



Postmodern History Writing—The Preservations and Alterations of History in *The Public Burning*

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Abstract— Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* is a quintessential example of postmodern historiographic metafiction, presenting a bold reinterpretation of the history concerning the Rosenberg case. In this novel, Coover constructed an absurd world that blurs the lines between fictionality and reality, as well as history and text. He tried to tint a sense of historical reality in his fiction, which is a counterpart to the absurdity in real history, showcasing his reflections on social reality. Through this lens, Coover critiques the mechanisms of power and media that shape public perception. Drawing on New Historicism, which emphasizes the interplay between literature and history within broader cultural frameworks, this paper will analyze Coover's innovative writing techniques in *The Public Burning*. It will explore his motivations and intentions behind the preservation and alteration of historical narratives, as well as the significance of historiographic metafiction in illuminating the complexities of historical representation and the ultimate impact on societal understanding.



Keywords—*The Public Burning*, Robert Coover, Postmodern, New Historicism

I. INTRODUCTION

Since history is constantly being constructed, its representation is a necessity. *The Public Burning* is Robert Coover's postmodern rewriting of the Rosenberg case under the background of the Cold War and the climate of McCarthyism. There is an ineffable relationship between history and text. Texts must be understood in context, while history can be considered as a text. Louis A. Montrose proposed a pair of concepts, namely, "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history," (Veaser, 1989) which implies the intertextuality between history and text. Catherine Belsy holds, "At its most brilliant, its most elegant, new historicism is characteristically postmodern... It is anything but nostalgic in its account of a world dominated by power, which produces resistance only to justify its own extension" (Belsy 2008) Therefore, based on the feature of postmodernism, new historicism can offer a brand-new illustration.

The historiographic metafiction, a term originally coined by Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*,

historiographic metafiction includes those postmodern works, usually popular novels, which are "both intensely self-reflexive and paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages". (Hutcheon, 1988) In this regard, *The Public Burning* is a typical historiographic metafiction that reflects the absurdity of historical events and manifests the truth in fiction by grasping some real elements to construct a fictional world. From the perspective of New Historicism, concerning Coover's preservation and the alteration of original historical events, this paper will try to explore the motivations for reconstructing history and rethink the significance of historiographic metafiction.

II. THE ROSENBERG CASE AND ROBERT COOVER'S *THE PUBLIC BURNING*

The Rosenberg case was also called the "Atom Spy Case". The Rosenberg Couple were communists living in New York who were accused of leaking information about the

atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. The U.S. government has failed to find convincing evidence, except for the testimony of Ethel's brother, David Greenglass. However, amid the Red Scare and the climate of McCarthyism, The Rosenberg Couple were still sentenced to death by Judge Irving Kaufman and J. Edgar Hoover believed they committed "the crime of the century." (Pessen, 1984) The case also became the first death sentence for an espionage case in peacetime U.S. history. "The execution in 1953 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the electric chair at Sing Sing prison set off political shock waves at home and abroad that a generation later has not yet subsided." (Pessen, 1984) "The Rosenberg case also made some ordinary Americans aware of how anti-communism, as represented by McCarthyism, led to abuses of power by the government in the name of national security, thus posing a great threat to civil rights and liberties." (Li, 2022) Coover adds an absurd and carnivalesque element to his historical reenactment of the case, which is his protest as a writer against the falsity of history.

Coover's *The Public Burning*, the historiographic metafiction, touches on this important historical moment that was hidden and interprets it in a new light. The events recounted throughout the book take place essentially two days before the execution of The Rosenberg Couple, including their arrest, conviction, and execution. In this novel, Coover "gets inside the stories as an entertainer" (Chen, 2011), trying to create a carnival atmosphere. His choice of Nixon as the narrator of the story and Uncle Sam as the presiding officer of the execution in Times Square are seemingly absurd and dramatic elements, all of which are his irony of the hypocritical political world of the time. In an interview, he said, "I felt that the use of the death penalty to force convictions to increase personal political leverage ran counter to the basic principles of America and created a very dark moment in American history." (Chen, 2011) What leads to the death of The Rosenberg Couple? The answer is not merely because of guilt. It's better to say the atmosphere of the Red Scare and Mass hysteria heightened the crime of The Rosenberg Couple. Behind this case, an undercurrent of the American National Identity Crisis went to the edge of the precipice. Celia Betsky once commented, "The Rosenberg Couple's guilt or innocence is immaterial in *The Public Burning* and they are not the center of attention. Coover is more interested in putting an entire generation, era, and system on trial. His book condemns the accusers and along with them an American tradition of persecution from the Salem witch-hunts to Sacco and Vanzetti." (Hume, 1979) Besides, the book was written at the time of the Vietnam War and is in certain ways an expression of the author's resistance to the war. As a postmodern writer, Coover's resistance

penetrates in his teasing of history. In this book, he chooses Nixon as the main narrator in an anarchy tone and uses a lot of real names of politicians which tinted this fiction with scandalous color. He blurred the border between the real and the fictional to dismantle the authority, knowledge and truth by the reality in his unveracious historical text, which aims at challenging hegemony and the Cold War mindset and revealing the absurdity of historical text to promote the awakening of public awareness.

III. THE REALITY IN THE FICTIONAL HISTORICAL TEXT

Coover deconstructed the original history through the truth in the fictional history and lampooned the hypocrisy in the real history, which corresponds to the historicity of the text. Louis A. Montrose said, "By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing—not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them." (Veese, 1989) Any text will be influenced by the social environment and cultural climate of the time. There must be some alterations by the author based on his new understanding of history, which are the reality he pursues. In my opinion, the reality in Coover's fictional world in *The Public Burning* directly reflects the historicity and can be expressed in three parts including writing techniques, characters and the changeover of location.

3.1 The Bold Techniques—From News Review to Collage and Parody

From my point of view, Coover's writing techniques greatly fit in the characteristic of "the literature of silence" proposed by Ihab Hassan, one of the earliest postmodern scholars. The "silence" is a metaphor for the characteristics of the avant-garde, "a questioning of the idea of literature itself and Western society. He draws on the myth of Orpheus to reveal that the most valuable literature of the 20th century is the "literature of silence", the avant-garde literature of destruction and creation. (Hassan, 1987) However, silence may be another kind of clamor, which means that readers gain more hermeneutic space.

Robert Coover applies the "bold techniques" in the "literature of silence". His father was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, and his college major was journalism. The prologue in the book has a prominent journalistic style of recording, but simultaneously blends multiple genres and uses meta-narrative techniques. Unlike the straightforward style of common journalism, the author's use of collage and parody is not only a writing technique but also full of cultural connotations. Coover seems to play with words, which is a sign of his sarcasm and confrontation with the

unreliable news media of the time. One of the distinctive features of metafiction is its nature of self-referential and self-reflexive, and Coover relies on this powerful tool to parody history. In the first few chapters, especially the prologue, there are some collages of different literary forms, including the author's parodies of ballads and free verse, the diamond-shaped text squares, and the Times reports. For example, In the prologue, "Call up yer dog, O call up yer dog, Le's go a-huntin' to ketch a groun'-hog"(Coover, 1993) it is certainly a parody of free verse. Besides, the title of the prologue is "Groun'-Hog Hunt". This is the first indication of the book's mixture of folklore and fact, as an accurate account of the historical workings of courts and law-enforcement agencies is counterpointed with a folk song about a groundhog hunt. Such seemingly absurd collages are in fact filled with the author's critique of the political world and the news media of the time. Coover uses literature that is silent and bizarre to attack the hypocrisy of reality.

The experimental novelist's innovation is not only reflected in the collage of words but also in the pictorial effect of words as visual symbols. The diamond shape is a variation of the square, symbolizing that the social order in America has changed. "*Times* says:

it
was a
sickening and
to Americans almost
incredible history of men
so fanatical that they would destroy
their own countries & col
leagues to serve a
treacherous
utopi
a"

This is Times commentary on the case of The Rosenberg Couple. The shape of the diamond resembles a slanted flag, which indicates that the social order of America was disordered at that time. Moreover, the diamond shape itself is an unstable structure that does not stand firm, which symbolizes the crisis of American national consciousness. Besides, Coover may have intended to split the two words "col-leagues", "utopi-a". Did the Americans really see The Rosenberg Couple as their colleagues? The "A" in "Utopia" may be interpreted to mean that America did not become a utopia for the people at that time. Coover did not completely detach himself from reality to fabricate his fictional world; in fact, he left many clues of authenticity.

Parodies abound in *The Public Burning*. The overall structure of the novel is a parody of traditional theater, and Coover mentions in the interview that he started with the idea of writing a street play against the war for Times Square, which eventually became a full-length novel. The novel includes a prologue, an epilogue, and four interludes, in addition to four parts. The second and third interludes mimic the structure of the play. The author deliberately moved the location of the death by electrocution from Sing Sing Prison to Times Square. This is a parody of a circus performance at the scene of the execution. The people who came to watch the execution were both spectators and actors. "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." (Coover, 1998) What's more, the most important actors, The Rosenberg Couple, are parodies of the martyrs in Coover's writing. "Even The Rosenberg Couple 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 with dignity."(Coover, 1998) Are The Rosenberg Couple martyrs for a sense of the greater good or scapegoats for hypocritical politics? These parodies leave the reader to ponder, and truth and falsity create new boundaries in Rosenberg's novel. Leslie Fiedler holds that The Rosenberg Couple case "is a parody of martyrdom they give us, too absurd to be truly tragic, too grim to be the joke it is always threatening."(Hite, 1993) How absurd the real historical events are, we might be capable of perceiving how real from the fictional history. Life is like a drama, drama is like life. As far as I am concerned, collage is the revolt of Coover in silent literature, while parody is the mapping of both the real and the false simultaneously.

3.2 The Subverted Characters—Nixon and Uncle Sam

The image of Nixon and Uncle Sam is completely subverted in this novel, and their relationship becomes the focal point of what Coover wants to present. Nixon is no longer the politician with a winning hand, but the clown of this circus-like political farce. Coover referred to the reason of choice of Nixon in an interview, "I realized that the circus needed a clown character from time to time to bring the readers back to life. At that moment Coover was working on the book when Nixon, as a representative of the anti-communists who punished the commies, was elected president and had reached the peak of power in his hands." (Chen, 2011) In addition, Nixon's experience has many comic aspects that are not known to the outside world, which will have a great ironic effect. Coover, with

the help of Nixon's words, reveals the huge gulf between the rich and the poor in America and the anger of the lower classes: underlying "the Red Scare" is the fear of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie, who are terrified of the powerful lower classes and poor people behind the communist ideology." (Wang, 2021) Nixon, as the main narrator of the novel, is uncertain even though his narrative is reliable in the meantime. On the one hand, he wants to discover the truth about Rosenberg's case, and on the other hand, he is like a jester who submits to the rule of Uncle Sam.

Uncle Sam is conceited, arrogant, war-mongering, and touts "Manifest Destiny". He is a representative of American hegemony and chauvinism, and through his portrayal of Uncle Sam, the writer's irony of the American beliefs and the American national mentality of the time is evident. In dealing with the Rosenberg case, Uncle Sam's attitude is very tough. "Uncle Sam blinked in amazement, gathering in the balls with one big hand, catching the putter and hat as they fell with the other. 'Guilty!' he roared, his chin whiskers bristling" (Coover, 1988), which demonstrates the absolute suppression of Nixon and the public by Uncle Sam. In the end, Nixon walked into Times Square naked to bring the whole story to a climax. "A man is backing bareass out onto the stage from the prisoners' entrance, his pants in a tangled puddle at his feet, a crumpled homburg down around his ears, "I AM A SCAMP" lipsticked on his butt." (Coover, 1998) To some degree, this can be considered a parody of a real historical event, the Watergate scandal. Finally, Uncle Sam's sodomy of Nixon ended the whole story. And Nixon said, "I love you, Uncle Sam", which is a compromise full of contradictions and struggles. The Subversion of these characters by Coover promotes new reflections on the history of that time. They are the crux of the author's rewriting of history. In Coover's fictional world, how could their ridiculous actions and ideas not be a reality? Nixon is surrounded by the blind worship of Uncle Tom and the sympathy and ambiguity for Ethel and made a fool of himself in public with his bare ass, which may be interpreted as a reference to those hypocritical politicians and the exposure of the chaos of the political order. Besides, the egotistical and warmongering Uncle Sam image is a vivid interpretation of the hegemonic America of the time.

3.3 The Location Switching—From Sing Sing Penitentiary to Time Square

The change in execution location is another way to expose the reality of the fictional world. In real history, The Rosenberg Couple was executed in Sing Sing penitentiary. "The fundamental manipulation by which Coover transforms his narrative from a historical fiction into a metaphorical realization of the fiction behind history

is the transposition of The Rosenberg Couple's executions from the death chamber at Sing Sing to a stage in the middle of Times Square." (Walsh, 1993) The Times Square is an American shrine where it would be fitting to exorcise the "phantom" of darkness. Some even consider the electrocution a public exorcism. Therefore, Times Square metaphorically represents a holy land that carries the power of light, and The Rosenberg Couple are the sons of the dark phantom, which is a completely righteous execution. By creating a carnival atmosphere, Coover was implying that The Rosenberg Couple may be the scapegoats to cater to the spectators. This paradox and tension in the text imply a reflection on real historical events.

As Coover said, "Applause, director, actors, script: yes, it was like—and this thought hit me now like a revelation—it was like a little morality play for our generation! (Coover, 1998) Efforts were also made to set up Times Square, which was used as an execution ground: They built a stage to simulate the dead house. Details from the set of the Warden's Office were decorated to restore The Valiant (Ethel acted), a one-act melodrama by Holworthy Hall. There are special seating sections, camera platforms, backstage VIP passageways, buntings... Even an Entertainment Committee is appointed. The death penalty is turned into a great carnival ritual here, and people are waiting for it with eager anticipation. This shows that more and more people are being swept up in the wave of McCarthyism. The fear of the "phantom" has driven people to moral bankruptcy and insanity. However, they may not realize that they are also actors in this grand show. Underneath this circus-like revelry lies a dangerous undercurrent and a crisis that will strike at any moment, and people can only pretend to enjoy the carnival to counteract this anxiety and fear.

IV. THE ABSURDITY IN THE REAL HISTORY EVENTS

As historical metafiction reflects reality in fiction, then it also retains to some extent the absurdity of real historical events. The spotlight of research should not only focus on the author's alterations to real history but also his retention of historical elements, that is to say, return to the textuality. "By the textuality of history...we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence." The textuality of history refers to the idea that history is constructed and fictionalized. Therefore, those absurd retentions Coover adopts in his text demonstrate his construction of history. The absurdity in real history and the reality in the fictional historical text are inseparable and complementary in *The Public Burning*.

4.1 Names, Dates and The Public

In order to establish a heavy sense of “historical reality” to expose the fictional nature of history, Coover did a great deal of meticulous research before writing. The real dates, names, biographies, newsweeklies, and American folk poetry of that time were all restored to his fictional work, which led him to produce a history that reached into the inner workings of America. Moreover, I also argue that the reason he retains this element of writing authentic history is that he intends the reader to always be reminded of its absurdity and unbelievability. In a chaotic social order, politicians placed political rights above the law. One of the purposes of reconstructing history is also to remember it, even if it was a dark time for America. Some of the real commentaries of the Times also appear in the work from time to time, but they often foster a false information system for the public. It is worth noting that, according to Gallup polls, about 67 percent of Americans say they support the government’s decision to execute The Rosenberg Couple. (Li, 2022) This indicates that the American public was rigid in their thinking and deeply poisoned by dogmatism. They relied excessively on the false outside system and their national consciousness had gone to extremes.

4.2 The Electrocutation of The Rosenberg Couple

The historical event of electrocution is preserved completely, and Coover even elaborates in his book on the reasons why he believes electrocution was adopted. “There are reasons for this: theatrical, political, and whimsical.” (Coover, 1998) Such an electrocution might provoke open confessions and such a public pageant is exactly what we need now to revive the declining spirit of our country. This public ritual can “cleanses their souls of the Phantom’s taint and free themselves before their deaths from the Phantom’s dark mysterious power”. (Coover, 1998) For Americans, it is an exorcism that can flush the Phantom from his underground cells and force him to materialize. Besides, “Fundamental to Coover’s strategy in *The Public Burning* is a surprisingly unsympathetic treatment of The Rosenberg Couple themselves.” (Walsh, 1993) He called them “thieves of light to be burned by the light”, and “Any man who is dominated by demonic spirits to the extent that he gives voice to apostasy is to be subject to the judgment upon sorcerers and wizards.”(Coover, 1998) As Hite commented, “Coover’s account accordingly takes the historical moment to a fabulistic and encyclopedic *reductio ad absurdum*, establishing in its opening paragraphs the electric chair “burning” of The Rosenberg Couple as a public religious spectacle taking place in Times Square.”(Hite, 1993) Under his elucidation, the absurdity of the ritual of electrocution is unveiled.

In addition, when people watch the torture of The Rosenberg Couple, the author starts to employ the Gothic narrative style. This scene can easily break through people’s mind defense like the apocalypse. They were even frightened that Ethel was still alive, so they immediately turned on the electric switch and were relieved to see the tragic death of The Rosenberg Couple. This real historical event in Coover’s fictional world becomes more absurd and thought-provoking.

V. HISTORICAL REENACTMENT-RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND TEXT

In postmodern history writing, I believe that reality in fictional historical texts and absurdity in real historical events are as intertextual and compatible as the historicity of texts and the textuality of history in New Historicism. Historical events occur in the real world, while the fictional world constructs historical facts. Historical events are the preconditions for constructing historical facts, and historical facts are “endowed with meaning” (Shan, 2016). The historical reenactment in postmodern history writing carried two perspectives: real and fictional, using the literature of silence with self-reflexiveness and paradoxicality to read history. As Chen Junsong commented, “Ultimately, these non-fiction works undermine the commemoration of The Rosenberg Couple, while postmodern fictionality seems more conducive to constructing a cultural memory of this dark moment in American history.” (Chen, 2019) The historiographic metafiction paves the way that rebuilds the relationship of history and text, the real and the fictional. While deconstructing and reconstructing history, it constructs a soul-searching cultural memory. Postmodernism may seem full of subversion, but in fact, it is all based on those elements that remain. Those alterations and preservations are equally important in postmodern writing. The last sentence of the novel is “Always leave ‘em laughin’ as you say good-bye!” (Coover, 1998) In this regard, he prefers the comic form to the tragic description. Using farce to tell significant facts, carnivalized laughter to map inner fears, and fictional reality to satirize the absurdity of historical events, this paradoxical nature with postmodernist qualities extends above the exploration of the relationship between history and text to the relationship between fiction and reality.

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