

HISTORY AS NIGHTMARE:
FICTIONALIZING THE PAST
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE*

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*“Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad’s out a’ tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
O’ th’ posture of a whore.”*

A kind of novel is being written today that may be best described as extra-fictional or pseudo-historical. More fiction than fact, it boldly mixes historical events and real personages with invented ones—usually with satirical intention. The historian, John Lukacs, calls it “novelized history,” for want of a better name, but it might just as well be labeled “factitious” or “sham” history, for it is contrived and synthetic. It is not written to instruct or to illuminate or to re-create the American past. It makes little use of myth or legend. History in such novels furnishes props for the fictive decor. The authors employ as principal characters people who were or are history-makers themselves and imagine them as they might have been but were not. History itself may feed the plots, but it is history idiosyncratically conceived as burlesque, parody, hal-

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lucination. "Novelized history," whether it denigrates or celebrates, trivializes. It is present-minded and future-oriented rather than backward looking, its account of the past derisive rather than affectionate or forbearing. Its purpose is ulterior.

Novelized history is likely to be written during periods of fear and social dislocation when the fictive imagination is susceptible to catastrophe and nightmare. At such times the writer is encouraged to read his own terrors into the cosmos and almost obsessively sniffs the rot and evil of his times. Not invariably but often the writer will present his Wasteland in the form of black farce as Nathanael West in his lunatic novel of the 1930's Depression, *A Cool Million*—a burlesque on American would-be Hitlers and on the hypocrisy of the American gospel of success. Among West's targets were John D. Rockefeller, who claimed to have run his business according to the Golden Rule, and Calvin Coolidge, author of the imperishable piece of wisdom, "When men are out of work, unemployment results." The special quality of West's brutal and disdainful parody is suggested in a passage from Herman Melville's novel, *Pierre*, quoted by West's biographer: "in hour of unusual affliction, minds of a certain temperament find a strange, hysterical relief in a wild perverse humorlessness, the more alluring from its entire unsuitableness to the occasion." West, however—unlike the writers I am about to discuss—used the historical scene only as a backdrop for his fable. He invented grotesque parodies of real people (he had President Coolidge in mind and a well-known Fascist demagogue) rather than introducing them as actual characters, and although history becomes nightmare in his fiction, he does not write what I have defined as novelized history.

Writers of novelized history are likely to find more popular and lucrative subjects in the "visitable past," to borrow Henry James's term, than in remote times about which most modern readers seem to know or care little. Their books do not have much in common with such historical novels as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* or *Burr* whose authors take liberties with facts but who manage all the same to evoke the historical

shudder. William Styron's story of a slave insurrection seemed all too topical to some readers. It was denounced as a covert defense of racism and triggered an insurrection of its own. Yet Styron's formulation of a shadowy historical personage, however distorted it might seem to his critics, is what he calls it: a "meditation" on history, an exercise of the historical imagination by a novelist contemplating the inner lives of characters rooted in antebellum America. Gore Vidal's *Burr* appears to be a tour de force, more adroit than deep; in fact it is a considered judgment of a personality and an age by a writer for whom American history is virtually a family affair. It might be said of Styron and Vidal, as H.B. Henderson III wrote of their distinguished predecessors, that for both "History becomes myth, a collection of traditional tales which are timebound yet possess contemporary relevance and emotional force."

The same with some reservations could be said of Joseph Charyn's *The Franklin Scare*—"A Novel About the True Life and War-Time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, J. Edgar Hoover, and a Sailor Named Oliver Beebe." Charyn's book has the earmarks of novelized history. It is a scandalous story of backstage official Washington in 1944, a kind of scabrous equivalent of William D. Hassett's *Off the Record With F.D.R., 1942-1945*, which Charyn, I suspect, used as one of his sources, and it is full of the gossip about the Roosevelts' domestic life, the rivalry of government agencies, allusions to popular songs, baseball players, newspaper columnists and the like. Yet what might well have become simply another exercise in black comedy and the studiously perverse turns into an evocative fantasy. The action is hyperbolic, the characters dreamlike, the true and apocryphal blended, but if Charyn distorts and caricaturizes the traits of his notables, he neither cheapens nor sentimentalizes them.

We see them through the eyes of Seaman Oliver Beebe, a cross between Billy Budd and the Good Soldier Schweik. He is F.D.R.'s barber and surrogate child; Fala's caretaker; companion to Eleanor Roosevelt (a comic yet noble figure as im-

pressive in her way as "The Boss"); diner-out with his "Uncle Edgar" J. Hoover, whom Charyn transforms into a wonderful wizard-like presence, half Caligula, half Robin Hood; an object of fascination to Stalin and the Russians and a "Rasputin in seaman's dress" to Churchill and the British. Involved willynilly with crazies and whores, Trotskyists and fascists, and veteran of sexual encounters with his sister, Oliver throughout retains his natural goodness and tact and fidelity and his fondness for tootsie roles without ever discovering how his sexual indiscretions could have brought down the Administration. Charyn relates Oliver's odyssey in an inventive style, simple and declarative, that is appropriate to his hero's bluntness and simplicity. He is witty and funny but never smirks at the reader or hits him over the head.

Candidean books of this sort are often disquieting not merely because they handle sacred cows sacrilegiously but because they give the outrageous a tragi-comic dimension and make moral judgments profanely. Hence they are received with more gingerliness and less delight than slick spoofs like E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* which is not at all disturbing. A few grouches here and abroad panned it when it came out, but reviewers all across the critical spectrum scarcely found words enough to express their delight in Doctorow's "viscerally satisfying" achievement which "read like a streak," "altered one's view of things," and "managed to seize the strands of reality and transform them into a fabulous tale."

Ragtime has already been scrutinized sufficiently to see what ingredients went into its concoction. John Lukacs sums up Doctorow as a highly talented trickster who fails to make history come alive because he has no "subtle feel" for it and lacks the gift of authentic novelists like Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald to convey a deep and intense vision of an age through imaginary characters. He writes, says Lukacs, "sheer movie stuff." And perhaps that is the best way to look at *Ragtime* as the episodes unroll under the author's hovering camera eye. Its sets are expensive and accurate. Parts of the

film-cum-novel have been shot on location, and the actors really look like the people, famous and anonymous, they are intended to represent. Written in an archly simple prose and enlivened by just the right amount of sex and violence and zany humor, *Ragtime* is a pastiche of highbrow and popular: a novel of Kleist; biography and autobiography; a game of names (some of them easily spotted, others a little harder) for readers to play; and a star-studded cast of honest-to-God historical figures—financier, industrialist, courtesan, anarchist, explorer, savant, magician, monarch—all mingling higgledy-piggledy and staring out of the pages as if from the brown-tinted rotogravure section of an old newspaper.

Since a good many of Doctorow's appreciative readers have been conditioned to look upon the current American scene as a continuing Johnny Carson show where entertainers, athletes, and professional celebrities sit side by side prominent writers and politicians and scientists, the journalistic license with which he exhibited his luminaries must not have seemed very unusual to them. Today a vast audience is privy to the sex life, medical history, and 'agonizing decisions' of Presidents and basketball players. Persons of consequence have become the intimates of everybody, yoked in the popular mind by their mutual recency. There is nothing new, of course, in the public's relish for behind-the-scenes behavior of famous and notorious people, but for a long time the source of rumors about them was the gossip column and the gutter press. Then at some point, it may have been shortly after World War II, men and women in the news were subjected (or they accommodated themselves) to a new kind of exposure. Suddenly Ike and Mamie, Jack and Jackie, Lyndon and Ladybird, Dick and Pat, along with the lesser fry, became characters in a national "All in the Family" TV series. Even before the horrendous Sixties and Seventies, Americans of all ages had learned from the Media to regard the eminent as their familiars.

Their curiosity and their appetite for the 'low-down' extended beyond the private lives of the famous to the important events the famous ostensibly participated in and affected. The

secrecy surrounding American military and diplomatic adventures and certain undiscussed phases of domestic politics—especially those growing out of the Vietnam war and Watergate—encouraged lurid speculation about what was really going on behind closed doors. Unsavory revelations (some of them pretty wild) dug up by investigative teams, inspired even wilder fictions. Here was incontestable proof of national rotteness, fresh evidence to buttress the texts of a hundred profane moralists. What could supply more relevant themes for “apocalyptic parody” with its helter-skelter sequences, its jumbling of historical facts, its cartoon characters, and its kaleidoscopic narrative line?

Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* comes directly out of this frenetic ambience. An oversized parody lit up by coruscating verbal fireworks and at moments savagely comic, it has none of the funny-funny humor of genial *Ragtime* or the off-beat comedy of *The Franklin Scare*. Coover is out to get America and scorns Doctorow’s calculated palliatives. His countrymen are as “perverse, rapacious, atavistic” as Cooper’s half-savage frontier renegades, “civilized in externals but savage at heart” like Melville’s John Paul Jones. Whitman’s dark diatribe against American corruption in 1871 might serve as a motto for *The Public Burning*: “the dominance of greed, the hell of passion, the decay of faith, the ceaseless need of prophets.” Coover’s America is all this and more, but although he flourishes the shreds and tatters of his research, his findings corroborate a pre-determined conclusion. He is less historian than social pathologist.

The novel’s action is compressed into three days of June, 1953. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s ordeal will culminate in a Grand National Lynching Bee, for they have collaborated with the Phantom, the epitome of everything alien and evil, and relinquished to him and his minions America’s Holy Grail—the Bomb. It is a time of fearful tensions at home and elsewhere. The nation’s troops are stalled in Freedom’s War, and Joseph McCarthy cries treason to receptive ears. In this atmosphere of mass hysteria with the population terrified by threats of

nuclear attack, the Rosenbergs are framed by the Power Structure and condemned to be electrocuted in Times Square while the world looks on. The traitors who disarmed the USA and conspired to kill our soldiers in Korea must suffer the vengeance of a wronged people. After delays and crises, the “burning” takes place.

Vice-President Richard Nixon is Coover’s informing intelligence. The story crazily unfolds in his monologues, and most of the other leading actors—Eisenhower, the Rosenbergs, Judge Kaufman, Supreme Court justices, politicians, and a supporting cast of thousands are revealed through his feverish consciousness. Authorial reflections provide additional commentary on the developing nightmare as do Coover’s dramatic “Intermezzos.” The President delivers a fireside chat on “The War Between the Children of Light and the Sons of Darkness” and later turns down Ethel Rosenberg’s plea for clemency; the Rosenbergs, in “A Last-Act Sing Sing Opera,” refuse to cooperate with the government and protest against their illegal and vindictive penalty as the “Chorus” of public opinion assails the two culprits. At various points the National Poet Laureate, *Time* magazine personified, delivers his messianic messages based “on inner vision and imaginary ‘sources’ ” and articulates in racy *Time*-ese the vision of the Republic.

Presiding over the entire extravaganza is Coover’s mighty incarnation of America, Uncle Sam, a composite of Sam Slick and Sut Lovingood. Uncle Sam is Coover’s *Deus ex machina*. He harangues his children with floods of vicious, exuberant, and scatological tall talk when their spirits sag. Randy, hard, rapacious, bigoted, violent, revengeful, he is the essence of frontier humorist with a dash of Lyndon Johnson and the Texas of Mailer’s *Why We Are in Vietnam*. When he passes into the souls of his chosen political heirs, they absorb his manifest unpleasantness. Only the Phantom, felt but never seen, dares stand up to him, and the struggle between these two titanic powers locked in comic-book contention is not decided until the public burning of the Rosenbergs. Will Nixon become Uncle Sam’s annointed son and assume the presidency? Or is

Uncle Sam too disgusted with his vacillating and pusillanimous servant who tries to be all things to all men? Only after Nixon is violently and redemptively sodomized by his angry but forgiving paterfamilias is doubt dispelled.

The Public Burning, among other things, is a study in the excremental grotesque and a jaundiced version of the Rosenberg case. It is history as 'happening' with real performers drafted to act in a Coover Spectacular. Here is Ike looking like his Norman Rockwell portrait, blue-eyes, sandy hair, the face America loves. He has reading problems and troubles with Mamie. He is the uncomplicated yet canny fellow who is only comfortable drinking and playing poker with his cronies and watching cowboy movies. And there is Nixon, lover of cottage cheese and ketchup, a caricature right out of a Herblock cartoon or *Mad* magazine. His eyebrows meet. He is afflicted with afternoon shadow. He is forever sweating and stinking. Yet Coover's Nixon, unlike any of the other characters in the novel, is examined in depth and not always unsympathetically. A sensitive and self-mortifying little man peeps out occasionally from under the hard mask. In his fantasies, he can identify with the Rosenbergs, for he too is an outsider trying to ingratiate himself with his tormentors. But he is also vindictive and cowardly, and his moments of insight about his superiors and inferiors and the shabby trial are followed by explosions of fatuity: dreams of converting America into a continental suburbia, visions of himself as an international hero. Coover, in complete command of Nixoniana and committed to smashing Nixon to smithereens, will finally not concede his humanity even though it is sometimes hard to distinguish Nixon's voice from his own. As for the Jewish couple whose trial bedevils Nixon's inner life as it advances his political fortunes, Coover is hardly the ardent advocate. He sees them as dreary innocents, decent enough and poignant but middlebrow in their tastes and not very smart. Their guilt or innocence is of less consequence to him than the mania of their traducers.

To convey the flavor of the Cold War era, Coover floods his novel with topical allusions both familiar and esoteric and

like Doctorow counts on the pleasure his readers may derive from identifying such *Zeitgeist* indicators as Bobo Olson, Christine Jorgenson, Luke Appling, Clark Kent, Bojangles Robinson, Johnny Mack Brown, Martha Raye, Irving Saypol, James Hagerty, Young Widow Brown, Punjab, David Greenglass, Dick Button, Lionel Stander, Dale Carnegie, and James Montgomery Flagg. He revives hoary political jokes and ransacks newspapers, literary texts, songs—more than a decade of popular culture—for tags to authenticate his assault against a squalid and haunted society. The Great American Joke, reiterated in Coover's clever parodies of radio entertainment, hangs on variations of the failure of potency. Uncle Sam's humor is crude and brutal, because crudity reminds Americans of the good old days when Columbia was full of piss and vinegar and answered her critics with a sock on the jaw.

A hodgepodge of names and songs and allusions to forgotten incidents may provoke nostalgic recollection, but the denseness and fluidity of the past are not recaptured through necrologies. Coover is a dazzling performer, witty, inventive, intelligent, and his novel is full of powerful moments: the scene, for example, in which a crowd tumbles out of a 3-dimensional horror film into an equally phantasmagorical Times Square. I take it that the burning of the Rosenbergs is intended to represent only one fantastic chapter in the fantasy of history, that like the movie crowd we awaken from our private nightmares into the nightmare of history. The idea if not new is brilliantly objectified.

Yet for all his dogged research and literary gifts, his fantasy of national convulsion is a waste of talent. Even serious parody cannot be sustained for over 500 pages. The Rosenberg case plainly told is horrific enough without the garnishing of an obscene pseudo-historical Pageant of America. In *The Public Burning*, the impious entertainer crowds out the moralist. And whereas Coover the moralist sees all the sins of America reflected in the mirror of the Media, Coover the entertainer is unable to resist punning and quipping like mad and indulging in the kinds of verbal gymnastics typical of the Luce

publications he is ostensibly scourging. He turns into a bore.

The example of Coover prompts the melancholy thought that even angry oppositionists, like the musical purist who finds to his disgust that he's been humming some noxious commercial jingle, are infested by the culture they execrate. What is more, they seek reassurance from it and inadvertently become collaborators. Gore Vidal once wrote that American writers today are power-obsessed and that in a society without a "moral, political, and religious center," there is a tremendous temptation "to fill in the void" with one's presence and to achieve a "crude celebrity." To write a merely "excellent" novel, intellectually and aesthetically satisfying is of no consequence to Demos, "indifferent to literature" and only reachable "by phenomena, by superior pornographies or meretriciously detailed accounts of the way we live now." As an example, Vidal cited Norman Mailer, an honorable artist, who finding his best work ignored by a thick-witted public and "unduly eager for fame," clowned for attention. This judgment, made before *The Armies of the Night* appeared, is more applicable to a number of Mailer's less remarkable contemporaries who in their quest of a larger readership turn mystagogues and allow their ideas, in T.S. Eliot's disparaging words, "to run wild and pasture in the emotions."

For such writers, history as conceived of in the recent "docudramas" offers a splendid way to attract popular notice. We live at a time when real events are hardly distinguishable from imaginary or "pseudo" ones. Movies and TV films not only seem to provide the scenarios for actual deeds of violence and crime (terrorists hijack a plane carrying among other passengers a troop of beauty queens) but also dictate the behavior of criminal and victim. Plots of every-day dramas grow increasingly improbable and melodramatic. A rich Texan is believed to have arranged the execution of his son-in-law, the latter himself suspected of murdering his wife, the Texan's socialite daughter. The case inspires a book arguing the culpability of the father, and he in turn sues the publisher and author. Meanwhile the book has been sold to the films, and when a famous

director arrives to observe the trial, accusers and accused respond histrionically to his presence and play their assigned roles like professional actors. It is almost as if the movie scene has become the reality, as if the Texas story or the one about the mother convicted of killing her two children (the subject of two books) or the exploits of the "Son of Sam" are not really graspable until translated into Media language.

Philip Roth, the novelist, expressed this idea some years ago in a much quoted passage. The modern writer, Roth said, "has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is a kind of embarrassment to one's imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." Perhaps this sense of monstrous quotidian "actuality" accounts for his own sometimes amusing but heavy-handed parody, *Our Gang* (1971) in which President Trick E. Dixon and his White House entourage blather over the abominations they have promoted. Starting with the premises of the Nixon administration, Roth manufactures an extended black joke almost as grotesque as Coover's. His imaginary situations—a massacre of the Boy Scouts, an invasion of Denmark (pornographic center of the world), exposure of plotters—are hardly less fantastic than the stories pouring out of the Media to an audience conditioned to regard history, past and present, as lurid entertainment made up largely of plots and conspiracies.

The conspiracy theme has a long history in America. Charges of subversion have been used with good effect against Masons, abolitionists, Catholics, Negroes, Jews, Communists, Fascists, and capitalists. It is particularly compelling for temperaments impatient with complexity and receptive to cut-and-dried polarities. In this time of foreign and domestic machinations, the conspiracy obsession gathers strength and quickens imagination. J.F.K. and Martin Luther King were obviously the victims of plotters, and literary sleuths have demonstrated how insiders did in Abe Lincoln. But why stop there? The Gar-

field business looks pretty fishy (“disappointed office seeker” indeed!) and don’t tell us that Leon Czolgosz pulled off the McKinley caper by himself. To American Manichaeans, irrespective of class, the Kingdoms of Light and Dark that President Eisenhower held forth on in Coover’s novel have been contending since the Pilgrims landed. The Devil foments mischief in literal or metaphysical hideouts, and Mr. Big, his protean American agent who figures so prominently in crime fiction, orchestrates the shenanigans of the “Interests” and the Mafia and the C.I.A.

“The situation of our time,” W.H. Auden wrote, “surrounds us like a baffling crime,” and the resourceful practitioners of novelized history find “Private faces in public places” less inviting “than public faces in private places.” By converting recent enormities into fiction and capitalizing on the conspiracy motif, these writers stand not only to increase the sale of their wares but also to revenge themselves against a society hungry for personalities and indifferent to all but “relevant” subjects. The demolition of Richard Nixon is one of those subjects, the story of the fall of a tinhorn Cataline from high place that ends not in tragedy, not even in pathos, but in bathos. It evokes no somber reflections. The groundlings pelt the ousted trickster with garbage. “Quick comedians” mock his speech and gestures and convey his heinousness through parody. How seriously the parodists take themselves it is hard to say, since they can either claim or disclaim a moral burden in their spoofs. Do they see themselves as the unacknowledged interpreters-of-events if not the legislators of mankind? Do they believe that their x-ray vision really does disclose the cancer in the body politic?

It has often been asserted that the serious writer with “tyrannous eye” and sense of felt life is better equipped than historians to explore the “hidden corridors” of history. Unbaffled by the plethora of facts which inhibit the historian who must eliminate to see, he is ostensibly endowed with the power to detect designs and read meanings in the contemporary flux. But what happens to the “antennae of the race”

when current reality embarrasses the literary imagination and the balked writer can no longer distinguish the real from the meretricious and the fake, when the fictional historians of our "low dishonest" decades have to compete with unfrocked politicians, ex-White House aides, newspaper reporters, and former undercover personnel—not the most clairvoyant elucidators of the post-war years?

The inventive fantasies of Doctorow, Coover and company are different but not intrinsically more interesting than the self-justifying ones of Spiro Agnew, E. Howard Hunt, William Safire, and John Erhlichman. Both compound the contemporary confusion or grossly simplify it. The Washington based novels may be nothing more than romans a clef, packages of vendible gossip that enable their authors to cash in on their exposures to power in high places. They may have little literary substance. Yet they possess the kind of verisimilitude to be found in some of the popular "docudramas" and the film variations on the theme of Watergate into which they are so readily convertible. Novelized histories are less adaptable to the media, but perhaps they have a value other than their literary merits. Treated as artifacts, they might conceivably offer some clues to the historian or novelist of the future seeking to fathom a type of sensibility (circa 1975) for whom American history was camp or junk and pertinent only in so far as it lent itself to farce or traced the course of national degradation.

歷史的夢魘：當代美國文學對往昔的描寫

艾丹立

(摘要)

小說化歷史揉合了歷史事件，真實人物，以及富於諷刺意味的虛構事件與人物。這種作品是以嘲弄或藉着惡夢的方式來表達歷史，而且常常是出現於社會發生脫節，人們開始醒悟之時。傳統的歷史小說可能隨意採用事實，但求透過虛構的想像而創造過去的感覺；小說化歷史的寫作則別有用意，它帶有現在的心向和未來的目標。

目前歷史小說化的時尚可由下面諸小說來證明，這些小說沒有一部具有了不得的文學重要性，但都富於象徵意義。查靈(Joseph Charyn)的富蘭克林的懼怖(*The Franklin Scare*)寫的是「有關小羅斯福總統與其妻愛蓮娜、胡佛和一位名叫奧立佛·畢比的水手的戰時的真實生活」；寶陀羅(E.L. Doctorow)的怪異的節奏(*Ragtime*)，是以一八九〇年至一九二〇年間若干名人為要角，配以虛擬的情節而寫成的一個騙案小說；庫孚(Robert Coover)的公開的焚燒(*The Public Burning*)描述朱利阿斯和愛瑟兒·羅森堡被處死前三天的夢魘；羅斯(Philip Roth)的咱這一伙(*Our Gang*)是關於尼克森及其白宮幕僚的一篇手法拙劣的諷刺文字。

這些小說皆各有其價值。查靈對華府戰時生活的描述非常怪異，態度嚴肅，富於機智；寶陀羅在巧妙而坦白的誇大中帶着幾許幽默；庫孚的小說充滿力量和光輝，而羅斯的小說則有不少引人會心一笑的片段。但是，使這些小說顯得突出的是，作者顯然善於逢迎喜聞美國名人私生活的讀者。本文指出，今日這些公共人物似乎都沒有秘密可言。藉着大眾傳播，觀眾與讀者皆視名人

如熟人；而小說化歷史之作者就藉著滑稽突梯的描繪來傳達國家生活的瑣碎與罪惡（戰爭、政治、審判、高級官員之腐敗、國內之醜聞等等），這些諷刺文字同時傳達了憤怒和厭惡，並且隱含着許多假設，作者以為日常發生的事可能遠比最荒誕的小說更為不可思議。

小說化歷史之作者所冒的危險是，他們被自己所諷刺揭發的情況所腐蝕。他們把最近發生的罪惡或醜聞變成小說，並利用人們對陰謀所懷抱的恐懼，輕而易舉地混淆真偽，不但不能對事實加以解釋，反而在時間的洪流中迷失了自己。無一例外的，他們的惡夢觀（在美國文學中充滿了這種光明與黑暗之間的鬭爭）可能幫助小說家或未來的歷史家至少瞭解二十世紀末期美國人的感受之一。