

GREIL MARCUS  
the **D**ustbin of History





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The  
Dustbin of History

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## Sketch

There's a story that's bothered me for a long time—a tale from a newspaper clipping I've hoarded for over a decade, though its background goes more than twenty years further into the past. In the early 1960s, a Louisiana misanthrope named John Kennedy Toole wrote a sprawling comic rant he called *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The hero of the book was one Ignatius Reilly, a joyous paranoid who goes to the movies solely to be outraged; a scholar of Boethius for whom the whole of the modern world is a travesty confirming his mission as holy fool and gnostic prophet; an overweight, unsightly gasbag (literally, unfortunately) who stalks the streets of New Orleans with a sword and a shield, dreaming of leading “many protest marches complete with the traditional banners and posters, but these would say, ‘End the Middle Class,’ ‘The Middle Class Must Go.’ I am not above tossing a small Molotov cocktail or two, either.”

The book's title came from Swift: “When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.” Unable to interest a publisher, Toole killed himself in 1969; he was thirty-two. Through the persistence of his mother, Thelma D. Toole, who enlisted the aid

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of Walker Percy, a box of manuscript (“a badly smeared, barely readable carbon,” Percy said) was turned into a book and published in 1980 by Louisiana State University Press. It became a best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Four years later, on 15 January 1984, *San Francisco Examiner* staff writers Charles C. Hardy and John Jacobs filed this report on the looming New Hampshire presidential primary:

Hanover, N.H.—One would think that the Democratic National Convention was being held this week at the old Hanover Inn here at Dartmouth College rather than six months from now in San Francisco.

On the eve of today’s televised debate on public television between the eight major Democratic presidential candidates, this elegant old inn was buzzing with ramrod-straight Secret Service agents, hordes of media workers with multicolored identification tags around their necks and, here and there, a certified presidential candidate.

As the candidates talked to a crowd of reporters in a large room with antique chests, sedate sofas and brass chandeliers, a lonely, well-dressed man paced outside the hotel carrying a yellow sign that read: “Why Won’t the Democrats Let Toole Debate? What Are They Afraid Of?”

The man holding the sign, John Kennedy Toole, a 39-year-old New Yorker, said he is running for president to call attention to the 2 million homeless in this country “who are out in the cold.”

“The criterion for being part of this debate,” he told the only reporter in sight, “seems to be national media coverage. Nowhere in the Constitution does it say that.”

“No one will talk to me. I’d much rather do that than stand out here holding this sign in the cold, you understand.”

If this was not the John Kennedy Toole who wrote *A Confederacy of Dunces* (as evidence, the man’s by-then pedantically correct use of “criterion” was scarier than the fact that as *Dunces* ended Ignatius Reilly lit out for New York with his Jewish girlfriend), then it was someone who had read the book and, honoring its author by taking his name, had decided to act it out. Or



so it seemed to me in 1984, or so I hoped. Though the pieces in this book were published as everyday critical work over the course of nearly two decades, from 1975 to 1993, it was this story that crystallized the suspicion and worry that lie behind each of them. The worry is that our sense of history, as it takes shape in everyday culture, is cramped, impoverished, and debilitating; that the commonplace assumption that history exists only in the past is a mystification powerfully resistant to any critical investigations that might reveal this assumption to be a fraud, or a jail. The suspicion is that we are living out history, making it and unmaking it—forgetting it, denying it—all of the time, in far more ways than we have really learned. “Culture is elusive,” Robert Cantwell writes in *Ethnomimesis*, beginning a passage that I might have begun with the word “history”:

It passes secretly, often silently, telepathically, between a parent and a child who does not even realize she has been looking on or listening until years later, when she somehow discovers what she has learned and can now do herself; it ripens, unintended, often unconsciously, in dreams, suddenly and unexpectedly to reveal itself in an expression or a turn of phrase, in a way of relating to one’s children or one’s spouse, or, at another level, in our musical or pictorial preferences, in the narratives we construct about ourselves and others or to which we turn for understanding. It may arise by accident, from a half-remembered memory, from fingers or hands idling with instruments and tools. Or it may simply persist, with a peculiar life of its own, in a circuitous transit over several centuries, from courtly to commercial to domestic culture and back again.

Later in the book, Cantwell says the same thing in different language:

Where orders of meaning have vanished entirely, and the sign erupts in its incandescence onto the cultural surface, we begin history anew and

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call our epoch by new names; the more deeply hidden the old order of meaning, the more powerful and persistent is our passion to interpret the isolate material sign—a turbulent, urgent desire to remember what we know we know.

Which is another way of saying something else Cantwell says: “We are all doctors and fortune tellers.”

You are pitiful isolated individuals; you are bankrupts; your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on—into the dustbin of history!

—Trotsky to the Mensheviks, at the Second All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, 25 October 1917

“The dustbin of history” is one of our terms for finality, for putting history behind us, where it seems to belong. There it was as Trotsky spoke on the stage of world history, our present-day ironies curling around him like an invisible snake. There it was in Hanover, New Hampshire, materializing right before your eyes if you were reading a certain story in a certain moment: no thing of the past or even for it, but a trap, a death sentence, or maybe a goal, a promised land, that can be found at any time. It can suck you in; perhaps it can be escaped. Leon Trotsky consigned the Mensheviks to the dustbin of history in 1917, and there they remain, with his shade now keeping their company. John Kennedy Toole consigned himself to the dustbin of history in 1969, and in 1980 was rescued from it—yet he wrote the sort of book that, no matter how or when it is encountered, no matter how many prizes and encomiums it might carry on its cover, speaks only from the dustbin of history.

Probably because a sense of time-marches-on only freezes history, or freezes people out of it, the pieces here are not in any chrono-



logical order. They are about the way history is cheapened and restricted; about those people, acts, and events that are casually left out of history or forcefully excluded from it, and about the way much of history finds its voice or bides its time in art works. These concerns are motives; as motives they are arguments; as arguments I hope they are, as a whole, a group of stories. There are some common characters. There are a lot of Germans here, both because in the first half of the twentieth century Germans probably made more history than any other people, and because in the second half of the century they looked so fervently to culture not only as a substitute for history, as a means of escaping from it, but also as a field for making history, for changing their and anyone else's sense of what history is. There are a lot of cowboys, both because the postwar Germans loved cowboys and because an American sense of the past and of action remains bound up in primitive, nineteenth-century wishes and fears. There are a lot of losers, people removed from history as soon as they flatter themselves they can make it. Today, in 1995, six years on from 1989, it is of course necessary to identify Chai Ling, one of the first voices heard in these pages, as a student leader at Tiananmen Square; it was necessary to do so in 1989. I don't know how many years will pass before it will be necessary to identify Tiananmen Square; plenty of people, all over the world, for all kinds of reasons, are working hard to ensure that it is not very many.

"The cultural standards governing emotion . . . have influenced me since childhood (*Gone with the Wind*, *Phèdre* or the songs of Edith Piaf are just as decisive as the Oedipus complex)," says the narrator of Annie Ernaux's *Simple Passion*, and it was in culture—movies, songs, novels, spy thrillers, paintings, TV shows—that I heard a lot of dustbin talk. It was the talk of people waiting, speeches delivered in exile, manifestoes of limitless possibility and desire: "demon-strations," as the San Francisco col-

lagist Jess once put it, “of the hermetic critique lockt up in Art.” “How much history can be communicated by pressure on a guitar string?” Robert Palmer asked in *Deep Blues*, and the answer is, more than we will ever know. His question, could I live up to it, would be the epigraph on a great number of the pieces here: how much history can be communicated by John Wayne pressing on a character? Palmer’s question revised, or gutted—how much can be transcended by the relief from history so often granted art—could work as an epigraph for the piece on Susan Sontag, or that on Robert Altman’s *Nashville* and E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. In their work, it seemed to me, culture replaces history—history as such is its own dustbin, and very nearly everyone is in it.

My tending toward culture, rather than conventionally structured incidents of politics or economics, makes the question of distortion constant here—along with the belief that distortion is not the same as dishonesty. The process of criticism is to me fundamentally mysterious. Often I cannot remember, or even exactly reconstruct, how I came to produce certain arguments—but that, I think, is a result of attempting to trust the artifact, the object of scrutiny. I take it on faith (until proven wrong, or until I run into my own limits) that a historical event or a cultural artifact that has sparked the enthusiasm, discomfort, or confusion of the critic will, if pressed hard enough, or merely in certain uncertain ways, give up untold and nearly infinite secrets. My method, if there is one, is to try to treat historical events as cultural happenstances and cultural happenstances as historical events—or to let the terms of one fade into those of the other.

It is easy enough to say why such an approach is foolish: one can be fooled. This does not seem to me, in our time, the greatest risk. Perhaps the most pernicious strain of contemporary criticism says one thing before it says anything else, says it to whatever historical event or cultural happenstance is supposedly at issue: *You can’t fool me*. I think criticism, or a critical engagement with



history, has a good deal to do with a willingness to be fooled: to take an idea too far, to bet too much on too small an object or occasion, to be caught up and even swept away. What I am always looking for, as in the story from the *San Francisco Examiner*—in the weird mix of a real-life author acting out the role of his own fictional character courtesy of a second real person confronting a conventionally structured political incident—is an objective platform for a subjective revision of our relations to the past, the present, and the future. Often the hard evidence is inadequate or close to altogether lacking for the stories we want to tell, or that we want to hear. Such an absence of hard facts makes faithfulness to those facts that are extant of nearly absolute importance, while at the same time leading us to invent, imagine, or experiment with versions of history, of events and their actors, that go well beyond or completely past real facts.

This is not a balancing act, but an imbalancing act. Some schools of history, Eric Hobsbawm said in 1993 with undisguised exasperation, assert “that all ‘facts’ claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructions. In short, there is no clear difference between fact and fiction. But there is,” he said,

and for historians, even for the most militantly antipositivist ones among us, the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely essential. We cannot invent our facts. Either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn’t. The question can be answered unambiguously on the basis of evidence, insofar as reliable evidence is available, which is sometimes the case. Either the present Turkish government, which denies the attempted genocide of the Armenians in 1915, is right or it is not.

The echoes of Hobsbawm’s last sentence (picking up, like a dumpster-diver in our dustbin, Hitler’s famous dismissal of possible reactions to the planned extermination of the Jews, “Who today remembers the Armenians?”) are all through this book,

sometimes as an insistence on hard facts, but sometimes as an insistence on the role of radical fantasies—or a willingness to be fooled—in any living sense of history. That is where the pieces on Nazi-hunting thrillers come into play, along with those on *The Manchurian Candidate* and Bob Dylan's song "Blind Willie McTell." Many of our most ambitious critical works, while making claims on objective truth, are precisely radical fantasies, placing the appropriate bets for the appropriate stakes: wagering everything on the hunch that the world is not as it seems. That is how I have tried to come to terms with Camille Paglia's insistence that the real gravitational pull of our history is pagan, not Judeo-Christian, or David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom's attempt to retrieve a hidden, original Bible, or Alexander Marshack's reconstruction of the Upper Paleolithic in Western Europe. In other hands, the same impulse to reveal what seems to lie beneath the surfaces of ordinary history turns lurid, as some abandon any pretense to truth in order to seek it, or anyway dramatize it, without the fetters of manners or rules. This is a gnostic strain of history, which Roberto Calasso, in *The Ruin of Kasch*, describes in terms little different from those Robert Cantwell applies to ordinary cultural transmission: as "largely made up of *'intersignes'* (as Massignon calls them), unusual warnings, coincidences (as historians call them, to avoid them), erratic forms, buried relics, physiognomic marks, constellations latent in the sky of thought." Far more than a willingness to be fooled, this is the work of gamblers anteing up with counterfeit money, the respectable word "hidden" overtaken by the disreputable word "occult." In these pages that strain breaks the surface again and again, whether in the form of the Nazis' secret victory in the Second World War as lined out in Thomas Gifford's *The Wind Chill Factor*, the Masonic symbols issuing prophecies in Bruce Conner's collages, or Umberto Eco earnestly rubbing the magic lamp of his *Foucault's Pendulum*, claiming he does so only to



prove there is no genie inside. The distinction between fact and fiction is necessary, but that is not all it is; it may be as useful as a precondition for fiction based in history, or conniving to change it.

Such a suspicion opens up in two directions. There is a sense of history as a story—a story that, by definition, did not have to turn out as it did. There are those moments in history when possibilities quickly lost to us, if we acknowledge only the official record, once loomed up; there are those moments when, as we reconstruct a place and time, things that truly did happen, that have irrevocably shaped us, nevertheless seem like impossibilities, or miracles, too unlikely, too accidental, too erratic or coincidental, to carry any real history with them. Tiananmen Square is an example of the first kind of moment; Deborah Chessler's work in the creation of rhythm and blues is an example of the second kind. I hope some of the stories here take in both, because those kinds of moments represent, I think, the true borders of history, as we make it, or unmake it—borders well beyond those within which what we call history is usually situated. All in all, this book means to be about how we situate ourselves in history: how we understand ourselves as creatures of the past and makers of our own present, and our own future—and, by implication, of our own pasts.





# Maps