

# A Quest For Historical Truth in Postmodernist American Fiction

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## I

Since the 1970's there have been ongoing debates about the nature of postmodernist American fiction. Many of the critics involved in these debates tend to think of postmodernist American fiction as metafiction, surfiction, or fabulation, emphasizing the self-reflexive characteristic of these fictions. We can see this trend of criticism reflected in the titles of books: Robert Scholes's *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), Larry McCaffery's *The Metafictional Muse* (1982), and Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction* (1984), which are regarded as important criticisms of postmodernist American fiction. Without denying that the metafictional trend is a conspicuous characteristic in postmodernist American fiction, it also appears to be correct to state that postmodernist American writers' concern with the social reality in which they live is an equal factor in the shaping of their works.

When we examine postmodernist American fiction more closely, we find that it, though metafictional and self-reflexive in form, starts with paying serious attention to the cultural, social and political circumstances of America which have changed rapidly since the 1960's. This fact that postmodernist American writers pay close attention to the current problems and troubles of importance in America is exemplified concretely in the themes of their works. For example, E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) deal with the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who were victimized in the whirlpool of the Cold War; Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1964) and Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) focus on the the disorder and desolation of modern American society; John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) analyzes the ideological conflict between Capitalism and Communism and the social problems in the electronic age; Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) gets at the heart of the nuclear war and, as a result of it, the fall of the world. Furthermore, even the so-called "purely metafictional" works have an important emphasis on the problems of contemporary American society. For instance, Coover's "The Babysitter" in *Pricksongs & Descantes* (1969) explores the gradual internal and external collapse of the ordinary American family.

Therefore, though postmodernist American writers have a deep interest in the process of expressing reality through "the process of writing itself," we can not draw a conclusion that they are indifferent to the social, political and cultural affairs, or obsessed only by

"metafictionality." On the contrary, as Coover put it, their attention to the writing act is to be looked upon as attempts to understand more accurately the present reality by checking the process of the writing act itself (Gordon, 2).

In trying to understand the problems of the present reality they never review only the reality which they confront in the present. They inquire additionally into the past which they think is the seedbed of the present. As a result, they discover that the historical facts which have been regarded as the historically absolute truth are in fact, as Michel Foucault pointed out, a kind of arbitrary historical construct fabricated by the ideologies of the times. Furthermore, they found out that the embellished past fabricated and distorted as the historical truth brings about the problems and crisis which they confronted in the present reality. Therefore, postmodernist American writers have been trying to find a new historical truth through their interrogation of the past, and build fictional constructs based on this new historical truth.

Robert Scholes called these kinds of postmodernist American writers' work "the atonement for the guilt of having created a fabulation and pretended it was real" (Scholes, 209). They do not, however, look upon the fictional construct they compose as the absolute truth, but accept the possibility that the fictional construct they build, too, may be colored and distorted by their subjective, if not prejudicial, view of reality.

In this essay in order to verify this unique attitude toward the present reality and history I will make a close examination of John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977).

## II

In *The Sot-Weed Factor* Barth attempts to find the historical truth of Maryland in the 17th century, but the starting point of this attempt is Barth's questioning about the problems of the present American society. This fact is clearly exemplified by Barth's remark on this fiction as saying "a moral allegory cloaked in terms of colonial history" (Morrell, 49). As to Barth's basic intention, Frederick R. Karl put it as follows:

He has, nevertheless, written a novel based on the 1950's...it is, indeed, at one level an allegory to the 1950's. The politics of Maryland, which will be the source of Ebenezer Cooke's crowning achievement, are very close to those of Washington in the fifties. [Karl, 466]

This point also appears clearly in the multiple meaning of the title, "the sot-weed factor." The title refers to a merchant of sot-weed, or tobacco, someone who sells or factors it. But factor can also mean a point of circumstance; sot-weed, besotted. In relation to this second meaning the title makes us associate to the besotted circumstances of 17th century Maryland. In addition, factor and sot-weed can also mean "influence" and "drug" respectively. In this meaning we can make an association to the drug-induced influence of the 1950's. Therefore, this title, mixing double meanings adroitly, seems to suggest to us

that the besotted circumstances of the 17th century bring about the result of the drug-addicted 1950's.

Barth's search for the historical truth of 17th century Maryland is shown through Eben's adventures and his initiation in this work. In the early part of this fiction the hero appears as a very innocent and romantic youth who idealizes everything. He sets up innocence as his virtue; virginity, his essence. This attitude of Eben's is exemplified clearly by his own epic on Maryland (*Marylandiad*) composed before starting for Maryland.

The courage and perseverance of her settlers in battling barb'rous nature and fearsome salvage to wrest a territoty from the wild and transform it to an earthly paradise! The majesty and enlightenment of her proprietors, who like kingly gardeners forstered the tender seeds of civilization in their rude soil, and so handed and cultivated them as to bring to fruit a Maryland beauteous beyond description; verdant, fertile, prosperous, and cultured; peopled with bravemen and virtuous women; healthy, handsome, and refined: Maryland, in short, splendid in her past, majestic in her present, and glorious in her future, the brightest jewel in the fair crown of England, owned and ruled to the benefit of both by a family second to none in the recorded history of the universal world. [87-8]

The epic is filled with only blind and enthusiastic applause to the land of Maryland and its early settlers, but as he takes a journey to Maryland, he learns that Maryland is not the beautiful land about which he writes gorgeous lines before he see it. It is a place where the settlers are cruel, stupid, and barbarous; where the slavery of the black and the exploitation of the Indians are common; and where opium and prostitution prevail. Arriving at his father's plantation in Maryland he also discovers that it has been turned into an opium den and brothel. At last he finds out that "the New World is a place where all the evils of the Old World persist: commercial intrigue, dishonest and intriguing governors, hatred and violence between the separate colonies, mob violence, conspiracy and counter-conspiracy with the French, the Indians, and the Dutch to seize various colonies—all the Machiavellian politics" (Waldmeir, 24). Because of these it is natural that every character in this fiction is related, directly and indirectly, to the political plots. Even the religious factions—Catholic or Puritan—design these kinds of intrigue and fight one another to expand their own power and influences. At the end of this piece Eben cried: "Here's naught but scondrels and perverts, hovols and brothels, corruption and poltroonery! What glory, to be singer of such a sewer!" (483).

The kind of historical truth Barth constructs about Maryland in this fiction is very different from the ideology of "New Jerusalem" or "Earthly Utopia"—the ideal community based on freedom and equality which the Founding Fathers in America claimed to stand for, and, since then, which most American have believed and mystified as their motto. It is this kind of ideology, fabricated by official history and regarded by many people as historical truth, that Barth challenges to in this novel.

But Barth's real purpose in this work doesn't seem to stop at the point of representing

the dark side of history hidden between the lines of official history. The more important thing we must not overlook in this fiction is Barth's unique attitude toward the historical construct he searches for and builds. In this work, though he continuously tries to show the historical truth of 17th century Maryland, on the other hand, he always thinks that this is not the absolutely objective truth, but can be a kind of fictional construct. Therefore he doesn't rule out the possibility that the historical truth he has excavated, though it could be close to the true circumstances, may be distorted and colored by his own subjective point of view.

In this work this view of Barth's can be exemplified by Smith's "Historie" and Henry I's "Journal", which show completely different understanding and recognition to the same experience. "Historie" is the records which Captain Smith wrote about his adventures in the New Continent with Henry I. In this record Captain Smith romantically idealized the beauty of the New Continent and his relationship with the Indian princess. But Despite the records written about the same incidents and experiences "Journal" of Henry I has a very different and opposite view from the contents of "Historie".

The most prominent example of this discrepancy is perhaps the cause of Smith's being rescued from execution. In "historie" Smith suggested that he was saved from being killed by indians, for Pocahontas, the indian princess, was overcome by his manly bearing and comely face, but according to "Journal" of Henry I the true reason is that Captain Smith got rid of Pocahontas's impregnable virgin's membrane through the mystical rites of the Sacred Eggplant.

The cause of these contrasting records arise, of course, from the fact that Captain Smith and Henry I saw the same accidents from their own points of view respectively. But it is evident that the records of Henry I put on record the circumstances of that times much more accurately because, as Henry I wrote on his "journal", the intention of his records is to correct the facts distorted by Captain Smith, and at the same time he continues trying to record his "Journal" objectively in order to satisfy this aim.

The more significant thing we have to focus our attention on, however, is that Barth, though he regards "Journal" as the thing closer to the real facts of the times, doesn't suppose that it is the truth in objective meaning. This is plainly shown by the fact that when he was left alone in the indian region deserted by his fellow white men he attributed the cause of his difficulties to the evilness of all white man, though he as an individual was responsible for his difficulties in some degree. Through this Barth eventually indicates that his *The Sot-Weed Factor* has a characteristic similar to Henry I's "Journal", that is, the historical truth in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is not absolute truth itself, though being faithful to the real circumstances of 17th century Maryland. This is, also, shown distinctively by the fact that in the epilogue Barth supposes the historical truth he searches for and his searching itself to be a play.

Of course, this attitude of Barth's basically results from the postmodernist American

writers' new attitude toward reality and history. To Barth, history is not a fixed and absolute truth but a field which the writer continues to rediscover and reconstruct through the actual progression of his quest, and, thus by this progression, to arrive at the critical means enabling him to reestablish a continuity leading to present reality.

### III

While *The Sot-Weed Factor* can be regarded as a work which searches for the root of 1950's American society in 17th century Maryland, Coover's *The Public Burning* is a work which tries to find the true cause of the surroundings of American society of the 1960's through a quest for the historical truth of the Rosenbergs' trial in the 1950's. This is exemplified by the fact that in his interview he states that his purpose in this work is to analyze the phenomena of the 1960's through the Rosenbergs' trial of the 1950's, thinking the history of 1960's American society, filled with anti-war demonstrations and disorder, goes in the wrong direction.

In order to recognize the historical truth Coover presents in this fiction we must, first of all, analyze the characters and incidents represented by Coover allegorically because Coover shows his historical truth primarily by these allegorical characters and incidents. From this point of view the most conspicuous character we have to focus on is Sam, for Sam, as known by the names such as Yankee Pedler or Sam Slick in this fiction, is the character Coover presents as the symbol of America. In this work Sam continues to lay emphasis on his Manifest Destiny. According to him America was founded by the grace of God, and therefore the world ought to be under his rule to keep peace and liberty. But differing from the idealistic statement Sam talks about, the Manifest Destiny Sam insists on is very negative in the process of fulfilling its aim. That is, he continues to talk about world peace, but in truth he believes that it is possible only through strong power like army, and he tries to obtain his aim through it, in fact. Furthermore Coover presents to us in this fiction that Sam's Manifest Destiny is not for world peace but only a fake ideology to rule the world for his own interest. This is clearly exemplified by what Eisenhower—the incarnation of Sam—sings about in the vision of America in the first intermezzo:

The reason we have representatives around the world is to protect American interests wherever they may be endangered or in difficulties; we do everything we can to protect the interests of the United States everywhere on the globe—the peace we seek is nothing less than the practice and fulfillment of our whole faith! [153]

Sam has governed the whole world through enormous military and economic power until the end of World War II. But since the end of World War II Phantom—the symbol of the Soviets—has kept increasing his power, and has now become a horrible threat to Sam. In consequence he feels conscious of a state of crisis, so he defines Phantom as “the Son of Darkness”, and looks upon all accidents happening contrary to his own interest in the

world as conspiracies made by Phantom and his followers.

It is in these circumstances that Sam plots the Rosenbergs incident; that is, he discovers Phantom is developing the atomic bomb, and then fabricates that spies acting in America have given the atomic secrets of America to the Phantom. Sam plots to arrest these spies, and burn them publicly at "Times Square"—the crossroad of the Western World. Through this action he intends to make that public burning into a fantasy festival, and rejuvenate an America made weak by the Phantom.

Are the Rosenbergs whom Sam intended to burn in public truly guilty, then? In this fiction, Coover seems to argue that in reality they didn't hand the atomic secret over to the Phantom. First of all, Harry Gold—the crucial witness to the Rosenbergs' crime—is a very inadequate character to prove that they are culpable. He is not only an alcoholic but also "an incorrigible fantasist" (124) who could write a drama. Also the proof the FBI presented to the trial as to the decisive evidence of the Rosenbergs' guilt is nothing but Ethel's outline sketch of the atomic bomb. The fact that they are innocent is clearly shown by the soliloquy and statement of the characters in this work who play positive roles in convicting the Rosenbergs of being guilty. For instance, in reviewing a great number of documents of the Rosenbergs' trial Nixon ascertained all these documents were lies the FBI faked, and this couple were victimized by Sam for his selfish interest as a scapegoat of the Cold War. He clarifies as follows:

The FBI has a special section which does nothing but produce fake documents. They have to do this, it's a routine part of policework, the kind of thing I might have enjoyed doing if they'd given me that I asked for when I left Duke...and much of the stuff Saypol offered up looked like it might well have come from that factory. [123]

But what we have to know here, is that Coover doesn't consider the historical truth he presents in this fiction as absolute truth, but accepts the possibility that it can be a kind of fictional construct. This can be easily detected if we review where Nixon's (he can be regarded as the mouthpiece of Coover) doubts about the truth of the Rosenbergs' guilt result from. For in this fiction, Nixon, thinking about the discrepancy between the Rosenberg incident as it exists in reality and the records as the linguistic construct to write about that incident, recognizes that the records become a kind of fictional construct because the records are necessarily colored and distorted by the subjective point of view of the recorders.

Furthermore this attitude of Coover's is plainly exemplified by the fact that like Barth, Coover presents this fiction to us as a play. In this work all characters, including Nixon, Ike, the Rosenbergs, are described as though they were actors that Coover makes go up into the stage to show the historical truth. Also Coover inserts the scene of opening and closing the curtain when each chapter ends.

Therefore the historical truth Coover shows in *The Public Burning*, though it is close

to the objective truth, is only one fictional construct selected in the various possibilities, not the truth itself.

#### IV

As discussed in the examples of *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *The Public Burning*, postmodernist American fiction is not only distinguished by metafictionality but shows a serious concern with present American social, cultural, and political circumstances as well. In their search for the present reality postmodernist American writers don't restrict their inquiry to the present reality itself, but focus on the past which has brought about the present reality. Through seeing the past history from a new point of view they rediscover historical truth—that is, not the historical truth as objective truth, but historical truth as a reinterpretation of the past—and build a fictional construct composed of what they discover.

As shown in the analysis of these two works, the historical truth Barth and Coover present in their works is not hopeful or optimistic. In *The Sot-Weed Factor* this is illustrated not only by the circumstances of 17th century Maryland shown according to Eben's initiation, but also by Eben's giving up even his ideals and his job as a poet. On this point of hope and optimism neither is *The Public Burning*. The blind madness the crowd in Times Square show and Nixon's complete yielding to Sam can be seen as clear examples.

That the historical truth presented in these works is so gloomy results from, above all, the fact that the present reality has actually become darker to a degree, in part due to the discoveries made in the act of creating their works. But this more desperate present reality underscores the importance of these writers' concerns with uncovering reality because through their efforts the society as a whole may become much healthier by suppressing or partially reversing the entropy which destroys human lives.

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