

★ THE ★

AMERICAN

★ NOVEL ★

剑桥美国小说新论·11  
(英文影印版)

New Essays on

# White Noise

《白噪音》新论

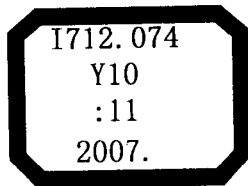
Frank Lentricchia 编



北京大学出版社  
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

★ THE ★  
AMERICAN  
★ NOVEL ★

剑桥美国小说新论 · 11



New Essays on

# *White Noise*

## 《白噪音》新论

Frank Lentricchia 编



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



北京大学出版社  
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

著作权合同登记 图字: 01-2006-7199 号

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

《白噪音》新论 = New Essays on *White Noise* / 伦特恰瓦(Lentricchia, F.) 编. —北京: 北京大学出版社, 2007.1

(剑桥美国小说新论·11)

ISBN 978-7-301-11366-0

I. 白… II. 伦… III. 长篇小说-文学研究-美国-现代-英文  
IV. I712.074

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2006)第150103号

Originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1991

This reprint edition is published with the permission of the Syndicate of the Press of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England.

THIS EDITION IS LICENSED FOR DISTRIBUTION AND SALE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ONLY, EXCLUDING HONG KONG, TAIWAN AND MACAO AND MAY NOT BE DISTRIBUTED AND SOLD ELSEWHERE.

书 名: *New Essays on White Noise*  
《白噪音》新论

著作责任者: Frank Lentricchia 编

组稿编辑: 张 冰

责任编辑: 刘 强

标准书号: ISBN 978-7-301-11366-0/I·0846

出版发行: 北京大学出版社

地 址: 北京市海淀区成府路 205 号 100871

网 址: <http://www.pup.cn>

电 话: 邮购部 62752015 发行部 62750672

编辑部 62767347 出版部 62754962

电子邮箱: [zbing@pup.pku.edu.cn](mailto:zbing@pup.pku.edu.cn)

印刷者: 三河市新世纪印务有限公司

经 销 者: 新华书店

650毫米×980毫米 16开本 8印张 131千字

2007年1月第1版 2007年1月第1次印刷

定 价: 20.00元

未经许可, 不得以任何方式复制或抄袭本书之部分或全部内容。

版权所有, 侵权必究 举报电话: 010-62752024

电子邮箱: [fd@pup.pku.edu.cn](mailto:fd@pup.pku.edu.cn)

# 导 读

北京大学英语系教授 陶洁

近年来,美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课,学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此,在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面,学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而,我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则,然后罗列一些例证,不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通,恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下,我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授,并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书,至今仍在发行并出版新书,目前已有五十多种,不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力,估计还会继续发行,主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发,深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则,每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说,论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述,主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述,从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐



释。这些文章并非信手拈来，而是专门为这套丛书撰写的，运用的理论都比较新，其中不乏颇有新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见，编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心，努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》，也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子，跑吧！》；有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》，也有我们还不了解的他的《漂亮水手》；有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了，武器》，令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两本作品入选，但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家，包括黑人和白人作家（可惜还没有华裔作家的作品），但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》，甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国，在全世界都有一定的影响，后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品，从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨，人们才开始重新评价这部作品，分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造，甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多，例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献，对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战，强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式，又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裘威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家，现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枫树之乡》对美国文学的贡献，分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场

对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说,这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在20世纪30年代曾经风靡一时,此后长期销声匿迹,60年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志100部优秀小说中的一部,被认为是上个世纪头50年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的论述里,作者通过分析《在密执安北部》,令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此,这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而,作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词,所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础,又对文本进行深入的分析;既把理论阐述得深入浅出,又把作品分析得丝丝入扣,让人不由得信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权,出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

## Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott  
University of California, Riverside



# Contents

Series Editor's Preface  
*page ix*

1  
Introduction  
FRANK LENTRICCHIA  
*page 1*

2  
Whole Families Shopping at Night!  
THOMAS J. FERRARO  
*page 15*

3  
"Adolf, We Hardly Knew You"  
PAUL A. CANTOR  
*page 39*

4  
Lust Removed from Nature  
MICHAEL VALDEZ MOSES  
*page 63*



★ THE ★

AMERICAN

★ NOVEL ★

*New Essays on White Noise*

5

Tales of the Electronic Tribe

FRANK LENTRICCHIA

*page 87*

Notes on Contributors

*page 114*

Bibliographical Note

*page 115*

剑  
桥  
美  
国  
小  
说  
新  
论

# I

## Introduction

FRANK LENTRICCHIA

FOR OBVIOUS reasons Don DeLillo's publishers are pleased to advertise their man as a "highly acclaimed" novelist, but until the publication of *White Noise* in 1985 DeLillo was a pretty obscure object of acclaim, both in and out of the academy. His readings are rare. He attends no conferences, teaches no summer workshops in fiction writing, never shows up on late-night television and doesn't cultivate second-person narrative in the present tense. So he has done little to promote himself in the approved ways. And the books are hard: All of them expressions of someone who has ideas (I don't mean opinions), who reads things other than novels and newspapers (though he clearly reads those, too, and to advantage), and who experiments with literary convention.

What is characteristic about DeLillo's books, aside from their contemporary subjects, is their irredeemably heterogeneous texture; they are montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America. Terrific comedy is DeLillo's mode: even, at the most unexpected moments, in *Libra*, his imagination of the life of President John F. Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. It is the sort of mode that marks writers who conceive their vocation as an act of cultural criticism; who invent in order to intervene; whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in its totality; and who desire to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the shape and fate of the self.

In other words, writers like DeLillo are not the sort who are impressed by the representative directive of the literary vocation of our time, the counsel to "write what you know," taken to heart by



producers of the new regionalism who in the South, for example, claim parentage in Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, two writers who would have been floored to hear that "what you know" means the chastely bound snapshot of your neighborhood and your biography. (An embarrassing sign of the aesthetic times: One critic, writing for the *Partisan Review*, reported his happy astonishment that DeLillo could invent such believable kids in *White Noise*, because, after all, DeLillo has no kids.) Writers in DeLillo's tradition have too much ambition to stay home. To leave home (I don't mean "transcend" it), to leave your region, your ethnicity, the idiom you grew up with, is made to seem pretentious in the setting of the new regionalism, and the South is not unique: It makes no difference if the province is generic North Carolina or generic New York City, or if the provincialist is Reynolds Price or Jay McInerney. In the cultural setting in which Bobbie Ann Mason incarnates the idea of the writer and Frederick Barthelme succeeds his brother in the pages of the *New Yorker*, to write novels that might be titled *An American Tragedy* or *USA* – DeLillo's first book was called *Americana* (1971) – no doubt is pretentious. In this kind of setting, a writer who tries what DeLillo tries is simply immodest, shamelessly so. Apparently only the Latin Americans have earned the right to their immodesty. So American novelists and critics first look sentimentally to the other Americas, where (so it goes) the good luck of fearsome situations of social crisis encourages a major literature; then look ruefully to home, where (so it goes) the comforts of our stability require a minor, apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals operating in "the private sector" of Raymond Carver and Anne Tyler, the modesty of small, good things: fiction all but labeled "No expense of intellect required. To be applied in eternal crises of the heart only." Unlike these new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties, DeLillo (or Joan Didion, or Toni Morrison, or Cynthia Ozick, or Norman Mailer) offers us no myth of political virginity preserved, no "individuals" who are not expressions of – and responses to – specific historical processes.

But things are changing now for DeLillo: In 1984 he was given an award by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and

Letters that honored his work to date; then *White Noise* won the American Book Award for 1985; then *Libra* was made a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the spring of 1988, hit the best-seller list for several weeks in the summer of that year, and got its author invited to do interviews on National Public Radio and NBC's *Today* show. Uncharacteristically, *Libra's* author assented. And best sign of all of cultural relevance in our day: The media political right has begun to take an active interest in DeLillo. The "highly acclaimed" author is now, in his newfound visibility, drawing his harshest notices.

In the midst of a presidential campaign in which he usually devoted his nationally syndicated column to the vagaries of George Bush and Michael Dukakis, George Will took time out to write an article on *Libra* in which he called DeLillo a literary vandal for writing about real people, a bad citizen for suggesting that Kennedy's murder was not the act of a "lone gunman" but the production of a conspiracy, and a bad influence because a lot of people were now apparently reading DeLillo. Will's charge of literary vandalism and bad citizenship (What is this, anyway, China?) is the latest frightened judgment – with a long American history – delivered upon writers critically engaged with particular American cultural and political matters, writers with terminal bad manners who refuse to limit themselves to celebratory platitudes about the truths of the heart, and who don't respect the definitive shibboleth of literary culture since the eighteenth century – the sharp and deadly distinction between fiction and nonfiction: as if everyone didn't know who Dreiser was writing about when *An American Tragedy* came out; as if Dos Passos hadn't named and butchered some famous names in *USA*; as if Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Coover's *Public Burning*, and Mailer's *Executioner's Song* hadn't worked that same territory.

Will is no lone gunman either: A few weeks before, a Pulitzer prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post*, who writes under the name of Jonathan Yardley, had similarly described DeLillo's efforts to imagine the lives of real people as "beneath contempt." Yardley is angry because he thinks DeLillo has somehow cheated, that thanks to a conspiracy of literary radicals he has "quite inexplicably acquired a substantial literary reputation"; Yardley is con-

vinced that *Libra* “will be lavishly praised in those quarters where DeLillo’s ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture is embraced”; and he is worried because Oswald, like James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, continues to fascinate us, Yardley included. Brandishing the literary theory of Eudora Welty, Cumaean sibyl of the new regionalism, who declares that fiction must have a “private address,” Yardley accuses DeLillo of committing an “ideological fiction.” By ideology he means (on this he’s as “liberal” as he is “conservative”) any point of view which traces any problematic action to an institutional, structural, or collective cause, rather than a personal one: any theory of society which refuses the lone gunman explanation of anything, but particularly of social crisis. Or, as Will puts it: DeLillo’s is “yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald’s act of derangement.” But political fiction is not fiction that forsakes the personal in order to blame the public sector, which it surely does critically assess; it is fiction that refuses the opposition of the personal and public altogether. Since DeLillo does not produce happy evaluations of the effects of large public pressures on individuals – has any interesting writer in America ever done so? – it follows for the media political right, which believes that America is good and that only individuals go astray (the homeless bring it on themselves, as Reagan used to say), that DeLillo is something of a traitor to his country.

In the words of a *New Criterion* soldier who preceded both Will and Yardley in this vein, DeLillo thinks “contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization has ever had.” The reality is otherwise, at least as it is seen in the *New Criterion*. Here in America we lead “richly varied” lives: If we do not, if there is any fault to be found, if anyone “is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo.” Two cheers for the media right: Their censorious reflections on DeLillo’s work – what consequences, anyway, ought to be visited upon the writer whose acts of invention are termed bad citizenship and bad influence? – are the best backhanded testimony I’ve seen in a long time on behalf of the social power of literature, for good or for ill, and an unintended but superb compliment to DeLillo’s success in making his writing count beyond the elite circle of connoisseurs of postmodernist criticism and fic-

tion. Not wanting to say so, the media right has nevertheless said in so many words, against its Will, that fiction does not have a private address and that DeLillo does to Oswald what we, for good or for ill, do every day to our friends, lovers, and enemies: He interprets him, he creates a character.

The telling assumption of DeLillo's media-right reviewers is that he is coming from the left – as if the criticism of American culture is necessarily a Marxist plot and we've never heard of the activists on the political right and their agendas for social change; as if some of our most honored writers – I mean precisely those whom conservative intellectuals charge universities with forsaking, as we go whoring after the strange gods of minority cultures – as if Emerson, Thoreau, and Twain had not written savage critiques of America, not peripherally but centrally, as their life's work. It is true that DeLillo's heroes are usually in repulsed flight from American life. But what did Emerson say? He said: "Society" – he meant ours – "is a joint stock company in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."

Should conservative intellectuals refresh their memories of American literature, they'd find that the canonical American writers – those who conservatives say best embody American values – are adversarial critics of our culture. The American literary way has from the start been fiercely antinomian, suspicious, even "paranoid," and how interesting that key word of contemporary jargon becomes when it characterizes the main take on our culture from Anne Hutchinson and Emerson to Pynchon and DeLillo. The main literary line is political, but not in the trivial didactic sense of offering programs of renovation, or of encouraging us to go out and "do something." Writing in the main line in effect stands in harsh judgment against American fiction of the last couple of decades, that soft humanist underbelly of American literature: a realism of domestic setting whose characters play out their little dramas of ordinary event and feeling in an America miraculously free from the environment and disasters of contemporary technology, untouched by racial and gender tensions, and blissfully unaware of political power; a fiction, to be sure, cleverly veneered with place (Tyler's Baltimore), brand names, and other signs of ad-

vanced consumer culture (Carver's cube steak, his Jim Beam). In the fashioning of such surfaces lies the entire claim of these writers to realism. But the deep action of this kind of fiction is culturally and historically rootless, an expression of the possibilities of "human nature," here, now, forever, as ever. This is realism maybe in the old philosophical sense of the word, when they affirmed that only the universals are real. The Jim Beam, the dope, the TV set, the cube steak, which all make apparently authoritative appearances in Carver's world, are not of the essence; they are merely props. In the context of recent American fiction, the reading of DeLillo's writing is an experience of overwhelming cultural density – these are novels that could not have been written before the mid-1960s. In this, their historical rigor, I suspect, lies their political outrage: the unprecedented degree to which they prevent their readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today.

In the lingo of the publishing trade, *White Noise* was DeLillo's "breakthrough" book, a term I first heard applied to the novel by a salesman from Viking who made the claim shortly after the book was published. (In other words, when it was too early to make the claim.) He was saying that the novel would achieve more than the critical esteem which would "butter no parsnips," as Robert Frost once put it, and he turned out to be right. The novel sold much better than DeLillo's previous seven and in a short time found acceptance in the very place held up to satiric scrutiny in *White Noise*, the place in America where serious fiction is read, discussed, and written about. With *White Noise*, DeLillo has cracked the university curriculum in American literature, more and more taking over the slot hitherto occupied by a novelist beloved by students and professors in the sixties and seventies, Thomas Pynchon. The book orders of university teachers do what critical esteem cannot do: butter the parsnips while making, sustaining, and unmaking reputations – even of the canonical sort.

The question as to why a particular novel "breaks through" to a mass audience is subject to very little evidence of the hard kind and therefore to much speculation, as in the following: (1) Ours is



a country committed to mass education, even at the higher levels, and *White Noise* is a campus novel (of sorts). (2) DeLillo has pretty assiduously stayed away from the domestic novel and the complacent realism regularly featured in the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*, fiction “around-the-house-and-in-the-backyard,” as he once put it. In an age of domestic realism, writers who do not comply must expect to pay the price. But in *White Noise*, DeLillo finally writes his domestic novel (of sorts). (3) *White Noise* is DeLillo’s eighth novel. To that point he was well known to reviewers and a cadre of readers as a gifted writer who had published seven novels in the space of a decade. By the time of *White Noise*, DeLillo’s career has gathered some momentum, is poised at the edge of breakthrough, if only he will write the right sort of novel. (4) The central event of *White Noise* is an ecological disaster. Thus: an ecological novel at the dawn of ecological consciousness. (5) The inevitable anecdotal reports, two of which I can’t resist passing on: In a course on contemporary fiction, one of my colleagues tells me that a student said to him, “This is the first book in the course about me.” Another undergraduate tells me that he did not “read” *White Noise*; he “inhaled” it.

The speculation I favor is the one about the domestic novel, a sentimental form plied to huge profit by women novelists in America in the nineteenth century (Updike, Carver, and company have learned the mode well), Anne Tyler’s work being only its latest commercial avatar. In *White Noise*, DeLillo deploys that popular literary form of the private life, but only in order to have his way with it, showing what large and nearly invisible things invade our kitchens, the various coercive environments within which the so-called private life is led. And yet though he insists in *White Noise*, as everywhere else in his work, upon a comprehensive cultural canvas, and though his critical impulses here, as everywhere else in his work, give no quarter, there remains in his fiction a space for the poetry of mystery, awe, and commitment; in *White Noise*, a commitment to the possibility, however laid to waste by contemporary forces, of domesticity as the life support we cannot do without. The formal handles that *White Noise* gives its readers are easy to grab on to; its texture is inviting, often hilariously so. But this novel, like all of his books, is an original, and like all originals