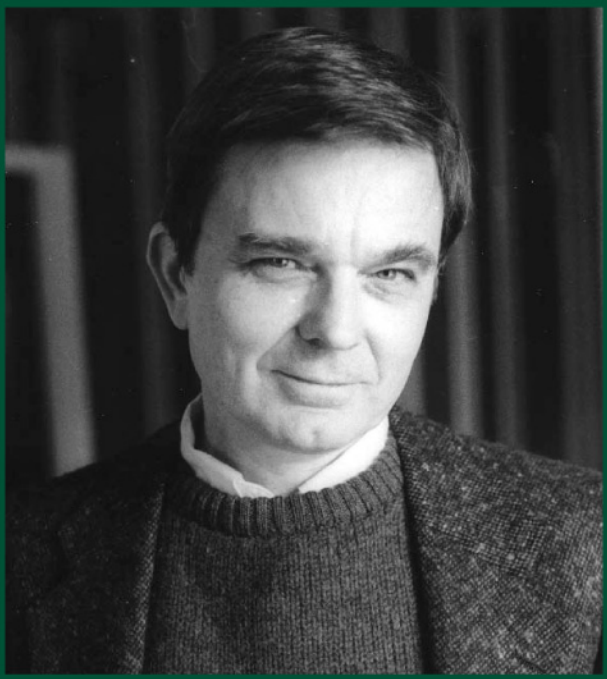
UNDERSTANDING

ROBERT COOVER



Brian Evenson

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

The volumes of *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* have been planned as guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers. The editor and publisher perceive a need for these volumes because much of the influential contemporary literature makes special demands. Uninitiated readers encounter difficulty in approaching works that depart from the traditional forms and techniques of prose and poetry. Literature relies on conventions, but the conventions keep evolving; new writers form their own conventions—which in time may become familiar. Put simply, *UCAL* provides instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers—identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience.

The word *understanding* in the titles was deliberately chosen. Many willing readers lack an adequate understanding of how contemporary literature works; that is, what the author is attempting to express and the means by which it is conveyed. Although the criticism and analysis in the series have been aimed at a level of general accessibility, these introductory volumes are meant to be applied in conjunction with the works they cover. They do not provide a substitute for the works and authors they introduce, but rather prepare the reader for more profitable literary experiences.

M. J. B.

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CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Robert Coover

Considered, along with Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, and John Barth, to be one of the three or four most notable practitioners of literary postmodernism and metafiction, Robert Coover has had, and continues to have, a major impact on the shape of American fiction. Seen as an innovator in the 1960s and 1970s, Coover has profoundly influenced writers such as Steven Millhauser, David Eggers, Jonathan Lethem, Rick Moody, Ken Kalfus, and R. M. Berry, and is one of the major forces to make possible the resurgence of formally concerned fiction in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In addition, Coover has championed hypertext and hypermedia—computer composed fiction and text/visual/sound combinations which allow the reader to move through the story in several different ways. Though he does not write hypertext himself, as the founder of Brown University's hypertext program he has been integral in preparing America's younger writers to approach the new form.

Coover was born February 4, 1932, in Charles City, Iowa, to Grant Marion and Maxine Sweet Coover. When he was nine his family left Iowa, moving first to Indiana and then to Illinois. After renouncing religion in his late teens, Coover went to Southern Illinois University, followed by Indiana University where, in 1953, he received a Bachelor of Arts with a focus on Slavic Studies. Called up during the Korean War, he served from 1953 to 1957 as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, on board a ship that spent most of its time in Europe. On a tour of the Mediterranean he met Marie del Pilar

Sans-Mallafré, studying at the University of Barcelona, whom he married in 1959.

His literary career began with the publication in 1960 in *Fiddlehead* of "One Summer in Spain," a series of five poems which seems to have gone largely unnoticed. In the years to follow, however, Coover managed to place several stories in Grove Press editor Barney Rosset's magazine, *The Evergreen Review.* At the time, *The Evergreen Review* was one of the strongest venues for experimental fiction in the United States, publishing Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and many other underground writers. Most notable of Coover's stories from this period is "The Second Son," published in 1963, which would later serve as the basis for one of the chapters of Coover's second novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*

It was when he turned his hand to longer fiction that Coover found acclaim. Published in 1966, just a year after he had received his Master's degree from the University of Chicago (which he attended from 1958 to 1961), *The Origin of the Brunists* is an impressive debut, the kind of complex and multi-voiced affair that most writers don't dare to risk at the beginning of their careers. Despite mixed reviews, it received the William Faulkner Award and was an alternate selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club. It seemed the beginning of a promising career. Though more plot-driven and conventional than Coover's mature work, the novel still possesses much of the linguistic verve and textured syntax of Coover's later novels, and manages to mix realism with the fantastic in a fashion that would become one of Coover's stylistic signatures. In his exploration of the birth of a cult in a mining town, Coover allows his narrative to reside in a variety of distinct viewpoints. The

novel's critique of religion establishes a thematic pattern that would continue in Coover's later work: the disruption through fiction of unexamined myths and of the institutions that attempt to control lives. In addition, in showing how a cult is formed, Coover explores how people make an event mean something by reading it in a specific way, ignoring other possible readings.

From 1966 to 1967, Coover taught at Bard College, and then subsequently at the University of Iowa from 1967 to 1969. During that time, Coover published his second and perhaps most consistently praised book, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968). The novel lives up to the promise of *The Origin of the Brunists*. More focused, it extends Coover's critique of religion, using of the institution of baseball as an odd substitute for religion. It explores the life of J. Henry Waugh, a man obsessed with a dice-throwing baseball game he has devised. As the game's proprietor, Henry is a sort of creator/artist/God, controlling the fate of the imaginary characters he has generated, yet bound himself by the rules of the game. Soon the world of the game comes to seem more vibrant and genuine than Henry's actual, banal life. The boundary between game and life blur as Coover reviews the way in which a creation can overtake and consume its creator.

The story collection *Pricksongs & Descants*, published by Dutton in 1969, includes Coover's most anthologized story, "The Babysitter," the only fictional work by Coover to be made into a feature film. The book shows Coover to be a master of a variety of different kinds of stories, all decidedly of his own invention—stories that revise fairy tales, stories about the absurdity of life, "metafictional" stories that comment on themselves and explore the nature of the fictional and its relation to reality. Equally indebted to

Cervantes and to surrealism, the larger project of Coover's stories is to break up the tired myths, the conventional ways of putting stories together, so as to revitalize literature, making it relevant to the complexities and difficulties of modern life.

The same year that Coover published *Pricksongs & Descants,* he wrote, directed and produced a movie entitled *On a Confrontation at Iowa City,* which he describes as "a kind of lyrical documentary about radical commitment."[1] Shown only locally, the documentary was later revived by New Wave filmmaker Chris Marker in France. Coover also received a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship and a citation in fiction from Brandeis University. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1971. The following year, Coover published a collection of plays, *A Theological Position,* which showed him to be as able a dramatist as he was a fiction writer. The American Place Theater production of *The Kid,* one of the four short plays in *A Theological Position,* won three Obie awards.

In 1972, Coover taught briefly at Columbia University; this was followed by a year of teaching at Princeton. In 1974, he received another Guggenheim Fellowship. During the same time period, he was working on a novel, *The Public Burning,* his most ambitious work yet, the book he was certain would make his name. The book was finished in time to be published in 1976, the year of the nation's bicentennial, but a series of mishaps and editorial fears of a lawsuit kept the book shuffling from one publisher to another. For a long time, it was uncertain if the book would actually be published at all. It must have been small consolation that in the same year Coover was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The novel is a fictional recreation of Richard Nixon's role in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg atomic bomb spy trials of the 1950s. It paints Nixon in a surprisingly sympathetic light, as victim of his own shortcomings and greed, struggling with the Cold War paranoia to which most of the nation succumbed. Coming on the heels of Watergate, the book seemed remarkably relevant to contemporary politics despite being concerned with an historical event a few decades distant. It is not a realistic depiction: the Rosenberg trial becomes a sort of carnival, Coover mixing historical fact with fantasy to create a book at once roughly historically accurate and mythical in scope. When *The Public Burning* was finally published to polarized reviews in 1977, Viking Press, reportedly fearing a suit from Richard Nixon, the protagonist of the novel, quietly pulled the book from stores.[2] Readers enticed by the reviews had a difficult time finding *The Public Burning* on bookstore shelves. The book that should have made Coover's career seemed instead to threaten to ruin it.

Coover's next few books were short stories published individually and in limited editions with small presses (*The Hair o' The Chine, Charlie in the House of Rue,* and *After Lazarus*). It would be almost a decade before Coover published another long book. Not until three years after the belated and semi-abortive publication of *The Public Burning* did Viking Press put out *A Political Fable* (1980), a short novella previously published in 1968 in the *New American Review* as "The Cat in the Hat for President." In it, Dr. Seuss's character The Cat in the Hat decides to run for President, Coover using the occasion as a means to comment on how American politics has become a sort of circus. Though not panned, the

book was hardly noticed. That same year, Coover accepted a teaching position at Brown University, where, at the time of writing, he is an emeritus professor.

In 1981, *Spanking the Maid* appeared as a limited edition illustrated book with illustrations by novelist Rikki Ducornet, later to be reprinted in a larger commercial edition with Grove Press. A slight revision of the story "A Working Day," which was published in 1981's *Best American Short Stories*, *Spanking the Maid* concerns a maid and her master who seem to be trapped in their roles, searching for perfection but unable to find it. It is at once an odd commentary on Victorian pornographic fiction and a piece about the impossibility of actually enjoying life while one is obsessed with achieving perfection. It was followed by *In Bed One Night and Other Brief Encounters*, the shortest and slightest of Coover's fiction collections, published by Burning Deck, a small press in Providence, Rhode Island. The stories in the collection are generally quite short, many of them written in long poetic lines, though a story like "Beginnings" has all the strengths and complexities of Coover's best fiction.

The time after the publication of *The Public Burning* was a period in which Coover seemed to be regrouping while working toward a larger novel. Though the work published during this period is often quite good, most of it is short. Some of what was published in book form for the first time during this period was in fact written earlier, as was the case with *A Political Fable*. Even the longest pieces are somewhere between a short story and a novella in length. Like the short stories published before *The Origin of the Brunists*, these pieces seem written on the way to something larger—strong in their own right, but not enough to garnish the kind

of acclaim that a large sprawling novel like *The Public Burning* could potentially receive. *The Pubic Burning* should have vitalized Coover's career and raised him to prominence; instead, the book's difficulties forced Coover, at least partly, to begin again.

In 1985, Coover received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. By 1986, he seemed to have fully recovered. He published *Gerald's Party,* a large and ambitious novel he had first begun working on under that title in 1977.[3] *Gerald's Party* has a cast of characters nearly as large as *The Origin of the Brunists.* Parodying the detective genre, the novel takes place in the midst of a wild suburban party. It centers on the murder of one of the partygoers and the rather absurd way in which the guests and the police deal with the murder. It is above all a book about art, about the relation of art to life, and presents many different aesthetic statements and positions.

1987's *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This* is a collection of stories all connected to movies in some way, each of them ostensibly falling into a certain movie genre and then either exploding that genre from within or cross-pollinating it with other types of movies to create something odd and different. It is more than a simple group of stories, for the stories as an aggregate add up to a cohesive, coherent book; critic Jackson Cope called the collection a kind of novel.[4] Coover received a Rea Award for the Short Story from the Dungannon Foundation based on the success of the stories in this book and in his two other books of fiction, and was commended for spinning "the treasure of Myth" out of the "dross of the ordinary."[5]

Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears, published the same year, uses Richard Nixon as a character, offering an

alternate history of what Nixon's life might have been. The short novel was first written in shorter form in 1974, as a kind of relief from the massive effort of writing *The Public Burning,*[6] and was published as a story in *New American Review* in 1975. What might have happened, the short novel asks, if, instead of joining the debate club and following a path of coincidences and circumstances that would lead him to become President, Nixon would have had a football career? In this text, Coover's Nixon, or Gloomy Gus as he is known here, doesn't have the sympathetic qualities that the Nixon of *The Public Burning* has. Instead, he is a sort of automaton. His personality consists of a series of memorized gestures and acts that he must practice every day or else forget. He has no substance. The effect of *Gloomy Gus* is to stand in the reader's mind beside the real Nixon, to cause reflection on the actual Nixon. *Gloomy Gus* is thus a novel involved in a very active interchange with the real world.

Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice* was not published until 1991. A retelling of C. Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio,* it is a de-Disneyfication of the Pinocchio myth. As it progresses, it becomes a complex and intriguing philosophical discussion of issues such as the nature of being, the relation of being to memory, and the relation of one's writing to one's self. It has all the humor of Coover's earlier work, but there is a somber quality to it as well, death being a different kind of presence than in Coover's earlier novels.

John's Wife, one of Coover's most ambitious and worthwhile books, did not appear until five years later, in 1996, though it was first begun in 1971. It employs the multiple viewpoints of *The Origin of the Brunists,* combining them with the sort of middle-class characters found in *Gerald's Party.* It is a rollicking novel, full of constant shifts in point of view and in time. The character at the

heart of the novel, John's wife, fascinates other members of the town because she seems ungraspable, in flux—not only symbolically, but quite literally. Like several of Coover's larger books, it has not received all the positive attention it deserves.

The year 1996 also brought the publication of *Briar Rose,* a novella first published in a slightly different version in *Conjunctions* magazine, which has garnished a great deal of critical success. It retells the Sleeping Beauty story, taking the fairy tale apart.

Ghost Town, Coover's rewriting of the myths of the old West, appeared in 1998. It is a short but lively novel in which dream and reality commingle inextricably. It draws from the stock situations and characters of books and movies about the Old West, exploding the genre of the Western from within. In the same year, Grove Press reissued *The Public Burning,* which had been out of print for nearly twenty years. Long admired and written about by critics, the book is finally once again available to readers. Since this republication, the journal *Critique* has devoted an entire issue to the novel, an indication that *The Public Burning* is likely to last. With politics even more cartoonish and carnivalized today than in the 1970s, the novel seems as relevant to current times as it is to the past.

As of this writing, Coover, nearly seventy years old, shows no signs of slowing down. He has just published, with Burning Deck Press, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell),* a collection of ten interrelated stories that describe imaginary hotels. He is preparing to publish a roughly 200,000-word novel entitled *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut,* parts of which have appeared in magazines as the "Lucky Pierre" stories. The novel concerns a pornographic film star and is divided into reels. With *The Public Burning* finally reissued, and a great many of his books now back in print with

Grove Press, Coover's career seems as healthy and productive as it ever has been. He remains one of America's finest innovative writers.

Overview

Coover writes along several different thematic lines, some of which cross over into one another and all of which are related in some way. He is concerned with communities and the way in which communities both come together and hold together through a series of shared stories and myths; yet he also sees something menacing about the way communities reinforce themselves through exclusion and scapegoating. He is interested in the ways in which the real and the fantastic can be made to play off one another in a work of fiction, and he often explores the gap between real events and how these events are interpreted. Coover examines storytelling and the ways in which fiction develops and comes to seem significant; he wants his readers to understand the dynamics not only of the story but also of the fictions people create in the world at large. For Coover politics, family interactions, and religion all contain an element of fictionalization and interpretation, but this element is often unexamined. He believes that one role of the fiction writer is to bring about an awareness of the assumptions found behind interpretations and myths.

Coover contends that this is the end of an era and that "our ways of looking at the world and of adjusting to it through fictions are changing. . . . Our old faith—one might better say our old sense of constructs derived from myths, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories, and other fictions which help to explain what

happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have, why the world turns as it does—has lost its efficacy. Not necessarily is it false; it is just not as efficacious as it was."[7] The world itself, Coover suggests, is not something people perceive first hand. People approach the world and its institutions with opinions and beliefs in place, and what they see is often determined by the models and constructs that they have been given. They see the world through the lens of their language, but languages, at least living languages, are always caught up in certain attitudes and politico-cultural assumptions. Even something as simple as color, and individual perception of it, is influenced by language, with some languages having two or more words for what English would think of as a single color. Unless people are made to see the difference by entering into a new language system, it is very possible they will not be able to make the distinction. Learning a different language, then, will expand people's ability to perceive the world as a whole by giving them different, additional ways of classifying and understanding the raw data that they sort through in their interaction with the world.

Fiction can do this as well. It can both provide new ways of seeing the world and it can help call into question the ways of seeing that have been accepted uncritically. Says Coover, "The world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notion of things."[8] For Coover, notions of how things are—how the natural world is, what human nature is, what love is, how institutions are, what behavior is or is not appropriate—are not based solely, or even primarily, in rational understanding: "The crucial beliefs of

people are mythic in nature."[9] People feel that things are the way they are because it seems natural, because that is the way it seems they should be. Reason doesn't always enter into it.

The world is a complicated place. It is impossible for individuals to take everything in all at once. Much of Coover's fiction maintains that the world cannot be objectively understood—there is just too much to sort through. In the face of an overwhelming amount of data people take another route: myth. A myth has the ring and feel of truth, but rational thought and objective analysis are not needed to put it into place and allow it to function. By accepting myths, people put themselves in a position where they feel they can go on with life, that they have a place of stability from which to operate. *I,* an efficacious myth says about itself, *am something you can take as a given, something that is true. You don't need to examine me; you can trust me and organize the rest of the universe around me. Find comfort in me.* Or, as Coover suggests, "we fabricate; we invent constellations that permit an illusion of order to enable us to get from here to there. And we devise short cuts—ways of thinking without thinking through: code words that are in themselves a form of mythopoeia."[10]

Human beings have a need to order the chaos. They do not simply accept the world around them but instead search for patterns, means of ordering and cataloging, something to point toward a meaning or purpose in life. Humans are organizing animals; they feel that they have to understand the world, make sense of it, so as to know where they stand in relation to it. In developing this understanding, they try out different possibilities. They employ different narratives about why things are the way they are. Why does the sun rise? One myth might involve the sun being a god who is awake by

day, asleep at night. Another myth might involve a flaming chariot driven by a god or some god's minion. Another myth might explain it in terms of planetary motion and attraction. All, though, are fictions. Coover writes: "In a sense, we are all creating fictions all the time, out of necessity. We constantly test them against the experience of life." As long as these myths seem to provide a valid explanation, as long as they don't clash too much with other myths, and as long as they aren't too closely examined, they remain efficacious. Coover believes that some myths "continue to be functional: we are content to let them be rather than try to analyze them and, in the process, forget something else that is even more important. Others outlive their usefulness. They disturb life in unnecessary ways, and so it becomes necessary to break them up and perhaps change their force."[11]

This process of breaking down the old myths and clearing the way for the birth of new myths, of new ways of thinking about life, is, for Coover, the task of the writer. He says that it "is the role of the author, the fiction maker, the mythologizer, to be the creative spark in this process of renewal: he's the one who tears apart the old story, speaks the unspeakable, makes the ground shake, then shuffles the bits back together into a new story. Partly anarchical, in other words, partly creative—or re-creative."[12] The word "re-creative" here should be read both in the sense of creating something over again and in the sense of recreation or sports/play. Like Henry in *The Universal Baseball Association*, the writer is involved in a creative game, and because he understands the weaknesses of the old myth, and isn't eager to put a new unexamined myth in its place, he's able to enjoy the process of taking the myth apart.

Yet not everyone may realize when a myth has lost its usefulness; people often remain very committed to their myths, whether

these myths are cultural or political or religious. They have a hard time seeing them *as* myths, as approved stories. People often become trapped in their myths and fictional systems, unable to see their weaknesses or flaws. Without other beliefs established to take their place, it is sometimes very dizzying for people to let go of their old beliefs and their old systems, and they are likely to strike out against anyone who pushes them to do so. The fiction writer's attempt to reveal the way the myth works may be met with resentment and hostility, and indeed, some of the objections to Coover's work by critics seems based in just this sort of hostility. In addition, the characters within Coover's stories who try to call attention to the myths, defuse them, debunk them, play with them, are often subject to punishment by other characters who aren't so eager to play. Jason "Tiger" Miller, for instance, in *The Origin of the Brunists*, is almost killed because of his willingness to play alternately at supporting and debunking a belief system. Even if violence is avoided, people may simply pay no attention. The crone in *Briar Rose* discovers that no matter how many times she tries to disrupt Sleeping Beauty's belief that a handsome prince will rescue her, the girl continues to believe. The old myth, in this case, is reassuring in a way that the new myth cannot be. This, then, is the dilemma of the fiction writer: how does one disrupt the myths in a way that will keep people from doing violence to you but still cause them to listen?

Myths, when they are no longer efficacious, are no longer myths. They become fictions. The weight and authority that gathers in them, their ability to serve as an anchor point for a life or a society, is lost. While myths affirm and support an established order, fictions at their best can take that order apart, show the holes in it, and provide new ground upon which to build. Myths are official stories,

sanctioned stories that are not to be questioned. When they are questioned effectively, their official nature, their sanctioned quality, dissolves. Fiction, then, is the more human form of myth—myth that has been demythologized. It has a great deal of ambiguity and free play. It does not claim to definitively know the answers. But fiction can help people to see the questions freshly again, and assist them in realizing that while they've been putting their faith in unexamined myths, the questions have perhaps changed.

Considering his view that the world is a construct of fictions, it is not surprising that Coover should be interested in metafiction. Metafiction is, in its most basic form, fiction that is about the process of writing and composing fiction. Often the telling of the story itself becomes the subject of the story. For this reason, the writer of metafiction is often more interested in revealing the devices of his fiction, in showing their artificiality, than in hiding them. He or she plays with literary forms, creates patterns, shows the ropes and levers that bring the effects about, and disrupts generic concerns and expectations in ways that cause readers to think about why they give such credence to forms and genres in the first place. How is meaning created? metafiction asks. How are stories put together, and why do people feel the need to put stories together in the first place?

However, metafiction, as Larry McCaffery discusses in the opening chapter of *The Metafictional Muse*, can be seen as dealing with a much more than just words on a page. If it is true that the world and people's perceptions of the world are a construct of fictions, then metafiction would concern not only writing but all construction of reality—the way individuals and social groups put together a sense of the world. Says McCaffery, in metafiction "the

author is using the writer/text relationship as a paradigm for all of human creative activity. By exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated."[13] For McCaffery, this process can also be reversed. Some of the most interesting metafictional texts, including texts of Coover's, are those that do not directly address the writer/text relationship but nevertheless say something about larger meaning systems which can be read back into an understanding of the artist and of artistic activity.

Mythmaking and metafiction are addressed differently in different works by Coover, though it is hard to see this as part of a developing sense of concern on Coover's part. He moves back and forth between different approaches, not surprising in that many of his novels have sometimes been first conceived years before their actual publication, whereas other works have been written quickly, over a short period. *John's Wife,* for instance, was first begun in 1971, though not finished until much later and only published in 1996. Coover has been working on *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre,* his most recently completed book, since 1970, so its composition spans most of his career. On the other hand, *Spanking the Maid,* begun in 1977,[14] was published both in magazine and book form quickly after its initial conception. For Coover some projects, particularly the more ambitious ones, seem to develop gradually, over the course of many years, even decades. Others come quickly and can perhaps even be insightfully read as written during moments when the longer projects are still in the process of germinating.

Since many of Coover's recent works have roots earlier in his career, it is very difficult (and perhaps contrary to Coover's ideology) to think of his fiction as "developing" over time. Coover has

said that "whatever difference there is between my first novel and the bulk of the rest of my writing has little to do with development."[15] Instead of thinking of his career as a line, then, one might think of it as a plane, with different works occupying different positions on the plane relative to one another, and Coover returning to these positions as needed at different moments in his career. The work is all related and the basic project is the same, but the approach to that project varies quite dramatically.

In his short stories, Coover is often formally innovative, rarely holding to traditional forms of the short story. Many of his stories call attention to their own artificiality, to the way in which they are aesthetic objects. They are not conventional attempts at portraying something realistically; instead, they call attention to themselves as *story.* The stories in Coover's first collection, *Pricksongs & Descants*, are written in a wide range of styles, only the most realistic sort of storytelling being excluded. Some of the pieces rearrange the order of the narrative, some refuse to give the narrative satisfaction that readers have come to expect, some provide the material for several different mutually exclusive versions of the same basic story, refusing to choose between them. Some begin in an initially realistic vein and then turn odd or absurd, the story becoming something other than what its beginning has suggested. A few others tell familiar bible stories, fairy tales, and myths, but tell them from a perspective that defamiliarizes them, that causes readers to question them in a way they haven't before. "J's Marriage," for instance, tells the story of the birth of Jesus Christ from the perspective of a somewhat disgruntled Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. It challenges the original version by shifting perspective. "The Door" shows several different fairytale figures after they have gone through a myriad

of disappointments. It pokes holes in the original fairy tales by pushing them past their end.

Coover's *A Night at the Movies, or You Must Remember This* has more cohesiveness than *Pricksongs & Descants.* It looks at the way in which movies have created a new series of myths and of expectations connected with these myths. The book critiques genres—mixes genres up, allows unexpected things to happen—with the result being a questioning of the myths of Hollywood and a creation of new possible myths out of the fragments of the old. In effect, *A Night at the Movies* can be read as a careful and measured assault on the way in which the movie industry has changed people's thinking, with Coover's fictions putting readers in a position to begin to recognize what they tend to take for granted about the stock characters and images of the cinema.

In Coover's novels, one might distinguish between three different approaches to myth and metafiction. The first involves his biggest, most ambitious books—*The Origin of the Brunists, The Public Burning, Gerald's Party,* and *John's Wife.* All of these books move in a relatively linear manner. They have a definite beginning and end (even if that ending is in one case circular). They employ, to a great or lesser degree, elements of realistic fiction, offering relatively developed characters and a forward (though at times digressive) motion. In addition, all introduce during the course of the novel elements of the fantastic, disrupting the realistic narrative, replacing it with something quite different. *The Origin of the Brunists* is the most straightforward, introducing only a few elements that question the confines of a realistic novel. *Gerald's Party* violates its sense of realism by flights into the absurd, offering an odd crossing of a party novel and a detective novel in which

elements of both genres seem to be in operation at once, allowing for unexpected results. *John's Wife* seems realistic for most of its first half, until one of the characters begins to grow larger and larger while another seems to be vanishing. *The Public Burning* is the most rollicking and carnivalesque of the lot, with Coover taking a historical event, the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, and using it as a means of creating a clownish version of 1950s American history in which events that directly contradict the historical record occur.

All of these novels seem primarily concerned with notions of community. The community of *Gerald's Party* consists of the makeshift and temporary group that forms at a party, with the life of that party being the subject of the book. Both *John's Wife* and *The Origin of the Brunists* concern the dynamics of a small town, showing the way in which community interaction changes in the face of a crisis. *The Public Burning*, the most ambitious book of the four, gives a picture of American society during the Cold War, using the Rosenberg executions as a sort of scapegoat event that renews the larger American community.

In all of these works, statements are made about art. All of them are, to some extent, metafictional, though this quality is secondary to Coover's other concerns. The mythmaking here is on a vaster scale, and deals with the way in which people organize their lives and read certain events as significant, rather than with the way a story functions or a genre works. *The Public Burning* is, additionally, metahistorical, in that it comments on an actual historical event. It uses the greater latitudes of fiction to cause readers to reflect on the mythologizing and fictionalizing aspects of history, as well as on the ideology of the past and on their own time's ideologies.

The second sort of Cooverian novel would include works such as *Pinocchio in Venice, Briar Rose,* and *Ghost Town.* These novels critique existing myths and genres, questioning the myths and structures that have served us in the past. They have similarities to "The Door" and "The Gingerbread House" in *Pricksongs & Descants* in that they assume readers come to the text with a certain amount of cultural knowledge. *Pinocchio in Venice,* for instance, demands that readers know the basic elements of the Pinocchio fable—a story about a puppet who comes to life and goes on a quest to become a real boy. As they read the novel, readers are meant to find themselves thinking about the familiar story, watching as Coover's retelling transforms it into something else. Whereas the Disney version of *Pinocchio* can be seen as a developmental journey about dreams coming true as well as a fable about what the ideal characteristics of human beings are, Coover's book suggests that one's original nature can be hidden but will never be depleted. *Briar Rose* takes on the Sleeping Beauty legend, but instead of telling it as the story of a handsome prince rescuing a sleeping princess, it locates itself in the untold moments—in the dreams of the princess and in the prince's struggle to understand his own nature. *Ghost Town* is a rewriting not of a specific fairy tale but of a genre, in this case the Western. Like Coover's award-winning play *The Kid,* it calls into question the archetypal roles of the genre, suggesting that there may be more that is arbitrary to who fills these roles than one would like to think.

All three of these novels take as their primary characteristic a critique of story—whether fairy tale or genre—rather than a critique of the human need to search for meaning that is manifest not only

in storytelling but also in people's interaction with religion, politics, and popular culture. While the first set of novels exhibits a concern with the larger definition of metafiction—as any aspect of fiction-making whether on paper or in life—these novels are primarily focused on the more narrowly defined meaning of the term. In other words, they are stories about storytelling and genre expectations. Still, they have larger implications and can be used to think about creative activity of all kinds. Similarly, the first group of novels have significant implications in terms of one's understanding of the artist and his or her art, but that is not their main thrust.

The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop., and *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* belong to a different category, despite having many ties to the techniques and ideas of both sorts of novels discussed above. Both can be seen as generic revisions of the sports novel, but both also deal with issues of community. *The Universal Baseball Association*'s community is an imagined one, invented by Henry Waugh's parlor baseball game, and doesn't come into an existence entirely its own until the end. In *Gloomy Gus,* the notion of community is primary, though it has a tightness of focus to it that cannot be found in the sprawling approaches to community found in *The Origin of the Brunists* and *John's Wife.* Both books present alternate realities that are defined a little differently than in either other type of book. In *The Universal Baseball Association,* this is done by having the last chapter of the book shift completely to Henry's created world, with Henry dropping out entirely. In *Gloomy Gus,* readers are meant to quickly realize that they are reading an alternate reality, a version of American history that takes place in a similar but nevertheless

parallel universe. Both novels provoke careful thought about the relationship of the artistic object to reality while, at the same time, it is clear that what is being said is also about the relationship of the individual to the broader community. *The Universal Baseball Association* in particular is a remarkably successful novel in that it seems to combine perfectly the notions of the other two types of novels. With that book, it is difficult to say if one mode rather than another is primary.

In the end, Coover's work as a whole provides a remarkable study of the relationship of the artist to the creation, and of the relationship of humans to the world around them. As a metafictionalist, Coover has been more capable than most literary postmodernists in making his game-playing and self-reflexivity seem relevant to a larger understanding of the human condition. Game-playing for him is a singularly human activity. It reflects the basic strategies people use in order to apprehend the world as a whole, in all its complexity and difficulty. It is only when games and stories become stratified into enforced rules of behavior that individuals begin to lose sight of their tenuous relation to the world at large and substitute in fixed and awkward systems that keep them from seeing the full extent of their reality. As a writer, Coover continues to chip away at the myths, exposing them for what they are. By clearing a space for his readers, he allows them to move into the freedom that they always have but which they sometimes are unable to perceive.

CHAPTER TWO

Early Works

The Origin of the Brunists

Published in 1966, Robert Coover's first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, marked the appearance of a major new writer. Though it received the William Faulkner Award for best first novel, contemporary reviews of the book were mixed, largely because Coover was doing something different, something critics did not know quite how to comprehend.

The reviews of *The Origin of the Brunists* encapsulate many of the issues that critics continue to grapple with in regard to Coover's other books. The first is Coover's willingness to critique established institutions, particularly religious and political institutions. The second comes in Coover's willingness to draw elements from realism and naturalism but to combine them with absurd and surreal elements and with a metafictional style that sometimes calls attention to itself. His fiction is unwilling to "play by the rules," and for this reason makes some critics uncomfortable.

A reviewer for the *New York Times* said that Coover's writing possessed "a kind of jolting, bare-knuckled force" but insisted that while "Mr. Coover's prose can be lyrical and evocative, it is mostly craggy and rough-textured." The reviewer also "wishes [Coover] was a little less inventive" and declared himself overwhelmed by Coover's "ever-quickening pace." Yet ultimately these objections seem to be tied as much to moral issues as to matters of style: "Everything we like to think of when man contemplates his

Maker—devotion, comfort, love, sacrifice and selflessness, perhaps even a whiff of immortality—is absent from these pages."[1]

It may seem strange to find such objections surfacing in the 1960s, during a time when the sexual revolution was taking place and values of all sorts were coming into question. Yet perhaps this very flux of values caused certain critics to feel it necessary to reassert moral standards. Such criticism objects to Coover's willingness to challenge the moral systems and institutions that dominated (and continue to dominate today) much of American life.

Emile Capoya posited in *The Saturday Review* that Coover was attempting something new: "Mr. Coover has attempted to revive the naturalistic novel for serious literary purposes by grafting onto it fantastic, surreal, and hysterical elements. . . . his story does not convince us that it takes place in the real world. And since it is not a parable, the reader misses that real world."[2] For Capoya, Coover's failure lies, then, first in not fitting properly into a category and second in his not allowing the realistic elements to dominate. If Capoya is to be convinced, the novel finally must be realistic, involved in a direct, recognizable way with the real world. Capoya's suggestion that Coover is "grafting" on fantastic elements suggests that these elements are secondary. Yet a careful reading suggests that Coover is not so much grafting the fantastic onto the real as forcing the real and the fantastic into a collision in which neither dominates. Throughout much of Coover's career, however, critics return to this is line of questioning: Is it realistic? Is it fantastic? Is it supposed to be one or the other? Can the two be melded together to create a new form?

William Mathes, writing about *The Origin of the Brunists* for *Book Week*, offered a more clear-sighted view, a view which, if one hopes to get the most out of reading Coover, is worth heeding.

Instead of asking how well Coover fits into the literary scene or attacking the book on moral grounds, he accepts the book's blend of the real and the extraordinary in its own terms: "[This] first novel is a remarkable effort of imagination, concern and sheer creative force—sustained and elaborated from beginning to end. . . . Mr. Coover's characterizations are sharply wrought and remarkably multi-dimensional. . . . The handling of so many characters so masterfully is virtually unknown in first novels." Indeed for Mathes, "This is fiction as it should be, the product of high emotion and dedicated talent; real, hot with life in conflict, filled with the bizarre and the commonplace."[3]

Later critics' view of *The Origin of the Brunists* have been closer to Mathes. Lois Gordon, writing in 1983, called the novel "a *tour de force* of subtle and diverse characterization" and praised the "unique blend of realistic, fantastic, and mythic materials" that are found not only here but in Coover's later work.[4] At the time of this writing, thirty-five years after its first publication, *The Origin of the Brunists* has been reissued by Grove Press, testifying to its staying power.

The Origin of the Brunists explores the religious fervor connected with the rise of a religious cult in a small coal-mining town, among people desperate to find meaning in their lives. Written, at least on the surface, in a more realistic vein than most of Coover's subsequent work, *The Origin of the Brunists* still possesses much of the innovation and sentence-by-sentence exuberance of Coover's later novels, though this innovation is restricted to certain voices, certain portions of the novel. Coover says he considered the novel "a bit, as paying dues. I didn't feel I had the right to move into more

presumptuous fictions until I could prove I could handle the form as it now was in the world."[5]

The Origin of the Brunists, then, is the most traditional of Coover's books. Its characterization is often conventional, and it has a plot that builds tension roughly linearly, developing to a point of climax. Yet even within this form, Coover begins to experiment; it is already clear that the confines of the realistic novel are too constricting for his artistic vision. *The Origin of the Brunists* should be seen less as Coover's attempt to write a traditional novel than as Coover's attempt to figure an escape route *out* of the traditional novel.

The novel contains most of the thematic elements that will dominate Coover's later work. He says that "the basic concerns that are in everything I write are also in that book—though they look a little different they are still there."[6] It examines the impact that myths and religious fictions have, explores the human need to try to find meaning and symbolic significance in the disparate events of life, and calls attention to the constructedness of "knowledge" derived from ambiguous events.

The scope of *The Origin of the Brunists* is expansive, dealing in remarkable depth with the lives of more than two dozen characters from all walks of life and with a wide range of opinions. The book shifts from character to character, and the narration is offered in many different forms—among them expressions of interior consciousness, monologue, letters to the editor, supposedly unearthly and spiritual voices, and sermons. However, the primary mode of narration is through an unidentified third-person voice which is often *focalized* through individual characters; that is, the third-person narration is sometimes colored by and imitative of the

consciousness and speech patterns of the person whom the narration currently is examining.

The novel's epigraph comes from the final book of the New Testament, Revelations: "Write what you see in a book and send it to the Seven Churches" (Rev. 1:11). This quotation brings to light the relation between writing and divine revelation. To begin this way gives the sense that *The Origin of the Brunists* will be concerned with the nature of "revelation" and its interpretation and recording. Yet while Saint John's Revelations is to be sent to the different regions of the Christian Church as a way of joining them together under an umbrella of common belief, Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* is instead interested in the diversity of interpretation to which supposed revelation is subject. The novel chronicles in detail the power struggles inherent in the formation of a religious community, showing the way in which revelation and its interpretation —myth-making—are integral parts of these power struggles.

The novel begins with a short prologue entitled "The Sacrifice," which takes place chronologically after the major events of the rest of the narrative. The third-person narrative of this section is focalized through Hiram Clegg, a recent convert to the Brunist faith who, the end of the section indicates by projecting into the future, will have a significant role in the Brunist religion's growth and development (24). In thirteen pages, Coover offers the reader a brief, enigmatic portrait of a religious group gathering to await the end of the world. This is coupled with the unexpected death of a young woman, Marcella Bruno, and the way in which that death gets worked into the mythology of the emerging religion, vitalizing the system of belief. Through the narrative style, the contrast between a certain objective strain and Hiram's combination of

confusion and belief is passed along to the reader. Thus Coover is able both to suggest first what actually happened and second how the event has been reconstructed by the zealous after the fact. Through this, he emphasizes what will be one of the book's primary concerns: how people tend to recycle and rethink events to make them seem significant in terms of their own conscious (and sometimes unconscious) systems of belief. The reader thus approaches the novel that follows the prologue aware of this gap between reality and interpretation.

In the chapter following the prologue, Coover moves away from Hiram (who plays only a minor role in the book as a whole, appearing again only near the end), instead slipping back several months earlier to a disaster at the Deepwater No. 9 Coalmine. After an explosion causes a mine collapse, ninety-eight men are trapped in the mine, where they slowly suffocate. Giovanni Bruno, an odd man disliked by most people in West Condon, is the one man who "miraculously" survives and who, as a result, becomes the central figure of an emerging religion. Mentally damaged due to inhalation of carbon monoxide, Bruno is prone, when he speaks at all, to utter obscure and mysterious phrases which other Brunists see as revelations pointing toward a coming apocalypse. For most of the book, townspeople position themselves positively or with hostility toward the development of the cult, tensions rising as the Brunists proclaim the end of the world imminent and move toward a gathering at what they have dubbed "The Mount of Redemption."

Recording and publishing the development of the cult is Justin "Tiger" Miller—a newspaper owner, former town basketball star, and unbeliever, whose interest in the cult quickly shifts to an interest in Marcella, Giovanni Bruno's sister. While he chastely pursues

her, he is sexually involved with a wry nurse nicknamed Happy Bottom. Though he tries to coax Marcella away from the cult, he fails, and she eventually is killed in an automobile accident prior to the gathering. This death, like every other event, is endowed with significance by the cult.

At the Mount of Redemption, Miller finds himself among a crowd of the ecstatic cult members gathered around Marcella's body. This is a Bacchanalian and ritualistic scene that will reappear in several other books by Coover—often there is a point in Coover's fiction where seemingly harmless myth-making and interpretation develops a more sinister side. Here, "Naked or near-naked they leapt and groveled and embraced and rolled around in the mud. A large group danced wildly around Marcella, screaming at her, kissing her dead mouth, clearly expecting her to rise up off her litter. Women embraced the statue of Stephen and kissed its mouth. Men tore branches off the little tree until it was stripped nearly bare, and whipped themselves and each other" (408). Miller gets more than he asked for as, fighting through the frenzy, he is accused of having been responsible for Marcella's death. He becomes the sudden focus of the mob's frenzy as they beat him, and apparently sacrifice him, the third-person narrative indicating, largely because of the way in which Miller's own fears and beliefs color it, that Miller has been killed: "At which point, Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward" (410).

In the final section, "Epilogue: Return," the narrative indicates that Miller "rose from the dead" (431) and is in fact alive, though injured. Though Coover gives adequate reason for his survival, Miller's reappearance should be nonetheless construed as a symbolic mock-resurrection, the profane Miller thus ironically

postulated as a stand-in for Jesus Christ. Yet his miraculous recovery is not reincorporated into Brunist belief. He has been a scapegoat—by symbolically destroying him, they continue to crystallize their own sense of community. Miller's own 'cult' is quite a bit different, involving only himself and Happy Bottom. The only role religion plays in their lives is as a kind of profane sexual banter. Indeed, Happy Bottom, indifferent to the cult from the beginning, has gotten in the habit of sending Miller "revelations" in which she parodies religious fervor, burlesquing religion in an attempt to draw him, through humor, away from his fascination with Marcella and the cult. In the conclusion, she and Miller affirm life through sex, forthcoming children, and marriage rather than falling into the rigors and restraints of religion.

It can be argued that Miller is the protagonist of the novel, though the novel has so many varied voices, so many fleshed-out and developed characters, that it might be more accurate to think of the town itself as the protagonist. Within the time span that begins with the mine disaster and ends with the gathering on the Mount of Redemption, Coover offers perspectives that seem to define most of the different groups in the town. The majority of the novel explores the development of the cult in terms of individual responses to it, providing insight into people both involved in and opposed to the emerging order. The novel includes several subplots, related directly or marginally to the development of the cult. These range from one high school basketball star's attempts to lose his virginity to miner Vince Bonali's struggles with his family and with finding meaning in his life after the mine collapses.

Some of the most eccentric characters in *The Origin of the Brunists* are the three individuals most involved with the formation

of the cult. In the early days of the Brunists, the people most interested in it tend to be people who have already set themselves apart from West Condon society in some way. They are different, and thus they feel compelled to sift through the detritus of life in search of a higher design or divine plan that will give their existence meaning.

There is, for instance, Clara Collins, whose husband, a miner and preacher at the Church of the Nazarene, has died in the mine shaft. Her husband is found with a note which ends "We will stand together before our Lord the 8th of" (96). Clara, baffled by the way the note breaks off and desperate over the loss of her husband, finds it more comforting to think he has died for a reason. "Ifn he died like that, they must be a reason! The Good Lord would not take Ely away ifn they weren't no reason! Would he, Mr. Miller? *Would he? . . . What is God trying to tell me, Mr. Miller?*" (88). If she can think of the event as significant, believing that it had to happen because it was God's will, then Ely's death itself will no longer be horrible. Instead, it will give her solace.

Miller, unwilling to give her the answer she wants, "stammered something about being sorry" (88). Abner Baxter, the newly appointed minister of the Church of the Nazarene, suggests, largely as a threat to his own misbehaving children, that "the end of all things is at hand" (96). Clara sees his words as an indication that the world is ending, that the message *does* have larger significance. She ignores Abner's subsequent and more rational suggestion that the mine disaster occurred on the 8th of the month. She has already determined what she believes to be the truth and no evidence to the contrary can destroy that determination. She has begun the process of constructing a myth out of the materials experience offers.

Ralph Himebaugh, a low-profile lawyer, engages in a similar fictional projection, but instead of the tropes of religion he employs numerology. Obsessed with the relation between significant events and dates, numbers, and other data, Himebaugh spends his private life juggling abstract figures, believing that all events that occur are subject to mathematical formulae. He keeps combining numbers, trying to decipher the master key. Take for instance his reasoning about the number of people killed in the mine disaster:

> The number ninety-seven, the number of the dead, was itself unbelievably relevant. Not only did it take its place almost perfectly in the concatenation of disaster figures he had been recording, but it contained internal mysteries as well: nine, after all, was the number of the mine itself, and seven, pregnant integer out of all divination, was the number of the trapped miners. The number between nine and seven, eight, was the date of the explosion, and the day of the rescue was eleven, two one's, or two, the difference between nine and seven. Nine and seven added to sixteen, whose parts, one and six, again added to . . . seven! . . . And yet there was more. . . . (188)

As he deploys, juggles, and reshapes his numbers, patterns emerge. His system is "for him a new science, and if he did not yet embrace the whole truth of the universe, it was only because he still lacked all the data, lacked some vital but surely existent connection—in short, had not perfected his system" (261). Attempting to understand events, Himebaugh is caught up in another sort of myth—the

myth that an understanding of formulae can lead to a full and complete understanding of tangible human events. Like Miller, Himebaugh is obsessed with Marcella, but unlike Miller he is not open about his affection. Instead he hides under her bed, observing her, feeling her near without revealing himself. She remains for him an image, an idealization, and he doesn't dare touch her from fear that her idealized and abstract qualities will collapse. It is a judgment on Coover's part that Himebaugh ends up dying under Marcella's bed, wasting away to nothing as he refuses either to return to the cold company of his numbers or to dive more fully into life itself.

The third critical figure in the formation of the cult is Eleanor Norton, a local schoolteacher who believes she channels messages for Domiron, a higher, supernatural power who refers to her as Elan and to her husband Wylie as Womwom. With Domiron's words obviously stemming out of her own desires, fears, and needs, Eleanor's revelations are shot through with her own personality. While Himebaugh is constructing a seemingly objective myth from abstracts, Eleanor is constructing a myth based entirely on her own self and on intuition.

Desperate for guidance, Eleanor leaps on the mine disaster as a sign and an opportunity. She sees Giovanni Bruno as a figure she can use to make her spiritual "gifts" increasingly manifest to others. She and Himebaugh join in a spiritual alliance where Himebaugh's numerology and Eleanor's Domiron seem to confirm both one another and the cryptic sayings of Giovanni Bruno. Together, they attempt to dominate the cult developing around Bruno, trying to impose their own sets of myths on Clara Collins and others who have begun to be interested in the religion. Coover is effective at showing the way in which Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh

delicately balance their belief in their own systems with a very real play for control and a desire for power and glory—both are strongly invested in their respective systems, yet both as well are willing to work a little harder in interpreting their revelations or in juggling their numbers so that things come out with them both on top. The pair manage to stay on top for some time, but in the end it is the simpler Clara, holding fast both to certain aspects of the Christian faith and to the significance of her husband's death, who determines the direction the religion will take. If Bruno is the cult's Christ, it is Clara who serves as Peter, spreading the word and solidifying the Church, establishing the doctrine and the day-to-day operations of the faith.

If Coover is willing to satirize those in the cult, he is no less willing to satirize other townspeople. Outside of the cult and hostile to it are a number of individuals, most notably local concerned citizen Ted Cavanaugh, former miner Vince Bonali, and Reverend Abner Baxter. Cavanaugh is a banker who, worried about the financial effect the mine disaster will have on West Condon, consciously heroizes Bruno to raise the morale of the town, trying to make Bruno's survival stand symbolically for the community itself. His heroization of Bruno has the side effect of giving people like Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh a figure upon which to focus their myth making. Manipulative and savvy, Cavanaugh's transformation of Bruno into a symbol is a much more conscious and exploitative act than any of the myths of the cult members.

In addition, Cavanaugh is the hidden force behind the "Common Sense Committee" a group of 'concerned citizens' that are intent on getting things back to normal and running the Brunists out of town. Cavanaugh chooses as head of this committee Vince Bonali,

whose life has been foundering since the mine's closing. In his role on the committee, Bonali finds new meaning for himself, not realizing the degree to which he is Cavanaugh's pawn.

Reverend Abner Baxter, enjoying the power of his new ministerial position in the Church of the Nazarene, feels threatened by the rise of the Brunists, several of whom are former members of his own congregation. Rageful and self-righteous, Baxter seems almost a parody of a minister. Yet, when he accidentally strikes and kills Marcella with his car, he suffers a change of heart, ends up embracing the cult that he has hitherto ridiculed. This move is self-interested: as he feels his own position compromised by the murder, he is willing to embrace the new myth, which allows him to avoid responsibility for his actions.

Among all these reactions, drawing sympathy and blame from both sides, is Miller. At different times he is appealed to by both the Brunists and those opposed to the Brunists as someone who can use his newspaper either to help the cult to grow or to help to manage and control the cult. Though at times his newspaper stories seem to sympathize with one side or the other—largely as a result of how his relationship with Marcella is going at the time—he remains unassimilated by any group (347). For much of the novel he seems most to resemble a more benign Ted Cavanaugh, using his knowledge of the Brunists for ulterior motives, as a way of livening his life up and improving newspaper sales. He is playing a game. Yet as the cult develops, Miller becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his role. Eventually he is unable to avoid seeing his own responsibility in the events that lead to Marcella's death.

It is Miller who presents an alternative to the other characters' obsessive search for significance. Miller's way of thinking about the

world is quite different, for while everyone else is trying to interpret incomplete and provocative data into revelation and truth, he is interested in play: “Games are what kept Miller going. Games, and the pacifying of mind and organs. Miller perceived existence as a loose concatenation of separate and ultimately inconsequential instants, each colored by the actions that preceded it, but each possessed of a small wanton freedom of its own. Life, then, was a series of adjustments to these actions and, if one kept his sense of humor and produced as many of these actions as possible, adjustment was easier” (141–42). For Miller, the joy of life is its lack of determinism, the ability to get caught up in a flow of events that color but never predetermine one another. One can choose a vivid and fluid life or one can choose to try to calcify life by transforming it into a myth. It is clear that Miller is on the side of the former, which explains why, just after the above declaration on game, he picks up Happy Bottom and sleeps with her for the first time. His attraction to her is based on her playfulness, her ability to enter into the joy of life. At the end of the novel, this aspect of Miller’s philosophy seems not to have changed, despite all that has happened. When he discovers Happy Bottom is pregnant, he makes the adjustment to those facts, and they “quickly signed a pact, exchanged gifts, bought Ascension Day airline tickets for the Caribbean” (440). The novel’s final words, uttered by Happy Bottom’s written mock-version of Jesus, “Come and have breakfast,” are set in opposition to a Christianity absent of divine substance which persists because of “the enormity of the support organization and the goal hunger of the participants” (441). Breakfast is a small insignificant action, admittedly, an ultimately inconsequential instant, but for Coover, it is in

such instants of intimacy rather than in larger institutions and myths that Divine Substance finally resides.

The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.

J. Henry Waugh, the main character of Coover's second novel *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), might be seen as a combination of two very different characters from *The Origin of the Brunists*: Himebaugh and Miller. Like Himebaugh, Henry Waugh is obsessed with numbers—in this case statistics, baseball scores. The phrase "Games are what kept Miller going,"[7] seems equally applicable to Waugh, for in his case the game is literal. He is both kept going and completely possessed by baseball—not baseball in the world at large but his own elaborate dice-rolling baseball simulation, which, as the novel progresses, comes to seem more real to him than his actual life. In the age of virtual reality, 3-D video games, and electronic fantasy, the novel is more relevant than ever.

The Universal Baseball Association developed from "The Second Son," a story that Coover published in 1963 in *The Evergreen Review* and which reappears, revised, as the second chapter of the novel. Coover has suggested that after writing the story "I still hadn't gotten everything out of the metaphor, that I hadn't yet fully understood it. So over the years that followed I set about playing with the images, working out the Association history, searching out the structure that seemed to be hidden in it."[8] In "The Second Son," a frustrated accountant named Henry Waugh has developed an

elaborate dice-based baseball game, complete with complex charts. As time progresses, Henry has added elements to make the game seem more real to him: biographies for the players, reactions from the crowd and so on. As a result, he enters more and more deeply into the game, finally seeming to have difficulty remembering it's just a game. In particular he begins to identify with Damon Rutherford, a first-rate player, beginning to think of him as a "second son" (thus the title). When he rolls a combination on the dice that leads to Damon being killed by a pitch, Henry suffers a mental breakdown.

The novel incorporates this episode as a chapter but instead of opting for the straightforward breakdown of the story it explores in detail broader issues. *The Universal Baseball Association* examines the concerns and themes that Coover will keep coming back to: the relation of life to fiction and the interchange between the two, the human need to create fiction but the danger of becoming bound by those fictions, of transforming fictions into closed myths and insisting on their significance. Coover again offers a critique of religion and religious fervor, though less prominently than in *The Origin of the Brunists.*

Stylistically, the novel is more focused than *The Origin of the Brunists,* concentrating on one individual, Henry, and on the baseball world he has created, the Universal Baseball Association (UBA). The novel is told in third person, focalized in all but the last chapter (even though sometimes more visibly than others) through Henry's perspective. Henry, as the creator of the game, arches over the baseball games that he plays out with throws of the dice. He takes his games very seriously, naming not only the teams but the players as well, developing biographies for them, charting their off season, retaining old players as managers, postulating a political

system related to the different baseball leagues, writing up summaries of some of the best games, and so on. He becomes exhilarated with the speed with which he can play out an entire season, time seeming to pass incredibly rapidly for him as he does so.

Coover passes deftly between Henry's hardly glamorous day-to-day reality and the excitement of the imagined baseball league. There are two levels to the novel, then: that of the game and that of Henry's life. The two are continually impinging upon one another for Henry, his work taking away time from his UBA world, his UBA world constantly making inroads into his actual life. Henry *wants* to mix one with the other, referring for instance to his bartender Pete as Jake, the name of the owner of the bar where the universal baseball association players gather when not on field. As the novel continues, the tension between the two realities grows, with Henry caught in the middle. The fictional UBA is clearly more constructed or artificial than Henry's real world, but in terms of how Henry experiences the two worlds the hierarchy has been reversed: the UBA seems much more alive and dynamic and real to Henry than anything he can find in his actual life. The game has become a serious threat to his day-to-day existence.

The novel opens with what appears to be a description of an actual baseball game, Coover not giving away that he is writing about a dice game. He transforms the throws of the dice into actual plays in the same way Henry perceives them. In this first paragraph, there's nothing to suggest Henry is not in a real ballpark. The narration presents what seems to be a real baseball game through Henry's eyes, sensing his mounting excitement: "Bottom half of the seventh, Brock's boy had made it through another inning unscratched, one! two! three! Twenty-one down and just six

outs to go! and Henry's heart was racing, he was sweating with relief and tension all at once, unable to sit, unable to think, *in* there, *with* them!" (3). He sees not only the players, but the particulars of the ballpark as well, the narrator describing how "the hometown Pioneer fans cheer the boy. . . . He saw beers bought and drunk, hot dogs eaten, timeless gestures passed" (3). It is only on the second page, near the end of this first paragraph, that the illusion begins to wear thin, when Henry "squinted at the sun high over Pioneer Park, then at his watch: nearly eleven, Diskin's closing hours" (4). The disparity is odd, particularly since it is clearly night and the novel was written in the days before video recorders. Still, Henry might be watching a rebroadcast of a game played earlier in the day. At this point, little challenges readers' perception that Henry is watching something—if he is not actually in the park he is seeing it on TV.

Henry goes down to buy a sandwich at Diskin's, returns to his room to "hear the roar of the crowd, saw them take their seats" (6). Only a paragraph later, on the fourth page of text, does Henry pick up and roll the dice. Only then is it clear that he is not watching anything at all: he is playing a dice game. But it isn't until page twenty that Coover provides any sort of full description of the dynamics of the game itself.

This scene is emblematic of something that Coover often does in his fiction: he presents readers with what appears to be a relatively stable, solid reality and then a few sentences or a few pages later takes it apart, calls it into question, modifies it. What may seem to be a reality at one moment may be revealed later as something imagined or misinterpreted. Coover's narrators, whether they be first-person or third-person, are often unwilling or unable to spell

things out properly, clearly, and completely for readers. As is the case here, the narrator often will allow his own narrative statements to be colored or tainted by the ideas or minds of characters. In Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*, for instance, the narrator declares Miller dead at the end of one chapter only to allow him to reappear a few chapters later very much alive. In *UBA* this tainting occurs because the narrator is unwilling to provide readers anything beyond what Henry would think himself. Henry knows that he is playing a dice game, but he is playing with such intensity and fervor that it has become a reality for him. The narrator allows this to infuse the narrative, only gradually allowing readers to glimpse things from a less subjective perspective. This occurs only during moments when Henry steps back from the game slightly himself. At those moments the dice are visible, so to speak; at other moments, the narrative is immersed even more deeply than in the opening scene. It offers the conversations between characters, recites ballads created about the teams and sung by a retired player, and enters into the players' thoughts.

As the novel moves forward, Coover describes both Henry's day-to-day reality and his UBA reality in detail. He follows seasons of the UBA as Henry plays them through, giving a sense of Henry's excitement. But Coover also shows Henry going late to work, drinking, picking up a prostitute, and talking with his clumsy friend Lou. By the end of the first chapter, Coover has established both the complexity of the game and of the game's hold on Henry; he has revealed as well Henry's identification with one of his imaginary players, Damon Rutherford.

In the second chapter, Henry, glared at by his boss Horace Zifferblatt for having arrived late, admits to himself in a piece of

foreshadowing that "Damon Rutherford meant more to him than any player should. It had happened before and it had always caused problems" (38). He is tempted to "baby" Damon for the rest of the season, to play him only infrequently so as to maintain his record, but he is faced by the question of the validity of this approach in the world he has created. Though Henry knows the rules that are in place, the imagined team manager Barney Bancroft does not: "Barney Bancroft didn't know what Henry knew. He didn't know about the different charts. He didn't even know about Aces and why it was the good ones often stayed good over the years. Of course, he must have sensed it, they all did . . ." (39). The dilemma, Henry feels, is that once he has set up the rules of the world, should he be allowed to interfere?

At this point in the novel, his answer is no. He himself feels bound by the system he has created, even by the arbitrary aspects of that system, the dice throw:

> And could Henry sit idly by and watch the kid get powdered, lose hope of becoming an Ace? He had to. Oh, sure, he was free to throw away the dice, run the game by whim, but then what would be the point of it? Who would Damon Rutherford really be then? Nobody, an empty name, a play actor. Even though he'd set his own rules, his own limits, and though he could change them whenever he wished, nevertheless he and his players were committed to the turns of the mindless and unpredictable—one might even say, irresponsible—dice. That was how it was. He had to accept it or quit the game altogether. (40)

Such ideas about the relation of creator to created are very similar to eighteenth century Deism's theological notions of a clockmaker God: God creates the complex structure that is the universe and then winds it up and lets it run by itself, not interfering. To the degree to which God participates in the universe, He does so according to its own rules, without violating the integrity of the system. Coover has taken a similar metaphor and developed it in a way that incorporates chance and chaos, accepting them as the governing part of the system. In the place of the watch there are dice. Henry—whose full name Larry McCaffery has pointed out is very similar to the Hebrew name for God[9]—is, as the game's proprietor, in a position to do anything he wants, but he has very consciously chosen not to interfere, not to bias the game itself. He will stick to the rules despite the fact that he has created them and can, at any time, change or destroy them. The chaos, the randomness of the dice throw, is in charge.

Yet though he is willing to hold himself rigorously to the rules of the game, he won't "play by the rules" in the real world. Henry has begun to detach himself from his job—after a drunken night having sex while pretending to be Damon, he comes in to work late, doesn't respond to the boss's queries, chooses to leave nine minutes early though he knows it will infuriate his boss. He cannot make himself care about reality. In the world where he is actually subject to punishment if he does not follow the "rules," he chooses to act as if the rules do not apply to him.

Once at home, he continues to think about player Damon Rutherford, pushing his identification with him. He realizes that he and Damon's father Brock are exactly the same age, and begins to feel as if he is Damon's father. He begins to roll the dice again, only

to discover that if he rolls triple ones again, Damon Rutherford will be killed by a beanball. The odds are low (one chance in 216), but Henry is nonetheless nervous, considers pulling Damon out of the line-up.

> But, damn it, could he risk leaving him in there? No, somehow, he had to get him out of there! He sought for some excuse. . . . But who could he sacrifice in his place? Tuck Wilson? Rawlings? And listen! What if he pulled him and then—as had always been the case—Casey threw an ordinary number? The second no-hitter, which could smash nearly all the records in world history, would be out the window . . . and all for nothing. . . . And what about Damon, getting jerked from the game like that, what would his attitude afterwards be? What would he make of it? There was more than one risk here. (71)

It's a small risk to roll the dice again, he knows, and he believes there are other factors involved. Though there is nothing in the way the number system of the baseball game is devised to suggest that removing Damon from the game will affect his performance later, he cannot help but think of Damon not as a number but as a human being. These are, for Henry, real lives, and he respects their reality much more than he respects the reality of those around him in the world into which he was born.

After all his agonizing he comes to the same conclusion: "There's nothing to be done about it, he said to himself. Play it out" (71). When he does so, the triple ones come up and Damon is killed

by a pitch from player Jock Casey. Henry imagines the crowd shouting for them to do something, "But do what? The dice were rolled" (73). He even reaches out, to take up the dice again, to change them "but no, he let them, he let it be, he had to, he stayed his hand" (74). Like the clockmaker God, he cannot bring himself to interfere.

Henry and Damon in this situation might be equated with God and Jesus, with God's willingness to allow his only begotten son to be crucified so that his plan for the redemption of humanity could come to fruition. But what is the plan here? What is the grander scheme? It is only a game. Perhaps God, too, the narrative implies, is only a somewhat demented man playing a game, and religions have ended up reading into his behavior motivations that do not belong there. In any case, Coover shows a great sensitivity to Henry's dilemma, and suggests that for Henry there is a genuine struggle taking place which could be seen both in terms of God's struggle to allow his son to be sacrificed, and in terms of the relation of the artist to the elements of his creation. At the same time, the implication is that the sacrifice was wasted, that Damon has been killed when he could have been saved, that God is cruel if he'll allow a system of rules to survive over a life.

As the book continues, Henry is lost and confused. The killing of Damon—which he has done to preserve the rules of the game and thus preserve the game itself—has made the game unbearable to him, "a complete bore" (170). But even though this is the case, he finds himself more in the UBA world than in the real world, imagining Damon's funeral and wake. He loses himself in the imagined soul-searching of the players, managers, and association leaders. His performance at work deteriorates even more. He confesses

to his friend Lou that someone close to him has died, a ballplayer, bringing his grief over Damon's loss into the real world as if it were actual fact. He imagines himself in the stadium, the players frozen, waiting for him to go on with the game, but feels he is ready to quit. When he does play, he plays mechanically, unable to enter fully into the spirit of the game. It feels more like a game to him now, less like a vibrant reality.

Out of desperation he invites his friend Lou over, hoping that playing the game with Lou will bring it back to life. Yet Lou only makes things worse. He cannot focus on the game fully, slows everything down, questions the rules, spills beer on the charts and logbooks and rosters. If Henry is the God of the UBA, then Lou is the Association's bumbling devil, creating mayhem by accident. As Larry McCaffery suggests: "Lou, of course, is Lucifer (Lou Engel = 'Fallen Angel'), and their game parallels the deadly struggle between Jahweh and his arch enemy."[10] But their struggle is parodic, with both of them incompetent and pathetic aging men. Lou's presence keeps Henry from stepping through the frame of the game and into the world beyond it. Worse, Lou is playing with the team of the man who killed Damon Rutherford, Jock Casey, and despite Henry having stacked the deck a little against them, they seem to be winning.

After Lou has been banished from the apartment, Henry's compulsion about changing the rules seems to have dissolved. On impulse, "almost instinctively" (200), he turns one of the dice to a different number, begins to cheat in a way that will give him an opportunity to kill Jock Casey with a line drive. He has some concerns, wonders if he has entered into a new kind of craziness, worries about how his players will react, realizes he is entering an alien,

troubling space. He has always felt that the players can sense his intentions and desires, even when he hasn't been cheating. Earlier in the book, Henry has secretly rooted for someone to defeat the team known as the Pioneers. "Of course, he hadn't interfered directly in any way, and yet the Pioneers must have felt, somehow, his resistance" (60). How much more will the players feel it, then, when Henry moves from simply secretly rooting to actively manipulating the results of the dice?

One side of Henry wants to return to the real world: "Now stop and think, he cautioned himself. . . . Wouldn't it be better to drop it now, burn it, go on to something else, get working regularly again, back into the swing of things, see movies, maybe copyright that Intermonop game and try to market it, or do some traveling, read books" (201). Yet another side of him wants to bind himself inextricably to the game. Perhaps, he thinks, cheating so as to kill Jock is precisely the way to do it. "Yes, if you killed that boy out there, then you *couldn't* quit, could you? No, that's a real commitment, you'd be hung up for good, they wouldn't *let* you go. *Who* wouldn't? aren't you forgetting—never mind, never mind" (201).

At this stage, Henry can still make a distinction between reality and fantasy, but it's a distinction that he'd like to suppress. "Aren't you forgetting that this is just a game?" one half of him is trying to say, while the other half *wants* that to be forgotten, wants to enter fully and pathologically into the world of the UBA. In the end, after much thought, Henry deliberately sets down the dice in a way that kills Casey, taking his vengeance and by doing so linking himself inextricably to the world he has created.

Chapter Seven, which follows the killing of Jock, suggests that Henry's manipulations have transformed the game for its participants

(or at least Henry's imaginings about them) into "static participants in an ancient yet transformed ritual" (203). The game has developed a fixed, yet nevertheless mythic element, as if the players are operating according to destiny, suggesting that Henry's manipulations of the dice have continued. He has stopped going to work, has withdrawn from life. Henry wants to commemorate the loss of both Damon and Jock, but the full extent of this commemoration will be worked out only in the next (and final) chapter of the novel.

If *The Universal Baseball Association* were to end after the seventh chapter, it would still be a powerful novel about the relation of reality to fantasy and game to life, a novel which provided effective and original commentary on God and fictionmaking. But it is the final chapter which transforms Coover's novel into a *tour de force.* Here, Henry seems to have dropped out entirely (though doubtless it is he who has arranged the circumstances of the world depicted), leaving only the world of the UBA. There seems to be no other world. The game of baseball has been transformed into something else entirely: a religious ritual.

The final chapter takes place in year 157, 101 seasons after Damon Rutherford has been killed. Different groups have sprung up within the Universal Baseball Association. The Damonites are a politico-religious sect who identify with Damon Rutherford and think of themselves as supporting the established order. As good company men, they hold at their worst what others refer to as "the simplistic and pious view of Damon as Good and Jock as Evil" (221). In opposition there are the Caseyites, who identify with Jock Casey (whose initials are the same as those of Jesus Christ) and "celebrate the mystery of Casey's uniqueness, his essential freedom" (222). They believe in "'a rising above the

rules,' an abandonment of all conceptualizations, including score-keepers, umpires, Gods in any dress" (240).

An annual passion play acts out the Casey/Rutherford killings, "the annual rookie initiation ceremony, the Damonsday reenactment of the Parable of the Duel" (220). Numerology has managed to draw all sorts of significance from the number of the game and the inning that the deaths first took place. There's even a catechism and a group of twelve Elders similar to Jesus's twelve Apostles. Other myths seem to be springing up as well—myths which claim authority and power for some of the other figures of Damon and Jock's time, myths which point to conspiracies or employ game theory. As these myths proliferate one "can't even be sure about the simple *facts*. Some writers even argue that Rutherford and Casey never existed—nothing more than another of the ancient myths of the sun, symbolized as a victim slaughtered by the monster or force of darkness. History: in the end, you can never prove a thing." (223). One of the players even suggests "maybe this whole goddam Association has got some kind of screw loose" (227) or as a professor within the book says: "God exists and he is a nut" (233).

These debates and dilemmas echo some of the arguments of popular theology. As the players converse about the meaning of baseball and the association, they might just as well be talking about religion; Coover effectively shows the ways in which people will interpret unusual events to regard them as significant. Baseball is as ready and pliable a material for religious belief as is, say, crucifixion. Coover elaborates a world which is also a game, one Henry (perhaps mad) has created and is running, but Coover does not depict Henry's participation in this final chapter. Readers must infer it from what has come before. The players ponder, trying to figure

out questions about their existence and the meaning of life, questions that remain, at least for them, unanswerable. Yet how much of this pondering is their own—a function of their own Caseyite 'essential freedom'—and how much is Henry's remains difficult to discern.

Near the end of the novel, a character named Raspberry Schultz remarks to Paul Trench (an agnostic player who is playing Casey in the passion play): "I don't know if there's really a record-keeper up there or not, Paunch. But even if there weren't, I think we'd have to play the game as though there were" (239). His comments echo an idea found in philosopher, mathematician, and mystic Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, published in 1660. In *Pensées*, Pascal argues that human beings have everything to gain if they live as if God did exist and only potential for loss if they live as if he did not exist. Thus, they might as well wager that God exists and live accordingly. Yet Raspberry's comments evoke Paul's objection: "Would we? Is this reason enough? Continuance for its own inscrutable sake?" (239). Paul is depressed with this notion of continuance: "Beyond each game, he sees another, and yet another, in endless and hopeless succession. . . . What difference, in the terror of eternity, does it make? He stares at the sky, beyond which is more sky, overwhelming in its enormity" (238).

Yet the final stroke of the novel is ultimately a positive one. Through all Paul's doubt, and fear of the looming nothingness, the dead Damon says to him: "Hey, wait, buddy! you *love* this game, don't you?" Paul "doesn't know any more whether he's a Damonite or a Caseyite or something else again, a New Heretic or an unregenerate Golden Ager, doesn't even know if he's Paul Trench or Royce Ingram or Pappy Rooney or Long Lew Lydell, it's all irrelevant, it

doesn't matter that he's going to die, all that counts is that he is *here* and here's The Man and here's the boys and there's the crowd, the sun, the noise" (242). Hereness is enough of an answer, maybe the only answer anyone can expect. The players love the game, they love to play, they love life: they might as well enjoy it while it lasts rather than getting obsessed with positioning themselves in relation to that which remains unknowable. As part of the last sentence of the novel suggests in less formal terms, "Hang loose" (242).

Pricksongs & Descants

Coover's third book, *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), consists of stories, many of which were written and published in magazines before the appearance of Coover's first two novels; the book includes Coover's most frequently anthologized story, "The Babysitter." The first story in the collection Coover reports as having been written in 1957, the second in 1960, the third in 1962; much of Coover's other fiction published in magazines between 1957 and the book's publication in 1969 was left out of the collection because of Coover's own desire to "produce a book that had a beginning, a middle, and an end."[11] For that reason, *Pricksongs & Descants* has a thematic and formal unity and progression often lacking in collections of stories.

The stories here often insist on the multiplicity of possibilities available in fiction, sometimes pursuing several mutually exclusive versions of the same story at once. In this process, the stories frequently become metafictional, commenting implicitly or explicitly on the process of fictionmaking. At other moments, Coover seems to be writing directly within, or even in response to, the

absurd tradition as typified by authors ranging from Samuel Beckett to Albert Camus. Often, too, Coover responds to traditional myths and stories as well as traditional literary genres, rethinking fairy tales, for instance, in a way that allows the stories associated with them to evolve. Such a process can be seen even as late as Coover's 1997 novel *Briar Rose* and Coover's 1998 remake of the Western in *Ghost Town*. In most of the stories in *Pricksongs & Descants*, Coover questions the conventions of the narrative tradition, writing to provide other possibilities.

In an interview with Frank Gado, Coover speaks at length of the two unusual words in the book's title, both of which refer to early music terminology: "'Pricksong' derives from the physical manner in which the song was printed—the notes were literally pricked out; 'descant' refers to the form of music in which there is a *cantus firmus*, a basic line, and variations that other voices play against it." Coover goes on to say that "there is an obvious sexual suggestion. In this connection, I thought of the descants as feminine decoration around the pricking of the basic line. Thus: the masculine thrust of narrative and the lyrical play around it."[12] In Coover's work this play often subverts the narrative line entirely. The darker side of this sexual connection is seen in the second part of "The Door" when Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother speaks of the wolf taking hold of Red's "giddy ear with his old death-cunt-and-prick songs" (16), an idea which combines the erotic with the dangerous. The idea of the Death Cunt, according to novelist Rikki Ducornet, is a "perception of the female body as seduction, a lethal detour of the spirit leading to enslavement: the cunt as snare, prison, and coffin."[13]

William H. Gass refers to the stories in *Pricksongs & Descants* as "thin and definite narrative slices." They are, in a sense, like cards,

and give "the impression that we might scoop them all up and reshuffle, altering not the elements but the order or the rules of play. . . . We are led to feel that a single fable may have various versions: narrative time may be disrupted . . . or the same space occupied by different eyes, . . . fantasy may fall on fact, lust outnumber love, cliché cover consternation. The characters are highly stylized like the face cards."[14] Instead of choosing a plot and pursuing it to its bitter end, Coover "says yes to everything."[15] Interested in the possibilities of stories, he sometimes seems to tell several stories at the same time.

Stylistically, the stories often begin in a fashion that seems realistic, though they quickly begin to move in non-realistic directions. Situations that seem initially straightforward quickly reveal themselves as unstable and odd.

For the purposes of discussion, the book can be seen to fall into four parts. The first part consists of "The Door: *A Prologue of Sorts*," which introduces many of the concerns of the collection and stands in a special relation to the book as a whole. The second part comprises three stories: "The Magic Poker," "Morris in Chains," and "The Gingerbread House." The third includes "Seven Exemplary Fictions" and "The Sentient Lens" pieces. The final part is made up of the last pieces of the collection, excepting "The Sentient Lens."

"The Door" consists of three sections, each of which focuses on three different (but for Coover, interconnected) fairy tales: Jack and the Beanstalk, Beauty and the Beast, and Little Red Riding Hood. Each is offered through a new perspective.

In the first, narrated in a straightforward third person, Jack has grown up into an ogre and has become a woodcutter. Now that his fairy tale is over, he lives a life far from the heroic, beset by

worries. As he cuts trees in the forest, he thinks over the disappointments he has faced and considers how he has failed to prepare his daughter, Little Red Riding Hood, for the reality of the world. He has "left out the terror. . . . And when she encountered it, found herself alone and besieged: what then?" (14). As he chops, he thinks he hears her knocking on his mother's door, entering into her own fairy tale: "Sooner or later, it must happen, mustn't it? Sooner or later, she'd know everything, know he'd lied. He'd pretended to her that there were no monsters, no wolves or witches, but yes, goddamn it, there were, there were" (15).

The second portion of the story is from the perspective of Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, also Jack's mother, who was once Beauty from the Beauty and the Beast legend. Told in a run-on first person that uses anachronistic expressions like "durned kid" (15), the section shows an old woman reflecting bitterly on the disappointments of her life as she waits for her granddaughter to arrive with her basket of goodies. The beast, as it turns out, "never became a prince" (16). Instead of a happy ending she has "suffered a lifetime of his doggy stink . . . I have watched my own beauty decline my love and still no Prince no Prince" (17).

The third and final portion of "The Door" begins with Red standing at the door of her grandmother's cottage. Something, she realizes, is not right; the door is open. She hesitates at the threshold of her own fairy tale, on the verge of "an encounter and an emergence" (18) with the event that will transform her from child into adult: "Well, it would be a big production, that was already apparent. An elaborate game, embellished with masks and poetry, a marshalling of legendary doves and herbs. And why not? . . . she realized this was a comedy from which, once entered, you never

returned, it nevertheless possessed its own astonishments and conjurings, its towers and closets, and even more pathways, more gardens and more doors" (18–19). Not having lived her own fairy tale yet, life seems fresh and adventurous to her, full of mystery and wonder. The story ends with Red stepping inside, pulling the door shut behind her and latching it, trapping both herself and the reader inside a fairy tale.

In "The Door" Coover is working with myths and legends that have grown up, which no longer offer adults the simple consolations they offer to children. Coover is inviting readers to look at the cracks and fault lines in their unexamined tales and myths. By doing so, they uncover ideas and moments more important and more relevant to their current existence. He does not want people so much to abandon these myths as to look for ways to transform them, take them apart, and revitalize them.

"The Magic Poker" directly follows "The Door," but pursues formal innovation and metafictional invention rather than exploring and debunking myth. Though the story makes allusions to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and has some of the generic aspects of the ghost story, these gestures do not cohere into the grander critique found when Coover deals more directly with specific literary genres, myths, or fairy tales.

For Coover, the process of writing fiction is similar to the process of creating myths, but fiction's redeeming virtue is that it can remain in the realm of game or play instead of degenerating into insistent belief systems. "The Magic Poker" anticipates Coover's acclaimed story "The Babysitter" in being written in a series of discontinuous fragments. It moves from one perspective to another,

offers several mutually exclusive versions of what might either be the same event or perhaps several slightly different events. "The Magic Poker" belongs to that type of fiction heavily influenced by play, in which one cannot move smoothly along the greased chute of narrative through climax to end up at denouement. Instead, Coover has torn the chute into pieces and rearranged it so it keeps doubling back on itself. This doubling back reveals narrative dislocations and changes the way the events of the story are perceived.

In the first lines of the story, the narrator calls attention to the fictional nature of the piece: "I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees—pines and birch and dogwood and firs—and cause the water to lap the pebbles of its abandoned shore. This and more: I deposit shadows and dampness, spin webs, and scatter ruins. . . . I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness" (20). At this point the author/narrator seems very much in control of his fictional creation, but the sentence that follows suggests that he is not interested in being completely in control: "But anything can happen" (20). As the story progresses, the narrator continues to comment and interrupt, drawing attention to himself and even drawing attention to the way he has lost control of certain objects in his story; "But where is the caretaker's son?" he asks himself at one point. "This is awkward. Didn't I invent him myself?" (27). At another point, having written himself away from his chief topic, the magic poker, he admits: "Wait a minute, this is getting out of hand!" (30). Sometimes the narrator even calls into question the relation of fiction to life: "At times, I forget that this arrangement is my own invention. I begin to think of the island as somehow real, its objects solid and intractible" (33). If the island is real, perhaps it is the narrator who is the invention: "But the caretaker's son? To tell the truth, I sometimes wonder if it was not he

who invented me" (27). Near the end of the story, he realizes he is slipping from the picture, that what he has invented has become reality. "I am disappearing. You have noticed. . . . listen: it's just as I feared, my invented island is really taking its place in world geography" (40). Soon after, an old woman promises to tell her two grandchildren the "story of 'The Magic Poker,'" thus presenting "The Magic Poker" as a story within itself.

William Gass has commented that Coover, along with writers like John Barth and Donald Barthelme, can be seen as writing in the tradition of Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges.[16] In the case of "The Magic Poker" the influence is fairly visible. The notion of an imagined place that begins to assert itself as real because it has been written about is the topic of Borges's story "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbus Tertius." What Coover adds to Borges's basic idea is the notion that as the place becomes real, the creator of the place evaporates. It is almost as if either he or the island can be real, but not both.

"The Magic Poker" revolves around the narrator and the characters he has created. One major part of the story concerns the narrator and his manipulations/observations. Another begins with two sisters, one who wears tight gold pants, who have come to visit a ruined mansion found on the invented island. As they explore, they are observed by two other characters: the son of the caretaker and an enigmatic man who wears a turtleneck shirt. These two may or may not actually meet the sisters, depending on which narrative line the reader chooses to pursue as real. Throughout the story, Coover opts for a certain confusion among actual and imagined events, and a situation recounted might equally be real or something envisioned or imagined by the characters. This creates a backtracking in the narration, a presentation of alternate versions of the same events, and a sense that the characters are trapped in

some kind of narrative hell where stories keep happening to them again and again.

For instance, the girl with the gold pants is described five times as finding a magic (and highly sexualized) poker. Each of these seems to be for the first time. The first time, she kisses the poker and the man with the turtleneck shirt appears. The second time, she picks it up and, horrified to find its underside aswarm with insects, drops it. The third time, she kisses its tip and an unidentified man appears. The fourth, it appears as part of an embedded fairy tale about a beautiful young princess in tight gold pants; when she kisses the poker a knight suspiciously resembling the man in the turtleneck shirt appears. The fifth time, the sister of the girl in the gold pants, Karen, picks it up, washes it in the lake, and dries it off on her dress.

Which is the correct version? None of them. Or perhaps all of them. Coover is not interested in allowing the reader to puzzle out what *really* happened. Rather it is the aggregate of what might have happened, the exhaustion of possibilities, that is important: the story is left deliberately open-ended. Instead of following one narrative line, Coover is interested in the lyric play. He embroiders around a theme rather than pursuing the theme to a definitive conclusion.

"Morris in Chains" continues Coover's commitment to formal innovation. The narrative is constructed of two alternating narrative threads. The first, written as a report to the nation, is a straightforward narrative about the hunt for and eventual capture of a shepherd named Morris who has kept sheep in parks of the city. The narrator of this piece is pro-state, anti-Morris, and in support of Dr. Doris Peloris, M.D. Ph.D., U.D., who uses her rational skills, mechanical crickets, and modern scientific methods to capture and

restrain Morris. The report writer is convinced that Morris, with his bucolic nature and antiestablishmentarian shepherding practices, is a menace to society. The second narrative thread is written in Morris's first-person voice and consists of long-lined poetry. It is set within parentheses as an indication of the position it holds in regard to official speech. Lyrical and barely punctuated, full of inventive language and reading like stream of consciousness, the voice's subjective nature is emphasized.

Both Morris and Dr. Peloris seem caricatures of certain sorts of ideals, one pastoral/bucolic, the other scientific/rational. Morris seems a kind of half-man/half-goat, an embodiment of Pan. When Morris is captured, the nurse comments on "The . . . the *legs*, doctor! the *fur*—!" (58). Coover opts in this story for a collision of types, a parody of the nature/culture conflict. It is hard to accept either alternative as viable, for one cannot live all in nature or entirely outside it with any degree of happiness. In addition, the story is about the collision of two different language types, two ways of perceiving the world. Though Morris is captured and a semen sample is taken from him and classified, he refuses Dr. Peloris's offer of rehabilitation. The last words of the story are his own and shows he is far from taking the standardized language of the establishment as his own, that he continues to compose his own speech, despite despairing over the gelding of his prized ram, Rameses:

> (Doris Peloris the chorus and Morris sonorous canorous Horace scores Boris—should be able to make *somethin* outa that by juniper then there's bore us and whore us and up the old torus no not so good not

> so good losin the old touch I am by damn/ *ahh! Rameses!* why'd they go and *do* that to ye for? it's the motherin insane are free!) (60)

The suggestion that there's something insane about someone who denies the sexual and the imaginative in favor of system and dry reason is a common Cooverian theme. Morris's mixture of hope—his continuing to compose and rhyme in the face of adversity—coupled with despair over confinement, suggest the struggles of an artist placed in opposition to the state and restricted by it.

"The Gingerbread House" returns to the territory sketched out by "The Door." It retells the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale in forty-two numbered fragments. Coover leaves most of the context of the Grimm Brothers's tale out, beginning the story with an old man, the children's father, leading them into the forest. Yet there is enough information provided for the reader to be able to figure out the fairy tale behind the story. Readers familiar with "Hansel and Gretel" thus approach the reading equipped with the original version and its expectations. The story could be described as "interactive" in that Coover gives enough details to invite the reader to fill in the gaps, but he also forces readers to backtrack, abandon their initial assumptions. His story often frustrates expectations, bringing in elements that are absent from the original fairy tale or elements that skew the original. "The Gingerbread House," then, serves as a virus, infecting the reader's cultural knowledge to create a fever which kills the simple enjoyment of the original by forcing readers to examine their unstated assumptions. But this simple enjoyment gives way to a more complex enjoyment and understanding.

The father of the story has found that his life has not lived up to the expectations he had for it, and as a result he mistrusts the adult world. He wants to keep his children from growing up, wants to keep them from passing through the door into adulthood. The door to the gingerbread house is sexualized—"heart-shaped and bloodstone-red . . . pulsing softly, radiantly" (75)—suggesting that for Coover this initiation into adulthood is sexual. Sexual images abound in the story, from the boy and girl licking candy off one another to the girl nesting a dead dove "in her small round thighs" (67). The father desires the witch, but slaps the boy when he has the same desires, an attempt no doubt to save the child from the disappointments of adulthood.

But the door is not only sexual; in fact, the door is described in the same way as the heart of a dove killed earlier in the story. This heart is used by the witch to lure the young boy: "a brilliant heart-shaped bloodstone. It beat still. A soft radiant pulsing" (66); "The glowing heart pulses gently, evenly, excitingly" (71). There is a complex connection between sex, death, and coming of age. Coover emphasizes the mingling of sex and the threat of death, of pleasure and pain, in what is said of the door in the last lines of the story: "Yes, marvelous! delicious! insuperable! but beyond: what is the sound of black rags flapping?" (75). The story ends short of the door, with the children hesitating and somewhat afraid. Unlike Red, they have not yet raised the courage to cross the threshold.

At the center of *Pricksongs & Descants* are "Seven Exemplary Fictions," preceded by a prologue and dedication to Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote* and of several exemplary fictions of his

own. Chronologically, these and "The Sentient Lens" trio are the earliest stories in Coover's collection, and the only stories, according to Coover's prologue, which he wrote before 1962 that are still "able to bear this later exposure" (77). Coover quotes Cervantes speaking of his intention through his fiction to set up "a billiard table where everyone may come to amuse himself . . . for decent and pleasing pastimes are profitable rather than harmful" (77).[17] Fiction then is equated with game-playing and recreation. Coover responds: "splendid, *don* Miguel! for as our mutual friend *don* Roberto S. [Coover here is referring to the critic Robert Scholes, author of *The Fabulators*, a book on the playfulness of modern and contemporary writers] has told us, fiction 'must provide us with an imaginative experience which is necessary to our imaginative well-being. . . . We need all the imagination we have, and we need it exercised and in good condition'" (77). Literature, then, for Coover, is about exercising the imagination. It is play, or recreation, but a play or recreation that preserves and strengthens the imagination in the same way physical exercise improves the physical body.

Yet something more serious goes hand and hand with the exercise of the imagination; game-playing is only half of what Coover calls "the dual nature of all good narrative art." Coover says several things about Cervantes's novellas that might be seen as applying to his own work: "they struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life and sought to synthesize the unsynthesizable, sallied forth against adolescent thought-modes and exhausted art forms, and returned home with new complexities" (77). Coover too is concerned with working against unconscious mythic residue, in making readers reconsider what they take for granted. Cervantes's

Don Quixote took as its starting point the tales of chivalry that came before it, but turned these tales on their head, subverted them. By doing so, it complexified them, created something new.

Yet despite Cervantes's abilities and his innovations, his work is now almost 400 years old. Coover acknowledges that all is not right in the contemporary house of fiction. "*Don* Miguel, the optimism, the innocence, the aura of possibility you experienced have been largely drained away, and the universe is closing in on us again. Like you, we, too, seem to be standing at the end of one age and on the threshold of another. . . . We, too, suffer from a 'literature of exhaustion,' though ironically our nonheroes are no longer tireless and tiresome Amadises, but hopelessly defeated and bedridden Quixotes" (78). The "literature of exhaustion" that Coover refers to comes from the title of an essay by novelist John Barth in which Barth suggests that what seems radical and innovative in one period becomes the tradition to which later literature must respond and move beyond.[18] As Barth summarizes in another essay: "the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness . . . artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (205).[19] *Don Quixote* revitalized the literature of its time but now it has become one of the standards. What is needed above all, says Coover, are "new modes of perception and fictional forms able to encompass them" (79). Literature that is both valuable and playful will shock readers out of old modes of perception, offering new ways of thinking about the world.

In the exemplary fictions, Coover does this in several ways, ways which he will continue to explore throughout his short and

long fiction. The first is to offer reinterpretations of the stories—fables, myths, legends, fairy tales, nursery rhymes—that are part of received Western cultural knowledge. By telling these stories skew, Coover allows their hidden assumptions and agendas to be seen and explored. Just as literature needs from time to time to be revitalized, so myths, perceptions, and worldviews need to be reconsidered, modified, and exchanged. Connected to this is a second concern: that of using literature to open up possibilities rather than shut them down. Coover does this by subverting literary and generic conventions and standardized ideas about what it means to be human, short-circuiting the expectations the traditionally-minded reader has for what a story should do. As literary convention is itself a controller of perception, one could argue that the two projects are very closely related.

Two of Coover's exemplary fictions rewrite recognizable preexisting traditional stories: "The Brother" and "J's Marriage" both reinterpret Bible stories. "Panel Game" takes on a popular contemporary genre, the TV game show. "The Marker" and "In A Train Station" both present absurd situations that cannot be understood in realistic terms, while "Klee Dead" subverts the reader's expectations of what narrative promises. The final story of the sequence, "The Wayfarer," explores the relation of the autonomous individual to the broader society.

"The Brother" is the story of the Flood, retold from the perspective of Noah's brother. The writing is an eccentric and largely unpunctuated run-on, the voice informal and fairly contemporary in its use of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Dubious of Noah's desire to build a boat, he agrees nonetheless to help out, though his wife "can't figure it out I can't see why you always have to be babyin

that old fool he ain't never done nothing for you God knows" (92). Torn between his need to work on his own farm and his desire to help a brother he is convinced is crazy, he nonetheless helps and then returns home to try to mend fences with his wife. When the rains come, Noah's brother returns to the boat, calling up: "hey is it all right for me and my wife to come over until this thing blows over?" Noah, though,

> he don't say a damn word he just raises his hand in that same sillyass way and I holler "hey you stupid sonuvabitch I'm soakin wet goddam it and my house is fulla water and my wife she's about to have a kid and she's apt to get sick all wet and cold to the bone and all I'm askin you—" and right then right while I'm still talkin he turns around and he goes back in the boat and I can't hardly believe it me his brother but he don't come back out. (97)

When he finally makes it home through the rising floodwaters, he finds his wife dead. Since he recounts the story from the top of a hill, waiting for the water to rise over him, his own death seems imminent as well.

Coover is very adept at showing the love between Noah's brother and his pregnant wife, presenting them both in a sympathetic manner that works against the Bible story's denigration of them for their unrighteousness. He takes a story that has been told over and over again in the same way in the Judeo-Christian tradition and applies pressure to it, filtering it through a new perspective. Coover wants to suggest there may be another side to the story, a

side that does not get recorded in the Bible and which may call into question the ethical nature of Noah's actions. In this interpretation, the story is recast as a betrayal of one brother by another. As told from Noah's brother's viewpoint, the story of the Deluge seems closer to the Cain and Abel story. Telling it this way forces us to think about those destroyed in the flood rather than rejoicing over the handful who were saved.

"J's Marriage" tells the story of Mary's conception of Jesus from a point sympathetic with her husband Joseph, again giving an alternative history of a familiar religious story. "After an excessive period of inlicensed self-humiliation, ecstatic protests of love, fear, despair, and the total impossibility of any imaginable kind of ultimate happiness" (112), Joseph (or J as he is called throughout the story) decides to marry Mary (referred to only as "her"). After proposing, he realizes that she is terrified of "the prospect of the love-act itself" perhaps due to "a lifetime of misguided dehortations from ancient deformed grannies, miserable old tales of blood and the tortures of the underworld . . . or some early misadventure, perhaps a dominant father?" (113). When J marries her, he allows her to set the coital conditions of the marriage: though she'll sleep beside him she will not allow the marriage to be consummated or even for him to see her naked. Joseph, "patient, infinitely patient" (115), hopes intimacy will develop gradually. He thinks, when he finds her naked beside the bed, that the time for consummation has come, only to discover that she is pregnant with what she claims is God's child.

Unable to convince himself that "any God would so involve himself in the tedious personal affairs of this or any other human animal" (117), Joseph undergoes a breakdown. When he finally gives

in to the notion that God would bother to impregnate a human female, he begins to recover, even experiences great joy at Jesus's birth itself which he describes as "the climax of his love for her; afterwards, they drifted quietly and impassively apart, until in later years J found himself incapable of describing her to himself or any other person" (118). He dies in a tavern of a consumptive cough as he laughs over the circumstances of his wedding night.

Though there are indications throughout that "J's Marriage" is a retelling of the story of Jesus, Coover's decision to call Joseph "J" and Mary simply "her" has an interesting effect. It insures that the reader begin the piece of fiction seeing it as a story in its own right rather than reading it from the outset as a commentary on Christianity. Only gradually does it become clear who "J" is, what the myth behind Coover's story is. As a result, the reader enters into the human element of the story, experiencing it *as* story before considering its relation to the Christian mythos.

Like, "The Door"'s retelling of the Beauty and the Beast fable, and "The Brother"'s retelling of the Flood myth, "J's Marriage" offers the bleaker, more discouraging side of a familiar myth. It is a myth that has come, in a sanitized and unified version, to dominate the religious beliefs of more than a billion people. Other works of fiction, for instance Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* and Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, have provided alternate views of Christ, but Coover's is the only story to reconsider the Christ myth through Joseph's consciousness.

What, finally, is the purpose or effect of doing so? Is it an attack on Christianity? No, at least not primarily—though it is an attack on organized religion's tendency to make events significant

by viewing them through very specific lenses. However, it might be productively seen as an attack on mythmaking. To make an event or a story into an effective myth, something that doctrine can be based on, much has to be set aside. All the aspects of the event or story that do not fit neatly into the myth, that don't seem properly significant, are discarded in favor of faith-affirming or myth-affirming aspects. Coover rightly recognizes that those abandoned elements are often the most human moments of the event. What official versions and sanctioned myths leave out is the sense of the value of human experience.

"Panel Game" is a critique of a generic form that has become quite common in the contemporary age: the television game show. The story has a family resemblance to Donald Barthelme's "A Shower of Gold" (published in 1964 in his collection *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*), which is about an existentialist game show. Both stories appropriate the basic formal characteristics of the game show genre and render them absurd. In Coover's case, the contestant, named "Unwilling Participant," must guess the nature of the game he is playing. Referred to in the second person as "you," "Unwilling Participant" serves as a stand-in for the reader, who also doesn't at first know the nature of the game, is as equally lost and foundering as Unwilling Participant.[20] Perhaps the reader is equally unwilling to participate in a story that puts demands on him or her. Unwilling Participant thinks through elaborate strings of associative connections, trying to find an answer that will satisfy the merry Moderator, not even certain if the game has begun or not.

Ostensibly assisting him are three other panelists: Aged Clown, Lovely Lady, and a fat and bald Mr. America. These popular types seem to hinder more than help, though, with Lovely Lady

stripteasing before him on the tabletop and the Clown heckling him while a wheezing and muttering Mr. America nudges him. Absurdly, the rules of the game seem to be available to everyone but the reader and Unwilling Participant. Everyone else is in on the joke. When Unwilling Participant is unable to give the proper answer, the game quickly turns ugly, as games and rituals are wont to do in Coover's fiction. "FAILED! YOU HAVE FAILED! AND YOU MUST PAY THE CONSEQUENCES!" (86) shouts the announcer, while the Clown sings that "*the name of the game— . . . is La Mort!" La Mort,* the French word for death, is the ultimate game. "I thought it was all for fun" (87) claims Unwilling Participant, but what has been defined as a game seems in fact to have become a ritual, and the audience is now thirsty for blood. The situation may be absurd, but it is no easier to escape from for that. Because of his failure, Unwilling Participant is hanged. The disconnected and fragmented style of the final passage, imitating the death and Unwilling Participant's collapsing consciousness, seems modeled on the equally disjunctive ending of Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies:*

> The dog rose and there depended
> Lamps extended—WHAP!
> Burst into crimson flares . . .
> Eyes of the
> So long, Sport.

Similarly absurd and dreamlike, "The Marker" begins with what seems a stage direction, forefronting the artificial quality of the situation: "Of the seven people (Jason, his wife, the police officer, and the officer's four assistants) only Jason and his wife are in the

room" (88). Jason, who has been reading, watches his wife prepare for bed. Invited to make love to her, he marks his place in the book, puts the book on an end table, turns out the light, and makes his way toward the bed. But as soon as the lights are out, everything in the room seems to have changed. The bed is not where it was. Disoriented, Jason stumbles about the room, tries to turn the light back on, and finally, led by his wife's laughter, stumbles his way to the new location of the bed.

Finally in bed, making love, he starts to notice some unusual details which cause him to wonder if the woman beneath really is his wife, including a strange and disagreeable odor. Suddenly the lights are turned on by a police officer and Jason discovers he has been making love to his wife's corpse. As punishment, the police officer pounds Jason's genitals to a pulp with the butt of his gun, then delivers a lecture on experimentation and tradition that plucks the readers out of the immediate events of the story to drop them into a disquisition on storytelling in general.

> "You understand, of course," he says, "that I am not, in the strictest sense, a traditionalist. I mean to say I do not recognize tradition *qua* tradition as sanctified in its own sake. On the other hand, I do not join hands with those who find inherent in tradition some malignant evil, and who therefore deem it of terrible necessity that all custom be rooted out at all costs. I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their own turn by the innovations which created them.

> I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them" (91).

In fact, the policeman's lecture gives us an alternate way to view the story, suggesting that Jason and his lover are allegories for the relation of the reader to his or her reading. When traditional artistic forms become dead and decayed, to continue to return to them, and only to them, is equivalent to making love uselessly to a dead corpse in the dark. It is the active growth of innovation out of tradition rather than a slavish fidelity to tradition which allows literature to remain vital, keeps it from decaying.

The final moment of the story, however, shows that Jason has not learned his lesson. As the police officer picks up his book and drops the bookmark from it, Jason seems distressed. "'The marker!' he gasps desperately." Despite his experience, he wants to continue reading the same things. He cannot make the leap from the actual to the symbolic value of his experience. Unlike the policeman, he remains trapped in the story. In any case, his plea falls on deaf ears. "The police officer does not hear him, nor does he want to" (92).

There is another way to read the story. Considering that Coover's fiction often includes several different versions of the same event, it makes sense to see the stories themselves as subject to multiple, perhaps sometimes mutually exclusive, interpretations. Keeping in mind Coover's view of authority figures, it seems odd that he would use a policeman as a spokesman for ideas that are his own. For this reason the policeman's words can perhaps be treated with a certain skepticism. Though one can recognize the wisdom of not taking a slavish view of tradition, what the policeman insists

upon in addition to that is *moderation,* the safe "middle road." Yet Coover's own fictions can hardly be seen as taking a middle road; Coover often takes large risks in his fictions. One could argue that his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists,* incorporates elements of experimentation and tradition, but as I've suggested in my discussion of that novel, critics faulted Coover for not striking what they felt would be the proper balance. Critics have a tendency to try to police writers, and punish those writers who step out of bounds, who innovate along unapproved paths. Finally, artists need to be allowed to take risks, to perhaps go overboard, to risk being transgressive or obscene, if the literature is to develop. Jason, in any case, is passionately interested in reading, while the policeman when he looks at the book has only "an expression of mild curiosity" which "it is difficult to know if it is sincere" (92). Which of the two is more likely to have a real commitment to literature?

"In A Train Station" begins ordinarily enough, with a man named Alfred purchasing a train ticket from the Stationmaster. The first three paragraphs give simple facts about the train and Alfred, suggesting that the story might be a piece of realism. Yet the fourth paragraph begins with the phrase "Now, assuming both Alfred and the Express Train to be real" (99), raising the possibility that they might not be.

Still, after this brief interruption, which also informs us ("it will perhaps seem strange"), projecting into the future, that Alfred will not take his train, things seem to return to normal for several pages. The station is described, Alfred and the Stationmaster have a conversation as Alfred eats a bagged lunch he claims his wife has prepared for him. However, late in this conversation, the Stationmaster seems to feed Alfred his line, as if he is an actor:

> The Stationmaster looks up at him through the ticket window. After a moment, he says: "And a . . ."
>
> "And a . . . ," says Alfred, his mouth still full of half-chewed chicken leg. But his eyes are puzzled and he does not continue.
>
> "And a good . . ."
>
> "And a good wife!" cries Alfred. Both men laugh. (100)

A moment later Alfred panics as he realizes he has not replaced a knife in the bag of food his wife has given him. As casual conversation continues with the Stationmaster, Alfred suddenly interrupts himself.

> "Need a—*look!*" Alfred spins suddenly around to confront the Stationmaster, his pale blue eyes damp as though with tears. "Don't ye think maybe this time I could—?"
>
> "Need a little . . . ," intones the Stationmaster softly, firmly.
>
> Alfred sighs . . . "Need a little rain," he says glumly. (101)

All is not right, though the reader remains in the dark about what exactly is going on. A moment later a drunk enters, passing out on the floor. The stationmaster scolds Alfred—"Alfred! Shame, *shame!*"—until he takes out his knife. He grasps the man's hair, presses the knife to the man's throat, then hesitates. The Stationmaster, demanding Alfred watch, picks up the knife, uses it to cut

the man's head off as Alfred weeps, then carries the corpse away. He manually turns the clock back and, as the story ends, the ritual begins all over again.

Why is this ritual being played out again and again? Is it meant to be a drama or is time somehow repeating itself? Why was Alfred chosen for the role, if it is a role rather than an absurd reality, and why must he endlessly repeat it? Once he 'gets it right,' will the ritual slaughter cease?

Coover offers no answers to any of these questions, giving little information external to the situation itself. Lois Gordon calls the story "one of Coover's most enigmatic pieces."[21] Alfred seems trapped in some kind of personal hell where, like Sisyphus rolling the same rock again and again up a slope, he is compelled to repeat the same actions, the same failure, again and again. As with many of his other stories, Coover points to the constructed quality of the story, both by demanding the reader assume the situation to be real and by allowing the dialogue in the station to break down. Considered in a metafictional sense, "In a Train Station" seems to be concerned with the breakdown of traditional form. Beginning as a traditional story, it soon starts to fall apart, to become unhinged. Alfred does not want to do what the story demands, but the stationmaster is merciless—they'll do it until they get it right. The traditional story, one could extrapolate from "In a Train Station," has become absurd, its gestures and attitudes artificial. To continue to try to repeat it again and again until it turns out right is an absurd act.

"Klee Dead" is also a story about a story failing to come together. It begins with the statement "Klee, Wilbur Klee, dies" (104). Immediately the narrator revises his statement to "Is dead, rather" and then begins to comment on the situation of the story: "I

know, I know: too soon. It should come, after a package of hopefully ingenious preparations, at the end. . . . But what's to be done? He's already gone" (104). Throughout the story, the narrator continues to address the reader. He seems confused that the story isn't coming together effectively. Instead of giving us significant information about Klee, the narrator offers series of digressions in which he speaks of the city clerk shifting Klee's file, of how death is spoken about in other languages and, for several pages, of how Millicent Gee is not dead and what she is like. Eventually he works his way back around to Klee and speaks of the circumstances of his death (jumping from a great height), though he refuses to go into his personal details: "Who was Klee, you ask? I do not know, I do not care. . . . Wilbur Klee was Wilbur Klee, that's where it starts and ends" (107). Quickly the narrator tires of Klee again, deciding instead to speak of Orval Nulin Evachefsky for several pages. Near the end he returns to Klee again as the latter's body is removed from the pavement. "Whether Klee's suicide, however, was the result of a mere disease of his private reason, or if, more simply, reason itself *was* Klee's disease, we will, I am sorry to say, never know. . . . The best we can do, finally, is to impose the soothing distortion of individuation on the luckless bastard, and I for one feel we deserve more than that, whether he does or not" (111). At the end the narrator apologizes to the reader: "I'm sorry. What can I say? Even I had expected more. You are right to be angry" (111), and offers the reader tickets to go see something else.

In the place of a traditional developed plot and standard characterization, "Klee Dead" offers scattered distracted statements, constructing a narrative out of fragmentation. Though the story is called "Klee Dead," and though the narrator begins with mention of

Klee's death, he ultimately has no real interest in Klee. "Who was Klee, you ask? I do not know, I do not care" (107). The narrator is not interested in answering the questions that a traditional story of the same title would answer. The story can be seen as a con game on the part of the narrator, a kind of show-off attempt to hold readers' attention, manipulating their expectations about what fiction does or can do. Or it can be seen as taking as its subject the thought process and the mind of the narrator. It is a fiction about the way stories are told; rather than calling attention to Klee's death, it calls attention to the process of its own telling and to the human inability, finally, to synthesize something as difficult as death. Death is hardly something you can make sense of, hardly something that can be reduced to a story.

"The Wayfarer," the last of the exemplary fictions, is a first-person narrative told by a law official who finds a wayfarer with a long beard sitting at the side of the road. When he begins to question the man, the man does not answer, refusing to be provoked. If he can get the man to speak, to answer his questions, the official knows it will be an acknowledgment on the wayfarer's part of his authority, an entering into society and acceptance of society's rules. But the wayfarer chooses to remain autonomous. Even when the officer begins to poke the man in the groin with his rifle, the man does not respond. As his questions become orders and he breaks the wayfarer's nose with his rifle butt, the man still does not respond: "still he sat, sat on that old milestone, sat and stared" (122). The narrator finally opts for more extreme tactics: "I told him if he did not speak, I would carry out my orders and execute him on the spot" (122). When the man still refuses to speak, the officer shoots him in the chest. Only after the wayfarer is slowly dying of his wounds does he begin to speak, but not in a manner the officer expects or

approves of. He speaks in a fashion unacceptable to the society, and in a mishmash of themes that set him outside of the standard and the rational: "He spoke rapidly, desperately, with neither punctuation nor sentence structure. Just a ceaseless eruption of obtuse language. He spoke of constellations, bone structures, mythologies and love. He spoke of belief and lymph nodes, of excavations, categories, and prophecies. Faster and faster he spoke. His eyes gleamed. Harmonics! Foliations! Etymology! Impulses! Suffering! His voice rose to a shriek. Immateriality patricide ideations heatstroke virtue predication —I grew annoyed and shot him in the head" (124). The consequences of being willing to think autonomously in a society that values conformity are death, either literally or symbolically. Yet, though the officer feels he has done his duty, he still remains shaken by the incident, troubled: "My mind was not entirely free of the old man. At times, he would loom in my inner eye larger than the very landscape" (124). He recovers by watching the steady and regular movement of the traffic:

> I watched the traffic. Gradually I became absorbed in it. Uniformly it flowed, quietly, possessed of its own unbroken grace and precision. There was variety in the detail, but the stream itself was one. One. The thought warmed me. It flowed away and away and the unpleasant images that had troubled my mind flowed away with it. At last, I sat up, started the motor, and entered the flow itself. I felt calm and happy. A participant. I enjoy my work. (124)

In this final gesture he returns to the social flow, becomes once again a cog in a machine that values duty and convention over

independent thought. He is participating in a system that tries to stamp out those that are different. The official culture refuses to recognize certain kinds of discourses—those of the irrational, the prophetic, the imaginative—seeing them as a threat. Coover would like to suggest that yes, they are a threat to an unthinking order, but that in their ability to make people think on their own, they free people from their socio-cultural stereotypes and restrictions. The officer is not unsympathetic, and is moved by the old man, troubled by his words, unable instantly to reduce his experience to something harmless. He is capable of becoming more autonomous than his role as a mere participant in the society allows but, afraid to be independent, he destroys the wayfarer and returns to the fold.

The narratives gathered under the title "The Sentient Lens," though not part of the exemplary fictions, were also written early in Coover's career and deserve to be talked about alongside them. Like the exemplary fictions, they bring into question the notion of narrative, ask what fiction is and could be, and challenge conventional artistic modes. In this case, Coover explores the way in which a movie camera both reproduces and shapes reality. Any artistic "lens" is sentient in the sense that the act of looking is an act of selection—you choose to look at one thing rather than another—and thus implies a consciousness or subjective presence.

"Scenes from Winter" is a vision of a winter scene viewed through a movie camera. It reads, at times, almost like a loose treatment for a movie, with the narrator both conveying a sense of a developing image and giving directions such as "No sound, it gets going in utter silence" (168). John Dos Passos has used similar

techniques in “The Camera Eye” sections of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, and perhaps Coover was influenced by him here—certainly Dos Passos’s influence can be felt in Coover’s novel *The Public Burning.* As the scene progresses, the camera responds to sounds, pausing for a moment when ice cracks wood, following the sound of footprints in the snow to a white rabbit, then moving to a dog that seems to be stalking it. Initially giving the impression of being in the woods, the camera eventually focuses on objects to reveal a park. A sleigh passes and then a man appears, walking toward the camera. Tension builds. He comes closer, lights a cigarette, and then the narrator describes over the course of several paragraphs how he urinates in the snow and then begins to laugh. Curiously though, his laughter does not seem to match his expression, which is terrified. The camera pans away and for a moment reveals, “as though in a memory,” the man’s face again, “but we gradually perceive that it is not the man at all, no, it is only the face of the white rabbit” (174) being held in the dog’s jaws.

Throughout the story, the reader is given hints as to how to respond to what he or she is seeing, the narrator establishing a first-person-plural (we) voice so as to include the reader. The narrator suggests to the reader what he or she is feeling, giving a sense of how to interpret the visual images presented. For instance, “The man’s face is familiar, someone we know, or have at least seen before, or much *like* someone we have seen before” (170). Yet, the significance of the switch from the rabbit to the man—the equation of the two—he does not comment on, does not endow with a broader symbolic value. The narrator even guides readers through their misperceptions and gradual shifts from one perception to another. By making the camera sentient, Coover makes the reader

experience a movie in a way that would be impossible in a strictly visual form. He allows fiction to appropriate the medium and transform it into something only fiction can achieve.

The second piece, "The Milkmaid of Samaniego," continues this mixture of objective vision and inclusion of the reader, the narrator endowing the reader with certain responses. In this case, Coover offers a pastoral scene: an old man sits at the foot of a bridge staring idly into a small stream, while a milkmaid approaches. The narrator feels the need to indicate that a milkmaid will be approaching even before she appears: "we've nothing present to suppose it, except the realization perhaps of being, vaguely, in the country somewhere, yet nevertheless it is true: there is, though we do not now see her, a milkmaid approaching" (194). He suggests that the situation itself is something that has a long artistic history, is a cultural type, "almost as though there has been some sort of unspoken but well understood prologue, no mere epigraph of random design, but a precise structure of predetermined images, both basic and prior to us, that describes her to us before our senses have located her" (175). In other words, in a movie that takes place in the country, a milkmaid is bound to appear. The narrative offers ample description of the maid and "her full breasts, fuller perhaps than we had expected" (176). The narrator struggles to keep the lens focused on her rather than on the somewhat tattered man at the foot of the bridge. Suddenly, the milkmaid is in a farmyard beside "a tall lad, dark and fine-boned with flashing brown eyes and bold mouth" (177). Significant glances are exchanged, the youth gazing "at her in wonderment, at her gently blushing fair-skinned cheeks" (177). A pastoral and innocent love seems to be developing, but suddenly

the boy assaults her, begins tearing at her dress, the pastoral expectations the story has so far offered being shattered. In the struggle, she drops her pitcher.

As she does so, the farmyard scene and the boy dissolve, leaving her alone with the spilled pitcher next to the bridge. Without explanation everything has vanished. The man on the bridge helps her set the pitcher aright, but he frightens her. Only gradually does she begin to trust him and to pay attention to him, as he shows her a handful of gold and silver coins, either offering to buy the pitcher from her or trying to buy sex or merely showing the money; it is not clear which. The story ends with the pitcher slipping down the hill and shattering.

The story suggests that fixed cultural forms, the way those forms define us, are ultimately damaging. Stereotypes are deceiving and have little to do with reality. Just as the creation of myths tends to take one view of a story and disallow other points of view and other "non-useful" information, character types and stock settings tend to be very limiting. Readers and viewers think they know about characters because of the way they dress, act, and are described, but a rosy-cheeked milkmaid may be more than she seems, while a seemingly innocent young man might not fit the expectation with which a pastoral setting would stereotypically endow him. Hiding within the conventions of the form are more sordid desires. The figure on the bridge, who seems initially the conventional dirty old man, ultimately might have more to him than his appearance suggests, though again the ambiguity of the story's ending, where one cannot be certain what the money intends to buy, makes it difficult to say what the man exactly is. That he sits at the foot of a bridge,

however, suggests that he marks the crossing point into another sort of life for the girl. Like "The Door"'s threshold, the bridge is a symbolic passage into adulthood.

In "The Leper's Helix," the final piece in "The Sentient Lens" series, the camera focuses on a leper who is approaching a camera that circles around him, causing him to describe a spiraling path. As the camera's speed decreases, the leper comes closer and is described in grotesque detail. Eventually, the leper "hurls himself into our arms, smothering us, pitching us to the red clay, his sticky cold flesh fastening to us . . . we lie, I lie, helpless under the sickening weight of his perishing flesh" (182). The "we" that has been the narrative voice of all three stories has fragmented into an "I" and a "you," with the narrator distinguishing himself from the viewer/reader. The narrator is trapped beneath the leper's decaying body while the you, the reader, remains at a safe remove.

The narrator frees himself, begins to dig a hole to bury the leper but grows weary and waits, appealing to either the reader or the writer or both to help finish the job: "We wait, as he waited for us, for you. Desperate in need, yet with terror. What terrible game will *you* play with *us*? me" (182). The narrator now recognizes himself as a manipulable entity, realizes that the same games he has played with his borrowed camera could be played against him as well. He is left at the mercy of the writer and reader, the story ending with him suspended, beside the dead body, eternally waiting for help.

Lois Gordon suggests of "The Sentient Lens" stories that they "exemplify the transformational process of perceiving and translating experience, the relationship between the world, sense perception, thought and verbalization."[22] In *The Origin of the Brunists*, this relationship was dealt with on the complex level of perceiving

experience and then translating it into the symbolic realm, moving from experience to myth-making. In these stories, however, the narrator offers a relatively straightforward description of how things are and then provides as an overlay a translation of how readers should feel about what they are seeing, how they should respond to it on a visceral level and, at least in some stories, what the next levels of response are.

For Gordon, these stories are "among Coover's most impressive metafictions" as well as "lyrical and exquisite word-paintings."[23] Yet they are word-paintings in a very impressionistic sense—as in impressionist painting, the emotion evoked by what is perceived is included in the way the object is framed and defined. Here, however, the process is slowed down—the narrative voice shows us something and then moves into an interior space, shows the thoughts the objects begin to provoke. The voice does this subtly, by using careful modifiers. The man's eyelashes in the first story, for instance, are described as "strangely prominent," the word "strangely" implying how readers should feel about what they see.

The range of these perceptions and the degree of commentary on these perceptions change from story to story. "Scenes from Winter" stops short of offering us the next step, of moving into symbolic identification. There are gestures toward this—the rabbit, the dog's jaws, for instance, and the way they are momentarily confused with the unknown man's face—but they remain evasive, not quite significant enough to give a symbolic unity to any given story. Instead, Coover asks us to focus more closely on the basic processes of perception itself.

In the second story, "The Milkmaid of Samaniego," Coover provides a situation that seems part of the pastoral genre, and the

narrator's comments in this case try create an awareness of this. The story is moving away from the basic perception of objects to the larger issue of the cultural ramifications of perception. Perception is predetermined by expectations about what a milkmaid culturally represents.

In the final story, "The Leper's Helix," the narrative device that controls the perception in the other stories is called into question. While in one sense the reader is one with the narrator, perceiving what he perceives, in another sense the reader remains outside, as if perceiving a movie. The narrator remains behind the camera, inside the story, filming a reality that the reader experiences through the filter of language. As the writer writes, as the reader reads what the writer has written, events play themselves out, bringing the narrator into conjunction with a dying leper. When the narrator is no longer able to maintain the first-person plural, realizing that it is not "We lie" but "I lie, under the sickening weight of his perishing flesh" (182), he draws attention to the nature of fiction, the way in which fiction both allows readers to share other perceptions, other physical and mental positions in other places, yet at the same time preserves them from the full impact of these positions.

"The Elevator," which follows the exemplary fictions, is about Martin, a man riding the service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works. The story is divided into fifteen fragments, one for each floor of the building (counting the basement), each of them a permutation of the experience of riding an elevator. Each of these may be a series of absurd events from different days of riding the elevator, but they are more likely to be a series of imagined possibilities for an elevator trip: a proliferation of different versions of

possible realities, similar to those found in "The Magic Poker" and "The Babysitter."

These versions of reality vary substantially. In the first, Martin, who has always gone up, impulsively decides to press the button for the basement, imagining he is descending into hell. But when the doors open he sees only an ordinary basement. In other sections, he is harassed by co-workers, fantasizes about having a sexual encounter while the elevator falls, imagines meeting Death, and fancies himself deified for the size of his penis. In the final section, which has an ellipsis after the section number—suggesting the permutations could continue endlessly—several fantasy lines are continued without being concluded (sex as the elevator falls, Martin's God-like stature) while Martin decides to take the stairs rather than the elevator. "Halfway up, he hears the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash below" (137). This final passage, while it provides a kind of closure through the destruction of the mechanism of the story itself, is simply one more version that may or may not be real.

There is finally no way of determining which of the sections of "The Elevator" are meant to be taken as real, which are fantasy. Some are more plausible than others, but any could be the subject of a traditional story. The third-person narrator seems to take what is likely to be a fairly humdrum moment in a person's day—the act of riding an elevator—and embroiders around it. Coover is not concerned with what usually happens in an elevator; he is interested in what possibly *could* happen, in the range of possibilities. He moves the story away from the real and into the realm of imagination, leaving it suspended there, the play of possibilities being more exciting than any single thing that could occur.

"Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady" takes on a traditional pairing at least as old as the nursery rhyme "Jack Sprat." The male narrator opens by acknowledging "many stories have been told, songs sung, about the Thin Man and the Fat Lady," suggesting in addition that they are a metaphor for male and female sexual relations (138). But despite the conventional nature of the duo, they stand for something larger. "We are all Thin Men. You are all Fat Ladies" (138).

In this telling, the Thin Man and the Fat Lady are circus freaks, each driven to try to change his or her condition to please the other. The Thin Man wants to put on some muscle, while the Fat Lady wants to lose some weight. Yet the Ringmaster demands they maintain their extremes. He threatens to take action when the Thin Man begins beefing up and the Fat Lady starts slimming down. Unhappy, they grow despondent until the rest of the circus rises up to slaughter the Ringmaster.

After the murder of the Ringmaster, the Thin Man and the Fat Lady's respective beefing up and slimming down seem all roses, the couple very much in love. The circus people notice how well they're doing and feel they've set out on something altogether new: "I mean, you *go* along for years, see, thinking you got a Ringmaster on accounta you gotta have one. Ever see a circus without a Ringmaster? No. Well, that just goes to show you how history can fake you out" (142), suggests a performer. Another says: "Suddenly it hits you, see. All your life you been looking at circuses and you say, that's how circuses are. But what if they ain't? What if that's all a goddam myth propagated by Ringmasters? You dig? What if it's all open-ended?" (142).

Yet very quickly people stop visiting the stalls of the Formerly Fat Lady and the Formerly Thin Man. People don't want a slim Fat Lady and a muscled Thin Man; they want the pair to be the types they have come to expect. They do not want complications. Though at first in denial, the circus eventually gives in to the marketplace and gives up the dream of a different kind of circus. Unhappy again, the pair try to return to their original roles, fight, and separate. When the Fat Lady is sold by the Thin Man (who has stepped into the role of Ringmaster) to a rival circus, the narrator becomes distraught: "But wait! See what we have come to! The Fat Lady separated from her inseparable Thin Man! . . . Our metaphor, with time, has come unhinged! A rescue is called for!" (146). Rescue comes when the Thin Man is sold "never mind why or how" to the rival circus as well (146). They're together again, says the narrator, and "our precious metaphor" has thus been maintained. "Yet," the narrator acknowledges, "somehow, strangely, it has lost some of its old charm . . . we nevertheless return home somehow dissatisfied" (147).

The reason for this, the narrator admits, might well be that "perhaps it is ourselves who are corrupted. . . . Maybe it's just that we've lost a taste for the simple in a world perplexingly simple" (147). When the metaphor loses its power for the audience and the circus must revitalize itself, the Thin Man and the Fat Lady are made to ride a rocket, their original sexual metaphor being sublated and joined to another, newer, more exciting metaphor.

Coover is commenting ironically on writers who run after fashion, give in to the marketplace, give the public what they want rather than allowing their work to move in new directions and thus challenge the public. He also acknowledges here how difficult it is

to break with the old metaphors, to move fiction away from what people have come to expect. One is caught between the monotony of the old metaphors and the flash of something new—the writer doing serious work in the space between.

"Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl" takes a relatively realistic situation and transforms it. Quenby and Swede live on the banks of a lake with their daughter Ola, earning their living by running hunting and fishing trips. Carl comes to the lake every summer to fish. Narrated in fragments, some in second person (the "you" referring to Carl) but most in third person, the story develops gradually, with some of the early fragments only being given a context later. As with others of Coover's permutive short stories, it is possible that some of the fragments are imagined by Carl, though there aren't the same direct and intense contradictions that are sometimes found in the fragments in a story like "The Magic Poker" or "The Babysitter." Still, Coover makes a few gestures toward the tentative, suggesting for instance, after having Swede be an active presence in the story, that "perhaps Swede is long since dead, and Carl only imagines his presence" (163).

In one story line, the one that opens the piece, Carl and Swede sit in a stalled boat on the lake in the middle of the night. Carl, who has slept with Quenby and swam naked with Ola, is nervous, worried about what Swede knows. He suspects that Swede has brought him out on the lake to kill him. "You know what's going on out here, don't you? You're not that stupid. You know why the motor's gone dead, way out here, miles from nowhere. You know the reason for the silence" (161). As they wait, Carl tries to cover his nervousness by pretending to be macho. A second story line involves a party at the barbecue pit after Swede has returned from a trip, with Ola

recounting the story of Swede throwing her cat up in the air and shooting it. She tells the story as if it were a joke. It gives insight into Swede's character, increases the menace in the first narrative line (Swede and Carl on the boat) by showing us Swede may well be capable of violence. In addition, it gives just a hint of how difficult Quenby and Ola's lives must be with Swede around. A third and fourth involve respectively Carl's approach to Quenby and his swimming naked with Ola. Both lines might be fantasies on Carl's part, though one cannot say for certain. The final sequence of fragments is primarily descriptions of the lake and surroundings.

Coover expertly maintains the tension of the story, bringing us into Carl's fear and keep us there while allowing the reasons for that fear to become clear gradually. Swede remains a mysterious figure, except for Carl's limited conversation with him and Ola's story about what Swede did to her cat. Though he seems to be brutal, and Carl imagines that life for Quenby and Ola might be unpleasant, Swede is so threatening precisely because he remains a cipher. The story ends remarkably with nobody dead, Carl and Swede still in the boat, and Ola speculating on the death of her cat. In the place of Freitag's pyramid—rising action, climax, and denouement—Coover offers another pattern: an opening tension which only intensifies as the story progresses. There is no resolution to the story, just as there is seldom full resolution in life. The reader is left with the situation unresolved, the story like a loaded gun, heavy and menacing but not yet fired.

In "A Pedestrian Accident" Coover returns to his interest in absurd situations, transforming an accident into a sort of theater-spectacle. The story opens with the words: "Paul stepped off the curb and got hit by a truck" (183). As Paul lies injured on the ground, the

truckdriver gets out but rather than seeing if Paul is okay he begins to blame Paul, claiming that the accident was his fault. When a police officer arrives, the situation seems to get no better: "And with that it started up again, same as before, the clamor, the outrage, the arguments, the learned quotations, but louder and more discordant than ever. I'm hurt, Paul said. No one heard" (186). Everyone is so caught up in the accident as a kind of event that they pay little attention to Paul and his injuries. Coover puts a lot of weight on the absurdity of the situation, the way in which Paul lies dying but ignored, the way in which those around him fail to respond as one would expect them to. When the policeman finally does crouch down beside him to get his side of the story, Paul finds himself unable to speak aloud. The policeman does not seem to notice the seriousness of his condition, continuing to speak to him as if he is unharmed:

> "What's your name, lad?" he asked, turning back to Paul. At first, the policeman smiled . . . but gradually it faded. "Come, come, boy! Don't be afraid!" He winked, nudged him gently. "We're here to help you."
>
> Paul, Paul replied. But no, no doubt about it, it was jammed up in there and he wasn't getting it out.
>
> "Well, if you won't help me, I can't help you," the policeman said pettishly and tilted his nose up. (187)

In what follows, Paul lies helpless as a woman named Mrs. Grundy appears, playing theatrically to the crowd, calling Paul "Amory Westerman" and claiming he was her lover. She and the policeman develop a kind of comic routine while Paul continues to die. He thinks, watching their performance: "*I'm* the strange one" (190).

When they finally get around to calling for a doctor, Paul finds the man who shows up terrifying somehow: "I'm in trouble, thought Paul. Oh boy, I'm really in trouble" (197). In fact, the doctor orders the truckdriver to drive his truck over Paul, further ruining him. Eventually Paul finds himself dying and abandoned in the street, alone except for a dog who takes some of his flesh and a beggar waiting to take his clothing. "How much longer must this go on? he wondered. How much longer?" (205). He continues to wonder as the story ends.

"The Babysitter," Coover's best known story, culminates many of the techniques used in the other stories found in *Pricksongs & Descants*. Like "The Gingerbread House," "The Magic Poker," "The Elevator," and "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl," the story is told in narrative fragments. In the course of more than one hundred paragraphs, each set off by space breaks, Coover develops several hundred different possible events and sequences. The fragments of different narratives are deftly juxtaposed and deliberately allowed to contradict one another. They explore the relation of fantasy to reality without giving one primacy over the other, explode the coming of age story, and offer a wild party that serves as the precursor to Coover's wilder shindig in the novel *Gerald's Party.*

The story concerns a babysitter who arrives at the Tucker's house to babysit at 7:40 P.M. It pursues anything that could possibly happen between that time and ten in the evening, both in the Tucker's home and at the party the Tucker parents are attending. Almost anything that could possibly happen in a babysitting experience does, including a good many things that rarely if ever happen at all. The third-person narrator presents each event, many mutually exclusive, as if it were a reality. There is no clear line drawn in the

story between fantasy and reality. The relation between the external world and the interior world of the imagination has been abolished on the page. Television shows which characters watch seem to take over the larger story, rape and playing pinball get confused, people peep in windows, events at the party seem to trickle back into the Tucker's home, and nearly all the characters' fantasies spring to life. Coover refuses to choose one possibility over all the others. As William H. Gass says of the story, "our author says yes to everything; we've been reading a remarkable fugue, the stock fears and wishes, desires and dangers of our time done into Bach."[24]

Roughly speaking, the story can be worked into a chronology, one which Coover manipulates through the course of his narrative. In the first twenty minutes or so, the babysitter shows up and the Tuckers leave for the party, the babysitter feeds the children, her friends Mark and Jack awkwardly contemplate rape as they play pinball, and the children wrestle with the babysitter. In the next hour, the children make up reasons why they should not have to go to bed, Mr. Tucker imagines himself making love to the babysitter, Mrs. Tucker is not certain that she trusts the babysitter, the babysitter refuses to let Jack and Mark come over after telling them they can, Jack and Mark rape the babysitter, Jack saves the babysitter from being raped by Mark, Mr. Tucker fantasizes about seducing the babysitter, the babysitter fails to get Jimmy Tucker to take a bath but allows him to wash her back while she bathes, Jack and Mark call the babysitter on the phone and watch through a window as she gets in and out of a tub. Mr. Tucker catches Jack making love to the babysitter then rapes her himself, catches the boys raping the babysitter outside, sends Jack home without any clothing, sings "I dream of Jeannie with the light brown pubic hair." From nine to ten,

most of what has happened before all happens again, with new variations, the chronology confusing itself and events seeming to occur out of place. The party the Tuckers are attending becomes an attempt to get Mrs. Dolly Tucker back into her girdle by greasing her with butter. The babysitter drowns and suffocates the baby. Jack and Mark drown the babysitter. The babysitter does the dishes and falls asleep.

As a last act Coover offers two very different concluding paragraphs, representing the two extremes of possibility:

> She wakes, startled to find Mr. Tucker hovering over her. "I must have dozed off!" she exclaims. "Did you hear the news about the babysitter?" Mrs. Tucker asks. "Part of it," she says, rising. "Too bad, wasn't it?" Mr. Tucker is watching the report of the ball scores and golf tournaments. "I'll drive you home in just a minute, dear," he says. "Why, how nice!" Mrs. Tucker exclaims from the kitchen. "The dishes are all done!"

followed by:

> "What can I say, Dolly?" the host says with a sigh, twisting the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers. "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV, the news is over, and they're selling aspirin. "Hell, *I* don't know," she says. "Let's see what's on the late late movie."

Mrs. Tucker seems to have more of a reaction to the dishes being done than she does to the destruction of her life. The characters in the story seem either to react on a superficial level or not to react at all, often both at different times in different situations. They are caught up in their own fantasies and desires, and there seems to be little genuine human interaction between them.

"The Babysitter" is metafiction at its best. It not only forces us to think about fiction, about how stories are put together, but it also gives us all the enjoyment that one—or several—conventional and suspenseful stories might provide. It offers a critique of the concerns of contemporary life, points out the superficialities of lives whose most intense relationships seem to be with the TV. In the place of the purified, monolithic, and officially sanctioned myths of the dominant order, in place of rarefied stories with a moral message, in place of realism or sexploitation or suspense, Coover offers a piece of fiction that gives all the versions, that offers all the merry and not so merry possibilities of life. It is a story that quivers with possibility without ever gelling into one narrative. "The Babysitter" represents all that fiction usually discards, all it tends to repress.

"The Hat Act" can be read as a denouement for the volume, as an epilogue or cooling down after "The Babysitter." It is the script for a magic show, complete with stage directions and indications of audience response. Beginning by pulling a rabbit out of a hat, then hats out of hats, the magician quickly engages in more technically challenging tricks, including pulling his own assistant from his hat and pulling his own head out of a hat. Each time he does a trick, the audience expects more, not offering their support unless the current trick is clearly more challenging and dazzling than the one before. Near the end of the act the magician becomes upset with his

assistant in the hat, throws the hat on the floor and stamps on it, apparently killing her, after which a large man and a country boy tie him up and drag him away.

Says Lois Gordon of the story "What he implies is that after a series of truly fabulous tricks, the artist must capitulate to the jeers and hostility of his highly critical and demanding audience."[25] As Larry McCaffery has contended, the magician functions as a symbol of the fiction-maker in Coover's work, as well as a symbol for Coover himself. For McCaffery: "like the magician, Coover continually presents the fabulous and improbable to surprise us and jar us out of our expectations. Like the magician's audience, the reader is forced to view the ordinary perpetually transformed into new shapes and patterns. Indeed, the magician in 'The Hat Act' is representative of all the fiction-makers in Coover's work. . . . All these characters are actively engaged in the magical transformation of daily reality into their own systems."[26] Yet the magician can only do so much, and in the end his act itself, which initially might please the audience, is also that which destroys him. The audience enjoys the performance as long as it keeps getting better and as long as it stays within certain boundaries, but if it moves into indecent or troubling space, they're quick to tie the magician up, keep him from practicing his art. The audience is fickle, eager both to cheer and to boo, but the artist does what he can. The story ends with words that can be read as a comment on the volume as a whole: "THIS ACT IS CONCLUDED/THE MANAGEMENT REGRETS THERE/WILL BE NO REFUND" (256). Like the magician, Coover has entertained, has taken risks, has perhaps come to some unexpected and sometimes shocking results, but in the end he has accomplished what he has accomplished and the show is over.

A Theological Position: Plays

Drama, plays, spectacle, and ritual have played an important role in much of Coover's fiction; it is not surprising, therefore, that he has in the course of his career turned his talents to writing plays, often with great success. *The Kid*, one of four plays in *A Theological Position*, received three Obie awards. The plays continue many of the same explorations of Coover's fiction. They look carefully at the role myth has in human life, at the necessity of fiction to the human imagination, and at the perversion of fiction into dogma.

In *The Kid*, Coover takes on Hollywood's version of the Wild West, translating the almost stereotypical image of the showdown between Sheriff and villain into a passion play. The conflict is between two types. The first is a Sheriff who is tall and lean, very similar to Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, "*one of those soft-spoken goodguy worrier types from the Western flicks*" (13). The dialogue plays with the clichés of Westerns as well, complete with ballads about the Kid.

As the play opens, the bandit, who is the Sheriff's archrival and the second type, is about to show up. One might expect the play to explore in detail the interactions between the Sheriff, the Kid, and the townspeople, the play climaxing, as so many Westerns do, in a shoot-out which will leave only the Kid or the Sheriff standing. The first twenty pages or so build up an impressive tapestry of legend and fact around the Kid, making him into a larger-than-life figure. He moves "acrosst the grasslands like white lightnin!" (15), and he is described, despite all his nasty badness, as "the Savior of the West" (18). The play sings: "When the killin's all done/They aint anyone/Left standing 'cept fer the Kid!/He's the number one gun,/ And fer him it's jist fun,/Surveyin all the dead!" (18).

When the Kid finally shows up he is described in the stage directions as "a real impressive piece of magical meanness" (24). Without speaking, he engages in a series of elaborate gun tricks, shooting away bottles and shooting hats off heads, shooting cards out of decks, demonstrating his skill and declaring that he is the fastest gun in the West and more than a match for the Sheriff.

Yet when the Sheriff shows up, and they both draw, the result is not what the commentary and ballads have led us to expect:

> The Kid *suddenly whirls and draws.* The Sheriff *draws simultaneously, and there's an explosive exchange of gunfire.* The Sheriff, *almost disbelievingly, remains standing, as* The Kid, *surprised at his own wound, slowly crumples. Prolonged shocked silence, as* The Kid *sinks to the floor and dies. . . .*
>
> Sheriff: Hey! I'll be durned! Hey, I—I *done* it! I got him, boys! *I got the Kid!*
>
> Cowpokes *stare at* The Sheriff *with astonishment, disappointment, even some gathering disgust. . . .*
>
> Cowpoke 125: *(genuinely upset)* Aw shucks, Sheriff! Yuh fucked it up! (39)

The play grinds momentarily to a halt, the Sheriff's deputy slipping out of his role as a bumbling sidekick and gathering the cowpokes around him as they try to figure out what to do for the remainder of the play, how to redeem the myth they've been creating. The archetypal situation has not played out as it was meant to, and now they must scramble to figure out what to do next. Quickly they recover, getting the Sheriff drunk so he can't do further damage as the Deputy takes over and begins to tell stories about the Sheriff, establishing a

legend around him just as they've established one around the Kid. Before long they've recast the drunken and confused Sheriff as "*a kind of makeshift ragtag KID*" (66), something the Sheriff resists. As they praise him and dress him up, he refuses to take the lines they feed him, refuses to fall into the spirit of the new myth being created. When they proclaim him the new fastest gun in the West, he protests further, attempting to negate the possibility of a new legend:

> See, what I'm trying tuh tell yuh, boys, is that they ain't no such thing as the fastest gun in the West. Yes! *That's* what I'm tryin tuh say! Me and the Kid there, see, it jist happened like. It don't mean a thing. . . . The fastest gun, well, we jist made all that up. See, yuh gotta learn that. I seen it soon as I seen the Kid go down. If sombody'd only told the Kid, why, mighta saved his life. Now . . . now, I know how bad you wanna believe it. I ain't no different boys, I wanna believe it too. . . . I mean, it'd be easy for me tuh pretend, tuh take yuh all in, make yuh think I'm something I ain't, and all the easier cuz it's what yuh *want* me tuh do! Yuh think yuh *need* it. But you're wrong, boys! Yuh gotta face up to it! (69–70)

Yet, like anyone who wants to disrupt the myths that society finds comfortable, the Sheriff is met with extreme resistance. He is told to shut up. The drama continues with the Sheriff a reluctant and unwilling participant, transformed by the words of others into the Kid, the Kid's pistols in his hands blasting away of their own accord. The cowpokes tell the same old story, making him fulfill the

role he wants them to recognize as unnecessary. The Sheriff tries to get out of the role, but when he persists they choose to hang him, sacrificing him so as to keep their myths intact.

The shorter *Love Scene* focuses on a director's attempt to get a love scene right. The actors are unable to play the scene with passion and real emotion. The director, a disembodied voice offstage, attempts to spark some fire in his actors by presenting them with clichéd stories about romance. Unable to move beyond these clichés, however, he is unable to inspire the actors. When romance fails, he brings a third actor on stage with a gun, demanding that he shoot the couple since "They're all used up. They're not worth shit anymore" (97). If sex won't come off, perhaps violence will. "There they are, man," the director encourages the third actor, "the whole western world, all that lunacy, all that history, A to Z—shoot 'em!" (97). Once the old metaphors lose their efficacy and become clichés, the implication is, the whole tradition that is based on these metaphors is all used up and must be abandoned.

Rip Awake is a dramatic monologue that serves as a follow-up to Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." As in "The Door," Coover is interested in pursuing the tale that serves as the catalyst for the play out past where the tale itself ended, to the tale's aftermath. While Irving's story ends with Rip's realization that he has slept for twenty years, with that moment of recognition, Coover's monologue tells what happens after that. After his long sleep, Rip has difficulty distinguishing between reality and his dreams. Afraid to fall asleep again, he tries to stay awake, begins to suffer hallucinations, imagining he is talking to people he knows are dead. The hallucinations cause him to kill his daughter and shoot his dog, the waking dreams intruding on his reality and changing his response to it. He even

begins to think of himself in his current state as someone conjured up by the Dutchmen: "The way I figure it, it was Old Rip they invented, old Rip Van Winkle they conjured up in that flagon of hollands" (117). He has a sense of himself as a fiction, yet, knowing nothing about the fact that he is a character from a story by Washington Irving, he blames the Dutchmen, who are also part of the fiction. By the end of the play, he has begun to hike back up into the mountains to face the Dutchmen who originally put him to sleep, hoping they will set things right: "we're gonna come to some kind of peace and understanding, or ninepins ain't the only things gonna come rolling down the mountain!" (117).

The title play, *A Theological Position*, begins with a conversation between a priest and a husband, as a wife sits nearby, silent. The initial "position" is the church's position against the possibility of a second virgin birth. The husband, however, insists his wife is six months pregnant despite his never having ejaculated inside of her. Faced with this difficulty, the priest remains adamant. "Even if," the priest suggests, "it should occur: *we could not permit it!*" (129–30).

After making the position clear, the priest, at the man's suggestion, has sex with the woman so as to remove her virginity (the fact that this will occur well after the pregnancy is a technicality, he insists). He does, gingerly and anxiously at first and then with more enthusiasm, and with the husband's encouragement. But he too finds himself unable to ejaculate inside the woman, finds rather that near the end her vagina is biting his penis. "I sort of forgot to mention that part" (156), the husband confides, and then states as well that his wife's vagina has been speaking aloud for several months, which in fact it now begins to do, criticizing them for their sexual

insensitivity: "Trouble is," the vagina says, "you boys get misled by the rigidity, secundum quid, of your own organs. . . . You work up a hard-on and like it so much you call it a system, but you're afraid of orgasm and call it death!" (162). The vagina has been telling the husband what she calls "a history of cunts" because "she'd had enough assaults on the world by the old sausage gods" (164). The husband's response is framed in chauvinist terms: "I mean, god-damn it, I've had enough! I work hard, the world is tough, I need a place to relax, somebody to help me find a moment's peace! I deserve it! How can she understand how it is for me? I mean, I care for her, I respect her, I love her—but we all have our work, we all have our place, and she has hers! . . . I'M JUST NOT GONNA PUT UP WITH THIS KINDA SHIT AROUND THE HOUSE!!" (166–67). When the priest tries to shut the orifice with his hand, she bites him. When he threatens to burn her, the vagina responds "That's right, anything you don't understand, kill it, that's your road to salvation, your covenant with holy inertia! Kill and codify!" (168).

Desperate to get her vagina to stop talking, the priest stabs the woman and kills her. As the woman dies she speaks out of her actual mouth for the first time: "You . . . you have hurt me . . . !" (171). Shortly after, the husband's penis speaks for the first time: "Now we didn't need to do that" (171). The priest's penis follows suit: "We got carried away" (172), the play ending with both male organs admitting "After all, there's something to be said for talking cunts" (172).

A Theological Position can be read as a warning against man's tendency to reduce everything to rational terms, an attack on the male desire to codify and organize things to death. It is an attack on the monolithic, a plea to keep very human and not altogether

rational activities from developing into rigid systems. The vagina must be shut up so as to keep the system unchallenged—according to the system, cunts (both literally and as a slang term for women) should not be allowed to have their say; they should sit back and be quiet and enjoy what they get. Coover suggests that more attention should be paid to "the soft letter of the soft law" (162) in lieu of choosing an ascetic and restricted "position."

CHAPTER THREE

The Public Burning

Despite having been quickly squelched by a publisher nervous of a lawsuit, *The Public Burning* remains one of Coover's most acclaimed and most well-respected works of fiction.[1] It is one of the first works of American fiction to use undisguised living historical figures, such as Richard Nixon, as primary characters; it cut new ground, ground which later writers such as David Foster Wallace and Max Apple have exploited. At 534 pages, it is Coover's longest and perhaps most elaborate work to date.

Coover began working on *The Public Burning* shortly after the appearance of *The Origin of the Brunists*. The book "began as a play, but then I thought it was awkward in that form; so . . . I played with the idea as fiction."[2] Disappointed with the American public's willingness to forget the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg treason executions and the events that led up to them, Coover was interested in bringing them back into public consciousness. For Coover, the Rosenberg case was a "watershed event in American history, and we'd all repressed it. So it occurred to me then to restage it—with special added attractions—in Times Square, where we could all have another look at it."[3] As he explained to Larry McCaffery, Coover initially saw this restaging as quite literal, and thought of creating a piece of radical street theater.[4]

Even though Coover abandoned the idea of writing the work as a play, the final novel does contain some sections written out as dramatic scenes. The book grounds its events in a carnival atmosphere, which has a family resemblance to drama. At its center stands the

execution of the Rosenbergs, done this time not in Sing Sing Prison but in Times Square, as the heart of a gala spectacle, a highly scripted event combining "scapegoat rituals and American showbizz" in the middle of "that dark farce known as the Cold War."[5]

Even after Coover had realized that he was going to write the book as a novel rather than as a play, the project went through several important transitions. He originally conceived of it as a novella, though as he did more research, the project began to take on a life and shape of its own. The project did not begin to come together until 1969, when Richard Nixon was inaugurated as President. Nixon, who had been Vice President during the Rosenberg trials, struck Coover as the ideal clown, as a perfect figure to serve as the first-person narrator for a good portion of the book. He was someone who might be able to hold the book together by providing contrast to the narrative gestures and the dazzling stylistics of the third-person sections. For Coover, the novel "grew out of my concept of the book as a sequence of circus acts. That immediately brought to mind the notion of clown acts, bringing the show back down to the ground. You have a thrilling high-wire number, and then the clown comes on, shoots off a cannon, takes a pratfall, drops his pants and exits. And then you can throw another high-wire act at them."[6] Use of Nixon allowed Coover to create an alternating structure—sections with an unnamed and apparently omniscient narrator offering sweeping views of events and Cold War sentiment in America, alternating with sections in which Nixon expresses nervousness about his present role in the Rosenberg trial, thinking as well about his past and wondering what his future holds in store.

As William H. Gass describes in his introduction to the paperback edition of *The Public Burning,* and as Coover has elaborated in "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," Coover faced a great many obstacles trying to publish a novel containing living historical figures. Several publishers initially committed to the book and then, out of fear of a lawsuit, backed down. Although Coover completed his book in July of 1975, it was not published by Viking until 1977, and then only under circumstances that were far from ideal. Despite being nominated for a National Book Award, *The Public Burning* quickly disappeared (helped along by its publisher) and was only reprinted in paperback in 1998.[7]

The contemporary reviews of the novel were polarized, and are probably of little importance to a long-term understanding of Coover and his achievement. Most positioned themselves either politically or morally, using the book as an excuse to assert a position rather than dealing with the book itself. The most thoughtful of the early reviews is Geoffrey Wolff's "An American Epic," appearing in *New Times,* which deals with the book on its own terms. Wolff, after a careful consideration of the novel's strengths and weaknesses, says: "I would guess that since World War II only *Lolita, Invisible Man,* and *Catch-22* are in its class for durability. But for the risks it runs, for its capacity and reach, for its literary and probably social consequence, nothing I know of written in our language since the war can touch it."[8]

Despite several other strongly favorable articles, according to Elisabeth Ly Bell, very little has changed since the book's initial critical reception; there are still "two distinct camps, with apparently no middle ground; one is either enthusiastically pro or vehemently

contra."[9] *The Public Burning* has continued to polarize critics, though the vehemence attached to this polarization seems to have faded somewhat with time, and certain areas of contention have surfaced.

The first issue involves the use of history in fiction. More specifically, how much, and what kind of, invention should a novelist be allowed when dealing with a recognizable historical moment? Says Bell: "the main hue and cry was, and still is, over the integrity of the historical record, over how far a novelist may go in treating real (and living) historical figures, over the limits of political satire and the political novel."[10] The questions these critics raise include: Is Coover's treatment a distortion of history? Does the novel have a different sort of truth than history does? Is history, in a sense, fictional narrative? How do (or do not) the fantastic elements that Coover introduces into the historical era help disclose aspects of the Cold War that a straightforward historical account would not reveal?

The Public Burning begins by invoking history. It presents itself from the outset as a historical novel. The novel starts with the words: "On June 24, 1950, less than five years after the end of World War II, the Korean War begins, American boys are again sent off in uniforms to die for Liberty, and a few weeks later, two New York City Jews, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, are arrested by the FBI and charged with having conspired to steal atomic secrets and pass them to the Russians" (3). There is nothing in this beginning to suggest that Coover is writing a piece that does not consciously imitate the actual world. There is no hint of the fantastic. This voice continues in this vein—factual, informational, authoritative, realistic—but manages, near the end of the paragraph, to slip in a bit of

information that anyone familiar with the Rosenberg case knows is not part of the historical record: "it is determined to burn them in New York City's Times Square" (3). As the narrative progresses, fantastic elements are introduced, and characters such as Uncle Sam and the Phantom come into being—personifications of different idea sets rather than actual historical characters. The historical characters, too, at times act in a way that is not historical. For instance, Ethel Rosenberg tries to seduce Richard Nixon, and Nixon responds. Time and setting seem to slip as well—Nixon seems capable of stepping through a door in Sing Sing Prison (where the Rosenbergs were actually executed) and out onto the main stage at Times Square. The rules that usually function in a historical novel—regularities of time, setting, place, not to mention a loyalty to historical accuracy, begin to slip.

In some ways, the issues *The Public Burning* raises are not dissimilar to issues concerning Coover's integration of the realistic and the fantastic that critics have raised ever since the appearance of his first novel. If a novel which seems realistic suddenly has fantastic elements then readers are put in a position where they no longer are certain how to read it. Generic and formal distinctions are devices readers use as signposts—instructing how something is to be read, how it is to be interpreted—and when those signposts change, readers may think they are on the wrong road, or that they have been led astray. A good reader, however, will be willing to abandon their belief in what literature *should* do in order to see what this particular work *will* do. A work that combines both realistic and fantastic elements may create connections that literary works with only one or the other are unable to make. Since people live in the factual world but also have a rich interior imaginative life, perhaps they

have something to gain from work such as Coover's that blurs the distinctions between realism and the fantastic.

Such an argument could be applied to a Coover work such as *The Public Burning*, which combines the historical (which it could be argued is a subset of realism, a very specific type of realism) and the fantastic in a single work of fiction. Usually fantastic fiction exists in a non-historical space, not subject to the history and rules of the actual world. For that reason, things can potentially happen that would not happen in the real world. The unlikely, even the impossible, can occur within fantastic literature. On the other hand, historical fiction is usually faithful to a historical moment; whatever happens in regard to the plot and the characters, the historical background and the feel of the period are supposed to be authentic and accurate. That accuracy is something most readers have come to rely on. Thus a work like Coover's which combines the fantastic and the historical challenges many readers. It is clear, reading *The Public Burning*, that some moments are historical and some moments are fantastic, but it is not always clear where the line between the two is. There are a great many moments that could be real or could be fantastic or some subtle combination of both. Like Nixon, struggling to keep his feet in the carnivalesque world surrounding the execution of the Rosenbergs, readers do not know where to stand.

It should be remembered that finally all fiction, whether historical or not, takes reality as its basis and then deforms it, modifying it to a lesser or greater degree. In realism, the assumption is made that the fiction should be realistic. It should imitate life. Because of this, most "laws" from life—ranging from physical laws such as gravity to ideas about what people are like—remain in

place. In historical fiction, the fiction not only imitates life as realism does, but insists on imitating a certain era or a certain place-specific notion of actual life, in capturing a historical moment. In fantastic fiction, almost anything from life can be subject to deformation—fantastic fiction writes its own laws. Pigs can fly, for instance, characters can experience sudden shifts in time and space, characters can continue to function after their heads are chopped off, and so on, as long as this is justified within the fiction itself. Fantastic fiction is not primarily or exclusively mimetic; it does not intend to provide a picture of life as it is.

Coover begins in a realistic space and then moves into the fantastic, starting with a set of given rules and then subtly breaking them as the fiction progresses. By doing so he moves from a fiction whose rules seem dictated from without, by life, to a fiction which establishes its own rules. But what Coover recognizes is that finally all rules are arbitrary—fiction can concern itself with anything, real or not. He refuses to give the consolations of fixed genre, instead throwing readers into the world of his fiction and demanding they sort things out for themselves.

The second issue which criticism of *The Public Burning* focuses on is the effectiveness of Coover's formal inventiveness and evocative power; the focus is on *the Public Burning*'s "great virtuousity, extravagance, and mastery and on its magic, mythology, and meaning."[11] Indeed, the book consists of 534 pages crammed with political opinions, historical facts, and popular culture. It provides a variety of voices and events, and seems an attempt to recreate the frenzied paranoia of the Cold War 1950s, cramming into a historical period of three days the feel of a decade. Critical reception of the book's language has been mixed, with more critics

admiring Coover's stylistic gestures than dismissing them. However, even sympathetic critics, such as Geoffrey Wolff, suggest that sometimes Coover "allows his mischief to beguile him, and lets a scene run too long, or become too extreme. . . . And in its middle sections it sometimes sags, and breaks the spell."[12]

Though this is to some extent true, equally impressive is how remarkably Coover manages to hold together a 534–page book that seems modeled after a circus. Any sagging is easily made up for by the scenes that are successful. In addition, it is important to remember that in writing *The Public Burning* Coover was entering into uncharted territory—he was creating a hybrid form whose only precedent was the Democratic and Republican conventions on the one hand and his previous novels' attempts to combine fantasy and reality on the other. Coover takes a great many risks in creating *The Public Burning;* what is remarkable is how many of those risks ended up paying off. Larry McCaffery speaks of the novel employing "a deliberate strategy of excess."[13] This can, admittedly, make for moments of frustrating reading, but the end result, McCaffery insists, is quite worth while. The book's excessive qualities put the reader in the same position as Richard Nixon. As he stumbles about trying to make sense of the Rosenberg case, bewildered by both the accumulation of data and by the odd things that seem to be happening around him, so too does the reader sift through *The Public Burning.*

Despite being out of print in the United States for twenty years, the novel has inspired a steady stream of critical attention and commentary since first appearing. Grove Press's reissue of the book in 1998 led the journal *Critique* to devote its fall 2000 issue to the novel. According to the triune of editors that put the issue together,

The Public Burning is "perhaps the most complete replenishment of the language since Whitman and (in a different way) Mark Twain . . . no writer since Melville has dived so deeply and fearlessly into this collective American dream as Coover has in this novel."[14] Considering the witch hunt nature of politics today and America's burgeoning interest in spectacle and scandal, *The Public Burning* seems remarkably current.

Coover had originally hoped to publish the novel under the title *The Public Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: An Historical Romance*, but Viking insisted on shortening the title to *The Public Burning*. The longer title gives a sense of the focus of the book, and the subtitle, "An Historical Romance," suggests up front that the book is a combination of history and romance, with "romance" being the primary term (the noun) and "history" the secondary term (a modifier of the noun). "Romance" here is used as a literary term indicating a type of fiction which involves fantastic elements and which is free of the verisimilitude demanded by realism. Thus the rejected subtitle tells the savvy reader that the book contains a mixture of the fantastic and the historical, and that the fantastic will take precedence.

The historical element of the novel focuses on the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and on the paranoid climate of the 1950s. In 1946, defeated Germany was divided into East and West, occupied by the Soviet Union on one side and Allied forces on the other. The Soviet Union was identified as the new enemy, and the United States began a "cold war" with Communism. Comforted by the fact that it had the atomic bomb and Russia did not, America felt confident.

In August 1949, Russia exploded its first atomic bomb. Americans were convinced the Russians had stolen the secret of the atomic bomb. This led to a fear that there were communist spies in the United States. Leftist opinions, which had long been an active and important part of American politics, became highly suspect. Senator Joseph McCarthy began accusing people in governmental positions of being communists. To escape McCarthy's persecution involved denying ever having had any association with the Communist Party and accusing others of being Communist sympathizers. With the fear of Russia very much on American minds, McCarthy was seen as a hero of democracy. In 1950 McCarthyism was on the rise, reaching a climax in 1952 and 1953, the time of the Rosenberg executions.

On February 2, 1950, physicist Klaus Fuchs was arrested for passing information about the atomic bomb to a Russian spy. On May 23, chemist Harry Gold was arrested and accused of being that spy. A few weeks later, David Greenglass, a former Army machinist who has been stationed at Los Alamos, the site where the atomic bomb was developed, was arrested and charged with passing secret information to the Russians. On July 17, Julius Rosenberg, the brother-in-law of David Greenglass, was accused of being part of a chain of espionage, a charge which he termed fantastic. Soon, his wife Ethel was arrested and similarly charged. Both the Rosenbergs consistently claimed innocence from the charges.

On March 6, 1951, the Rosenbergs' first trial began. After fourteen days of testimony, the Rosenbergs were found guilty and sentenced to death. After several years of numerous appeals, on June 15, 1953, the Supreme Court decided in a five to four decision to deny a final review of the Rosenberg case and then promptly recessed. After

the Supreme Court turned down the final appeal, Justice William O. Douglas (to whom Coover dedicates *The Public Burning*) was approached by two lawyers who argued that the Rosenbergs had been tried under the wrong law. On June 17, 1953, Douglas ruled that there was sufficient merit to their case to grant a stay of execution until October when the Supreme Court reconvened. However, because of rising public sentiment both in the United States and abroad, the decision was quickly made to reconvene the Supreme Court, and by Friday morning, June 19th, Douglas's stay of execution had been overturned, six to three. At eight that evening, the Rosenbergs were executed.

The Rosenberg case is important to American history for several reasons. The most notable is that the Rosenbergs were the only Americans ever to be executed for espionage. Ostensibly they were executed for stealing atomic secrets, but enough was known about the basic principles of the atomic bomb that scientists have testified that it was just a matter of time before the Russians acquired the knowledge and materials to build it. The second is that their case lies at the crux of a period of American history—it can be read as the focal point of the Cold War period, and a look at the case and its dynamics can tell us a great deal about the dynamics of American politics and paranoia at the time. Coover uses the case, and his elaboration/fictionalization of it, as a means of creating an image of the American psyche at a particular moment. Third, the case can be read as saying something about the way in which societies renew themselves. Henri Pierre, writing for the French newspaper *Le Monde*, saw the execution of the Rosenbergs as "ritual murder" with the Rosenbergs as "expiatory victims of the Cold War."[15] This notion of expiation, or atonement, is an idea that Coover picks up

on in his novel. For Coover, the execution of the Rosenbergs is used as something to bring the country together; by shedding blood, society is cleansed and renewed, bound tighter together. Coover seems to see the Rosenberg execution as an attempt of a society that is running down and falling apart, to renew itself and make its myths efficacious again.

In an interview, Coover summarizes the novel as follows: "It is the story of June 19, 1953. On that day, the Rosenbergs are burned in Times Square and all the members of the tribe are drawn to the scene. All that has happened that day happens there, in a way; everything is condensed into one big circus event."[16] Coover's achievement in *The Public Burning* comes from his ability to transform a historical event into a kind of circus, a transformation which reveals a great deal about the American political system. Coover mixes fact with fiction, moving effortlessly from one to another and using the first as the petri dish in which to grow the second.

Stylistically the novel is varied and diffuse, offering different forms of discourse and different approaches, ranging from relatively factual moments to the fantastic. These include sections in first and third person, songs, brief dramatic moments, catalogues, exhaustive lists, speeches, newspaper headlines that mysteriously change, pieces of letters, twisted Jack Benny and Marx Brothers routines, and opera. The first-person sections are told in Richard Nixon's voice, in a style that at least at the beginning is relatively close to realism. The third-person sections, however, recall Dos Passos's "The Camera Eye" newsreels in *U.S.A.*

Like *U.S.A.*, Coover's *The Public Burning* is a distinctly political book but not a topical one. Though Coover focuses his energy on a given moment of history, the Rosenberg trial and execution, he

is not interested in simply recounting the incident. Instead, Coover sees the Rosenberg trial as fodder which fiction can transform into a subtle and exacting parody of American politics. For that reason, Coover's parodic and satiric narrative seems as relevant to the politics of today as to the politics of the 1950s.

Another author frequently mentioned by critics in connection with *The Public Burning* is E. L. Doctorow, in particular his novels *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. In 1971, Doctorow published *The Book of Daniel*, a historical novel which has at its heart the espionage trial and executions of the Rosenbergs. Doctorow, however, chose to use other names, to slightly disguise the Rosenbergs, though he gives readers clues to the characters's real-life counterparts. In addition, Doctorow has spoken of using as the model for the stylistic organization of the book the television show *Laugh-In*, a variety show that aired in the late 1960s, which suggests that he had a concern for and interest in vaudeville that parallels Coover's. Like *The Public Burning*, The *Book of Daniel* has a carnivalesque quality to it. It is in fact one of Doctorow's most stylistically self-conscious books, with frequent shifts in voice, style, and scene.

Coover read *The Book of Daniel* in the autumn of 1972, and found it powerful. He has admitted that he had a difficult time at first separating his perception of the Rosenbergs from Doctorow's, and that "the conclusions he comes to are close to quite a few of mine."[17] Yet Doctorow's main character is Daniel, the son of the executed spies, and the Rosenberg's story is told retrospectively, in pieces: the book is less about them than about Daniel's development from them. Coover's book, on the other hand, is told in the moment itself and uses Nixon as its narrator. It seems equally a portrait of a developing fictional Nixon and of the Cold War. Doctorow's book,

too, despite its stylistic devices, is much more conventional and traditional in its treatment of the Rosenberg case than is *The Public Burning*—Doctorow's treatment of the historical event is straightforward and factual. Despite its narrative pyrotechnics, Doctorow's book is, historically speaking, a conventional reexamination of the Rosenberg case. By comparison, Coover's is a quite unconventional one.

Ragtime, published in 1975, shares some of the qualities of Coover's approach to history. It takes more liberties with the historical record, mostly in regard to the novel's characters, which include historical figures like Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, and Henry Ford. These figures, none of whom are central characters, act and speak in ways which, though not necessarily opposed to what they might actually have been, are not historically verifiable. The treatment of history, though more conventional and less aggressively transformative, is not dissimilar to Coover's treatment in *The Public Burning*, and Doctorow's usage of historical figures resembles Coover's use of Nixon, though Doctorow opts for dead historical figures instead of living ones. Though *Ragtime* was published too late to be an influence on Coover, it says something about the shape of American letters that two very different major American writers were simultaneously critiquing history in a similar way.

The Public Burning consists primarily of twenty-eight chapters narrated alternately by Nixon and by the anonymous third-person narrator. Breaking these chapters up into four seven-part sections are three additional pieces, called *intermezzo*, which consist, respectively, of a speech by Eisenhower (rewritten with linebreaks), a dramatic dialogue between President Eisenhower and Ethel Rosenberg, and an opera concerning Prison Director Bennett's final attempt

to get Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to confess and have a stay put on their death sentence. The book also opens with a prologue told as a newsreel, and ends with an epilogue in which Nixon is sodomized (and thus set apart for greatness) by Uncle Sam.

The first of the four sections recounts the two days before the execution, the last three the morning, afternoon, and night of the day of execution. The chapters narrated by Nixon are simpler, in first person, in the past tense. They show Nixon thinking and talking, hoping to be chosen and sanctified by Uncle Sam; they postulate his dreams and desires, his ambitions. In addition, they present Nixon as someone struggling to understand the events going on around him. Despite the fact that Coover wrote portions of the book after news of Watergate had broken, and after Nixon's resignation, Coover resists easy jabs; Nixon is not portrayed in a harsh light. The Nixon of Coover's novel is a Nixon early in his career: ambitious, unsure of himself, self-deluded, hypocritical, paranoid, sympathetic, confused, human. As William H. Gass suggests: "Coover's Richard Nixon is a rich and beautifully rendered fictional character. The real Richard Nixon is a caricature. This is one of the profound ironies of Coover's achievement. . . . The allegedly real Nixon does not speak in sentences, but in sputters and jabs. His clichés are mostly scatological. He talks like a mob boss."[18] Coover's Nixon is more three-dimensional than the media image of Nixon popularized after Watergate. His Nixon speaks and thinks in impassioned style, seems flawed but not yet dishonest.

Nixon most often seems caught between Uncle Sam (and Uncle Sam's present manifestation President Dwight D. Eisenhower) and his sympathy for the Rosenbergs. He is the linking point between the political extremes, between different ideologies, and

perhaps the only point where the two can be both seen for what they are. Nixon sees these ideologies in terms of different ways of understanding American space. For Eisenhower, who is from small-town America, "everything rural was natural, everything urban unnatural." For the Rosenbergs, Nixon postulates, "only the cities were civilized, the rest of the country untamed and barren. What was missing was the middle ingredient" (373). Nixon, politically postulating himself as belonging to the city-country space of the suburbs, sees himself as this middle ingredient: "Dwight Eisenhower and Julius Rosenberg would never understand each other, but I could understand—and contain—both. Was this to be my role?" (373).

In addition Coover has referred to Nixon as his clown,[19] and the Nixon chapters indeed provide a contrast to and relief from the dense and driven third-person sections. If the novel is a circus, then Nixon is the comic relief between death-defying feats, the clown who keeps falling down but also keeps resiliently springing to his feet. As the novel progresses, he keeps on taking pratfalls. He makes incorrect assumptions, and unwittingly steps into situations he does not know how to deal with. Nixon's clownish behavior includes mistaking anti-Rosenberg demonstrators for pro-Rosenberg demonstrators, accidentally getting horse dung all over himself, handing Uncle Sam an exploding cigar, making a fool of himself in front of any number of people, and being suddenly found on stage in Times Square with his pants down around his ankles. Yet, despite all the setbacks, Nixon keeps going. Though clownish, he is also persistent, and he manages to continue to seem human to the bitter end.

The third-person chapters have an exhaustive quality to them: they list facts, offering a wide array of information about the

Rosenbergs and their trial. Told in the present tense, these sections offer a proliferation of detail, some directly relevant to the case, some serving as background or as a means of creating the historical era. These sections play out a kind of scripted struggle between the personification of two abstract ideals. One of the two fleshed-out ideas is Uncle Sam, a.k.a. Sam Slick, representative of capitalism and the embodiment of Democracy's strengths as well as its weaknesses. He is a personification of American medicine showmanship, manifest-destinism, ugliness, and arrogance. His speech is craggy and colloquial, and according to Coover it incorporates thousands of quotations and one-liners from past presidents, political figures, and Americans of all kinds. As a representation of American politics and American history Coover's assumption was that Sam "would have picked up phrases from all those previous embodiments as well as those of all the early American settlers, revolutionaries, pioneers, war and sports heroes, movie stars, and so on. My idea was essentially that whenever Uncle Sam spoke, he would be speaking, literally, in the collective voice of the people."[20]

Sam is a personification of American attitudes. Always ready for a fight, Sam describes himself as:

> . . . the Yankee Peddler—I can ride on a flash of lightnin', catch a thunderbolt in my fist, swaller niggers whole, raw or cooked . . . Yippee! I'm wild and woolly and fulla fleas, ain't never been curried below the knees, so if you wish to avoid foreign collision, you had better abandon the ocean, women and children first! For we hold these truths to be self-evident: that God helps them what helps themselves, it's a mere

> matter of marchin'; that idelness is emptiness and he who lives on hope will die with his foot in his mouth; that no nation was ever ruint by trade; and that nothin' is sartin but death, taxes, God's glowin' Covenant, enlightened self-interest, certain unalienated rights, and woods, woods, woods, as far as the world extends! (7)

Patriotic, scrappy, and unrefined, Sam is the embodiment of the upstart American ideal. He represents the system, the rule of law, the principles that went into the founding of America (both the stated ones and the unstated self-interested ones), the forces of control that keep American society as it is. He is the silent majority.

The other fleshed-out idea is the Phantom: an embodiment of anything opposed to order, of anything that challenges the comforting myths of middle America. It is the shadow or threat that falls upon the order in power, the potential for threat found everywhere. Communism is a convenient scapegoating name for it, but the Phantom represents a great deal more than Communism: it is any threat to the status quo. Any sign of a weakening of the current order is blamed on the Phantom, from coffee plots in Brazil to Russian tanks rolling toward East Berlin. The Phantom has troops in Korea, fighting against American GIs. When it comes to the pending Rosenberg execution: "The Phantom whips up anti-American demonstrations in their behalf in Milan, Toronto, Jakarta, Genoa, Paris, London, and swamps the White House with protest letters" (38). The Phantom even seems capable of changing an electric sign in Times Square reading "America the Hope of the World" to "America the Joke of the World!" (41).

The balance of power between Uncle Sam and the Phantom shifts when the Rosenbergs are granted a temporary stay of execution by Supreme Court Justice Douglas. At that moment, the Phantom begins to spread, gaining power, and Uncle Sam disappears. As the balance of power swings back, however, and plans are made for the execution to continue after all, Uncle Sam reappears, crawling out from under a car wreck as American soldiers rescue a kidnapped Czech refugee. A moment later he is sweeping away "the Phantom's debris" (64), preparing Times Square for a carnivalized public execution of the Rosenbergs. As he does so, the electric sign in Times Square reverts to "America the Hope of the World," the press attacks Douglas's actions, and Uncle Sam himself sets about trying to talk the Supreme Court into quickly lifting the stay of execution so his execution/circus can go on. As support for the Rosenbergs pours in from around the world, Uncle Sam pushes events inexorably forward, admitting cynically at the same time to Vice President Nixon that the trial was a frame up but, after all, "what trial isn't? . . . Hell, *all* courtroom testimony about the past is ipso facto and teetotaciously a baldface lie, ain't that so? Moonshine! Chicanery! The old gum game! . . . Appearances, my boy, appearances! Practical politics consists of ignorin' facts! *Opinion* ultimately governs the world!" (86).

It is all a matter of manipulating facts to cast the "proper" light on America. The execution will be couched in a medium of entertainment, a circus, to make it palatable, easy for the American people to swallow. Yet there is more to it than manipulation: it is almost, Nixon ponders, as if the execution and the events surrounding it have been predetermined as if part of a ritual or play, with Uncle Sam in the director's chair:

> Maybe it was nothing more than just an exemplary entertainment of sorts. . . . Certainly it was very theatrical. . . . the sense throughout that this was clearly a struggle between the forces of good and evil. . . . But there was more to it than that. Not only was everybody in this case from the Judge on down—indeed, just about everyone in the nation, in and out of government, myself included—behaving like actors caught up in a play, but we all seemed moreover to be aware of just what we were doing and at the same time of our inability, committed as we were to some higher purpose, some larger script as it were, to do otherwise. Even the Rosenbergs seemed to be swept up in this sense of an embracing and compelling drama, speaking in their letters of sinister "plots" and worldwide "themes" and "setting the stage" and playing the parts they had been—rightly or wrongly—cast for "with honor and dignity." (117)

Nixon sees the execution as a piece of didactic ritual drama, a way of instructing and revitalizing America: "Applause, director, actors, script: *. . . it was like a little morality play for our generation!*" (119). But it is not merely a morality play. It is a piece of ritualized religious scapegoating, the Rosenbergs being sacrificed so America can maintain its image of itself, can continue to hold together as a unified social body. Uncle Sam says that the execution in Times Square "is to be a consecration, a new charter of the moral and social order of the Western World, the precedint on which the future is to be carn-structed to ensure peace in our time!" (88).

The Rosenbergs are being sacrificed because Uncle Sam wants something to explain how the Phantom has developed the capacity to build a nuclear bomb, wanting to believe that the only way a Communist country could get a nuclear bomb was if they stole the idea from the U.S. through spies. To grow healthy again, America must uncover and expel Communists and Communist sympathizers. Fostered by the witchhunts of Joseph McCarthy, which were at their height during the time of the Rosenberg executions, a paranoia of "the enemy within" had developed.

To this purpose J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, has either uncovered a spy ring or fictionalized a spy ring into existence, depending on one's point of view. When he "breaks" the ring, he finds the Rosenbergs at the heart of it as sellers of American military secrets. They will serve as an example to others. Their punishment is a way of cleaning house.

With these issues and this background in place, it makes sense to go through the four parts of the novel in chronological order, focusing on the sections narrated by Nixon to try to get a sense of Nixon as a developing character.

The first section, "Wednesday-Thursday" takes place in the two days before the Rosenberg execution, opening with word that Justice Douglas has put a stay on the execution. Watching Eisenhower perform during the press conference, Nixon tries to figure out what it takes to be President, what Eisenhower's appeal is, and whether he'll ever have an appeal of his own. When Ike is told of the stay he "drew himself up . . . his countenance was already changing" and declares that "*this is a job for Uncle Sam!*" (35). The president as the current manifestation of Uncle Sam seems able to

suddenly become the symbolic figure, something that Nixon envies and admires. Just like Clark Kent becoming Superman, Ike becomes the great American superhero.

After a trip to the Senate floor to help a friend cram a partisan bill through, Nixon hunkers down on the floor in his office, "surrounded by every scrap of information I could find on the Rosenberg case, feeling scruffy and tired, dejected, lost in a surfeit of detail and further from a final position on the issue than ever" (79). The position the reader is in, surrounded by all the details of the intervening chapters, the barrage of quotations and data that Coover offers, may very well feel analogous. Even though the case has not been his, Nixon feels attached to it, responsible for it, and feels the need to review it because, on the golf course a few days earlier Uncle Sam (stepping out of his current incarnation as President Eisenhower to take his mythic role) has asked him what he thinks of the case. As he tries at once to express his opinions and to figure out what Uncle Sam expects of him, he comes to the conclusion that the Rosenbergs have been "*Sons of Darkness!*" (88), a premise that Uncle Sam has led him to and which he affirms, suggesting that they deserve for this to be burned.

There's something, too, Uncle Sam suggests, to make the Rosenbergs special. He says both the Phantom's favors and Uncle Sam's favors take people out of the crowd and set them apart: "the pact with the Phantom is no less consecratin' in its dire way that gettin' graced by Yours Truly" (89). Nixon perhaps has something to learn from the Rosenbergs, and their consecration prefigures his hope to be further consecrated himself (by Uncle Sam, not by the Phantom). Uncle Sam says that the details of the Rosenberg case are "*the sacraments!*" (93). His urging, then, that Nixon study the

Rosenberg case is a suggestion that Nixon take the sacraments in preparation for being consecrated and set apart. The execution has to take place this week, Uncle Sam insists, and Nixon has "gotta get on top of this thing" or else "our name is shit with a capital mud!" (94). The way Uncle Sam sees it, and the way he tries to make Nixon see it, they are engaged in a "fight for the reestablishment of our national *character*" (94) and in that fight they risk the destruction of that symbol of America itself, Uncle Sam.

As the scene shifts back to Nixon sorting through documents again, he comes to think of it all as drama, and in fact as a kind of initiation rite. What he has not been able to understand while on the golf course, he now begins to formulate: the Rosenberg case, from its beginning to its conclusion, is part of a larger process:

> Now my own generation was coming to its own—and this was . . . our initiation drama, our gateway into History! Or part of it anyway, for the plot was still unfolding. In the larger drama, of which the Rosenberg episode was a single act, I was a principal actor—if not, before the play is ended, *the* principal actor—but within this scene alone, I was more like a kind of stage manager, an assistant director or producer, a presence more felt than seen. This was true even of the trial itself: I felt somehow the author of it—not of the words so much, for these were, in a sense, improvisations, but rather of the *style* of the performances, as though I had through my own public appearances created the audience expectations, set the standards, keyed the rhetoric, crystallized the roles, in order that

> my generation might witness in dramatic form the fundamental controversy of our time!" (119–20)

Nixon is coming into a sense of his own significance as someone involved in a performance and as someone shaping the drama; he presents himself as the shape of a certain generation, as timely. Uncle Sam represents the whole scope of American history and idealism. Nixon, however, represents a change in this idealism, a new way of thinking. But, again, he is nothing more than a character in a grander political drama. He is playing a role.

The Rosenbergs are playing a role as well, but "then who were the real Rosenbergs behind their role-playing? Probably never know" (128). Yet, despite this statement, Nixon tries for a moment to set aside their roles in order to get a glimpse of the real people. As he does, he thinks about them in terms of himself. He imagines they've come to their current situation through a chain of circumstances similar to that which led him to be elected Vice President. He too, he believes, has been "carried along by a desire, much like theirs, to reach the heart of things, to participate deeply in life" (128). They all, in a sense, have achieved their goals, taking major parts of the current American drama, though Nixon's circumstances have attached him to Uncle Sam, while the Rosenbergs' situation has led them to join with the Phantom.

In addition, perhaps partly because of his growing tendency to identify himself with the Rosenbergs, aspects of the case disturb him. He begins to have doubts. If one "walked forward through all this data, like the journalists, like the FBI invited everyone 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). He concludes that the prosecution has not proven their point. It is a brilliant move on Coover's part to have Nixon—despite his own politics and his own involvement in the hysteria of the Cold War—be the one who, looking at the data, realizes that the Rosenberg case is not clear cut. Of all the characters in the book, Nixon is one of the very few who isn't doctrinaire in establishing his ideology.

As the third-person narrator says later in the book: "Raw data is paralyzing, a nightmare, there's too much of it and man's mind is quickly engulfed by it. Poetry is the art of subordinating facts to the imagination, of giving them shape and visibility, keeping them *personal*" (320). This seems like an adequate description of how Nixon approaches the data—he begins by thinking of the Rosenbergs' motivation as if it is connected to his own, personalizes the case, and as a result begins to tease out a narrative. But the narrative he reads through this approach, in which nothing is proven, is very different from the official story, the one the FBI offers, of obvious guilt. Nixon goes so far as to wonder if there was even a spy ring at all. Perhaps the participants, entering into a national drama, have taken on roles that have nothing to do with reality: "Whereupon the Rosenbergs, thinking everybody was crazy, nevertheless fell for it, moving ineluctably into the martyr roles they'd been waiting for all along, eager to be admired and pitied, to demonstrate their heroism and their loyalty to the cause of their friends, some of whom they were certain (the FBI said there was a spy ring there had to be one), were members of the alleged conspiracy" (135–36). Things seem less a reality than part of a drama which has a truth and logic of its own. As the section ends, Nixon's understanding of the case has radically changed.

As Nixon sorts through the material of the case, he becomes obsessed with Ethel Rosenberg, fantasizing about her "amazing bottom" (146). His fantasies terrify him: it's a sign that the Phantom is trying to get to him. The dark side has become appealing. Trying to confront the shadowy and evasive presence that he feels rising, he walks into the wall, smacking his head, since the phantom finally is ungraspable, perhaps does not really exist at all.

The second section, "Friday Morning," returns to Nixon after his sleepless night exploring the case. Falling back into the discourse of Communism as the enemy from within, he has begun to think of his feelings about the Rosenbergs and about the case as "though something had gotten into me last night, like an alien gene" (174). Now, by morning light, he is involved again in his own life, in speculations about his past, and he can see that some of the more visionary moments of identification with the Rosenbergs were in fact transpositions of events from his past into an understanding of their lives.

On the way to the White House, his limousine runs into a placard-carrying mob. Nervously, Nixon leaves the car and tries to run the seven blocks to the White House. After a long internal disquisition on the unintelligence of mobs, Nixon becomes afraid that he'll be recognized and torn apart. Then "one of the ringleaders, a typical case-hardened Communist operative, stepped into my path, blocking me off, a look of cold hatred in his eyes. . . . This was Communism as it really is" (208). In fact, the crowd is protesting the delay in the Rosenberg executions; they are Nixon's followers. In typical Cold War fashion, Nixon's paranoia is so strong that he feels beleaguered and surrounded by enemies even when among his own constituency.

After signing autographs, and seeing at a little distance individuals who he thinks are the "real demonstrators," he accidentally knocks down a child whom he describes as looking like "the waifs out of those Horatio Alger novels" (210). The novels he is referring to are rags-to-riches stories which proclaim the American belief that one can begin penniless but through perseverance and hard work make one's fortune. It is a myth that at times Nixon applies to himself, to his own rise to greatness (for instance: "I've had a 'Horatio Alger-like career" (295)). He is taken by the child, responding to him on a spiritual level: "As though from a dream, a beautiful dream" (210). He finds this quite comforting until he suddenly realizes who the child's face reminds him of: Ethel Rosenberg. Apparently it is harder for Nixon to forget about the Rosenbergs and his identification with them than he first thought. He feels haunted by them, Ethel in particular. His obsession with her has started to grow.

In the White House, Nixon engages in a cabinet meeting where they discuss both the Rosenberg case and the military struggle in Korea. Nixon, uninterested, works on a crossword puzzle. Even in this game playing, however, his obsession with Ethel is manifest: for the clue "*Be superior to*" he tries to fill in "E — — EL" as "ETHEL" rather than as "EXCEL" (227). In the meantime, the cabinet sets the execution for that evening, shortly before dark so as not to interfere with the Jewish Sabbath.

During the cabinet meeting, Nixon comes to feel that he has partly misunderstood what Uncle Sam expects of him: "I had to reread the letters, the biographies, search out the hidden themes, somehow reach a panoramic view of the event, and *write a speech!* That was the point: I had to go before the people tonight and unleash a real philippic, communicate the facts, publicize the truth, help

them all stand taller and feel proud to be Americans! *That* was what Uncle Sam was expecting of me! That was what language was for: to transcend the confusions, restore the spirit, recreate the society!" (234). He is still thinking of the event as a drama, but now it is a social drama, a drama of renewal. He plans to use the execution to bring America together and, at the same time, to set the groundwork for his becoming President.

The third section, "Friday Afternoon," further pursues Nixon's preparations for the execution. Chapter fifteen, "Iron Butt Gets Smeared Again," begins with Eisenhower just having read a statement in which he declines to intervene on behalf of the Rosenbergs, a fact starkly contrasted by the presidential valet polishing up his golf clubs. Eisenhower is not going to allow a mere execution to interfere with a round or two of his favorite game. For Nixon, Eisenhower is unconscious, not aware of his role of history, unaware of when Uncle Sam is speaking through him or when he has entered into a symbolic, historic moment in which Uncle Sam is controlling his words and actions: "He even thought that people were listening to him and doing the things that he suggested they do!" (262). Nixon, more contemporary and more cynical, is of a generation that no longer has such blissful unawareness. Throughout the novel, Nixon is hyperconscious, though sometimes bumblingly so, of his role in history. Yet, though Nixon is aware of Eisenhower's transformation into Uncle Sam in a way that Eisenhower is not, he is incapable of bringing it about in himself, despite practicing in front of the mirror.

Taking a cab away from the White House, Nixon discovers that he has stepped in horse manure. As he rides, the cabbie, described as an "ugly man, hard, looked foreign" (264), becomes increasingly belligerent. Nixon gets his shoe stuck under the seat and in trying to

pull it free smears his hand and then his pocket with dung. The cabbie badgers Nixon about his role in the war, accusing him of selling supplies at a markup and keeping the money for himself. He claims as well to have known Ethel Rosenberg, though any information he can provide about her seems tenuous at best, eventually collapsing altogether.

"Look," the cabbie finally says, "can't we get past all these worn-out rituals, these stupid fuckin' reflexes? . . . They got nothin' to do with life, you know that, life's always new and changing so why fuck it up with all this shit about scapegoats, sacrifices, initiations, saturnalias—?" (273). Talk like this, Nixon realizes, could only come from the "ungraspable Phantom" (273). "I don't know everything," the cabbie says. "But I think you're on the wrong track. Easter Trials, Burning Tree, morality plays, cowtown vendettas—life's too big, you can't wrap it up like that!" (273). The Phantom realizes something that Nixon, despite his self-awareness, will not come to grasp on his own until much later: attempts to make life fit it into systems are restrictions of life. Life only fits into genres after violence has been done to it.

The Phantom's words have a great deal of sense to them, though Nixon regards them as a trap, as advice which, if he follows it, will remove any sense of stability that he has. Fear of the unknown is often the supreme reinforcer of unexamined myths. When the Phantom urges him to "turn back—forget this dumb circus" (274), Nixon tumbles out of the cab and makes his escape, stumbling into a group of skeptical newsmen who engage in a kind of burlesque banter about the excrement smeared on him. His story about the Phantom trying to get him is met with scepticism and disbelief, Nixon's own words doing much to discredit himself.

In chapter seventeen, "The Eye in the Sky," Nixon prepares to write his speech. He tells himself "You're not born with 'character,' you create this as you go along" (295), a statement that might be read as the operating principle of Coover's other book about Nixon, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* in which Nixon has no personality except one he has artificially constructed. Trying to write, he returns to reflections on his high school debate days and to the Rosenberg files. He is hoping with the latter to get "some mosaic out of all that, a succinct rebuttal, something on brainwashing maybe" (297). He continues, in sifting through the data, to look for significant patterns, to try to find themes that he can use to support the execution as a cultural and political renewal. Nixon, always the optimist, believes that if he can rethink the trial from a new angle he'll find the "right" pattern. He is still thinking in terms of official stories and myths. Yet he cannot stay focused on the task, instead thinks of past loves in high school, the beauty of the day outside. He seems to be getting nowhere, is "running like a dry creek" (303). Thinking about Ethel Rosenberg while sorting through the countless pieces of paper about her life leads him to a question: "Which was real, I wondered, the paper or the people?" (305).

What will be remembered, he realizes, is not the Rosenbergs as they are, but the Rosenbergs as they have been recorded for history. Though Nixon is self-consciously aware of his own role in regard to history, he faults the Rosenbergs for having that awareness: "If they could say to hell with History, they'd be home free" (305). If they are willing to swallow their words, confess and apologize, they will be saved death. Considered in light of Nixon's own political career, particularly his handling of Watergate, this has an ironic ring.

As he continues to read about the Rosenbergs, his sense of identification with them again begins to increase, and his obsession with Ethel rises again. He imagines a love scene between him and Ethel, imaginings which are interrupted when Uncle Sam flies in the window to find Nixon masturbating. Sam scolds Nixon for abusing himself when the execution is fast approaching, but then suggests that he is more natural at that than at either golf or politics.

Uncle Sam believes that they are on the edge of something that they might not come back from, that their ability to resist the Phantom might be faltering. As he continues discoursing he takes a cigar from Nixon, which ends up exploding when he lights it, a plant from the Phantom, a clear sign that the Phantom's reach is already extensive.

Nixon, left alone and without guidance from Uncle Sam, decides to board a train, just to get away. Nixon seems ready to abandon his search for pattern and order, wanting to believe that anything is possible. His sense of the events around him as plotted and theatrical has begun to dissolve as he enters into a more open understanding of the nature of life, at least for the moment:

> And then I'd realized what it was that had been bothering me: that sense that everything happening was somehow inevitable, as though it had all been scripted out in advance. But bullshit! There were no scripts, no necessary patterns, no final scenes, there was just *action*, and then *more action!* Maybe in Russia History had a plot because one was being laid on, but not here—*that was what freedom was all about!* It was what Uncle Sam had been trying to tell me: *Act—act*

> *in the living present!* . . . This then was my crisis: to accept what I already knew. That there was no author, no director, and the audience had no memories—they got reinvented every day! I'd thought: perhaps there is not even a War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness! Perhaps we are all pretending!" (362)

He realizes that if the notion of history being controlled and plotted is an illusion, then he can manipulate it: "I had to step in and change the script!" (363). He comes to the realization that he can try to do so by going up to Sing Sing himself, trying to bring the executions to a halt by wringing a confession out of the alleged spies. As he boards another train, he considers what would be the best possible way to bring the Rosenbergs over to his point of view, again entering into a partial reexamination of the case, a reconsideration of the data. He begins to slip again into thinking of the historical moment as a scripted drama, despite his speech about acting in the living present, and declares: "In a sense I was no more free than the Rosenbergs were, we'd both been drawn into dramas above and beyond those of ordinary mortals" (367). The freedom to break with this script, he fears, may not be freedom at all, but merely something the drama has already predicated: "was my breaking out a part of the script, too? Oh shit!" (367). Again, he has doubts about the Rosenbergs' guilt; though he believes they are "guilty of something, all right, but not as charged" (367–68). He even suggests that maybe "the whole trial had been just an elaborate smoke screen thrown up by the Phantom to conceal the real ring" (369). At the end of the section, Nixon enters Sing Sing, unsure of himself, not knowing if he is doing the right thing.

In the final section, Nixon is led by the prison warden to a room where he will be allowed to meet the Rosenbergs. He asks to see Ethel first, and asks that he be allowed to see her alone. Nixon's obsession with Ethel Rosenberg culminates in this last section in a fantastic and transgressive scene which is not part of the historical record, and in which Ethel's desires seem at least partly a function of Nixon's own fantasies. At first their meeting is confrontational, with Ethel sticking to her guns, each of them uttering the maxims of their own political positions. She continues to insist on her innocence, maintaining her stance until Nixon takes her in his arms and offers his love. She has never loved her husband, Nixon tells her—it's "all just been an act, Ethel, and you know it! Part of the strategy!" (435). Nixon is trying to rewrite the script on the fly, trying to find a real Ethel beneath the act. The arguments he uses sound like they've been recycled from romantic movies of the 1940s and 1950s: "We've both been victims of the same lie, Ethel! There *is* no purpose, there *are* no causes, all that's just stuff we make up to hold the goddam world together—all we've really got is what we have right here and now: being alive. *Don't throw it away, Ethel!*" (436).

They embrace passionately, apparently carried away by their emotions, but even then Nixon finds it difficult to escape the idea that the scene has been scripted for him. His mind is full of memories of plays he has acted in while in high school, dramatic terms and situations threatening to interfere with "real life." In a matter of seconds they exchange telegraphic information about their lives and their pasts, Coover parodying the exchange of information that occurs between couples over time as they try to establish a relationship.

Nixon tells Ethel that he doesn't want her to die: "Oh, Ethel, I'd do anything for you!" he sobs (444), to which Ethel responds: "You must take me! Here!" (444). As Nixon struggles awkwardly out of his pants, Ethel claims that they're coming to take her, and after frantic goodbyes, pushes him into the execution room. But Nixon has been set up: Ethel's interest in him has been feigned to catch him unawares. Instead of Sing Sing, he finds himself "unexpectedly onstage in the middle of Times Square, staring out on an amazing sea of upturned faces staring back, my shirttails bunched up in my armpits and my pants in a dangle around my ankles, my poor butt on fire" (470). People laugh while he tries desperately to put his clothing on again, "hobbling about in a tight miserable circle" as he fights "to drag myself back to myself, my old safe self" (471). Nixon is the entertainment for the crowd, the pratfalling clown before the grander entertainment of the execution. He tries to maintain his dignity by giving a speech as he stumbles about, his ass covered in lipstick, donkeys braying, while Uncle Sam looks on. Finally, he hits on a way of using his own struggles as a strength, developing a national commitment to the country by putting everyone in the same position as himself:

> *We have nothing to hide! And we have a lot to be proud of! . . . I say it is time for a new sense of dedication in this country! I ask for your support in helping to develop the national spirit, the faith that we need in order to meet our responsibilities in the world! It is a great goal! And to achieve it, I am asking everyone tonight to step forward—right now!—and drop his pants for America!* (482)

Crying "PANTS DOWN FOR GOD AND COUNTRY!" (482), the crowd follows suit, both men and women, and soon even Uncle Sam is being pressured to take off his pants. When Uncle Sam does, there is a blinding flash of light, followed by a blackout. With Sam identified throughout as the avatar of the American way, connected with light, and the Phantom on the other hand tied to Communism, shadow, and darkness, the implication is clear: the Phantom has taken over. During the blackout people scream: "UNCLE SAM IS DEAD" (486) and "THE PHANTOM'S KILLT UNCLE SAM!" (487). People panic and try to flee. The darkness is terrifying, despair dominates, fights break out, and the "hollow evil laughter" of the Phantom can be heard.

Yet when things look their bleakest, Uncle Sam rises from the ashes, "bearing in his lean gnarled hands a new birth of freedom" (493), and brings the lights back up as he performs and preaches against Communism. *"But hey! if the Red slayer thinks he slays, boys, he knows not well the sub-tile ways I keeps whuppin' the she-double-I-it outen any slantindicular sidewinder what trifles with freedom. . . . Whoopee! A nation, like a person, has got somethin' deeper, somethin' more permanent and pestifferous, somethin' larger than the scum of its parts, and what this nation's got is ME!"* (496). With the help of Betty Crocker, he begins to set his house in order, cleaning up corruption in America, once again taking the upper hand. Julius Rosenberg is led out, strapped into the electric chair onstage, and killed as the spectacles and festivities continue all through Times Square. A few moments later, Ethel is killed as well, more awkwardly, her body "sizzling and popping like fire-crackers, lights up with the force of the current, casting a flickering radiance on all those around her" (517). She has been transformed

into light, the symbol Uncle Sam stands for as well, her electrocution restoring an incandescence to the nation.

In the Epilogue, Coover calls into question some of the premises of the rest of the book, and points toward things to come. Uncle Sam faces Nixon in this final sequence, showing up to inform Nixon: "*I want YOU!*" (530). But as it turns out, the phrase is used in a different context than we are used to from Uncle Sam; Sam wants to sodomize Nixon, and in fact does so.[21] Nixon believes that this is an odd form of execution, that he is being punished for forcing Sam to drop his pants in public and thus unleashing the phantom. Yet after Sam has finished he declares: "Hey, you're the one you know! . . . You're my everything, sunshine—*you're my boy!*" (534). Nixon has been set apart, prepared for his upcoming presidency. Nixon, despite the horrific rape which he describes in devastating terms, suddenly finds Uncle Sam "beautiful . . . the most beautiful thing in all the world. . . . '*I . . . I love you, Uncle Sam!*' I confessed" (534).

The final words of the novel are Sam's last words, whispered to Nixon before he leaves him alone: "always leave 'em laughin' as you say good-bye!" They are, ironically enough, uttered while Nixon describes himself as "rolling about helplessly on the spare-room floor, scrunched up around my throbbing pain and bawling like a baby" (534). He clearly hasn't been laughing. Has the reader? Probably the reader's reaction to the novel, despite moments of nervous laughter, has been complex. One comes away from the spectacle both dazzled and aware that there is a great deal more darkness in Uncle Sam than one might like to believe.

In the middle of the book the narrator suggests, his ideas colored by the poet TIME, that "objectivity is an impossible illusion, a

'fantastic claim'. . . and as an ideal perhaps even immoral, that *only* through the frankly biased and distorting lens of art is any real grasp of the facts—not to mention Ultimate Truth—even remotely possible" (320); this can be seen as a statement of Coover's aesthetic. Truth is not something objective; it is something that comes out of the subjective. A work of art, to have value, will not merely depict reality; it will distort and significantly transform it. While Uncle Sam tends to see things objectively, in terms of light and darkness, in terms of black and white, Coover suggests that any truth that is abstracted is no truth at all. People make sense of life by pushing it into patterns. But why insist on those patterns as absolutes when they are ultimately arbitrary? As Nixon himself realizes: "nothing is predictable, anything can happen" (367). So why not make it happen?

CHAPTER FOUR

Later Works

A Political Fable

A Political Fable was originally finished in 1967 and submitted to Random House, the publisher of both Dr. Seuss and Coover at the time. Not only was it rejected but Coover was told by his editor that "if the story appears *anywhere,* I'm no longer a Random House author and his own job is in jeopardy."[1] Despite that, never one not to take a risk, Coover published the text in *The New American Review* as "The Cat in the Hat for President." It appeared in a presidential election year, 1968. One of Coover's least available works, *A Political Fable* has not been reprinted since its initial appearance in hardback in 1980. In its vision of the American political system, the novella stands with *The Public Burning* (and, in a much more oblique way, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*) as Coover's most overtly political work. That both *A Political Fable* and *Gloomy Gus* were written while Coover was working on *The Public Burning* suggests that they served both as a relief from the larger task of writing the longer novel, and as ways of clarifying or focusing on issues that might otherwise have been lost in *The Public Burning*'s greater concerns and more complex texture.

A Political Fable is a parody of the way in which American presidential politics operate. The book chooses to use characters from Doctor Seuss's work, blending a relatively realistic political world with the antics of Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat.* It is likely that

Coover was aware of the wartime political cartoons that Seuss did in the 1940s, in which Seuss used his familiar style and even some of his familiar characters to attack Hitler.

The novella's narrator is Soothsayer Brown, the National Chairman of his (unidentified) political party. A realist, Brown plays at politics like it is a game, coolly calculating odds, working through numbers and probabilities in a way that suggests he has grown cynical. He believes that the distinction between political views is in large degree a fiction: "Theoretically, politics is all issues: the word used to describe the conflicts arising in men's efforts to suffer one another. But practically, of course, there are no issues in politics at all. Not even ideological species. 'Liberal,' 'conservative,' 'left,' 'right,' these are mere fictions of the press, metaphoric conventions to which politicians sooner or later and in varying ways adapt" (7). Brown sees the politician's ability to judge as an ability to anticipate and ride what he calls "the kinetics of politics" (7). It is an ability to predict where the press and the fictions and metaphors are swaying and follow them. Whereas the writer, as Coover says in *Pricksongs & Descants*, works against the dominant fictions, metaphors, and myths, writing against their grain so as to expose their insidious and unstated qualities, the politician rides the dominant like a wave, gives himself actively over to it, at least on the surface. For Brown, it is a game: he delights, he tells the reader, "in the illusion of democracy in action," which he sees as "a great entertainment" (11).

Brown's initial quest to choose a presidential candidate consists of going after someone safe and opting for a loss so as to build that candidate up for a later election. He wants to "strengthen and enlarge the center," to move the party toward a middle American norm, so as to win in a later election, and thus he opts for "a solid

middle-of-the-roader with an uncontroversial record, a man whose carefully controlled candidacy this year would lay the groundwork for his election four years later" (4). Brown's attitude is generally one of restraint: "There are risk-takers in politics," he says. "I'm proud to say I'm not one of them. My life in business and politics has been long, successful, and colorless" (6). He has held political office, has even been a U.S. congressman and an ambassador, but prefers to stay out of the limelight, to work quietly for the party, to stay anonymous, without glory, without honor. He plays the system, rides the kinetics, and knows exactly where he stands, choosing two candidates that are equally satisfactory and pitting them against one another for his party's nomination.

Enter the Cat in the Hat, a dark horse candidate for president who turns the convention upside down. He runs under the slogan "I CAN LEAD IT ALL BY MYSELF" (12), a parody of the motto "I can read it all by myself" which appears on the covers of Dr. Seuss's books. Virtually unknown when the party convention begins, the Cat quickly seems to be making inroads, supported by a pair of rhyming vaudevillians and by scrawled slogans that keep appearing on toilet walls. In the course of a single day, the convention becomes "something of a circus" (15) with the Cat's slogans and songs filling people's heads. When the Cat appears, he doesn't stick to the pattern: "this balmy flaunting of the rules of the game was to become the pattern, if not in fact the message, of his whole Presidential campaign" (17).

In sequences that pay homage to Dr. Seuss books ranging from *Green Eggs and Ham* to *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins,* the Cat makes the convention into a carnival; he switches slogans, disables the other campaigns, plays a series of pranks and gags,

and introduces live raccoons in the place of one of the candidates' coonskin hats. He fires guns. He throws everything into disarray. Because the people are dying for something new ("We have a terrible need for the extraordinary" (39) suggests Sam, a former governor who has become the Cat's Vice Presidential candidate), the Cat ends up receiving the party's nomination. Brown, at first skeptical, manages to justify accepting the Cat based on his sense, from reading Seuss's books, of where the Cat's antics lead: "the Cat, I recalled, always cleaned up his own messes. After the liberating infractions, the old rules were restored—reinforced, in fact" (38). Even if Brown thinks politics is a game, he takes the myths seriously—he wants the old rules to remain in place.

The Cat accepts the nomination in a fashion that seems taken from Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*, arriving

> on roller skates, holding up a cake on a rake. On, or in, the cake, sat a goat wearing a coat, an umbrella balanced on its nose. On the tip of the umbrella wobbled a fishbowl, with a fish inside that was crying:
>
> "Stop it! Stop it!
> I will fall!
> I do not like this!
> Not at all!" (39–40)

When everything falls with a crash, the water from the fishbowl floods the auditorium. Pandemonium ensues. Brown is swallowed by the fish, which has grown to the size of a whale, and finds the rest of the convention inside. They escape the whale's belly by

shouting the word "Voom," the name of a powerful substance in Dr Seuss's work which cleans everything up.

The Cat, Brown recognizes, "was entertaining, maybe, exciting, liberating, even prodigious—but he was also, obscurely, a threat. Dangerous, yes, he was" (45–46). Behind the Cat, managing his campaign, is a man named Clark, who positions himself against the old order and who has put forward the Cat in the Hat as a move toward stripping away the old dictums—and ultimately the old order itself—so as to reveal things as they actually are. Says Clark, "I believe, simply, that we live in an age of darkness, that humanity, with all efficiency and presumed purpose has gone mad. What we must do, Mr. Brown, is help all men once more to experience reality concretely, fully, wholly without mystification, unencumbered by pseudo-systems. If we succeed at that, don't you see, elections may no longer be relevant" (47). Brown joins in, supporting the Cat's candidacy, but he cannot "go along with Clark's claim that the Cat's goofy gambits were exposing the madness of normalcy" (50). The Cat continues to run a campaign *saboteur,* playing pranks against his opponent from the other party at every turn. In his most extravagant act, he knocks a series of hats off his opponent during a nationally televised debate—not a shocking act in itself, but as each new hat appears, the opponent's speech and manners change to fit the hat. He is "now a jungle fighter, now a hippie, next a cop hollering for law and order, then a farmer shooting pigs" and so on (60). The opponent, who has no idea what is happening to him, quickly goes mad.

Voters go crazy for the Cat's quips, songs, and antics. Brown, watching the campaign, finds himself off-balance, though he begins to share the voter's "almost hysterical delight" (56) in the anarchic freedom the cat offers. Slowly Brown begins to understand the

nerve the cat is touching, and begins to offer voters interpretations of the Cat's antics, explaining them with fast thinking after the fact in a way that transforms the antics into statements about life and about the relation of the people to the government. Brown and his friend and fellow campaigner Sam serve as spin doctors for the Cat's acts and Clark's intemperate ideas, reincorporating their desire for anarchy and societal destruction back into the social order. Coover suggests through this the resilience of society, and of its ability to protect itself from the forces that would like to change it. Just as artistic movements such as Dada and Surrealism which proclaim the death of art end up being reincorporated into art itself, so too does revolution and rebellion tend to be swallowed and transformed by society. A radical statement might appear five years later in a television commercial, used as a device to sell pants.

Yet the Cat refuses to be subsumed. As Brown suggests: "You could never be sure he entirely understood we were on his side" (68), and for this reason at times his pranks seem as directed at his supporters as at his opponents. He won't stay in line, won't come around. His antics, which at first delighted, begin to fill people with suspicion. Different factions of the party withdraw their support. Once a symbol of freedom, now the Cat seems a symbol of anarchy, which in fact is what Clark wants—an utter destruction of the political system. The army threatens to pull a coup to stop the Cat from taking over as president. This does not seem to upset Clark. Rather, he has been secretly pushing for this all along: he wants to pit the cat against the military. He wants a total violent confrontation. "What's more important?" asks Clark. "Physical survival of an accidental human horde or idea survival?" (77). For Clark it is the latter. If America gets wiped out in the process, that is incidental.

Clark is an extreme idealist, so enmeshed in his ideas that he is unable to see the practical side of things. For Clark, one must have all or nothing, and have it all at once. His ability to bring about change is compromised by his extremist attitudes. Brown is not substantially better. For Brown, politics is a game; he has no commitment to ideas, doesn't even believe ideas exists. Instead, he rides the currents, caring only how the game can be best manipulated. Brown and Clark are both extreme in their own fashion, and Coover suggests that the carnival of American politics breeds extremes. By putting readers in a position to observe both someone who cares deeply about ideas and someone who does not believe in ideas, Coover suggests that the American political system breeds either people who care too much or people who do not care at all.

Brown, to avoid confrontation, makes the choice of turning the Cat over to be killed by the crowds who hate him. "That they'd kill him, we knew" (79), says Brown, but what he does not foresee is the way in which the killing will incorporate elements of both religious ritual and lynching. In a scene reminiscent of the conclusion of *The Origin of the Brunists,* the crowd crucifies the cat upside down, making him a religious sacrifice, an inverted Christ. Yet, despite all, his hat refuses to come off. This drives the crowd into a "mad frenzy of pulling and ripping, cursing and gut-flinging, and they weren't too neat maybe, but it was a thorough job of skinning a cat. Except for the Hat: when they were done it was still there" (81). The carnival of the political process, the "great entertainment" as Brown calls it, decays into a deadly and frenzied religious ritual. Carried away, the crowd strips and commences an orgy, which Brown calls "the Great American Dream in oily actuality" (82). Parodying the idea of America as the melting pot, Coover shows the

crowd "fuck[ing] in a great conglobulation of races, sexes, ages, and convictions" (82). They cook and eat the cat's flesh, which turns out to be a potent psychedelic, inflicting the crowd with sexualized political visions. "[T]he whole hoopla of American history stormed through our exploded minds, all the massacres, motherings, couplings, and connivings, all the baseball games, PTA Meetings, bloodbaths, old movies, and piracies. . . . It was all there, I can't begin to tell it" (83–84).

Yet all this rebellion is temporary, and the crowd's frenzy gives way to "mere exhaustion" (85) and shame. After the fact, the Cat becomes reincorporated into the system as a martyr, his hat "a somber symbol," his call "a moving chant" (86). In dying, the Cat has become ubiquitous, a presence that the people can accept and relate to. While alive, he could not be controlled, was liable to do anything. Now that he is dead, however, the politicians can safely transform the Cat into a static symbol, control the way people remember him. They can transform his death into an official story, making it at once safe and useful. Brown is able to push the sober, unexciting candidate he initially supported into office. Order is preserved, life goes on, change is quashed.

Spanking the Maid

Spanking the Maid (1981) was originally published in a version nearly identical to what it would become in book form (same number of sections, almost identical wording within the sections) in *The Iowa Review* as the story "A Working Day." It reappeared in 1981's *Best American Short Stories* and was judged sufficiently strong to be included in *Best American Short Stories of the 1980s.* Its first

book publication was in a limited edition in 1981 with Bruccoli Clark, a house which has published several other short pieces by Coover in limited editions, including a deleted chapter of *The Origin of the Brunists* called *The Water Pourer* (1972) and the short story *After Lazarus* (1980). In this initial publication, *Spanking the Maid* was printed with voluptuous illustrations by novelist Rikki Ducornet. A year later, the book was reissued in a commercial edition, without illustrations, by Grove Press, and has since been the source of some controversy. Says Thomas Kennedy, "Coover's work has, in fact, elicited violent attempts to eject it from [the] culture—evidenced most recently in brick-throwing attacks by ideologues on bookshops carrying a reprint of Coover's novella *Spanking the Maid* (1982), another example of a literalist failure of the imagination necessary to an appreciation of Coover's achievement."[2]

At less than one hundred pages (only thirty-five pages in the larger page size and smaller type of its *Best American* incarnation) Coover's *Spanking the Maid* is, along with *A Political Fable* and *Briar Rose*, one of Coover's shortest books. As such, it qualifies as a novella. Taking a length between a novel and a short story, the novella at its best can share aspects of both forms, drawing on both the immediacy and tight focus of the short story and at least some of the complexity of the novel. It is an optimum form for philosophical fiction, allowing an intense exploration of issues of being and knowing that might be harder to pull off in the smaller space of the short story and which might become tedious in a full-length novel.

The novella begins with a simple scene: an unnamed maid arrives to clean her unnamed master's chamber. Quickly, though, Coover makes us aware of the storytelling process, for after the third

sentence the narrator declares: “No. Again” (9) and starts to retell the story from the beginning. The maid moves across the room, “as she’s been taught” (9), opens the curtains, and the glass doors to the garden. The narrator again recoils (10), tells the story again, this time showing her enter with a bucket. The narrator’s corrections and recommencements give the text a repetitive and cyclical quality which Coover will use to his advantage.

A second scene follows, that of the master awakening in bed and wondering what errors the maid will commit that day. This scene is told in a straightforward fashion, with none of the textual recoilings emphasized in the initial scene. A third scene shows the maid preparing to clean, nervous about making an error, perhaps having already made one.

So far, apart from the slight textual recoilings of the first section, there has been nothing unusual. In the next scene, however, things take a turn into distinctively Cooverian territory. Here the master awakens again, as if the narrative has either moved to a new day or as if the narrator has decided to revise the initial event. In the fifth scene, the maid enters again and threatens at the end of the passage to go out and enter again: “Perhaps, she thinks, her heart sinking, I’d better go out and come in again” (19). The maid continues to enter throughout the book and the master continues to awake as well. They seem doomed to repeat the process until the maid gets it right: until she enters dressed correctly and with all the tools she needs to do the cleaning, until she folds the sheets correctly and remembers to change the towels. She seems trapped in an absurdist hell of repetition and failure.

When the maid does not fulfill her tasks properly, the master is obliged to punish her, which he does by spanking her with “a rod,

sometimes his hand, his belt, sometimes a whip, a cane, a cat-o'-nine-tails, a bull's pizzle, a hickory switch, a martinet, ruler, slipper, a leather strap, a hairbrush" (45). The use of all these objects is dictated from outside the scene: "There are manuals for this. Different preparations and positions to be assumed, the number and severity of the strokes generally prescribed to fit the offense" (46).

Jackson Cope calls the book "a pastiche of nineteenth-century styles from the literature of pornography."[3] Considering the common tropes of pornography (perhaps pornography is "the manuals," though they are more likely conduct manuals), the spanking could be seen as sadistic in a sexual sense were it not for the failure of both master and servant to gain any sort of pleasure from the act. "She does not enjoy the discipline of the rod," we are told, "nor does he—or so he believes, though what would it matter if he did?" (50). Rather than feeling pleasure, the master feels trapped: "He is not a free man, his life is consecrated, for though he is *her* master, her failures are inescapably *his*" (66). The master believes his own situation to be worse than the maid's: "She, after all, is free to come and go, her correction finitely inscribed by time and the manuals, but he . . . he sighs unhappily. How did it all begin, he wonders" (42).

Why does the master, trapped though he is, continue to punish the maid? Because "they are both dedicated to the fundamental proposition . . . that her daily tasks, however trivial, are perfectible, her punishments serving her as a road, loosely speaking, to bring her daily nearer God, at least in terms of the manuals" (50–51). He has taught her this dedication, though the details of that teaching are unavailable—all that is shown is the repetition of the maid at her task and the master's punishment of her, with no reference to a world

before that time and only fleeting speculation about what world could possibly come after: “Now, with time, she has come to understand that the tasks, truly common, are only peripheral details in some larger scheme of things” (63). What is essential is the pain, for “God has ordained bodily punishment” (63). Pain is that which brings us closer to God.

In a gesture reminiscent of Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” the master finds himself looking for significance in the act of punishing the maid. In Kafka’s story, punishment is inflicted by a harrowing machine, a machine which carves in infinitely convoluted script the reasons for the punishment into the flesh of the guilty party. As the machine carves deeper, supposedly enlightenment comes to the victim and he understands his punishment. In Coover’s novella, as the master looks at the maid’s reddening buttocks, “he finds himself searching it for something, he doesn’t know what exactly, a message of sorts, the revelation of a mystery in the spreading flush, in the pout and quiver of her cheeks.” But for him the search seems futile: “the futility of his labors, that’s all there is to read there” (86–87). The pain he inflicts upon someone else does not seem able to lead him to a kind of enlightenment. He has doubts. He wonders (with Coover punning in the background): “Has he devoted himself to a higher end[?]” (78). He conquers such doubts by ignoring them, taking “refuge in the purity of technique” (78), pondering the instruments he will use in his task so as to avoid “the riddles and paradoxes of his calling” (78).

The master is disturbed in other ways as well. He has dreams, awakens frequently beset by vague nightmares, the meaning of which he seems unable to puzzle out. These include a dream of a bird with blood in its beak and a dream about a “teacher” who is

chastising him. These dreams, of which Coover gives only fragments, often involve a confusion of two words: pizzle and puzzle, humidity and hymnody, order and odor, scouring and scourging, humility and humor. He seems to be fixated on words with phonetic similarities but with disparate meanings. In addition, most of these word pairs he mentions have one term that focuses on order or purity or religion while the other suggests something unacceptable to order. That he cannot distinguish between the two is significant, for the master seems trapped in the Cartesian dilemma, split between body and soul. In life, he chooses soul over body, the spiritual over the physical, but in his dreams the renounced physical constantly threatens to substitute itself for the spiritual.

Not only in his dreams. The maid each morning makes discoveries, finding objects in the master's bed. These discoveries are often odd, vaguely threatening. They disturb the maid deeply. They include "old razor blades, broken bottles, banana skins, bloody pessaries, crumbs and ants, leather thongs, mirrors, empty books, old toys, dark stains. Once, even, a frog jumped out at her" (28). Each of these, so the maid believes, is a "dark little pocket of lingering night" (28). They are the repressed objects, the renounced objects, returning, summoned by the master's dreams and by the darkness. They are suggestive of another way of life, unacknowledged by day.

The master believes that as the maid nears perfection and comes closer to God, so shall he. Theoretically, if she accomplishes her tasks without fault perhaps they will be freed from their perpetual repetition. At the very least, "he might at least have time for a stroll in the garden" (42). As she begins to think of the pain as itself significant and ordained by God, as a sign of God's grace, to be freed would also mean to be damned. They are operating in a paradox,

both maid and master trapped in the endless repetition of this process that seems to work against its own conclusion. Yet despite all their doubts, they never utterly abandon hope; as the book ends, the maid is still trying to get her task and role right, her master thinking (though perhaps it is just wishful thinking): *"Perhaps today then . . . at last!"* (102).

John O'Brien, who would later reprint several of Coover's books with Dalkey Archive Press, calls *Spanking the Maid* "a failed attempt to employ the methods of the *nouveau roman;* the repetitions, the variations upon images, the structural loops, the shifts in perspective, all seems wearily imitative, forced, and pretentious . . . the machinery creaks, sputters, and grinds; the tricks are telegraphed." Yet O'Brien goes on to say that the significance of the fiction itself may lie in this failure: "Finally I began to suspect that some grand metaphor was rearing its ugly head. Or a fable: the man and his maid are supposed to represent the relationship between man and woman, between husband and wife, children and parents; or between artist and society, or artist and critic. No matter how well the artist does some things, so the fable might go, the critic will spank him for not doing others."[4]

Jackson Cope pursues a similar path, suggesting that the story is primarily metafictional, "an allegory about writing within genres, styles, limits. And in it Coover uses the least imaginative genre to force a sense of the final need for imaginative conquest of limits."[5] Such a intepretation suggests that the master is a writer and that the maid's bare buttocks, which he refers to as "a blank ledger on which to write,"[6] are fresh pages of paper. The sheets on the bed become sheets of paper from the growing manuscript, always disorderly.

The master/writer each day attempts the same ritual, but both he and the maid seem trapped, unable to get anywhere, unable to break out of their old techniques. There is some truth to this reading—certainly there's textual evidence to support it—but to reduce the novella to a simple metaphor about the writer's role is to work against the playfulness and ambiguity that characterize a Coover text.

Larry McCaffery calls the book "one of Coover's most perfectly executed works, *Spanking the Maid* is destined to be regarded as a miniature masterpiece of postmodern fiction."[7] It appropriates the genre of Victorian pornography and uses it otherwise than as intended. Instead of being titillating, the repetition of the maid's failure and her being spanked comes across as deadening; neither maid nor master nor reader derives pleasure from it. Yet through this repetition, the reader is brought to speculate not only on the nature of *writing* but also on the nature of religious and philosophical ideas of self-renunciation.

On a philosophico-religious level, the ideas of *Spanking the Maid* are not unfamiliar ones; they reflect Protestant notions of the relation of this world to the world to come. Through self-renunciation and suffering, one detaches one's self from this world and moves closer to God. Yet Coover uses these ideas parodically, suggesting quite the opposite by taking the ideas out of their context. The master and maid's interaction, which theoretically should lead toward some sort of salvation, instead seems to be moving in circles. Though the maid's action is perfectible, it is never perfected. The administration and receipt of pain has replaced progression. The master and maid's focus on perfection and renunciation has taken over their lives; they do nothing else. There is not even time for the master to walk in the garden.

This garden might be argued to be the symbolic garden of Eden, yet there are indications that oppose this interpretation. For instance, interpreting one of her master's dreams the maid asks the master if he's afraid of the garden, a suggestion he responds to by flogging "her so mercilessly she couldn't stand up after, much less sit down" (89). In addition, there is the suggestion that the master could go to the garden anytime he wants, as long as he is willing to set aside the punishment. The garden is thus something that has been renounced. It is more likely to be the garden of earthly delights, the enjoyment of the things of this world, than any sort of heavenly paradise.

This, then, seems to be the final result of the maid and master's interaction; both are trapped, trying to mediate the feeling they have of being trapped by resorting to God, and by appealing to renunciation as something that will lead them to God. The endless repetition of their tasks keeps them from enjoying the pleasure of each other's company. It keeps them in the house and out of the garden, making their lives a pointless, miserable round.

Spanking the Maid has often been misunderstood, seen as a pornographic novella. If it were such, its primary goal would be titillation. Elements of titillation do exist in the story—the spanking, for instance, is often described in some detail—but the primary purpose of the novella is not sexual. Instead, it spends a great deal of time inside the heads of the maid and master, neither of whom seem interested in sex. They are not interested in heaving bosoms, throbbing vaginas and thrusting penises, but instead in what their roles consist of, what their tasks are and whether today they will succeed or fail in their search for perfection. Coover pastiches the pornographic tale as a means of allowing the reader to reflect on notions of order, task, and responsibility both in fiction and in life.

In Bed One Night and Other Brief Encounters

Coover's *In Bed One Night and Other Brief Encounters* (1983) was published in both hardcover and paperback by Burning Deck, a small Providence, Rhode Island–based press which specializes in innovative fiction and poetry. It is the shortest of Coover's three short story collections (fifty-nine pages), and the slightest as well. Seven of the nine stories gathered here are only several pages each in length, with the two remaining stories, "the convention" and "beginnings," occupying nearly half the volume.

Because of being published by a small press, and perhaps because of the stories themselves, *In Bed One Night* has not attracted the critical commentary and readership that Coover's other collections of stories have. Still, considering the literary prestige of many of the magazines in which these stories were published (*Harper's, Antaeus, Tri-Quarterly Review,* among others) and the fact that they often exhibit, in attenuated and sometimes clarified form, gestures and devices found throughout Coover's fiction, they are well worth discussing.

The first story in the collection, "debris," is about a man's discovery of a dead woman on a beach. There is no punctuation, the story written in lines rather than paragraphs. Coover also opts against capitalization. The result is a text that seems to operate somewhere between prose and poetry. It is not a prose poem, since line breaks are maintained, nor is it a poem proper in that the common devices of poetry—for instance, alliteration, metaphor, rhythm—are not present, at least not overtly. Rather, it feels like a story that has gone through a half-birth, remaining foetal and unformed, more than

notes toward a story but less than a developed narrative. There is very little attempt to build up a tension.

"debris" begins with the man on the beach thinking about a song, but "he has forgotten the words/maybe it's the melody he's lost he has the words" (9). But this song seems only a distraction from the matter at hand: "and what is he to do with this woman" (9). As the story progresses through a page and half, he alternates between trying to remember the song, the words and melody slipping away and coming back but never coming together, and looking at the woman's corpse. Finally, he addresses her: "what went wrong between us he asks because he needs a little cheering up/why did you wash up in this bad light" (10). The story concludes with the sand gathering about her ankles "as if to make me count the grains he complains/I have no ear for it" (10). This last line is assumably a movement away from the dead woman and back again to the tune he is trying to remember, a suggestion that he has no ear for music.

The story gives no sense of what the relationship (if any) existed between the man and the dead woman, and it fizzles out before the reader learns anything substantial. Since all there is to cling to are the song and the woman, it is tempting to equate the two. Thus the reader is drawn to ponder the relationship between the woman and the song, but since he or she knows nothing about the nature of the song and next to nothing about the woman, it is difficult to know what to say about either. Perhaps both are debris. The woman is dead and is in the process of being buried by sand. The song is dead or dying in the man's mind, is in the process of being covered over by forgetfulness.

Finally, though, what does the reader gain by seeing the action of waves covering a body on a beach as analogous to the mental process of forgetting? Perhaps that there are more links between the physical and the mental worlds than one might imagine. Perhaps that forgetfulness is a natural process. Or perhaps that beneath the smooth surface of the unblemished beach of memory are repressed horrors. Coover's story, though, ends before arriving at these possibilities. The man abandons his attempts to reconstruct the lost song—dismissing the memory process—before the elements of the story can build up symbolic weight.

"the old man" starts with the words: "this one has to do with an old man." Like "debris," it is written without punctuation or capitalization, in lines, with the same nascent sense of a story still in the process of forming. An old man sits on a park bench, talking to the birds, though "his voice was old and weak the birds couldn't hear it" (12). The children laugh at him and "wished the birds dead the old man dead the bread dead" (12). The man continues each day to feed the birds and talk to them but "what a voice you couldn't hear him" (12).

Halfway through, however, the story takes a turn into the fantastic: "one day the old man got up and started flying around with the birds" (12). He thinks this will shock "the living vinegar" out of the children, but they don't even notice. The freedom the old man experiences quickly turns bitter. He considers shitting on the children from above to get their attention but, he realizes as the story ends:

> . . . he couldn't fly and shit at the same time
> his coat was heavy it was hard work for an old man

his hat blew off he lost it
he didn't fly well because of the palsy
he was afraid of pneumonia
he couldn't see how far up he was
birds he said
get me down
birds (13)

As one knows from earlier in the story, the old man's voice is weak, not likely to be heard by the birds. The man is left suspended in the air, his ability to enjoy the fantastic event that has occurred compromised by his physical decrepitude and by his fears. Even in the air, he cannot stop remembering that he is an old man, his initial elation quickly succumbing to fear.

"the old man" follows a process similar to the critique of myth found in several of Coover's stories and novels. Here, though, Coover is not rewriting an existing myth so much as writing a new story that could be seen as entering into mythic space, and then taking it apart before it can fully do so. The escape and hope that the story could provide are quickly replaced by the reality of the man's existence—his inability, perhaps even his unwillingness, to be released from the confines of his physical body. Rather than flying, he prefers to be safe on the ground.

The title story, "in bed one night," employs a different stylistic strategy than the stories examined above. In the place of lines, Coover offers a single four-page run-on sentence—without commas or periods—with a few dashes and occasional exclamation points.

"so one night," the story begins, starting in the middle of the tale. An unnamed character crawls into bed to discover "a pale

white-haired lady in a plain gray nightgown lying in bed beside him" (14). Demanding an explanation, he "is told she has been assigned to his bed by the social security it's the shortage" (14–15). As it turns out, not only she is in the bed but her one-legged brother is there as well. Soon they are joined by various other characters, the last of whom has not been assigned to the bed but is just along for the ride. As they crawl over each other, "a pale woman enters with three runnynose kids clinging to her limp skirts there's been some mistake but we're awfully tired sir just a little corner—?" (18). The unnamed protagonist falls asleep wondering whether he turned the bathroom light off.

Is the story about overpopulation? Perhaps, but there is something too carnivalesque about it to make it simply that. In the end, the social commentary of the piece is outweighed by the absurdity of the situation. What becomes important is less a sense of social critique than Coover's willingness to comment on the absurdity of contemporary life and people's ability, ultimately, to adapt to it. The human animal is, in the end, an adaptable beast.

"getting to wichita" returns to the use of long, largely unpunctuated lines. It too begins with a sense of entering into the middle of things: "so the driver eases off the interstate" (19). The driver of a car rolls into a filling station to ask a mechanic how far it is to Wichita. At first the mechanic ignores him, but eventually acknowledges him, though not in the fashion the driver expects. His wording belies his countrified appearance: "it is beyond calculation beyond analogy he says. . . . /those who seek to burn the sky with a torch end in tiring themselves out therefore cease from measuring heaven with a tiny piece of" (20). The driver's repartee to this abstract commentary is to interrupt it by asking the mechanic to "fill

er up goddamn it" (21), a request to which the mechanic responds in a much more direct fashion—"regular or premium?" (21).

The mechanic seems enigmatic. He answers one question/request with abstract statements that have everything to do with metaphysics and very little to do with how far it actually is to Wichita. For the mechanic, Wichita is an abstract ideal, beyond the purview of his world. His province is the filling station, for it is there that he possesses all the answers, knows how to act.

The title character of "the tinkerer" takes "a chance and invented mind/set it walking around jumping up and down seeing what it would do" (22). Mind is not his most successful invention but despite that "there was something engaging about it that made him/keep watching/ . . . /yes it was different somehow it had a certain *style*" (23). Once it runs down he reformulates it a little and winds it up, only to realize that "what he'd invented was not mind but love and now he'd gone and blown it" (24). Love goes on a rampage, inventing is outlawed, and the tinkerer is forced to go underground. He waits either for the city fathers to find and punish him or for love, his own invention, to destroy him. "[H]e could hear it whumping hugely around out there/wrecking the world" (24–25). As the story ends, he is "frantically inventing serenity" and dreaming of "a steadfast world free of slapdash and stumble/and the menace of misbegotten thingamajigs" (25). By transforming love into a mechanical invention, treating it as a robot run amuck, Coover's mock allegory achieves an ironic impact. Love is inconvenient, clumsy, and awkward. It bowls people over, destroys them. But in the end would anyone ever want to do without it?

"the fallguy's faith" is, along with "beginnings," one of only two stories in the collection to use conventional punctuation and

capitalization. The fallguy's faith seems to have a metaphorical component, to be a fall "from favor, or grace, some high artifice," but the fall itself seems sufficiently real: "with an earsplitting crack" he "splattered the base earth with his vital attributes" (26). As he lies, numb with terror, he runs through a series of metaphorical uses of the word "fall." As the list grows, he asks himself: "why was it that everything that happened to him had seemed to have happened in language? Even this! Almost as though, without words for it, it might not have happened at all! Had he been nothing more, after all was said and done, than a paraphrastic curiosity, an idle trope, within some vast syntactical flow of existence? Had he fallen . . . *merely to have it said he had fallen?*" (27). In this moment of suffering, as he approaches death, the fallguy seems to realize he is part of a piece of language, that his life is nothing more than words. But as he prepares to articulate this new understanding, he dies. Despite its compression (just over two pages), "the fallguy's faith" concerns how people process experience by putting it into language and how, paradoxically, the patterns and paths of language mediate experience in advance. Humans are often bound up more fully in words than they realize.

"an encounter" returns to unpunctuated, uncapitalized lines, begins again with an indication that this is something being told, that we're entering "storyspace": "here's what happened it was pretty good" (29). The story concerns an unnamed protagonist's walk through a series of empty rooms. He thinks of his experience as "having an encounter with emptiness," a thought which pleases him and causes him to try to meet "all the emptiness he could" (29). When he thinks of rooms in relation to their doors, he tells himself that "emptiness was plural, but he didn't believe it" (30). When he

works in the fact that the rooms have stairs leading up to other empty rooms, "he said something to himself about levels of emptiness but he didn't believe that either" (30). The more he tries to define and theorize the emptiness, the less he enjoys the experience of his wandering. As he realizes each room is identical to every other, he revises his notions: "I'm having an encounter with sameness he told himself he felt better" (31).

But sameness, as it turns out, is not as enjoyable as emptiness. He begins looking for a way out, running faster and faster, until at the end of the story "one day he stopped sat down stopped talking and there were no doors no stairs yes he was alone with it at last it" (31). Finally he has caught up with emptiness, enjoys the feeling of it, has perhaps even in some sense become it, but the narrator is not satisfied with this conclusion: "no no happy endings forget stop forget stop forget at last he kept running what else faster he" (31). But even this does not seem to satisfy the narrator, who responds to his own words with a statement "no wait" (31) and the declaration that the unnamed man did stop but everything is still the same, so he keeps running: "oh where will it all end he cried" (32). The narrative breaks off with the line "well a door closed and he," the story concluding without any real sense of finality, the encounter unresolved.

"the convention" was first published in 1982 in a limited edition by Lord John Press. At around six pages, it is the second longest piece in the collection. Written again in unpunctuated lines, it presents a protagonist named Tom's view of what it is like to be part of a convention at a hotel. At first it all seems fairly clear, with the men rushing into and out of the elevator Tom is riding in, possessed of the usual sense of "comradeship" and "hunger for women."

Quickly, though, Tom moves erratically from one room to another, barely coherent at times, drinking, listening to dirty stories, having sex, pissing, vomiting, laughing. He wanders downstairs to have a drink with an old friend in the hotel bar. The name tags people are wearing change from ordinary names like "Wally Duncan" (34) to joke names like "E. Z. Laye" and "R. U. Pistoff" (35).

As he drinks further, Tom's experience becomes progressively disconnected. Events seem superimposed on one another, everything happening all at once. But as either the narrator or Tom (one can't tell for sure which) says "hell/it's what conventions are all about" (39). Coover wonderfully parodies businessmen boozing it up and having sex. He uses style to simulate impaired consciousness, turning a multi-room party into a nightmare.

"beginnings," the strongest story of the book, was first published in *Harper's* in 1972, more than ten years before being collected in *In Bed One Night and Other Brief Encounters*. It concerns a writer, and begins by informing us that he "went to live alone on an island and shot himself. His blood, unable to resist a final joke, splattered the cabin wall in a pattern that read: It is important to begin when everything is already over" (40).

"This, then, was his problem: beginning. . . . Pulling the trigger, he thought: This is working! I'm getting on!" (41). Having killed himself doesn't seem to slow the writer down much. Despite being dead, he still goes to the mainland if he is out of food or if he cannot write. When the mainlanders tell a story about a writer who came to one of the islands to write but shot himself, he acknowledges "that was me, and they noticed that his head was coming apart and on the wall was a message: 'You ain't seen nothin' yet, friends!'" (42). The blood seems prone to occasionally write new

messages on the wall, and quickly it comes out with: "Well, we've made a new start. . . . Nothing else matters" (42). People who come to see his body interpret as significant the fact that the coffee pot has boiled over, reading a motive of some sort into it.

The island seems ordinary enough: "yet even before pulling the trigger, he recognized that there was something suspicious about it, as though it might have been, like the air he breathed, just another metaphor" (44). What it could be a metaphor for, Coover does not say, but it is an important indication that the space depicted is fictional, that the pulling of the trigger has occurred in an invented, imaginative state, as evidenced by the writer's unwillingness to stay dead.

Yet suddenly there is a woman with him on the island who, he claims, "must have come there sometime between the pulling of the trigger and the loosing of his blood and brains against the cabin wall" (44). Her arrival causes him to throw away all that he has written before: "It was at that time he began to suspect that he, not the island, was the metaphor. He began a story in which the first-person narrator was the story itself, he merely one of the characters, dead before the first paragraph was over" (45). The writer seems to be writing himself; as he already exists in a fictive space, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to say where fiction ends and reality begins.

The arrival of the woman brings about the "sharing of the rib" or "fucking" (45). Sex is described as "almost like a place . . . an island within an island" (46). This realization leads the writer to think of his own fiction as a kind of geography, and he invents a variety of techniques and unexpected fictional structures in composing, or thinking of composing, his own work. These range from

narrators all quoting one another, to footnotes containing sub-footnotes containing sub-sub-footnotes, to setting defined as shifting "like the hands of a clock." They are all techniques which, if not yet contained in a particular Coover story, certainly wouldn't be out of place.

The woman has children, whom the man eats when the woman is distracted and later feels sorry about having eaten. They live on the island, relatively happy, though he again puts the gun to his head. "Soon I'll be able to dispense with this gun altogether, he thought with his scattering brain" (47), as he blows his head off again.

Even after this, he seems frustrated that he cannot write and have sex at the same time, and even more frustrated when he is neither writing nor having sex, when either unsure of what he is doing or not knowing what to do next. Perhaps for this reason he tries to put off the ending, fearing it: "Also it became important to delay the climax. Thus, he got involved with spirals, revolutions, verb tenses, and game theory. There were puns that could make endings almost impossible" (49). He has countless ideas for stories but never writes any of them, never brings anything to fruition. Still, he is amazed by the fecundity of his thought, which he attributes to having begun by ending himself: "all of this from the pulling of one trigger!"

Perhaps all of this—his whole life with the woman, his fecundity of ideas—has occurred not over time but has been compressed into the moment between shooting himself and dying: "One thing leads to another, he thought, and that's how we keep moving along. The blast of the gun, the crack in his skull, were already fading, shrinking into history, wouldn't hear them at all soon, feel them at all" (54).

As the story ends, he and the woman are in the boat, rowing away from the island as:

> the island suddenly sank into the lake and disappeared. . . . You did that on purpose, the woman said. You always have to try to end it all! He had his reasons, but they didn't justify such devastation. . . . So much for fresh starts. He might as well not have pulled the trigger in the first place. But it was done and that was an end to it. Or so it said on the cabin wall. (58–59)

The reader is faced with the possibility that the story as a whole is what is written in blood on the cabin wall. Even if this is just an indication that the phrase "But it was done and that was the end of it" is what is written on the cabin wall, this is still odd: the notion that the story is ended is decreed from within the story itself, the writer seeming to have little control. In any case, the cabin seems to be at the bottom of the lake now, so what importance does the writing, first read only by the fish and then surely washed off by the water, have? Unless there are two cabins, one real, one not. Or both fictional, but at different levels within the fiction.

In other words, the fictional writer sits in his cabin and writes a story about a writer, perhaps meant to represent himself as a character within his own fiction, who kills himself while sitting in his cabin. At once a character in the story and the writer of the story, the writer is both God-like and his own victim. The story is a piece about the relation of the artist to his creation, and a metaphor for writer's block. It provokes, as does the best postmodern fiction, more questions than it answers. The relation between reality and fiction is

at once complicated and presented masterfully enough to make the story a difficult yet worthwhile gem.

Gerald's Party

Published in 1985, *Gerald's Party* was Coover's first long book since 1976's *The Public Burning.* Like *Spanking the Maid,* it pastiches a genre of writing. Like "The Babysitter," it has a party at its heart, a party that seems always on the verge of getting out of hand. Ambitious, sometimes maddening, the book has several dozen characters. Coover uses them all to give a sense of the whirl and sway of a party bursting at the seams.

The book takes place in a single locale: Gerald's house and yard. It is narrated by Gerald, in the past tense. He recalls the events of a night when he is throwing a party, as he rushes about trying and failing at keeping ice and *hors d'oeuvres* stocked, and at keeping everyone happy. The perspective is fragmented; Gerald giving us his impressions with very little sorting, with conversations and events overlapping and revising themselves, sometimes to outrageous effect, as the evening wears on. The party is attended by the upper middle class—a few doctors, a few lawyers—with artists and critics there as well to give the evening that artistic edge. Gerald and his wife are described as a relatively ordinary suburban couple. Gerald, despite having a crush on one of his guests, wants to be a good host, eagerly filling people's drinks, refusing to get upset when things begin to go wrong. There's nothing extraordinary about him; he is ordinary, slightly dull—not unhandsome, but nothing special either.

The initial line of the novel—"None of us noticed the body at first" (7)—indicates how far the party has swung out of control on one level, though on another level it can be seen as an indication that the party itself is going well—nobody is bored enough to notice a dead body. The body belongs to Ros, an "actress" of sorts, who has had sexual encounters with most of the men at the party at one time or another, including Gerald. She has come to the party with Roger, her jealous husband, who suddenly begins to ask if anyone has seen her. When finally she is discovered, she has been stabbed between the breasts and now lies dead.

A reader familiar with the markers particular to individual genres might see this as an indication that this is a detective story. True, on one level it is: a detective shows up, along with a newspaper reporter. There are a number of people who might qualify as suspects, including Ros's spouse Roger (who disappears shortly after Ros, perhaps done away with by the police), some of Ros's friends who have just completed a movie which begins with Ros being killed, and any of Ros's many ex-lovers or any of these lovers' many spouses (including Gerald's wife). In short, anyone except for Gerald.

The partygoers have all been fascinated by Ros because she is hard to pin down, ever changing: "almost fluid. Never the exact pose twice—even twice in the same minute" (56). Ros has a strange quality that Coover will push to extremes in *John's Wife*, where he postulates a woman whose identity is so fluid that she can hardly even be perceived by those around her. Even after Ros is dead, she seems to maintain that fluidity; no one is able to agree about where the body was found or what position it was in (109).

Ros is fascinating also because she seems almost entirely physical: "there was always something so direct, so *immediate* about her—and yet . . ." a partygoer named Dickie says, to which Gerald responds "Well, maybe that's all there was." Dickie answers "How can you say that, Gerald? Even bare skin is a kind of mask" (105). Both are right in that it is the mystery, the uncertainty of whether there is actually anything there or not, that people respond to in Ros. Ros, then, is an anti-Gus from *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* While Gus is a man who is entirely constructed, Ros seems artless to an extreme degree.

The party doesn't stop because of the murder; absurdly, it continues on. Inspector Pardew (his name is a play on the French "pardieu," a very mild expletive used as a reinforcing exclamation), carries on the investigation without clearing the room, investigating Ros's lacerations in front of everyone. It is as if the murder has become part of the party, the process of detection and the party equated. The inspector acknowledges this when, preparing to probe the wound, he says to those around him: "All right, boys and girls, ready for our little party?" (23). When the knife that may be the murder weapon comes to his attention, he does not preserve it as evidence; instead it is passed around from person to person, as if it were part of a party game like "hot potato," each person eager to pass it to someone else (28). Everyone seems to have gotten blood on them: "for the blood seemed to be spreading on its own" (22).

As the murder stays unsolved, the toilets block up, people have sex in upstairs rooms (where Gerald's son, babysat by his mother-in-law, is trying to sleep), and conversations about the nature of art and life continue. Meanwhile, the detective is inclined to confuse things rather than actually sort them out. He seems to get no closer

to the identity of the killer. He begins the investigation absurdly enough by saying "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask everyone to turn their watches in to me, if you don't mind" (32), a gesture which suggests that the party is taking place outside of normal time. Inspector Pardew's investigation after that consists of "fishing about under Ros's skirt with the tweezers" (28), of directing one policeman to hold Ros's limbs in different positions, and of "snipping through the leg of Ros's panties with a tiny pair of manicure scissors" (37). Soon he wants to conduct an autopsy on Ros while she lies on Gerald's floor, assembling kitchen knives and cocktail forks to carry out the task.

Pardew is a parody of the ultra-smart but somewhat disturbed detective popularized in the nineteenth century by Edgar Allan Poe (C. Auguste Dupin) and Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) and seen again in contemporary times in Alfredo Bioy Casares, and Jorge Luis Borges's Don Isidro. Instead of doing the legwork of detection, the detective more often cogitates his way to a solution. Thinking about the crime and its detail and then acting in a precise fashion is enough.

In addition to allowing the detection elements of the story to break down, Coover offers another set of generic markers which define the novel as a tale of erotic pursuit. Gerald has secretly planned the party so as to have in his presence Alison, a young woman he has recently met, and whom he seems bent on seducing. As he tries to refill drinks, find people, and satisfy the police, he is always looking for Alison, trying to spend a moment alone with her. Yet she keeps disappearing. Throughout the book he continues his pursuit.

It is as if different characters in the book think of themselves as being in different genres of novels. Still, there are points of at

least symbolic connection. Just as the investigation of the murder remains frustrated, so does Gerald's pursuit of Alison remain stalled; in the end he finds himself in bed not with Alison but with his wife. The inspector too ends up putting the case to bed by finding someone he can blame: a dwarf. Though little effort is made to make sense of this choice or to convince the reader that he is the murderer, the dwarf is dutifully hauled off to jail.

Gerald's Party is at once nightmarish and funny, the party a flux through which everyone seems to be swirling, not quite certain how to react. It has an exuberance, complexity, and thickness of texture found in Coover's best long novels, *The Public Burning* and *John's Wife.* It also manages, despite being involved in the middle of both a murder investigation and a party, to metafictionalize, to say a great deal about art that might be applied back to the book itself.

The speculations about art are numerous, moving in all different directions. According to a guest named Howard: "Every act of creation, no matter how frivolous it might seem, is, in its essence, *an act of magic!*" This can be read back into *Gerald's Party,* for the party is never too far from incantation and ritual, the reality of the creation shimmering on the verge of collapse. But ultimately this idea does little to explain the novel, and it is juxtaposed to other ideas, all of which have some truth to them, though flaws as well. Tania, a photographer, suggests that Life "was nothing but a sequence of interlocking incarnations, an interminable effort to fill the unfillable outline. Yes, vague chalk drawings, that's what genetics were, the origin of life: questions with no answers, just endless inadequate guesses. Art, she believed, attempted to reproduce not the guesses, but the questions. . . . But art was therefore dangerous"

(120). The idea seems to have relevance to *Gerald's Party* in that the book does not try to provide even tentative answers but instead throws readers into a flux in which they flounder and struggle. They are forced, in the tighter space of art, to encounter the questions which face them in life. But here the questions are more urgent, extracted as they are from the larger context. People cannot allow themselves to be distracted from the questions as they allow themselves to be in the day-to-day rush of life. Yet, for Tania, the answers, the guesses, still remain evasive. This view of art is mimetic, suggesting that art imitates life by asking the same questions life asks, and that it will withhold the same answers that life withholds. Gerald himself posits that "theater, like all art, was a kind of hallucination in the service of reality, and that full appreciation of it required total abject surrender—like religion" (153), "or love," augments Alison, the woman Gerald is interested in. Art, Gerald says elsewhere, "being a revelation of the innermost self, and thus a kind of transcended dream, was 'bedroom art.'" His friend Howard, the critic, responds: "The widespread confusion of art and dreams is a romantic fallacy . . . where dreams protect one's sleep, art disturbs it."

Though these views of art (and there are many more) are not mutually compatible, there are certain concerns that seem to arise repeatedly, and it is in these concerns that a glimpse of Coover's own views on art are given. *Gerald's Party* is a mix of dramatized aesthetic discussions and of action that is connected to these discussions. It is a philosophical novel (in the lineage of Denis Diderot and Anatole France) about the nature of art, in which illustrations and praxis occupy more space than the discussions themselves. What is important is that the conversations are taking place, and that Coover acknowledges that each conversation builds on earlier ones.

As Gerald suggests: "Of course, all conversations were encased in others, spoken and unspoken, I knew that. It was what gave their true dimension, even as it made their referents recede" (103). *Gerald's Party* is highly dialogic, many voices being allowed to speak, but with Coover refusing to come down to a definitive view by the novel's end. Instead of telling the reader what to think about art, he provides the reader with the discussion, accompanying actions, and leaves it to him or her to either sort it all out or, as one of the characters does, discard it as entertainment with the words: "Ah well, what the fuck, it's all just a—*farff! foo!*—fiction anyway" (259). *Gerald's Party* is a philosophical party novel and, as such, its many ideas should operate as a kind of open, postmodern narrative: "a kind of odd stuttering tale that refused to unfold, but rather became even more mysterious and self-enclosed, drawing us sweetly toward its inner profundities" (78).

There are certain strands that do seem to form among these different ideas, chains of ideas that keep coming up, the most prominent of which has to do with the way in which one experiences art. As Dickie says: "At heart, theater doesn't entertain *or* instruct, goddamn it—it's an atavistic folk rite" (171). Most of the more convincing comments on art found in Coover's novel suggest similar things: art is involved in posing questions rather than answering them, it is ritualistic, it is connected to play, it is tied to sensation. Art takes participants into the heart of the mystery without solving the mystery; instead, readers or viewers experience the sense of mystery as mystery. Gerald acknowledges that he has learned more about art from an affair with Ros in a costume closet than from any discussion: "I probably learned more about theater in that hour—

theater as *play,* and the power of play to provoke unexpected insights, unearth buried memories, dissolve paradox, excite the heart—in all the years before or since" (78). Art, this quote implies, is not an exclusively mental activity, but something *felt*, akin to love, religion, and sensation. Art's primary function in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is not to teach or to entertain, but through ritual to push participants into genuine sensation. Art is experiential. Though there are disagreements on what this might mean among the different voices, the dominant consensus is that art is something one enters, something one actively experiences.

Gerald addresses this late in the book, speaking of ritual gesture with the communal "we," inviting the reader into his aesthetic: "what fascinates us is not the ritualized gestures themselves—for, in a sense, no gesture is original, or can be—but rather that strange secondary phenomenon which repetition, the overt stylization of gesture, creates: namely, those mysterious spaces *in between.*" By moving participants into those mysterious spaces, art changes the nature of human experience.

The party, too, can be seen as a ritual. As a guest named Vic says, "Ritualized lives need ritualized forms of release. Parties were invented by priests, after all" (168). Though he says this somewhat disparagingly ("just another power gimmick at the end" he calls parties on the same page), there is some truth in this. In middle class lives in a century in which drama, ritual, and God seem to have lost their efficacy, Coover suggests, the party is all that people today have. If they are to look anywhere for enlightenment, they might as well look there. Yet meaning remains for Coover perpetually elusive. Dickie's playful comments, which rationalize the nature of the

party, still suggest its role as a potential transcendent. “For me, they’re like solving a puzzle—I keep thinking each time I’ll find just the little piece I’m looking for” (169).

An important, though often submerged, aspect of the discussion of art in the piece involves the relation of truth and beauty, a discussion which is as old as art itself, and which was perhaps most famously formulated by John Keats. For Tania, the photographer, the parody, the photograph, and the mirror, all of which provide a frame, “did not lie—on the contrary—but neither did it reflect: rather, . . . it *created* the truth we saw in it, thereby murdering potentiality” (83). Truth, according to this view, is something which art can create, but in choosing to make that creation it limits the potential for the real to speak. Speaking later of art, Tania argues that the reason art is dangerous is because of its connection to beauty: “the heart of beauty was red-hot . . . and it could burn your eyes out, sear your flesh away” (120). Beauty, then, is potentially destructive. Later, Gerald thinks “I understood now what Tania had meant when she said that truth, . . . dispersed into the clashing incongruities of the world, returns as beauty” (259). In other words, if there is such as thing as truth, it becomes dispersed in contact with the world, mixed with a number of other things, pressed down. When it rises up again, like the return of the repressed, in art rather than in life, it has become beauty.

A different notion of truth is embodied by Inspector Pardew as he tries to determine who committed the murder. For him, the facts are only a feeble reflection of the truth: “We have the facts, yes, a body, a place and a time, and all this associative evidence we’ve so painstakingly collected—but facts in the end are little more than surface scramblings of a hidden truth whose vaporous configuration

escapes us even as it draws us on" (283). He is involved in the guessing, the attempts to look at the questions and find the answer. What happens to truth? He answers in response to an elided fairy tale, perhaps that of Sleeping Beauty. "Truth," he claims, "when it is no longer pertinent, is not in the same sense truth any longer . . . it's as if that prince of yours were to hack his way through his thicket of briars and brambles, only to arouse a creature suffering from a fatal disease, as it were, or one who's lost her wits." (199). Gerald's mother-in-law answers: "Or perhaps to find a host of competing Beauties" (199).

The detective and the mother-in-law define two different ways of thinking about truth. In the first, truth persists but is twisted, deformed, in a way similar to how Coover deforms fairy tales in *Pricksongs & Descants* and *Briar Rose*, allowing myths and legends to lead to unexpected, sometimes disappointing results. In the second, "the host of competing Beauties," where one thought to find truth, one finds a polysemous beauty. One might see in this "host of competing Beauties" Coover's process of permutation—his ability to tell several versions of an event at once (such as in "The Magic Poker") without casting them off, and by doing so speculating on the nature of fiction. In any case, neither allow beauty in a traditional sense, but both have their own, unique, sometimes grotesque, appeal.

Through a collision of genres, Coover manages to locate us again in a liminal space between genres, in that ritual *between*, aware of a series of comforting but ultimately limiting conventions which otherwise might be passed over unnoticed. By jarring his readers, Coover makes them reconsider the kinds of stories they tell and are told. Yet as the novel ends and Gerald slips into sleep, things

seem to be beginning all over again, the ritual recurring, reinforcing itself through repetition. That, of course, is the difficulty: while ritual takes people to the between space, the between space leads nowhere. They can only come back out of it, and then, through ritual, return to it in a slightly different way. One becomes trapped in a circle, moving from temporary release back to reality back again to temporary release. The end result is, as Gerald's wife says "almost as though the parties have started giving us instead of us giving the parties" (305).

A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This

The final story of *Pricksongs & Descants* postulates the idea that fiction is a sort of entertainment, a magician's show. In *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This*, this idea is pursued in terms of another type of show: the movie. *A Night at the Movies* is Coover's simultaneous tribute to, and critique of, the silver screen; all of the stories in this linked connection are tied either to specific subgenres of movies or to actual classic movies, such as *Casablanca*. While Coover has experimented with fiction tied to movies before, both in sections of *The Public Burning* and in "The Sentient Lens" sequence in *Pricksongs & Descants*, these have been isolated occurrences. Here, however, Coover provides a full and extended critique of the contemporary art form that generates contemporary "myths" and things to believe in more quickly than any other.

While many of the stories in this collection had been published individually, they gain something by being brought together as a series. The collection taken as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and this cohesiveness has caused critic Jackson Cope to call

the collection "a novel about the experience of attending a night of movies."[8] Though I think calling the book a novel is going too far, it is true that the totality and nuance of Coover's homage and critique only manifest when the stories are taken together.

In the place of a "Table of Contents," Coover provides a "Program," suggesting to the reader that they've committed to a vintage night at the movies. Each of the stories is categorized as a different type of movie genre or as a different aspect of the movie experience. There are "Previews of Coming Attractions," "The Weekly Serial," "ADVENTURE!," "Selected Short Subjects," "COMEDY!," "Intermission," "For the Kiddies," "Travelogue," "Musical Interlude," and "ROMANCE!" A note on the page following the program proclaims: "Ladies and Gentlemen May safely visit this Theatre as no Offensive Films are ever Shown Here."

The collection begins with "The Phantom of the Movie Palace," billed as a coming attraction. The story is a coming attraction in the sense that it moves rapidly between different sorts of movies, giving a sense of what is to come in the rest of the collection. In addition, like "The Door" in *Pricksongs & Descants*, it prepares the thematic ground for the stories that follow, inscribing the parameters of the fictional world of this particular collection.

"The Phantom of the Movie House" is a reflective story; very little actually happens in most of it. Coover has transformed the phantom from Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* into a phantom of the cinema. The phantom in this case is an old projectionist hanging out in a theater that nobody visits anymore, nostalgically showing his favorite movies. The story opens by offering clips from five different unidentified movies, offered back to back without explanation. The explanation comes through the projectionist who

is found changing reels, thinking: "Ah, well, those were the days" (15). No one ever comes to the theater anymore, his movies play to empty seats, and he seeks his forgotten role through metaphors from the movies he has shown. He goes back and forth between projecting film and wandering the abandoned movie house, both its public spaces and its secret rooms, its "low-ceilinged maze of subterranean tunnels" which lead to "old dressing rooms, kennels and stables, billiard parlors, shower rooms, clinics, gymnasiums, hairdressing salons, garages and practice rooms, scene shops and prop rooms . . . a ghost town within a ghost town" (19). The movie palace seems to be for him an entire vanished society, and he himself both wanders the space and shows movies in an attempt to recuperate both his life and a lost aspect of American life.

In a metafictional moment, the narrator indicates: "Sometimes, when one picture does not seem enough, he projects two, three, even several at a time, creating his own split-screen effects, montages, superimpositions. Or he uses multiple projectors to produce a flow of improbable dissolves, startling sequences of abrupt cuts and freeze frames like the stopping of a heart, disturbing juxtapositions of slow and fast speeds, fades in and out like labored breathing" (22). The projectionist collages the films together, allowing the different genres to collide, allowing actions to occur and reoccur, combining incongruent characters and scenery. The result is that "slapstick *is* romance, heroism a dance number. Kisses kill" (25). The projectionist begins "sliding two or more projected images across each other like brushstrokes, painting each with the other, so to speak, so that a galloping cowboy gets in the way of some slapstick comedians and, as the films separate out, arrives at the shootout with custard on his face" (23). This could be read as a description of

Coover's methodology for the book as a whole—in story after story Coover will offer what seems initially to be a recognizable movie genre and then will overlay it with details or events that seem to be stolen from other genres, calling each genre into question by doing so, operating in the gap between the two. These statements are also an accurate description of other works by Coover—*Gerald's Party* and *The Public Burning*, for instance—and might be read as a statement of Coover's larger aesthetic.

The projectionist, a lover of the old movies, has reservations about some of his deformations. At one point, he refers to this blending of film as a "kind of pornography" (25). He knows "there's something corrupt, maybe even dangerous, about this collapsing of boundaries, but it's also liberating, augmenting his film library exponentially. And it is also necessary" (23). This can be seen in Coover's work as well, where an incredible liberation reveals danger to the general social order, causing values to fall apart. Such challenging is also necessary in that it allows one to continue on, work toward new myths more relevant to one's time.

Yet, the projectionist at first does not seem to realize the disruptive potential of what he is doing. He is amused by unusual juxtapositions, laughs at the combination of a chorus line and a western barroom brawl. But quickly things begin to go wrong, each film infecting the others. He loses one of the characters, an ingenue whom he keeps going back to and who seems, mysteriously, to have vanished from the films altogether. He senses someone in the theater, and as he goes out to search he finds himself nearly crushed by a fire curtain, lights flaring. No one is to be seen. Then, without his assistance, the movie begins to play, a real mixture of all different types of genres: "He can feel his body, as though penetrated by an

alien being from outer space, lose its will to resist" (30), and he feels assaulted by all types of movies, living out bits and pieces from each; trying to get back into the projection room, he finds his way blocked by "gleaming thickets of tangled film spooling out at him like some monstrous birth" (31). He has become a sort of Doctor Frankenstein, his experimentation with collage creating a creature that seems to be beyond his control. "What's frightening," an on-screen detective says, is "discovering that what you think you see only because *you* want to see *it . . . sees you"* (33).

The movie seems to have come alive. It draws him into it, the boundary between life and art breaking down. He finds himself reliving scenarios of terror and pursuit, haunted by thoughts of a character from an old movie, the notorious Iron Claw. The movies themselves seemingly come to life around him and "milieus slide by like dream cloths" (35) as the theater becomes an eighteenth-century French ballroom, which turns into a public square, where he is pushed into line and prodded toward a guillotine, along with all sorts of movie characters, the public screaming for blood. "It's all in your mind," an usherette tells him, "and so we're cutting it off" (36). If his mind's destroyed, everything will be over. The story ends with the projectionist's partial recognition that he is still in the theater, coupled with the guillotine blade's fall, the story ending suddenly, in mid-sentence.

That the projectionist is mad seems unquestionable, for the narrator refers in passing to "mad projectionists" (35). Yet, there is more going on here than a man who, unable to live his actual life, has retreated into movie-inspired madness. The story is about both the linking of art to madness, and the ability of art to create new worlds. It also acknowledges the danger of these worlds, the danger

of art in general. People tend to think of art as safe, as existing on a screen or within a frame or on a page. They are here and it is there, at a distance. "There's always this unbridgeable distance between the eye and its object. Even on the big screen," the narrator says. "Well, and if I *were* to bridge it, the projectionist thinks, what then?" (17). The story is about that bridging taking place, in this case through the decay of the projectionist's mental state. If one thinks of art in the traditional Western way as a *representation*, as an imitation of something in the real world, then it is easy to think of it as working on a lesser level than the real world, as being something that cannot affect us directly. However, Coover is consistently interested in questioning that distinction. In the case of the projectionist, art is a catalyst that reacts with his decaying mind to pull him out of his world and into the world of the movies. Art is affective and intensive for him, something that cannot be kept at a safe distance.

Yet the story is also about lost worlds, about the way in which the current public has rejected the old movies, would just as soon do away with not only the projectionist but with all the standbys of the silver screen. The myths of these worlds no longer seem relevant, a fact which Coover acknowledges as he goes about both paying tribute to old movies and pushing them in new directions.

From these "previews," Coover moves quickly along to "The Weekly Serial." Shown before the main feature in movies theaters in the first half of the twentieth century, the serial offered moviegoers a "chapter" of the usually action-oriented story each week, the chapter beginning with a dramatic moment, and ending with a cliffhanger which would be resolved in the next week's initial dramatic moment.

In the place of the more traditional version of the serial, Coover offers a biblical parody entitled "After Lazarus." Here, as in "The Sentient Lens" series, Coover writes as if he is presenting readers a treatment of the movie being made, giving descriptions of both the movement of the characters and the movement of the camera. The result distances the readers, pushing them one step further from the immediacy of the moment. The reader, instead of being close to the action, is located behind the camera, aware of the camera's movements as well as of the action depicted. Yet as it becomes clear that the camera is a sort of character, with a gaze and consciousness of its own, that distance begins to dissolve.

The story begins with titles and credits fading in and out, showing a plain white background which resolves itself into the sky. A voice repeats, in hollow tones, "*I have risen! I have risen!*" (37). Quickly the story switches to a new scene, the camera moving into a seemingly deserted village. In the sections that follow, the camera wanders about the streets, watches an old woman come out of a door, follows the woman down the street, watches her go into a cathedral. Soon the doors open and a priest and a crowd of people come out, carrying a casket. Everyone seems to have identical faces—the priest, the members of the crowd, the old woman, even the dead man in the coffin. They carry the coffin out to a freshly dug grave. As they lower it in, "the hands of the corpse lift tremblingly from his chest, reach plaintively up toward the pallbearers" who drop the coffin suddenly into the grave with what the story describes as an artificial "choreographed shock" (44). Watching the grave, they hear "a faint scraping sound, like the sound of mice in the wall" (45). The man crawls out of the grave, only to be thrown back in by a pallbearer.

At this point, something seems to have changed. The pallbearer is suddenly alone. He runs back to town, staggers from street to street: "He seems to be screaming, but no sound is heard" (46). Suddenly a sound *is* heard—the same "*I have risen! I have risen!*" that begins the story. He goes into a house and dresses himself up as a female mourner. Looking up, the pallbearer-become-mourner sees a pallbearer, identical to himself. In a scene at once disturbing and funny, this new pallbearer rushes into another house, dresses up as a mourner, sees another pallbearer. In an odd parody of a vaudeville act, mourners pull shawls and dresses out from under their clothing and pass them around. Soon, a pallbearer has made it to the church, has dressed up as the priest, and the funeral procession begins again.

As the others file out, a pallbearer is left alone and weary behind. He stumbles after the funeral procession. As he gets closer, he realizes the coffin is empty: "He glances about him, at the village, the cathedral, the old women, down at the heads of the pallbearers, over his shoulders toward the cemetery, the road lined with mourners. . . . No one seems to be noticing him. He slips over the edge and down into the casket. . . . Timidly, he eases himself down into the cushions, folding his hands on his chest. His soft smile stretches into a wide dry-lipped grin, his eyes protrude and film over" (51). As the story ends, the coffin has been lowered into the grave, and the camera sees only darkness. There is "a faint nearby scraping sound, like that of mice in a wall" (52), which is presumably the sound of the man making his way out of the grave.

In what sense is this combination of absurd theater, religious ritual, and vaudeville a serial? In that it seems a repeated gesture, a

ritual that is performed again and again, and which will be performed again next week in the same way that a church service recurs weekly or at least regularly. It is identical each time, played out for reasons of which the reader remains unaware, and seems to be the glue binding the community together. At the same time, Coover causes us to question if there actually *is* a community: each member of the community has the same face, and each, apparently, has an ability to fulfill any role in the ritual. This might be an indication that at least as far as the ritual is concerned they *are* faceless—it does not matter which of them fills the slot as long as it is filled by someone—and thus their differences are inessential in the ritual itself. All that matters is the role they play, and that the community is cleansed. Yet this sameness might also be read literally—each of them actually *is* the same person, the drama played out exists for one person alone, a private imagined ritual.

The title of the piece, "After Lazarus," refers to the New Testament story. When Jesus discovered that Lazarus had died, he commanded him to come forth from the tomb, bringing Lazarus back to life. Coover deforms the story by having a pallbearer come forward to hurl the dead man back into the grave. The dead should remain dead, Coover seems to say. Yet even this is complicated in that after having thrown the dead man back into the grave, the pallbearer finds himself alone, the crowd vanished (45). In addition, as he runs back to the town, he seems to be the one shouting, "I have risen!" The living pallbearer and the dead man are equated and, as the story progresses, one sees that all are interchangeable. What the effects of the ritual are, how they bind the community together, Coover leaves unstated, and as a result, the ritual seems aimless, repeated without any kind of growth occurring. The people in the town seem to have

little personality beyond their roles in the ritual; all of their lives (at least all of what the reader sees of them) have been reduced to the ritual, the weekly serial.

Though not scathing and subtly ambiguous, "After Lazarus" can thus be read as a critique of one of the stories of Christianity as well as a questioning of ritual's ability to render life meaningful. Coover tends to side with the individual over the group, and "After Lazarus" is no exception.

"ADVENTURE!" is the designation for the next story in the book, "Shootout at Gentry's Junction." More specifically, the story is a Western that warps at the edges in a way that recalls Coover's play *The Kid*. Though the story follows many of the conventions of the Western, it subverts some of the most important ones, allowing for instance, the demonized enemy to win.

Like Coover's story "Morris in Chains," "Shootout" is composed of two different types of narration, alternating regularly between them. The first is a third-person narrative which is colored by the attitude and values of Sheriff Henry Harmon who is waiting for a criminal, the Mex, to arrive in Gentry's Junction. The narrative line is straightforward, though it moves from objective description to Henry's subjective thoughts.

The second narrative is also third person but is italicized and in parentheses to set it apart. The narrative is colored by the consciousness of Don Pedo, the Mexican criminal, and gives a playful and somewhat ribald view of him, a view which a traditional Western would never provide. Don Pedo is a trickster, a clown-like figure who spends most of his time "Laughing and laughing! Hee hee hee!" (59). Full of joy, he "finds great pleasure in the life. He is

never never sad" (61). He is hardly the serious arch villain of the traditional Western.

The story that follows moves toward and through the shootout. The conflict, in addition to being between characters, can also be read as a conflict between narrative styles. In the first narrative style, third-person narration is inflected by a certain consciousness, but despite this inflection, the style remains straightforward, the verbal play and sparkle held to a minimum. It is endowed with the characteristic ideas of the Western genre, has a laconic, clipped style and a subject matter associated with stereotypes of cowboys:

> Henry Harmon. Hank. A tough honest man with clear speech and powerful hands, fast hands, fair hands and sure. There was no sun in his eyes, here in his office, but still he squinted as he stared toward the old screen door, toward Main Street of Gentry's Junction. Out there somewhere. If he was here yet. Hank knew what he had to do. (54)

This narrative style makes appeals to duty, postulates a sense of what is just and what is unjust. A definite persona is being created.

The second narrative is much more carnivalesque, more playful. It is inflected by verbal dislocations that symbolize a Spanish speaker's use of English. It includes Spanish words, verbal equivalents of laughter, and syntactic ruptures. The speech is raucous and joyous, verbally inventive:

> *And where is the Mexican that infamous one? He is in the office of the Sheriff. He is crumbling cowchips into*

> *the humidor. On the desk of Sheriff Henry there is a photograph of his—cómo? sí! his calentita! the guapísima calentita of the Sheriff who names herself Belle. The Mexican with a fat stump of a pencil he traces upon the photograph his own esplendid self, Don Pedo the Mexican bandit, in a posture not to be misunderstood. Festive carcajadas intrude themselves from outside the screen door where are coming together many very laughing persons of Gentry's junction.* (56–57)

In the typical Western, the American hero would face down the evil foreigner and defeat him. Yet the style represented by the Mexican has at least some of the playful qualities that Coover himself extolls. For this reason, it is hardly a surprise that the law ends up getting the worst of Don Pedo and his practical jokes, the sheriff being shot in the face with his own gun which, even to the point of death, he does not know how the Mex has managed to get. He is shot with a silver bullet, suggesting that, like the werewolf, the myth of the Sheriff is a sort of monster, that special measures must be taken to kill it off. The story ends ambiguously with the Mex riding off into the sunset wearing the sheriff's badge, while behind him in the town "the whiskey he is running like blood" in "the most festive of roar-ups" (72). The other authorities of the town and symbols of order—the storekeeper, the banker, and the preacher—have all been strung up, either by the Mex or by townspeople infected with his laughter and anarchic spirit. "Flames leap into the obscuring sky and the womans scream merrily" (73) as Don Pedo moves along to new territory, sporting the Sheriff's star which now gleams blood red in the

sun, leaving destruction in his wake. The old myths must be leveled if new ones are to have the chance to spring up.

"Selected Short Subjects" consist of three brief stories: "Gilda's Dream," "Inside the Frame," and "Lap Dissolves." In "Gilda's Dream," the dreamer (never identified by name and apparently male despite the dream belonging to "Gilda") is in the men's room doing a striptease, watched by a man looking through the louvered door of one of the stalls. "I was both threatening and desirable," the dreamer indicates, and he moves from being in danger and in fear, falling apart, to feeling "free, utterly free!" As the dream ends, the dreamer hears "the click of the secret weapon, and realized that my surrender to him . . . had disturbed the categories. I'd gambled and lost. My pride, my penis, my glove, my enigmatic beauty, my good name, everything. There would be no going home" (75).

Thomas Kennedy sees the story as evoking *Gilda*, a 1940s movie in which Rita Hayworth performs a mildly erotic dance in a South American nightclub.[9] This is probably the starting point, but Coover seems to have done the movie up in drag, and the dance has moved from the heart of a nightclub to a public restroom. The original text is deflated, cast into a vastly different light, as a private and somewhat sordid fantasy. "Gilda's Dream" is a page-long piece about achievement and loss, enigmatic in many ways. As the dreamer presents himself as an object for a hidden other's gaze, he becomes both threatening and desirable, falls apart and comes back together, but in the act of giving oneself to another, the dream suggests, one loses everything. The nature of the secret weapon is never revealed.

The two-page "Inside the Frame" consists of a series of generalized situations, as if Coover has gathered up bits of film off the cutting room floor. It offers images that have long been filmic clichés, images with symbolic resonance that crop up in any number of movies: a tumbleweed blowing across a street; a screen door banging; a sign creaking in the wind; a riderless horse; an Indian on a roof; a tall man holding a limp woman in his arms before a window; a couple passing with arms linked, walking and singing; the Indian leaping off the roof with a knife between his teeth. By putting these clichés together, however, Coover manages to draw them out of context, allows them to function more mysteriously; the story builds up a strange tension because it does not sequence properly, because juxtaposition gives it a strange, disturbing and dreamlike logic. If the piece went on any longer, it would not work, but as it stands it generates a certain amount of force and sensation in the reader, provoking an odd, visceral response. Says Kennedy: "The lack of coherence, finally, is the quality that grips and stays with the reader; it is an assault on that flimsy linearity that is the currency of Hollywood, which makes of its illusions not art but lies."[10]

"Lap Dissolves" is the longest of the three pieces, around seven pages. Its title refers to a film-making term. A *lap dissolve*, also known simply as a *dissolve*, is a way of making a transition; as one scene fades out, the next grows clear. Often there is some deliberate overlap and superimposition in the middle of the process. As in "Inside the Frame," Coover operates here through juxtaposition, allowing the two main characters of the movie, a man and a woman, to slide from one situation to another, as if moving from one movie type to another.

The unidentified woman begins by clinging to the edge of a cliff; the man breaks through the door as she falls over, then hails a bus. On the bus, he encounters the woman, who now seems a stranger. She leaves the bus and they enter into a *film noir* about a strangler, from there running through fields of clover. Pirates show up to kill him and rape her but shortly after they are alive again. They slip into a fifties sitcom and suddenly acquire a family. Their daughter recites a dream which incorporates a number of other movie types, from science fiction to chorus line. By the end of the recitation, the mother seems to have become a sidekick and the daughter a sheriff, the father disappearing entirely.

The story seems more fragmented, less purposeful than many of the stories in the collection. Coover gives himself a great deal of liberty here, cobbling together a sequence that doesn't fully make sense out of bits and pieces of film. It shows perhaps the way in which myths have broken down, the characters living lives that are scattered pieces of the myths that movies have given them. Yet it also might be thought of as a movie about the way in which viewers think about actors, particularly stars. As each actor spans different parts and different roles, they begin to establish an on-screen personal identity that moves from genre to genre, movie to movie, yet remains recognizable. When people talk about specific actors, about their interest in them, their conversations move rapidly through the different roles an actor has had in different movies. Coover can be read as offering life as a series of roles and situations that are not consecutive. By doing so he challenges the notion of life (and of art) as a stable, continuous entity that is meaningful and orderly.

COMEDY! is next on the program with "Charlie in the House of Rue." In this silent feature, Charlie Chaplin finds himself slapsticking

through a house which seems to be constantly changing, comedy and horror blending as the story progresses.

As the story opens, Charlie stands in his typical tramp's garb, in a vestibule in a mansion at the foot of a staircase. Coover gives meticulous descriptions of Charlie's actions through the piece, but does so in a way that renders the comic moments of Chaplin's movie work remarkably well. Though slightly distanced because his action is described rather than visually depicted, Coover's Chaplin captures both the feel and the humor of the original.

As he examines the furnishings, stealing cigars and having a comic encounter with a suit of armor among other things, Charlie glimpses a woman at the top of the stairs. She is "beautiful but strangely baleful" and "gazes past him, unseeing" (88). Smiling apologetically, he backs away and through a doorway.

He finds himself in a kitchen, in the company of a man staring sullenly into a bowl of soup. No matter what Charlie does, he cannot make the man acknowledge him or do anything but stare into the bowl. Looking "ill with fear," Charlie "runs as though pursued through the nearest door" (89), only to end up in a boudoir, confronted first by a nude woman and then, as the woman disappears, by a maid. He tries to tease her by hitching up her skirt with his cane, but the jokes go wrong, and he finds, horrified, that he has managed to remove her skirt and that, what's more, she seems to like it. Indeed, Charlie wanders the house falling from situation to situation, each of which he tries to handle with his usual antics. The technique Coover uses here is that of inserting a character from one genre into another genre. Throughout the story, Charlie is caught in a place that he does not seem to fit. The House of Rue seems occupied largely by those in mourning or those filled with regret, so eaten up by their regret that they have ceased to function. Here,

Charlie's pranks are ineffective, will bring neither laughter nor anger, will elicit either little response or responses that he finds inappropriate or disturbing. Though Charlie at one point meets a policemen with whom he has a more typically Chaplinesque exchange, this seems only a brief interlude. The policeman is as out of place as Charlie.

It seems that the house is some sort of funhouse, and that Charlie cannot act in the way he thinks he is acting—his actions end up being other than he expects and he seems to be moved from place to place without his knowing it. The house is in charge—either that or some sort of malignant entity which neither the reader nor Charlie can perceive is running the show. When Charlie finally resorts to the clown's ultimate weapon and slaps the man in the kitchen in the face with a pie, he finds that, somehow, due to a shift in the dream-like logic of the house, it is the face of the woman on the landing, which is coated with pie. Yet, when he cleans off the woman's face, he finds himself looking into an old man's rheumy eyes which are coming out of their sockets. When he tries to hold the eyes in with one hand, he finds he is in the bedroom, grabbing the maid's "round white bottom" (99).

Just when things seem most desperate, Charlie makes it back to the landing and finds, gradually, that the woman there seems to be interested in his antics after all. As he pratfalls and mimes, "her melancholy expression seems to soften" (100). As he redoubles his act "The lady seems fascinated now and, though she has still not smiled, watches him intently" (101). Just as things seem to be going well, however, Charlie accidentally knocks her off the landing, in a freak accident hanging her by the neck. Trying to release her at the end of another nightmarish ride from room to room, he accidentally

kills her by hanging on to her legs. As the story ends, Charlie is suspended in the air, clinging to the hanged lady, "pants adroop, tears in his eyes, shadows creeping over his face like bruises, gazing out into the encircling gloom with a look of anguish and bewilderment, as though to ask: What kind of place is this? Who took the light away? And why is everybody laughing?" (111). He now is fully in the house of rue, grief-stricken himself, his suffering the object of others' laughter.

"Charlie in the House of Rue" is one of the most successful pieces in the volume. It provides a good sense of Chaplin's antics while simultaneously critiquing the subgenre of the Chaplinesque movie. Coover's story is at once absurd and comic, presenting a character buffeted in a way he cannot understand. Trying to cope, he falls back on his traditional gestures which, because he is in a new context, prove ineffective. Thrown into a hostile world with the wrong tools, Charlie is either at the mercy of unfamiliar circumstances or is being consciously manipulated by a force he cannot understand. Coover's humor here is shot through with tragedy and angst. In the place of simple laughter, Coover offers a dark tale that might be read as a metaphor for the human existential crisis.[11]

In "Intermission," which takes place during the changing of the reels, the lights come on. Told in the third person, the narration's omniscience is limited, the narrator identifying closely with an unnamed female character, one of the moviegoers, as she goes out into the lobby for snacks. There she meets a "dazzling guy, all class and muscle" (116) whom she thinks must be a movie star and, "as though there's some prearranged signal" (117), she steps with him out into the street.

This prearranged signal is a reference back to movies: she has been taught to think of situations in certain ways by the movies. She refers constantly to them; she has been raised by the cinema.

With the handsome man she thinks she has entered into a romance, that she has fallen into a genre she has seen in the movies, but in fact she has been mistaken about which genre it actually is. "Mr. Class" turns her over to four menacing guys who drag her into an unmarked car and, as she turns to appeal to him as a hero, "he only smiles mysteriously" (117). Perhaps she has entered a gangster flick instead, or perhaps the stereotypes of the movies do not work in actual life.

She manages to leap from the car into a river, where she goes over the falls in a barrel, entering a new context. Suddenly she is out to sea, surrounded by sharks, then about to be tossed into a volcano by generic natives. Then just as suddenly, after what seem weeks of suffering, she finds herself in a small hut with the man she first saw in the theater lobby: "'The plan worked,' he exclaims, taking her in his arms, 'We're alone at last!'" (123). So, perhaps she is in a romance after all, and all the other movements into other genres have just been part of his "plan" to get her alone and to himself. Or they could be reading a script in a porn film, since he spends some time fondling her breasts. Yet suddenly missiles fall from the sky and, after another series of misadventures, she finds herself just outside the theater: "she still has her ticket stub, and in the theater the intermission buzzer is just this moment sounding its final warning and everyone is rushing back to his seat" (132).

She rushes back in, shaken by her experience, but with seemingly nothing wrong, as if all the events have taken place in her imagination in the few moments she has been out of the theater. Yet

once the movie starts (a cartoon) she realizes that something is wrong—nobody is laughing. All the people around her are dead. About to scream, she feels a claw on her shoulder: "The claw twists her around in her seat until she's facing the screen again and holds her there." At first worried, she begins to relax, for "as far as she can tell, the claw only wants her to watch the movie and, hey, she's been watching movies all her life, so why stop now, right? Besides isn't there always a happy ending? Has to be. It comes with the price of the ticket" (134).

Coover, however, is precisely about challenging that notion. Instead of art that reassures, falling into expected patterns, he refuses the happy ending. In fact, he often refuses the ending altogether, concluding his stories at a point of rising tension, breaking them off before a resolution can be pursued, ending in the middle of a nightmare. "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" breaks in the middle of a sentence; "Charlie in the House of Rue" ends with Charlie suspended in the air, not knowing what will come next; here, the girl's thoughts trail off, and the story ends with the claw still gripping her shoulder.

It is significant that the claw can force her to watch a movie when all around her there are the dead. The movie seems to be an alternative to life. A kind of mind deadener, it puts her under a spell. Despite being surrounded by deceased people, she is able to convince herself that the claw only wants her to watch the movie. The myths of the silver screen seem very effective at distracting people from the realities around them.

"Cartoon" is a playful meditation on the relation between the real and the imagined. It has a great many passing similarities to *Who*

Framed Roger Rabbit? a movie which mixes live-action and animation. It begins with a cartoon man in a cartoon car driving over a real man, followed by the real man's attempts to get a cartoon policeman to administer justice. Instead of justice, the real man finds himself dragged in the direction of jail by a real policeman (with cartoon eyes), who is only stopped from locking him away by a cartoon woman who flashes her breasts at him and then takes them off, gives them to the policeman. After the cartoon woman goes off with a cartoon dog, the man rights the cartoon car and drives back to the real town. Yet on the edge of the town, the car stops working. When he arrives home, he finds the cartoon man, tiny now, clinging under his wife's skirts and having sex with her as she tries to ignore him. Depressed, he goes into the bathroom and sees he has grown cartoon ears: "Well, well, he thinks . . . there's hope for me yet" (139).

Why would a real person want to become a cartoon? Partly because different sets of rules apply to real life and to the world of cartoons. The cartoon man is a gadabout, a trickster, and he seems to get away with everything. The real man, though, doesn't have the same leeway. By becoming a cartoon, he could enter into a new context, a new world. He could go from a regular life into a more exciting existence.

In addition, the story can be read as a critique of the idea that art and life exist in separate spaces. It is about a real man's interactions with the imaginary, the way in which the unreal or fictional can impact real lives. That the man grows cartoon ears suggests that he is beginning to experience at least part of his reality through the medium of fiction. Perhaps the next stage will be for him to acquire cartoon eyes, like the policeman, and then begin to see the world

through cartoon lenses. Art, even cartoons, has an effect on how people understand the world.

Identified as "Travelogue," "Milford Junction, 1939: A Brief Encounter" is a story without characters. A clear precursor of some of Steven Millhauser's stories, it focuses on a small market town called Milford Junction. The story is narrated in a lively and lush style, in a tone meant to make the town seem appealing and different, a place one might like to visit. The narrator describes "bustling High street," a "widely admired War memorial, even a famous hospital for the treatment of the specific form of pneumoconiosis known as anthracosis" (141). There's something unique here: "Milford: it's like a magical storybook place. . . . It's like watching the pictures and being *in* them at the same time" (141). To be in Milford is to enter into a movie.

Yet this magic is also the town's weakness, for "at night all this vanishes" (142). The town "might be little more than a theatrical performance put on each day for the costumers . . . then folding up each night as the customers return, a setting as ephemeral, as phantasmal as those of the afternoon pictures" (142). Medford is a sort of realized and daily movie that one can enter into, a temporary fantasy world, with little permanence to it. Like the movies, it is a temporary paradise.[12]

Counterposed to this hallucinatory town that vanishes after dark is the train station, which, the narrator is careful to point out, is a separate entity. Indeed, "the citizens of Milford do not really think of the station at Milford Junction as part of their town at all" (141). When the town vanishes nightly, the railway station still remains, so it seems to be of a different substance than the rest of

the town. An important part of the Milford experience is tea in the refreshment room just before the train pulls out. There's nothing romantic or extraordinary about the room; it seems to be a kind of decompression chamber between the strange town and the outside world, a way of easing oneself slowly back into the real world. The train, too, serves to give the visitors a chance to think through their experience, living for a moment neither in Milford nor in the real world, just as people sometimes continue to live with a work of art (whether it be movies or books or visual art) even after they have moved away from it. As the visitors ride the train back, they find themselves in "a space between." Milford recedes and finally "all those silly dreams disappear" (147). They return to the world, waiting to return to Milford Junction, to have the dreams come alive again. This, for Coover, has been one of the functions of the cinema (as suggested by his frequent references to the cinema in the story): the ability of it to take viewers out of the world, however briefly, and allow them to sojourn in a temporary paradise. While this at times can be problematic in that people slip into familiar patterns and tired myths, art at its best will offer a new and exciting Milford every time.

"Top Hat," the "Musical Interlude," pays tribute to dance numbers from the musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, in particular the films of Fred Astaire. The story is modeled quite directly on the title dance number from the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie *Top Hat*, with the actions of the characters paralleling that of the dancers in that number. Yet, Coover does the same thing with this dance number as he does with myth, putting it under pressure and thus transforming it. From the very beginning there is something disturbing

and military about this dance number: armed with walking sticks and sporting top hats, "Uniformed men move in a dark choral mass at the foot of an iron tower . . . their shadowed faces anonymous and interchangeable." They move in step, decorously, "their secret motives concealed" (148). They seem without personality, a faceless social force rather than a group of individuals.

Soon, however, their unity and rhythm is interrupted by a man who is "dressed like them and not like them" (148). He wears the same clothing, but has his hat cocked: "He is unmistakeably . . . an outsider here. And he means to offend" (148–49). In fact, he does offend them. They are not impressed with his variations, with his inability to keep in lockstep. With Nazi overtones, it is suggested that "he does not even seem completely white" (150), and so they leave him.

The narrative, in third person to this point, switches to first person, to the perspective of the out-of-step dancer. Alone on the scene, he reflects that he has come here to change his life, though the details of this change remain vague. He is nearly unable to stop from dancing. Soon a woman appears before him, watches him dance and suggests that his dancing is "some kind of affliction" (151). He agrees.

The scene that follows is in first person as well, this time from the perspective of the woman, who talks about how the man doesn't seem to fit in. She critiques the individualist: "He was playing with that swagger stick of his like he was trying to jerk it off, and I had the impression from the way he gaped at me that about all he could register for the moment was two tits and a tongue" (151). In that sense, the walking stick seems to be an extension of his penis or his libido, and his attachment to it is masturbatory. But the stick is

more than that: “it was like some hole in the middle that he could circle round all day but never get inside of, and it was driving him crazy” (152). The stick is desire and as such is an open void, a lack that can never be permanently filled. While the other dancers seem to have sublimated their desire, controlling it, refusing to express it, he cannot help but express his. It seems even worse when he is alone. For her, he seems incapable, driven by his desire, though despite that she finds him mildly attractive.

When the lockstep dancers return, springing up from the ground, the dancer uses the walking stick as a machine gun, killing them all as they wait indifferently for their approaching deaths. “They bring with them,” the third-person narrator of the fourth and final section admits, “the aura of purpose, of culture, law, of subjection of the will to the greater good of the whole, but this aura rests upon them more like an affliction than a promise” (153). Thus, as he kills them, he is setting himself against society and order, resisting the lock-step. The woman’s response to this is almost orgasmic —as the man kills she seems to fall in love—with the slaughter of the last corpse moving in for an embrace with the dancer.

Yet there remains one man, different from the rest, more human and easily able to dodge the bullets the dancer fires from his walking stick/gun. Perhaps the leader of the others, he stands at the foot of the tower, and begins to lecture the dancer, suggesting that the dancer is making a grave mistake:

> You are seeking, as I say, through murder, to overcome that ambivalence at the heart of your quest, but what you are killing is merely something in yourself. Indeed, it is unlikely that, when the killing is done, there can

> possibly be anything left. You cannot celebrate, my friend, what does not exist. . . . Yours is a grave misapprehension, with consequences far beyond your hasty actions here. (155)

To see the killing as symbolic, as destruction of parts of the self, changes one's sense of the story. Read in that fashion, the conflict is an external manifestation of an internalized struggle. Different parts of the self are parsed up, put on display. The woman, for instance, seems to be tied, at least in the dancer's mind, to his libido; the dancers seem to be enforcers, regulators, the equivalent of a superego. The lecturer, however, is a little harder to figure out—he seems to have a balance (though perhaps he is deceptive as well) that the others do not have, and he at least claims to have more of an understanding. He might be seen as the ego, or something close to the ego, though where does that put the dancer himself? The lecturer might also be seen as the dancer's double, a near equivalent to him and someone not nearly as easy to defeat as the others.

The dancer refuses to hear the lecturer out, using his walking stick to fire an arrow rather than bullets, disposing of this last man. As night deepens, he finds himself alone, the girl vanished, surrounded by corpses: "He tucks the stick under his arm, straightens his white tie, brushes off his tails, as though recollecting an old code" (155). He seems, after having killed, to slip back into old patterns, even takes the traditional bow at the end. More importantly his feet "are quiet at last" (155). He is controlled, his desire sublimated, though not as severely or mercilessly as it was with the other dancers; though he grins at his quiet feet, he "shrugs, waggles his hips" and, the narrator tells us, "he will never, never change" (155).

Is the lecturer's warning to be taken seriously? When the killing is done, is there anything left? Indeed there is, particularly if the dancer will "never, never change." He is alone, but he still exists, and seems not entirely disappointed by the fact. Even if one sees the story as a dramatization of an internal struggle, it is difficult not to argue that the dancer is more unified in the end, since the number of figures and voices has been reduced to one. And though he seems to have removed the social trappings, certain aspects of them remain in himself; he still recollects "the old code." But now he has the old code under control, has learned to manage it, be himself, and only himself, without either desiring to walk lockstep or losing his control.

This can be read metafictionally as Coover's view of the artist, the way in which an artist might think of his relation to society. One must be willing to cut through the rules and limitations, particularly those that have been internalized, but such cutting through should not imply chaos. One maintains aspects of the "old code" but does so in a way that makes it new. If they expect bullets, use arrows—continue to explore and invent. That invention, in itself, is the way of reaching freedom, confidence, and wholeness.

The final story in the collection is a "ROMANCE!," a retelling of *Casablanca.* It is one of the few pieces in the book that draws directly on an actual movie rather than on more generic movie types. It has a precursor in Woody Allen's screenplay *Play It Again, Sam* though Allen's film seems mainly to reproduce and pastiche aspects of *Casablanca* rather than extending beyond the movie to a critique of the movie's genre.

"You Must Remember This" takes a scene in *Casablanca* where Ilsa comes to see Rick, trying to get from him letters of transport to allow him and her husband Victor Laszlo, a noted international underground figure, to leave the country before they are caught by the German forces. It is a pivotal scene in that it reveals a great deal about Rick and Ilsa, putting them in a position where they might renew a past romance. Yet, for Coover, the scene can be made to reveal more; he is interested in what has been left out, what might have ended up on the cutting room floor.

The scene begins by following the expected sequence, but as it progresses, Ilsa's accent deteriorates. Things don't seem to be coming together quite right. She threatens Rick with a revolver and, when she can't shoot, on impulse he grabs both her breasts and they collapse in a sexual embrace. Ilsa is aware that something is going wrong, that the scene should not be going this way—"'Is this . . . right?' she gasps."—but she doesn't seem to know why it is wrong. Since she is a part of the movie, she can't see the real world outside, can't understand why things should be a different way, though like the ballplayers in *The Universal Baseball Association*, she senses something is odd. Though she has an intuition that things are not right, she is not able to work through it to an understanding of what she actually should be doing.

What follows is a long sex scene, complete with the narrator's commentary on what the characters are thinking. As they relax afterwards, they realize there is music in the background, an indication to the reader that they are part of a movie. From their perspective, though, they can't make sense of the music except to decide it must be Sam, the piano player, playing downstairs. Rick is

disturbed by memories of Ilsa's "Is that . . . right?" and asks her what she meant by it. She replies: "Oh, I don't know, darling. Yust a strange feeling, I don't exactly remember" (167). Rick remains disturbed: "*All* this seems strange somehow. Like something that shouldn't have—" (167). But though she attributes it to the strangeness of having an affair with a married woman, he is not so sure. Something is wrong, he is convinced, but instead of trying to resolve it, they engage in more sex. Later, still disturbed, he has the impression that time has stopped. Rushing down to the bar, he finds all the other cast members there, but "so hushed, so motionless" (184). The room seems to be getting darker. Slightly panicked, Rick says: "Listen. Maybe if we started over. . . . No, I mean, go back where you came in, see—the letters of transit and all that. Maybe we made some kinda mistake, I dunno, like when I put my hands on your jugs or something" (185). As they argue about it, the room gets darker and darker, and it becomes harder for them to hear each other. The story ends in darkness, with Rick and Ilsa lost in a kind of netherworld.

What happens, the story seems to ask, when the characters don't follow their script? What becomes of them? In Woody Allen's movie *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the movie continues to play, but the characters are unable to do anything; they just have to wait until the character who has left the movie comes back and picks up his lines again. In Coover's story "In a Train Station," the character Alfred is forced to do the same scene over and over. In Rick and Ilsa's case, by taking another path, an alternate route, they disable the mechanism. They step outside of time, slowly fading into nonexistence while the entire world around them fizzles out.

Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?

In *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* Coover returns to the main character of *The Public Burning*, Richard Milhous Nixon, this time reincarnating him as a pro-football player doomed to have a short life. The title comes from a line in *The Public Burning*, with Nixon speaking of his high school days: "People don't realize it, but I actually have to work harder, physically harder, to smile. They make jokes about my smiling calisthenics, but it's not a joke really. I've always envied people like Dwight Eisenhower who are born grinning. I looked like a preacher the day I was born. Gloomy Gus they called me" (142).

While *The Public Burning* is explicit in its use of the (then) living Nixon, a fact which prompted several publishers to recoil from the book, *Gloomy Gus*'s use of Nixon is much more subtle. In fact, Nixon's full name is never used. Though the book is full of clues defining Gloomy Gus as unmistakably Nixon, including a picture of a young Nixon and several high school football teammates on the jacket of the American hardback, this is not immediately obvious. In addition, while *The Public Burning* concerned itself, albeit fantastically, with a moment in Nixon's actual political career, *Gloomy Gus* offers an alternate existence for Nixon, imagining who he might have been had his life taken an entirely different turn.

The book is narrated by Meyer, a communist Russian Jew, politically active as a WPA sculptor and a union organizer. *Gloomy Gus* is one of Coover's most straightforward texts, with less fantastic and metafictional moments than is characteristic of much of his

work. Instead of metafictional, the book could be described as metahistorical: by giving an alternate life to a well known historical figure, Coover allows the reader to locate himself or herself between the actual history of Richard Nixon and this alternative history, reflecting on both.

The novel focuses on the events of Memorial Day, 1937, the day on which Gus, now off the football field, takes his last run. From the first sentence, the book's concern with history is clear. Meyer initially locates us in the events of the time. "It's the Duke of Windsor's wedding day" (9), he tells us, then goes on to describe details of the wedding, moving from there to speak of the Soviet Union, Fascist Germany, the White Sox, and other news of the day, including Gloomy Gus's death. In one of the few moments where the book's metahistoricity is acknowledged, Meyer says: "Only for the egoist and the dogmatist . . . is there one 'history' only. The rest of us live with the suspicion that there are as many histories as there are people and maybe a few more" (9–10).

Meyer is a chatty storyteller. He begins with the fact of Gus's death and then moves back to give the details which lead up to it. As narrator, he postulates a listener who is already a part of his circle, someone who shares his radical politics. Because of that, the book feels personal and approachable, like overheard confidences. Meyer lives in Depression era Chicago, surrounded by Marxist and union friends, all of them opinionated and often at odds with the authorities. These include a hardnose unioner named Leo, Meyer's Trotskyist poet friend Harry, the pale and wispy musician Ilya, and Gus's sometime lover Golda.

The odd man out and late addition to the group is Gloomy Gus, a man who seems able to do only three things: play football, recite

when correctly cued certain lines from plays, and pick up women. He has emptied his life out, cutting out everything else so as to be able to focus on sex and football (the latter later beginning to be replaced by acting), and as a result he seems without will, a sort of imbecile.

As the narrative moves toward Gus's death, Meyer explains how it is that Gus has become the way he is now. In his freshman year of high school, Gus had some success in debate and elections, the subjects Richard Nixon excelled in, but had no luck either with women or in sports: "Dick had two left feet. He couldn't coordinate" (97). He works out with the football team but suffering from "uncontrollable overeagerness" he constantly goes offside. His problem with women is the same: "he lurched out of control before the foreplay had even begun" (98).

He begins to master himself by setting aside a half hour daily to practice not going offside. He does this by staying onside until the number twenty-nine is shouted. He adds to this another hour and forty minutes to practice other football skills, then adds more on top of that. He expands from football out to women, working out a practice schedule for how to pick up women. In both activities, "his technique was precisely the same: learn one thing at a time, starting with the simplest, and practice it over and over and over until it was second nature (there being no first with Gus, of course). Then add the next element" (106). Every day he continues to practice all his skills, adding more in, reducing all other aspects of his life to a bare minimum, reaching a point where he can play football very well and seduce women even better.

Gus doesn't limit himself to the skills of football or dating; he drills himself in everything related to his chosen "arts": "he also had

practice sessions on how to jog out onto the field, spit water during time-outs, laugh at the coach's jokes, and crack bare butts with wet towels" (111). He does the same with the peripherals of dating as well; no gesture, however minor, is left to chance. The result is an individual who is not an individual, for Gus "lacked awareness of any kind. He had no core at all" (43).

Gus is the ultimate American product, a constructed person. He has taken Henry Ford's notion of the assembly line and applied it to himself, transforming himself into a factory that spews out sequences of gestures. He is a blank slate, and as such he has no personality—he has traded in his personality so as to be good at two things. He has constructed a self which must be reconstructed each day. If he chooses not to practice something, nothing will take its place. When Gus finds himself in a position, on the football field or with women, faced with the unknown, he doesn't know how to react. He is unable to make a decision, only to string together sequences of preformed gestures and hope they work.

Though Gus's techniques work in high school and college, once he joins the Chicago Bears things begin to go wrong. There are too many plays to learn, too much to keep in mind all at once. The time he needs to practice his skills takes over the other parts of his life until "even his eating, sleeping, and toilet time had to be used for practice somehow" (136). He spends as many as twenty hours a day practicing. At first, he does well, but then the other teams realize that his moves are composed of fixed patterns, that there's nothing creative or unpredictable to them. As he is forced to try to complicate his techniques, he begins to confuse things, tackling women and having orgasms on the football field. Finally he reaches the point where "he could no longer tell the difference between a

football field, a crowded sidewalk, a bedroom, and a madhouse" (144). He is institutionalized.

By the time Meyer meets him, Gus's football career is over. He has been released from the institution, has learned some acting skills, but is still far from normal, still lacks a personality. Meyer becomes obsessed with him, partly because he identifies with him. Though Meyer is a Jewish Bolshevik and Gus is the personification of the All American Boy, Meyer feels they have both been victimized by the myths that have been thrust upon them: "Both of us were ranging far from home, fulfilling myths about ourselves, his the rags-to-riches drama of the industrious American boy, mine the curse of the Wandering Jew. And we were both—captives of alienating systems—divided within ourselves" (122–23). Playing out roles that have been foisted upon them, they have had a difficult time actually living. The difference is that Meyer has at least a partial awareness of his role, has in later years managed to reconstruct his life, though in doing so he has perhaps sacrificed his sense of himself as a Jew. He has become an artist, has managed to justify his life, though it is significant that he is an artist who, like Gus, can't quite seem to take things to the next level without them falling apart. Yet, even in the fragments of his art, though there "is no harmony . . . there is life" (126), something Gus never has. The strength of art, according to Myer, is that it gives the artist "time and incentive for reflection" (93). Gus has no such awareness, no such time or possibility for reflection.

Meyer's art, realistic in nature, is about such reflection. His pieces depict bodies in motion, primarily athletes. He captures, as does Frederick Remington (a western artist he admires), a moment of their sequence of actions and removes it from time. By focusing

on a single moment in which the torque and twist of the sculpted body still suggests the "logic of motion" (92), Meyer allows this moment to be subject to reflection. But by doing so he replaces actual motion with the suggestion of motion. Gus, by in his practice breaking down everything to its most basic characteristics and then reassembling it, is moving in the opposite direction, from the static moment to active motion, from reflection and focus to unthinking action.

The most significant of these unthinking actions comes during the Memorial Day Massacre at the Republic Steel Plant. Meyer's friend Leo, involved in what is supposed to be a peaceful strike, takes Gus along. As the protest devolves into a riot, encouraged in that direction by company plants and cops, ten people are shot. The eleventh, Gus, while "trying to put on an entertainment for that cop, tackle him, or hump him . . . there's no doubt he was caught offsides once again and for the last time, his original sin" (12), ends up in the hospital where he'll die. While a conventional novel might initially treat Gus's fate as a mystery, only revealing the full circumstances of it in the final scene, Coover chooses not to take this route. Instead he allows the object of pursuit to be Gloomy Gus himself, informing us of his death early in the book. He spends his time in the rest of the book revealing the sort of person Gus is, revealing Meyer's obsession with him, and showing Gus's connection to American life. As Meyer suggests, Gus is a "cartoon image of the Social Product" (83).

Coover's critique of Nixon, though it is a critique of a Nixon living in an alternate reality, is at least as scathing as the critique in *The Public Burning.* In *The Public Burning,* Nixon is put in situations he

doesn't know how to handle, but there is the sense that he can think, and he is a surprisingly sympathetic character. In *Gloomy Gus,* however, Nixon (as Gus) has been reduced to a man without a personality, an emptiness without a center, a character of pure will assembled by practice. He is a man with no intrinsic values. He wants to play football because he knows an American boy should want to play football; he wants to score with women for the same reason. So while the book does not attack Nixon's politics, it reveals Nixon the character as hollow. Though it gives us an alternate history, that alternate history claims to reveal things about Nixon that might demand a reconsideration of the actual man and his actual history.

Near the end of the book, after speaking at length to Meyer about Gus, Golda asks: "What if, Meyer . . . what if he was really, you know, a man ahead of his time?" (145). Meyer lets the suggestion falter, being so much a man engaged in his own time that he is incapable of looking forward. However, the suggestion is meant by Coover as a question for his readers.

How is Gus ahead of his time? How is he relevant to contemporary times? In a consumer society, everything, including the individual, is considered a product. People come more and more to think of the self as a construct. In a day when people try with a vengeance to manufacture their own images, creating a certain look and a certain impression, even if that look and impression mask a deep uncertainty about who they are, Gus has led the way, serving both as a dark avatar and as a cautionary example. He has become the most impressive at two things, but in doing so he has dissolved into nothingness.

Pinocchio in Venice

In many of the stories in *Pricksongs & Descants,* Coover took on specific fairy tales and myths, demystifying them. It was not until *Pinocchio in Venice,* however, that he chose to demystify on a grand scale, using an entire novel to pay tribute to and rewrite a tale that has entered into contemporary mythology.

In *Pinocchio in Venice,* Coover goes about de-Disneyfying the Pinocchio story, doing so by returning to the original Pinocchio story, C. Collodi's *Adventures of Pinocchio,* and moving it in ribald directions. Coover's Pinocchio is an old and acclaimed university professor who has become a respectable figure and is returning for the first time to Venice, the city he grew up in. Yet the city has grown unfamiliar and strange, even hostile, and is in the midst of a carnival that renders it even stranger. As soon as he arrives, he becomes the focus of a con game and is robbed, losing his computer which contains his work-in-progress, *Mamma.* He is convinced *Mamma* will be his masterwork. All he needs to finish his work is the closing image, and for this he has returned to Venice. As he wanders the city in search of the thieves, without money or shelter, he literally falls apart. His flesh returns to wood, revealing his "inner puppet" that he has kept hidden for so long, no longer in any sort of condition. He begins to encounter those of his past, both bad and good, though the person he really wants to meet, the Blue Fairy, who has been like a mother and a lover for him all at once, remains evasive, absent. The past begins to well up and he finds himself troubled by memories that he'd prefer to forget. Reliving his own past, he finally manages to come to an understanding of what he now is.

Pinocchio is a book about memory and its relation to ontology: about the ways in which the past both constructs and destroys us, about how we manipulate the past and how we are manipulated by the past. As a writer, the professor first became famous for his autobiographical work *The Wretch* which is "a comprehensive best-selling assault upon all the heretical modern and eventually postmodern (he was a man ahead of his time) denials of what in a famous coinage he called 'I-ness,' a masterpiece whose single message . . . was that each man makes himself and thus the world" (32–33). The professor is a self-made man, has pulled himself up by his bootstraps, has become an aesthete and a scholar of the highest repute, and largely identifies himself as being equal to what he has created himself to be. Yet once he returns to Venice and is confronted by that which he has repressed, his "I-ness" (a pun, of course, on "highness," suggesting there is something aristocratic about such notions of selfhood) falls apart. Beneath all the flesh and scholarship is the wooden frame, that which in becoming a real boy by his good deeds he thought he had gotten rid of. His notion of life is based on that transformation, the belief that he had left the puppet entirely behind. Yet now, with his inner puppet reappearing, he is forced to ask himself: who am I?

The answer is not quickly forthcoming; it occupies the remainder of Coover's novel, the quest for his computer turning into a quest for self-understanding. Pinocchio, a hybrid of man and puppet, wanders through a Venice that is a hybrid of ancient and modern. Venice is, for Pinocchio, a city of labyrinths, and he has great difficulty in moving from one place to another. There seems something unreal about "this fake city built on fake pilings with its fake fronts and fake trompes l'oeil." Venice is also "this city of masks,

its very masks masked this morning by the snow blown against its crumbling walls like the white marble faces masking Palladio's pink churches, a dazzlingly sinister mask . . ." (102). His initial view on Carnival and its masks has been that the important thing "is not the masking but the unmasking, the revelation, the repentance, the reestablishment of sanity," but he comes to feel that "he was wrong. The important thing *is* the masking. What is sanity itself, after all, but terror's sweet foggy disguise? And love the mask that shields us from the abyss. . . ?" (258). Curiously, by being in a city of masks he becomes conscious of his own flaws and self-deceptions, but in seeing these masks he begins to question his "I-ness," for what is "I-ness" if not a mask? He feels "the mockery cast upon his own shabby self-deceptions, the impostures and evasions, grand pretensions, the many masks he's worn—and not least that of flesh itself, now falling from him like dried-up actor's putty. Ah, he was right to come here, after all" (103). He is going through an identity crisis, but perhaps it is necessary. He can only come back to completing his final work, his *Mamma* (which is the title of the last section of *Pinocchio in Venice* as well as being a novel within that novel), once he has stripped all the masks away. Or so he thinks, for by the time he strips the masks away he has no desire to write his final work. He wants to discard it all.

Connected with the search for self, for a concluding image for the novel, and for the lost computer, is the larger search that has motivated Pinocchio to come to Venice in the first place: the search for the Blue Fairy, the woman who made him flesh and blood and, in that sense, gave birth to him. He thinks her dead, and for that reason has been pursuing her only in literature, but then, in Venice, he keeps thinking he glimpses her. At the end of the book he does find

the Blue-Haired Fairy, his quest coming to an end only after all his flesh has been stripped away. Only in becoming a puppet again can he find the woman who made him other than a puppet. The Blue Fairy scolds Pinocchio: "When you came back here to our island looking for me now, I was so happy. I thought we could be together again. In the old way, like we used to be before you got changed and went off into the world. But you have disappointed me, my boy, slipping back into all your old habits . . . I ask myself, what was it all *for?*" (324). Yet she realizes the fault is hers as well, that in turning Pinocchio into a real boy she has held back: "The trouble is, though I have always tried to be a good fairy, I wasn't quite good enough. In the end, proud as I was of the proper little man I'd made, I found I loved the naughty puppet more than I should have and was afraid of losing him, or at least his good heart, and couldn't quite let him go. So I left just the tiniest seed inside" (325).

This seed has sprouted, taking over the body entirely. Pinocchio is unable to escape his past; when he returns, the memories well up, the puppet grows again. Coover seems to be suggesting here the way in which memory functions, commenting on people's inability to ever completely free themselves from their past. What they have been is very hard to ever escape.

Yet for Pinocchio, it is not what he used to be, but the tension between what he once was and what he later became that is problematic. In becoming a real boy, Pinocchio became separated from himself: "What bothered me was that the wooden puppet I once was was still there, outside of me, the Old Pinocchio, I saw him collapsed against a chair in my father's workshop" (326). In becoming real, he leaves himself behind, and that, he says, "has troubled me increasingly all my life" (326). Now, at the end of his life, he wants

the puppet back, wants to be able to identify with and become whole with that self that has been separated out from him: "I want you to let that puppet live again" (326).

Pinocchio wants to coincide with himself, to return to the wood from whence he came. The philosopher Martin Heidegger has argued that what makes humans different from other creatures is that they are in a state of Becoming rather than a state of Being. Rather than coinciding with what they are, humans are always in the process of developing, always becoming something else. For Heidegger, to reach a point where you *are what you are* is the equivalent of death. Considered in this fashion, what Pinocchio seems to be looking for in his search for equilibrium is death. He wants a mode of being where he is no longer changing, no longer developing. It is no coincidence that the professor's controversial critical work, *Art and the Spirit*, has as its central theme "the absorption (the punctured flesh) of Becoming . . . by Being" (114), with all absorbed in the end by "the transcendent Spirit" (114). In the place of accomplishments and a bibliography that is "one of the ten longest in the world" (327), Pinocchio would rather be a wooden boy who is fading out of consciousness.

The fairy warns him that to let the puppet live is to allow his other life and all his other accomplishments to collapse, disappearing from attention and memory. His work as a writer and scholar will be wiped away both from social memory and from his own mind: "But don't you see? If the stupid puppet lives on, all that will have been in vain! Your own beautiful life, the one I *gave* you, will have been meaningless!" (327).

Yet this is precisely what he wants. He would trade all his fame for a return to the puppet, a chance to be again in the Blue-Haired

Fairy's "pillowy lap" (328). *Is it possible to return to the past?* Coover seems to be asking. Yes, the answer is, but only by wiping out the present. Whether Coover himself thinks that such a return is worthwhile is uncertain, but for Pinocchio it certainly seems to be: better to be wood, he believes, than to be human.

Thus, Coover turns the Pinocchio myth on its head, his version of the story moving from flesh to wood rather than wood to flesh. As such, it is at once a supplement/extension of the original and a way of calling the original story into question. For Coover, writing exists in conjunction with already existing myths and stories, and with these myths and stories he struggles to compose his own discourse, a discourse at once dependent on the myths and in the process of freeing itself from them.

John's Wife

John's Wife is Coover's most ambitious work since *The Public Burning.* It is similar to *The Origin of the Brunists* in the way the narrative focuses on a town and in Coover's use of multiple perspective, though it seems less conventionally plot-driven than Coover's first novel. *John's Wife* is arguably his most expansive work; like *Gerald's Party,* it offers a large cast of characters and constant movement between concerns, quick shifts from place to another. But while the shifts of *Gerald's Party* are grounded in a single locale (Gerald's house) and, with the exception of a few flashbacks, a discrete period of time (the time of the party), *John's Wife* focuses on an entire Midwestern town, with forays out into the larger world, and covers several generations of people. It does have a point of focus—a Pioneers Day barbecue at John's house—but

Coover's narration moves in so many other directions that the narrative hardly spends any time there. John's barbecue does not have the centrality of Gerald's party. In scope and in style, the only book similar to it is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In addition, while *Gerald's Party* is held together by a single consciousness, by the fact that everything being seen is processed through Gerald's thoughts, *John's Wife* offers an anonymous but gossipy third person, largely omniscient, narrator, who allows his narrative to be colored by the thoughts and speech patterns of his characters. Almost every paragraph is focalized through a different character, the reader running through a gamut of connections. The result is less stability, an ability to make even larger leaps. On a stylistic level the book is a virtuoso performance, one that stretches the limits of narrative.

John's Wife begins by invoking traditional fairytale storytelling: ". . . Once, there was a man named John" (7). The book ends with the words "a man was there. Once . . ."—a near inversion of the opening lines of the story. This ending suggests a circularity to the narrative, a sense that the narrative is beginning again as it reaches the end.

The first section of the novel in fact provides a summary of the story as a whole, at least from John's perspective:

> . . . Once there was a man named John. John had money, family, power, good health, high regard, many friends. Though he worked hard for these things, he actually found it difficult not to succeed; though not easily satisfied, he was often satisfied, a man whose

> considerable resources matched his considerable desires. A fortunate man, John. He was a builder by trade: where he walked, the earth changed, because he wished it so, and like as not, his wishes all came true. Closed doors opened to him and obstacles fell. His enthusiasms were legendary. He ate and drank heartily but not to excess, played a tough but jocular game of golf, roamed the world on extended business trips, collected guns and cars and exotic fishing tackle, had the pleasure of many women, flew airplanes, contemplated running for Congress just for the sport of it. In spite of all that happened to his wife and friends, John lived happily ever after, as though this were somehow his destiny and his due. (7)

John is a kind of knightly hero, as Coover emphasizes throughout the text. He possesses "something like the aura that accompanies the heroes in folktales and popular novels" (181), and is described by Pauline, a woman who has had an affair with him, as a "magical prince with hair alight" (323). John's story is a contemporary fairy tale, though this fairy tale has been equated with the American success story. John has traded in the knight's sword for the joystick of his plane, his kingdom for real estate developments.

Yet *John's Wife* is not John's story. True, John's story is visible in the events of the pages that follow, with John remaining remarkably unscathed by all that happens to the town. But the story is finally that of the town itself. The central character, the person around which all the action in the town circles, John's wife, is

largely absent, a blank space at the center of the text. The members of the small town are obsessed with John's wife, who is never named in the text. They think about her constantly, finding her endearing and fascinating. Floyd, the manager of John's hardware business, covets her. Otis, who is a "self-styled guardian warrior" (17) and the town lawman, loves John's wife. Gordon, the town photographer, is intrigued by "her fleeting glances and her subtle movements, somehow never quite complete. She seemed to be always at rest and not at rest at the same time" (8). He finds that none of the photographs he takes of her look at all alike, and her "elusive mystery" maddens him. In fact, all the men in town are, in their own fashion, fascinated by John's wife, the minister not excepted. The women, too, are fascinated by her, though that fascination seems mixed with jealousy and hatred. Everyone is fascinated except for John himself who "disbelieved in love," who uses women "as freely and unreflectively as he did men." John likes to make money and acquire property, building up a kingdom for himself. He sees people not as equals but as means to accomplish his ends (10). He loves life, his life; he loves only himself.

Why are the other townspeople fascinated by John's wife? John's mother suggests a reason when, admitting a fondness for John's wife, she admits as well "she seems to know less about her now than she had before the marriage" (136). John's wife seems to be in flux, cannot quite be pinned down, and seems to be growing more enigmatic.

> This was a strange thing about John's wife: a thereness that was not there. She always seemed to be at the very

> heart of things in town, an endearing and ubiquitous presence, yet few of the town's citizens, if asked, could have described her, even as she passed before their eyes, or said what made her tick, or if they could or thought they could, would have found few or none who would agree. Coveted object, elusive mystery, beloved ideal, hated rival, princess, saint, or social asset, John's wife elicited opinions and emotions as varied and numerous as the townsfolk themselves, her unknowability being finally all they could agree on, and even then with reservations, for some said she was so much herself that she was simply unapproachable ("unreadable" as Lorraine liked to put it), others that the trouble was that she had no personality at all, so there was nothing to be known. Even fundamental matters were in dispute, her age, the tenor of her voice, the sizes that she wore. (73)

John's wife is the person holding the entire town together, for even though they all disagree about her, she is an obsession they have in common. As Otis says, the community is "a closed system . . . fixed by custom and routine." He sees it as his duty to keep the system closed and constant and for that reason distrusts "all intrusions, all changes, strangers, big ideas: why mess with a good thing?" He thinks of himself as "a kind of guardian warrior, one eye on the periphery, one eye on the center. At the center lived John's wife, whom he loved" (9). John's wife, unknowable but beloved, holds the town together. Yet though she is the town's center, she is also the

warp in the fabric where the pattern comes undone. Paradoxically, she is the presence of an absence, an empty space that nonetheless serves as a center.

As the book progresses, John's wife seems to become even more unknowable: "People were having trouble these days keeping John's bride, so long in the middle of things here, within their field of vision. She sort of was there, like always, and she sort of wasn't." She has a "tendency to come and go without really coming and going" (207). When Lennox, the town Reverend, finally gets John's wife alone in the bedroom, gets her to start taking her clothes off, he finds himself no nearer to pinning down John's wife. When she removes her pantyhose, it seems that there is "nothing underneath them. Nothing at all. . . . Her face flushed with admiration and surrender and she lifted her dress up over her head and she was gone" (304). The question is: Is there any substance to John's wife at all? If she is a mystery, then what is at the heart of the mystery, what can be found when everything else is stripped away? The answer, Coover seems to suggest, is nothing. John's wife consists of her mystery, and if the mystery is cut away, nothing remains.

It might also be true that "Art's true source is not in the seen, but in the longing for the not-seen" (335), and that John's wife is a illustration of this theory of art (which could also be seen as a theory of religion). It is through her absence that she becomes desirable, for one can only desire that which one lacks. If one sees John's wife as an illustration of this theory, then one recognizes that Coover has an aesthetic that is grounded in desire, both the art object or the lover representing a lack that must be achieved. John's wife, eternally evasive, strings along desire without ever satisfying it, and finally becomes utterly unattainable.

As John's wife becomes less and less substantial, phasing slowly out of existence, Pauline, the wife of Gordon the photographer, becomes increasingly present, fantastically there. A former lover of John's and the daughter of Daddy Duwayne, an abusive and malevolent old man currently in prison, Pauline lives an unfulfilling life with Gordon. She has been able to fit into the same clothes for the last seven or eight years, but suddenly, over the last several weeks, nothing seems to fit (162). She feels a terrible hunger, her body seemingly growing even at the thought of food. Soon, she is eating full donuts at a bite. She grows big as a mountain, uncertain and confused about what has happened to her. She blunders about, looking for food, still growing, hooking up with Cornell (a.k.a. Corny, an old boyfriend), who drives her about in a big pharmacy van, foraging for food for her. "Never a great thinker" she becomes "less of one" (325) as she becomes larger, more and more an exclusively physical being.

The townspeople finally catch up to Pauline in Settler's Woods outside of town, where the narrative offers a parody of the kind of confrontation between monster and organized social force seen in movies like *Godzilla* and *King Kong.* The difference here is that Pauline is not a monster, just confused and sad, and instead of carrying Fay Wray around, she picks up her abusive father, the real monster (brought from prison to try to control her), and throws him. She ignores bullets as if they are insect stings, and finally seems to die, or at least disappear, when the woods are set mysteriously on fire.

Pauline is the opposite of John's wife, the woman who has had none of the advantages and for whom nothing has worked out. Whereas John's wife become increasingly insubstantial as the story

progresses, more ethereal, Pauline becomes fleshier. Pauline and John's wife seem literal representations of spirit and flesh, each incomplete without the other. Coover deliberately has Gordon accidentally photograph John's wife in such a way as to impose her image over Pauline's to show a glimpse, the barest glimpse, of John's wife on the surface of Pauline's skin (216).

The disappearance of John's wife is not only a crisis for the community; it is a crisis in the nature of the narrative as well. To that point *John's Wife* has been a largely realistic and a cruelly accurate dissection of a small town, the absurd element present but kept under rein. True, *John's Wife* begins with gestures toward a fairy tale but it is a thoroughly modernized fairy tale, one that does not sit awkwardly with realism. In the place of many of the fantastic elements of some of Coover's other fiction, Coover offers business deals, airplane rides, intergenerational real estate struggles, snooping and gossip, affairs and collapsing marriages, sex and dirty pictures, barbecues and golf. Through most of the narrative, the absurdity seems primarily grounded in John's wife (with brief forays elsewhere), the strangeness of her being simultaneously present and absent. Yet when she gradually fades and Pauline becomes monstrous, the narrative moves away from realism and into a magical space. It as if John's wife has served as the anchor for the narrative style as well, as if her dissolution has permitted a shift into a new form. Yet once Pauline has been destroyed, things seem to return to normal, enough so that there are hints of John's wife appearing again, after her hiatus, at the end of the novel: a column she has written ("The Kiss of Life") appears in the newspaper (407), an injured and delusional man sees her appear, like an angel, at the foot of his bed (409), and she continues to be esteemed by the town

for her charitable activity (412). As the narrative returns to realism, John's wife gains back at least a little bit of her substance.

John's Wife also has a metafictional element, Coover reflecting on fictionmaking during the course of the novel. Among all the gossip, the references to the past, the stories and rumors that come out through the many sections of the novel, is Ellsworth's story, the story Ellsworth is composing. As the final section of *John's Wife* concludes with what can be read as part of this story, it is difficult to understand the conclusion of the book without a sense of the novel within the novel.

Ellsworth, who runs the town newspaper, is working on a novel about an Artist and his Model. It is full of high-flown ideas about art, particularly the purity of art. Yet as he writes, he finds his prose invaded by the Stalker, who takes the novel in directions he cannot control: "Ellsworth had not invited him in, he had intruded upon the text unbidden . . . he already posed a profound menace, not merely to the other characters in the novel (to wit, the Artist, his Model), but to the original plot as well, threatening it now with a total restructuring" (106) and "threatening to destroy it from within" (185). Despite Ellsworth's attempts to get rid of him, the Stalker remains intact; he keeps forcing his way back in. Ellsworth finds himself no longer master of his own creation. The Stalker calls into question both the Artist's and the writer Ellsworth's notions of the purity of art, and by doing so leads Ellsworth toward madness.

Like Henry in *The Universal Baseball Association,* Ellsworth becomes increasingly caught up in the world of his novel, losing awareness of the outside world. He becomes "more eccentric and abstracted than ever, absenting himself from the streets and turning darkly inward as though harboring some secret grief or rancor. It

was as though . . . he had lost his way" (182). Though Ellsworth originally identified with the Artist, as he continues he identifies more with the Stalker: "Was that the Stalker laughing? No, it was Ellsworth! He was leaping about in his study above the printshop like the Stalker doing his taunting satyric dance, whooping and laughing and yelling all at once! He blew kisses at the Stalker: his savior!" (187).

While writing, Ellsworth dreams of a forest on fire, a dream so real that he has a difficult time believing it is not real. When he wakes up, confusing himself with the Artist, he looks at the manuscript. He discovers that his Model has vanished, disappeared from the manuscript. "But she might still be here, after all, just hiding, playing a game" (209), the Artist/Ellsworth tries to tell himself. Ellsworth is convinced he must rescue her from the Stalker. He is no longer able to distinguish between himself and the Artist he has created: "it all tended to get blurred and come and go in odd ways" (228). Ellsworth remains haunted not so much by the dream of the fire as by an after-fire image: the forest devastated and charred, devoid of life "except for the Artist, alone and broken" (228).

As Ellsworth becomes more tired, more distraught, he begins to feel the Stalker is manipulating events in the real world as well, entering photographs in the newspaper, rearranging lines of type to create awkward jokes, and the like. The boundary between life and art has become permeable, each bleeding into the other.

Pining for the Model to return, the Artist draws images of what he imagines the Stalker is doing to the Model, thereby replicating her suffering, her torture. Yet when the Artist confronts him about the Model, the Stalker claims that he hasn't seen her, that he has been searching for her as well. All he has managed to find is a cryptic

note: “Art’s true source is not in the seen, but in the longing for the not-seen” (335). She, the Stalker says, has removed herself because it is “her way of continuing as your Model. . . . A lot less fun, though, isn’t it?” (335).

In other words, by remaining idealized and absent, the Model remains unsullied and pure, something the artist can stay eternally focused on. What is said about the Model might also be used to think about Coover’s own strategy in allowing John’s wife to disappear from the text. By becoming absent, she continues as a center nonetheless, maintains a mystery which, had she been less in flux, would have eventually collapsed. It is her “not seen” quality that makes her important to the town.

Ellsworth finds himself groping, lost, through a “forest he cannot even be sure *is* a forest” (368). By this point, he is indistinguishable not only from the Artist but from the Stalker as well. At once the Stalker and the Artist and himself, two characters in his work and the creator of the work, he finds himself bound by his own conceits, in a paradox from which there seems no escape. Reality and fiction have collapsed into one another, become indistinguishable; he is not even certain whether the forest he is in is real or imagined. The Artist and Model are both gone, vanished, and he is alone in darkness, seeing in his blindness a fire roaring through the forest, an event that may or may not have already occurred.

The final point of the interference of the fictional with the real comes with the actual fire and the mystery surrounding it. The narrative never clearly indicates who started the fire, though it implies that perhaps the Stalker may have had something to do with it. Coover makes a point, however, of indicating that Ellsworth watches the fire from his own second floor window. He is not certain, though,

how long he has been there, nor how he managed to get out of the real or imaginary wood that he and the Stalker found themselves in. When he goes out to the woods after the fire it strikes him as "a charred and misty dreamscape which seemed to have sprung directly from the dark abyss of his own imagination. . . . He had half expected to find the Stalker wandering there, blind and reproachful" (403). He has apparently burnt his novel (413), and perhaps this burning has had a manifestation in the real world's forest fire.

At the end of the novel, in the last section, the Model reappears. She has been in a forest, but now finds herself in landscape that is "ever more desolate, as though it were dying from within. Like a failure of the imagination" (427). She wanders the landscape, abandoned, continuing to try to get out, but now that Ellsworth has abandoned his project she cannot do so. She is trapped, will perhaps remained trapped forever. Though a fictional creation, she continues to exist even after having been abandoned by her creator. As the story ends, she tries to reassert the situation she was once involved in, searching for it through the waste: "for she was sure of it: there *was* a forest and she was there and a man was there. Once . . ." (428).

It is perhaps appropriate that Coover concludes with a section of the story within the story, leaving us within the story instead of letting us out. But the last line of the novel is nearly an inversion of the first line of the novel and feeds back into the beginning. By ending as he does, Coover structurally asserts a complex relation between life and art. In that simple stylistic gesture, Coover implies a great deal: life and art are connected, they feed into one another, they invert one another.

Briar Rose

Published on the heels of *John's Wife, Briar Rose* returns to the rewriting of popular myths that Coover began in *Pricksongs & Descants* and continued in *Pinocchio in Venice.* While *John's Wife* was expansive, taking in a range of characters and lives, the novella *Briar Rose* has a much more claustrophobic feel to it. It is a re-rendering of the Sleeping Beauty legend and, like Coover's other re-workings of myths and fairy tales, it tells the tale in a way that demands one reconsider it, that reveals hidden aspects of it.

Briar Rose can be seen as the apotheosis of Coover's critiques of fairy tales, a masterpiece that distills the ideas and techniques of many of Coover's stories and myths. It was listed as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year when it was first published in 1996. *Kirkus Review* called it "a tour de force that rings an astonishing series of changes on the familiar fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty,"[13] and this review typifies the reactions that followed. The *New York Times* called it a "rich and intricate set of variations on the old fairy tale,"[14] while the *Los Angeles Times* referred to it as "a brilliant reworking."[15]

In the Sleeping Beauty fable, on which the story is based, a royal couple have a child; they invite the local fairies to the celebration after the birth, and each gives her a present, usually a blessing for the child. However, the royal couple neglects to invite one fairy. She shows up anyway, casts a spell on the princess which promises that when she is older she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die. Another fairy, not having yet offered her present, manages to convert this spell from death to sleep: Sleeping Beauty will fall dead asleep after pricking her finger and will not

return to consciousness until awakened by the kiss of a prince. The evil fairy causes a mess of briars to grow up around the castle as a defense, yet after many years a prince manages to penetrate this barrier, defeat the witch, and rescue Sleeping Beauty from sleep. They live happily ever after.

Coover's version is told in third person in short narrative sections, each section focalized through one of three characters: a prince hacking through a wall of briars trying to get at the castle and the Sleeping Beauty inside; the sleeping and dreaming princess; and the fairy who has cast the enchantment. As the narrative progresses, Coover switches from one character to another, moving back and forth between the interior and exterior of the castle, inside and outside of the princess's dreams.

The story begins with the prince, as he finds the wall of thorns doesn't live up to the expectations he had of it. Rather than pricking him, the thorns seem inclined to caress him sexually: "He is surprised to discover how easy it is. The branches part like thighs, the silky petals caress his cheeks. His drawn sword is stained not with blood but with dew and pollen. Yet another inflated legend" (1). Throughout the book, the descriptions of the briars are highly sexualized, and the prince, in penetrating the thicket, seems to be cutting through the worldly, the substantial, the fleshy, to get at the mystery behind it. He has undertaken the quest not for the princess—for "what is another lonely bedridden princess?" (1)—but in order to "tame mystery" and "make, at last his name" (1). Though he acknowledges that "her awakening is not without its promise of passing pleasures" (4), the princess is ultimately irrelevant to him.

Appropriately enough, then, when the princess appears in the next section, she is dreaming "as she has often dreamt, of abandonment and betrayal, of lost hope, of the self gone astray from the

body, the body forsaking the unlikely self" (2). She feels fragmented, her self falling apart, only held together by the memory of the spindle which has pricked her. "It anchors her, locates a self when all else in sleep unbinds and scatters it" (5). Coover focuses in on her dreams, offering the parts of the story that the original fable passes over in silence, meditating on the nature of dream and the recurrence of dream. In the princess's dream, there are always princes, probing her, licking her, pricking her, as desire is played out fantastically in her dream-state. Her dreams even include her father "couched speculatively between her thighs . . . as, with velvety thrusts, he searches out the spindle" (11). Many of her dreams are parodically Freudian.

Coover offers a third voice, that of "a loving old crone" (6), the fairy herself as she sits beside the princess, listening in on her dreams, waiting for her to arise from sleep. She directs the dreams, adding moral lessons to them, but remains amazed that "nothing sticks in that wastrel's empty head, nothing except her perverse dream of lovestruck princes" (7). However, this prince is hardly lovestruck: he is more enamored with success and power than with lust or physical desire.

It is uncertain if the prince will ever arrive. He finds himself aroused by the soft caresses of the plants outside the castle, impeded by his own body's response to them. He is unsure of himself, too, of what he is, and begins to suspect that he is a function of the quest he is engaged in, filling a role that perhaps has very little to do with who he really is. He begins to sense that he is involved in something he cannot understand: "He wishes he could remember more about who or what set him off on this adventure, and how it is he knows his commitment and courage are so required. It is almost as though this questing—which is probably not even 'his' at all, but rather a

something out there in the world beyond this brambly arena into which he has been absorbed, in the way that an idea sucks up thought—were inventing him from scratch as it were" (15). But the alternative, that of not fitting the role, of not being able to rescue Beauty and be "the chosen one" (22), is even more horrifying to him, for it will mean his life will have no direction whatsoever, and he'll be left to die in the briars.

The prince becomes forgetful, tarrying too long among the plants. Soon he is "inextricably ensnared in the briars, yet never ceasing to resist" (38); the briars come to resemble for him less the velvety thighs of a young girl and more "the grasping flesh-raking claws of an old crone" (39). Soon it is only in his imagination that he can continue to slash (54), but "the more the possibility of reaching her bedside recedes, the closer he seems to come to her" (64), and he can imaginatively complete his quest even if he remains physically trapped in the hedge.

The fairy, in the meantime, wants to help the princess understand what she is, and in her dreams she tries to make the princess understand that the castle itself, the castle's situation, is a metaphor for herself. The princess, the fairy suggests, is "all things dangerous and inviolate . . . she who harbors wild forces and so defines and provokes the heroic" (13). Says the fairy: "You are that flame, flickering like a burning fever in the hearts of men, consuming them with desire, bewitching them with your radiant and mysterious allure. . . . What the fairy does not say, because she does not want to terrify her . . . is: You are Beauty" (14). The Princess is symbolic. As Beauty, with a capital "B," she can be seen both as Sleeping Beauty and as the artistic notion of the beautiful, that which art strives after, an ideal to live up to. Yet she is not happy being an ideal for others; she'd rather be awake, able to act and to be alive.

But is this as desirable as Beauty seems to think? Not according to the fairy, who finds the young girl's desires impetuous, her attitudes too innocent of the realities of the world for her own good. She wants to dispel Rose's myths and mistaken ideas. In life the fairy cares for the princess's physical body while she sleeps, even going so far as to "freshen her flesh and wipe her bum, costume and coiffure her, sweep the room of all morbidity and cushion her for he who will come in lustrous opulence" (7). She does her duty, but in the realm of dreams she does something altogether different. As Beauty sleeps, the fairy enters as a crone into her dreams and attempts, through telling stories, to "educate" her. She has described to Beauty "the stagnant and verminous pallet whereon she idly snoozes . . . has recounted for her the ancient legends of saints awaking from a hundred years of sleep, glimpsing with dismay the changes the world has suffered, and immediately crumbling into dust" (7). She tells stories which possess similarities to Beauty's own situation. She tells, for instance, of a Sleeping Beauty who woke up to find herself surrounded by babies, the result of her having been "visited" by a number of princes over the years. As it turns out, the princes are married and their jealous wives cook up Beauty's children and eat them. They slit Beauty's throat and boil her up in a soup, and then fight over her dresses. "But it's *terrible!*" says Briar Rose. "She would have been better off not waking up at *all!*" The fairy/crone responds with seeming innocence, having led Rose to the conclusion she was hoping for all along: "Well. Yes. I suppose that's true, my dear" (20). Indeed, the fairy would prefer it if Briar Rose never woke up.

In another version of the story, "everyone *might* have lived happily ever after . . . if it hadn't been for his jealous wife" (22), who ends up trying to cook Beauty. Before doing so, though, she

forces Beauty to strip out of a gown that she desires "which she did slowly, one article at a time, shrieking wildly" (24). Her husband hears Beauty's cries but finds his way blocked by a huge briar patch: "Has she heard this story before? She can't remember, but it sounds all too familiar" (23). In another version, Beauty is awoken not by a prince but by "a band of drunken peasants who had broken into the castle, intent on loot" (26). In another, the crone/fairy marries the princess off to a wild bear "who smelled so bad she had to stuff pebbles up her nose" (35). She tells of a princess chained to a rock and guarded by a sea-monster (37). She tells of three men kissing Sleeping Beauty awake: "a wizened old graybeard, a leprous hunchback with a beatific smile, and the handsome young hero of her dreams" (41). Once she is awake, she is forced to choose between them.

The stories go on, Briar Rose asking again and again if she's heard them before, displeased with the way they seem to be turning out: "But stories aren't like that, the ill-tempered child will inevitably insist, and the fairy only cackles sourly at that and tells another" (61). Nor is the fairy pleased with the way the didactic element of her stories is received: "Her dreamtime moral lessons: out one ear and out the other. . . . It's frustrating, she simply cannot, will not learn" (32). No matter how she tells the story, deforming the original in the process, the Princess will not comprehend.

The fairy, one discovers late in the volume, is "the bad fairy who is also the good fairy" (80), but her goodness and badness are perhaps not what readers might expect. Indeed, "the good fairy's boon to this child, newborn, was to arrange for her to expire before suffering the misery of the ever-after part of the human span, the wicked fairy in her, for the sake of her entertainment, transforming

that well-meant gift to death in life and life in death without surcease. And in truth, she *has* been entertained, is entertained, is entertained still" (80–81). She whiles away the century telling stories.

It is the fairy, then, that is doing the work that a Coover story in this vein usually does as a whole. Instead of the story as a whole debunking the myth and calling into question the assumptions behind it, the debunking of the myth is part of the story itself. In other words, Coover's metafiction here becomes a critique not only of myth but of itself, biting its own tail. Each of the characters is trying in different ways to bring the story they are participating in to some kind of conclusion or at least equilibrium. The prince wants to achieve the object of his quest, perhaps for the wrong reasons, but he is looking for an achievement that will give him an identity. The princess simply wants to awake to find romance and to live happily ever after. The fairy wants to protect her ward from the buffetings of the world, but mainly she wants to keep whiling away the centuries with her stories. Yet they all remain trapped: the prince in the briars, the princess in her dreams (which seem to be developing all the complexity of life), the fairy in her dependence on her own tales.

But through it all Beauty remains hopeful and inviolate. As the volume ends with another prince arriving, despite her awareness that this is probably just another dream, the princess still maintains her hope that perhaps this will be the right prince, the real prince, at last. The fairy's stories have not disfigured the reigning myth for her—she will continue to cling to the old story, the original myth, to hope and, perhaps foolishly, to wait. Perhaps, too, this is an acknowledgment on Coover's part that in the end people must face their own disillusionments, that they are not ready to surrender their myths on the basis of stories alone.

Ghost Town

As in *Briar Rose*, the partition between reality and dream/hallucination in *Ghost Town* is permeable, and it is difficult to know where dream ends and reality starts. All of *Ghost Town* seems a hallucination, but it is a hallucination within which the main character, the kid, has to live—his only alternative to it is "sand, dry rocks, and dead things" (3). Also, as in *Briar Rose*, there seems to be no waking up, no way out of the dream, and the book concludes at the moment when it seems as if it could begin again.

Ghost Town does to the epic Western what Coover's *Briar Rose*, "The Door," and "The Gingerbread House" did to fairy tales. It is not the first of Coover's books to take on the old West: both the story "Shootout at Gentry's Junction" and the play *The Kid* are precursors of *Ghost Town.* This short novel develops themes and ideas examined in those two texts, above all offering a similar assault on the myths of the old West. The novel is very tight, the narrative style slightly clipped, the language careful, particularly in passages of description. Stylistically it has passing resemblance to Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy.* But whereas McCarthy's work often breaks into metaphysical speculation, Coover's moves toward critique, parody, and comedy.

The novel begins with a lone figure riding through a bleak horizon, in the middle of nowhere (3). He seems a typical down-and-out Western hero, armed with six-shooter, rifle, and Bowie knife, wearing tattered and grimy clothes. He possesses a sort of weather-beaten innocence, for although he is "leathery and sunburnt and old as the hills," he is "yet just a kid. Won't ever be anything else" (3).

He rides toward a town on the horizon, hoping to make it by nightfall. Yet the town itself behaves oddly. It does not seem to get any closer, almost seems to be moving away from him, and he can see behind him, on the opposite horizon, another town, "a kind of mirror image of the one he's headed toward, as if he were coming from the same place he was going" (6). As the town before him recedes, the town behind him seems to speed toward him, "until at last it glides up under his horse's hoofs from behind and proceeds to pass him by even as he ambles forward" (6). It passes under him to leave him alone in the desert again, the town growing more distant and finally vanishing as night falls.

As should be evident, *Ghost Town* is hardly a piece of realism. Like many other works by Coover, it operates according to its own dreamlike logic. Even though it begins with recognizable situations and types, these are rapidly subverted, the narrative spilling over the sides instead of staying in expected channels.

The kid encounters a group of men in the desert, including one described as a "wizened graybeard" (7) who tells him that the town he is hunting is just a ghost town. Yet the kid continues to try to ride toward the town anyway. As it happens, the town rides up under him around noon, and this time he can dismount, and walk about. It is, in fact, a ghost town, and seems at first utterly deserted. When he pushes through the saloon's swinging doors, the place within is in ruins. In the claims office down the street, dust blankets everything, including a stack of cards on the claim office counter with the sign *Take one* beside them: "He takes the lot, turns them over: a pack of ordinary playing cards, but with coordinates of some kind inked onto each of their faces. He pockets the jack of spades, flings the others at the desk to make the dust erupt, steps back into the street" (12).

This taking of a card and disordering of the deck seems to have set something in motion. As he walks about the seemingly empty town, he encounters a beautiful woman, "like something dreamt and come to life; but as, in a daze, he steps toward her, she fades out of sight" (13) and is altogether gone. It seems as if this is a ghost town in more ways than one. When he springs the saloon doors open a second time, he seems to have entered into a still living, very active Western town. He stumbles into an encounter in the bar and ends up killing a man who seems to be following a script that the kid does not possess—despite the kid trying to satisfy the man's demands, the man speaks as if the kid were resisting him, and in the end attacks. Similarly, when the barkeep hands him a key and he returns it, asking for a beer, he finds himself in a hall in front of a door, the bar vanished. The transitions from situation to situation, from place to place, are odd and rapid, again have a dreamlike feel to them.

Behind the door is a room with a bath. As he bathes, he finds himself "fondled soapily from head to foot as if he were in the hands of some water nymph or Indian princess" (20). This simple "as if" seems to start up another life for him, and in the end of the section he finds himself in an Indian village, undergoing rites of passage as he marries an Indian girl. Yet by the next section he is out of the bath and back in the town, dressed in new clothing. Down in the saloon after an encounter with a barroom chanteuse, he is lifted up onto the men's shoulders, set on a table in the room's middle where he is made to eat testicles and where they try to force him to rape a woman, something he can only get out of by shooting up the place.

Next thing he knows, he has been made Sheriff. What follows are encounters with rough and tumble townspeople, in situations that the new Sheriff never quite seems to understand. The chanteuse, Belle, shows up to rob the already-robbed bank and ends up taking all that remains, a hanged body. Suddenly the kid is out in the streets, naked except for chaps, boots and hat, looking for his horse. Then, fully clothed again, he is forced to deal with a group of women who are protesting being repeatedly violated by "the local savages" (47), a protest which rapidly degenerates into a spanking party as the women demonstrate in detail what the savages have been doing to them. Soon a posse is formed, but the Sheriff finds himself alone and left behind, his borrowed horse not up to snuff. He is treated by the schoolmarm for snakebite, his penis flying high (to his embarrassment). Yet in the very next scene, he is back in town, the schoolmarm vanished, with Belle forcing him towards marriage. All of this confuses him, the transitions more disconcerting for him than they are for the reader. It as if something has gone wrong, as if he has stepped into the wrong role or the wrong series of roles in a movie. He has become the law, the authority, when he feels that he is more naturally outside of law: "his head is ever full of troubled thoughts, and, in spite of the blow it took, it has not lost any of them. He is a drifter and one whose history escapes him even as he experiences it. . . . He is above all a free man, intent on pursuing his meaning even if there is none. Or thus he always thought of himself before he forsook his rambling to try his hand at the sheriff's life" (78).

In effect, the kid seems always to be playing a part he doesn't quite fit, shuttling between Western roles. When he resists a sudden

marriage to Belle, he discovers himself trussed up and carted off to a bachelor party, but manages to work his way free of his ropes and ride out of town, an outlaw again. But the town is not done with him yet; indeed the town itself seems to possess a sort of sentience. He is in the middle of the desert when it rolls under his feet again, and he returns to find his face on "Wanted" posters all over town. In the place of his Sheriff's outfit he is wearing all-black clothing, better to fit the part of the criminal. Saved by Belle, he rides into the desert again, yet again the town takes him up. In the desert again, he falls asleep, is beset by a dream of riding through Indian country on a stagecoach with a beautiful woman in black. When he awakens, he finds himself in a bedroom, with the chanteuse encouraging him to gather a gang to rob a train: "You're a famous badman now, darlin," she explains. "So we gotta round us up a gang of sneakthiefs, gunslingers, and short-iron specialists and go do some killin and robbin" (101). But, once back in town, he slips into the role of Sheriff again, when he discovers that the schoolmarm, accused of stealing horses, is going to be hanged at noon.

Throughout the novel the kid is thrown back and forth between Belle and the schoolmarm, two women who function as types—Woman as lustful and sexual on the one hand, Woman as pure and pristine on the other. He finds his affections torn. He finds the jaunty and sexy barroom chanteuse appealing on a temporary and transient level, but he seems more drawn to the schoolmarm who will hardly give him the time of day. All of it confuses him. As he says of himself, "Never could understand women" (87). He has great difficulty even speaking to the schoolmarm. Still part drifter though he is Sheriff, he himself is bipartite, and as the novel progresses, Coover suggests that Belle and the schoolmarm may in essence be interchangeable, two different avatars of the same ideal.

Searching for the schoolmarm, the kid enters a church. Here, instead of being reduced to Sheriff or outlaw, he seems to have managed to integrate aspects of both. In the church he finds a blue-spectacled dealer cutting cards, clearly cheating, but also blind. Here, Coover brings games of chance together with religion; religion in this church seems to have been replaced by crooked gambling. In fact, Coover could also be seen as suggesting that religion itself is rigged, a game of chance that makes all willing to participate into losers.

Trapped, now part of the dealer's gambling winnings, is the schoolmarm. She is strapped to a spinning wheel of fortune, her skirt flipping up and down, staring at him with a look "compounded of fury, humiliation, and anguished appeal" (125). The only way to win her back is to enter the game of chance with the crooked dealer, bet his life against hers, and win.

How the kid does this is worth noting, in that it is one of the few moments of the novel when he seems to take control, where he is manipulating the situation instead of the situation manipulating him. He must use both his skills as a Sheriff and as a criminal. It is also a situation in which the scene is clearly manipulated, in which the artifice of the fiction intentionally breaks down: "He removes his spurs so they will not betray him, and then, leaving his voice behind, rises silently from the chair to slip around behind the dealer" (128). His voice continues to talk in front of the dealer while his body, acting criminally, "buries the blade deep in the dealer's throat, slicing from side to side through the thick piled-up flesh like stirring up a bucket of lard" (129).

He manages to save the schoolmarm and convince the town she's not guilty. Soon he saves her again from his jealous horse, in the process both confessing his love and gaining a slap from her.

The slap "knocks his hat off and her own dark bun is tipped askew." It seems that the schoolmarm is not what she seems "for he has beheld the strands of orange curls peeking out beneath the unsettled bun" (137). Apparently the schoolmarm is actually Belle the chanteuse: the two are one and the same. Belle, still sore from being jilted, calls for the kid's hanging, and though the townsfolk argue "Aw, Belle, he ain't but a killer, hoss thief, cattle rustler, trainrobber, 'n card cheat, whutsa harm in thet?" (138), they're willing to defer to her and throw him into prison.

Yet as things seem to be at their worst, a storm comes through, tears the roof off the jail, reducing the town to a ghost town again. The kid finds himself stumbling about it with his six-shooter, preparing to shoot his way out, but it seems the town itself is unoccupied, and has been unoccupied for a long time. The saloon, which shortly before seemed alive to him now is "nothing but a dark cobwebbed and dusty murk" (146). In fact, "the only sign of life is his own hat out in the middle of the empty street. He has misjudged everything. The town's been abandoned. He's all alone" (146). All that he has done in the town seems to have been an illusion, the only thing that is real being the card he has taken from the claims office: "He touches the card in his pocket to be sure it's still there, estimating that it represents all that he has learned from his lonely travails, everything else but a figment and a haunting, and it but a sign of them" (147).

Quickly he realizes that "the town is leaving him and taking the day with it" (146–47). As he lies on the ground the buildings move away as if propelled, leaving him in the end surrounded by "night, and there is nothing to be seen except the black sky riddled

with star holes overhead" (147). He is back where he began, in the middle of the desert, and perhaps has reached a point where everything can begin all over again.

Ghost Town portrays the universe as a hostile place in which people are thrown into existence and taken out of it again. The kid seems caught in a sort of trap, doomed to wander, perhaps eternally, reliving old roles and stereotypes again and again. This is a universe that is hostile, difficult, and one which keeps us at its mercy. Like many of Coover's characters, the kid remains bewildered. Though he can take control for a moment, that control is quickly lost once he realizes the schoolmarm is actually Belle.

Midway through the book, the kid watches as the stars begin "to slide about to realign themselves upon the black canvas of the sky as though to spell out some message for him. A warning maybe. But it was all just a sluggish scramble, like the shuffling of dominoes, nothing he could make any sense of, and he grasped thereby some small portion of his fate: that anything the universe might have to say would remain forever incomprehensible to him" (83). This is affirmed a few lines later when the kid stumbles across an old Indian. "Whut do the stars say, oletimer?" the kid asks. "After a long silent time, the Indian said: They say the universe is mute. Only men speak, though there is nothing to say" (83). If there is a God in the universe, if there is some sort of force beyond the speech of men, it remains mute. The individual is alone in his or her attempts to assemble meaning.

Near the end of the book, the kid remembers an experience he had in the desert:

> . . . a great band of Indian warriors came galloping past, riding bareback and without reins, heads high and staring rigidly ahead as though drawn by something out on the horizon that he could not see, their horses' hoofs raising a torment of dust but making not a sound. As they flew past, he saw that their lips were all sewn shut with rawhide thongs and their chests and foreheads were tattooed with mysterious pictographs and the teeth and tiny bones of animals were embedded in their flesh, and he understood that they were galloping into oblivion and carrying the secrets of the universe with them, and that although those secrets were not very interesting, they were the only secrets there were, and he would not be privy to them. (139)

The reader is left, like the kid, with glimpses of the old stories and old myths, trying to generate meaning in world devoid of meaning, facing an inhospitable and ultimately hostile universe. One listens to the sound of those galloping into oblivion, the noise of horses' hooves being the only speech of men who have nothing to say.

The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)

The first of two Coover books to appear in 2002, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)*, consists of ten interlinked vignettes, each concerning a different imaginary hotel. These hotels are inspired by the work of visual artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), whose most famous work consists of wooden boxes containing collages and assemblies of objects. Coover takes the cue for his title from Cornell

himself: a few of his boxes, such as "Grand Hôtel Semiramis," are imaginary microhotels. In addition, several of his untitled boxes have become identified as various grand hotels.[16]

For the most part, Coover's vignettes take the last part of their title from an actual Cornell work, or from a series of Cornell works, inserting the words Grand Hotel in front of it.[17] Discussing the relation of all ten vignettes to the Cornell work to which it refers is beyond the parameters of this study. In the discussion that follows, however, I will describe two Cornell boxes, "Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)" and "Untitled (Sequestered Bower)," and their relationship to Coover's "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade" and "The Grand Hotel Sequestered Bower," respectively.

The term grand hotel refers to old world, primarily European, turn-of-the-century hotels known for their charm and hospitality. They are roughly the equivalent, in terms of service, of today's five-star hotels. In Coover's text, grand hotel status is achieved by "architectural harmony and brilliance, high standards of service, novel décor, unique special features . . . the creation of surprise and wonder, dependable plumbing" (51). His grand hotels are unusual and magical, at once a metaphysical space outside of the world and something akin to a theme park. Coover's technique is documentary—these vignettes simply describe each hotel; there are no characters per se (though architects are mentioned from time to time), and no plot.

The Grand Hotel Night Voyage, is "an archetypal grand hotel, first of its kind and said to be the progenitor of all others" (9). Originally a hot air balloon, it is "for dedicated and solitary explorers of the night. There are no double beds in the Grand Hotel Night Voyage" (10). It is a refuge, a place to from the world.

The next vignette, "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade," is based on a Cornell box done in blue. At the box's center is a portrait of the actress Lauren Bacall. Below that are three smaller pictures of Bacall, all behind panes of blue glass. To either side are two columns of eight cubes, some of which are painted blue, some of which depict either a dog or Bacall in childhood, smiling. The box functions as an arcade—a small ball can be put into the top of it to rattle through the interior and come out at the bottom.[18] In constructing his story, Coover draws on many details from Cornell's box. At the heart of his Grand Hotel Penny Arcade, "encased in blue glass and pale as porcelain, floats a sleeping princess, gracefully coiling and uncoiling, clothed only in her own purity, her eyes open but unseeing" (12). An analog to the cubes to the side of the box, she "appears much of the time to find herself amid imagined multitudes, waving, greeting friends, dancing, eating, posing, petting a dog or cat" (12). The rooms of this hotel have the same "marine blue" as Cornell's box, each room equipped "with its own individual coin-operated peephole viewers" where guests are allowed to observe the "princess of solitude" (13). The guests are invited to live vicariously through her movements and expressions, which raises for them sometimes troubling questions about the reality of their own lives.

The Grand Hotel Galactic Center is "approached by the way of a labyrinth of narrow twisted streets, a maze that often thwarts the novice, making the hotel, which is in the very heart of the city, seem mythic and remote, improbable even" (17). Once one arrives, however, it acquires a "startling thereness that can never ever after be entirely avoided" (17). Its theme is cosmic grandeur, and every room has a view of the night sky so that guests can contemplate the

infinite. It is an odd hotel, since interaction with the infinite is dangerous, and many guests seem simply to vanish.

The front desk at the Grand Hotel Forgotten Game "is shifted about from hour to hour, making checking into the hotel the first game one is obliged to play here, though by no means the most difficult. It is child's play compared, for example, to finding one's room afterwords" (22). Indeed, the rooms can only be reached by carousels and Ferris wheels, the games and puzzles never ceasing. At the top of the hotel, we are told, is the Game Room, where all the games and fun of the hotel are plotted out. "It is widely assumed . . . that these Game Room meetings are the happiest games of all" yet in fact they seem to have a "prevailing mood of inwardness and preoccupation, melancholy, wistfulness, in which, say, the blowing of a soap bubble would be a cause for tears" (26). Indeed, there seems to be a great disjunction between the guests' experience of the hotel and the experience of those creating their enjoyment. The artist's suffering leads to the viewers delight.[19]

The Grand Hotel Nymphlight is described as "the source and model of all architecture, grand hotels included" (27). It allows guests to enjoy "the literal reexperience of one's own lost childhood" (27). One can experience one's childhood "while yet knowing what one knows as an adult" (27). However, to be admitted to the hotel, one must provide a vast array of supporting materials, memories and objects from childhood. In fact, the Grand Hotel Nymphlight is a hotel within a hotel, residing within Hotel Lost Domain. From the Hotel Lost Domain, one can observe the reverted adults at play and "immerse oneself all day in the magical world of children" (30). There is a rumor that the Hotel Lost Domain resides

within still another hotel "wherein watchers watch the watchers and the watched as well" (30) in a voyeuristic chain.

The Grand Hotel Crystal Cage refers to a work ("The Crystal Cage") that Cornell developed from 1934 to 1967.[20] It consists of a valise containing numerous postcards, photographs, and letters. The architect of Coover's hotel was ridiculed for his first hotel, which seems to include everything (the hotel is labeled "Grandiose Hotel Hodge-Podge"), but slowly, working in solitude, his ideas begin to change. Instead of including everything, he now chooses to begin to pare things away, eventually building only from specialized types of glass. Soon he is commissioned to build a hotel and in fact does so, but it is invisible; nobody knows where it is. Some speculate that the entire city has been enclosed by the architect, but nobody can say for certain.

The vignette "The Grand Hotel Sand Fountain" is different in form than many of the others, and presented as a tour guide's spiel. This hotel is known as the hotel of brief encounters. The prehistoric sand fountain seems to provoke meditations on time and the shortness of life, which in turn lead to passing flings and brief affairs that give momentary distraction from one's one mortality. "In the very brevity of these encounters of ours, as we all know, the pleasure of living life is vividly intensified, commingled as it is with the anguish of the same life's approaching end" (48). For the benefit of the artistically inclined guests, odd objects are left lying around so that they might turn up later in love poems written after the encounter's end.

The Grand Hotel Bald Cockatoo began as an annex of the Grand Hotel Night Voyage, but over time became its own hotel. It is staffed entirely by birds "whose very presence serves to rein-force that sensation of entrancement" (52). Here Coover alludes to a

number of Cornell boxes and to Cornell's repeated use of birds in his work. Indeed, he makes subtle and effortless allusions to Cornell's works throughout the piece. His mention, for instance, of "unsavory incidents in the shooting galleries" (52) can be tied to Cornell's piece "Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery," in which cutouts of four birds stand behind a broken pane of glass, one of them, head daubed with red paint, seemingly shot.

The vignette "The Grand Hotel Sequestered Bower" is based on Cornell's "Untitled (Sequestered Bower)." Within it, a nude doll, twine bound around her waist, stands behind a pane of amber glass enclosed in a rough wooden structure. The effect is quite disturbing, giving a sense of loneliness and foreboding. Coover's hotel is described as "hauntingly beautiful." The hotel is set up "to experience the deep structure of nature itself" and one is only aware of having arrived when a porter pops out of the undergrowth (54). At the heart of the hotel is the bower, which is viewed by many as "far from benign," as "the creation of a repressed and tortured mystic, whose impassioned and disciplined engagement with the so-called structure of nature is little more than 'a strategy to encourage deviance'" (57). Though the situation itself is somewhat different from the Cornell work it takes its title from, Coover perfectly captures the mood, mystery, and oddness of the Cornell original.

The final hotel, the Grand Hotel Home, Poor Heart, "has been here all along. The architect did not so much build it as find it. But finding it was itself a major architectural achievement for it had been so long lost it was thought lost forever" (58). Decorated with images quite prominent in Cornell's art, the hotel seems a tribute to the past, shot through with nostalgia. For some people the "[a]rousing of the dead past" (60) that the hotel provokes leads to nightmares. Yet "for most, pursuing a reassuring continuity between

their present and their past so as to embrace, not the one, but both, a visit to the Grand Hotel Home, Poor Heart is ennobling and enriching, and even when there is heartache, there is bittersweet pleasure in it" (61). Still others, however, confronted by their lost past and the disappointments of their present, end up killing themselves. Yet despite these deaths, it remains the quintessential grand hotel. Perhaps the words of the architect indicate why: "When asked what it was he was seeking in his life, the architect replied simply: 'Quiet consolations, sudden joys, touches of beauty'" (62). This has become, the narrator tells us, the motto of grand hotels everywhere.

The jacket copy for the hardcover of *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* quotes Coover's suggestion that the vignettes are intended as an "architectural portrait of the artist" and that biographical material is "built into the construction of the text like girders, brickwork, or décor." The fact that Cornell lived at once cradled and isolated in solitary life might be seen as metaphorically expressed in "The Grand Hotel Night Voyage" or by the architect's frustration with society in "The Grand Hotel Crystal Cage." In this piece, the narrator indicates that the architect "rarely left his ill-lit basement workroom" (35). Cornell, too, worked "in a tiny basement surrounded by his tools, objects, and obsessions."[21] The questions raised by the princess of solitude at the center of the Grand Hotel Penny Arcade "may speak to the architect's genius for provocation; or [they] may speak to his confusion. For, his adoration of his structural centerpiece has seemed to go beyond mere aesthetics" (16). Indeed, his amorous obsession seems to have become an "inescapable entrapment," in a way analogous to Cornell's own

obsession with unachievable women. Yet this is not in any sense a biography of Cornell; indeed, Cornell is being used both as a spark and as raw material for Coover's own creative process and creative concerns, to develop his own notion of the artist.

According to Robert McLaughlin, "Each hotel also symbolically offers commentary on the creation and reception of art," and certainly "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade," which raises issues of reception (is it voyeurism or art to look at the princess?) as well as exploring the way in which the artist is both the creator of and the slave to his creation, seems to bear that out.[22] "The Grand Hotel Forgotten Game" expresses a disjunction between the creator of a work of art (the producer of the games of the hotel) and those experiencing the art. "The Grand Hotel Sequestered Bower" raises questions about the relation of creation to deviance, of repression to art, while the final vignette offers a sense of art as something that can rediscover and transform the past. Just over fifty pages long, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* is rich in suggestion and allusion, and shows Coover's ability to develop and complicate his own concerns while still paying respectful tribute to Joseph Cornell's powerful artistic vision.

The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut

Coover's most recent book, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut* (2002), like *John's Wife* and *Gerald's Party,* underwent a slow and careful gestation, only coming to fruition years after it was initially conceived. In his "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," Coover's 1970 entry reports that he is "launching a new work about a pornographic film hero, with a working title of *Winter.*"[23] By the

end of the year, Coover writes, "the first of the nine projected *Winter* 'reels' is completed. As 'research' we take in the 'First Annual Wet Dream Festival' in Amsterdam in November, a kind of porn-film love-in."[24] By 1971, Coover had finished the second and most of the third reel of the book (a "reel" being the equivalent of a section or long chapter), and by 1972 a section of the novel had been accepted for publication by *The North American Review*. The novel seemed to be moving forward rapidly and might have been finished in the early 1970s had not Coover chosen, in November of 1971, to set it aside. With a presidential election looming, he chose instead to work on the book that would eventually become *The Public Burning*.[25]

Since that time, Coover has published portions of *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* in literary journals and glossy magazines ranging from *New American Writing* and *Postmodern Culture* to *Playboy*. Each publication has raised the novel's mystique and cult status, making it now, more than thirty years after it was first begun, a book as legendary in literary circles as William Gass's long-awaited novel *The Tunnel* or Thomas Pynchon's (as it turns out apocryphal) civil war novel. As with other legendary literary projects, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*'s first battle is with its own reputation. Can a book awaited for thirty years live up to its own myth? Considering that *Lucky Pierre* is itself a meditation on the nature of myth (as processed through American popular erotic culture) and its relationship to reality, certainly this is a question that Coover himself has anticipated.

Lucky Pierre is a novel about a pornographic film hero of the same name. After years of starring in pornographic movies, he has become wildly successful, part of a institutionalized city film system.

Pierre lives in Cinecity, a name which plays on both the city's connection to cinema and on its connection to transgression (Sin City). Coover's original title for the novel, *Winter,* survives in the atmosphere of the piece: Cinecity seems to be stuck in a phase of perpetual winter. The primary product of the region seems to be pornographic films, the city either a paradise or hell, depending on one's point of view. The primary male star of these films is Lucky Pierre.

As in *A Night at the Movies,* the cinema serves as the organizing trope for the book as a whole, though in this case instead of running through a number of genres Coover focuses on one, offering a "festival" of nine pornographic films. Formally the novel consisted of nine reels—forty-plus page long sections, each a different film directed by a different woman, a woman who can be considered both one of Lucky Pierre's (or L.P. as he is sometimes called) on- and off-screen sex partners and one of his muses. As each of these directors creates her reel, the other eight women sometimes help and sometimes interfere with the current project. Each reel is an occasion for L.P. to perform. Yet L.P. has been performing in films for so long that several unusual things have begun to happen. First, as the novel progresses his memory seems to be slipping, the past becoming more and more a blur. Second, L.P. seems to be having a harder and harder time distinguishing between real life and film, between the *reel* and the *real*. Everything seems scripted, every moment directed, and, like Charlie in "Charlie in the House of Rue," his own experiences seem disconnected and outside of his control. As one of his directors, Cecilia, suggests to another, "It's not his life you're shooting, Cleo. It's a life your film has laid on him like a curse" (68).

Who is Lucky Pierre exactly? He goes by several names, depending on the artistic level of the scenario he is participating in; in addition to being Lucky Pierre he is also Crazy Leg, Peter Prick, Willie, Badboy, El Loco Perdido, and Pete the Beast. According to Cinecity's mayor, he is "the very life and soul of the city, the radical root of our political and historical consciousness, the mainspring of our municipal policy!" (86). He seems to have lived for quite some time, his earliest roles being in silent black-and-white features, his most recent ones shot with shaky hand-held video cameras. But he seems also timeless, someone who has evolved as the medium itself has evolved. Indeed, "he's been called an 'immortal' in all the media, has he not, and when he asked Clara about it, she assured him that, yes, that's virtually so" (137). Ultimately he seems less a man than an idea, a public icon, the personification or mythologization of stardom. What is admired of an actor in his or her films often has little to do with what the person is in life: the star that the public worships is a construction, a myth, and there usually exists a substantial gap between how an audience constructs an actor and who that actor really is. With Lucky Pierre, Coover takes this one step further. L.P. *is* his films, no more, no less. As such, he is as hollow as Gloomy Gus. He is star without substance, an onscreen personality lacking an offscreen self.

The name Lucky Pierre, and the title of the novel, seem to have been taken from *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*,[26] a 1961 pornographic film directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis, starring Billy Falbo and a group of nude women referred to collectively as Pierre's Playmates. After an opening scene in which the film's narrator is hauled off to the hospital because of his comments on the film's brilliance, the movie offers five scenarios in which Pierre

stumbles mutely through misadventures with nude women. In one scenario, for instance, he has to try to fix a man's shower while the man's wife is still in it. In another, he goes to a drive-in to see a black-and-white porn film, but soon finds his view blocked by a truck that parks in front of him. The movie is hardly high art, containing both elements of slapstick and vaudeville, but its combination of light pornography and humor must have attracted Coover. Similar play with pornography and slapstick exists not only in certain scenes of Coover's own Lucky Pierre novel but in both "Charlie in the House of Rue" and *The Public Burning*.

On the whole, however, Coover's *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* is not nearly so coy as the film from which it takes its name, and if Coover incorporates elements of humor into certain reels, other sections are darker, more textured. Even in the more humorous sections, the humor is often black. Coover combines comedy, absurdity, and laughter to generate an artistic space entirely his own. He is interested in deploying the different subgenres and devices of pornography and manipulating them, using them to explore the tired confines of a predictable genre so as to comment on both that genre and on the larger connections and disjunctions between mythmaking and life.

Each reel of the novel operates according to different types of pornographic tropes—whichever pleasures happen to be the favorite of the woman directing—each reel creating its own world for Pierre to inhabit. In addition, Coover hints that each director is associated with a muse—with one of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (i.e., Memory) who served in ancient Greece as the goddesses of music, art, literature, and intellectual pursuits.[27] In the final reel of the novel, for L.P.'s "Final Fuck" (360), his nine directors dress in

Greek garb and take on the names of each of the muses. However, as Cecilia puns while playing a muse, "we are his little Pierrodies!" (29), a statement both suggesting the women's connection to Pierre and signally that their museness is parodic. In other words, the relationship to the muses is tongue in cheek, meant to complicate and deepen the reading rather than to be taken as the absolute key to understanding the text.

Character/Muse Relationships

Director	Associated Muse
Cecilia (Cissy)	Euterpe
Cleo	Clio
Clara	Urania
Cassandra (Cassie)	Polyhymnia
Constance (Connie)	Erato
Carlotta (Lottie)	Melpomene
Cora	Terpsichore
Catherine (Kate)	Thalia
Calliope (Cally)	Calliope

The first reel of the novel (which incorporates titles as well), is directed by Cecilia. She is associated with Euterpe, the muse of music whose symbol is the flute. Throughout the reel, Coover makes references to music, uses musical terms, and makes musical allusions. The first word of the reel, Cantus, is a Latin word meaning a song or a melody. Enclosed in parentheses in the text, it reads like a direction for staging, suggesting that the reel is meant to be sung. Wafting in on the air shortly after is "a soft incipient lament . . . a plainchant." It continues as a flickering light reveals "a strange

valley" (1) and a lonely city. The landscape slowly resolves itself into a woman's body which becomes covered with flickering notations such as "VAGINAL ORIFICE" and "LABIA MAJORA" (2). From the breasts of the woman, snow falls down and onto the winter-bound city.

Within the city, a man, seemingly an ordinary city dweller, walks through the snow, huddled and shivering. However, after two paragraphs of description one discovers that despite the cold his penis is out and "ramrod stiff in the morning wind, glistening with ice crystals" (4). What is more, nobody seems to think twice about his display. Indeed, the ads on the buses are pornographic, theaters are showing nothing but pornography, and even newspaper headlines are voyeuristic. In addition, while the situation itself seems real enough (albeit absurd), mud splashes onto the buses to create the title sequences for a film, calling into question the boundary between film and reality. Can there be said, properly, to be a reality, or does the art of film mediate everything?

The shivering man is the porn star Lucky Pierre, "a living legend, who knows, maybe the last of his kind" (4). Soon L.P. moves out of the cold and into his office building, riding up in the elevator to the 69th floor. On the way he exchanges sexual wordplay and receives a blowjob. When he reaches his floor, suddenly the scene turns slow motion as he attempts, and fails, to leap over a desk and into a sexual encounter with the receptionist. It seems that he is losing his touch.

Yet, as he stumbles into his office, followed by Cecilia (Cissy) playing the role of personal assistant, it is clear that even if he is not personally at the height of his powers, his reputation is still strong.

He has autographs to sign, personal product lines to maintain, and his work is state-supported; he even has an assistant to wipe his ass with a sponge (18). Yet he seems to have very little control over the direction his life is taking, and keeps falling into new and troubling situations. Relaxing in a warm bath with Cecilia, he finds himself suddenly drowning on the open sea. "[H]ow can this have happened?" he asks himself. "What went wrong? Where the hell's the stunt man?" (22). As his life flashes before him, he thinks, "I might at least know at last, if too late, who I am!" (23).

In the scene that follows, he has been washed up on shore where nine sexually naive nymphs (the nine directors, taking on the names of the nine muses) fondle him, mystified by his maleness. Only after the scene goes on for some time does Coover make it clear that it's a rerun, something that L.P. is watching on a television in a bar. There is no explanation of how he got out of the bath-turned-ocean and into the bar. He is simply there. He watches "Cissy/Euterpe" (29) onscreen blow across his penis "as though it were a flute . . . making a strange music" (29). Soon he is meditating on some of his old films and his work with Cissy . . . and just as quickly he seems to be back in his office. There, one section ending with someone knocking on the door is followed by another early film, which as it turns out he is watching with Cissy. "I've left something of me behind in that film," he confesses to her, "and now it's no longer what it was. Nor am I. It's like it's left me with an itch I can't quite find" (38). But even this revelation seems staged to him, as if "he's been here before" (38). Already his facade has begun to crumble. He is experiencing a kind of crisis of faith, a crisis from which, as the reel ends, Cissy tries to distract him through sex laden with musical metaphors.

In this first reel, Coover prepares the reader for the experience that will follow, which promises to be one of discontinuity. The reader shares Lucky Pierre's confusion, the jerkiness of his existence being mimicked in the reading process. L.P.'s description of Cecilia's working process might be applied to Coover's method as a whole. L.P. calls it "a rhythmic but discordant intercutting of old clips with new, attempts to empty his life of conventional 'meaning,' replacing it with a purely aesthetic one, which she thinks of as liberating, as might he were it not such a harrowing ordeal" (32). Coover too, both here and in many of his other books, replaces simple narrative progression with a story that is spliced and overlayed and rearranged, demanding that the reader surrender their conventional notions of meaning so as to get at something new and unexpected. Yet, unlike Lucky Pierre, unlike Lazarus or the Fall Guy, the reader is cushioned, harrowed on the page rather than literally.

The second reel belongs to Cleo, whose muse is Clio, the muse of history. Clio is a documentary filmmaker, intent on making all of L.P.'s life into art. L.P., on the other hand, is interested only in reliving his first sexual encounter with her, trying to reconstruct conditions in Cleo's "coldwater flat" so as to evoke the past and make sex with her feel like it felt the first time. Their notions of history are very different. He wants to repeat a single event. She wants to record everything as it happens. After they have sex she scratches statistics on a notepad. "Fortyseven minutes, 836 thrusts, she announces flatly" (48). His response is equally rooted in his own obsession: "I just realized, Cleo. There's one too many ashtrays in this room" (48).

The scene abruptly ends when he is tugged up into Cleo's womb, feeling at once comforted and as if he is choking. He awakens on a

couch made of young serving girls and, rushing off to work, finds that his floor is occupied by "Lucky Pierre's Fucking Academy" (56), which is also identified in the first reel as one of his films (16). He is at once an adult and a child, back in school, reliving his own history. He either has slipped into the film or the film has spilled out into life. In the classroom, he finds himself distracted momentarily by a "student practicing her scales" (60), the action being described in the same way as Cecilia's instrument-playing in the first reel, though he himself does not investigate or even think twice about it. Indeed, this seems an attempt of Cecilia to disrupt Cleo's film. Throughout the reels that follow, motives from other reels will try to elbow their way in with varying degrees of success. The women sometimes work together, and sometimes sabotage each other.

Lucky Pierre's experience in school leads him to his own conclusions about history: "This, he thinks, with a shudder, is what history really is. Something happens, and then nothing happens" (60). Yet, this thought is interrupted by something happening: the teacher calls on him and he gives an incorrect answer. This too, in turn, is interrupted by something even larger, the school is suddenly swarmed over by the Extars, a terrorist group who believe in street theater and who want to get rid of movie stars. "PARTS FOR THE PEOPLE! PARTS FOR THE PEOPLE!" they yell (63). Cleo moves among them, filming them with a news camera as the police club and shoot them. At first Pierre looks on horrified, but soon is spurred to try to save Lottie, one of the more attractive Extars, from falling out the window. After the carnage, he tries to quit, tries to take a plane away, but soon finds himself back at the same place, beginning again, attending a banquet with Cinecity's attractive mayor. There is no escape for Pierre. Even on the plane he finds himself

caught up in a scene with Constance, one of the woman directors. There's no escaping the movies, which makes Cleo's documentary project odd: she's filming a "reality" that cannot escape being a fantasy. The act of filming transforms that tenuous reality, making it even more suspect than it already is.

Reel three, Clara's reel, seems to begin over again, with L.P. once again entering the office just as he did in the first reel (Cecelia's), everything repeated nearly exactly. But this time as the scene goes wrong, the film is rewound, and the scene begins again. Again the scene is botched and backed up, only this time it is backed up too far and L.P. tumbles down the elevator shaft.

This initial scene seems less part of Clara's film than a device used to get L.P. into the situation she desires—she wants him injured and half-conscious so that she can play doctor with him. It's not enough to fake it, since, ironically enough, "She wants the truth, hardcore truth, twentyfour times a second, even if she has to create it herself" (96).

Clara is associated with Urania, the muse connected to astronomy and the heavens. L.P. say that she makes him feel "Like I'm falling through infinity or something!" (100). Her goal is to lead him "beyond history" (104), but what she leads him to is a kind of confrontation with the void of outer space: "darkness falls about him, collapsing like a starry sky" (104). Clara's relation to her muse is more vexed than the others heretofore looked at, but perhaps that is because of the way our notion of the heavens have changed.

After the doctor, Pierre finds himself receiving a special delivery "Cunt of the Month" (106). He puts it together and finds that it is Catherine, another of his leading ladies. The only problem is she does not seem to be fitting together right and pieces seem missing

or misarranged. As he is assembling her, one of her eyeballs rolls into his pool, and soon he finds himself pushed in after it. Once again, as in the first reel, he is drowning, but his response this time is to question the reality of the moment:

> —Stop it! That's enough!
> —What—?
> —Switch it off!
> —But what's the matter, L.P.?
> —It's wrong, all wrong, that's what's the matter! (115)

It seems he's been watching the whole sequence with Cecilia. Is this part of Clara's film or is it a reality outside of it? One cannot say for certain. Once again the reader is snapped out of one scene and placed into another level of reality. And the reason L.P. has stopped the film seems to be not because of his fear of drowning but because of his sense that he has lost his ability to act: "Where did I fuck up, Cissy? How did I lose it?" (116). His only hope, he thinks, is to go back to the beginning, to walk in the street as he does in the first reel and try to figure out where he went wrong. He begins to cut and paste, slipping somehow out of the situation and into the film, back onto the streets, becoming a bum. Only Calliope, the chief of all the muses, can manage to go after him and pull him out, but soon he finds himself again in a predicament, hanging precariously, about to fall. Indeed, fall is precisely what he does, with the reel fading out as he descends.

When he unfades in reel four, he is no longer falling but fallen, and currently having sex with Cassie. The events that have led up to this moment are unclear but "it is understood that this is who he is,

what he does, what he must do, it is his karma" (134). This is Cassandra's reel—her muse being Polyhymnia, the many-hymned muse connected variously with sacred poetry and mime. In the third reel, Pierre remembered spending an afternoon with her at the editing bench "looking at a reelful of spliced-together goof-ups from the cutting room floor: the tagends of orgasms, flash frames, miscues, foggy runouts and blistered close-ups, jittery tracking shots, clumsy wipes—all of it joined together just as she's picked it up: forwards, backwards, emulsion in or out, grease-penciled, notched, or punched" (120), a process perhaps descriptive of her many-hymned nature, and certainly descriptive as well of some of Coover's own strategies. For Cassie, "all time is space, all events simultaneous, all clips interchangeable" (135). In reel four, the rapid montage method is replaced, at least at first, by a slower, less slapstick pace. The first section is devoid of dialogue, with both Cassie and Pierre seemingly unable to talk, but communicating thoughts directly into one another's heads. This version of Cassie manages to be at once simple and very complex: sex with her is "so masterfully simple, so effortless, direct, and aesthetically pure, stripped of all extraneous gesture. . . . Yet, for all its self-denying simplicity it is a work of immense scale and astonishing richness, austere yet gorgeously radiant" (138). As he watches, images of his "rearing and plunging cock" are superimposed on one another, creating an almost fugue-like intensity, revealing the multiplicity always inherent in Cassie's gestures. As the scene progresses, he loses all track of time, loses a sense of his location in space, finds himself spinning out.

Cassie's polyphonic nature begins to assert itself more fully. In the next scene the Extars reappear, and Pierre tries to talk one of

them, Lottie, into having sex, accidentally delaying her long enough to cause her to be captured by Cora, the mayor. One abrupt cut later, he finds himself wandering about the city, apparently on the way to work, reliving parts of the scene that opened the book. But now it is a scene full of "cut-and-splice discontinuities." He finds himself one Lucky Pierre in a line of many pursuing the same path, assaulted by "a rush of speeded-up highlights from old movies" (145). After encounters and pratfalls in a subway station, including a futile pursuit of a damsel in distress (played by Constance), he falls into the film's black leader and fears his existence is coming to the end. But, as Cleo assures some of the other women, this is not the end, for "endings are a conscious thought. Heroes are avatars of the unconscious. They *live* in this urzeit, dreamtime shit. That's what makes them heroes. And the unconscious is too dumb to stay down after a pratfall" (158). The film studio, too, we discover, seems to be closing, and the women wonder what Pierre will do next. Cassie's only response to the other women's concerns is to punch them, staying appropriately mute.

Pierre finds himself lying on the train platform with no idea how he has arrived. He boards the train to find Constance, the damsel in distress. He tries to help her, but someone seems to be operating his body, making him say and do things that make him a villain and sexual predator rather than a hero. As the reel concludes, he finds himself at a party at his own house, finally able to relax a little, now engaged to be married to Constance. The other eight women are all there, including Cassie, who remains mute, communicating now by sashes with palindromes written on them. It is she who leads him outside to show him projected titles on the sky indicating what the next reel will contain.

Reel five belongs to Constance (Connie). She is associated with Erato, the muse of love poetry. She and Pierre are married, he seemingly committed to her. He has retired from professional film-making and now participates in the home-movies that Connie shoots—naive little love movies that they show to their neighbors at private screenings. They have children and a little love nest, are enjoying marital bliss and, perhaps as a result, this reel seems to have more continuity than some of the others.

During the middle of one of these screenings, Peter tells Connie he needs to get back to the office. Instead, he wanders the city, trying to get into porn theaters that all seem to be closed. Eventually he stumbles into an auction. He becomes extremely interested in lot 169, "CUNT VICTORIAN" (204). He ends up bartering away his house to gain her, then takes her out to dinner. He discovers as he woos her in a restaurant that she is not Victorian at all but is rather Calliope in disguise, attempting to draw him back into the movies. He storms out, vowing that "he's through with them. Through with the scripted life" (215). Wandering into a porn movie, he watches, as if experiencing it for the first time, a movie of his wedding to Connie in the High Church of Hard Core, a wedding that degenerates into a kind of riot. As the reel ends he is pregnant, just giving birth through his urethra to a nine-reeled film.

Reel six, Carlotta's reel, is associated with Melpomene, the muse of tragedy. The reel is divided into two long sections—Adventures of Crazy Leg Parts I & II—interrupted by a five page "Intromission" (250) in which Pierre and his wife Constance go to a sex education workshop. The first section begins again with L.P. walking through the snow, this time after his family has been evicted from the cottage he has traded for lot 169. Soon he finds himself on

a subway platform where he discovers a poster of Lottie, the Extar, as part of "[Mayor] Madame Cora's Sex Circus" (236). Suddenly he is surrounding by Extars who demand that he help them get Lottie back, since after all it was his fault that she was taken in the first place. What follows is a trip to the sex circus with his wife and family. Once there, he sneaks away to plot the rescue attempt, but instead gets roped into performing acrobatics with his hands behind his back, hanging midair from Lottie's vagina by his penis. With a flick of her hips she throws him through a hole at the top of the tent and he and she escape into revolutionary life with the Extars.

This comes crashing to an end when he jumps off a collapsing building and is suddenly in city hall, face to face with the mayor, Cora, whose reel is just beginning. Cora is associated with Terpsichore, the muse of dance. She is also a sadomasochist, interested in sex as power, in domination and submission. She whips and blindfolds him, disciplines him in scenes reminiscent of those from the pages of John Willie's *Bizarre* magazine. After many sessions, once he has become submissive she gives him a golden cockring and casts him out into the world to fight against the Extars.

However, once he sees Lottie again, he finds himself desiring to switch sides, fighting with the Extars rather than against them. Yet things do not work out as planned. As he tries to follow them into a subway entrance, he finds the street suddenly tilted and he slides away. When he adjusts the street tilts in the opposite direction, keeping him off balance. Suddenly he feels frozen in place, insubstantial. People walk through him, seeming not to notice him. He is saved by Kate, the animator, who can sense him in a way the others cannot and who realizes that the cockring is a device Cora is using to control him.

Able to move again, substantial again, he finds himself thrown onto a gurney and carried off by a team of nurses as Kate is elbowed aside. The nurses test his hymen-breaking capability, forcing his erect penis to break stronger and stronger artificial membranes. Finally, they inject his organ with steel. Then, as a kind of cyborg knight, he is made to do battle with Cora in an arena, laying siege to her metaphorical castle, trying to break her maidenhead. The reel offers commentary on the relation of the individual to the state as well as providing one of Coover's most ribald reworkings of the material of fairy tales.

In reel 8, Catherine (Kate) takes charge. She is an animator, associated with Thalia, the muse of comedy. Discovering Pierre (or Pete the Beast as she chooses to call him) frozen outside, she breaks off his penis and replaces it with an animated member. The reel mostly consists of a series of comic animated films starring Pete the Beast, shown and made while Pete lives in the animation studio with Kate, learning her art, having sex with the robots she constructs. In one film Pete confronts a dragon. In another he has sex with a "farm missy" and acquires hoof and mouth disease. In the longest film, which bleeds into life and carries him to the last and final reel, he has grown old, is only a shadow of his earlier self. He kisses a robot and turns it into a princess and then ends up pursuing her through comic misadventures, never quite able to capture her.

Kate's artistic vision is such as to equate her art with life. "For Kate, life and animation are synonyms. Stasis is the ordinary condition of the universe. The freeze is. The single frame. . . . Flicker. Animation. Persistence of vision is not merely a cinematic illusion. It is also how reality works. A sequence of dead stills in rapid succession,

the only difference being that reality runs at a lot more than twenty-four frames per second" (331). For Kate, the only difference between art and life is that art is life simplified, with fewer frames per second.

In the final reel, titled the "FINAL FUCK" (360), Lucky Pierre is old, at the end of his career, his memory almost completely gone, his sexual ability halting at best. He is being taken by Calliope, the director of the reel, to a film festival, a Lucky Pierre revival. The reel is associated with the muse Calliope, the only muse in the book whose name is identical to that of the character playing her. She is the muse of epic poetry and writing, the chief of all the muses. She is leading the decrepit Pierre to his final film session, where he will remake the nymph fantasia that he watched and experienced in the first reel: a man washed up onto an island is discovered by nymphs who have never seen a male member before. As the nine women prepare for the scene, making certain that everything is all right, Pierre wraps himself in a tapestry and departs. He wanders the city, trading the tapestry for his old overcoat and a punchcard that will get him into three movies. The first one he watches is a cartoon in which Pete the Beast converses with his penis. The theater is full of children, and as he "needs a deep quiet film he can really sink into" he quickly leaves. The second theater he enters is playing *On the Wings of Wind*, "a film about a flying fuck he remembers well and with fondness" (376). But the memories associated with the old theater itself make him feel "lonelier and more unanchored than ever before in his long career" (376). Once the film begins, he becomes involved with it, slowly losing himself, only to have his experience interrupted by the Extars who tear apart the screen. He hooks up with Lottie again, who takes him to Cleo's coldwater flat and to

Cleo herself, for whom it seems the Extars are now working. Cleo is trying to disrupt Calliope's film, to have the "final fuck" all to herself and on her own terms. But Pierre won't play, leaving instead to attend another film.

The film he sees, one of Cassie's enigmatic works, seems to be untitled and quite abstract, consisting of flitting, washed-out shapes that slowly resolve into shadowy hills. He begins to drift off, only to be awakened by a tremendous crash. The shadowy hills, he can see now, have become crisp, resolving into the bare backside of a woman, the film slowly fading as he looks at it further. He continues to watch, but when he closes his eyes again he hears a sudden roar that makes him jump and cry out. It seems that the movie is punishing him for not watching it: "All right. He has the pattern. Soft fleshy adagios interrupted by heart-stopping percussive bursts if he slips into a haze for a moment. A film that talks back. That won't tolerate inattention" (391). He continues to watch, seeing now scattered bits and pieces of previous films, not all of which he remembers. He finds too that he seems now to have some measure of control. "If he leans forward and presses his attention, he can stretch the sequences out, push them a few frames toward climax" (391–92). But then he realizes that "in effect: his whole life is passing before his eyes" (392), a statement suggesting both that Pierre is approaching death and that Pierre's life has been nothing but his films. Slowly he begins to realize that "*The Final Fuck,* if that's what it is to be called, is neither threat nor promise, but simply . . . an opportunity that can be lost" (394). No longer afraid, he returns to shoot his final film, which as it turns out, begins as the nymph scene but ends with him and Calliope having sex in the director's office, the novel breaking off in mid-sentence just as he comes.

Calliope is the woman he remains most taken by, his favorite, and perhaps it is right to end with the two of them coupled. Despite the many years they have worked together, she still remains a mystery to him. "There is not an inch of her he has not explored, over and over again. Yet for all the photos, films, interviews, his own admittedly unreliable memory, even these larger-than-lifesize posters before his eyes, he could not accurately describe any part of her, except to say she was breathtakingly beautiful" (387). She remains something that cannot be finalized or pinned down and for that reason remains an object of perpetually renewing desire—like Roz in *Gerald's Party* or John's wife in *John's Wife*. Even if Lucky Pierre the porn star might be breathing his last, might have become a myth better to discard, desire will continue on.

Should *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* be classified as a pornographic novel? Certainly it has scenes that are titillating. Certainly a familiarity with different types of pornography is likely to deepen one's reading of the text. Certainly the novel chooses to employ the tropes of pornographic films in a way that makes the sexual most of those tropes, even while exploding them. In addition, the language Coover uses is very textured and palpable, shifting back and forth from high to low discourse. On the one hand, there are lines like, "And still the hushing plaint, undeterred by light, plying its fricatives like a persistent woeful wind, the echo of woe, affanato, piangevole" (1). On the other hand, lines like "That's right, Maggie, lift your arse and whush, crump, crump, tickle my balls!" (5). The latter example is more recognizably ribald, but the first example has a real concern with sound and style, with the way words work in the mouth. Both can be considered erotic. In any

case, however sensuous the language, the overall effect of the book is not one of titillation; indeed, the titillation offered is given on the way to more cerebral concerns. The novel might perhaps be described as a non-pornographic novel with pornographic elements. But these pornographic elements are nonetheless essential to the novel. Read in this fashion, one both apprehends the erotic surface of the text and sees the deeper implications of Coover's thinking.

In many ways *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* is an odd book. Initially generated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of the novel feels more connected to that time and to the challenging of sexual mores that occurred then than it feels connected to contemporary life. It would fit very well, for instance, within the pages of Barney Rosset's *The Evergreen Review*, a cutting-edge magazine very popular during the period. Yet, at the same time, had Coover finished *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* thirty years ago, it wouldn't have been nearly the book it is now; for there is a darkness to the book, a clear-eyed sense of death and aging, a notion of stripping away, that is not to be found in Coover's earlier work. Indeed, the only thing analogous to it in Coover's oeuvre is his relatively late novel *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991). Written by a younger man in the 1970s, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* would have likely had all the same pornographic elements without the depth of mood. Indeed, one of the main strengths of the book is the way in which it charts, simultaneous to changing trends in pornography, the decay of a life, the combination of collapse and reawakening that age involves. Like many of Coover's early characters, Pierre often seems helpless, thrown about by destiny, but here the reader sees destiny in the form of the directors, and one shares the sympathy these women

have for Pierre. They are hard mistresses, often cruel, but there is a depth of connection to and feeling for Pierre that generates a profound and unsentimental sympathy.

Thus, we end with a book begun near to one side of Coover's career and concluded near to the other. Coover, established as he is, remains as outrageous as ever, continuing to challenge readers rather than resting on his laurels. He often writes against the current literary grain, pursuing his own unique and maverick vision sometimes at the expense of popular acclaim. His concern with communities and the way in which they hold together, his interest in storytelling and mythmaking, his critique of popular forms as a way of awakening people to the unexamined nature of their ideas, his concern with the dynamics and structures of fiction, all these things come together in unexpected ways to generate a serious work that is never far from the comedic. For it is through uneasy laughter that Coover gets at what is most important in life: questions of being and knowing, of what it means to be human and of how, through stories, we apprehend the world. Robert Coover remains one of the most original and unique writers of his generation.

NOTES

Chapter 1—Understanding Robert Coover

1. Robert Coover, "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," *Critique* 42, no. 1 (fall 2000): 85.

2. William H. Gass, introduction to *The Public Burning*, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), xvii.

3. Coover, "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," 113.

4. Jackson I. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 136.

5. Quoted on dust jacket for hardback first edition of Robert Coover, *Pinocchio in Venice* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1991).

6. Coover, "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," 91.

7. Frank Gado, "Robert Coover," in *Conversations on Writers and Writing.* Edited by Frank Gado (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1973), 142–43.

8. Gado, "Robert Coover," 150.

9. Ibid., 152.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Geoffrey Wolff, "An American Epic," *New Times* 9 (August 1977): 54.

13. Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 7.

14. Coover, "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," 112.

15. Gado, "Robert Coover," 148.

Chapter 2—Early Works

1. Thomas Lask, review of *The Origin of the Brunists, New York Times,* 5 Oct. 1966, 49.

2. Emile Capoya, "Real Life in an Unreal World," *Saturday Review* 41 (15 Oct. 1966): 38.

3. William Mathes, review of *The Origin of the Brunists, Book Week,* 9 Oct. 1966, 14.

4. Lois Gordon, *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 19.

5. Gado, "Robert Coover," 148.

6. Ibid.

7. Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists* (New York: Putnam, 1966), 141.

8. Gado, "Robert Coover," 148.

9. McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse,* 43.

10. Ibid., 51.

11. Gado, "Robert Coover," 151.

12. Ibid., 150–51

13. Rikki Ducornet, "The Death Cunt of Deep Dell." in *The Monstrous and the Marvelous* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), 82.

14. William H. Gass, "Pricksongs & Descants," in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 105.

15. Ibid., 106.

16. Ibid., 107.

17. Coover's quotation is in the original Spanish. The English translation is from Miguel de Cervantes, *The Portable Cervantes.* Translated by Samuel Putnam (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 707.

18. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 62–76.

19. Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," *The Friday Book*, 193–206.

20. Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 83. I owe a debt to Maltby's reading of this story.

21. Gordon, *Robert Coover*, 106.

22. Ibid., 115.

23. Ibid.

24. Gass, "Pricksongs," 106.

25. Gordon, *Robert Coover*, 121.

26. McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse*, 60.

Chapter 3—*The Public Burning*

1. Gass, introduction to *The Public Burning*, xvii.

2. Gado, "Robert Coover," 154.

3. Wolff, "An American Epic," 54.

4. McCaffery, "As Guilty as the Rest of Them: An Interview with Robert Coover," *Critique* 42, no. 1 (fall 2000): 117.

5. Coover, *The Public Burning* log 1966–77, 85.

6. Wolff, "An American Epic," 54.

7. For a fuller history, see Gass's fascinating discussion of the publishing history of the novel in his introduction to its 1998 reissue, particularly pages xvi and xvii. Also of interest is Coover's own "*The Public Burning* log 1966–77," a personal account of the immense difficulties the book faced before and after publication.

8. Wolff, "An American Epic," 57.

9. Elisabeth Ly Bell, "The Notorious Hot Potato," *Critique* 42, no. 1 (fall 2000), 7.

10. Bell, "The Notorious Hot Potato," 8.

11. Ibid.

12. Wolff, "An American Epic," 56.

13. McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse,* 85.

14. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery, "*The Public Burning,* Coover's Fiery Masterpiece on Center Stage Again," *Critique* 42, no. 1 (fall 2000): 4.

15. Walter and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest: Reopening the Rosenberg Case* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 241.

16. Gado, "Robert Coover," 155.

17. Ibid.

18. Gass, introduction to *The Public Burning,* xii.

19. Wolff, "An American Epic," 54

20. McCaffery, "As Guilty as the Rest of Them," 119.

21. Coover may be responding ironically here to Philip Roth's parody of Nixon as Trick E. Dixon in *Our Gang* (1971), particularly to Tricky's shock over being told the sexual habits of homosexuals (37–41).

Chapter 4—Later Works

1. Coover, *The Public Burning* log 1966–77, 86.

2. Thomas Kennedy, *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 10–11.

3. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions,* 55.

4. John O'Brien, "Inventions and Conventions in the New Wave Novel," *Washington Post Book World,* 15 Aug 1982, 10.

5. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions,* 57.

6. Ibid., 54.

7. Comment on the back of the paperback copy of Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid* (New York: Grove Press, 1982).

8. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions,* 136.

9. Kennedy, *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction,* 81.

10. Ibid., 82.

11. As this book was going to press, Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* was issued. The second chapter of that novel, which describes a silent film, draws blatantly from Coover's filmic stories, particularly "Charlie in the House of Rue," though the novel as a whole moves in a much more conventional direction. Indeed, Auster has arguably made a career out of taking innovative techniques and simplifying them for popular audiences.

12. In a sense "Milford Junction" offers an inverted image of Bruno Schulz's street of crocodiles, in which a magical life takes place at night only to seem cardboard and tawdry during the day.

13. Review of *Briar Rose. Kirkus Review* 64 (15 Dec. 1996): 1751.

14. Michael Gorra, "The Awakening," *The New York Times,* 16 Feb. 1997, 7.

15. Charlotte Innes, Review of *Briar Rose, The Los Angeles Times Book Review,* 13 April 1997, 6.

16. For instance, an untitled box owned by the Guggenheim Museum has come to be known as "Grand Hôtel de l'Observatoire" (Grand Hotel of the Observatory) because these words appear pasted on the inside of the box. Indeed, many other boxes contain within their collages the names of hotels cut from pieces of stationery.

17. Some of these names are variations or familiar shorthand; for instance, "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade" is connected to the Cornell box "Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)"; an example of a name taken from a series of Cornell's works is Grand Hotel Sand Fountain, which seems connected to at least four different untitled Cornell boxes constructed between 1954 and 1959, each of which has come to be known as "Sand Fountain."

18. There may also be allusions made in this story to Cornell's "Penny Arcade Machine," which contains a human figure colored blue as its primary image.

19. The Cornell piece this story takes its title from is a white box fronted by a white panel that has five rows of six circular openings. Each of these contain a picture of a bird. A blue rubber ball can be inserted in the top so as to pass down a track and through the box, ringing a bell at the end of each row as well as a larger bell at the bottom. In this case, Coover seems to have taken the notion of the game but done very little with the box itself, though certainly his piece is still very much in the spirit of Cornell. Indeed, this particular box seems more connected, considering its proliferation of birds, to "The Grand Hotel Bald Cockatoo."

20. Coover's piece probably also refers to "The Crystal Cage: Portrait of Berenice" a collage work published in *View* magazine in 1943.

21. Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell* (New York: George Brazilier, 1977), 29.

22. Robert L. McLaughlin, review of Robert Coover, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (summer 2002), 233–34.

23. Coover, *The Public Burning* log 1966–77, 87.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Also worthy of mention is a statement from Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto," in which, speaking of his artistic process, O'Hara suggests "It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it." Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," In *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage, 1974), 2.

27. The general information on the Muses throughout the chapter is taken primarily from two sources: Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Elizabeth Burr, trans., *The Chiron Dictionary of Greek & Roman Mythology* (Wilmette, Ill.: Chiron Publications, 1993).

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