

themes, although external, function the same way, insofar as they invite the reader to make the necessary imaginative link engendered by five visual artists (Delvaux, Magritte, Rauschenberg, Hamilton—the photographer—and Robbe-Grillet himself—now that he too has begun to paint) and the text's internal linguistic interplay. The five external generators of the text link up with the number five within the text (five bars on the prison window, five solid walls to the prison cell, the five fingers of the woman holding the stylet, etc.).

Since Ms. Leki devotes space to Robbe-Grillet's critical reception in France, it would have been informative also to review his reception in America where books about the author of *La Jalousie* began appearing as early as 1964. Nevertheless, in spite of sins of omission and of commission, her study is a competent and frequently interesting overview of Robbe-Grillet's novels.

Ben Stoltzfus

LOIS GORDON

Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983. Pp. 182. \$15.95.

All those convinced of Robert Coover's considerable literary talents will welcome the appearance of Lois Gordon's monograph. Gordon, the author of early monographs on Pinter (1969) and Barthelme (1981), offers here one of the first book-length studies of Coover. On the whole, Gordon has contended well with a very complex and mostly neglected corpus of vignettes, short stories, novellas, novels, and plays. Given the originality of Coover's "fictions," exegesis is no easy task. The difficulty is compounded by the lack of substantial biographical and critical material. In the opening chapter Gordon provides her readers with a much-needed biographical sketch of Coover. Working from interviews with the author's friends and former colleagues, Gordon manages a cursory, yet helpful reconstruction of the author's life. In this same chapter Gordon attempts a characterization of the relativism of twentieth-century thought and

the representativeness of Coover's aesthetic and philosophical values thereof. Gordon does not narrow her interpretive focus to matters of simple formal interest, a recurrent temptation in the reading of technically innovative writers like Coover. Gordon realizes that a balanced discussion of Coover cannot fail to emphasize the often subtle, but unmistakable moralizing of *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), *The Public Burning* (1977) or "A Theological Position" (1972), each intent on unmasking the immorality of dictatorial ideologies, political, religious, or otherwise.

Gordon's readings of the major fiction capably highlight Coover's preoccupation with pattern and structure. Pattern and structure play a mostly negative role in Coover's novels. Religion in *The Origin of the Brunists*, baseball in *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), and uninformed patriotism in *The Public Burning* afford means for the individual to deny the processual nature of life. But, as Gordon's reading of Coover points out, belief systems and personal mythologies can play a positive role; they can construct as well as constrict (p. 47). Structures become disabling when they are static. Where belief systems remain sensitive to the changing circumstances of life, they work as useful heuristic devices in the understanding of life for, in Gordon's paraphrase of Coover, "nothing is final but process" (p. 46).

Gordon's discussion of *The Public Burning* is perhaps the most insightful of her interpretations. It carefully establishes the moral implications of that secular religion that has found such a receptive host in the American public—patriotism. Gordon correctly identifies the protagonist, Richard Nixon, as an American Everyman, a living realization of the American dream, who rides to the highest offices of the land on the shirtilails of his ethical tractability. A simplistic reading would see the text as either a satire or character assassination (as you please) of particular historical figures, notably Nixon. Indeed, as Gordon informs us, some initial reviews saw *The Public Burning* as a "cowardly lie" (Norman Podhoretz) and a "misuse" of history (Pearl Bell); (p. 55). Gordon, to her credit, clearly shows how thoroughly the novel implicates not merely a few public officials but in fact the American people in the sociojuridical process that convicts and executes Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), *A Theological Position* (a collection of four one-

act plays published in 1972), and, finally, to five recently published novellas (1979-81). Although one might complain that some of his favorites have been given short shrift, e.g. "The Babysitter" (1969), her readings of the highly inventive fiction of *Prickongs and Descants* will prove especially helpful to those coming to this collection for the first time. The analyses of the plays are similarly instructive. As for the novellas, a legitimate reservation might be raised with regard to Gordon's curt treatment of Coover's most recent work, *Spanking the Maid* (1981). The latter, a highly involved version of the earlier "multiple fictions" of *Prickongs and Descants*, would have benefited from the patient scrutiny given, for example, to *Hair O' the Chine* (1979).

While her critical readings are informed, Gordon's monograph suffers from the lack of a concluding chapter in which she might have drawn together the various threads of individual textual readings. Furthermore, Gordon might have concerned herself with the shifting emphases of Coover's work over the last twenty years and their aesthetic and philosophical implications. The author fails, generally, to see Coover's work in historical, developmental terms. Gordon makes frequent and often vague comparisons between Coover and prominent Anglo-American poets of the last two centuries. These frequently serve to distract the reader and blunt the poignancy of the discussion rather than sharpen it. The contextualization of Coover within American and international postmodernism would have proven more illuminating. Few contemporary writers are mentioned beyond the introductory chapter.

Her bibliography of Coover's works seems to be definitive. It would have proven useful, however, to have listed the actual dates of composition (where possible) for, as Gordon herself acknowledges, major time lags often exist between the composition and publication of his works (p. 15). A closing, perhaps pedantic observation. To designate the bibliography as "Works about Robert Coover" misrepresents some of the catalogued items. In fact, several of the listed texts, those of Federman, Zavarzadeh (misspelt, p. 177), and Klinkowitz for instance, make little reference to Coover—only one in each of the two former cases. These texts do, of course, offer engaging studies of contemporary innovative fiction but they are not substantially concerned with Robert Coover. Obvious bibliographical lacunae are Richard Andersen's Coover monograph

(Boston: Twayne, 1981)—the first book-length study by my reckoning—and Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) which, though more concerned with Barthelme, says quite as much about Coover as some other works listed by Gordon. (Having only appeared late in 1982, the absence of Larry McCaffery's *The Metafictional Muse* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press] is understandable.)

These reservations notwithstanding, Lois Gordon's work accomplishes two important goals—to provide access to the philosophical and structural peculiarities of an as-yet-neglected author, and to promote the study of noncanonical literature in general.

Jerry A. Varsava

JANET HOLMGREN MCKAY
Narration and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. pp. 212. \$20.00.

Realism in nineteenth-century fiction, as virtually all readers and scholars know, is a notoriously slippery topic. But the easy evasions of vague terms like "true to life," "honest," "objective," "anti-sentimental," or "anti-romantic" are nowadays more difficult to maintain, thanks to critical investigations of the subject by Edwin Cady, Richard Bridgman, Douglas Hewitt, Harold Kolb, Gordon Taylor, and others. Supplementing these scholars' concern for realistic characterization and psychological processes, documentary techniques and historical-sociological subject matter, Janet Holmgren McKay here focuses on narrative modes and discourse devices as artistic activities basic to realism. With help from a group of contemporary narratologists—including Prague's and Toronto's Lubomir Dolezel, France's Gérard Genette, and U.S. critics like Dorrit Cohn, Seymour Chatman, and Ann Banfield—she grounds her discussion freshly but narrowly in a double development in storytelling: ". . . limitations