. White's unique take gave him the opportunity to imagine a public beyond mere partisanship or particular ideology. Indeed he offered no manifesto or program, only repeated evocation of shared grounding in coequal soil. But it was here, in trying to tease out the ligatures of transnational relation between individual selves, that White found a unique voice for at least this one "big idea," a voice that cut the sentiment seen in his lament for the failures of the United Nations with his customary dry wit, a mode of address that could call up a spirit of

popular internationalism fit to compete with the similarly seductive sentiment that underlay emerging Cold War nationalism, triumphalism, and expansionism.

II

White was hardly the first to suggest the need for a world government, nor was he alone in his advocacy of increased international and even "supranational" connection during and just after the war. World government visions have varied across the history of human civilization, from the medieval period, when Dante, inspired by the Roman Empire, argued for a world community ruled over by a benevolent monarch, to current debates about the design of institutions to promote "global governance" in the form of international law and human rights.[8] The search for what the poet Alfred Tennyson would call "the parliament of man" was often reactive, waxing in the aftermath of warfare, waning as hostilities broke out between nations and empires. Visions of cooperation, mutual dependence, and universal human fellowship reached a plateau with the League of Nations, the international body established at the close of World War I. The League made great strides in establishing various mechanisms of what historian Paul Kennedy calls "international civic society," but it proved itself less effective in coercing nations and empires to act collectively to preserve peace. American isolationism, Soviet suspicion, Japanese militarism, British empire, German and Italian aggression; ultimately the League could curb none of these because it remained by design what its name implied: an organization of independent nations structurally committed to state sovereignty.[9]

But it was during and after World War II, with the failures of the League in recent memory, that plans for world federation grabbed the world's attention, particularly in the United States. Amongst all the debate over war, peace, and America's role abroad, world government ideas enjoyed a host of supporters from disparate political backgrounds during the war years and the late 1940s. They found unprecedented access to publishing houses, newspapers, and magazines, particularly during 1945, when the United Nations was founded and the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Backers of world government—such as the broadcaster Raymond Gram Swing, *Saturday Review* publisher Norman Cousins, the lawyer Grenville Clark, the columnist Dorothy Thompson, University of Chicago chancellor Robert Hutchins, the physicists Albert Einstein and Leó Szilárd, Supreme Court justice Owen J. Roberts—threw their support behind a new organization called the United World Federalists. Polls in 1945 and 1946 found that a significant number of Americans supported the idea of world federation, although the number dropped precipitously if the question made clear how completely such an organization would infringe on American sovereignty.[10]

In the United States between the late 1930s and 1950, world government was one current in a larger climate of internationalism that benefited from general and widespread idealism about American power, influence, and benevolence. Climbing

out from under the isolationism of the 1930s to the heights of the 1940s, internationalist ideals enjoyed unprecedented attention in an outpouring of conferences, organizations, books, pamphlets, and magazine articles. The most famous of these was Wendell Willkie's *One World*. Willkie, a utility executive and popular writer, had been the unlikely Republican presidential candidate in 1940—swept into contention by his vocal opposition to the Tennessee Valley Authority and in spite of his internationalism and the fact that he had been a Democrat until that very year. Two years later, after carrying ten states in his loss to Roosevelt, he embarked on a world tour of Allied countries. *One World* was his travelogue, published in 1943, and one of the most popular books of that time, selling millions of copies and spending weeks on the bestseller lists. Willkie stopped short of calling for world government; he instead lamented the failure of the League, advised the Allies to realize that Asia and the rest of the world were no longer content "to be Eastern slaves for Western profits," and hoped for "a new society of independent nations" based on the world's increased "interdependence."[11]

Willkie's journey and travelogue represented the popular face of what historian Elizabeth Borgwardt has called "the multilateralist moment" in American political culture.[12] Inaugurated in 1941 with Roosevelt and Winston Churchill's Atlantic Charter and its call for a postwar peace that "will afford assurance that all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want," this time of popular support for internationalism saw the creation of a series of multilateral agreements and institutions—most notably the Bretton Woods charter that established the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Charter, and the Nuremberg war crimes courts (4, 133). Left-liberal internationalists, given license by a new spirit of popular cosmopolitanism fed by wartime service and mobility, forged these accords as a way to extend domestic New Deal security, organization, and welfare initiatives to the international sphere. This "New Deal for the world" laid the groundwork for a modern understanding of human rights based in a reconceptualized notion of the relation between national sovereignty and citizenship, one that "posited the individual as being in a relationship with a wider international order, and, by extension, implied that the individual was a legitimate object of international concern."[13]

Willkie may have been the most high profile of the wartime internationalists, but he did not go as far as White and other federalists would in their attempts to outline how national loyalty could be superseded. Willkie's book was about what Americans should expect to find when they encountered the world out there. Like much of the New Deal internationalism of the "multilateral moment," it remained tethered to the national frame even as it advised American leaders to relinquish plans for unilateral world leadership. White's writings were both more local and more quixotic, more conservative and more far-reaching; they encouraged Americans to feel the press of the world on their own places, their own homes, even while they stayed at home.

White's interest in world organization began early. Like other idealistic young Americans of his generation, White had been hopeful, as a college student, about the idea for the League of Nations. Despite the League's failure, this initial interest deepened. As early as April 1933, in the "Notes and Comment" section of the *New Yorker*, the page from which he would later wave "the wild flag," he commended Albert Einstein's critique of nationalism and warned of the "forces inimical to life" gathering in Nazi policy.[14] In a 1935 essay he observed that "a common enemy" was "the most solidifying thing a nation can have, welding all the people into a happy, unified mass."[15] Foreshadowing the tactics he would use to stump for world government, he illustrated the general principle with a slice of mundane middle-class domestic drama:

> We saw how true that was in our own home last week when we discovered that the place we had moved into had cockroaches, or, as the cook calls them, cackaroachies. We discovered them late one night when we went down into the pantry and snapped on a light; since then, the household has warred against them with a high feeling of family unity and solidarity, sniping at them with a Flit gun, rubbing poisonous paste on bits of potatoes for them to eat, the house full of great singleness of purpose and accord. No wonder a dictator, when he feels uneasy, looks around for something for his people to squash. (79–80)

A bit later, in March of 1941, he surveyed a handful of tourists in a Florida trailer park for their support for a "world federation of democracies." When "union" scored a narrow victory, 4–3, he was encouraged by the prospects for "a bold new planetary society" and an end to "narrow nationalistic groups."[16]

At first glance, these suspicions and hopes seem to have issued largely from "the minutes of his own meeting." White reveals little trace of precise intellectual influence and, when he does, he treats other thinkers not as building blocks for his argument but simply invokes them as opportunities for light humor or inspirational effect. His only reference to the classic philosophical literature of cosmopolitanism and world union, for instance, an offhand reference to Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace" and Albert Einstein's writings, arrives in a whimsical reading list for UN delegates that name-checks "Manny Kant" and "Al Einstein."[17] And yet, in the late 1930s, according to his biographer, he read Clarence Streit's *Union Now*, which advocated a union of the Atlantic democracies as a precursor to a world government.[18] Much later White would recall that he "drifted into" his advocacy for world government after reading Emery Reves, a prominent world federalist who published two widely read books in those years, *A Democratic Manifesto* (1942) and *The Anatomy of Peace* (1945). White met Reves when *The Anatomy of Peace*—for

which White claimed to have supplied the title—was still in draft form. The book had "a profound influence" on White's thinking about world federation. Near the end of his life he remembered spending "the most nourishing fortnight I ever put in" with Reves and other world federalists during the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco.[19]

In many respects, White's ideas dovetailed with those of other world government enthusiasts like Reves. For him, the position was simple. "The answer to war is no war," he wrote in the preface to *The Wild Flag*. "And the likeliest means of removing war from the routine of national life is to elevate the community's authority to a level which is above national level."[20] Like others in the movement, he thought a return to Wilsonian internationalism or an embrace of New Deal internationalism was not enough. The only way to secure the "community's authority," he thought, was through government. "We regard this world," he wrote in March of 1945, "as an imperfect one and consequently in need of the best possible government of law, order, and human rights based on human responsibilities" (70). However, White was able to achieve something few other world government idealists could. In the wry and sometimes smug tone readers had come to expect from the *New Yorker*—a voice that White had done much to invent for the front of the book over the previous two decades—he made world government seem the natural future course for middle-of-the-road, midcentury liberalism. What might have appeared wild-eyed or dreamy in another writer's hands seemed a matter of mundane civic participation in White's telling.

Indeed White made his vision sound old-fashioned, even conservative. Human imperfection, he argued, could only be guided by mutually and publicly agreed-on coercion at a global scale. "What treatment is there for nationalism, a more troublesome disease at this point than cancer?" he wrote in response to the discord that marred the early deliberations of the United Nations. "The treatment is known, but not admired. There is a specific [he uses here an older word for medicine] for nationalism. We use it everyday in our own localities. The specific is government—that is, law; that is, codification of people's moral desires, together with enforcement of the law for common weal" (182). Only with government—and its police powers—could the world put war out of business. "Force, not the absence of it," he wrote in late 1946, "is the essence of peace; and the trouble with force, as we know it in these times, is that it exists for each nation, doesn't exist for the human community."[21] The United Nations, disarmament talks, internationalist ideals, all fell short of the final requirement: "Government is the thing. Law is the thing. Not brotherhood, not international co-operation, not security councils that can stop war only by waging it."[22]

If White was perhaps too trusting in the harmony and equality that would result from law, government, and the police, too secure in his sense that there could be no exclusions from their universal embrace, he nonetheless offered some ingenious arguments for order through sanctioned force. In the delimited field in

which he operated, he managed to disrupt his share of conventional wisdom. For instance, the failures of the UN, he thought, were rooted in the reliance on "policy." Indeed he counterposed law and government to "foreign policy"—the arena in which more conventional forms of midcentury liberal internationalism operated. "Policy," he wrote late in the war, "is a system of conduct shaped by expediency. It is supported by diplomacy and it takes for granted independence of action. Because of its peculiar nature, policy is a luxury which the world can probably no longer afford, although the world realizes this only dimly and may not perceive it sharply for many years to come" (24). Ultimately he suggested that "foreign policy" was a liability because it was not the tool of reason and moderation it appeared to be: "It is impossible to envision an orderly world in which policy remains the accepted instrument of government and in which sixty or seventy nations each arrive independently at a clear, well-defined foreign policy based on self-interest. Such a political arrangement is essentially chaotic, and will remain so, in our opinion" (25).

Like other world federalists, White believed that nationalism and foreign policy were fundamentally outmoded because they were powerless to keep pace with developments in other areas of modern life. For instance, even before the destruction of Hiroshima, White was observing that human affairs had to keep up with the ever-widening reach of human technology. "Politically the shape of the new world must be the shape of penicillin and sulfa and blood plasma," he wrote, "the shape of the buzz bomb and the V-2 and the X-903, the shape of the mothproof closet and the shatter-proof glass and the helicopter with the built-in waffle iron" (42). He continued, "If we try to live with all these majestic and fantastic and destructive gifts of science in a political framework reminiscent of the one-hoss shay, in danger of being upset by the irresponsibilities of diplomacy and the delicate balances of regional alliances and the wistful vetoes of the accused, we will soon enough discover disaster. . . . What curious defect it is in us that we should endorse the supercharger and deny the supra-state!" (43).

But White understood that the dilemmas at the heart of any push for world government went beyond those of policy and law. The most resonant passages in *The Wild Flag* and his other writings on world federation temper his emphasis on consensual coercion with an appeal to more intimate concerns. They arrive in the course of his attempts to suggest how a *feeling* of global solidarity might be inculcated in the teeth of persistent nationalism. As self-evident as the "supra-state" appeared in White's prose, such reasonableness was hard pressed to overcome the tug of loyalty, which drew from deep wellsprings of country and soil. "One of the curious difficulties in the way of world federation," White wrote in one of his earliest entries, "is the necessity of developing a planetary loyalty as a substitute for, or a complement to, national loyalty" (10). The problem was that national feeling took root early and crowded out other possibilities. "We take pains to educate our children at an early age in the rituals and mysteries of the nation," he wrote in the

introduction to *The Wild Flag*, "infusing national feeling into them in place of the universal feeling which is their birthright" (ix).

This early education disguised what he called "the fictitious character of the nation." It "persists in people's minds as a tangible, solid, living, and breathing thing, capable of doing and thinking, feeling and believing, having and enjoying. But the nation is not that at all. A nation is a state of mind."[23] This conceptualization—familiar to us in the way that it echoes Benedict Anderson's more recent critique of the nation as an "imagined community"—prompted the question of how to instill "planetary loyalty," how to encourage "universal feeling" over, or, crucially for White, *alongside* "national feeling."[24] If the nation, merely a "state of mind," so easily and completely won allegiance despite its weightlessness, how was world federation, with even less to draw on, to earn adherents? What were the intimate trusses and stays by which an international imagined community might be bound? White's major contribution was to advance a novel way to imagine the lineaments of what one reviewer of *The Wild Flag* called "the global mind."[25]

At first glance, he offered little in the way of a program. Like other cosmopolitans, he thought that those who would embrace world government had to "relinquish the antique pleasure of remaining mutually unknowable; that is, detached, separate, independent."[26] They "must take pride in the whole world" (10). But White's musings often focused less on "the whole world" and more on territory closer to home. In looking for the necessary global spirit, White favored metaphors and examples drawn from the national, natural, and local realms. In fact, the model he offered is really only implicit, never concrete or systematized, and seems at first counterintuitive, turning as it does back to "national feeling" as a kind of blueprint for "universal feeling," and rooting national attachments in the local and the natural.

"We know, we Americans, what America means in the human heart," he wrote in the preface to *The Wild Flag*, "we remember its principles and we honor its record; but we tend to forget that it has its counterpart in sixty or seventy other places" (x). Planetary loyalty, he suggested, could be based on a sense of equivalence between national loyalties if those attachments were understood as attachment to place: "When you think with longing of the place where you were born, remember that the sun leaves it daily to go somewhere else" (145). With the globe joined by the natural rhythms of sunrise and fall, White said, each and every place should enjoy the favor accorded to one's native place.

For White, national pride was rooted in feeling for landscape, in the ecological details of natural life collected in particular environments. This fondness could serve as the connective tissue between disparate places separated by national borders. White rehearsed some of these ideas early on, a few days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, in an essay called "Intimations" that he wrote from his farm in Maine for *Harper's*. He began with the nation and tried to feel his way toward an antidote for its "fatal charms": "The passionate love of Americans for their America will have a lot to do with winning the war. It is an odd thing though: the very patriotism on which we

now rely is the thing that must eventually be in part relinquished if the world is ever to find a lasting peace and an end to these butcheries." And yet the very specificity of the love that each American has for "their America" gives a hint of how to supersede that patriotism. "To hold America in one's thoughts," he continued, "is like holding a love letter in one's hand—it has so special a meaning. Since I started writing this column snow has begun falling again; I sit in my room watching the re-enactment of this stagy old phenomenon outside the window. For this picture, for this privilege, this cameo of New England with snow falling, I would give everything." And yet he could not shake the sense that it was "this very loyalty, this feeling of being part of a special place, this respect for one's native scene" that made it hard to "love the whole planet." Nationalism encouraged counterposing "a place that is definable and familiar, as against a place that is strange, remote." White couldn't solve this conundrum, but he floated one notion that turned back to partiality for particular place and looked for global connection in shared nature: "Before you can be a supranationalist you have first to be a naturalist and feel the ground under you making a whole circle." Feeling that shared ground, White suggested, might compensate for the fact that the planet, unlike the nation, is nonexclusive. It is "everybody's" and can only offer "the grass, the sky, the water, and the ineluctable dream of peace and fruition."[27]

Five years later, in the closing moments of the preface to *The Wild Flag*, White returned to this theme at length and found more precisely the local roots of his "natural" dissolvent for nationalism:

> A world government, were we ever to get one, would impose on the individual the curious burden of taking the entire globe to his bosom—although not in any sense depriving him of the love of his front yard. The special feeling of an Englishman for a stream in Devonshire or a lane in Kent would have to run parallel to his pride in Athens and his insane love of Jersey City. The special feeling of a Netherlander for a dyke in Holland would have to extend onward and outward until it found the Norris Dam and the terraces of Egypt. A Chinese farmer in a rice paddy would have to feel, between his toes, not only the immediate wetness of the world, but the vast wetness of the fertile world. (xi–xii)

Each global citizen, White imagined, had to be yoked to every other by the fact that he or she loved "his front yard"; this would be the basic motivation for taking the "globe to his bosom." Neither locality nor worldliness need be sacrificed in this ecological "supranationalism"; the fact that everyone shared an equally loved place,

White hoped, should be reason enough for an imaginative reciprocity that would join all.

This conception of the way that international solidarities might be imagined and called up differed from much conventional world government thinking. Emery Reves, for instance, began *The Anatomy of Peace* by arguing that nationalism was unequipped to handle "a Copernican world."[28] Just as science had once been trapped in a "geocentric" mindset, now "political, social and economic thinking" was caught in "a geocentric world of nation states." Before Copernicus everyone accepted the idea that the sun revolved around the earth, and now, in the middle of the twentieth century, "we still believe, in each one of the seventy or eighty sovereign states, that our 'nation' is the immovable center around which the whole world revolves." But history, Reves contended, had made such thinking obsolete. Industrialization, mass consumption, technology, world war; all these had shrunk the globe and demanded that "we rise above dogmatic nation-centric conceptions and . . . see all the nations and national matters in motion, in their interrelated functions, rotating according to the same laws without any fixed points created by our own imagination for our own convenience" (24–26). In Reves's formulation the proper planetary attitude would be to "rise above" the sovereign state. He advocated seeing nations from the outside and in relation to one another, rather than from within as the center of a nation-oriented global system. But White, as much as he admired Reves and had been inspired by his work, found his most powerful appeals in a vision that worked its way out from and through locality and the nation, not one that hoped for a way to dispose of it altogether.

One of White's original "Notes and Comment" manuscripts discloses his logic at work, revealing through White's own revisions the trace of this idea. The piece, which ran in September of 1943 and also appeared in the book, was a riposte to Clarence Budington Kelland, a prominent Republican and popular author who, White said, had argued for making the Pacific Ocean "an American lake." White undercut Kelland's imperial fantasy with the dry observation that the Chinese and Russians had far more frontage on this "lake" than the United States and he wondered whether their waterways were to become merely "coves in an American lake." Originally, he also included a second paragraph remarking that so few "plans for the world . . . start where they should, with a planet." They start, he continued, "with a Republic, or a Dominion, or a Federation, or an Empire, or a deck of cards, and try to work their way out from there. It would be better to start with the sun, or some other distant spot, and work earthward. A person working out of Saturn, and coming upon the little figure of Mr. Kelland making sand pies by his American lake, would be able to see it in his proper perspective." White submitted this version but later that day sent a telegram to the *New Yorker* instructing William Shawn, his editor, to "please kill second paragraph." Whatever was behind this change—and it may have been nothing more than stylistic concerns or White's desire not to overtly insult Kelland—the result was to delete the conventional top-down, outside-the-nation view and

bring the perspective of the entire piece down to earth. In the published version, White stays grounded, celebrating a shared Pacific and a sense of humanity's mutual investment in the charms of what White called the "little bays where we can go to catch our pickerel among the weeds" that Kelland had casually wanted to reserve only for the United States.[29]

What manner of cosmopolitanism is this? Could it serve as an adequate model of attachment for the—to steal a phrase from historian James Clifford—"new political-cultural conditions of global relationality" facing White and his audience in the postwar moment?[30] The medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor offered one of the earliest and still most well-known conceptions of the cosmopolitan spirit—a formulation that has been endorsed by Erich Auerbach, by Edward Said, and by Clifford: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land" (quoted in 264). Of course, as Clifford suggests in his critique of Said, to the degree that this vision of spiritual homelessness is simply an appeal to "humanist common denominators" it is "meaningless, since they bypass the local cultural codes that make personal experience articulate" (263). White's formulation is instructive in this regard; his brief for finding the common in the local appears to satisfy only Hugh's second level of cosmopolitanism—the strength one finds in the belief that "every soil is as his native one." And yet White's vision calls on more than merely strength. It requires, not perfection perhaps, but the kind of investment in "local cultural codes" that can, in his view, allow relations of solidarity between disparate and otherwise isolable humans.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has supplied a recent account of cosmopolitanism in which the general and the particular form two intertwining strands of a larger whole: "One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance."[31] By these lights cosmopolitanism must satisfy two linked but potentially clashing ideals; it must negotiate between what he calls "universal concern and respect for legitimate difference" (xv). Cosmopolitanism lies in both superseding and honoring particularity; it must find a way to marry universality and locality. Perhaps in finding commonality in shared love for locality, White offered one way to unite Appiah's two strands, to bind the particular to the universal, to make fealty to the local open up to love for the planetary.

III

White suspected that his editorials would fall on deaf ears. It may have been even harder for him that they did not. Between 1943 and 1946, when they appeared

unsigned in "Notes and Comment," it was generally known in New York literary circles that it was White stumping for world federation. In 1946, in fact, the Newspaper Guild awarded the magazine its Page One Award for editorial excellence, singling out White's contributions.[32] By late 1946, when *The Wild Flag* had been published and widely and warmly reviewed, that open secret became public knowledge. The book sold well for a collection of reprints: 17,011 copies (not including 3,000 bought by the *New Yorker* itself) in the last couple months of 1946, and another 2,784 by the middle of 1949.[33] Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the hopeful postwar climate, the peaking popularity of world government ideas, and the wide readership that White had cultivated in the pages of *Harper's* and the *New Yorker* (which had a combined circulation hovering around 380,000 during the war), White had succeeded in making the case for world federation as a legitimate brand of popular internationalism.[34]

And yet, despite the acclaim, and the many letters he received from readers, the process was not a happy one for White. In fact, the very fact of bringing out *The Wild Flag* shook him. He had long suffered from periodic bouts of depression and anxiety, and the year 1946 marked one of his worst. His misgivings were twofold. First, as he admitted in the preface to the book, he had his doubts about advocating for an unworkable political form. The whole idea of world government was "too purely theoretical for the practicing statesman, who is faced with operating with the equipment at hand" and "too sweetly reasonable for the skeptic, who knows what an unpredictable customer the human being is."[35] Second, and more important to him, was his sense that, as a skeptic himself, he was on unsure ground speaking for *any* political form. Disturbed by having taken up for a "cause" in print, he worried privately that he had "betrayed the deepest instincts of a creative person."[36] He did not doubt the need for world government, only the act of promoting it from his bully pulpit at the front of the *New Yorker*, an undertaking he ultimately viewed as crossing a personal boundary between observation and advocacy. White had always been shy about approaching "massive themes" in his writing, so the road leading to the ramparts of *The Wild Flag* had been slow and influenced by other, more immediate political concerns. During the 1930s, as the Depression deepened, he began to feel that the *New Yorker*—conventionally apolitical since the magazine's founding in 1925—must have something to say about the worsening condition of the country and the world. It was hard, he later wrote, to "remain seated on the low hummocks of satire and humor in the midst of grim events" (247–48). Gradually White—and by extension the *New Yorker*, since White wrote almost all its lead editorials—began to offer cautious support for the New Deal and to venture into other issues of the day, while still couching such forays into politics in the magazine's trademark voice, which undercut conviction with humor—the very template he would use in crafting his advocacy for world government.[37]

Despite White's deepening attention to political themes, critics, some of them friends, still objected to the magazine's blasé mood in times of crisis. For instance,

Ralph Ingersoll, a former *New Yorker* editor, wrote in *Fortune* in 1934 that White and the magazine could only fight "nobly if ineffectually" because White's "gossamer writing" was so "swathed in whimsy" that it ended up forgoing the responsibility to advocate for the good in a world that was "far from perfection." In 1937 Ingersoll wrote to White personally to bemoan his friend's "gentle complacency." He worried that White would be "emotionally always a reactionary."[38] By 1946, however, Ingersoll, then the founder and publisher of the left-liberal daily *PM*, had recanted. In his review of *The Wild Flag*, he "[ate] a few words" he wrote about White's editorials "many years ago" and joined the cavalcade of critical acclaim that greeted *The Wild Flag*.[39] Ingersoll's anger at White and the *New Yorker* was finally impatience about content; he doubted the existence of their political commitment. Still, a few critics went further. Their doubts about the book were less about content and more about the form of White's writing itself. They argued that he and the magazine were not only afraid of commitment, they were effectively *committed to* reaction because of the form they embraced.

Writing in the *Nation*, Isaac Rosenfeld reduced the *New Yorker*'s wartime "conscience" to rote middle-class "fear of dispossession." He judged White's call for world federation doomed by the magazine's failure to do more than try to "convert its own apostates: they whom it sustained in archness and in coyness and the *bon ton* of small talk, on whose middle brows it laid its blessing." There was nothing, he said, in *The Wild Flag* about "actual politics." The establishment of world government would require "revolutionary measures," the sort of things floated at "crowded downtown East Side meeting halls with their folding chairs and smoke in the dingy room, the stain in the armpits of the excited speaker." Since that would be in "bad taste," White's advocacy, Rosenfeld charged, was rendered toothless by the "limits of tone" the magazine's middle-class audience demanded. "The bourgeoisie," he concluded, "will never give up its tone without a struggle."[40]

For Rosenfeld and for Robert Warshow, who attacked the book in the pages of *Partisan Review*, the problem was not White so much as the *New Yorker* itself. White, Warshow wrote, has "good will and intelligence, and he is trying to live up to his responsibilities as a citizen."[41] But any power White's advocacy for world government may have had, Warshow suggested, was vitiated by the imperturbable voice White adopted to suit the magazine's house style. All that remained was what the magazine always offered: a prescription for bourgeois "attitude" cultivation. "The *New Yorker*," he continued, "has always dealt with experience not by trying to understand it but by prescribing the attitude to be adopted toward it." The magazine's function was to provide "the intelligent and cultured college graduate with the most comfortable and least compromising attitude he can assume toward capitalist society without being forced into actual conflict." Taking this "suitable attitude" allowed this putatively male subject to preserve a sense of innocence in the face of the "gracelessness of capitalism" (75). It kept this "liberal, middle-class reader" safely outside history, removed from conflict, watching "a spectacle that one

can observe without being touched—above all, without feeling really threatened" (78, 75–76). White's writing was finally not about "democracy or the nature of the war or the possibility of permanent peace," but evidence simply of the magazine's relentless ability to convert struggle into contentment, its need to domesticate and contain experience, its propensity to emit a "humane and yet knowing atmosphere" in which "history and destruction and one's own helplessness become small and simple and somehow peaceful, like life back home on the farm" (77–78).

Rosenfeld and Warshow's volleys did not miss their target. In anatomizing the way the magazine deployed its "tone" as a form of cultural capital, they showed how the magazine was a guide, for a certain middle-class readership, to appearing simultaneously up-to-the-minute and above the fray. If one views the *New Yorker*, as they did, as at heart an organ of class identification, then the idea that it rewarded its audience for their well-meaning concern but also safeguarded an equally well-guarded remove from "actual politics" is axiomatic. And White's customary voice—with its air of the bewildered everyman adrift in the slightly dispiriting soup of modern life—was likely to serve as Exhibit A in any condemnation of what Louis Menand—unconsciously echoing Ralph Ingersoll—has much more recently called the *New Yorker*'s "politics of whimsy."[42] If the *New Yorker*'s high-minded appeal to its readers was carefully and only calculated to encourage what historian Mary Corey has called "a symbiotic relationship between the possession of goods and the quality of goodness," then White's forays into politics could be easily dismissed.[43]

And yet the critical attention directed at the *New Yorker*'s "tone" and "attitude" could threaten to crowd out sensitive appraisal of White's political writing itself—not to mention its appeal to a readership that included but went beyond those callow "college graduate[s]" Warshow and Rosenfeld pilloried. Whether these critics, or others like them, contributed to White's depression in 1946 or not, their objections were well placed to play on his own doubts about his suitability for the role of "THINKER," as he sardonically labeled himself in a letter to his brother that year.[44] Still, perhaps some of White's personal troubles might have stemmed from the frustration he felt in having seen his subtle appeals simplified as mere lack of "commitment."

White may have done more than almost anyone to create the *New Yorker* voice, but what has appeared to be mere "whimsy" to some was for White a subtle instrument whose distancing effects served to record the force of his own skepticism. This skepticism was primarily about his fitness for the role of advocate—and also about stumping for an idea he believed to be at once necessary and too absolute to ever convince those, like himself, for whom skepticism was second nature—but it was finally about the idea of commitment itself.

If he shied away from ever appearing to be too taken with his cause, from seeming too much the zealot, if he appeared to have trouble finding the right register in which to pitch his takes on "political themes," it was largely because White did not pledge fealty to the same icons as his critics. He did not believe in art as a

weapon of propaganda for a cause, as Ingersoll had in the 1930s, or any avant-garde notion of formal disruption of status-quo complacency, as Rosenfeld and Warshow did a decade on. Years later, responding to an interviewer's queries, White elaborated on his motives in writing about "supranational government":

> A writer should concern himself with whatever absorbs his fancy, stirs his heart, and unlimbers his typewriter. I feel no obligations to deal with politics. I do feel a responsibility to society because of going into print: a writer has the duty to be good, not lousy; true, not false; lively, not dull; accurate, not full of error. . . . Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life. . . . I didn't do it from any sense of commitment, I did it because it was what I felt like writing.[45]

White's conception of the writer's "duty" begins in the self, but it is constrained and shaped by a felt public of readers rather than a social movement in need of encouragement or a benighted mass in need of a disruptive jolt. Insofar as he felt that he could act in the world it was not as a movement intellectual who would simply "reflect and interpret" political positions, rather it was as a citizen responsible to a "society" of readers whose own senses would be engaged with his in an effort to "inform and shape life" and, as such, would expect and demand from him those basic obligations to which he assented. Nonetheless, these critiques rattled him. White's leeriness about aligning himself with any explicitly partisan campaign risked leaving his ideal little more than a dalliance, just the kind of literary affectation it appeared in Warshow or Rosenfeld's target sights or the naïve utopian fantasy it appeared in the hands of many "one worlders."

The result was a paradox. On the one hand, he believed in a practical, hardheaded form of world government, so he called not for widespread, abstract transformation in attitudes and mindsets but for explicit, actual reform of governance structures around the world. But his calling as a writer encouraged him to believe that his greatest advantage lay in a more ordinary mode of address. So while he made his share of concrete political suggestions, they all rested, ironically, on what amounts to a call for fundamental transformation in consciousness, yet one that is continually held at arm's length by the humble, wry tone of White's literary voice.

Ultimately, White's much-maligned style made this paradox productive. In recording the traces of White's skepticism, the characteristic *New Yorker* voice may have appeared whimsical, but it also gave White the requisite "tone" needed to balance the practical and literary elements of his efforts and the formal ingredients for a unique approach to his subject. White had, mindfully or not, devised a subtle tool to reach the *New Yorker* audience with an idea that might seem beyond the pale

had it issued from other literary or political precincts. The upper- and middle-class readers of the magazine were used to the soft touch of light humor. They were sure of their own sophistication but also anxious not to seem out of touch with "regular life." By couching his remarks in a tone little different from his other more well-known writings, a voice that blended homespun common sense and urbane sophistication, irony and heartfelt, sometimes sentimental conviction, he gratified that audience's sense of itself as both worldly and rooted—the very virtues he hoped to unite in his model of cosmopolitanism. Warshow and Rosenfeld did reveal the pretension that underlay this attempt to merge sophistication and plainspoken appeal. And yet, at the same time, this voice also allowed White to open up a form of address that might reach those for whom the "actual politics" Rosenfeld advocated were off-putting. It was the very fact of White's appeal to those who were—or wanted to be—in Warshow's words, "back home on the farm" that gave his writing such wide reach and allowed him to recast questions of nationalism in new terms—a kind of "actual politics" that both Rosenfeld and Warshow underestimated. Refiguring the cosmopolitan ideals needed to underpin any successful world government as elements of local and natural fellow feeling earned him not only readers but a certain kind of novel wisdom about the knotty relations between idealism and loyalty, a strategy that helped him seem to critic Clifton Fadiman in 1945 "one of the most useful political thinkers in this country."[46]

Ultimately, Rosenfeld and Warshow's critiques turned on their authors' shared sense that the *New Yorker* appealed to what Rosenfeld called the "middle brow" reader. Like their fellow "New York intellectuals," the two critics were concerned to defend and promote what they saw as true avant-garde art; for them much popular writing and art was compromised by its attempt to reach a broad middle-class readership. "Middlebrow"—as it was more often spelled—was a threat to them because it seemed too easily and comfortably to split the difference between high and low. Neither avant-garde modernism nor "vulgar" popular culture, middlebrow—from *Life* magazine to *Reader's Digest* to the *Saturday Review of Literature* to the Book of the Month Club—was an unholy amalgam of the two. As a host of critics in the 1950s and 1960s charged, it yoked seriousness to what Leslie Fiedler called a "sentimental egalitarian" style in a way that, as Dwight Macdonald had it, put "the modern idiom in service of the banal."[47] Anxious about the effects of mass culture on midcentury American political culture, the New York intellectuals sought to demarcate and police the very distinctions they believed middlebrow muddied. For them, a critical public needed to be able to make the interpretive judgments that could recognize such hierarchies—skills fostered by an appreciation for the difficulties of modernism, of course—in order to fend off the totalitarian mindset that flourished in societies in which culture became overtly politicized and popularized. Ultimately they detected in middlebrow more than a whiff of the Popular Front culture of the 1930s, a style or temperament that they associated with folksy solidarity, appeals to Americanism, sentimental moralism, and the explicit

communication of political messages through artistic content rather than form. "Middlebrow was suspect," writes Christina Klein, "because it was a mass cultural form that engaged directly with social and political issues, and because its universalizing aesthetic threatened to obliterate meaningful class and cultural distinctions."[48]

As literary historians like Klein, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Janice Radway have shown, middlebrow was something more than merely a stalking horse for mandarins on the left. A "cultural formation"—Raymond Williams's term, adopted by Klein—middlebrow gathered a host of writers, editors, and other intellectuals in a loosely connected host of institutions—magazines, publishing houses, book clubs, Broadway, and the Hollywood studios—to promote an aesthetic of moral uplift and entertaining education for a growing professional-managerial middle class.[49] Rooted in the 1920s—when the *New Yorker* was founded—middlebrow was self-consciously internationalist and universalist. By the 1940s and 1950s it had emerged as the vast center of mainstream American culture. Urging Americans to see their lives as linked with others around the globe, it worked to establish "imaginative communion" between domestic and foreign through an aesthetic of what Radway calls "personalism," an ideal that sought to gin up engagement and commitment to postwar political and social duties through narratives that called up sympathy in readers for the plight of those unblessed with the prosperity and affluence enjoyed by American readers.[50] Committed to the idea of humanistic, eternal values beyond nations and cultures, middlebrow was fertile ground for visions of post–World War II internationalism and even world government.

Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, was perhaps the best-known middlebrow advocate of world government. Shocked by Hiroshima, Cousins penned a long editorial for the *Saturday Review* called "Modern Man Is Obsolete"—later published as a widely read book—in which he gravely stared into "the glare brighter than sunlight produced by the assault on the atom." In that light, he declared, "the old sovereignties are seen for what they are—vestigial obstructions in the circulatory system of the world." Like White, he called for "the transformation or adjustment from national man to world man."[51] But this agreement masked significant differences between the two, differences that suggested how White's efforts refused the "middlebrow" label. On the one hand, Cousins would go on to become a more ardent world federalist than White himself, eventually assuming the leadership of the United World Federalists. On the other, Cousins and the *Saturday Review* simultaneously forged a brand of tutelary internationalism that sought to prod Americans into a personal and affective relation with the outside world. Their version of middlebrow "personalism"—their imagined global "intimate public sphere"—hovered between asking Americans to leave behind their national selves in making communion with the world and encouraging America, as a nation, to take up the burden of benevolent global leadership. Ultimately, Cousins and his magazine formed what Klein calls the "cultural left wing" of the

"Cold War hegemonic bloc" that taught Americans how to think of the world as an arena for good works that would fortify the nation's interests against the Soviet Union.[52]

By this light, the sentimental tethers that Cousins proposed were, like so many other world federalist visions, nearly opposite of those bonds White imagined in his appeals to a locally sourced cosmopolitanism. Cousins was vague where White was concrete; his "world man" was another specter of conventional cosmopolitan thought, to be called up as Americans were inevitably forced to embrace the world that technology and war had brought to their door. In this and others of Cousins's writings the world was depicted as a field for the exercising of American energies, for the investment of Americans' affective capital. White's writings offered the chance to instead see the lure of the nation as superseded by the local and the natural. The universalism that underpinned his cosmopolitan ideal rested on the shared earth rather than the faith that American political values were adequate to express the longings of all the world's citizens. Add to this the balm of White's signature wit, so key to establishing the *New Yorker* as a sophisticated and urbane alternative to other publications pitched to an emerging professional and middle class, and one gets the sense for the measure of detachment and distance with which he salted the sentimental appeal of his world vision.[53] This combination of groundedness and worldliness, leavened by humor, undercut the kind of sentimental moralism that made Cousins's middlebrow internationalism so amenable to the emerging Cold War frame. If Rosenfeld and Warshow had feared that the middlebrow culture Cousins represented threatened to erode the boundaries between freedom and totaliarianism, they failed to see in White a kind of politics that, in welding his particular skeptical whimsicality to a vision of "personalist" intimacy, sought to remake the ingredients of middlebrow nationalism as the base for a global public of reciprocal attachment to locality.[54] Their indictment of the *New Yorker*'s "tone" as an evasion of "actual politics" misread the twin political characteristics of White's writing: an attempt to imagine both a new intimate public that drew on the appeal of middlebrow nationalism but could never be reduced to it, and a political public that could provide an alternative to the avant-garde aestheticism on which the critics' own cosmopolitanism rested.

IV

World government ideas had a short shelf life. For all the fervor of 1945, 1946, and 1947, by 1948 and 1949 the emerging Cold War cut deeply into the popular appeal of supranationalism and put its advocates on the defensive. It wasn't only world government that suffered. Deepening discord between the United States and the Soviet Union in these years changed the terms of debate for all internationalist ideals. If the vision of a global polity animated by "direct relationship between individual human dignity and some set of supranational legal norms" outlasted what

Borgwardt calls "the Zeitgeist of 1945," it was in compromised form.[55] Popular commitment to worldliness survived, but only insofar as it accommodated itself to the renewed powers of nationalism. President Harry Truman and other Cold War liberals benefited from lingering internationalism but fused it with a determination to contain the Soviet Union to create the famed Cold War consensus. Left-liberals like Cousins, recognizing the danger of appearing soft on Communism, shored up their anti-Communist bona fides by hewing to what Fousek calls the "existing fusion of universalist and nationalist values that already shaped much public discourse."[56] The boundaries of this public discourse narrowed, dimming the political fortunes of those who did not align with the new watchwords of consensus: "national greatness, global responsibility, and the triumph of freedom" (41). Political support for world organization beyond the institutions created at the end of the war faltered, and any hope that those, like White, had of seeing the United Nations move beyond a mere federation of independent nations dimmed. Membership in the United World Federalists declined precipitously; its leaders moved on to other issues or fell in line with Cold War internationalism.[57] All the signs and warnings suggested that the globe would henceforth be arranged as two worlds, not one.

Mainstream liberals—temperamentally dubious about the feasibility and effectiveness of world government even at the close of the war—now moved to extinguish the fading fires of the movement for world federation. Girding themselves for battle with the language of hard-nosed realism, they attacked world government as utopian, naïve, and unworkable. Their chief objection was that supranationalists like White sought to use government to bring about a unity that, given current conditions, could only be achieved through social or individual transformation. Some, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were sympathetic to the "noble goal" but felt it placed too much faith in "constitutional formulas" when "an actual sense of community" was lacking. In the short run, he wrote in *The Vital Center*, "the theory that parchment can bridge the abysses opening up in a disintegrating world is false and deceptive."[58] Idealism was ultimately a distraction from commitment to containment of the Soviet Union. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, was no less scathing about the "illusion" of world government. "The fact is," he charged, "that even the wisest statecraft cannot create social tissue. It can cut, sew and redesign social fabric to a limited degree. But the social fabric upon which it works must be 'given.'"[59] World government idealists, he thought, had taken the world crisis as cause enough to usher in global federation but ignored the imperfect condition of human affairs and the deep rifts between the United States and Soviet Union. "Our precarious situation," he intoned, "is unfortunately no proof, either of the moral ability of man to create a world government by an act of the will, nor of the political ability of such a government to integrate a world community in advance of a more gradual growth of the 'social tissue' which every community requires more than government" (380). The failure of world government idealists to see that the

needed "social tissue" was "scant" simply supplied "a touch of pathos to the tragedy of our age" (386, 379).

White recognized the diminishing prospects for his ideal and even shared some of the liberals' reservations. By the late 1940s and early 1950s he knew that world government had become a political nonstarter. "Candidates for public office," he wrote in 1956, "steer clear of what Mrs. Luce used to call 'globaloney,' for fear they may lose the entire American Legion vote and pick up only Norman Cousins."[60] He had no illusions about the Soviet Union, or its differences with the United States, but unlike some more ardent Cold Warriors he did not let that threat occlude his critical view of his own nation's system:

> Both capitalism and socialism accept certain responsibilities, avoid others. Socialism holds itself responsible to the people for the use and management of resources, and in so doing is likely to wind up (as it has in Russia) by managing everything else, including the citizen's private life, personal thoughts, his arts and his science. This is wholly repugnant to democratic capitalists, whose system accepts the responsibility for guarding civil liberties and is notably cavalier about private concentrations of economic power, despite the fact that the destinies of people are tied up in them.[61]

Still, by the late 1940s he feared that much of *The Wild Flag* was already obsolete, outrun by "the nationalist spirit" ascendant since the war.[62] These worries pushed him to modify some of his earlier convictions. White continued to distrust and confront the narrow nationalism he saw rising all around him, but the emerging Cold War refreshed some of his trust in particular qualities of the American polity, leading him to see them as necessary ingredients of any future planetary system of governance.[63]

In keeping with his reticence about advocacy, White had never relished being lumped in with the official supranationalist groups, particularly the United World Federalists. He wished them well—even thought of himself as "one of them, although not an organization man"—but resisted several efforts to bring out his writings under their banner.[64] The emerging Cold War deepened his differences with the UWF, and in 1950 he wrote a review of Grenville Clark's book *A Plan for Peace* that clarified his objections. Clark and other world federalists, as Schlesinger and Niebuhr had noted, believed that efforts to establish world government should move ahead despite the emerging impasse between the United States and the Soviet Union. They argued that federation was the most important means to achieve the end of world peace, and that it should be attempted even if it meant uniting democratic and authoritarian nations under one international body. In *The Wild Flag*, White had

argued for the power of government, law, and force as the basic building blocks of global political community, but he now found himself doubtful. Under the current conditions, this approach, he wrote, echoing Niebuhr, "seeks to dissociate force from social ideas." It reversed the necessary order of things—putting the cart of government before the horse of community: "A community becomes a government when it embraces a complete set of positive principles; the weakness in Mr. Clark's proposal is that he attempts to jump the gun and create a government around the single negative principle of *no fighting*." Clark's idealism would falter in a world of ordinary people forced to select sides in a divided world: "He suggests that irreconcilable political systems can and must pool their arms, in the name of security and to save the day. If men had no blood in their eye, no gnawing in their belly, no flame in their spirit, such a scheme might suffice. As things go, it isn't enough."[65]

White could not sanction world government without the kind of intimate public—the kind of "community"—that he simultaneously imagined in his writings. This community would have to answer to each person's felt relation to the world as it was—the "gnawing in their belly," the "flame in their spirit"—and give it voice through political principles. A community, he believed, formed government, through laws, precisely because it could recognize itself as having legitimate license to protect the embodied and affective ideals individuals had invested in what Niebuhr would have called their "social tissue." The "precondition of world government," White suggested, was "agreement on moral principles, political safeguards, and human rights," but these "social ideas" were ultimately, for him, meant to secure the freedom of individuals, to give official protection to the freedoms that allowed individuals to choose the manner and nature of their community-making (182). World government, for White, had only been attractive insofar as it promised to protect these individual rights and served to place coercion at the behest of democratic freedoms. It made him wary when it seemed too much akin to the work of those New Deal "intellectual idealists" (including, ironically, Niebuhr himself): an imposition on his idea of freedom. The idea of a world state in which, as Borgwardt describes the goals of an internationalized New Deal, "the international community was capable of reaching through a nation's so-called veil of sovereignty" was hopeful when the veil concealed ill intent, but troubling when only sovereignty protected individual freedom.[66] By the late 1940s, given the deepening Cold War, White found himself confronted with just that dilemma: it seemed that only national—and particularly, American—power could best secure the freedoms he valued. "The only reason ideas are able to compete at all, these days, is that the free nations maintain national strength," he asserted. "If that strength were to be removed by uniting it with its opposite number, the result would not be a mixture of freedom and control, the result would be control. Free speech and controlled speech cannot federate, nor can irreconcilables pool their strength."[67]

White's critique put him in the awkward position of, as he wrote to a UWF member, "eating some of the words in 'The Wild Flag.'"[68] He still believed in the goal

and idea of world government—he would quietly support it for the rest of his life—but he had fallen back on the national frame as a guarantor of the principles he held dear. On the one hand, he now saw supranationalism as achievable only if it enshrined political principles that he saw as particularly American. On the other hand, White's objections to the UWF line reflected his underlying commitment to an ideal of world government that rested not merely on governance but on a globally shared reconnecting of Niebuhr's "social tissue." In fact, in objecting to the entire idea of world federation, Niebuhr offered a partial gloss on the ingredients for White's hoped-for global public. Advocates of world government, the theologian argued, put too much faith in government. They did not see that "mutual respect for each other's rights in particular communities is older than any code of law."[69] For White, the idea of world government endured because it was always possible to imagine that "mutual respect for each other's rights" could reach beyond "particular communities," if fellow feeling across national boundaries could be energized by conjuring mutual feeling for the very fact of those separate and beloved "particular communities."

White's most fitting ode to this negotiated settlement between the local and the planetary arrived in an editorial he filed for Christmas of 1943. An evocative and wry account of the banner under which disparate peoples could be joined, it features the "wild flag" that gave the book its title. But in keeping with the troubled fortunes of world government—in both the world and in White's own thinking—the sketch offered an ambiguous prophecy for the flag's future. In it, he reports having had a dream in which, after World War III, representatives of the remaining nations—there are eighty-three—come together for a peace conference. Each representative arrives toting his national flag, save the delegate from China, who, after having consulted with "an ancient and very wise man," brings no cloth flag at all. Instead he has a shoebox, "from which he drew a living flower which looked very like an iris." China had decided to adopt this "convenient and universal device" because it "grows everywhere in the moist places of the earth for all to observe and wonder at." The delegate proposes that all nations should adopt this same "wild flag," so that it would be "impossible for us to insult each other's flag."[70]

White has this announcement set off a flurry of uneasy questions, perhaps the most pointed of which is the American delegate's: "Can it be waved?" Yes, answers the Chinese delegate, "but it is more interesting in repose or as the breeze stirs it." Others are troubled that the wild flag can't support "a strong foreign policy" or that it is not special enough to represent a "master race" (the German delegate, of course)—concerns that the Chinese delegate parries with White's customary light witticisms. Finally, the delegate from Patagonia suggests that "the wild flag, one for all, will prove an unpopular idea." With only a few hundred people left alive on earth, the Chinese delegate replies, the "word 'unpopular' loses most of its meaning. At this juncture we might conceivably act in a sensible, rather than a popular, manner." With that, he "produced eighty-two more shoeboxes and handed a wild flag to each

delegate, bowing ceremoniously." The delegates all return home, "marveling at what they had accomplished in so short a time," and White wakes up (21–23).

Here, then, is a fitting summation of White's efforts to call up an intimate world public and his own skepticism about such pursuits. The wild flag—symbol of all our shared relation to soil, our connection to what White called "the vast wetness of the fertile world" (xii)—is raised as an acknowledged triumph of sensible planetary governance. And yet, given the depth of the doubts that plagued White, and given the knotty route his advocacy for world government required him to negotiate through contemporary political currents and the tide of swiftly unfolding events, it's perhaps no surprise that his triumphal flag raising arrives finally only in dreamtime. In the end, this was perhaps the only literary device by which world government might have been fully realized.

Notes

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[1] E. B. White to Katharine S. White, 31 January 1942, in *Letters of E. B. White*, rev. ed., orig. ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth, revised and updated by Martha White (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 213. In early 1942, White was asked, along with Max Lerner, an editor at the left-liberal daily *PM*, and Reinhold Niebuhr, the liberal theologian, to come to Washington to collaborate on a government propaganda pamphlet explaining Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Archibald MacLeish, the poet and Librarian of Congress, oversaw the project. White found the project bewildering and "sobering."

[2] E. B. White, "Little Green Shebang," in *The Second Tree from the Corner* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 234.

[3] Ibid., 234. See also E. B. White, "Sootfall and Fallout," in *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 112–24.

[4] E. B. White, *The Wild Flag: Editorials from The New Yorker on Federal World Government and Other Matters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

[5] E. B. White to Scott Elledge, 25 August 1982, in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 654.

[6] E. B. White quoted in Scott Elledge, *E. B. White: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1984), 247–48. See also Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[7] I am adapting Lauren Berlant's term to indicate how White was trying to appeal to a latent set of feelings that he sensed abroad in the world but had not been appealed to *as* an identifiable public as of yet and was thus in the process of forming through White's call. This call was, as we shall see, not entirely successful, but White's appeal fits the bill described by Michael Warner when he argues that "publics exist only by virtue of their imagining." They are a "relation among strangers" or a "virtual social object" that "exist by virtue of their address." See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 8, 74, 55, 73. Berlant argues that "what makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience." White assumed this shared "emotional knowledge"—but he had to, as Warner shows, seek to call it up, make it recognizable for it to have effects in the world. It is, as Berlant writes, "an achievement" that promises "belonging." White was trying to reveal that sense of belonging to achieve a new public. Of course, Berlant's intimate public sphere, unlike White's, is constituted by "nondominant people," and in particular "women's culture," a key difference that leads her in different directions than White. See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.

[8] For Dante's treatise, see Dante Alighieri, *On World Government, or De Monarchia*, trans. Herbert Schneider (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1949). This is not the place for a review of the massive literature on world government but, for a sampling, see Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (New York: Random House, 2006); Derek Heater, *World Citizenship and Government: Cosmopolitan Ideas in the History of Western Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Luis Cabrera, *Political Theory of Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Case for the World State* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Campbell Craig, "The Resurgent Idea of World Government," *Ethics and International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2008): 133–42; and Catherine Lu, "World Government," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/world-government/.

[9] Kennedy, *Parliament of Man*, 12.

[10] Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 33–45. Books advocating world federation during this period include Clarence Streit, *Union Now* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940); Emery Reves, *A Democratic Manifesto* (New York: Random House, 1942); Ely Culbertson, *Total Peace: What Makes Wars and How to Organize Peace* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1943); Emery Reves, *The Anatomy of Peace* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945); Scott Nearing, *United World: The Road to International Peace* (New York: Island Press, 1945); Norman Cousins, *Modern Man Is Obsolete* (New York: Viking, 1945); Raymond Swing, *In the Name of Sanity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946); Fremont Rider, *The Great Dilemma of World Organization* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946); and Grenville Clark, *A Plan for Peace* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

[11] Wendell Willkie, *One World* (1943; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 204–6.

[12] Borgwardt, *New Deal for the World*, 132.

[13] Ibid., 29. See also Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967); and Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 131–76.

[14] E. B. White, "Inimical Forces," in *Writings from the New Yorker, 1927–1976*, ed. Rebecca M. Dale (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 79.

[15] E. B. White, "Common Enemy," in Dale, *Writings from the New Yorker*, 79.

[16] E. B. White, "The Trailer Park," in *One Man's Meat*, by White (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 1997), 184–85.

[17] White, *Wild Flag*, 145.

[18] Elledge, *E. B. White*, 241.

[19] White to Elledge, 25 August 1982; and E. B. White to Scott Elledge, 30 May 1984, in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 654, 682–83.

[20] White, *Wild Flag*, ix.

[21] E. B. White, draft of "Notes and Comment," 14 December 1946, box 43, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

[22] White, *Wild Flag*, 187.

[23] E. B. White, draft of "Notes and Comment," 20 June 1946, box 43, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

[24] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[25] Irwin Edman, review of *The Wild Flag*, by E. B. White, *New York Herald Tribune*, November 10, 1946.

[26] White, *Wild Flag*, 56.

[27] E. B. White, "Intimations," in White, *One Man's Meat*, 221–22.

[28] Reves, *Anatomy of Peace*, 1.

[29] E. B. White, draft of "Notes and Comment," 11 September 1943, box 42, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See the final version in White, *Wild Flag*, 18.

[30] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 274.

[31] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), xv.

[32] Elledge, *E. B. White*, 249.

[33] See the many clippings of dozens of positive reviews of the book filed in boxes 233–240, and the sales figures in Paul Brooks to E. B. White, 12 July 1949, box 129, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

[34] Elledge, *E. B. White*, 249. By the immediate postwar years, according to the historian Mary Corey, the *New Yorker* alone "was reaching close to half a million people a week." Mary F. Corey, *The World through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 21.

[35] White, *Wild Flag*, xiv.

[36] Elledge, *E. B. White*, 267.

[37] For a full analysis of the *New Yorker*'s embrace of political themes in the postwar era, see Corey, *World through a Monocle*.

[38] Elledge, *E. B. White*, 188–90, 199.

[39] Ralph Ingersoll, "White Is World's Best Writer on the World's Most Vital Issue," *PM*, November 10, 1946, M8–M9.

[40] Isaac Rosenfeld, review of *The Wild Flag*, by E. B. White, *Nation*, December 28, 1946.

[41] Robert Warshow, "E. B. White and the *New Yorker*," in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, by Warshow (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 77. Originally published as Robert Warshow, "Melancholy to the End," *Partisan Review*, January–February 1947.

[42] Louis Menand, "A Friend Writes: The Old *New Yorker*," in *American Studies*, by Menand (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 139.

[43] Corey, *World through a Monocle*, 39.

[44] E. B. White to Stanley Hart White, 14 September 1946, in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 260; and Elledge, *E. B. White*, 248.

[45] Quoted in George A. Plimpton and Frank H. Crowther, "The Art of the Essay, I: E. B. White," *Paris Review* no. 48 (1969): 85.

[46] Clifton Fadiman, "In Praise of E. B. White, Realist," in *Critical Essays on E. B. White*, ed. Robert L. Root, Jr. (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), 110. Corey has shown that by the postwar years the *New Yorker* was reaching a broad and varied audience in many parts of the country that was educated, white, predominantly but not entirely middle and upper-middle class, and one that reflected the broadening educational and income demographics and taste patterns of a growing middle class in the 1940s and 1950s. See Corey, *World through a Monocle*, 10–17. This audience was, as Trysh Travis has suggested, "elite but not so rarefied as to scorn to go among the people." Trysh Travis, "What We Talk About When We Talk About *The New Yorker*," *Book History* 3 (2000): 266.

[47] Quoted in Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 65, 66. For the most concise windows into the New York intellectuals' take on popular culture, see Warshow, *Immediate Experience*; and Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962). It should be noted that some of the pieces in Macdonald's book originally appeared in the *New Yorker* despite Rosenfeld's and Warshow's critiques, suggesting that the contents of the middlebrow category were not at all self-evident.

[48] Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 67.

[49] See ibid., 7, 64–67; and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 118–20.

[50] Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 65; and Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 283–84. See also Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[51] Cousins, *Modern Man Is Obsolete*, 23, 20.

[52] Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 75, see also 67–85.

[53] On the *New Yorker*'s attempts to appeal to a more sophisticated brand of reader, see any of the many histories and memoirs of the magazine's early years. I have used Elledge,

E. B. White, 98–114; Thomas Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of* The New Yorker (New York: Random House, 1995); Ben Yagoda, *About Town:* The New Yorker *and the World It Made* (New York: Scribner, 2000); and Menand, "A Friend Writes." For the way that appeal was complicated by appeals to a literary community and the gradual cultivation of a political voice, see Travis, "What We Talk About"; and Corey, *World through a Monocle*.

[54] Trysh Travis has suggested that we label the *New Yorker* as "high middlebrow," a term as good as any other for the way that the magazine refused to sit easily in the categories erected by the likes of Warshow and Rosenfeld. As Travis describes it, the magazine "elevated the commercial culture of the street without losing its elemental inclusivity." She stresses the way that the postwar *New Yorker*'s institutional culture was designed to create a community of readers and writers—an intimate public, we might say—that provided the possibility of an independent mode of political address that can be discerned within and despite the magazine's function as a kind of guidebook for urbane consumer sophistication. Travis, "What We Talk About," 254, 266.

[55] Borgwardt, *New Deal for the World*, 274.

[56] Fousek, *To Lead the Free World*, 129.

[57] Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, 43–45.

[58] Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 240.

[59] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Illusion of World Government," *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1949): 386.

[60] White, *Essays of E. B. White*, 119. Indeed, White's earliest forays into writing about world government struck many more conservative readers of the *New Yorker* as "heretical," and White never convinced his friend Harold Ross, founder of the magazine, of the usefulness of the cause. See Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise*, 403.

[61] E. B. White, draft of "Notes and Comment," 3 April 1948, box 44, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. It also appears in Dale, *Writings from the New Yorker*, 84–87.

[62] E. B. White to Janice White, 27 April 1952, in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 327. An editor at Houghton Mifflin named Paul Brooks approached White about reprinting his world government editorials. White responded that he'd rather see a collection of "World Federalist Papers." Eventually, though, despite his misgivings, White agreed to the book that became *The Wild Flag*, in part due to the fact that Harold Ross was behind the idea (despite his doubts about the whole idea of world government). See E. B. White to Paul Brooks, 15 February 1946, box 62; Paul Brooks to E. B. White, 19 February 1946, box 129; Paul Brooks to E. B. White, 13 March 1946, box 129; and Paul Brooks to E. B. White, 12 July 1946, box 129, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and

Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. In June of 1946 White wrote to his regular editor at Harper and Brothers, Cass Canfield, about the arrangement, apologizing for not having contacted him first. He admitted, even at this early date, a few months before the book even appeared, that he thought the editorials "dated" and that he wasn't even that enthusiastic about the book. See E. B. White to Cass Canfield, 26 June 1946, box 62, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See also E. B. White to Clifton Fadiman, 5 February 1947, box 62, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, for another instance in which White called his work "out of date."

[63] Mary Corey, writing about White's take on the Korean War (he approved of it as a United Nations–led police action that gave "national policy" the backing of "world policy"), argues that White's "affinity for wishful metaphor, his sheer writerly deftness, allowed him to make convincing arguments out of what may well have been huge leaps in logic." Furthermore, she says that he was "wrapping U.S. nationalism in the U.N. flag and thereby offering readers an argument for a progressive version of American imperialism." White may or may not have been right on the Korean War but, as I have attempted to show, it is too easy to depict him as a higher-browed version of Norman Cousins. His literary efforts were not about obfuscation, not "attempts to use the slipperiness of language to dissolve geopolitical problems," but about an effort to search out an ethical path by which to navigate the tumultuous times for himself and his public of readers. See Corey, *World through a Monocle*, 68–71. Corey's book, the best analysis of the *New Yorker* we have, is well attuned to the way that the *New Yorker* helped readers to navigate between their privilege and their conscience, but she is, in this instance, less than willing to grant White the integrity of the stance he discovered in his version of that journey.

[64] E. B. White to Janice White, 27 April 1952, in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 327.

[65] E. B. White, "The Embattled Architects," *New Yorker*, November 18, 1950, 179.

[66] Borgwardt, *New Deal for the World*, 75.

[67] White, "Embattled Architects," 179, 182, 185.

[68] E. B. White to Harland Hoisington, Jr., 15 December 1950 in Guth and White, *Letters of E. B. White*, 301. See also Barbara Hoisington to E. B. White, 9 December 1950; and Harland W. Hoisington, Jr., to E. B. White, 7 December 1950, box 128, E. B. White Collection, #4619, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

[69] Niebuhr, "Illusion of World Government," 380.

[70] White, *Wild Flag*, 20–21.

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