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Myth and Carnival in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*

Certain situations in Coover's fictions seem to conspire with a sense of impending

disaster, which we have visited upon us from day to day. We have had, in that sense, an unending sequence of apocalypses, long before Christianity began and up to the present... in a lot of contemporary fiction there's a sense of foreboding disaster which is part of the times, just like self reflexive fictions. (Coover 1983, 78)

As allegory, the trope of the apocalypse—a postmodern version of the Aristotelian tragic *catastrophe*—stands at the center of Coover's choice of content, his method of treating his materials, and his view of writing. In his fictions, one observes desperate people caught in religious nightmares leading to terrible catastrophes, a middle-aged man whose life is sacrificed at the altar of an imaginary baseball game, beautiful women repeatedly killed in the Gothic intrigues of *Gerald's Party*, and other hints and omens of death and annihilation. And what about the Rosenbergs, whom the powers that be "determined to burn... in New York City's Times Square on the night of their fourteenth wedding anniversary, Thursday, June 18, 1953"(PB 3)?¹ In *The Public Burning*, apocalypse becomes holocaust—quite literally, the Greek *holokauston*, a "sacrifice consumed by fire."

What proves interesting from a narrative point of view is that Coover makes disaster, apocalypse and holocaust part of the materials of the fictions "of the times"—which he calls "self-reflexive fictions." But what is the relation between genocide, human annihilation, and self-reflexive fictions? How do fictions "of the times" reflect holocaust? Larry McCaffery suggests:

in most of Coover's fiction there exists a tension between the process of man creating his fictions and his desire to assert that his systems have an independent existence of their own. For Coover, this tension typically results in man losing sight of the fictional basis of his systems and eventually becoming trapped within them. (McCaffery 25-26)

Similarly, Marc Chénétier argues that, for Coover, fictions

organize meaning, but they also gel it, they arrange between the world and the self a sumptuously embroidered screen of sortileges that is hard to remove at will (*fascinum*), a screen that clings too tightly to what it is supposed to reveal and takes its place... Mythification... is, *in proprio tempore*, mystification, a chain of choices and inventions, something like a structure forever after prearranged, a narrative pall from under which it becomes highly strenuous to escape. (Chénétier 1988, 87)

In both McCaffery's and Chénétier's statements, one notices an echo of Kermode's distinction between fiction as pragmatic explanation of the world and the hypostasis of fiction onto the plane of myth as "agent of stability [and] call for absolute" (Kermode 39). When "a series of overlapping fictions [that] cohere into a convincing semblance of historical continuity and logical truth" (PB 122) is "mythified" and its artificial nature is forgotten, the historical necessities and logical truths thus created may seize control over human life in the name of Reason, Patriotism, and Righteousness. Put in a different perspective, a heuristic of reality can be stabilized into absolute truth, and thus create the entropic episteme (in Foucault's terms) of a social and political order. Once a whole society is entrapped in a "mythification" of reality, a totalitarian control can start its work of repression, aiming at coercing everything and everybody into the framework of myth.

If myth, narratively speaking, is a story that organizes the real as a meaningful experience, it is also, ideologically, a way to organize a social reality as a meaningful *unicum* and to reduce conflicts and differences to a totality of sorts. The ritualistic fire of the apocalypse or the holocaust is, for Coover, the symbolic agency of this ideological reduction. This ritualistic power of symbolic fire, agent for the purification and reconstitution of the social body, has been singled out by Gaston Bachelard:

fire purifies everything... fire separates substances and destroys material impurities. In other words, that which has gone through the ordeal of fire has gained in homogeneity and hence in purity. (Bachelard 103-04, author's emphasis)

This is undoubtedly the social meaning of the public burning, a symbolic purification of the social body from its impurities—the outlaw, the reprobate, the "other." But the holocaust is also, for Coover, the narrative principle sustaining the classical novel: linear narrative, unique diegesis, the final closure leading to the epiphany of Truth, all contribute to create a plot that is nothing less than the elimination of innumerable other ways to recount the so-called "mysteries" of existence. In foucaultian terms, the novel, by encompassing the chaotic material of reality within the pervasive plot of the omniscient author, institutes a "theater," a "spectacle" for the reaffirmation of social Truth and Power. The mystery of the classical novel, which epitomizes a society and its agents momentarily incapable of making sense of the misleading signs left by the criminal, is finally "worked out to a solution by a power that no one has charge of. The equivocal role of the [narrative closure] is thus a part of a [narrative] strategy whose ideological implications should be plain" (Miller 49). It is maybe against these "ideological implications" that Coover's narrative technique, by showing that (social) myths and truths "are merely artifices—that is, they are always in some way false, or incomplete"—produces statements which are both aesthetic and political (Coover 1983, 68).

Coover's statements, then, are not so much political *or* literary assertions as *topoi*—"commonplaces" where the literary and the social coexist in some sort of metonymic contiguity. The essence of these *topoi* is *allegory*. The resulting rhetorical complexity is far greater than many reviewers of Coover's *The Public Burning* have yet allowed. It yields at the very least an intriguing resonance, a "sympathy" between the real and narration, and a rich dissonance of implications. Read in this context, Coover's fiction shows the writer enlarging his relationship to the living subject by evoking the precise contiguity—albeit simply rhetorical and metonymic—between fiction and reality, myth and ideology. The writer's metafictional efforts are not inert and

suppressed "accounts," a mere part of the genesis of writing, but allusions meant to be recognized—signs in the finished work that its originality, organization and continuing life depend on a suggestive "negative capability" (what Harold Bloom calls "strong imagination") that manipulates and changes a preexistent literary and social order of language. Fiction becomes an imaginary *topos* that stages the fundamental antagonism on which social myths are structured.

However, what is the social significance of this Keatsean negative capability in the face of myth? Coover seems to believe in the fundamental similarity of myth and ideology. What myth does is to create a comprehensive, stable, and totalitarian interpretation of nothing less than everything. Myth is the totalitarian speech of Uncle Sam:

The untransacted destiny of the American people is to establish a new order in human affairs, to confirm the destiny of the human race, and to pull that switch and shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind. Men's hopes call upon us to say what we will do—who shall live up to the great trust? (PB 496-7)

The paradoxical functioning of "the American people," the "human race" and "mankind" can be detected through an analysis of such statements. Uncle Sam's propositions cannot be falsified because behind the form of an observation of a fact, we have a circular definition of "the people," "human race," and "mankind": in Uncle Sam's universe, belief in the (Mormon) myth of America's "mission" to create a "new world order" (to echo President Bush's speech on the Gulf War, which echoed Goebbel's discourse on the mission of Nazi Germany) is rigidly designated by the terms "humanity," "mankind," and "the American people."² That is why the only real members of the human race and the People are those who believe in the myth, whereas those who work against its rule are automatically excluded from these rigid categories—just like the Rosenbergs. Myth demands belief. Moreover, myth demands sacrifice. At the very moment that a group of individuals suspends its belief in it, myth must reconstitute the "meaningfulness" of its rigid denominators by ritualistically purifying the body of the People from any subversive agency.

Coover's definition of myth would then be: a ritualistic fictional

order, hypostatized as totalitarian ideology, that structures language and society through the continuous and spectacular suppression of difference (the "other plot" of the Rosenbergs). A myth is born as a fiction, but its fictional nature is soon forgotten. Forgetfulness poses the ultimate threat to human lives. The essence of Myth is its spectacular staging of ritualistic sacrifices—it is, so to speak, the consumption of difference by fire, which achieves the final reconstitution of the unity of the social (and literary) body in its ultimate meaningfulness.

Although Coover constantly denounces the tendency to mythify fictions, nonetheless he is well aware of humanity's basic fear of chaos. In *The Public Burning*, Richard Nixon tells us that fictions are necessary "to transcend the confusions" (PB 234). Nixon's own struggle to solve the confusion over the Rosenberg case becomes a metafictional allegory of the human need for fictions:

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... 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. (PB 320)

The "fire" of poetic imagination reduces the paralyzing complexity of "raw" data and "cooks" them, reducing them down to organized meaningful units. Yet, the relationship that fiction bears to knowledge brings us eventually back to Kermode's notion of "myth" as absolute and all-encompassing epistemology and to Bakhtin's suggestion that "when the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline" (Bakhtin 132). To put things differently, if there exists a "human need for pattern, and language's propensity, willy-nilly, for supplying it" (Coover 1983, 68), the fiction-maker cannot abdicate his/her role of storytelling, since the fictional model is the only speculative paradigm for human understanding and the ordering of chaos. However, the "artist" must seek new narrative forms, different from the classical novel (omniscient, linear, regulative of a notion of reality...), forms which flaunt their own condition of

artifice and that, in so doing, escape from hyposthesis into "myth" and avoid fostering any epistemological "discipline." These new narrative forms have been variously defined as "metafictional," "surfictional," and "self-conscious"; Coover, for his part, prefers to talk of "Exemplary Fictions":

Ejemplares you [Cervantes] called your tales, because your intention was "*poner en la plaza una mesa de nuestra republica, una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno pueda llegar a entretenerse sin daño del alma ni del cuerpo, porque los ejercicios honestos y agreeables antes aprovechan que dañan*" (Coover 1969, 77)

If Cervantes's *Novelas Ejemplares* called into question the status of fictions and of themselves as fictions, they also affirmed the autonomy of the fiction-maker's "imagination" from Truth. Knowing that a fiction is, after all, only a fiction, is potentially subversive of any given notion of "realism" and "meaningfulness" that might have been attributed to, and sustained by, previous literary artifacts. Exemplarity can be described as a comic disruption of older forms and dogmas, a tension both moral and ontological to undermine a fixed notion of reality. Coover says:

Maybe the struggle I had as a young writer against the old forms had made me overly aware of their restrictive nature, such that I found myself burdened with a vast number of metaphoric possibilities, all of which were touched by this sense of dogma invading the world and turning it to stone. (Coover 1983, 69)

Caught in a quite Borgesian "Pierre Menard's paradox," Coover's rewriting of Cervantes's "exemplarity" is destined to go much further than Cervantes could have possibly foretold, because, for Coover, not only the realist novel but the very notion of "reality" is an artificial construction: "every effort to form a view of the world involves a kind of fiction-making process" (Coover 1983, 68). Coover's disruption of old narrative forms coincides with the disruption of a stable notion of reality which legitimates, and is legitimated by, a "restrictive" social structure that sets the limits and the status of a given "reality." Significantly, *The Public Burning* focuses on a much wider body of "reality-making processes" than novels conventionally do—or, for that

matter, *The New York Times* with its journalistic mythopoiesis. As creator of "newly fleshed" realities, journalism has a divine role in modern society, and provides a theology which is sustained by faith and belief. Marc Chénétier argues that in *The Public Burning*

la presse, que l'on suppose être le degré zéro de l'Histoire, n'est en fait que le stade premier de l'élaboration des rêves, qu'elle communique à ses lecteurs l'idée première qu'il existe une transcendance à l'événement, que l'on peut ériger l'anamnèse sautillante en parcours objectif. Tout lien établi par l'oeil entre deux colonnes du journal, voisines ou non, postule Dieu. (Chénétier 1979, 232)

It postulates, in other words, a transcendental theology, the biblical apocalypse that reunites chaos and confusion into a comprehensive and common *telos*; it presupposes, also, the *incipit* of the gospel according to John—"In the beginning was the Word," a divine epiphany of the *logos*:

nothing living ever appears here at all, only presumptions, newly fleshed out from day to day, keeping intact that vast, intricate, yet static *tableau*—*The New York Times*'s finest creation—within which a reasonable and orderly picture of reality can unfold. No matter how crazy it is. (PB 192)

A heuristic of reality coincides for Coover with a heuristic of power: if reality is the result of a fictional construct—"No matter how crazy it is"—power is the ability, on the part of a political establishment, to stop the proliferation of reality-construction into a "static tableau." In this sense, one of the most overwhelming manifestations of power is the construction of historical "truths" as dogmatic explanations and legitimations of a political status quo. Written during the period in which Coover was still working on *The Public Burning*, the novella *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* suggests that

Only for... 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... what arrangements can we *not* imagine? (Coover 1987, 9)

The ways we can arrange data to make reasonable histories out of them are virtually infinite. *The Public Burning* exploits Coover's notions of history as fictional construct and of History as mythopoiesis, both relying on language to create systems by arranging and rearranging random elements into significant events:

What was fact, what was 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 ... 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? (*PB 136*)

Nixon here endorses a vision of history-making as partisan activity: on the one hand he accuses the Phantom (symbol of a Communist Evil) of "playing with evidence;" on the other he seems to suggest that the "evidence" itself—just like history—is but a linguistic invention. From this perspective, Uncle Sam offers his a lesson in realpolitik:

Hell, all courtroom testimony about the fact is ipso facto and tacitously a boldface 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 ignoring facts! *Opinion* ultimately governs the world. (*PB 86*)

A reference to Michel Foucault is inevitable at this point. The same notions of history as production and legitimation of a social order seem to be at work both in Coover's fiction and in Foucault's questioning of historical truth, for example in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Moreover, both Coover and Foucault seem to single out the nature and force of power in its ability to "mythify" an epistemological reading of reality as absolute truth. Without suggesting a direct influence of Foucault on Coover, one notices the similarity between Foucault's notion of power as disseminated

At the crossroads, in the gardens, at the side of the road being repaired or bridges built, in workshops open to all, in the depths of mines that may be visited... placards... inscriptions, posters, symbols, texts...

Scenery, perspectives, optical effects, *trompe l'oeil*, magnified scenes
(Foucault 113)

and Coover's

camera platforms ... backstage VIP passageways, wedding altars, side-shows, special light and sound systems... traffic ... rerouted so as to cause maximum congestion and rage, a solid belt of fury at the periphery being an essential liturgical complement to the melting calm at the center. (PB 5)

For both Foucault and Coover, power is a series of elements that seem to cohere into a semblance of Unity, Totality, and Truth.

More specifically, the transformation of history into spectacle and of the human body into theatrical agent are common *traits d'union* between Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Coover's *The Public Burning*. In both works, the execution of the outlaw enacts the triumphal epiphany of a power that stages the history of its own potency; the body of the condemned becomes the text in which Power inscribes its mythified magnificence. Public execution serves power as a ritual of regeneration and rebirth, "just what the troubled nation needs right now to renew its sinking spirit. Something archetypal, tragic, exemplary" (PB 4).

In this context, Coover's "exemplarity" may well coincide, as Jackson Cope has suggested, with Bakhtin's notion of "carnival," that is, with a virtual subversion of "reality" and the inversion of rules, authority and structures. The "dialogic" element of Coover's meta-fiction opens a breach between, on the one hand, the monologism of power with its epiphanies—history, documents on the Rosenberg's case, Uncle Sam's fiction-making and theatrical staging—and, on the other, a "carnivalistic" subversion of monologism aiming at suggesting that "there are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations" (Coover 1983, 68). In *The Public Burning*, this carnivalization finds its propitiation in the moment when Ethel Rosenberg's body—sacrificial victim of the American myth—loses its consistency to become two-dimensional, something written on the page of a fiction, its consistency and three-dimensionality being only a *trompe l'oeil*, "like one of those trick images in a 3-D movie..." (PB 517). Pushing

Cope's suggestion further, I would argue that Coover's dialogism functions as much more than a carnival—i.e., as the carnivalization of a public event which was not supposed to be a carnival.

It might be useful here to distinguish between the ritual tension and the carnivalesque tension in *The Public Burning*. On the one hand, we have Uncle Sam's monologic desire to assert his drama as "true" and absolute, using the Rosenbergs's execution as a ritual for the renewal of America's sinking spirit, to "make everything new again: after all, that was what light and darkness, the sacred and the diabolic, death and regeneration were all about!" (*PB* 95); on the other hand, we witness the falling apart of Uncle Sam's metaphoric structures. The untenability of the "grand narrative" of his dossier on the Rosenbergs, which "grew and grew [l]ike Pinocchio's nose" (*PB* 368), transforms the celebration into a farce in which the "whole nation is falling on its ass" (*PB* 363). As Coover sets fiction (dialogism) against myth (monologism), in exactly the same way the narrator of *The Public Burning* sets the carnival *against* Uncle Sam's official mythologizing effort. As for Foucault's model, Coover's theater of the public burning can flip from discipline into its opposite number when the sovereign's rhetoric is denounced, its intention reversed, and "public execution allow[s] the luxury of... momentary saturnalia" (Foucault 60).

Coover's exemplary narrative is rooted in his twofold way of interpreting the Rosenbergs's execution as official ritual (myth) or as subversive carnival (fiction), and in the dialogic tension thereby created. It is, from a different perspective, an ecology of the public "place"—the literary *topos* of Times Square. What, he seems to be asking, are the uses of a public place such as the novel form or the city square? Should we use it for mythologizing purposes and therein stage the theater of power, or should we use it to enact the drama of a liberating carnival? When Nixon tells us that Times Square "is the most paradoxical place in all America" (*PB* 164), we are ready to register Times Square as an allegory (etymologically: *allos-agera*, place of assembly) of fiction in general, that "vibrant space between the poles of paradox where all the exciting art happens" (Coover 1983, 67). As paradoxical space, Times Square, that allegory of fiction, oscillates between the two poles of ritual and carnival, myth and de-mythification, order and subversion, Law and saturnalia, the novel as

"policing power [and] regulation of social order" (Miller 207) and Coover's exemplary anti-novel, deregulation of social order and dialogue. Uncle Sam has gathered everybody in Times Square, has recruited everyone for the enactment of his mythologizing drama:

Who could tell what was on Uncle Sam's mind? Certainly it was very theatrical... everybody in this case from the Judge on down—indeed, just about everyone in the nation, in and out of government, myself included—[was] behaving like actors caught up in a play... some larger script... (PB 117)

That Uncle Sam's ritual drama and cathartic spectacle turns into a carnival is due primarily to its self-elected protagonist, Richard Nixon the clown.³ Exemplary character of Uncle Sam's American morality play—competitive, cynical, self-made man—Nixon is too paranoid and self-conscious to endorse completely Uncle Sam's narrative project: "The trouble with me... is that I'm too attentive, I see things too clearly."⁴ Himself a bad actor in his youth (in a drama entitled "The Farting Quaker"), Nixon ends up denouncing the Rosenberg trial as "a carefully rehearsed professional drama" (PB 121), and eventually ruins Uncle Sam's spectacle:

"You fool!" rasped Uncle Sam, dropping me back down on the stage. He glanced apprehensively up at the night sky, dark and starless. "You're going too far!" I was frightened (how had it got so dark so soon?), but I had passed the point of no return... (PB 484)

Nixon's role as narrator of *The Public Burning* is twofold: he is both metafictional consciousness and representative character. Firstly, he serves as a vehicle for Coover's distrust against hypostatized narratives—for example, when he wonders if the whole Rosenberg story might be a complete fabrication ("And then what if there were no spy ring at all? What if all these characters believed there was and acted out their parts on this assumption, a whole courtroom full of fantasies," PB 135). Secondly, he allows Coover to give a portrayal of Nixon as both caricature ("the caricature came first and the face followed," Nixon says of himself, PB 187) and representative of the American character. McCaffery argues:

We are probably expected to laugh at Nixon's constant comparison between himself and various other American heroes like Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Horatio Alger; but one of the most telling aspects of the way Coover uses Nixon is the fact that Nixon's career really does seem to embrace a lot of the American Dream. (McCaffery 92)

While Coover was still working on *The Public Burning*, all of Nixon's "abuses and deceits" were already public knowledge in America, Watergate included. Yet, for Coover, all attempts to connect the decay of American civilization to a specific name (Nixon or McCarthy) elude the fact that we are dealing here with the "real" (to use Lacan's terms) of American civilization, a "real" that returns as the same traumatic kernel in all subsequent "incarnations" of the American Dream.

This is probably one of the most disturbing features of *The Public Burning*. Set during the fifties, between McCarthyism and the Korean War, Coover's novel suggests that the violence of that age *was not* of that age only; as Edward Thomas has argued in his review of *The Public Burning*, "Villains of the past... aren't the source of evil, but its agents, dupes, or victims; the evil is us..." (Thomas). It would be limiting to blame Nixon or Eisenhower—mere receptacles of a transcendent power—for what happened. Ultimately, power does not belong to the "I":

only Uncle Sam knows why this or that receptacle is chosen to receive the Host... The new President was packaged and sold by BBD&O as "strictly a No-Deal Man Clean as a Hound's Tooth Who Will Go to Korea Restore Faith in God and Country and Carry On a Crusade to Clean Up Creeping Socialism Five-Percenters the Mess in Washington Crooks Cronies Mink Coats Deep Freezers and Rising Inflation," but the true source of his power was summed up more simply in the big badge Uncle Sam wore last fall on his blue lapel: I LIKE IKE... A "crusade" Eisenhower called his political campaign, and he told stories about his old Uncle Abraham Lincoln Eisenhower galloping his goofy gospel wagon through prairie villages, shouting "The way to heaven!" (PB 161-62)

Tracing genealogies between Lincoln and Eisenhower, Washington and Nixon, Jesus Christ and Uncle Sam, Coover suggests that "persons" and Presidents are just the packaged product of a myth that not even

Superhero Uncle Sam is able to control. What is power, then? Perhaps, as the last line of the quoted passage suggests, power is a mythical superstructure that legitimates and condemns, blesses and executes, in the name of a religion of the State:

They [the Rosenbergs] never mention the afterlife, angels, or the Holy Trinity... This... has stirred the hearts and minds of American Superheroes from General George Washington right down to the current Incarnation, who is much given to visions of God working His wondrous will through the invention of America. His Quaker Vice President, lay evangelist and cleanser of the temple, has often echoed him, and more: "Our belief must be combined with a crusading zeal to change the world!" (PB 105)

Coover's implicit message is that violence is at the root of American society, coiled in the myth and invention of America, transmitted like a disease from one Incarnation to another since the times of the first Superhero, General George Washington. Rather than a book on the fifties, *The Public Burning* is a novel that, through the spectacle of the fifties, reaches to the mythical archetypes at the center of American power in an attempt to undermine their hold.

Why were the Rosenbergs burned? To answer this question, Coover leads us back to the origins of American society and to the founding myth of which present evil is only a belated emanation. At that time, "A trial [was] held under a tree, at which lads disguised as soldiers pronounce[d] sentence of death." This is not *The Public Burning*, it is Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Just as in Frazer's ritual, the sentence against the Rosenbergs is pronounced by Uncle Sam under "the Burning Tree," and again as in Frazer's regenerative rituals, the execution of the Rosenbergs forms part of a ritualistic festival. From the very opening of the novel, Coover's symbolic setting organizes the execution in terms of a Dionysian ritual of death and rebirth:

[the execution] symbolizes fusion and organization, justice and temperament; the City is this year celebrating the tercentenary of its own founding as New Amsterdam, its axis the Times Tower is in its Silver Anniversary year, and the Statue of Liberty—our Lady of the Harbor, Refuge of the Destitute, Ark of the Covenant, Regina Coeli, Mother Full of Goodness, Star of the Sea and Gem of the Ocean—is sixty-nine;

Times Square itself is an American holy place long associated with festivals and rebirth; and spring is still in the air. (PB 4)

But Coover's ritual is not Frazer's Victorian festival; rather, it is a celebration in line with the American tradition. The myth to be renewed on the anniversary of "the original Merrycunt Revilusion!" (PB 423) is not that of Dionysius or of the king, but that of America. And the American ritual par excellence is the New Englanders's public burning of wizards and witches in order to free the New Canaan from all the agents of Satan (or the Phantom) and purify the Promised Land from its undesired guests. In the spirit of the Salem witch trials, the Rosenbergs are sentenced to be burned

—thieves of light to be burned by light—in the electric chair, for it is written that "any man who is dominated by demonic spirits to the extent that he gives voice to apostasy is to be subject to the judgement upon sorcerers and wizards." (PB 3)

The paradigmatic tension between myth and violence set up by the Rosenbergs trial reenacts the inquisitions of the first Puritan settlers: the Rosenbergs's defendants are "clobbered with a dead cat by a Salem Witch and stuffed down an open manhole by a gang of soused-up examiners from the Patent Office" (PB 467); Uncle Sam "could be as cold as a New England parson sometimes" (PB 87). Salem, "the inevitable center of the universe," as Hawthorne once said, might well be imagined as the original site of American civilization, archetype of Coover's Times Square.

In *The Public Burning*, little Ethel Rosenberg wears an 'A' on her chest (PB 226). Does this letter "most worthy of interpretation" stand for the A-Bomb, the secret allegedly stolen by the Rosenbergs? Or maybe for the adultery that Ethel, like Hester, commits with the High-priest/Nixon? Or does it stand for America, the stigma of a myth to which the rebel did not conform?

Whatever the letter "A" may mean, the idea that Coover seems to convey is that the most advanced society in the world, the land of freedom and democracy, is still caught in the barbaric logic of inquisition: "Enlightenment or no, we still had our roots in the Dark

Ages" (PB 58). In a moment of philosophical lucidity, Nixon articulates his own Adornian critique of Enlightenment:

Enlightenment did not illuminate, but spread a greater darkness. The dream of utopia made men miserable, both through disappointment with their flawed existence and through the horrors they inflicted on each other through pursuit of the rational—and therefore unattainable—ideal. Thus, "enlightenment" and "self-interest" were two sides of the same coin, and if there was evil in the world it was due to our failure to see both sides at once. "Enlightened self-interest" was a stoic formula of acceptance, part of the tragedy of history. (PB 230)

For Nixon/Coover, as for Horkheimer and Adorno, the stoic formula of "enlightened self-interest" is "part of the tragedy of history" insofar as it proposes a myth (a "rational ideal") or a utopia that, once accepted as possible or true, generates the kind of totalitarian ideology of post-Hegelian philosophy and Nazism: "Was this more than a mere symbolic expiation? Were the Rosenbergs in fact the very trigger... for the ultimate holocaust?" (PB 337). Once a society gives credit to a myth or to a utopia, whoever does not share in "sympathy" with the social ideal must be erased, burned, physically eliminated. In his book on America, Jean Baudrillard argues:

If [one assumes that] the Utopia has been realized, then unhappiness must not exist, and poverty becomes untenable... America acknowledges only the evidence of wealth, the tautology of power... The poor will be forgotten, abandoned, and will be made disappear. It is the logic of the Must Exit. Poor people must exit. The ultimatum of wealth and efficiency erases them. Obviously, since they have had the bad taste not to accord with the general consensus... "The Utopia has been realized; let those who did not participate disappear." (Baudrillard 90)

Not altogether differently, Coover seems to denounce the mercilessness of the American myth; in his paranoid pondering on the trial, Nixon eventually concludes that, no matter whether the Rosenbergs committed espionage or not, they are nevertheless guilty of having betrayed the "Great American Dream":

I could even understand their working free for the Phantom—I'd do the same for Uncle Sam, though I was glad he had never asked this from me. How could he? Money is dignity, he's told me that himself. What I

couldn't understand, though, was the Rosenbergs' staying poor. Not that poor. Not in America. (PB 115)

Poverty is a crime against the American myth, or at least "the poor, given their resentments, were not to be trusted, and if there were any trouble, it was smart to look there first" (PB 182).

Coover offers his view of myth as totalizing ideology, and, accordingly, engages in a powerful critique of America—"a civilization," as Frederick Turner has pointed out, "that has substituted history for myth as a way for understanding life" (Turner *xi*). A subsidiary Toquevillian theme is also present: in "Æsop's Forest" Coover refers to a "democracy of the dead," and in *The Public Burning* he has Nixon characterize the American myth as "a dream of love and death." History being public opinion (as Uncle Sam has told us) and public opinion being created by *The New York Times* and by all the king's men in terms of a monologue of power, the History of America becomes the history of a public opinion that suppresses the "other" (the Rosenbergs are radicals, communists, Jewish, and poor) to ensure uniformity and a profound sympathy with the revealed Truth. The American democratic ideal becomes, in Kermode's term, a myth from which it is strenuous to escape. It becomes a prison, a doom—a hell.

Like the classical underworld, Uncle Sam's theater for the execution consists of three levels. "Underground... [there is the] Times Square subway station, [where] Uncle Sam is busily sorting out the official celebrants and lining them up" (PB 401). The subway is the passageway that leads from the living world to Times Square, the center of Uncle Sam's hell where the Rosenbergs will be executed and Nixon sodomized. Then there is the Sing Sing prison, where, like in the pit of Tartarus, the Rosenbergs and others who have offended the gods wait for their death. Between Times Square and Sing Sing runs the Hudson, which Nixon crosses twice in the taxi-cab of a Charon-like Phantom. As if crossing the Lethe, both times he forgets what he has to do in Sing Sing, what his name is and what he has to say in Times Square. This is the allegorical American hell in which the Rosenbergs are burned, Ethel last:

Her body, sizzling and popping like firecrackers, lights up with the force of the current, casting a flickering radiance on all those around her, and

so she burns—and burns—and burns—as though held aloft by her own incandescent will and haloed about by all the gleaming great of the nation... (PB 517)

A certain purification could be seen in Ethel's turning into a Saint-like figure—America renewing its "sinking spirit" in the avatar of the final fireworks. Nonetheless, purification should be understood here in terms of irony. Uncle Sam's brutality is modulated by Nixon's doubt about right and truth; the burning is negated and enjoyed by a critical use of the Times Square theater which, to be sure, "burns" and punishes not so much the Rosenbergs, who are transformed into angels, but the "evil" of America and its agents. The quivering flame of Coover's public burning, like Canetti's *Autodafé*, explodes the unity of Uncle Sam's mythological *episteme* by recreating a story never before narrated by official documents. The absoluteness of the myth is destroyed, its violence denounced, its consistency burned away. Coover's fiction takes the place left vacant by myth, but this fiction is conscious of the divide between itself and the facts it pretends to narrate; the three-dimensionality of the narration (Coover's, Nixon's, and Uncle Sam's diegetic points of view) dissipates the oppressive themes of an omniscient monologism through the exuberant irony of an exemplary fiction.

¹ Hereafter, all references to Coover's *The Public Burning (PB)* will be given in brackets in the text.

² On the Mormon influence on American politics and mythology, see Harold Bloom.

³ "I was developing this series of circus acts—all these verbal acrobatics, death-defying highwire acts, showy parades, and so on—and I needed a clown to break in from time to time and do a few pratfalls. He [Nixon] was perfect for this. For a while, anyway. Eventually his real-life pratfalls nearly undid my own. I couldn't keep up with him... the Watergate episode forced me to work a lot harder, dig deeper, think beyond the pratfalls" (McCaffery 75).

⁴ In the McCaffery interview, Coover describes Nixon as follows: "he's such a self-conscious character. He has to analyze everything, work out all parameters. He worries about things—and then there is his somewhat suspicious view of the world... This attitude of his allowed me to reach skeptical conclusions through him about what was happening at the time of the Rosenberg executions, conclusions which would have

been difficult from other viewpoints. For Eisenhower, if the FBI and the courts said so, then the Rosenbergs were guilty, they had to be. But Nixon could doubt this" (75).

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