

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and the Ethics of Historical Understanding

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With the exception of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), no novel enjoyed more critical attention in the course of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s than Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977). Its polemical handling of the postwar sociopolitical background—the Nixon era, the Cold War and, above all, the Rosenberg case—guaranteed its becoming a most significant work in contemporary American fiction. Since its appearance, Coover's novel has stood as a landmark in the 1970s American novel, and an example of the subversive powers of postmodern fiction. This is so mainly because it incorporates some of the most representative features of the literature of the postmodern age: plurality of narrative levels, intertextual dissemination of voice, the laying bare (sometimes, the relentless questioning) of our notions of history and fiction.

In this paper I will be looking at the relevance of historical discourse to the representation of otherness in *The Public Burning*, a novel whose unique dialogical configuration thematizes some of the crucial interests of contemporary fiction. My central point is that the role of the "other" in sociopolitical representation is, in Coover's novel, that of a scapegoat whose mere existence implicitly justifies the dominant ideology. I intend not to analyze the forms of historical representation in *The Public Burning* so much as to outline the ethical consequences that Coover's designs can have for our notions of history and fiction. As I intend to show in what follows, the study of the unconscious reification of social and political models and its influence on our representation of the extratextual world can provide us with a valuable site for cultural critique and ethical agency.¹

Despite the thematic differences found among postmodern literary works, the polemical treatment of the historical text is a feature shared by many novels. Historiographical metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon calls it, "represents a

¹ For three serious investigations into the interaction between ethics, aesthetics, sociopolitical commitment, and the academy, see Paul A. Bové, *In the Wake of Theory* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992); Daniel T. O'Hara, *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency after Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). An interesting analysis of some of these issues in the field of contemporary fiction can be found in Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Fiction and Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

challenging of the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history writing through its acknowledgement of their inescapable textuality.² The formal-narrative approach to history is concerned with the cognitive organization and presentation of the elements and materials of reality rather than its purely written form. Certain works of fiction, as well as some sections of contemporary critical theory, play a prominent role in this reconfiguration of historical discourse in different ways. The postmodern novel, with its sustained inquiry into the nature and functioning of cultural paradigms, can provide us with grounds for an examination of processes involved in cultural representation.

The reason why Coover's novel is relevant in the context of the ethics of fiction is connected to our present-day views of history as some theorists, such as Hayden White, have reworked it. The rhetorical approach to the discourse of history opens the way to the study of historical consciousness in terms of its representational strategies. Many contemporary novels from the 1960s onwards—such as John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1967) or E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and *Ragtime* (1975)—seem to incorporate the textualist conception of history as a discursive practice with singular precision. In *The Public Burning*, Coover unveils the strictness of the conservative politics of history in a far-fetched recreation of the Rosenberg case with Richard Nixon as the central character. His criticism of the Cold War era suggests an open view of history whose purpose, in spite of Coover's all-pervasive irony, is not only the rejection of conservative politics, but also the calling into question of the belief in historical representation in terms of transparency, objectivity, and detachment.

The traditionally accepted notion of the discourse of history as an unbiased report of past reality is discarded in Coover's novel from the onset. Against the view of historical discourse as an organically ordered account of events, Coover's novel presents us with a motley parade of voices that swirls around the ceremonial of the Rosenbergs' execution.³ The ideological integration of this swarm of discourses largely depends on this sacrificial rite which momentarily relieves—and, at the same time, energizes—the country in its fight against its political adversaries (the Red Scare represented by international communism and socialism). The institutions' ability to present collective agreement as the basis of historical continuity becomes the fundamental support of ideological allegiance.⁴ This way, any intrusion that threatens the system's stability, whether real or

² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 129. Hutcheon's parenthesis.

³ Coover had already explored the relevance of historical consciousness and ritual to the configuration of personal and collective identity in *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) and *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), where these concepts play a prominent role. For an overview of Coover's idea of history in these works, as well as in *The Public Burning*, see Vincent D. Balitas, "Historical Consciousness in the Novels of Robert Coover," *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 28 (1981): 369–79.

⁴ On this question, see Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 28–29.

imagined, can be turned into the cause of a spirit-releasing ritual. The Rosenbergs' execution, therefore, appears as the "communal pageant [that] the troubled nation needs right now to renew its sinking spirit."⁵ Every social and political representative group, from the Church to the FBI to Hollywood stars, wants to play a part in this purging ceremony after which the unity of America's Civil Religion will be restored:⁶ "the nation needs these deaths and needs them soon" (189) in order to exterminate the arch enemies of the country's ideological "solidity."

Uncle Sam's prophetic image of America endows events (the made-up story of the Rosenbergs' dissidence and their destruction) with a ideological coherence and a moral meaning.⁷ What is necessary for this version of history to be set up is a regulating center around which events can be given a meaning and a moral order. In the case of *The Public Burning*, Uncle Sam himself is this center. When he speaks, "what at the moment seems to be nothing more than the random rise and fall of men and ideas, false starts and sudden brainstorm, erratic bursts of passion and apathy, brief setbacks and partial victories, is later discovered to be—in the light of America's gradual unveiling as the New Athens, New Rome, and New Jerusalem all in one—a necessary and inevitable sequence of interlocking events, a divine code" (9). In the context of the Rosenberg case, this ideological center also requires skilled politicians capable of narrativizing random data into logical coherence. Among them, prosecuting attorney Irving Saypol stands out as being "powerful enough in his hushed no-messing-around way to make what might later seem like nothing more than a series of overlapping fictions cohere into a convincing semblance of historical continuity and logical truth" (122). The *New York Times* becomes "a charter of moral and social order, a political force-field maker, *defining meaningful actions merely by showing them*" (191; my emphasis). Reflecting on his own "art of revelation," the National Poet Laureate *Time Magazine* observes that the most important thing is to collect "images, experimenting with various forms and meters, searching for the metaphoric frame by which to contain and to re-create tonight's main ceremony . . . and *cause it, by its own manifesto, to happen in people's minds*" (319–20; my emphasis). This is what his art is all about, this is what it means, as his mother says, to be "called to be the servant of truth. It is not enough to present facts—something has to *happen* in time and space. . . . Poetry is the art of subordinating

⁵ Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (New York: Viking Press, 1977) 3–4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. The best analysis of the circuslike construction of *The Public Burning* is to be found in Tom LeClair, "Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*, and the Art of Excess," *Critique* 23. 3 (1982): 5–28.

⁶ The term "America's Civil Religion" is Jackson I. Cope's. See his *Robert Coover's Fictions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 59–113.

⁷ This accomplishment of cognitive coherence and ethical force is, according to Hayden White, one of the main features differentiating narrativized history from other earlier forms of historical account, such as annals or chronicles. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 13ff.

facts to the imagination, of giving them shape and visibility, keeping them *personal*" (320).

To explore how facts can become anything but *personal* is the aim of *The Public Burning*. Coover's interest is to analyze how visionary constructions can function as an ideologically concerted effort to eliminate historical contingency, difference, and otherness in the name of universalism. After all, the Rosenbergs' sacrifice is intended to serve as an expiatory act which relieves both people and the administration from their paranoid political anxieties. As Uncle Sam puts it, "We ain't goin' up to Times Square just to fulfill the statutorial law. . . . we're goin' up there to *wash our feet*, son! (91).

The two features I have referred to, ideological compliance and the belief in historical universalism, stand behind the view Coover offers as the background of the America of the 1950s and the Rosenberg case. Both the anticommunist schizophrenia and the need for collective ritual work throughout *The Public Burning* as the ideological source out of which subjectivity and critical agency—whether Nixon's or the Rosenbergs'—are forged. In fact, what Coover proposes is an assessment of the interaction between the discourse of history and the construction of identity in basically discursive terms.

One main strategy making Coover's *The Public Burning* a valuable novel from the point of view of literary ethics resides in its treatment of the duality between public and private versions of history. In fact, the reflexive examination of historical discourse is by and large the aspect of the novel which has attracted most critical commentary.⁸ In a lengthy passage, Coover expresses this duality as follows: "There are those who commune directly with the words, caressing them blearily with their sleepy eyes or swallowing them like antacids, leaning against the slabs for support whenever the earth should rock, but doubting they represent anything more than themselves. Others gamely seek the space between, likening these cryptic hoarstones to clues in the daily crossword puzzle. . . . And perhaps that was why—the tenacious faith in the residual magic of language—this monument was erected in the first place: that effort to reconstruct with words and iconography each fleeting day in the hope of discovering some pattern, some coherence, some meaningful dialogue with time. . . . 'Objectivity' is in spite of itself a willful program for the stacking of perceptions; facts emerge not from life but from revelation" (191). The former

⁸ See, for some examples, Vicent D. Balitas, "Historical Consciousness in the Novels of Robert Coover"; Lois Gordon, *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983) 51–86; Peter Humm, "Telling Tales on the Rosenbergs," *Literature and History* 12. 1 (1986): 48–57; Heinz Ickstadt, "History, Fiction, and the Designs of Robert Coover," *Amerikastudien* 28 (1983): 347–60; Naomi Jacobs, *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990) 166–94; Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 97–126; and Raymond A. Mazurek, "Metafiction, the Historical Novel, and Coover's *The Public Burning*," *Critique* 23. 3 (1982): 29–42.

attitude implies a view of history as self-referential textuality, whose central concern is the representation and organization of events. This is the text of history. The latter, on the contrary, although also in broadly discursive terms, hinges on indeterminacy, the "space between," and the distrust of linearity. The former narrativizes history, gathering facts and establishing causal links, whereas the latter undercuts narratives by exposing the artificial foundations of those links. While it is clear that the first of these positions corresponds to Uncle Sam's view, the second represents Coover's own version of historical discourse, more concerned with fabulation and discontinuity than with continuity and totalization. And although it is the former that prevails in the end—leading to the Rosenbergs' execution—it is the latter that appears as a more legitimate alternative for understanding our consciousness of the past and present. These two possible ways of presenting historical discourse are presented alternatively in the novel in two distinct ways: Uncle Sam's public, causal, and totalizing account, on the one hand, and Nixon's inner and private view, on the other. The contrast between them makes the novel appear as a genealogical exploration.⁹

As the novel proceeds, Nixon's sympathies for the scapegoats increase to the point where he begins to change his own conception of history. Although preserving an ambivalent position, he goes on to recognize the unreliability of causality and logical coherence. "The great experience of the twentieth century," Nixon finds, "has been to accept the objective reality of time and thus of process—history does not repeat, the universe is not changeless, masses dissolve and slide through the fingers, there are no precognitions—and out in that flow all . . . assertions may be true, false, inconsequential, or all at the same time" (195). In his effort to make some sense out of the Rosenberg case, he perceives that there is something uneasy about "logical" linkages. Despite his faithfulness to Uncle Sam ("the maker and shaper of world history" [212]), Nixon realizes that the Rosenberg story is becoming a mere corollary of a political design, allowing no room for uncertainty, objection, or dissent. In fact, "if you walked forward through all these data, like the journalists, like the FBI invited everybody to do, the story was cohesive and seemed as simple and true as an epigram. . . . But working backwards, like a lawyer, the narrative came unraveled" (131–32).

And it is precisely by "working backwards" that *The Public Burning* unsettles the hegemonic ideology of mid-century America and the Rosenberg case. Near the end, in his desperate attempt to save Ethel from execution, Nixon realizes that "There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that's just stuff we make up to hold the goddamn world together" (436). The ultimate form of history turns out to be only "design as a game. Randomness as design. Design ironically revealing randomness. Arbitrariness as a principle, allowing us to laugh at the tragic. As in

⁹ An example of this approach can be found in Susan Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 66–92.

dreams, there is an impressive amount of condensation on the one hand, elaboration on the other. Logical relations are repressed, but reappear through displacement" (190). Once he understands that the fanatical need for public ritual might well have distorted reality, that innocent people are on the brink of extermination, his consciousness begins to allow some room for difference and individuality. Groping through his memories to reconstruct his own identity, he begins to look at the Rosenbergs (especially Ethel) in a different way, neglecting more or less consciously the role of devilish creatures that Uncle Sam's discourse has forced them to play. They all emerge as the product, and the victims, of a political struggle, a national paranoid anxiety, and an alleged international threat—in the end, as Nixon puts it, "victims of the same lie" (436).

Among other things, *The Public Burning* constitutes not only a metacritical opposition between two ways of forging the discourse of history, but also an inquiry into the conflict between identity and difference. This presupposes a critical examination of the power mechanisms operating in particular sociopolitical contexts as well as an analysis of their influence on our ethical assessment of specific cultural paradigms. In these two contexts, the discourse of history and the politics of identity and difference, the question of representation certainly plays an essential role.

The Rosenberg case is presented throughout the novel according to binary paradigms such as freedom/communism, Nixon/Rosenbergs, ritual communion/anarchy, God/Satan, etc., the first terms corresponding to Uncle Sam's America, and the second to the Phantom. The first terms function as the main, if not the only, horizon of social and political intelligibility, while the second maintain and feed the first as their arch oppositional forces. While the former articulate a particular ideological construction, the latter are needed to support and justify it.¹⁰ This mode of representing both individuality foregrounds the politics of difference by pitting two radically different ideologies and making individuality appear as a construction entangled in a war between conflicting discourses. America being "engaged in a life and death struggle with a completely different system," the Rosenbergs' execution becomes the inevitable result of an "irrepressible conflict between opposin' and endurin' forces" (287, 337). The Rosenbergs' innocence or guilt is taken for granted beforehand. As Uncle Sam puts it, "guilt, real guilt, is like grace: some people got it, some don't. These people got it. . . . It's in their bones, their very acids" (87). That they are America's enemies is never questioned.

The differences between one and another's use of language are also foregrounded as evidence of the unbridgeable gap between two irreconcilable worldviews. The language of political representation becomes another marker of the boundaries between the different discourses, as well as the only ontological

¹⁰ See John Ramage, "Myth and Monomyth in Coover's *The Public Burning*," *Critique* 23. 3 (1982): 55–57.

horizon of ethical judgment. Nixon, for instance, discovers that “the slogan that excited the imagination was the one attached to ‘Courage’ over the doorway to the West, my part of the country: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. Yes, this was what America was all about, I thought, this was the true revolution of our era. . . . Of course, you had to be careful—revolution, new order, it was the kind of language people like the Rosenbergs used, too—but in ignorance, in darkness: yes, the truth about the Phantom was that he was a *reactionary*, trying to derail the Train of Progress!” (59).

In a similar spirit, the Church fosters the repression of the Other and welcomes the executions as an important triumph in God’s fight against Satan—symbolized by “Communism with hammer and sickle, and America and Christians with cross of Christ!” (418). The Reverend Billy Graham warns that “when God begins to move in a country, as He is moving mightily in America, *Satan also begins to move!*” (102). The religious tone of the war against the Phantom reinforces the idea that there is more than just political difference involved in the representation of the Rosenbergs. “Everything they have touched seems suffused now with a strange dark power” (352). They are characterized not so much as mere political adversaries, but rather as completely alien creatures. Shortly before the executions are carried out, the Rosenbergs’ warden at the Death House recalls how their arrival in prison “was though they were bringing some outside presence in with them” (409). After a conversation with Uncle Sam, Nixon realizes that “the Rosenbergs no longer belonged to the ordinary world of men, that was obvious, you could see the sort of energy they now possessed, even though stuffed away in Sing Sing prison” (91). Why and how the spies can irradiate this enigmatic energy is not made clear, but taken for granted.

The dramatization of radical otherness also presupposes, in this case, a basic opposition between the freedom of individualism on the one hand, and the tyranny of historical determinism on the other. As Nixon puts it, “That’s the difference between us and the Socialists. . . . Our central idea is to look for what works in an essentially open-ended situation; theirs is what’s necessary in some kind of universal and inevitable history. Free individual enterprise versus the predestined structure, social engineering” (407). Again this passage implies that there is more than just a political conflict involved in the Rosenberg case, and that the triumph over the Phantom largely rests upon the ability to transcend the Rosenbergs’ individuality and to present this conflict as a more general struggle between Good and Evil. Comically, the very “open-ended situation” that Nixon seems to have discovered at the core of the nation’s spirit ultimately destroys the Rosenbergs and leads Nixon himself to ideological assent. The Rosenbergs are fanatically executed while, a few hours later, Nixon is sodomized by Uncle Sam in a ritual act symbolizing his future, becoming President of the nation. Unable to escape from the social and political rites that make up a national community,

both pursuer and pursued are sacrificed by the very discourses they are bound to represent.

What is important in *The Public Burning* from the ethical point of view is not the fictionalization of real-life individuals in order to satirize postwar American culture. The use of figures such as Nixon and the Rosenbergs, though no doubt thematically relevant, is not a substantial element of its ethical content. Approaches featuring the novel's use of historical figures or its parody of the American 1950s inevitably reduce its critical effectiveness to social and political satire.¹¹ Any such approach to *The Public Burning* will overlook the novel's reflexive core, neglecting how the literary representation of historical discourse and individuality can modify and reorient our use of these concepts. For those who believe, as I do, that postmodern fiction has an ethico-critical component, it would be all too easy to conclude that in *The Public Burning* this component lies primarily in its critique of the dominant ideology of the United States during the 1950s.¹² This is, obviously, one of the book's features, but by no means the most important one. The central ethical content of the novel, its relevance to our assessment of the construction of individuality and the forms of history, resides, as I have already pointed out, in its exploration of history, otherness, and the intersection between them. And it is in this sense that *The Public Burning* differs from some postmodern novels whose main interest is also the politics of historical representation, insofar as it transcends the evaluation of a specific period in order to reach a more encompassing analysis of the epistemology of historical knowledge at large.

However, despite Coover's critical dramatization of the Rosenberg case and his exploration of historical knowledge, there remains the fact that the novel does not suggest any way out of the pitfalls pointed to by this exploration. Indeed the novel presents a view of history ironically skeptical, where fact and fiction are merged to the extent of becoming almost indistinct, and ideology overwhelms individuals to the very verge of extinction. But Coover's concern is not to provide alternatives, but rather to examine the assumptions of historical knowledge by thematizing the interchange between aesthetics and politics. It is in this sense that *The Public Burning* focuses not only upon historical discourse, but also upon the epistemic modes of discourse making up our view of the extratextual world, in order to criticize the truth-claims of certain epistemological assumptions, such as the positivistic need for objectivity or the artificial linearity

¹¹ For two examples of such a reductive view, see David Estes, "American Folk Laughter in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*," *Contemporary Literature* 28 (1987): 255; and Humm, "Telling Tales on the Rosenbergs," 54-55.

¹² In *Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Virginia Carmichael provides a thorough account of the Rosenberg case, including chapters on both Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Coover's *The Public Burning* dealing with the social and ethical dimensions presupposed by their explorations of the spies' story.

of cause-effect thinking.¹³ The ethical dimension of Coover's painstaking imaginative construction resides not in solving any problem but in exploring its origin. This reflexive thrust into the epistemology of knowledge, an attribute Coover shares with many other authors, largely constitutes the ethical import of many contemporary novels. Reflexivity, the exploration into the various processes of representation, basically presupposes a reflection and appraisal on the nature, functioning, and power of culture at large. This never-ending enterprise can provide us with valuable ethical insights into specific areas of knowledge—and, particularly, into the authority of what Lyotard has labeled "grand narratives."¹⁴ Any approach to contemporary fiction featuring the novel's critical engagement toward extraliterary reality cannot sidestep this reflexive component, which would entail disregarding postmodern fiction's most distinctive feature within the novelistic tradition at large.

¹³ See Jacobs, *The Character of Truth* 171–72.

¹⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).