

# *The Public Burning: “Play[ing] games with the evidence, manipul[at] language itself, mak[ing] History a partisan ally?”*

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***Abstract:** What is the relationship of testimonial and artistic frameworks and representations? How are they shaping history and our understanding of reality in general? This paper tries to elucidate some of the ways in which Robert Coover underpins the multivalent interactions of the testifiers and the recipients of a specific historical case study, probing the metaphorical significance of historical allusions and narrative patterning. In his novel *The Public Burning*, Coover balances fact and fancy, experimenting with forms, mixing absurd and grotesque with the real, fabricating evidence, incorporating historical figures, public testimony, newspaper quotes, dates and other real data with falsifications. The time frame of the novel is the Cold War period, casting a bitter panorama of the U.S.A. during the early 1950s. Coover's detailing of the Eisenhower years, specifically the two days that preceded the Rosenberg execution, and his mixing of fictionalized material with 'hard facts', label this foray into epistemological questions a perfect blend of fact and fiction within a 'historical novel.'*

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We have 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, insisting upon itself, absorbing our attention, compelling revelation. (Coover 283)

The difference between the historian and the poet is not that between using verse or prose; Herodotus' work could be versified and would be just as much a kind of history in verse as in prose. No, the difference is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. (Aristotle 59)

The last forty years have seen an increase in the use of history as the subject matter of narrative, with a significant change, opposed to the previous periods, addressing a dispute over the authenticity of the historical time. This phenomenon has brought about a revival of historical fiction, terminology varying from neo-historical to historiographic metafiction, and the pseudo-historical novel. The desire for authenticity and narratives of the past, for re-creations and re-constructions, seems boundless at every level of our culture. As literature intervenes in history with its own authentic force, it transforms vital and historical forces and experiences into artistic tension, testing grounds and negotiating vital ideological changes.

Furthermore, the new historical narrative proliferated with a revival of retro fashions and restorations, while memory practices often centered on the medium of photography and the increase of historical documentaries on television. A mass-marketing of nostalgia surfaced with its memoir writing, confessional literature, the rise of autobiography, and the postmodern historical narrative, revealing its uneasy negotiation between fact and fiction. On the traumatic side of memory culture, triggered by the debate in the eighties about the Holocaust, the vast psychoanalytic literature on trauma, related to genocide, slavery, sexual abuse, and other types of violence appeared. It accelerated with political anniversaries and commemorations of World War II and was stirred up by the recurrence of genocidal politics in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo in the nineties.

These circumstances have brought about a revival of historical fiction, marking history as text: a personal reconstruction. A variety of postmodern authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, and Robert Coover acknowledge in their novels that "history is a field of competing rhetorical and narrative strategies, a plural discourse which can always produce a number of alternative accounts" (Norris 101).

Within its texts literature intermediates with history, revealing in itself the world's constructed nature, and generating multiple significations. Succumbing to oppressive and traumatic experiences proliferating in their plots, the formal and linguistic structures crumble under pressure of these overpowering historical forces and present dissolution and fragmentation of reality/temporality.

Acknowledging postmodern theoretical framework and criticism that nonverbal experience can only be described and not reproduced, and that history gets highly distorted through language (which is why historical testaments must be regarded with certain skepticism), this paper focuses on Robert Coover's fictive treatment of the Cold War period in his novel *The Public Burning*.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it concentrates on manifestations of history, its factuality, multivalence, ideologies, fictiveness, and 'posthistory,' dealing with the 'witch-hunt' atmosphere of the '50s in America—the early Eisenhower era—and demonstrating how historical perspective is just a narrative, often based on political or social bias, a presentation of ideals, heroes, and villains, but also providing moral and exemplified behavior for future generations. Observing this relationship of the real and the fictive within the novel reveals an entropic condition of postmodern history, a mixture of fact and fancy where Coover experiments with forms, mixing absurd and grotesque with the real, fabricating evidence, incorporating historical figures, public testimony, newspaper quotes, dates and other real data.

This confrontation of historical facts and their falsifications is grounded in the history of historiography as well, for the relationship between truth and fabrication, between fact and fancy, between public and individual testimony, has never been unproblematic. From a contemporary point of view, ancient literature had 'looser' distinctive lines between fiction and history, demonstrating interactive relations, than the modernization period emerging in the eighteenth century. As Hayden White indicates: "[P]rior to the French Revolution, historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its 'fictive' nature generally recognized" (White 1976: 23). Although the ancient world, as is visible from Aristotle's quotation, drew lines between history and fiction, there were traits of an unwillingness to clearly distinguish between a rigidly factual historical discourse that strives for quasi-

1 Since Robert Coover's novel *The Public Burning* is quoted throughout this text, citation references will be abbreviated and marked hereafter as *PB*.

mathematical precision on the one hand, and all sorts of fictional discourse on the other. The reason why Aristotle preferred the fictional over the factual is probably because the former is free from any restraints and deals with the real as well as with the imagined, while the latter is confined to the narrow constraints of reality and is limited by time and space. His scholarship informs postmodern views of history in the post-Enlightenment West, revealing its uneasy negotiation between fact and fiction.

But, the postmodern historical novels in which we find an innovative recuperation of the historical model cannot simply be defined as historical, for they are “multi-genred,” hosting many literary models within a single text. The mixing of genres, as well as of fact and fiction, results in the weakening of typical connotations associated with each adopted historical model, and as a consequence produces a disorienting effect which makes narrative structure appear open and hardly cohesive when compared to traditional historical novels. Although “by speculating on what might have been, we learn what was, and is” (Kitchin 25), as is hinted in Coover’s novel.

Whatever the specific content of the many contemporary debates about history and memory may be, underlying them is a fundamental disturbance not just of the relationship between history as objective and scientific, and memory as subjective and personal, but of history itself and its groundings in narrative. There were traces of criticism of historiography as a tool of domination and ideology already in the late nineteenth century, presented by the social historian Walter Mehring in Germany, and later by Walter Benjamin in his radical, political critique of all historicism. After that followed the post-Nietzschean attacks on linearity and causality, the postcolonial critique of Western history as a fundamentally imperialist and racist Western canon, and dissatisfaction with the myths of origin as articulated in the work of Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida (Huysen 5).

Ever since the 1960s, many theorists, divergences aside, have claimed that historical evidence is constructed and structured narratively. Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Paul Ricoeur, Louis O. Mink, and others, have defined history as a construct with the narrative representation of history no longer a secondary operation performed on given, pre-existing material—evidence, but rather a way of getting access to the collective past, an indispensable vehicle for understanding and making sense of history. The historical enterprise is viewed as “grasping together [...] things which are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced” (Mink 113): “a work of construction rather than of discovery” (White 1986: 487).

These theoretical views have produced a shift in the understanding of both history and fiction, overcoming the boundaries previously imposed and approximating the historical and the fictive. Narrative, the primary agency of fiction-making has now also gained fundamental importance in historical enterprise as “their common basic mode of operation” (Kunow 377).

Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* qualifies as a historical narrative for it narrates recognizable sections of the past, documenting the trajectory of history in the Cold War America; but this history (with a lower-case h) is represented not as a process of unilinear evolution—a concatenation of causes and effects culminating in the present. Rather, Coover’s microhistories include forgotten events whose latent presence is acknowledged as part of a constantly changing present. The author purposely recovered forgotten ‘fragments,’ placing them in juxtapositions and recuperating and valorizing in the present those un-textualized traces of past reality that survive in conscious and unconscious memory and in orally transmitted knowledge.

Patricia Waugh argues that in both non-fiction and metafictional novels, history is seen as a provisional construct:

Historical writing matches a determinate individual object with a direct representation of a determinate individual object ... Fictional writing matches an imaginatively constructed fictional object with a general class of possibly real objects. (Waugh 105)

She concludes that this is why fiction is always to be completed by a reader, and fictional characters, as part of an imaginary world, are ontologically indeterminate and always awaiting completion. However, metafictional texts which introduce historical figures (as Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*) and events (as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*) expose not only the mockery of verisimilar writing but also that of historical writing itself. Although the protagonists and events may ‘match’ those in the real world, they are always re-contextualized in the act of writing history. Their meanings, acts, identities, and nature always change with the variety of contexts they are put in. So history, although ultimately a past, once a material but now inaccessible ‘reality’ (a presence), is shown to exist always within ‘textual’ boundaries, to the extent that it is “also ‘fictional,’ also a set of ‘alternative worlds’” (Waugh 106).

This paradox is explored in Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, which draws, on the one hand, from the eye-witness accounts and factual historical sources about the events leading up to the Rosenberg execution and, on

the other hand, from the unreal fantasy figures of American myth and popular culture. As one grows increasingly absorbed in the book, it becomes clear that some moments are historical and some are fantastic, but it is not clear where the line between the two is, as the reader is taken with the range of Coover's details. As Linda Hutcheon notes:

historiographic metafiction ... both install[s] and then blur[s] the line between fiction and history. This kind of generic blurring has been a feature of literature since the classical epic and the Bible ... but the simulations and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries are more postmodern. (Hutcheon 2002: 113)

Indeed, postmodern texts demonstrate interconnections of fictional and historical or 'real' space-times, blurring their borderlines, and collapsing into one another, which is visible in *The Public Burning*. There are many events in the novel that could be real or could be fantastic or some subtle combination of both, such as Ethel's wish to become a singer or Eisenhower's valet assisting him each morning with his underpants. Aside from these 'trivial' accounts, there are more serious questions at stake, for example, did Eisenhower fail to understand the case, or did the Rosenbergs receive a fair trial, and if they did, was it a fair sentence? These events are extensively probed in the novel and "Coover provides voluminous information on both sides of the question" (Gordon 55). But the historical standard or history with a capital H is presented as a mechanism of totalitarian tendencies, written to increase the power of those already in power, while at the same time presenting past events that multiply by offering various and even opposite vistas of the same advent.

Although nowadays *The Public Burning* is one of Coover's most respected works, the author faced many obstacles when he finished the book in 1975 and tried to publish it. Containing 'controversial' material about living historical personalities—Nixon, the Rosenbergs, Eisenhower and others—the novel represented a threat for the publishers because of the possibility of a lawsuit from the descendants of these historical figures. When Richard Seaver finally accepted the challenge in 1977 and the novel came out in Viking Press, it evoked a great deal of controversy. Many reviewers were appalled by this mixture of fact and fantasy, confusing aesthetics with politics. Some used very harsh judgment, for example, Norman Podhoretz who called the novel a "cowardly lie" (Podhoretz 27), while Pearl Bell spoke of "misuse" of historical evidence and "subversion of reality" (Bell in Gordon

55). As Nutter and Johnston put it: "It is particularly the lack of distinction between political history and fantasy that has made some readers uneasy" (Nutter and Johnston 549). The book was out of print for twenty years until Grove Press reissued it in 1998.

The novel was supposed to be published under the name *The Public Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: An Historical Romance*, but Viking insisted on keeping it short. Its longer title suggests up front that the book is a combination of history and romance, as Brian Evenson acknowledges "with 'romance' being the primary term (the noun) and 'history' the secondary term (a modifier of the noun)" (Evenson 111). "Romance" involves fantastic elements, reminiscent of both Greek narratives, where heroes experience numerous adventures but never mature, and medieval narrative in prose or verse that tells of the adventures and heroic exploits of chivalric heroes, such as an *Arthurian romance*. *The original title underlines the idea that the story will have some historic traits but that the fantastic will predominate, although not diminishing the authenticity of the "historical climate" that Coover witnessed in the early fifties.*

One of the most striking features of the novel is its detailed framework, casting a bitter panorama of America during the early 1950s. Its blend of fact and fiction detailing the early Eisenhower years, specifically the two days that preceded the Rosenberg execution (notorious because the Rosenbergs were the only Americans executed for espionage), mark *The Public Burning* as Coover's most daring book, a mixture of epic and fantasy. Coover stretches the limits of the historical novel to include a number of literary forms and techniques: melodrama, farce, comedy and tragedy (Moraru 65) that are incorporated with pop-culture and Nixon's short but meticulous three-day 'saga.'

The novel lists and characterizes virtually everyone closely or slightly connected with the Rosenbergs: prosecutor Irving Saypol, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Judge Irving Kaufman, defense lawyer Emanuel Bloch, the president's assistant Sherman Adams, the White House press secretary Jim Hagerty, jailkeepers, coroners, people as 'distinguished' as the Supreme Court justices, and as 'important' as the Sing Sing executioner, Joseph P. Francel. Coover "quotes dozens of people and devotes a single chapter to the June 19, 1953, *New York Times*, with information whose 'relevance' (if not 'import') varies from the most weighty to the most trivial" (Gordon 54). The readers learn about major battles in Korea, "PANAMA AND FRANK," "TURKS URGE GREEKS" (PB 188), "ROSENBERGS

MAY FIGHT ... SENTENCE IS UPSET" (PB 190). Many other historical, political or just simply interesting, but also quotidian events receive attention: "Universal-International wants Ruth Roman to share the adventure-some life with James Stewart in 'The Far Country.' Timothy J. Doody has entered bankruptcy proceedings. The President had breakfast with Bridges, Dirksen, Magnuson, and Dodge ... Sarah Dougherty sells the 4-story 1-family dwelling at 825 Carroll Street to Mrs. Rudolphine Dick" (PB 195); "Eleanor Hortense Almond dies at 103" (PB 196).

A hotly debated event in post-war American history, the Rosenberg case is made even more 'spicy' with fictionalized material being mixed with 'hard facts,' as Coover blends at times serious, sarcastic, bitter, or whimsical segments with historical data. For example, the narrator enumerates reports from the stock exchange, prices of cantaloupes: "Television set production is up 70 percent ... doing even better than pornography and missiles ... Net sales of General Foods is up from \$196 million in 1942 to \$701 million today" (PB 215). Ethel cost the state \$38.60 a day, but Julius cost more because of his dental treatment (although in the spirit of American common sense, he was provided with temporary dentures).

Some facts about the Cold War frenzy should be recalled in order to follow the story. It appears that the threat of communism in the U.S. was augmented when in 1949 Russia exploded its first atomic bomb, and Americans were positive the Russians had stolen the secret. This meant there were communist spies among Americans. Senator McCarthy kept long black lists of people suspected to collaborate with the Russians, many of them in governmental positions. Among the arrested was David Greenglass, a former Army machinist, who happened to be stationed at Los Alamos where the atomic bomb was developed (Evenson 112). Soon, his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg and his wife Ethel were accused of treason. The trials began on March 6, 1951, and in two weeks the couple was sentenced to death. After numerous appeals the Supreme Court denied the final appeal. However, Justice William O. Douglas (to whom Coover dedicated *The Public Burning*) wanted to postpone the executions because he was approached by two lawyers who argued that the Rosenbergs had had a mistrial. But because of the rising public sentiment within the U.S., as Justice Douglas states in his conversation with professor Walter F. Murphy on June, 9, 1962: "the country was aroused" (Transcriptions of Conversations between Justice William O. Douglas and Professor Walter F. Murphy), and his stay of execution was overturned. The Rosenbergs were executed at eight o'clock on June 19, 1953.



In the novel, Justice Douglas, refusing to be a part of the public frenzy, is one of the characters who rebel against this politically contrived plot and the government conspiracy in the persecution of the Rosenbergs. He tells Uncle Sam that the trial violated the law: "don't you think it's about time you got down off this Sons of Light and Darkness kick? I've about had it with all this" (*PB* 77). Unassimilated to the reigning ideology, his voice is powerless to change the outcome.

Another character who points at the randomness and relativity of what people perceive as the truth about the Rosenberg case is a cabdriver, trying to explain to Nixon: "life's too big, you can't wrap it up like that!" (*PB* 273). He tells Nixon a story about "the atom spy" (*PB* 271) who went to school with him, which fantastically assimilates Ethel Rosenberg's life story, but it turns out to be about Julie Rosenblatt. This short tale demonstrates how facts do not speak for themselves. There is always a human voice—in this case cabbie's—but in the 'big picture' the press and governmental agencies speak for the facts, or better to say, they unify fragments of the past into a story-like representation. To express his views more plastically, the cabbie (who Nixon thinks is the Phantom) chases "a pair of copulating dogs in the street" (*PB* 267), portraying in a brutal manner the persecutions of the Rosenbergs, until "clipping the top one in the butt and sending them both skidding, still locked up, spraddle-legged and yipping wildly, right into the doorway of the National Theater" (*PB* 268). Trying to get to Nixon he adds: "can't we get past all these worn-out rituals ... 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—?" (*PB* 273). But the Vice President does not at this point understand "that the evening's ritual murder will fail to reconstruct a realistic, causal, safe version of time and events" (Strehle 81).

The novel offers different approaches and modes of discourse, ranging from relatively factual events to the fantastic. It teems with dramatic moments, speeches, dialogs, opera, comedy, and newspaper headlines that mysteriously change. It is mostly told by the anonymous third-person voice in the present tense, or narrated in the first person past tense by Richard Nixon. The third person narrative is presented in a factual manner, displaying information about the Rosenbergs and the trial, proliferating in detail and supporting the historical background of the 1950s, the era of continuous conflict between the forces of communism, embodied in the Phantom, and their opponents, the free democratic society, with Uncle Sam as its

driving force. The first person sections are amusing, featuring Nixon and his pratfalls, but like every clown, he keeps springing to his feet: "he ... constantly tries to adjust [...] after all, he has been rehearsing for the 'Sam Slick Show' all his life" (Pughe 64).

Adding to an extensive research of the Eisenhower era, the author relives memories and reconstructs his own experiences (for Coover was a young man in the early fifties), which makes him an eye-witness, 'well-equipped' to deal with problematic issues from the past. For Coover,

the execution of the Rosenbergs had been a watershed event in American history which we had somehow managed to forget or repress ... but it was important that we remember it, that we not be so callous as to just shrug it off, or else it can happen again and again. (Coover in McCaffrey 1981: 62)

Memory is augmented by the imagination that, in turn, leads to the creation of new narrative and the re-assembly of fragmented identities. In this sense, fiction conforms to the essential functions of revelation and transformation as described by Paul Ricoeur because it brings features to light that were concealed but at the heart of our experience, as he states that

fiction would borrow as much from history as history borrows from fiction. It is this reciprocal borrowing that authorizes my posing the problem of the *interweaving* reference between history and narrative fiction. (Ricoeur 82)

In this view, *The Public Burning* is just another metafiction regarding the Rosenberg event. Using a 'real' event from the American collective past, Coover starts the novel by invoking history:

On June 24, 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, the 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. (*PB* 3)

Although beginning in a realistic mode, Coover shifts into the fantastic; starting the novel with a set of given rules and then subtly breaking them as the fiction progresses. As Evenson states: "By doing so he moves from a fiction whose rules seem dictated from without, by life, to a fiction which establishes its own rules" (Evenson 109).

But the narrative is presented in a rather realistic form with characters

following the temporal line of Judeo-Christian, linear history (unlike most of the protagonists of postmodern fiction). As Strehle notes: “[C]haracters commit themselves to the public version of History as a realistic text or coherent story plotted along one continuous, end-ordered, causal line” (Strehle 73). For example, Judge Kaufman, “the Boy Judge” (*PB* 26) thinks that the Rosenbergs caused the Korean War, and even the protests over their execution are “not a mere accident ... *I think it has been by design!*” (*PB* 280). The causation and its divine nature are presented in assimilating diversity into unity and constructing America’s role in history:

Throughout the solemn unfolding of the American miracle, men have noticed this remarkable phenomenon: what at the moment seems to be nothing more than the random rise and fall of men and ideas ... is later discovered to be—in the light of America’s gradual unveiling as the New Athens, New Rome, and New Jerusalem all in one—a necessary and inevitable sequence of interlocking events, a divine code. (*PB* 8-9)

History and politics are viewed as a part of Newtonian universe: predictable and spatial, following a sequential trajectory. This type of a system demands causal order and symmetry which has been disturbed by the Rosenbergs, so the public thinks. Therefore, order must be redeemed: “thieves of light to be burned by light” (*PB* 3). The bipolarity of good and evil, democracy and communism is visible through Nixon’s musing: “If you walked forward through all this data, like the journalists, like the FBI invited everybody to do, the story was cohesive and seemed as simple and true as an epigram” (*PB* 131). Nixon connects the FBI with the press, for both fabricate reality, which recalls White who acknowledges the problem: “... when we wish to give to *real* events the *form* of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult” (White 1981: 4). Analyzing reality, history, and their narration is what makes it clearer or more meaningful, which is why public agencies persist in these tasks. Unfortunately they also moralize it and inflict biased opinions, which turns these realities/histories into creations and not truths.

There are two structures of History in the novel complementing one another. The first is linear and demonstrates the beginning-middle-end form, and the second one is circular. As Strehle explains: “Between the beginning which contains the ending, and the end that points to its origin, all experience revolves in the mythic, ritual cycle of heroism, sacrifice, catharsis, and renewal” (Strehle 75). Both imposed structures assimilate accidents into a causal order. The public, as well as FBI detectives and journalists, present

their readers with linear, cohesive, and historically composed versions of the evidence.

The chapter entitled "President Eisenhower's News Conference" portrays the nation's heroic role in the battle against the Phantom instead of giving 'real' news, like the title would suggest. Actually, the president and his staff do not announce any new facts or events, and purposely suppress the fresh news that arrives during the conference: Justice Douglas has issued a stay of execution. Turning a blind eye, Eisenhower is ready to "confirm the details and remind the nation: 'I think I am as implacable a foe of the Communistic theory as there is in the world!'" (PB 29).

The trial and executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for the alleged espionage for the Soviet Union in 1953 and the debate which accompanied these events, insinuating the FBI's frame-up, made this case famous over the years and susceptible to narrativization. Including the Korean War background and political intrigues in Washington, reviving the atmosphere of the early 1950s, containing repeated references to films such as *House of Wax* and *High Noon* (which provide cultural analogues to the drama that is unfolding during the trial), and peaking with the Rosenberg executions, the novel stands as a landmark of "the public consciousness on June 19, 1953" (McCaffrey 1982: 85). The events that unfold in the book are not real, but the author has succeeded in creating the atmosphere that depicts very realistically how Americans felt at the time, furnishing, in Coover's words, "an effective mosaic" (PB 320) of the age, the feel of a decade. The ways in which the interaction of history and fiction is portrayed are certainly different than those of the traditional historical novel. The regularities of time, place, setting, and historical accuracy are slipping.

Although a clownish figure, Nixon is not presented as the Watergate scandal would imply—in a harsh light. On the contrary, he appears human to the end: "The Nixon of Coover's novel is a Nixon early in his career: ambitious, unsure of himself, self-deluded, hypocritical, paranoid, sympathetic, confused, human" (Evenson 117).

Coover has chosen Nixon to be the main protagonist in *The Public Burning* because the Vice President was a prominent member of the Eisenhower administration and a fervent anti-communist. But the author also

wanted someone who lived inside the mythology, accepting it, and close to the center, yet not quite in the center ... this man who has played such a large role in American society since World War II, would have to reveal something about us all. (Coover in McCaffrey 1981: 58-59)

Although depicted as the middle ground of two political extremes, a link between Eisenhower and the Rosenbergs, which makes his role even more controversial, Nixon views history from the winner's and not the victim's perspective, which is made clear in the rape scene, where according to Pughe: "Uncle Sam finally 'incarnates' himself in Richard Nixon, by raping him" (Pughe 59). These 'incarnations' have happened to other presidents too, as Nixon ponders: "I recalled Hoover's glazed stare, Roosevelt's anguished tics, Ike's silly smile: I should have guessed" (*PB* 533). Uncle Sam approaches each of his candidates with "I *want* YOU!" after which he deals with them both physically and psychologically, and they are soon elected presidents.

As to Nixon's 'middle ground' position, Coover connects it somehow to the origin, more precisely to space. Whereas Eisenhower was from "a simple old-fashioned village of prairie peasants" and thought of rural as "natural, everything urban unnatural"; the Rosenbergs were city folk, cherishing the idea "that only the cities were civilized, the rest of the country untamed and barbarous" (*PB* 373). Nixon positioned himself in between, arguing that "the old frontier was gone" and there were only suburbs:

Dwight Eisenhower and Julius Rosenberg would never understand each other, but I could understand—and contain—both. Was this to be my role? To urbanize the countryside and bring the wilderness back to the cities? To lead the New Revolution? To bring the suburb to all America? (*PB* 373)

Although he does not always understand the 'plots' and 'conspiracies' going on around him, Nixon presents a view of history as artificial, made with and of language "to transcend the confusions, restore the spirit, recreate the society" (*PB* 234). Rearranging facts and random elements into a self-made sequence, each historian creates a history or "the mosaic of history" (*PB* 226):

What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally? Of course, the Phantom was already onto this, wasn't he? Ahead of us again. What were his dialectical machinations if not the dissolution of the natural limits of language, the conscious invention of a space, a spooky artificial no-man's land, between logical alternatives? (*PB* 136)

This time he is aware of the Phantom's ability to turn historical elements into fictions useful to his cause, but misses the point that Uncle Sam is manipulating "facts" and creating his own history as well.

Uncle Sam, counting on America's rage and fear of losing world power in the aftermath of World War II, produces a black-and-white perspective where communism is trying to destroy democracy in the free world, for which it must be rooted out from the American soil (symbolically presented through the execution of the Rosenbergs). The whole public domain seems 'conspired' into this good versus evil plot, "The War Between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness" (PB 149), with journalists leading the way because of the power given to the media: *Time* and *New York Times*. Shuffling testimony, quotes and quasi-quotes from historical figures and contriving patterns from random but 'suitable' data, the newspapers "reconstruct with words and iconography each fleeting day in the hope of discovering some pattern, some coherence, some meaningful dialogue with time" (PB 191). Thus, media is not a mere narrator of history, rather it seems to produce it, and people are eagerly waiting for the new number to come out: "*The New York Times* ... to commune with the latest transactions of the Spirit of History as made manifest in all the words and deeds of living and dying men fit to print" (PB 188), "a political force-field maker" (PB 191).

Producing falsely coherent representations, the press plays one of the most important roles in the novel (taken as an eye-witness), serving the fictional readers with linear, historically composed versions of the evidence and leading them to the grand finale: the 'deserved' executions of the spies. Taking on almost mythical attire, *Time* is described as "also a prophet of religious truth, the recreator of deep tribal realities, committed 'desperately, whimsically, absurdly, cockeyedly, whole-souledly' to Revelation" (PB 328). This quote and the previous portrayal of *The New York Times* as "the Spirit of History," underline the Newtonian principle by invoking absolutes and unifying discontinuities. Both journals shape History (with a capital H), collecting bits and pieces of fragmentary reality: "bringing a kind of fragile episodic continuity to the daily debris of human enterprise" (PB 188) and unifying events into a causally complete story that serves as "a talisman against the terrible flux: [for] men fear only surprises" (PB 188). Indeed, "[r]aw 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" (PB 320). Therefore, random accidents are quickly recovered into a meaningful wholeness, so

that there are no surprises, and the composed historical patterns are safe and intact. On top of all that, *Time* “would find simply illiterate anyone who concluded from this that he was not serving Truth” (PB 320). And the truth is that both journals, in spite of their names, negate and spatialize time, “*The New York Times* transforms this time-process into something hard and—momentarily anyway—durable” (PB 195). Fabricating events, the news industry supervises ‘reality’ and shapes not just the nation’s past, but its future, which to some extent is a testimony of American exceptionalism.

Uncle Sam is aware of these political plays of history, offering a very cynical view in his typical Yankee lingo:

“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! Like history itself—all more or less bunk ... the fatal slantindicular futility of Fact! Appearances, my boy, appearances! Practical politics consists in ignorin’ facts! *Opinion* ultimately governs the world!” ...

“And so a trial in the midst of all this flux and a slippery past is just one set of bolloxeratin’ sophistries agin another—or call ‘em mettyfours if you like, approximations, all the same desputt humbugery—” (PB 86)

The President views history as parallel to the narrative of his favorite movie, *High Noon* (PB 5): “The lives of the A-bomb rustlers are now in the hands of that gangly wire-tough old general, Ike (Swede) Eisenhower, who has seen a lot of border action in his day” (PB 237). To reject the Rosenbergs’ appeal for clemency is only natural. Following the plot from *High Noon* “the stereotyped outlaw needs to be vanquished if order is to reign” (Pughe 61), and

The President, unlike Gary Cooper, is not alone—no, the nation is ready for this, the whole damn town will be marching down Main Street tonight behind Uncle Sam and Ike and Dick and Edgar and Joe and Irving and all the rest, no one’s forsaking anybody, oh my darling, we’re all in on this one, everybody from the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Cabinet, down to your average housewife, ditchdigger, man in the street, give or take a skunk or two. (PB 241-242)

This is how Eisenhower describes the Rosenberg case:

The forces threatening this continent strike directly at the faith of our fathers and the lives of our sons ... It is, friends, a spiritual struggle. And at such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith; we are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free. (PB 150-153)

This faith is summarized in the mythical Uncle Sam, “the maker and shaper of world history” (PB 212). Uncle Sam also serves as a kind of general chronicler (sort of an American collective mind).

All this supports the idea that history comes to us as a construct, in a textual form, rather than simply the given past of a nation. Ricoeur views narrativization of history as invented plots “by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience” (Ricoeur, xi) in order to make it meaningful. White points out that “every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats” (White 1981: 14). History has become, as Frederick Jameson states, “an absent cause ... inaccessible to us except in textual form” (Jameson 35), which gives the text a privileged position, as an organizer of historical experience as well as an accessible medium in which we look at the past. This is how history and fiction are connected: their common basic mode of operation is narrative. As to the “absent cause,” it describes the abyss between the raw material of history and the forces that shape it, standing for the elusive quality of historical knowledge.

Marking the beginning of a new era, *The Public Burning* depicts an evolving postmodern society that has outgrown the Newtonian universe, where precognitions and old-fashioned modes of behavior, thinking, and action do not apply and are ridiculed—which announces the end of history as it was understood before, bearing witness to the patchwork nature of our reality. Coover’s argument seems to be that the atomic age is a continuation of World War II with its progressive, destructive technological warfare and politics, while humans are left helpless and incapable of stopping the gravitational pull released by these technological innovations and are confused what is real and what is fictive. His text forces the readers to view history in an “unrefined,” unconventional and innovative way, representing events without polishing them or neutralizing their monstrosity. Even when engaged in “storifying,” Coover undermines the “moralizing” part and engages in fictive narrative, adding to the embellishment of fiction and not history and avoiding to present history as more rational or meaningful with explanations or causal links, for they cannot be made sense of.

Coover’s forcing of a controversial series of historical events into a seemingly coherent structure foregrounds the way in which historical narrative imposes a moral meaning on reality. The wish for coherence and closure is “intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality



that we can imagine" (White 1981: 14). But apart from authorial aspirations once encapsulated in language, the author's intentions will further "be comprehended, distorted, elaborated on, and cannibalized by readers" (Appleby 128), adding to the overall erosion of the boundary between fact and fiction.

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