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VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN POSTMODERN LITERATURE: ANALYSIS OF ROBERT COOVER'S NOVELS 1966–1986

PhD. Dissertation

BY

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NÁSILÍ V LITERATUŘE AMERICKÉ POSTMODERNY: ANALÝZA DÍLA ROBERTA COOVERA 1966–1986

Disertační práce

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PROHLÁŠENÍ

Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci vypracovala samostatně, pouze s použitím citovaných pramenů a literatury.

I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature.

V Chrudimi, 1. prosince 2023

Chrudim, December 1, 2023

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1 Introduction

Violence in American fiction has gained much-deserved attention only in the last thirty years. However, attempts to give it boundaries and, most importantly, to define it appeared already in the 1950s. The authors of early literary criticism on violence in American fiction employed several approaches. One of them, represented by Wilbur M. Frohock, presumed that violence and its meaning will reveal itself through works of fiction and its function in the narrative and, therefore, that the literary work can provide a self-definition of violence. This idea is based on the presumption that violence serves a limited purpose in fiction, conforming to the restrictive forms of literature from the interwar era.[1]

Another approach, that of James R Giles, is more scientific and traditional in its form. It is based on a dictionary definition that delimits the boundaries of violence to mostly aggressive behavior or physical harm. It presumes that there is a generally accepted agreement that violence, despite its omnipresence, cannot be defined. However, its existence relied on general knowledge and the power of its automatic recognition. Finally, the specific nature and multidimensionality of American violence called for a particular approach that would narrow down and dissect violence into multiple areas: geographical, mythical, social, and spatial. Giles created his own systematic and multispatial theory of violence that he uses to assess and delimit violence in American fiction.[2]

Strangely enough, most postmodern writers were omitted from such discussions and literary interpretations. Their contribution was often neglected, and the acts of violence were commonly judged, as could be inferred from Patrick W. Shaw's words, as "random examples of postmodern unmotivated malignancy." [3] However, the

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[1] See Wilbur M. Frohock, "Two Strains of Sensibility," in *The Novel of Violence in America*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press), 3–22.

[2] See James R. Giles, "Violence and Space," in *The Spaces of Violence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 1–15.

[3] Patrick W. Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000), 190.

postmodern approach used by authors who were not primarily connected with postmodernism was accepted and even appreciated. Again, Shaw provides valuable insight in this respect: "When [Toni Morrison] combines ghost story, slave narrative, and postmodern attitudes toward violence, [she] creates a singular example of the American novel of violence. Cormac McCarthy takes yet another venerable genre and regenerates it with postmodernist violence."[4] Therefore, postmodern methods are often seen as reinvigorating and innovative for the traditional genres.

The only postmodern authors deemed suitable for analysis by the theoreticians of violence were Thomas Pynchon and Vladimir Nabokov. However, no major work analyzes violence in the writings of one of the most prolific postmodern authors, Robert Coover. Coover sees postmodernism as an empty term: "Some ways of naming a generation are fruitful and some are not. Postmodernism is not. It doesn't really say anything."[5] Coover's profound and lifelong interest in philosophy, sociology, and politics stretches his work beyond literary constrictions. This work aims to understand how an author with a postmodern diagnosis deals with violence and represents it. It also aims to better understanding of its purpose and specificity, which usually challenges the more traditional forms of fiction. One of the tasks of the present work is to determine through what lenses violence in postmodern fiction could be viewed and by what key it could be decoded, denying the idea that violence in postmodern fiction is a random feature that serves no significant purpose except for its malevolence.

Of course, the necessary precursor is to determine the meaning of violence, not only in its primary and most visible physical form but also in its other numerous implications. These are mainly violence and its representations, but also violence that dwells in language and becomes its repository.

Violence in fiction is primarily representational, that is, it creates images of violence that force a question of what is represented and what these representations tell us about society or the social aspects that lie behind this representation. One may argue that this fulfills an educational purpose. Michael Kowalewski writes that "the only presence violence has in fiction is verbal."[6] While Kowalewski is primarily concerned

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[4] Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, 204.

[5] Aaron Shulman, "An Interview with Robert Coover," *Believer* 112 (July 1, 2015), https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-robert-coover/ (accessed September 1, 2023).

[6] Michael Kowalewski, *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4.

with stylistic features of literary violence, another significant level should be taken into account. It is language that may become a source of violence not because of the words it uses but because it divides and opens barriers, distorts and creates illusions, intentionally leaves things unspoken; in general, *is* itself violence.

The first works of literary criticism on Coover and his writing had difficulties dealing with his experimental style. Unable to grasp Coover's innovative approach, they resulted in petty and conservative discourse on his first books. However, other studies successfully directed their attention to Coover's use of myths, fairy tales, shared stories, and the fantastic. Although the general public often neglected Coover's works, they gained a significant response from scholars interested in Coover's metafictional impulses, his capacity to establish a dialogue, and the position of a man as a fiction-maker. Later works were rather comparative, placing Coover next to other postmodern writers.

In 2003 (Coover was seventy-one) Brian Evenson published the first comprehensive study, *Understanding Robert Coover*. This work aims to present approaches that are complementary in its task. It strives to chronologically foreshadow the literary background that deals with violence, its major preoccupations and approaches. The first chapter, "Tackling the Literary Violence," provides a general overview of literature on literary violence and the diversity of topics it aims to represent. The next chapter, "Robert Coover and the Punishment of Postmodernism," uncovers major topics in Coover's work through the work of various literary scholars. Finally, chapter Three, "Robert Coover: Representations of Violence," identifies Coover's creative influences and processes that are relevant to the topic of the present work. It deals not only with Coover's thorough knowledge of philosophy, religion, history, and sociology, but it also analyzes his approaches to metafiction and violence, both stylistic and representational.

As a core for analysis, I chose four major Coover's works that were published between 1966 and 1986, implementing various theoretical approaches that functionally represent the sources of violence and possible ways of their interpretation. The novels, in all their diversity, reflect Coover's changing relationship with violence and writing as such, often reflecting his personal involvement and attitude to social and often controversial political issues. The final chapters analyze Coover's novels using various theories that help deconstruct Coover's work and align it against the solid theoretical background.

Coover's first and award-winning novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), is his intentionally traditional novel, both in style and narrative approach, in which violence represents an externality that disrupts the lives of a small-town community. The acts of violence are analyzed mainly against the theoretical work of Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Žižek, or René Girard. *The Public Burning* (1977) stirred a great deal of controversy mainly because of its involvement with back-then living characters and resuscitation of the debate surrounding the trial and execution of convicted Soviet spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. My main theoretical framework uses the ideas of Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and Norbert Elias. *Spanking the Maid* (1982) is a novel/novella that constricts the maid and her master to a cyclical game of perverse violence. The chapter on this work is based on the theories of Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan. Finally, *Gerald's Party* (1986) revolves around the murder of a young actress in the course of an events-packed party; I approach a debate on the nature of love and desire through the psychoanalytic approach of Jacques Lacan.

2 Tackling the Literary Violence: Modern American Novel of Violence

Until the 1990s, there were not many books that would directly deal with the violence in American literature. The pioneering work of a general nature was Wilbur M. Frohock's *The Novel of Violence in America* (1950). Apart from that, there were works dealing with violence related either to a specific location, for example, the study by Louis Y. Gossett *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (1965), or focusing on a specific type of protagonist, a hard-boiled hero, as in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (1968) by David Madden. *Violence in the Black Imagination* by Ronald T. Takaki (1972) then analyzed works of African American authors. Last but not least, there was a remarkable study *Violence in the Arts* by John Fraser (1974).

Since the 1990s there were visible tendencies to reflect on the writings by authors who dealt with racial, gender, and ethnic discourse. Such issues had their resonance in the perception of violence that could be structurally classified into the following categories: racial violence, violence against women, masculine violence, Spanish and Hispanic crime fiction, or a combination of any of the categories. Finally, the violence could have been functionally explained through these concepts and has become a vehicle for casting light on the previously avoided social ills. In this respect, the violence served a didactic purpose and therefore had a purely representative form. However, there was still an unsatisfied urge to grasp violence as a whole, deconstruct it as a concept *per se*, to find a meaning that had been escaping the general tendency for some systematic theory of violence.

The primary concern of the authors of books on literary violence has always been connected with the need to provide a meaningful definition that would limit the scope of their exploits, give them a direction, and enable them to extract proper examples or corresponding comparisons. Wilbur M. Frohock in *The Novel of Violence in America* does not attempt any dictionary-style definition of violence but infers its meaning from the two strands he identified in the American literature, that is, the novel of erosion and the novel of destiny.[7] Michael Kowalewski, the author of *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction* (1993), is interested in the

[7] See Frohock, *The Novel of Violence in America*, 3–22.

verbal form of violence and considers violence as a styled product of imagination. Violence is often defined as an antisocial deliberate act of aggression; however, Kowalewski easily dispels that notion and adds: "The word 'violence' is a catch-all term, a kind of verbal wooden nickel, used with such frequent ease that its actual indeterminate status appears almost self-evidently clear."[8]

James R. Giles provides six dictionary entries only to conclude that "[v]iolence seems comparable to pornography in being difficult to identify but nevertheless a phenomenon most people claim to be able to recognize when they see it."[9] The only universal characteristic of violence seems to be its excess. Giles accepts the position offered by Arthur Redding and claims that violence in its excess cannot be grasped by any linguistic devices: "By inevitably shattering linguistic boundaries, the excessive will escape any system of signs designed to contain it."[10]

Also, Sally Bachner in her recent study *The Prestige of Violence* (2011) does not inflict any general theory on the reader and admits that her understanding of violence comes from the texts that help her define boundaries and from which she draws her conclusions. Yet, her texts usually portray some obvious examples of violence, which project into systemic or structural violence.[11]

As Patrick W. Shaw in his book *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (2000) says, violence is inherent to the American personality and if any other culture claims it, the Americans are ready to prove their point: "The truth is, those genes that made us intrepid enough to venture into the wilderness were the same genes that intensified the natural tendency to violence. Mixed, mingled, and regenerated, those genes have made America's history a hemophile's delight."[12] For decades, American writers have been trying to expose the true "bloodthirsty" nature of the American character to the Americans, but to no success, since the American nation that believes in its immaculate conception refuses to accept the ugly truth that life without violence is impassionate and restrictive. Such is the basic premise of Shaw's book; he claims that "[t]hose relatively

[8] Kowalewski, *Deadly Musings*, 7.

[9] Giles, *The Spaces of Violence*, 5.

[10] Giles, *The Spaces of Violence*, 5.

[11] See Sally Bachner, introduction to *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction 1962–2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 1–29.

[12] Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, 13.

rare novels in which violence is central come closer than any others to being The American Novels."[13]

Using the famous quote by Cormac McCarthy: "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed (. . .)," Shaw suggests that the civilizing process deprived the man of his soul and striving for life in harmony, a sign of civilized society, will result in numbness and subjugation.[14] Shaw stresses that it was the violent spirit of the pioneers that created America and it seems he reaches towards Richard Slotkin (*Regeneration through Violence*, 1973) and his idea of frontier myth and American experience, which is based on the regenerative power of violence. Even though Slotkin's book has often been criticized for inconsistencies and oversimplifications, even chauvinism, it seems that it still inspires and provides an explanation for the origin of American violence that strongly resonates with many.

Shaw intends to get hold of violence through its definitions and the biological explanation of violent behavior in some individuals. Although he mentions Freud or Darwin, Shaw fails to bring any deeper analysis or provide other insights into the origin of violence; his statements, as he admits, are often commonsensical. By defining violence strictly in the biological sense, Shaw restricts himself to one point of view and therefore sets a pattern to which he either finds a corresponding theory or looks for points of disapproval. Similarly, Shaw sets his standards when he strictly defines the modern American novel of violence. Firstly, the violence serves as the "central narrative focus and as the conflict that energizes the plot."[15] Secondly, it must have a distinct vocabulary of violence. As he insists, this does not apply to "novels in which violence is an end in itself. The distinction between gratuitous violence and violence that directs a narrative to intellectual or aesthetic purposefulness is obviously a difficult line to draw. Yet, common sense and experience make that line discernible enough to serve as a guide."[16] Also, Shaw excludes works in which violence functions as a means of scare. The works that have qualified for his analysis are, for example, Willliam Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). All in all, Shaw's book is a work in its own terms but one

[13] Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, 14.

[14] McCarthy said that in his interview with Richard B. Woodward from the *New York Times* in 1992. Richard B. Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times*, April 19, 1992.

[15] Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, 6.

[16] Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, 6.

craves for more variable and open discussion of the topics that would provide more innovative approach.

One of the first books to deal with the novel of violence and an author who inspired Shaw is *The Novel of Violence in America* (1950) by Wilbur M. Frohock. He divides the novels of violence into two categories: the novel of erosion and the novel of destiny. The novel of erosion feels the presence of time as erosive, blending it with some violent action and using characters largely unresponsive to their fates and as Frohock contends: "Time sweeps along and eventually the individual submerges beneath the stream, leaving his place for another; and while the character may delude himself into having a sense of his own significance, the reader is always aware that the significance is the delusion of a creature like himself, made and bounded by time."[17] In the novel of destiny violence is the fate of man; it becomes the only means of escape but also of his own destruction. Frohock concludes: "But still he accepts the way of violence, because life, as he sees life, is like that: violence is man's fate."[18] Frohock analyzes the works of Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck.

Michael Kowalewski's study of violence *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction* (1993) aims to analyze the aesthetics of violence and Kowalewski asserts: "Violence is always verbally mediated (. . .) American writers have persistently, almost obsessively, turned violence (. . .) into an imaginative resource."[19] His work focuses on the language of American fiction and the ways it evolved. He sees violence as both strangely attractive and repulsive: "There seems little point in pretending that American authors and their readers are not often fascinated as they are horrified by instances of violence."[20] He is interested in the ways authors incorporate violence into their work. The study covers all major American writers from James Fenimore Cooper to Thomas Pynchon and, as such, seeks to become a work that could be universally used.

James R. Giles has to his name two studies on violence in the American works of fiction. His first book *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel* (2000) focuses,

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[17] Frohock, *The Novel of Violence in America*, 4–5.

[18] Frohock, *The Novel of Violence in America*, 7.

[19] Kowalewski, *Deadly Musings*, 4.

[20] Kowalewski, *Deadly Musings*, 12.

in contradiction to its universal title, on naturalistic urban fiction. Giles credits Arthur Redding (*Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism, and Violence*, 1998) for providing a thought-provoking debate on systemic and structural violence. The texts he discusses do not treat violence as a revolutionary or liberating force, but represent a solitary fight of the oppressed in the same socioeconomic or racial group. Without any deeper theoretical background, Giles discusses the nature of the American urban environment and shifts in its cultural development. He stresses out the importance of Don DeLillo, his works acting as witnesses of national paranoia, his victims often falling prey to casual savagery. On the background of systemic violence, Giles emphasizes that violence asserts the existence of those men and women who fell victim to the commodification of society and thus became "traceless."[21] In his first study on violence, Giles explores the books by William Kennedy, Sandra Cisneros, Cormac McCarthy, N. Scott Momaday, and John Rechy.

In his second book, *The Spaces of Violence* (2006), Giles not only focuses his vision but also provides for his own systematic theory which is based on space. His spatial study is mainly based on two works: Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) and Edward W. Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996). Giles uses three axes to establish his points of view from which he recounts violence. The first one is the spatial diversity, both geographic and extra-geographic. The geographic diversity stems from desert places to urban spaces, namely from West Texas and Appalachia to New England. Extra-geographic spaces move from naturalistic and realistic to metaphoric and surreal.[22]

The next level reflects mainly the work of René Girard (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1979) and Giles calls it the naturalistic-mythological continuum. According to Girard, the sacred role of violence is closely connected to the ritual sacrifice and search for a surrogate victim. Giles finds a link to mythological violence in the works of Cormac McCarthy, but traces of male violence are present in most texts Giles chose for his analysis. The existence of primal violence, which resides away from human capacities, is closely linked to the existence of ritual sacrifice. This would suggest that it is not in the human capacity to get hold of violence, which is hard to tackle, finding its

[21] James R. Giles, *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 5.

[22] Giles, *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel*, 4.

reflection in systemic violence. Naturalism in literature then serves as an ideal genre for the portrayal of systemic violence.

The third continuum is the fourthspace, a concept conceived in response to Soja's concept of thirdspace, which is often present at the borders of the culture in the urban space. The importance of thirdspace dwells in its ability to break down binary oppositions and thus allows for the intrusion of resistance. Giles employs the concept of fourthspace as a "negative extension" of thirdspace, where "liberation inherent in thirdspace has been co-opted and is no longer possible."[23] In his study, Giles discusses the texts by Cormac McCarthy, Dorothy Allison, Lewis Nordan, Don DeLillo, Robert Stone, and Bret Easton Ellis.

One of the latest studies that deal with violence in American fiction is the book by Sally Bachner *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962–2007* (2011). Bachner is eager to answer the question of the rising prominence of violence in the works of fiction published since the 1960s. The success of these novels often highlights the prestige of violence and is promoted by the writers themselves. These writers often claim that violence is central to the realities of American life: "They locate in violence the ultimate source and site of authentically unmediated reality, even as they claim that such a reality cannot be accessed directly by the novel."[24] These books sustain the idea that violence is unspeakable, that it provides access to some obscure reality, and that the language distorts the real.

Bachner connects prestige to taste, which affirms and legitimizes class values. She states that her purpose is to "show how the ideas about language, violence, and ultimately, about the exercise of American power described here register anxieties about and offer solutions to affluent Americans as they make sense of the world in which they live."[25] Bachner establishes a connection between the prestige of violence and the feelings of the prominent classes that their peaceful life is undeserved and false. In her opinion, violence gained prestige as something that the United States could not experience themselves, and that questioned the validity of American life. The political and economic success of the United States wholly depended on the idea that violence and suffering happen elsewhere. Bachner claims: "The structural opposition between

[23] Giles, *The Spaces of Violence*, 13.

[24] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 2–3.

[25] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 4.

violence and conventional language, and the foregrounding of a violence guaranteed by its material absence at the center of American life, enables a deeply therapeutic and illusory reckoning with that violence."[26]

In her discourse, Bachner discards writers like Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, and Philip Roth as "instructive counterexample[s] to the ideas about violence pursued in [her] book."[27] For example, Bachner thinks McCarthy's works are unsuitable since they are rooted in "the brutal facts of American history," but also "the relentless silence of his landscapes and characters doesn't reflect the sublime sanctity of the violence being committed or the inadequacy of language to the task of representation."[28] She regards his works as ideal linguistic representations of violence and McCarthy "endlessly demonstrates the way that violence can indeed be represented."[29]

Bachner is ready to explore violence through trauma that she often finds unspeakable and that, as such, cannot be transmitted through the Symbolic nor assert its proximity to the Real.[30] However, this Real is often obscured or distorted by language. Also, she makes her point when differentiating between the violence as a representation that owes a lot to its author. Bachner perfectly realizes that it cannot be treated as a pure image of violence or, on the other side, purely as a work of the author's creativity. Most of the authors are concerned with how to effectively transmit violence as a socially codified message and the challenge of its portrayal with the devices at hand. The works she has selected deal with the problem of appropriately representing the trauma, and the possibilities of language to faithfully capture the image of violence: "Language in most of these texts is represented as fundamental to the production of a violence to which it proves subsequently inadequate."[31]

The trauma represents the only remaining connection with the world of the Real. However, Bachner stresses out that she uses "the real" "to designate a range of

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[26] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 5.

[27] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 5.

[28] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 5.

[29] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 5.

[30] The Symbolic and the Real are terms used by Jacques Lacan. The Symbolic is a structural system that forms meaning and identities and from which the selfhood stems. The Real is opposed to reality, which is a mere cultural construct. The Real cannot be approached, it is outside the Symbolic.

[31] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 4.

purportedly authentic, nonsocial truths to which these authors seek access through violence." [32] She ascribes the American obsession with violence to anxiety that suffering, which happens elsewhere in the world, results from and as a consequence of economic and political necessities of the American way of life. This discrepancy opens new therapeutic possibilities of coping with violence and has the ability to reveal its true nature.

[32] Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence*, 4.

3 Robert Coover and the Punishment of Postmodernism

Robert Coover is an author who has contributed significantly to American postmodern fiction in his literary career which spans more than sixty years. His first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, debuted in 1966 while his latest novel, *Open House*, was published in July 2023.

Coover's focus rests mainly on language or rather the representation of speech in everyday American reality that often addresses both political and social issues, often painful and provocative to the American mind. He continually describes the national character disdainfully, gently uncovering flaws in the American mentality through the most basic human principles. This tendency is still visible in his 2016 novel *Huck Out West*. In fact, Coover listed Mark Twain as one of the American literary figures he had always admired, a writer with "a stunning imagination" who "was playful with the technical aspects of storytelling."[33]

Coover possesses a distinctive narrative voice that was not always appreciated by critics but never failed to gain the attention of the literary public. "If he can somehow control his Hollywood giganticism and focus his vision of life, he may become heir to Dreiser or Lewis," concludes Webster Schott in his review of Coover's first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966).[34] Indeed, it is the explosion of the spoken, of the narrative forces, that makes his writing so unique; in Schott's words, he "writes his first novel as if he doesn't expect to make it to a second."[35] Schott appreciates Coover's connection to the old tradition, yet finds his novel superficial and lacking in a proper message. The novel nevertheless earned Coover a William Faulkner Award in 1966. In 2016 Coover did not resist the lure of the gigantic, since he was not afraid to tackle one of the most

[33] Frank Gado, *First Person: Conversations on Writers & Writing* (New York: Union College Press, 1973), 146.

[34] Webster Schott, "All the Hidden Nuts Cracked Open," *New York Times*, September 25, 1966.

[35] Webster Schott, "All the Hidden Nuts Cracked Open," *New York Times*, September 25, 1966. In fact, John Barth called it „the literature of exhaustion" in John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly* 20, no. 2 (August 1967): 29–34.

beloved American characters Huckleberry Finn. Yet, Ron Powers in the *New York Times* noted that Coover's "pen is warmed up in hell."[36]

One of the first journals of literary criticism to consider Robert Coover a future major American author was the *Hollins Critic* published by the Hollins College, Virginia in 1970.[37] The journal focuses on aspiring authors, always devoting one issue to a promising young novelist. The issue does not overwhelm its reader with overcomplicated theory but rather well-written and lucid contributions. The editor of the Robert Coover special issue was R. H. W. Dillard, a Southern poet and literary critic. He rather nicely sums up Coover's continuity with "the major American literary tradition, that of Poe and Melville, Hawthorne and Faulkner, for he seeks in his fiction the truths of the human heart in the labyrinths of a fallen world and of the darkened human mind."[38]

One year later Coover's short story collection *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969) was reviewed by the writer Joyce Carol Oates in the *Southern Review* (Winter 1971), but also by William Gass in the *New York Times*; his review was later reprinted in his book *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971).[39] Gass reads the stories like cards, unsure who is being played; perhaps the reader, although he may have all the cards in his hand. The narrative line is broken, the point of view shapes the space and, when opened, reveals the multiplicity that dwells behind the closed door. Most of the stories had already been published before, but Coover insisted only on those stories that would give the book a coherent unity.

Eleven years after the publication of Coover's first novel, Thomas R. Edwards in the review of Coover's famous novel *The Public Burning* (1977) concludes that his writing still "suffers from excess: it is considerably too long and repetitive, it tests one's capacity for embarrassment rather too cruelly, (. . .)."[40] At the same time, Edwards calls his literary skills fantastic, brilliant, and extravagant. The seventies were a rather difficult period for Coover, mainly because he struggled to get his major work *The*

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[36] Ron Powers, "Who Would Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Grow Up to Be?" *New York Times*, January 20, 2017.

[37] R. H. W. Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast: The Fictions of Robert Coover," *The Hollins Critic* 7, no. 2 (April 1970): 1–12.

[38] Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast," 1–2.

[39] Joyce Carol Oates, "Realism of Distance, Realism of Immediacy," *Southern Review* 8 (Winter 1971): 305–6.

[40] Thomas R. Edwards, "Real People, Mythic History," *New York Times*, August 14, 1977.

Public Burning published and his existence as a writer was at stake. Nevertheless, in 1978 Coover had his entry published in the well-established *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, in the volume *American Novelists Since World War II* edited by Larry McCaffery, this entry was later updated in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Yearbook 1981*.

Later, in 1981, Richard Andersen published the book of literary criticism simply called *Robert Coover*. The book covers fifteen years of Coover's literary career, his most notable novels being at that time *The Origin of the Brunists*, *The Public Burning*, and *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968).

Andersen, simply defined as a writer, assumes that Coover's central interest is the role of the fiction maker, which the author uses as a metaphor through which he inquires into the mysteries of human imagination and the power of fiction to find a meaning in the chaotic world and shows a tendency to turn fiction into the acceptable truth. Things, such as science or religion, are presented as fictional constructs that can realistically reveal instincts for self-destruction in every human being. He appreciates his stylistic creativity and bold choice of subject. Also, Coover's retelling of familiar stories proves challenging to his readers, who are used to more traditional forms of recounting human experience.

Unfortunately, Andersen handles Coover's work through a conventional approach, giving only a general overview of his work instead of thorough analysis. Unable to cope with the postmodern or at least experimental discourse, he often resorts to usual simplifications, merely scratching the surface. Andersen spends a lot of time with Coover's early works, but his most famous book *The Public Burning* is not discussed at greater length. It seems that Andersen is at his best when he describes works that are more traditional in form, but Coover's later works leave him rather baffled and critically unresponsive. This incapacity is visible in the rendering of Coover's probably most analyzed short story "The Babysitter." The block quotation of synopsis, written by William Gass, leads to further plot clarifications and repetitions only to conclude that the short story is a combination of fragments that bear a social meaning: "[A] collection of fascinating technical tricks, however, is its characters' lack of any but the most superficial of human thoughts and emotions, a consistent failing in most of Coover's short fictions, and the story's slight social message, which informs its

readers in no subtle terms that lust, violence, boredom, and deceit play a significant part in the real and imagined events of contemporary man."[41]

Finally, Andersen concludes that Coover's metaphors are vital for "a healthy imagination" and that readers of Coover's fiction may find novelty in their approach to life while keeping "their concern for humanity's condition," which brings them "a healthy sense of humor."[42] However, the best description of Coover's work is offered by Coover himself, through quotations from his interviews with Frank Gado, Leo Hertzel, and Geoffrey Wolff.

Andersen's book does not rank Coover among postmodern authors and does not introduce in his analysis any theorists of postmodernism at all. In one of his later interviews, Coover disclosed that although he thought it to be a "flattering" term he insisted that "to be categorized is a punishment not a gift."[43] Coover also reflected on one of his first literary conferences, "Unspeakable Practices," where writers like Donald Barthelme, Stanley Elkin, William Gaddis, or William Gass were asked for a final definition of postmodernism.[44] All of them provided the characteristics that none of them fit. Coover himself concluded: "[S]ome ways of naming a generation are fruitful and some are not. Postmodernism is not. It doesn't really say anything."[45]

This shortcoming was fully corrected in the next book of literary criticism that focuses on the work of three postmodern writers. The art of metafiction comes under scrutiny in the study by Larry McCaffery, which is called, conveniently to its content, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (1982).[46] Although McCaffery dedicated only one chapter to the literary creations of Robert Coover, he clearly squeezes in everything that is important while keeping a good and organized pace to his thoughts.

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[41] Richard Andersen, *Robert Coover* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 105.

[42] Andersen, *Robert Coover*, 141.

[43] Shulman, "An Interview with Robert Coover."

[44] The panel was moderated by Leslie Fiedler, who "posed questions one writer later described as the sort you fear getting from little old ladies in tennis shoes. Why do you write? Who is your audience? (. . .) 'I know exactly who I'm writing for,' said Mr. Barthelme. 'They are extremely intelligent and physically attractive.' (. . .) When Mr. Fiedler concluded by saying, 'None of us will be remembered as long or revered as deeply as our contemporary Stephen King,' many writers became furious and insulted." In Caryn James, "The Avant-Garde Ex PostFacto," *New York Times*, April 9, 1988.

[45] Shulman, "An Interview with Robert Coover."

[46] The art of metafiction in the works of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and William Gass was discussed by Robert Scholes in *The Iowa Review*. See Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *Iowa Review* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1970): 110–5.

In his introduction, McCaffery starts with literary conventions that kept many writers, such as Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and John Barth, in literary obscurity. The writers whose work was viewed through the conventional perspectives were deemed eccentric or not taken into account in the 1960s. McCaffery reveals what is central to these works: socially alienated characters that create their own meaningful systems that provide them with the opportunity to live in organized and emotionally responsive worlds. In a general sense, these worlds represent organizing principles of history, politics, religion, or myths that come to overwhelm their creators and position them as mere pawns in a game that crosses the borders of its own rules. However, these characters accept their fate willingly, since any order and structure is better than chaos and social expulsion. These works want to stress that behind every creation stands a human being and therefore fiction cannot be accepted as a faithful representation of reality. The writers often lavishly present their works as literary inventions denying any claims on reality; in short, they openly display themselves as metafictions.

McCaffery's work is systematic and successfully developed a prerequisite necessary for any book of literary criticism. The chapter dedicated to Coover, "Robert Coover and the Magic of Fiction Making," provides a step-by-step exposure of Coover's strategies and motivations.[47] McCaffery starts with a concept of man-as-a-fiction-maker that leads to the breakdown of the narrative process but also recognizes the importance of metaphor that is not an end in itself but is literally deconstructed and impregnated with a new meaning. McCaffery stresses Coover's ability to enter into an open discourse with his readers, in which he uncovers contradictions in the conventional approach to fiction that often leads to an impasse.

The book focuses on four Coover's books, *The Origin of the Brunists*, *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), *Pricksongs & Descants*, and *The Public Burning*. In the part on *The Origin of the Brunists*, McCaffery's expert hand professes itself in the account of fictional systems Coover's protagonists devise. It seems that McCaffery falls into the Coover trap, at large explaining the numerological patterns found in the book (similar to those present in the Bible) only to reveal it as a joke on the reader, who is subconsciously forced to attribute meanings to numbers and draw patterns out of them. He extends his analysis of Coover's preoccupation with the role of the fiction writer and comments on his topical development in a purely literary way. In

[47] See Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 25–98.

his book, McCaffery efficiently uncovers the mechanisms of metafiction and offers a more coherent view of Coover's fiction in one chapter than Andersen did in his whole book.

If Andersen's book presents rather an introductory look at Coover's fiction and McCaffery's work approaches Coover in a distinctly critical approach, then the book by Lois Gordon *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process* (1983), does not share any of those two approaches.

Gordon includes a theoretical chapter on Robert Coover and the avant-garde. She comments on the concepts that have evolved in opposition to the traditional ones and provides a general view of the spiritual environment that opened innovative points of view in many areas, such as physics or philosophy. Gordon characterizes Coover's style and method, as well as the fictional spaces he builds. Interestingly, she sees Coover as a skilled sociologist and psychologist and appreciates his capability to offer new insights into American history. Gordon reveals a lot from his personal history and educational background citing philosophical and sociological influences: Freud, Durkheim, Jaspers, Lévi-Strauss, Ovid, and Cervantes.[48] One must appreciate Gordon's complex attitude that proposes new ways in which to experience Coover and retell Coover's work. Gordon makes us aware that it is not only the literary work that gives insight into the author's mindset but also the influences that shaped him as a writer.

The eighties produced most of the studies dealing with the works of Coover. A different approach is presented by Jackson I. Cope in his book *Robert Coover's Fiction* (1986). In his preface, Cope stresses his friendly relationship with Robert Coover and thus takes the liberty of not surveying his works, comparing them to those of his contemporaries. Instead, he recommends reading a study by Kathryn Hume.[49] For Cope, "postmodernism" is a matter of the past: "The burning issues in criticism of the past two decades have burned out in the best way: They flared alarmingly, burned down into a hard core of truth haloed by blue flame from the devil's disciples, and gave Coover and other serious factionalists of his generation a generic photograph of themselves against which to react in a re-creative way."[50] It is clear that Cope will have his own way of dealing with Coover that many may find confusing at least. Notably, his work has also

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[48] Gordon obtained a large amount of information on Coover's publishing career from Richard Seaver, a man who dared to publish *The Public Burning*.

[49] Kathryn Hume, "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic," *Novel* 12 (1979): 127–48.

[50] Jackson I. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), x.

strong linguistic qualities that sound at some points more like developments of Coover's own ideas.

Cope avoids any larger treatise on *The Origin of the Brunists*, but apart from all Coover's most famous novels he also deals with *The Night at the Movies*, *Gerald's Party,* and *Spanking the Maid*, the books that reflect Coover's preoccupation with the possibilities of various literary genres. Cope treats *The Public Burning* as a dialogic novel that is a dialogue between the public and the private, masterly unified in one work of art. Cope analyzes Coover on the background of the Bakhtinian discourse discovering new possibilities for reading his fiction. Exploring Coover's work, he does not look for a central unifying idea but rather prefers extracting one idea from every book and analyze it in depth. Thus he dedicates his first chapter to the analysis of short stories from *Pricksongs & Descants*, revising myths and fables. Cope stresses the unique quality of myth that cannot decide whether it wants to be true or false; only falsity leads to fiction.

In his book *Dissident Postmodernist*s (1991) Paul Maltby ranks Robert Coover among dissident postmodernists together with Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme. In a dictionary-entry style, Maltby efficiently explains the basic postmodern concepts such as difference, logocentrism, media society, and critique of universal knowledge, introducing philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-François Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard. He has dedicated special attention to the works of Frederic Jameson, "the *locus classicus* of the postmodernism debate (. . .)."[51]

Maltby explores language in terms of its social function, showing its position within the political and cultural framework that has reshaped its functioning under the logic of late capitalism. With these ideas in sight, Maltby recognizes two strands in American postmodern fiction: the dissident tendency which is represented by Coover, Barthelme, or Pynchon, and the introverted tendency, which is reflected in the works of Nabokov or Gass. In the introverted tendency, the language is not tainted by further political implications. However, as Maltby eagerly points out, these are not finite categories; the dissident tendency shows itself "by its *heightened perception* of the politics of language."[52]

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[51] Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 8. Italics in the original.

[52] Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 37. Italics in the original.

Contrary to other critics, Maltby stresses that metafiction reaches beyond the scope of postmodernism and in general involves "*any systematically self-reflexive* work of fiction (. . .)."[53] Maltby decries the term "metafiction" as defined by Gass, since the implied intertextuality is entirely literary. Therefore, Maltby opens possibilities for the nonliterary-oriented discourse that reflects, among other things, political or socio-historical debates.

For dissident postmodernists, power is no longer class-oriented but rather, in Maltby's words, "*diffused* through the cultural sphere, in particular, through language (. . .)."[54] Power comes to be associated with language and thus fiction can no longer be written in the "confrontational mode" that diverts attention to the postmodern way of writing, which reveals itself to be self-reflexive. Language is associated with the power of social integration. Maltby even extracts several concepts from the works of Robert Coover that are relevant to the dissident tendency reflecting the political and social discourse. Unfortunately, Maltby does not delve deeply into these tendencies that he so eagerly propagates. Also, he does not explore to the full the language and its importance in the works of the dissidents.

The latest book of Coover literary criticism, *Understanding Robert Coover*, was published in 2001. The book was consulted with and approved by Coover, which makes its content a relevant source of information. The book is part of a literary series on contemporary American literature published by the University of South Carolina Press, and is probably one of the most complex books of literary criticism reflecting on the work of Robert Coover. The book carefully covers all of his works, referencing interviews and reviews, publication struggles, and various concepts that are frequently debated in literary journals. The author of the study, Brian Evenson does not propose any specific critical standpoint; he presents opinions and offers various points of view; however, he slightly presumes that his book is at the other end of Coover's literary career. Yet, more than twenty years later it is relevant to say that nothing is finished, nothing is closed, and there are still many years the literary critics have to contend with.

Most of the literary theorists and critics read Coover through Coover himself, that is, focusing on the topics that either Coover directly reveals or that Coover's classification as a postmodern writer allows. One must be pretty sure that for Coover

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[53] Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 20. Italics in the original.

[54] Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 41. Italics in the original.

categorizing is not comfortable. On the contrary, he is capable of accepting the varied discourse his books precipitate ad is pleased with the unexpected challenges his own books bring. The theories on Coover's work are like time capsules of literary criticism. They are enclosed in a specific theoretical framework that does not overstep the neatly settled boundaries.

However, Coover's work can be successfully tested against the hard-boiled socio-political theories that will reveal its coherence with the contemporary thought and show whether his books are empty shells of postmodern outcry or find their justification even years after their publication. Also, most of these studies do not fully reflect on the tools that Coover uses to probe into the structures, myths and fables. There are several patterns Coover gladly uses and omnipresence of violence is one of them. Violence is a force that transcends most of his work.

4 Robert Coover: Representations of Violence

Literary critics always appreciate about Robert Coover his ability to control the things he creates. In his interview with Coover, Larry McCaffery discloses that Coover chooses "his words carefully" and expresses "his opinions forcefully."[55] Indeed, Coover is a controller of meaning; he does not move inside any structural system but positions himself outside of these controlled spaces and thus grants the independence to the meaning he generates; he intentionally controls the funhouses he creates. Like other postmodern writers, he lays the meaning structures bare, reflecting on the falsity of identities that are often constituted through the systems his characters populate. The fictitious reality reflects the nature of social and political systems, their conflicting values and power structures. Coover casts away the traditional uses of language and, therefore, detaches himself from the values and discourses that would keep him subjugated to the systems they represent. He positions himself as an independent creator of discourse and provider of meaning opening spaces for parallel discourses and representations.

Coover belongs to the group of writers who started their literary careers in the early 1960s. This generation of writers was confronted with various international conflicts from the Vietnam to the Cold War. Interestingly, as Coover himself reveals in his interview with Thomas Alden Bass, even though most of these writers had never met in person, they ended up coming to the same conclusion. Coover himself also provided a characteristics of what his generation aims at: "A reaction against the sclerosis of old forms, (. . .). The adoption of self-conscious narrators and experimentation in literary structure."[56] What becomes apparent is that realistic fiction was losing its grip on the modern world; the values it sustained were no longer relevant, since the reality that supported it could no longer be trusted.

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[55] Larry McCaffery, ed., *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 63.

[56] Thomas Alden Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," *Antioch Review* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 300.

The postwar world was perceived as oppressive by many writers with its aged structures, which deepened the writers' urge for an imaginative approach and finding new ways to accustom their writing to new realities. The changed reality and the new sensitivity required innovative methods both in style and structure. Linearity was discarded in favor of fragmentation, time and space were freed and therefore much of the creative challenge was transferred to the reader, who was now compelled to impose order and meaning on the loose and dissolved elements. At the same time, the language was distrusted, since reality became unstable and unreadable. The linguistic devices were exhausted, and many writers felt the urge to escape the form that was imposed on them. Coover repeatedly talked of his need to liberate himself from the old ideas he personally found limiting:

> Maybe the struggle I had as a young writer against the old forms 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.[57]

Still, Coover acknowledges many thinkers who helped him to navigate through the world of the narrative and extend his own forms beyond the world he perceived as petrified; he repeatedly credits writers who do not seem to be tangled in any pattern, like Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, or James Joyce. In the early interviews, he also mentions Miguel de Cervantes, a literary inspiration he shares with John Barth, whose fictions "are full of 'code words' that point to a significance beyond themselves."[58] In his Prologue to "Seven Exemplary Fictions" (*Pricksongs & Descants*, 1969) he honors Cervantes as a master teacher who defined the author's purpose: "The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader (. . .) to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation."[59] However, his major influences were not those of the literary world. As a writer, he was fascinated with the idea of transposing the solid theory into its more imaginative and literary version:

> When I think about what most altered my perceptions of the world and how to write stories, though, it tended not to be other

[57] McCaffery, *Anything Can Happen*, 69.

[58] Gado, *First Person*, 143.

[59] Robert Coover, *Pricksongs & Descants* (New York: Plume, 1969), 79.

> fiction writers, so much as philosophers and historians and scientists. People like Freud and Durkheim and Kierkegaard and Kant and all the revisionist historians of the time.[60]

Coover graduated in philosophy and is well-traveled in the world of academia. According to Bass he was "[n]ot diddling with creative writing programs, but studying the hard-core stuff, especially a good dose of philosophy (. . .)."[61] His philosophical studies ventured into his works; his initiation to the craft happened via theology, but it soon diverted to history which, as he believes, "was an attempt to replace religion."[62] His novels often carry the philosophical burden, his characters, just like many philosophers, assign a meaning to events in their lives, and seek structures like historians and religionists. Sometimes Coover injects his fiction with philosophical concepts and waits for the response and the ceaseless struggle to make the world of meaning a habitable place again, at least temporarily. Coover's capacity to skillfully handle various sociological and psychological concepts often results in reversed tendency; he sees them "more as confirmation than as inspiration."[63]

Coover also recognizes the importance of metaphor in his work, but he never serves a complete idea to the reader. His metaphors involve a process of recognition, since their meaning cannot be clearly and readily discerned. They contain pieces of everything that can be encountered in everyday reality, but they need to be made into a coherent whole by the reader. Coover admits that metaphor is central to his work, but only in the general sense; he never provides any detailed explanations; he rather underlines the impulses or general ideas his works carry: "It's not good for an author to explain his own metaphors, and when he does, he's often wrong."[64]

His protagonists are often trapped in artificial systems they create to get hold of the universe, to find meaning in the world they do not understand, or that does not reveal itself in a comprehensible way to them. In *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), the socially marginalized characters interpret the mining disaster as a divine intervention, building a religious system that successfully penetrates the social fabric denied to them

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[60] Thomas E. Kennedy, *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 116. From an interview with David Appleby.

[61] Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," 288.

[62] Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," 291.

[63] Larry McCaffery, "As Guilty as the Rest of Them: An Interview with Robert Coover," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42, no. 1 (2000): 124.

[64] Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," 295.

as individuals. Robert Nixon, the main protagonist of *The Public Burning* (1977), craves to be included in the historical and political processes, subordinating his life to constant reconsideration and sorting of facts into comprehensible wholes. In *Gerald's Party* (1986), the main narrator, Gerald, cannot escape his family funhouse that cyclically tortures him with the horrors of his middle-class suburban life. Finally, in *Spanking the Maid* (1982) two characters are enslaved to their compulsively perverse private universe and stereotypically assigned roles within this system. Mainly, the characters realize that the systems they so desperately crave to enter are no less fictional or artificial than the ones they created. However, Coover frequently roots his systems in political, cultural, and historical background.

Coover's connection to the real world is through the language and the Symbolic; Coover reshuffles the Symbolic and therefore creates a parallel world to the real one, a world which is constantly pinching and provoking the real.[65] However, the real world is not the only true world, since both of them are true by their own standards. Coover uses metaphor to suggest an existing relation to the real world; however, this metaphor does not pretend to merely reflect on the real world but lays claim to its own reasoning. Coover openly admits that there is a metaphor behind his work which is publicly exposed and continuously reveals its own deformity. The metaphor thus comes discarded only to be reassembled and liberated from the old crusts it gathered in the past.

The perception of the world is fabricated through language and the only chance for a change can be administered through the Symbolic. The language that had always been a tool of creative thinking and a symbol of discourse rather than violent action has become a trap in which a man finds himself. In *Spanking the Maid*, the maid's language is restricted by the Symbolic order in which she is assigned her servant position; her language is that of reconciliation and acceptance of her predicament. Her language is the language of powerlessness and non-violence, a medium that turned her life into a reasonable and justifiable construct. However, Coover indeed implies that language is

[65] Nick Mansfield explains one of the three Lacanian orders as follows: "Your sense of self is outside you, projected at you from a world over which you have minimal control. The system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives is not your own." In Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 43.

violence. Coover's idea approximates to that of Slavoj Žižek's, who concluded with his usual clairvoyance that man "dwells in a torture-house of language."[66]

In 1973, Neil Schmitz called Coover "a prisoner of words," implying that language cannot be escaped, that it writes itself into one's body and soul that not only becomes a prison but a place of torture in the Lacanian sense.[67] The language alienates a man from himself, creates an abyss with a man on one side and the language on the other. In order to reveal the truth, Žižek suggests that language "should be twisted, denaturalized, extended, condensed, cut and reunited, made to work against itself. Language (. . .) [is] a place of cruel indifference and stupidity."[68] Coover does not limit himself to mere representations of violence through language, but he tortures it and finally uses it as a tool of violence.

Coover does not let the language roam free, he does not passively accept it as an ultimate product; he bends it and subjects it to his needs. In his hands, language becomes its own enemy, playing against itself. To reveal the truth, the reader not only has to interpret the words but also extract the meaning. Schmitz concludes: "Endlessly projecting his image, the metafictive artist works in the hothouse of the masturbatory fantasy where no resolutions are reached, where the word is never incarnate."[69] The process of fiction-writing is no longer seen as mimetic, that is, it denies its reflective relationship to reality. Coover stresses that the Platonic perception of the world has moved from "the sense of the microcosm as an imitation of the macrocosm and that there was indeed a perfect order of which we could perceive only an imperfect illusion—toward an Aristotelian attitude which, instead of attempting a grand comprehensive view of the whole, looked at each particular subject matter and asked what was true about it."[70]

The writing process is openly revealed as a purely linguistic construct projected into multiple spaces. Coover empowers the language to a performative quality that tears it away from the stiffened forms of use, a game of words that injects energy into situations that are often sinking with dismay and hopelessness. In *Spanking the Maid*,

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[66] Slavoj Žižek, "Language, Violence and Non-Violence," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 2, no. 3 (2008): 4.

[67] Neil Schmitz, "A Prisoner of Words," *Partisan Review* 40 (Winter 1973): 131.

[68] Žižek, "Language, Violence and Non-Violence," 4.

[69] Schmitz, "A Prisoner of Words," 133.

[70] Gado, *First Person*, 143.

the language becomes contrapuntal, with exchanges between the meditations on the nature of spiritual sacrifices and whip-like passages of experienced pain:

> "When you are ordered to do anything, do not grumble or let your countenance betray any dislike thereunto, but do it cheerfully and generously!" "Yes, sir, but—" "What? WHAT—?!' Whish-CRACK! "OW!" SLASH! Her crimson bottom, hugged close to the pillows, bobs and dances under the whistling cane. "When anyone finds fault with you, do not answer rudely!" Whirr-SMACK! "NO, SIR!" Each stroke, surprising her afresh, makes her jerk with pain and wrings a little cry from her (as anticipated by the manuals when the bull's pizzle is employed), which she attempts to stifle by burying her face in the horsehair cushion. "Be respectful—?" "Be respectful and obedient, sir, to those—" swish-THWOCK! "—placed—OW!—placed OVER you—AARGH!" Whizz-SWACK! "With fear and trembling—" SMASH! "—and in singleness of your heart!" he reminds her gravely as she groans, starts, quivers under his patient instruction. "Ouch! Yes, sir!"[71]

Coover's language always approaches the excess, which is supposed to nauseate and frighten but also entertain. Through the change in the rhythm, he emphasizes what was initially invisible, becoming both sketch-like and spectacular. Violence can be experienced through form, which provokes imagination and performatively highlights its reality. Still, Coover never falls into clichés, and if he seemingly does, the normative idea of violence is soon torn apart by his imaginative forces. Under Coover's guidance, language exposes the falsity of structures, becomes a means of discord, and recognizes the other only to the extent it serves its purpose. Language itself is the primary system that divides and alienates. Violence is constructed through language and therefore a response can be obtained only to such violence that is verbally defined and exists in the Symbolic order, since it is the language that creates portraits, images, and representations. For Coover, language is the ultimate tool of power.

Coover's portrayal of violence does not come close to anything that corresponds to the general idea of violence in the real world, that is, to descriptive images of violence a reader usually faces. For this reason, the violence seems unjustifiably cruel and comes functionally rejected as unreal and unnecessary. His violence is indeed regarded as fictional, a violence that does not happen, and, as such, cannot be accounted for. Coover's violence cannot be dismissed as a mere reenactment of violence. He

[71] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 73–4.

constructs an image of violence that shows itself as a constructed image and does not even pretend to be real. To a reader, violence exists only as a representation. Coover does not connect violence with prestige, but it always occupies a deviantly prominent position. In his fiction, violence always goes to excess, often is superficially transposed into something comical and farcical, an exceedingly vivid matter with a tint of unbelievability. He always starts with an image of violence, which is common and familiar, a representation, as for example in *Gerald's Party*, in which the dead body of a young actress is found stabbed in the middle of the living room, a carbon copy of a paradigmatic detective situation that calls for some hard facts and steady mind. However, in Coover's execution, this situation is soon twisted to the extremity that openly reveals its fictionality, but simultaneously turns into an emotional attack on the vulnerable reader.

With time, Coover's violence spirals deeper, from external and openly visible causes to some underlying and more intimate issues. In *The Origin of the Brunists*, the act of violence happens openly, "traditionally," as an externality that causes disturbance in the small town community. *The Public Burning*, his most controversial book, features violence that is performed publicly but, at the same time, is legally non-existent, overlooked, and left unspoken by the system in power. Coover's intention is clearly revelatory; the suppressed violence resurfaces in the face of the whole nation. In *Gerald's Party*, the violence is unpronounced, an integral part already physically present but not accepted as a social reality. Finally, in *Spanking the Maid*, the violence is most intimate, an inseparable essence of everyday life. Coover's violence is often instrumental; in the words of one of his characters, the method is simply described as "[s]tick it in, see what surfaces."[72] Coover uses it to point at things, to uncover hidden conflicts, to disturb the system, to recreate and reshape the old forms. In Coover's world, acts of violence have the capacity to create meaning and violence constructs alternatives to the world.

However, the reader is denied a conclusion or some final resolution of the conflict that often dominates Coover's fiction and accumulates all the clues in a seemingly coherent narrative line, leaving no possibility for interpretations. His protagonists face endless chains of signifiers that they can neither organize nor make any sense of and, therefore, their access to ultimate and liberating meaning is restricted

[72] Robert Coover, *Gerald's Party* (London: Paladin Books, 1998), 288.

to them. They show a resistant incapability to abandon the Symbolic position they were assigned to, the ticking narrative speeding towards the inevitable end that reveals itself as void. The reader is cyclically manipulated to enjoy this game, to test his own set of values and their acceptability. The compulsivity shows no way out or how to disentangle oneself from it. While in *Gerald's Party* the whole bash resembles an exercise in social affinity, *The Public Burning* tests the loyalty to the ruling order under any circumstances. However, the systems the protagonists accept so willingly often turn against those who refuse to be subjected to them.

Consequently, the protagonist is transformed into a guardian who eliminates those disobedient, serving and empowering the system, which is most visibly present in the character of the American superhero Uncle Sam from *The Public Burning*, who embodies the energy and vitality of the nation that is fueled by its believers. Richard Nixon, who constantly attributes meaning to historical and political events, can become a master mover of the meaning in the future, since he uncovers the workings of the system and, through the doings of Uncle Sam, grants to the meaning its universality. Thus, all persons and events are turned into units, waiting to be assigned the politically correct meaning; therefore, the original meaning is lost to the purpose. The increase in violence attempts to elicit a response or a reaction, but Coover's characters remain mostly unresponsive, undisturbed. Anything that could possibly perturb the legitimacy of the orders the characters so gladly inhabit is discarded, and they remain under the spell of civilized social orders that determine all aspects of their individuality.

Still, some representations cannot be seen, are left unspoken, and protrude from behind in increased cruelty and outbursts of violence, the cases that point to some hidden or unconscious apocalypse. Again, Coover's apocalypse is mainly metaphorical, freed from the strictly religious implications; it poses as a parallel to contemporary life, a "dominant metaphor, the one most necessary for the domestication of terror."[73] *Gerald's Party* explores a feast of phallocentric consumerism that turns women into objects, revealing the Lacanian desire, a lack that cannot be satisfied, and violence that penetrated the white middle-class home and remains largely unpronounced. Sexual aggression and violence is often fully revealed but never acknowledged by Gerald, the narrator, who reports on the acts but is rarely emotionally engaged. Also, the media coverage of the party by the present filmmakers fictionalizes the reality, obscuring the

[73] Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," 300.

real. Violence and sexually predatory behavior penetrated the middle class, and the acts of violence remain concealed behind the high-brow talk. Violence seems casual, banal, well-assimilated, and readily accepted. In *Gerald's Party*, there are several cases of violence against women committed by men. Victor, Gerald's friend, is beating his partner in the middle of the living room. However, Gerald denies it, doubts the reality of the situation that is happening in front of his eyes, and cannot cope and appropriately respond to the situation. A young woman, Alison, is apparently sexually harassed. However, a man is wearing her tights like "a superhero's cape."[74] In *The Public Burning*, the public execution of the Rosenbergs uncovers the falsity of the system that most characters find safe, reliable, and accept as democratic.

Coover's violence is often bound to the world controlled and created by men, but also to the failing myths he openly exposes as deficient and perverted. The protagonists are often haunted by the corrupted structures they cannot escape, hide from, or successfully challenge. Their worlds are almost naturally infused with violence that always goes beyond the propriety. That is beyond what is interpretatively acceptable, often spilling beyond the borders of all that is serious, violating everything that comes into its way leaving no sphere, either political, social, or mental, totally unaffected, bringing no spiritual redemption.

There are multiple ways of approaching the theory of violence in Coover's fiction. Firstly, it is possible to treat violence as a representation that reflects the reality of American life, its social and cultural *milieu*. Coover does not find violence in the social margins or urban spaces, but reaches to the core of the society which he often finds damaged and pretentious. Therefore, unlike many other authors, Coover's works not only describe how language represents violence and creates its image, but also uses language as a means of violence. For Coover, language is power and therefore language becomes violence. Language in Coover's hands not only describes the whipped behind of the maid, but is also used as the whip that violates her body. Cover's language-turned-violence affects the reader, instead of just representatively hitting the body of his characters. His use of violence is strategically and meticulously planned. First, the world of his characters is thrown off-balance, and a need reveals itself to incorporate it into the constructed world they inhabit. What was initially an externality turns into an intimate reality that is either accepted with sinister pleasure or turns into a nightmarish

[74] Robert Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 166.

torture. Coover treats his characters with cruelty and without indulgence; they become mere puppets confronting forces of the Symbolic they cannot control.

In general, Coover highlights the fictitiousness of his stories, using tales that are embedded in readers' minds in their total unity, as closed systems. These are often fairytales, folktales, and other somewhat stereotypically formed literary works that do not raise expectations on the reader's side or create challenges. By retelling them, Coover offers the reader a means of escape from those old forms, since he not only retells them, but starts where most of them end, in the happy-ever-after, in their conclusive finality that awakens to the challenge of a new day. Through the acts of violence, Coover dissolves mythical structures, just like when Snow White is watching her stepmother dance in the iron shoes, a moment of epiphany for the Prince, awakening to some terrible realization: "How she'd squealed to see the old Queen's flailing limbs, how she'd applauded the ringing of those flaming iron clogs against the marble floors! Yet, it was almost as though she were ignorant of the pain, of any cause or malice, ignorant of consequences—like a happy child at the circus, unaware of any skills or risks."[75]

[75] Robert Coover, "The Dead Queen," in *A Child Again* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2005), 52.

5 Political and Socio-Economic Violence

Political theory was the first area of discourse that paid proper attention to the word violence. Namely, Hannah Arendt in her study *On Violence* (1969) provided a deep analysis of the term. Arendt recognized the necessity of not only providing for a proper linguistic definition of the term but also pointed out the linguistic inadequacy with which the term had been used. She also emphasized that violence should be examined through the lens of the realities it reflects.

Violence, in the positivist sense, has often been considered in terms of its physical impact on the human body, associated with the raw force or aggression. This violence was always considered an outcome of some socially unacceptable behavior; and as such, violence had to be prevented, isolated, and stamped on. There was no inclination to explore violence as an independent concept; it presented a negative social phenomenon that should be contained or came along as a part of some more significant cultural, social, or political events, such as wars, revolutions, or uprisings. However, the first step to contain and tackle violence was to systematically organize it into categories on the basis of some common characteristics, initially reducing it to binary oppositions. In the 1980s historians, such as Jean-Claude Chesnais were among the first in their field to differentiate between interpersonal and collective violence, and criminal or noncriminal violence. However, their studies either reflected available statistical records from the archives or their attitude to violence was purely cultural.[76]

Still, it seems that it was Arendt's essay with a straightforward title *On Violence* (1970) that aroused major interest in violence as such and pointed for many the direction in which the future studies should be carried out. Firstly, Arendt stressed out the need to linguistically differentiate between various concepts that were often interchanged, and that have "also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to."[77] Therefore she seeks diversity in the following concepts: power, strength, force, authority, and violence. Secondly, she linked the concept of violence to that of power. Being influenced by the violent events of the 20th century, Arendt decided to analyze violence in its political manifestation. In her opinion, violence was a

[76] See Philip Dwyer, "Violence and its Histories: Meaning, Methods, Problems," *History and Theory* 56, no. 4 (December 2017): 7–22.

[77] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harvest Book, 1970), 43.

manifestation of power in its extreme form, and political institutions incarnate this power. For Arendt, violence is instrumental and hence needs justification in comparison with power that desires legitimacy; for example, Max Weber saw political organizations as being dependent on their ability to generate legitimate violence.[78] Thus, I intentionally avoid discussing the words such as legitimate or illegitimate since these words are easily obscured or misused by those in power. Arendt herself was very clear and adamant on that point: "Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate."[79]

Soon, violence has come to mean more than just the physical form. Most attempts to provide some final definition of violence failed and the attitude was to explicitly state its indescribability but at the same time its apparent and self-evident recognition. However, the theory of the sociologist Johan Galtung opens the discourse on violence negating the usual perception of violence as "*somatic* incapacitation, or deprivation of health, alone (. . .), at the hands of an *actor* who *intends* this to be the consequence."[80] Galtung starts his thesis with an idea of peace as "an absence of violence."[81] This enabled him to bring larger forces into play and redefine violence "as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual."[82] Galtung introduced the term "structural violence" where persons have limited access to realize their potentialities, not only because of physical violence or a punishment for doing something wrong, but also as a result of psychological violence or a positive attitude to violence which is based on rewards for doing the right thing. That is, a subject is rewarded for behaving appropriately and therefore, his available choices are restricted. Also, Galtung deconstructs the subject-object relationship in violence, suggesting that it does not always require an object that is hurt, and not always a subject that performs the act: "The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and

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[78] See Max Weber, "Legitimations of Domination," in *Politics as a Vocation*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 3–4. Max Weber, "Basic Sociological Terms," in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, trans. Talcott Parsons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 3–62.

[79] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 52.

[80] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 168. Italics in the original.

[81] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 168.

[82] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 168.

consequently as unequal life chances."[83] Moreover, structural violence comes often undetected, since the intention and therefore guilt cannot be directly attributed and therefore appear to be latent. Finally, Galtung directly links structural violence to social injustice and often interchanges the terms.

There is no surprise that all attempts to define violence failed, since violence is largely dependent on the historical development of various concepts and society as such. That is to say, violence has always been present in some form in all cultures and societies but its understanding varies across time. Under this assumption, violence can be viewed as a social, cultural, and political construct, a reflection of some society and its values at one particular moment in time.

It was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who saw language as instrumental in its relation to power.[84] Language represents domination, just as the need for organization and classification within certain societies increased. "Symbolic violence," a term that Bourdieu conceived in the 1970s, "is violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it."[85] Hence it comes naturally accepted, since the categories and structures are imposed upon people who come to accept them without any resistance and acknowledge them as the natural order of things. These systems do not require any real violence or force to preserve their dominant position, since oppression is created within them. Through obedience of the hierarchy that rules within these systems the system legitimizes itself to the extent that the oppressed act only within their assigned roles in the hierarchy.

For example, one of the historians who investigate the decrease in violence performed by young males is Robert Muchembled in his study *A History of Violence* (2012). He takes into account biological aggression but also cultural factors and brings in the "civilizing process" that imposed a set of rules on aggression. These rules were guarded by sanctions but also a change in the sensibility, caused by multiple wars around 1650, which came to loath the sight of blood. The state slowly took over the control of the noblemen's rights to honorable kill and curbed the peasant tradition so as

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[83] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 171.

[84] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[85] Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: New Press, 1996), 17.

to establish "the state monopoly of violence."[86] For Muchembled, the era between 1650 until the 1950s is the period that managed to subjugate violence and "[w]ith the exception of periods of war, European societies were now governed by a powerful blood taboo, which sharply distinguished them from the United States."[87] Apparently Muchembled's theory was largely inspired by the civilizing process as defined by Norbert Elias and Max Weber. Weber claimed that the relationship between the state and the violence is very "intimate."[88] While in the past various institutions used violence to suit their needs, nowadays the right to use legitimate violence belongs to the state and therefore Weber defines the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory."[89] Weber's main concern is with the legitimate use of violence by the state, which is founded on dominion and obedience. In fact, Weber redefined his idea of the state later in his book *Economy and Society* (1922) when he added that the administrative staff is responsible for the successful "claim to the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order."[90] From Weber's point of view, the growing bureaucratization of the state enforced the control of violence and since it was the state to have the only legitimate claim to violence, the other "uses" of violence were denied and therefore regarded as culturally unacceptable.

In the next part, I would like to present opinions of two intellectuals who have significantly shaped the discourse on violence. Besides Hannah Arendt, who is a voice from the past, with the atrocities of the Second World War on her mind, there is a contemporary thinker, Slavoj Žižek, whose opinion on violence also resonates strongly. He is often violently opposed and loudly discussed, his relationship with the academia being, to say the least, complicated. Žižek decided to summarize his philosophical view on violence in his book aptly named *Violence* (2008). He ties his knowledge to Jacques Lacan, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Sigmund Freud, but also Karl Marx, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu and other thinkers. In his essays, Žižek takes mostly a critical stand towards the Western society and its principles, committing himself to Lenin's

[86] Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3.

[87] Muchembled, *A History of Violence*, 5.

[88] Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 2. The statement that "every state is founded on force" is often attributed to Weber; however, it was Trotsky who said that at Brest-Litovsk.

[89] Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 2. Italics in the original.

[90] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 54. Italics in the original.

credo: "We need to 'learn, learn and learn' what causes this violence." [91] The comparison between these two thinkers shows how much the discourse on violence has changed, deepened and become more complicated, globalized, where the old truths are dismembered and the political recedes into a more varied discourse.

Hannah Arendt and the Instrumentality of Violence

Hannah Arendt deals, among other things, with the apocalypse of the 20th century, when victory in an armed conflict would mean the annihilation of both opponents. Arendt concludes that victory is no longer the required outcome of an armed conflict but only a deterrence to ensure peace.

As Arendt claims, "violence — as distinct from power, force, or strength — (. . .) always needs *implements*."[92] Violence also bears some degree of arbitrariness, since the results of human actions are often unpredictable. Predictability is eligible only in the world where nothing happens; once the continuous flow of events is interrupted, so is the projection in which the events occur. Thus, there are no random events, since these serve to alienate theory from reality. People are susceptible to accept theories based on indisputable facts; however, they only lead us astray from reality.

Since violence had often been labeled as arbitrary, it was often avoided from specialized discourse, since it was often regarded as a continuation of some process that stood as its cause. Arendt positions "violence as the accelerator of economic development" or stresses that violence is most readily associated with the political process.[93] The events of the 20th century deny this view and turn violence into a central driving force, proposing a changing relationship between power and violence. Arendt also adds that the wealth of any country may become its most significant disadvantage, corrupting its power and political system.

In her further discourse, Arendt cites Sartre that "'irrepressible violence . . . is man recreating himself,' that it is through 'mad fury' that 'the wretched of the earth'

[91] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 7.

[92] Arendt, *On Violence*, 4. Italics in the original.

[93] Arendt, *On Violence*, 9. Arendt rephrases the basic premise of Frederick Engels, namely his chapter on "Barbarism and Civilization." In Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, trans. Alec West (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 144–163.

can become men."[94] Arendt accuses Sartre of glorification of violence however as Rivca Gordon proves, her reading of Sartre is rather selective and detached from the overall context.[95]

Violence is often associated with power, that is, violence embodies power in its instrumental form. The state, the political body, embodies an institution of power. For Max Weber, the state legitimizes the use of violence.[96] Arendt comes to various interpretations of power, mainly understood as the rule of men over men. Digging deeper, she realizes the need to distinguish between power and force and to uncover the nature of power in general. Eighteenth-century revolutions elevated the republic as a form of government that relied on the people's power and where citizen's consent provided unconditional support of the laws. The support of the citizens keeps the body political, the formal representatives of power, alive and thriving. Arendt claims that "one of the most obvious distinctions between power and violence is that power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence to point can manage without them because it relies on implements."[97] Where the majority rules without being restricted by laws, the voices of discontent can be silenced more effectively and non-violently.

Arendt positions violence as instrumental. Authority, which is nothing less than power embraced by institutions, is essential in organized societies. Arendt emphasizes that unconditional acceptance of authorities is crucial to societies since it ensures its smooth working. Power and violence often go hand in hand but that does not mean simplifying their relationship to command and obedience: "Since in foreign relations as well as domestic affairs violence appears as a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers (. . .)."[98]

Arendt uses revolution as a test of the power structures that should show how firm the grounds on which the government stands are; the more coherent the consent, the less likely the government is about to fall. The power is sustained by public support, and if this is no longer the case, the disintegration becomes a reality. Therefore,

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[94] Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, transl. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 18, cited in Arendt, *On Violence*, 12.

[95] Rivca Gordon, "A Response to Hannah Arendt's Critique of Sartre's View on Violence," *Sartre Studies International* 7, no. 1 (2001): 69–80.

[96] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 54.

[97] Arendt, *On Violence*, 42.

[98] Arendt, *On Violence*, 47.

revolutions test the power system and its institutions and the forces that sustain it, which is the public opinion. In some cases, revolutions foreground the longstanding decay of power and the subjective violence resurfaces.

What Arendt stresses, is the instrumental nature of violence. Power does not require violence, but violence "always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."[99] Violence plays an important role when tackling individual contenders in the domestic field who act against a unified majority. Power should always be legitimate and its legitimacy a result of past consensus, whereas justifications always aim for the future. Thus, violence "can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate."[100] The more immediate the justification, the more acceptable the violence becomes. Violence can become a means of power destruction, but no power stems from violence. Often, the decline in power brings replacement in the form of violence, which becomes useless, since power cannot support it. When all the power is annihilated, it is substituted by terror, which is government by violence. With all opponents gone, the social fabric is destroyed up to the point when everybody can be an enemy and thus the whole country is brought to a deadlock.

Violence tends to be associated with natural behavior and instincts. Researchers attribute to humans reason and tool-making skills, which distinguish them from animals. Arendt suggests that science makes a man irrational if he/she fails to accept its evidence. Arendt pinpoints the importance of churches that become the only place of freedom. Dehumanization does not attribute animal qualities to man. Rage is a feeling of injustice, especially when the possibility to change things comes close. Outbursts of violence and rage release the accumulated energy but can also advocate an instant remedy. Although anti-political, Arendt takes them for a truly natural and human emotion: "Rage and violence turn irrational only when they are directed against substitutes (. . .)."[101] It is the collective guilt that represents such substitute and failure of the society to reflect but also fail to act. The collective guilt not only provides a shelter for the guilty but also creates its opposition in collective innocence.

Violence as a means of bringing attention or revealing hidden cracks in the power system belongs to the most potent incentives, only when oriented against the

[99] Arendt, *On Violence*, 51.

[100] Arendt, *On Violence*, 52.

[101] Arendt, *On Violence*, 64.

cause without any sinister intentions, bringing its own purpose and intentions, and therefore becoming irrational through injected rationality and action.

It is specific for collective violence to delete any traces of individualism and take advantage of consistent superiority in numbers. Group dynamics has its specific means of ensuring cohesion. One of them is an "irrevocable action" that detaches the individual from the remainder of the society outside the group and creates and fortifies the bond among its members. Violent death reinvigorates both the individual and the group it serves.

Thus, the inevitability of death provided an impetus for the creation of the body politic, which, in its essence, is immortal. Collective violence creates a communal sense and false hopes of an emerging community that accepts violence as a part of everyday struggle. Hence, violence acquired a positive status as a creative element of life and, similarly, power, so closely related to the needs of violence to grow. From this point of view, revolutions should provide a growing space for power. Arendt denies the organic theory that justifies violence as a creative force and stresses out that "collective violent action, quite apart from its inherent attraction, may appear as natural a prerequisite for the collective life of mankind as the struggle for survival and violent death for continuing life in the animal kingdom."[102] There is one more danger in urban violence, which could use the justification of violence as the basis for an ideological racist discourse.

Violence is most effective in reaching short-term goals. Arendt clarifies that these violent actions may radicalize body politic, making violence an everyday reality. Just as bureaucracy encroaches upon the *res publica*, the bigger the probability that violence will rise, since the bureaucracy is, in fact, a dehumanized rule of nobody. The greatness of superpowers brings anonymity to the organization of the public sphere. Since man depends on his/her power to act in political matters, this desperate inability to act may lead to glorifying violence.

Slavoj Žižek and Sideways Glances on Violence

As per usual, Slavoj Žižek offers multiple fruitful insights into the nature of violence in his 2008 study *Violence*. For Žižek, violence is like an iceberg; the major part of it

[102] Arendt, *On Violence*, 75.

remains hidden under the surface. Žižek differentiates between subjective violence, that is, violence where the offender is clearly identified, and objective violence that splits into two more categories, the symbolic one, which is the violence hidden in the language and its representations, and the systemic violence, generated by the systems both political and economic. Both kinds of violence are projected from different backgrounds. The subjective violence disturbs the peaceful waters of our ordinary lives, while the objective violence lurks in waters we take for safe. Žižek's view shuns away from the effects of violence that obstruct thinking capabilities, chooses to observe it from a safe distance, and casts sideways glances on it.

Apart from the emotional sterility of Western lives, Žižek also uncovers separation and ideological numbness from which fear can resuscitate us to some subjectivity and passion. The meaninglessness of violence dwells in the "worldless" social space.[103] There is no anchoring of the principles and goals in the world that is controlled by globalization and capitalism. According to Žižek, capitalism "is the first socio-economic order which detotalises meaning."[104]

Furthermore, our social life is based on distance, alienation, and deliberate ignorance of others that may, under some circumstances, ensure peaceful coexistence. Language plays an essential role in this scheme when it positions the subject into the field of language, that is, the Symbolic and "every concrete, 'really existing' space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a violent imposition of a Master-Signifier," with its reduction of a thing, to one single unity, a process Žižek calls "violent."[105] Thus, language is the source of the social divide. Language creates meaning and symbols, provides essence from where the fundamental violence comes when our worlds are shaken. Therefore, language not only separates us but also creates images of those around us. Žižek asserts that "verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence."[106] Also, he mentions the case of anti-Semitic pogroms that were fighting an image or a figure of the Jew that had been traditionally constructed, but not related to reality.

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[103] This term was used by Alain Badiou. See *Images of the Present Time*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

[104] Žižek, *Violence*, 68.

[105] Žižek, *Violence*, 56–57.

[106] Žižek, *Violence*, 57

Again, it is a question of the Lacanian Other as subject of desire and temptation, which brings Žižek to the ability to accept failure and meditate on the nature of envy. This envy is based on the ability to enjoy rather than the ability to possess. Generally, people fear their social order will perish and disintegrate in some near-catastrophic scenario. This belief stands at the root of fear, which leads to prejudice and accusations that do not have their origin in facts, although they may later prove true.[107]

For centuries, religion provided the morality path, restricting violence, but nowadays it becomes "the source of murderous violence."[108] The tendency is to accuse the violence itself, not religion, which is often treated as an innocent disgraced victim. Thus, in Žižek's view, the religion justifies violence, providing larger than life causes which make the fact of killing unimportant. The human side of violence is subjugated to the sacred cause. Moral and ethics that pertain to the outside of the faith should guarantee that the love of the religious entity will not be misused.[109]

Totalitarian regimes often employed norms written in a style that blurred borders between offense and innocence so that they could be directed against everyone who did not suit the regime. Violation of the law thus became an everyday reality, a means of dealing with the regime on one's own terms. In the so-called symbolic exchange or empty gesture, we are meant to use our freedom, but not entirely, since our social circumstances expect us to reject the gesture. By doing the right thing, an individual is validated as a solidary social group member. To violate the habit means to endanger the coherence of the social fabric, to remind us that our freedom is cracked. We are servants of habits, and these, being embedded in our identities, become a source of social violence. The danger of habits rests in the unconscious acceptance of their dark underside.[110]

Žižek also deals with rituals, especially torture as an initiation ritual based on free choice and torture as a part of social exclusion in which a gesture that justifies the violent act is often required. Some rituals combine illegality with group acceptance, cementing the social group's relationships. For Žižek, torture is an obscene part of the

[107] See Žižek, *Violence*, 63–88.

[108] Žižek, *Violence*, 113.

[109] See Žižek, *Violence*, 109–18.

[110] See Žižek, *Violence*, 134–46.

Western civilization, which "forms the necessary supplement to the public values of personal dignity, democracy and freedom."[111]

Divine violence stands for an act that goes beyond the law. This violence is often felt as unreasonable and unjustifiable, and, therefore, symbolic attributes often serve as a damper to the traumatic events; that is, they soften up their effect and withhold the harsh reality so as not to confront it raw. Žižek refers to this reluctance as a "resistance to meaning." [112] Hence, the horrific events become works of God and divine interference. For Žižek, catastrophes serve a double purpose; they are not only represented as the ultimate evil in human character but also capable of reviving and showing the communal spirit. Divine violence includes various violent outbursts, such as crimes committed by the raging mob or those committed under the shelter of revolutionary effort.[113]

Revenge pacifies the mind and reveals the future; punishment provides freedom to the criminal and makes forgetting possible. Christians are always indebted to God, since he is the one to pay for the deeds of those born in sin: "Divine violence purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law, because law is limited to the living: it cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life, what is more than mere life."[114] Divine violence goes against the lawful life; it is the extra outside the ordinary life. Divine violence has no meaning; mythic violence provides a legal background and divine violence functions as the repose of subjective meaning for those who see it that way. Divine violence does not pertain to God but to those who take risks and demand justice, thus proving God's powerlessness. Finally, Žižek also speaks on the nature of love: "Sometimes, hatred is the only proof that I really love you." [115] Thus, in love (as expounded by Saint Paul the Apostle), which is external to law, we encounter pure violence.

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[111] Žižek, *Violence*, 150.

[112] Žižek, *Violence*, 153.

[113] See Žižek, *Violence*, 151–73.

[114] Žižek, *Violence*, 168.

[115] Žižek, *Violence*, 173.

5.1 Creating Meaning through Violence: *The Origin of the Brunists*

In 1966, the judges decided that the award of the William Faulkner Foundation should be given to Robert Coover for his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*: "William Faulkner provided for annual award of a bronze medal with the stipulation that the judges be under 40, on the theory that writer is best judged by his own generation. The judges for 1966 were three assistant professors, R. H. W. Dillard of Harvard, Richard Johnson of Mount Holyoke and W. R. Robinson of Virginia. All three found the book both comic and serious, worldly and religious."[116] Other reviews take his first novel for a rather too courageous first attempt. Thomas Lask judges it as a "deep plunge" that at some point may become overwhelming and hurried; he classifies Coover's prose as mostly "craggy and rough-textured. (. . .) But this reader wishes that he were a little less inventive and that he had restrained the catastrophic flow of incident. [Coover] pushes his tale over into the absurd."[117] Yet, as Coover himself admitted, he wrote a traditional novel on purpose since it could "be the last piece of [his] writing read by a general public."[118] Coover's book centers on a small mining town, in which a mining disaster gives rise to a religious cult and unveils the hidden forces in the human nature in a desperate search for meaning in life. Now, the words of Webster Schott come back to us. Coover did not intend to make it to his second novel in the traditional vein. Indeed, his novel is apocalyptic, a parallel to contemporary life that could take various forms and beliefs, such as the Last Judgment.

Coover's first novel is not straightforwardly linear. The prologue, aptly named "The Sacrifice," foreshadows the climactic events on the Mount of Redemption, where a group of believers, the Brunists, gathers to witness the world's end. In this chapter, Coover focuses on a minor character that only reappears in the book's last chapter,

[116] "Faulkner Foundation Awards," *New York Times*, March 24, 1967.

[117] Thomas Lask, "Starting from the Ground Up," *New York Times*, October 5, 1966.

[118] Bass, "An Encounter with Robert Coover," 294.

Hiram Clegg. The central part of the novel focuses on the tensions in the community of West Condon that emerge in the wake of the mining disaster.

Forty eight years later, Coover returned to West Condon in his sequel *The Brunist Day of Wrath* (2014). In his review, Robert Moore writes: "At its weakest point, *Wrath* can feel like an overgrown movie sequel. (. . .) At its best, it makes *The Origin* feel like a prelude."[119] The book features an aspiring writer Sally Elliot, who ends up writing a book on the mining disaster and the Brunists. Coover's playful craftiness strikes again, since he created an ouroboros and therefore another cycle he frequently seeks in his works.

In *The Origin of the Brunists*, Coover dissects small-town life and its inhabitants on all levels and provides insight into power structures that lie behind a small community, whose life has been for generations defined by coal mining, where the majority is powerless to shape their destiny, not to say to attribute meaning to the life of struggle and poverty. West Condon is a small mining town, its community consisting of coalminers and Christians, mostly of Italian descent. The town depends entirely on the Deepwater No. 9 Coalmine; it is the "town's life, its essence."[120] Most of them are first-generation immigrants whose parents do not handle the English language correctly or still actively use Italian. They find themselves excluded and at odds with their children. Their children are fully Americanized, boys with their minds focused on sports and girls and girls losing their virginity at the back of the car.

The town's Golden Age dates back to the days when Justin "Tiger" Miller, now an owner of the local newspaper, the West Condon *Chronicle*, made it to the state basketball finals with the West Condon High School. Miller was an outstanding student who left the town immediately after graduation, and nobody asked why since the town did not hold any prospects for the ambitious youth. It was a surprise when Miller, nicknamed Tiger, left his job as a correspondent and took care of the neglected *Chronicle*. The return of Miller, who "was something of a local institution," was a sign of hope and prosperity for the whole town and his status as a local icon confirmed when some fortunate events and prodigies heralding good fortune struck the town: "[T]he highway was widened by the state, two mines resumed operations awhile, and a new factory making plastic toys was established on the outskirts, though this operation later

[119] Robert Moor, "Strange Loop," *Harper's*, July 2014, 97.

[120] Robert Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 65.

folded."[121] Tiger Miller placed West Condon on the map and town people relied on Tiger to save them from whatever misfortune should befall them.

The central figure around which the story revolves is the coal miner of Italian descent, Giovanni Bruno. The personality and personal history of Giovanni Bruno are almost unknown; his life is defined mainly by the economic situation in the coal mining industry and mining in general. His two brothers died in the mines, and his father has been left crippled. The only definition of Bruno's personality is given by those surrounding him; he is often described as a useless crybaby, a misfit without a family, interests, or bad habits. Interestingly, the only person to call him Johnny "Chonny" is his mother, who is otherwise scared of the English tongue. In literary criticism, Giovanni Bruno's name is often associated with that of Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake for his cosmologic theory in 1600. However, other implications could be assumed. He could also be Goodman Brown, a man devoted to faith, sharing surname and initials with Hawthorne's notable character that appears in his short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), in which on one dreary night Goodman Brown loses his faith deep in the woods, learning of the imperfections of the world and the corruptibility of the human soul. But he could also impersonate the infamous John Brown, an executed 19th-century abolitionist whose life was a failure until he became a terrorist and who believed in acting in the name of God. Similarly, Giovanni Bruno becomes the instrument of divinity as the sole survivor of the mining disaster, a Prophet.

The disaster struck eight days after the New Year, "but the vague hope its advent traditionally engenders has already gone stale."[122] The frame of the day is gray and colorless; the sky is dull, monotony looms, "the usual post-Christmas slump."[123] In the mine showers, Vince Bonali is harassing his fellow coal miner, tall and bony Giovanni Bruno, with a poem Bruno wrote about his mother; everybody is laughing; only Bruno is crying. Some moments later, down in the mine, the distant sound of bees foreshadows the upcoming disaster. A lighted cigarette, a spark from a machine, and accumulated gas cause the death of ninety-seven coalminers. Immediately after the explosion, Giovanni Bruno is found by one of his fellow coal miners, his mind not present, idly

[121] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 151.

[122] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 29.

[123] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 30.

scratching his ass while others try to find their way out of the mine. Bruno is not capable of any speech: "His goddamn face was white as the Virgin's behind with feathery black streaks on his cheekbones."[124] He is dragged away, left on a ledge in a small recess. A small group of six more men, including the preacher Ely Collins, fight for their lives building a tomb-like shelter. Four days later, they are all found dead. Bruno is the only survivor.

Many cannot accept the fact that a generally disliked man like Bruno survived, and a large number of good men died. The emotions behind his survival spark further interest, and several people point out that there must be some hidden logic to the deaths of so many, some ulterior reason. Clara Collins, the wife of the preacher and victim of the disaster Ely Collins, believes and puts her faith in her husband's unfinished message he held in his hand: "DEAR CLARA AND ALL: I dissobayed and I know I must Die. Listen allways to the Holy Spirit in your Harts Abide in Grace. We will stand Together befor Our Lord the 8th of."[125] Clara cannot accept the horror of Ely's death and believes the message that burdens her has some ulterior meaning. Like his message, his death represents an open ending she must finish. She asks Reverend Abner Baxter, a radical fanatic who took over the Church of the Nazarene after the violent death of beloved Preacher Ely Collins for counsel and while advising her, Reverend's children cause fatal disruption:

> The children were growing restless and noisy, but fell silent instantly before Abner's sudden buffeting glare. "The living and the dead," he repeated, then added, though his mind seemed to be on the children: "For the end of all things is at hand — "[126]

Suddenly, a deathnote is transformed into a prophetic vision, God's final judgment is nigh. Words that have been pronounced more as a speech accident to tame unruly children are readily accepted and incorporated into the system of belief of Mrs. Clara Collins, who becomes one of the founding members of the rising cult.

Tiger Miller likes to play games: "Games were what kept Miller going. Games, and the pacifying of mind and organs."[127] What drives Tiger Miller is not rationalism but a sex drive: "[I]t was the spook behind sex, that thing that designed him, reshaped

[124] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 41.

[125] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 96.

[126] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 96.

[127] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 141.

him, waked him, churned him, thought for him even: Jesus, when was the last time he'd committed a wholly rational act!"[128] Miller's philosophy of life is not based on any spiritual system; in fact, he is primarily opposed to searching for meaning in life. For him, life is just a series of random events, and an individual's response to these events is of no consequence. Additionally, to be an originator of such events provides necessary freedom and joy in life and makes life bearable. To prove his belief right, he picks up a nurse in the hospital whom he later lovingly names Happy Bottom. The second driving force in Miller's life is conflict, conflict is what fascinates him, and "it was a kind of sudden gamy wish to raise a little hell. West Condon was going stale on him, needed a spectacle."[129]

Therefore, Tiger Miller has decided to play a game of his own and, to his amusement, headlined the article about Giovanni Bruno's survival "MIRACLE IN WEST CONDON just to wow the homefolks."[130] Soon the mysterious message preacher Ely Collins left, and the miraculous survival of Giovanni Bruno sparked uneasy feelings among people, "especially the suddenly widowed — (. . .) if something disastrous, perhaps worldwide in scope, might not be in the air. Their immediate fear, apparently, was the eighth of February."[131] All is happening to the diversion of Miller, who decides to provide his unchristian help and prints everything that could support their enigmatic theories. From the medical standpoint, the disaster leaves Bruno with a damaged brain due to carbon monoxide poisoning. However, Clara Collins and Eleanor Norton, a high school teacher and firm believer in higher beings, largely ignore the fact. They believe that Bruno was reborn, rose from the dead, and that his body serves some higher purpose. Miller sees him as a puppet worthy of control, "his head — one thought of it more as a mechanical toy than a living man's head."[132] For Miller, the game has just begun. After his accident, Giovanni Bruno pronounces seven words, all of which are to become part of the Creed.

Another founding member of the cult, Eleanor Norton is not a West Condoner; she and her husband Wylie do not belong to the mining community. They moved places

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[128] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 156.

[129] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 191.

[130] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 85.

[131] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 141.

[132] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 193.

several times due to Mrs. Norton's interest in young boys and belief in signs that a higher being named Domiron keeps sending her. Therefore she regards her West Condon stay as a mission, they were sent and finally, their presence is justified through the disaster. To Mrs. Norton, the disaster and especially the miraculous survival of Giovanni Bruno pose a new spiritual opportunity: "Giovanni Bruno's body had been invaded by a higher being! Contact had been established!" [133] And so suddenly, everything in her life starts to fall into place in the spiritual system she created. Finally, this is her chance to be heard and to prove her importance. Eleanor Norton believes that Bruno's survival is a part of a bigger plan and articles in the *Chronicle* confirm her assumptions.

Similarly, Giovanni's sister Marcella believes in her brother's transformation: "His black hair is long on the neck, feathers dark and wild on the pillow. He is . . , somehow . . . changed: yes, a new brother must come of it."[134] The revelation comes in different forms that highlight how susceptible people are in interpreting reality in many of ways to suit their mental framework and spiritual needs.

The third person to bring substance to the movement is Ralph Himebaugh, a lawyer who does not accept cases that would lead him to court and has a complicated relationship with his cats, especially the black one. Ralph feels isolated "as though nature herself were persecuting him, the victim, the sacrifice, the outcast."[135] He adds, subtracts, calculates values, the whole world transposed into the system of numbers and Himebaugh is there to discover the secret formulae that give sense to everything. He believes that nature and the entire universe are logically explainable, employing formulas and concatenations. For the cult, he provides complex mathematical proofs that leave no doubt that the upcoming happenings must be authentic. Himebaugh is an ardent admirer of Marcella Bruno whom he cautiously observes from behind the window, incidentally bursts into the bathroom when she takes her bath, and deliberately lies under her bed, she is his Lacanian *objet petit a* he never dares to approach.[136] Accepting her personality and taking her as an independent being rather than his perfect vision would threaten his ideals and destabilize his perfectly calculated world. Soon

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[133] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 132.

[134] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 98.

[135] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 184.

[136] *Objet petit a* in Lacanian theory is a cause of desire that represents lack.

after the disaster, Mr. Himebaugh finds a new and unexpected ally that brings light into his grim visions:

> The blossoming spiritual affair between Ralph Himebaugh and Eleanor Norton was, to be sure, one of the more fascinating products of the cult. And it was odd, because under ordinary circumstances, they would probably never even have spoken to each other. (. . .) But a disaster had thrown them together, two innocents surprised in a fever, and now their logbooks, their respective systems, were drawing their timid souls together in holy intercourse. In fact, their two systems did fit together in the mating posture, one embracing from above, the other reaching up from below. The funny thing was, though, Ralph's system was the one on the bottom.[137]

The emerging cult and the attention it draws disconcerts many, who observe its rise with a growing grudge. One of them is Reverend Abner Baxner, a man known for his enormous hatred. However, this does not affect his power, and his capability as a preacher has never been questioned. For his followers, the disaster is classified as a judgment and trial. Sister Clara Collins becomes his main competitor, the person he personally despises, and all those who gather in the house of the alleged Prophet Giovanni Bruno.

The other person who decides to deal with the rising power of the cult is Ted Cavanaugh, the president of the town bank. Cavanaugh believes in communities and good will in them, and the rising tension between Reverend's followers and the Brunists disquiets him. The fierce agitation of Reverend Baxner reveals a new opportunity for him; it "[c]reated that old vacuum, the filling of which is every American's first nature: the need for a third force."[138] Cavanaugh becomes the main character behind the Common Sense Committee, which he strategically created to change the negative religious dynamics by injecting the third force, which is common sense. The third force's intrusion should ensure balance and return the status quo. For Cavanaugh both the Brunists and Reverend Baxner are highly unpredictable forces that could wreck the community spirit. The Brunists could even rise to prominence, and the new influential group could change the whole power structure of the town. Hence, common sense becomes a plausible formula for those do not favor any radical ideology. However, it is also a way of taming both spiritual fractions by pointing at them as opposing common

[137] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 259.

[138] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 242.

sense, thus being irrational. The Common Sense Committee becomes a catch-all party for all reasonable citizens.

At the same time, the cult is Cavanaugh's only chance to keep the communal spirit high when the mining industry inevitably fails. Ted Cavanaugh portrays Giovanni Bruno as a man who worked for the public good and represents "this generation's victory over hatred and prejudice, (. . .), not because of who Bruno was personally or what he'd done, but because of the way others saw him."[139] To approach both feuding groups, Cavanaugh appoints one of the miners, Vince Bonali, as the speaker for the Committee, which consists of men only. Bonali sees it as an opportunity for upward social movement and soon he becomes addicted to his illusionary power without realizing that he serves Cavanaugh's plans.

Initially, the Brunists are tolerated as an unpredictable group of lunatics, men and women who cannot use reason that is common sense. Thus, if reason is a characteristic that defines man, then a lack of it results in dehumanizating those who do not profess adherence to the generally accepted set of rules, making them vulnerable and provoking fear and rage. At the start, the Brunists are contained in the Bruno house, where they intimately meet, occasionally visited by Mr. Miller. Their growing support in the *Chronicle* disrupts the monotonous events people in West Condon crave.

There is a growing uncertainty and feeling that the social order is threatened or has already been compromised, the institutions are under pressure, and the mine is closing down. On the other hand, the Brunists feel rising tensions oriented against them. Needless to say, the children of Reverend Baxner have their share in this, since under the fabricated name of Black Hand commit various mischief that speak to many as acts of the Devil or evil foreboding: "They stole and put poop on porches and tortured victims and broke bottles and burned birds they shot in gasoline and one night they strangled Widow Harlowe's cat." [140] In fact, the children use "a beautifully gnarled black hand that lay, carbonized and unattached, among the bodies and other refuse" as the magical artifact in their own cult.[141] Of course, the hand belongs to one of the victims of the mining disaster.

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[139] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 144.

[140] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 164–65.

[141] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 163.

The men from the Common Sense Committee approach the members of the Brunists, hoping that they would abandon the movement. They are allowed to have their spiritual freedom on condition that they behave in a socially accepted manner. However, they are deemed subversive, once they refuse to comply with the imposed demands. The committee men present them with the free choice only if their choice is the right one; they do not seek to understand them but present them with the arguments they regard as solely valid. Thus, there is no free choice in the presented choice. The refusal of the Brunists to act in the suggested communal interest, in fact, aims at the destruction of the current social order.

Tiger Miller falls in love with Marcella Bruno. He admires her commitment but at the same time wants to lure her away from the Brunists: "Was it something in her he had loved . . . or something in himself he had hated?"[142] He is ready to accept the consequences, if he succeeds. Of course, there is the mischievous Happy Bottom, who keeps him amused with her satirical letters on the Last Judgment and who does not give up on him easily. Tiger's obstacle is Marcella's faith. He wants to destroy this obstacle and supplement it with marriage. Tiger cannot enjoy Marcella's physical love; he knows that to destroy Marcella's faith would result in her unhappiness, and hence, her misery would be the basis of his happiness. He is unable to pass to the act and therefore she remains the object of his desire, Lacanian *jouissance*, a painful pleasure that must remain out of reach.

In fact, Marcella Bruno is the only character who is allowed to speak for herself from her inner perspective. When she becomes an object of love, lust, and in the end a sacrifice, her thoughts are revealed in the most straightforward manner through her inner intimate monologue. She does not create a meaning; she is a true believer; she believes in purity and the Coming of Light that she accidentally mistakes for the light of Reverend Abner Baxner's car on the night that is to be called the Night of Sacrifice.

When Marcella is hit by the car, Reverend Baxner feels everything is lost to him; there are no followers of his, only voices calling him a murderer. An ambulance should have been called, the accident reported to the police, Reverend Baxner taken in custody and hauled off to the nearest police station, but no such thing happens. Salvation comes for Abner Baxner from the least expected person, his archenemy Sister Clara Collins, who speaks to the passionate crowd:

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[142] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 400.

> "No, friends! We're all murderers! (. . .) We all killed her with our hate and with our fear!" And he recognized the magnitude of it, the greatness of spirit, and he was stirred in the soul and much amazed. She stared then at his face, and Abner gave her much to read there, if she could but discern it. "Abner," she said softly, softly though her voice carried far in the night air and stilled the lamentations, "this awful thing is a judgment on us — Please! Join hands with us now and pray!" And he reached across and accepted Clara's hand, and as he did so, a great warmth surged through him — for all things are cleansed with blood, he thought, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission — and then, unleashed, the tears flowed.[143]

However, his criminal act is classified as an act of collective violence, hence sharing and distributing responsibility, which is dispersed among many cult followers who accept it. Therefore, he is now bound to the Brunists not only by the accident itself but by the fact that he is guilty of committing a crime in the face of a just society. He becomes a member of the group where justice and the political system represent oppression and, as such, come disrespected. This means that not only illegal actions might be taken to protect the movement, but covering their crimes chains its members to obedience and servitude to the cult. Finally, the interpretation of Marcella's death is the most significant achievement of Clara Collins and proves her leadership skills that have not created a scapegoat but united many.

The unimportance of Marcella as a person was substituted by her elevation to a prominent position by the Brunists when she became a uniting symbol, thus granting the movement much-needed religious sacrifice and promoting it to a higher importance. At the same time this is the first step to certify the Brunists as a religious organization, not as a one-person movement but a religious body.

The escalation of violence happens on the Mount of Redemption, right above the Deepwater coalmine, familiarly called Cunt Hill by the locals. The media cover the whole event; there is a helicopter and state police overlooking the place. Marcella's dead body, similarly to the body of Ross in *Gerald's Party*, is worshipped and dragged around on a folded lawn chair. Out of economic coincidence, the place has been rented for a small carnival, and a ticket booth awaits the large crowd of spectators, as well as refreshment stands and various games. As the clouds gather, the behavior of the cult followers becomes ecstatic and out of control: "Yet, they yearned to storm that hill, Miller could feel it, they ached to obliterate that white fungus, they were hate hungry

[143] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 391.

and here was something to hit out at. They waited for: the outrage."[144] The world turns upside down with men tearing off their clothes, whipping themselves, and people dancing naked in the mud. A woman is trampled, a fight breaks out, another woman miscarries, and a small kid dies. There is some considerable myth-making capacity that could spark out of ever-present irrationality and raging natural forces surrounding the hill.

Just as Justin Miller predicted, the accumulated energy of the crowd must be released:

> Suddenly he heard a shrill mad shriek that carried over all the roar up there: "That's him! He murdered her!" It was Eleanor Norton, gray hair wild with the rain, tunic limp on her aging body, eyes fixed on him through wet lenses, arms outspread and fingers bent like claws— "Killer! Killer! Killer!" It was a signal for them. All the aimless fury of the moment before suddenly discovered its object.[145]

For the Brunists, Miller stands behind the death of Marcella Bruno. Also, he is a representation of the world that despised them, the Philistine, a monster that brought discord into the community of West Condon: "Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitors who undermine it."[146] Through Miller's death, they beat their enemy, fight against the system he represents and prove their capability to act in accord and physically assert their collective strength. The Brunists are objectified through their uniform clothing, a white tunic with a brown cross, and their individuality repressed.

Just as Marcella's death is transformed into the sacrifice that unites the two religious communities, a case of foundational violence, Tiger Miller falls victim to collective violence; he is sacrificed to the cult. As Žižek notes: "Sacrificial logic is reasserted as the condition of community, as its secret bond."[147] Tiger Miller is sacrificed so that the community of West Condon may regain its stability that had been corrupted not only by the disaster but also by the failing economy of the town. Miller

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[144] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 406.

[145] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 409.

[146] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freggero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 16.

[147] Žižek, *Violence*, 21.

becomes a scapegoat, he is rationally condemned as a murderer and corrupted individual capable of destroying the purest believer. Although his guilt is not proved, the cult attributes the responsibility to Miller. Miller must be exposed and punished. Although Miller is central to West Condon, he is de facto situated in the margin; he is both an elite but also someone who is not a member of the community; his sole rule is not to date women from West Condon. He pokes fun at honorable citizens, fails morally, and disappoints the community that relies on him. Also, the Brunists feel used and exploited by him. Through Miller's death, the order is restored and the Brunists rise from the womb of the Mount of Redemption, naming themselves the Reformed Nazarene Followers of Giovanni Bruno.

There is a substantial danger in the belief that something new and higher emerges through violence. This organic attitude to violence makes it readily justifiable; violence is endowed with the creative quality to recreate, revive, and give rise to a better world. As Arendt proposes, "Neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process (. . .)."[148] In the novel, several violent actions are glorified, endowed with additional meanings, challenging to the local authorities and the whole justice system. However, to see violence as a creative force may prove misleading, since it may instigate more violence and test the system in power.

The deaths in the mining disaster are often referred to as violent; rescuers report more and more violence further down the mine they approach, the whole mine regarded as a place of too much violence. To call the disaster an act of violence means to locate the culprit, assign agency, and point a finger at the culprit. The act was not accidental in nature but deliberate. To endow an event with intentionality is to fill it with some ulterior meaning. Since there is no coincidence, everything happens for a reason, and therefore, the disaster is read as a message, which is further strengthened by the alleged appearance of the white bird in the mine. The image of the white bird is the symbolic semblance softening the impact of the act of violence. White bird is the metaphor that appears throughout the book, providing higher meaning to ordinary or tragic events and thus infusing these events with signs of divine agency; it becomes part of the Brunists' mythology as White Bird visitation. These signs are endowed with a purpose: to bring spiritual enlightenment and freedom.

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[148] Robert Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 82.

Indeed, when they refer to the mining disaster as an act of violence, the true nature of the catastrophic event is revealed. To call it a disaster would mean its occurrence was random and could not be avoided. However, it corresponds to the general neglect and safety rules avoidance both by the individuals and the company itself. The mining company is the group in power; it holds power over the miners since it provides for their living and, in exchange, the miners keep it in power through their everyday work. Still, no anger was directed against the company, which resembles a bureaucratic machine, with no individual representative that could be held responsible, "just so some fucking out-of-town rich bastard out in the East could live it up on fucking twenty-dollar dinners and hundred-dollar whores."[149] Thus, the disaster would be a case of resurfacing systemic violence fueled by the capitalistic system and accepted as an inevitable fact of their lives. Using Sartre's logic, the miners are free only when passive and unresponsive, their lives reduced to monotony and no prospects for the future. Their freedom is limited only to the extent of their passivity, and their only right choice is the path of powerlessness. They are still treated as free persons; however, the system subjects them to impotence and as Sartre asserts:

> This is the contradiction of racism, colonialism and all forms of tyranny: in order to treat a man like a dog, one must first recognise him as a man. (. . .) The concealed discomfort of the master is that he always has to consider the human reality of his slaves (. . .), while at the same time refusing them the economic and political status which, in this period, defines human beings.[150]

Hence, the West Condon citizens are just as impotent as the town name playfully suggests, their capacities suppressed and inferiority their only viable choice.

The decline of West Condon was unavoidable; the relationships within families were severed, and hopeful youth was leaving the town never to come back, the closing down of the mine an inevitable but hardly accepted fact. As René Girard asserts, a cultural downfall represents inherently a social crisis, and therefore, men incline to believe the main reason behind the crisis is moral decay. With the communal ties loosening, the fault is often attributed to the "society as a whole, which costs [people] nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable

[149] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 286.

[150] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 1982), 111.

reasons."[151] More bad signs are observed only to add to the general tension, and among the first to be attacked are either the authorities or the weakest. This premise functions not only for the Brunists but also for Tiger Miller, himself an institution, the symbol of hope, of a better future, and the voice of the *Chronicle*. With his provocative articles, Miller is recognized as a threat to the whole community in general; the Brunists increasingly deem him a wrongdoer and the man who corrupted the innocent soul of Marcella Bruno. Also, rumors spread that the Brunists are committing various acts social transgression, an inevitable consequence of several *Chronicle* articles.

The Brunists are attributed stereotypical offenses, such as ritual sacrificing, rape of young virgins, making bread of babies, and drinking their blood: "Well, this wasn't the Brunists, this was some people in Russia a hundred years or so ago, but the point is, (. . .), they're all the same." [152] The accusations of ritual murder date back to the Middle Ages, when notions that Jews murder Christians spread from England to the European continent. Although the accusations of blood libel faded out in the sixteenth century, mainly as a result of growing Protestantism, it marked its reemergence in the nineteenth century, especially in the Habsburg and Russian Empire. In the 1880s a wave of pogroms swept through the areas of southern Russia and the Ukraine. For example, the governor of Odessa insisted that the Jews "drain the blood of the Christians." [153] According to the historian David Vital, "the presence of the Jews in the land was not only an offence to its indigenous population, but a part—indeed, a very great part—of the explanation of Russia's misery."[154] One of the most famous cases of ritual murder was that of Mendel Beilis in Kiev, which dates back to 1913. Beilis became a protagonist of Bernard Malamud's award-winning novel *The Fixer* (1966).

The Brunists do not tick all the stereotypes of persecution Girard suggests. Although the act of violence, the disaster, is genuine, the Brunists were not the originators of the crime but emerged through the crime instead. Consequently, the social stability is threatened, West Condon society polarized, and the economic factor of mine closing down added to the general feeling of stability loss. The guilt is attributed to a small group that meets in the house of Giovanni Bruno: "A month and a half ago, it was

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[151] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 14.

[152] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 360.

[153] *Jewish Chronicle*, February 17, 1882.

[154] David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe 1789–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 295.

all about coalmines and violence and economics and death, and there was an innocence about it. Today it is faith and prophecy and cataclysm and conflict, and it is outrageous."[155]

When the town officials try to persuade the members of the Brunists to leave the cult, they are not fighting the Brunists themselves but their own fear and lack of faith that would exclude them, making them question their own principles. Their belief in common sense is, in fact, the non-belief, and their violent attack and destruction of the prayer room frees the accumulated frustration. Although they present themselves as the rational good-doers, the contrary is true. Their behavior is irrational; the calm refusal of the Brunists only infuriates them (since they cannot "rationally" accept the other) and points at their own inferiority and moral superiority of the Brunists.

Just as the wheels of Tiger's game spin faster, Tiger is forced to face a violent act himself when someone smashes the *Chronicle* windows. His deeds, that is, his questionably growing support for the Brunists, have caused a wave of disagreement around the town, and this is the way of expressing them. Also, this act is done anonymously, suggesting it is a general will of the public. Thus, breaking the windows is a means of exerting pressure on those that should be under control. However, Tiger leaves the windows broken and covers them with cardboard, not only to arouse the interest of the present press but also to show that it is his act of resistance, a sign of disobedience.

After the violent events at the Mount of Redemption, things seem to fall back into place, although differently, heralding a change in the town's social structure. Some people left seeking new prospects up North, and many departures struck the crumbling coal mining community. Bruno's house is empty, and the whole sect moves its place to Randolph Junction, where the mayor is one of the followers of Light. The spoken rules of the Brunists are transformed into an official code, albeit fluid in content. The character of Giovanni Bruno is turned into a symbolic authority, and his ghostly physical form is rejected.

Giovanni Bruno is the pronounced creator, the Prophet; he is the one no one can compare to, and therefore he becomes an obstacle. Being brain-damaged, he cannot be judged by any standards; he stands outside the rational world. However, after the cult is firmly established, he is deposited into the psychiatric facility, since his physical form is

[155] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 330.

no longer needed. Bruno is potentially the only one who can pose an existential threat to the cult by challenging the legality of its leaders. He is the primal father, a model object for all brothers and sisters; his disposal to a mental institution is explained as persecution, turning him into an unreachable ideal. The sense of guilt resulted in their identification with him, the followers devouring his strength, and hence in Freud's words "[t]he dead father became stronger that the living one had been."[156] There can be no other Bruno, he is incomparable and, consequently, his ideological position must be preserved. In the Freudian view, the dead father is turned into a totem, and the victory over the father is celebrated to sustain his memory. After their successful transformation into a religious organization by devouring their primal father, the Reformed Nazarene Followers of Giovanni Bruno reassume the name Justin Miller gave them: the Brunists; this way they fully identify themselves with their dead father. By reintroducing their old name, the Brunists make peace with Tiger Miller; he becomes Mr. Miller again. This seems to be a common feature in myths; the person who caused the crisis, "restores the order, symbolizes, and even incarnates it."[157] The Brunists celebrate their dead father, the Coming of Light and organize rallies all over the world with other brothers and sisters, this time in a less provoking manner; they also create their rituals like a baptism by Light.

The Epilogue sees the resurrection and happily-ever-after end for Tiger Miller, who is saved by Happy, who nurses and bathes his broken body. Miller suggests Happy to form a cult of their own: "Trade rings, break a pot, whatever it is they do these days, build for perpetuity."[158] Miller and Happy do not place their faith in some external divinity but rather assume responsibility for their acts, focusing on their soon-to-grow family and ordinary life. The Brunists are still waiting for the Coming of Light, with no success, but their events gain the media's attention, drawing large crowds. In fact, the reality of the event is often verified by the presence of media, although nothing really happens. Elaine Collins, the daughter of Clara Collins, notices that "as exciting as their own meeting was and as important as she was in it, she kept feeling all night like she'd rather go see it on television, as if that was where it was *really* happening."[159]

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[156] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950), 143.

[157] Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 42.

[158] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 434.

[159] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 422. Italics in the original.

Originally, the Brunists appeared in the *Chronicle* as a part of Miller's game. However, he failed to recognize the power they would gain through the media that later created their actual representation in the fictitious TV space. Elaine, like many, puts her faith in the media rather than her real experience.

The movement adjusted to regular life, their ideas and rallies mushrooming internationally, drawing much-needed capitalist income. Their beliefs were summed up in the Creed, which was fluid in its nature, ready to accept changes, and thus becoming "a *living* Creed."[160] Some initial exceedingly irrational ideas were dropped, and characters like Eleanor Norton were pushed into the background. At least Vince Bonali finds his redemption while visiting Bruno's house and discovering the dead body of Ralph Himebaugh under the bed. Some members ended up in mental asylums that were "controlled by Jews and atheists and they tortured Christians."[161] Mrs. Clara Collins was appointed the principal Leader and Organizer with a regular wage. The Brunists decide to reach other parts of the world, and believe that "*God willing*, (. . .) *we will go out and win the souls of the whole wide world!*"[162]

Through a series of violent events, the Brunists integrated themselves into the existent social order, that is, they validated themselves and asserted their legibility, a process that often happens in revolutionary movements. The disaster created a potential that enabled them to lay basic premises for their movement. Also, the reaction of their surroundings defined their goals and established their leaders. The rise of the Brunists represents a disruption in the historical continuum that will enable former socially excluded citizens to become members of a more varied social fabric. Some of their methods were abandoned and took a more conservative approach. The Brunists have created their own bureaucratic system, a means of self-control, a working apparatus representing an anonymous means of control that is de-individualized in the way it rules; the working is ensured by the religious rules that supplicate the law. The flexibility of religious rules enacts freedom; however, all members have to submit to the control of the organization. Also, the propagation of brotherhood and sisterhood creates a sentimental tie that allows the intrusion of stronger collective violence but also imposes a taboo and diminishes sexual desires. All this creates space for a strong female

[160] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 423. Italics in the original.

[161] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 428.

[162] Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists*, 430. Italics in the original.

leader. At first, everything is done on account of individualism; once they become collectivized, all traces of individual traits must be suppressed. From one point of view, the Brunists may be seen as a movement capable of tackling the underprivileged and socially excluded to bring them into a controllable system and thus not only decrease the possible discourse scale but also lessen the threat they pose to the whole system. At the same time, the movement, in its unity, may challenge the social and political strata.

To sum up, the first chapter, "The Sacrifice," shows Coover's refusal to follow the traditional narrative linearity; in this way; he builds tension, raises expectations about things to come, and provides a view from the outside through the character of Hiram Clegg. Clegg is one of the freshest acquisitions to the emerging religious cult of the Brunists and, as we learn, in the future, he earns himself the highest ranks in the cult hierarchy; he is to become the Bishop of the State of Florida. Coover makes clear from the start that the Brunists are to be taken seriously, and despite whatever may come, they will rise to the position of religious importance. Also, knowing the outcome increases the awareness of how successful religious cults come into power, how the reasoning behind their existence works, how their power system is established, and, most importantly, how some events are adapted to those needing a meaning in life. Multiple violent acts serve the purpose and add to the transformative myth-making experience.

5.2 Public Violence to the Body: *The Public Burning*

The publication of Coover's third novel initially provoked many legal threats and Coover himself was at the risk of losing everything he owned. Mentally conceived eleven years before its publication, its typescript rewritten several times, Coover's most notorious novel was finally published in 1977. There were several obstacles Coover had to face; apart from the enraged lawyers, there were also ensuing criminal charges, censorship and a lot of fear, "nothing but cold feet and chicken hearts."[163] Since the book dealt with many characters living at that time, the risk of a lawsuit was enormous and the financial success of the book would only increase the chance. Before its publication Coover was a promising young author known mainly to the educated readers and intelligentsia, but *The Public Burning* (1977) turned him into a major American novelist.

Ten years earlier, in 1967, Coover submitted his first political work *A Political Fable* (1980) for publication. However, the book was rejected and published twelve years later. The book parodies the American system of presidential election and features the Cat in the Hat, a character from Dr. Seuss. In fact, 1968 was a presidential election year in which the Vice President Richard Nixon won. Despite his initial refusal, Coover published the work under the title "The Cat in the Hat for President" in the *New American Review*.[164]

Contrary to its literary aspirations, *The Public Burning* was deposited into *libri prohibiti* in the libraries, George Will called it "A Sick Fantasy" in his *Omaha World-Herald* column, the book won Gordon Coogler Award for the worst book of the year, presented by the *American Spectator*, but also shortlisted for the National Book Award in 1978.[165] Coover himself was ostracized, his academic invitations renounced. The

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[163] Robert Coover, "One Hot Book: Richard Seaver & *The Public Burning*'s Wild Ride," *Humanist* 70, no. 3 (2010): 17.

[164] Robert Coover, "The Cat in the Hat for President," *New American Review* 4 (1968): 7–45.

[165] J. David Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 213. In his article, "One Hot Book: Richard Seaver & *The Public Burning*'s Wild Ride," Coover attributes the prize to the *American Statesman*, but this seems to be a mistake.

book industry was under the spell of marketplace dictatorship that Coover painfully experienced: "There is creative human expression, and there is the suppression of it. And the ceaseless struggle against this suppression."[166] Coover's masterpiece is indeed a proof of many struggles: editorial, authorial, and historical.

Given its title and theme, the book is often ranked among American political novels, but Coover himself originally called it *The Public Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: An Historical Romance* only to drop it after a consultation with his publisher, and he used the abbreviated version that lends seriousness and shocking urgency to the title. Although the book centers on the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, it also contains a substantial amount of information both historical and political in nature. Rosenbergs, both of Jewish origin, were convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union in 1951 and executed in Sing Sing prison two years later. They were accused of stealing classified material, especially on nuclear weapons. The case gained much attention of the public and there were numerous campaigns all over the world to pardon the Rosenbergs since their guilt was not proven satisfactorily and was believed to result from anti-Semitism. However, more than forty years later, the newly published documents confirmed that the Rosenbergs were involved in espionage to a degree.[167]

The book literally overflows with names, places, songs, gigs, acts, comical events, but also pleas to pardon the Rosenbergs. The inundation with living characters proves Coover to be both daring and capable of challenging the exposed personalities in page-by-page confrontation. Initially, Coover did not intend to go to such lengths and pondered over the form for a long time. In his 1976 interview with Geoffrey Wolff for the *New Times* magazine, Coover discloses that "[a]t first it was just a simple theater idea," but "it developed into more of a story *about* staging the executions in Times Square than actually doing it as a theater piece itself (. . .) ."[168] In summer of 1977, in a phone call with the journalist Herbert Mitgang, Coover confirms that he wanted to write a novella "and not a book of over 500 pages."[169]

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[166] Coover, "One Hot Book: Richard Seaver & *The Public Burning*'s Wild Ride," 21.

[167] See John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[168] Geoffrey Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," *New Times* 9, no. 4 (August 1977): 54. Italics in the original.

[169] Herbert Mitgang, "Metafiction," *New York Times*, June 19, 1977.

The choice of topic was more of an accident, when Coover picked up a neglected book on the Rosenbergs, the first Americans to be executed for Communist espionage in 1953, in the college library during one of his college teaching stints. Although the Rosenbergs' execution marked an era in American history, Coover felt the topic had been ousted from the collective memory, with no resonance in younger generations: "I felt that the event was something that had been repressed. If you mentioned the Rosenberg case, people were turned off or young persons didn't know what it had been all about."[170] Coover admits that *The Book of Daniel* (1971) by E. L. Doctorow helped to shape his idea about his own book on the Rosenbergs. Both Doctorow and Coover are reviewing the trial. While Doctorow does it in retrospective through fictitious Daniel, the son of the alleged spies, Coover uses the Vice President Richard M. Nixon, a direct observer of the trial, who buries himself in private letters and FBI reports and seeks for the truth, often discovering disturbing parallels with his own private life. In fact, William H. Gass in his introduction suggests that Coover's Nixon is "a rich and beautifully rendered fictional character. The real Richard Nixon is a caricature."[171]

The book portrays the last days before the execution of the Rosenbergs on June 19, 1953, and Coover does not hold back when it comes to exploitation of all that is historical, comical, carnivalesque, grotesque, theatrical, and clownish. The book is divided into four parts and three intermezzos, which bear the form of a public proclamation, a dramatic dialogue and a last-act opera. Coover concludes that the Rosenbergs' "execution — plus the prevalence of old-fashioned American hoopla — gave [him] the central metaphor for the book."[172] Coover transforms Times Square into the main arena, where the Death House is staged and the electric chair awaits its clients: "Coming here's like attending church. The American church, (. . .)."[173]

Negative reviews were mostly a result of misunderstanding Coover's style and the inability to challenge lived-in literary notions. In retrospective, most of them can be functionally rejected, since they did not grasp the idea behind the book, but deal with the political circumstances, taking them for realistic; they criticize Coover for the lack

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[170] Herbert Mitgang, "Metafiction," *New York Times*, June 19, 1977.

[171] William H. Gass, introduction to *The Public Burning*, by Robert Coover (New York: Grove Press, 1977), xii.

[172] Herbert Mitgang, "Metafiction," *New York Times*, June 19, 1977.

[173] Geoffrey Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," 54.

of a moral and psychological message. In his article on the American political novel in the *New York Times*, Robert Alter judged the book as "a crushingly boring repetition of the same idea in seemingly endless variations. (. . .) What is particularly troubling about this book (. . .) is the astonishing degree of puerility it exhibits."[174] Coover uses the fascination of humankind with numbers and facts and builds upon it in the Prologue. Only until the moment the first blow to the factuality comes, the fantastic mischief may begin in Times Square. Coover does not differentiate between facts and fiction; he treats them equally, since where the fact is, there must be fiction. He plays his own game, the fictitious provocation to the realistic beliefs, drawing the available reader into his own world of rules. The Prologue is an issued warning of things to come. Coover rediscovers new truths and realities, he moves from the *terra firma* to a land of *hic sunt leones*, full of barbaric tribes and nonexistent rules. In general, the reviewers were confused with the missing search for the hidden cause and unraveling of the Rosenberg mystery. The use of real characters was deemed obtrusive to the reading as well. In his review, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote: "Also, you needn't read any further if you are troubled by a novelist using actual people in a work of the imagination (. . .)."[175]

The character to gain most attention (and pages in the book) is that of Richard M. Nixon, the Vice President of the United States of America: "I [Coover] needed a clown act to intersperse with the circus act. And so Nixon became the clown. Clowns are sympathetic when you get to know them."[176] The masses, the mob, the audience, the spectators, the crowd, a countless number of American citizens gathered in Times Square form the counterpart to Nixon. His character provides the much needed respite from the unavoidable loudness of the American spirit. Nixon counterbalances the over-the-top theatrical parts with his personal insight and meaning he wants to impose on the bare facts. Nixon was not a main figure in the Rosenbergs' trial, but made his career through another espionage trial: that of government official Alger Hiss. Nixon's sidekick position allows him to occasionally disappear, to observe and comment, to navigate the reader through the political realities and the importance of an individual in the process we call history.

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[174] Robert Alter, "The American Political Novel," *New York Times*, August, 10, 1980.

[175] Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Books of The Times," *New York Times*, September 7, 1977.

[176] Herbert Mitgang, "Metafiction," *New York Times*, June 19, 1977.

The real personality of Richard Nixon, as well as his political career has always been considered controversial and Nixon himself has never been a favorite politician. While Henry Kissinger, who served as Nixon's security advisor, does not shy away from Nixon's controversies, he still thinks him a leader committed to the national interest and dedicated a chapter to him, in his latest book on leadership, ranking him alongside Margaret Thatcher and Charles de Gaulle; a leader who "reshaped a failing world order at the height of the Cold War."[177]

Kissinger credits Nixon for transforming the bipolar conflict into a more viable triangular scheme through American involvement with China. Nixon had to face challenges both political and cultural, since the United States was under pressure with its foreign engagements, but it was not until the Vietnam War that the American elites admitted that the defeat was both unavoidable and positively welcome. As Kissinger asserts, "such a conviction implied the breakdown of the centuries-long consensus that the national interest represented a legitimate, even moral, end."[178]

Kissinger describes him as "decisive and thoughtful" on the outside, but "there was another Nixon – insecure about his image, uncertain of his authority and plagued by a nagging self-doubt." He sees Nixon as a man who has "been haunted by [such] critical self-awareness all his life." Nixon's language "was often meant to convey an impression of some end that had not necessarily been revealed to the other party."[179] Nixon craved respect that would silence his personal doubts, but avoided face-to-face confrontations: "Nixon's handicaps (. . .) ultimately damaged his presidency. But the achievements of Nixon's career require recognition as a stupendous effort to transcend inhibitions that would have defeated a lesser leader."[180] Kissinger's words reflect those of Coover, who spoke quite positively of Nixon: "Something to do with his resilience, I guess – get up from each pratfall, forget it, get ready to take another. A man's worst defect usually has something to do with his best virtue."[181] Indeed, the personality of Richard Nixon is a key to the whole novel and he is not only counterbalancing his own faults, but also contrasts with the intimidating and boisterous character of Uncle Sam, the American

[177] Henry Kissinger, *Leadership* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 125.

[178] Kissinger, *Leadership*, 127.

[179] Kissinger, *Leadership*, 130.

[180] Kissinger, *Leadership*, 134.

[181] Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," 54.

superhero. Not many readers thoroughly deprived of deeper historical knowledge would guess Nixon to be a leader albeit a Vice President.

In the novel, Nixon is a clumsy speaker who often responds in a confusing manner, addressing topics he was not questioned about and providing answers too general in nature. Although he cannot shy away from his public role, his personality is revealed only through his inner monologue. His political attitude is always responsible and well thought of. He finds comfort in well-researched knowledge. It provides him with a protective wall from everything personal. He seeks approval and is happiest when getting a dog-like treatment from President Eisenhower: "Later, in Wheeling, the General embraced me and called me 'my boy' and let me walk on his right side."[182] Indeed, Coover recalls that Nixon was "more as a kind of Robin to Eisenhower's Batman."[183] Nixon avoids conflict and does not want to be personally embroiled in anything that would be damaging to his image or discredit his public persona.

Contrary to his unwillingness, Nixon faces many grotesque situations, the dynamic style protruding through comical and profane minor events, such as Nixon's wild taxi ride with a bawdy driver aka the Phantom, the ultimate resistance of the police horse poo on his shoe, his naughty fly that just does not want be zipped up, or a cigar exploding into Uncle Sam's face. Nixon's climactic performance is that of a public sacrifice, with his trousers down to his ankles, for the sake of American spirit, his ardent speech inspiring everyone to do just the same; undoubtedly this is his best clown act: "You have a thrilling high-wire number, and then the clown comes on, shoots off a cannon, takes a pratfall, drops his pants and exits."[184]

The dynamic feature of the novel is the never-ending battle between Uncle Sam and the ever-present, but never materialized in physical form, the Phantom. Uncle Sam, the superhero, a defender of freedom, is a stronghold of all that is American; he protects American interests and fights for them in an unscrupulous way:

> They [Americans] need no omens to pull a switch, turn a buck, or change the world, for these are the elected sons and daughters of Uncle Sam, né Sam Slick, that wily Yankee Peddler who, much like that ballsy Greek girl of long ago, popped virgin-born and fully constituted from the shattered seed-poll of the very

[182] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 311.

[183] Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," 54.

[184] Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," 54.

> Enlightenment—"slick," as the Evangels put it, "as a snake out of a black skin!" Young Sam, "lank as a leafless elm," already chin-whiskered and plug-hatted and all rigged out in his long-tailed blue and his striped pantaloons, his pockets stuffed with pitches, patents, and pyrotechnics, burst upon the withering Old World like a Fourth of July skyrocket, snorting and neighing like a wild horse: "Who—Whoo— Whoop! Who'll come gouge with me? Who'll come bite with me? Rowff—Yough—Snort—YAHOO![185]

While boisterous Uncle Sam represents everything that is American, the Phantom is simply behind everything that damages the global power structure maintained by the United States and skillfully diminishes the unlimited capacities of Uncle Sam. Coover obeys the bipolar discourse and builds his cartoon-like superheroes on dual principles such as light/darkness and good/evil.

Another representative of all that is American is the place of the execution, which happens in Times Square, a hub of all information flow and that, in the course of the novel, faithfully reflects the American mood through electrical signs. It is portrayed as a prominent part of the country so that everyone can see and enjoy the spectacle of public burning, a practice common to the Middle Ages:

> Times Square itself is an American holy place long associated with festivals of rebirth; and spring is still in the air. It is even hoped that a fierce public exorcism right now might flush the Phantom from his underground cells, force him to materialize, show himself plainly in the honest electrical glow of an all-American night-on-the-town, give Uncle Sam something to swing at besides a lot of remote gooks.[186]

The punishment is exemplary and the execution is part of a much larger spectacle and a show has been built around the Rosenberg story. Their characters are embedded into the popular culture; skits and sketches from their life performed; they have become part of the inevitable future, their characters immortalized. The Rosenbergs are fictionalized through the spectacle, their real personas separated and lost from those recreated in the story. In fact, everything is built around the Rosenbergs; they are central characters to the story; however, the fixed centre towards which every action flows is missing.

Similarly to his unrelenting pursuit of Alger Hiss, Nixon takes it as his personal task to prove himself also in the Rosenbergs' case. Nixon analyzes their personalities,

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[185] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 6.

[186] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 4.

Ethel, a promising actress and singer, raised in a Brooklyn ghetto, married Julius, a conventional left-winger. They had a business that failed and they had no money, they were an ordinary couple that could not appropriate their bourgeois role. Nixon ponders over their path to Communism and treason and concludes: "After all, I'd become Vice President of the United States of America by a chain of circumstances not all that different, one thing drifting into the next, carried along by a desire, much like theirs, to reach the heart of things, to participate deeply in life."[187] The Rosenbergs have no particular qualities, they are mere onlookers. For Nixon they are "a paradigm case for analyzing how neither particular evil nor particularly smart people could get caught in the machinery of evil and commit the deeds they did."[188] The term "banality of evil," introduced by political thinker Hannah Arendt closely sums up the thoughts of Nixon, but the original case for Arendt's paradigm was Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi official. Nixon cannot help but compare his life to that of the Rosenbergs, who were the same age, had the same opportunities, but ended up in Sing Sing, awaiting execution. Nixon, an experienced strategist, is obsessed with things that make for a potential historical decision and how actions will be evaluated in the future. Apart from this, he develops a soft spot for Ethel, impressed with her trueness, courage, and irresistibly shaped behind.

Nixon himself feels too civilized for a successful career in politics: "It was the toughest part about being a politician, the one thing I personally hated the most. I'm no shrinking violet, I'm not unduly shy or modest, but I'm a private man and always have been. Formal. When I have sex I like to do it between the sheets in a dark room. When I take a shit I lock the door. My chest is hairy but I don't show it off. I don't even like to eat in public and just talking about one's personal life embarrasses me."[189] Real politics is a corrupted power struggle, it is a game played dirty, not for the soft-hearted and well-spoken:

> As Uncle Sam once told me: "Politics is the only game played with real blood." I didn't want to believe him at the time, I wanted it to be played with rhetoric and industry, yet down deep

[187] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 128.

[188] Seyla Benhabib, "Identity, Perspective and Narrative in Hannah Arendt's 'Eichmann in Jerusalem'," *History and Memory* 8, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 1996): 37.

[189] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 526.

> I knew that even at its most trivial, politics flirted with murder and mayhem, theft and cannibalism.[190]

The trial itself is a game, a house of cards where "justice is entertainment."[191] The Rosenbergs are the only actors who apparently have not rehearsed for their roles.

Nixon is unsure about himself; he accepts the idea that he and the Rosenbergs are performing their roles, that they are part of something bigger that is out of their reach. Gradually, Nixon comes to realize his own power to change or at least shift the course of history. He exchanges inevitability for action and takes an unusually bold decision to elicit a confession from the Rosenbergs himself. In a desperate attempt to prove his allegiance to Uncle Sam, he boards the nearest train for Sing Sing and confronts his femme fatale, Ethel Rosenberg, face-to-face. Although she initially despises him, they end up exchanging words of love and tender feelings. Nixon's ability to think in patterns results in an amorous dialogue that resembles a cheap, well-worn romance full of clichés and tangled trousers in an attempted intercourse. The nearing spectacle catches Nixon unawares and, deceived by the treacherous Ethel, he finds himself on the stage in Times Square, "'I AM A SCAMP' lipsticked on his butt."[192]

As we learn, the Times Square setting is suggestive of everything that is to happen to the bodies of the Rosenbergs:

> This stage is built to simulate the Death House at Sing Sing, its walls whitewashed and glaringly lit, furnished simply with the old oaken electric chair, cables and heating pipes, a fire extinguisher, a mop and bucket for cleaning up the involuntary evacuations of the victims, and a trolley for carting the corpses off. The switch is visible through an open door, stage right, illuminated by a hanging spot. Other elegantly paneled doors, right, exit off to press and autopsy rooms, and upstage left another door leads in from the "Last Mile," or "Dance Hall." Over this entry, which the Rosenbergs will use, a sign is tacked up that reads: SILENCE.[193]

The presence of the body is made dominant to the scene, as well as possible suffering and bodily manifestations. The focus is also on the man who is about to operate the chair, the State Executioner Joseph P. Francel, an electrician who is skilled in his trade

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[190] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 48.

[191] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 121.

[192] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 469.

[193] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 4.

and ensures the operation runs smoothly and efficiently. The execution is not anonymous, but is made remote, with a flick of the switch. Interestingly, electrocution is avoiding any physical contact with the body; the only preparation is to make the body conductive enough. The electricity represents the law that ultimately penetrates the body of the criminal; the separation between the legal process and punishment is theoretically at its perfection.

There is a contradiction in the public execution of the Rosenbergs since modern states sought minimization of bodily pains or aimed at the avoidance of the body in general. Through the public execution the power of the state is on display, the power which relies on violence and spectacularity. Coover's book suppresses the idea of the civilizing process as popularized by Norbert Elias. According to Elias, modern society feels discomfort when things like bodily functions are mentioned openly, regarded as uncivilized and barbaric, similar to physical suffering and growing refusal of violence. It is part of the "civilizing process of the state (. . .) liberation of broader sections of the population from all that was still barbaric or irrational in existing conditions, whether it were the legal penalties or the class restrictions (. . .) this civilizing must follow the refinement of manners (. . .)."[194] Higher sensitivity of the ruling elites to physical punishment led to the refusal of torture and spectacular public executions, which were extremely popular in the late Middle Ages.

The use of electrocution as an effective and state-of-the-art execution method should minimalize the pain and bring immediate death; hence the physical body should be ignored at all costs. In fact *In re Kemmler* (1890), the U. S. Supreme Court rules execution by the electric chair as constitutional; it presents electrocution as a suitable method of execution, since "it is within easy reach of electrical science at this day to so generate and apply to the person of the convict a current of electricity of such known and sufficient force as to certainly produce instantaneous, and therefore painless, death."[195] David Garland emphasizes that "[m]odern capital punishment aims to avoid the body, and certainly to avoid being seen to punish the body. Its aim [is] to terminate life without implicating the body (. . .)."[196] Coover's decision to show the process in its

[194] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 41–42.

[195] In re Kemmler, 136 U.S. 436 (1890), https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/136/436/ (accessed September 5, 2023).

[196] David Garland, "The Problem of the Body in Modern State Punishment," *Social Research* 78, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 772.

entirety means to challenge the notion of humane and painless death. The Sing Sing warden describes the elaborate and technically advanced process that should deprive the Rosenbergs of their life in the following way:

> But we've made a lot of refinements over the years, and it's not so gruesome any more. For the victim, electrolethe, as we used to call it, is probably the best way to be taken off—much faster than gassing, garroting, or hanging, surer than shooting. As far as we know, it destroys them instantaneously—the current melts the brain so fast that the nervous system probably doesn't even have time to register any pain.[197]

Coover denied the privacy and concealment of the execution and brought it out to public, so that the whole nation, including its elites sitting in the VIP section, could take part in it and face it in person. Coover proposes that the idea of painless humane killing is a mystification, that the Rosenbergs did experience suffering, equaling it with torture.[198] Furthermore, the whole procedure is visible to the public, ritualized, its parts easily discernible: the death sentence reading, the arrival of the condemned, the rabbi providing words of consolation, the suffering, the confirmation of their death, and the removal of body liquids and the body itself.

Thus, through detailed description, the organization of death is directly attributed to the state; the state is directly linked with the punishment and made responsible for it. Coover participates in the discourse of reappearance. Indeed, the Rosenbergs' bodies are brought back in the debates that arise questions about the legitimacy of the death sentence in a liberal democracy.

Coover issues a warning against the insensitivity of the American society towards violence, where painful and unpleasant aspects were moved into the background of the social sphere and their nature concealed behind high-brow ideas of humanity, national importance, and civilizing progress. This goes with the increasing avoidance of the human body, direct confrontation substituted with precise equipment and dehumanized control process that ensures smooth operation which should be clean, fast, and painless, as if the justice was executing itself without any harmful human interference.

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[197] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 412.

[198] For Foucault, torture is an organized pain; it is a technique, which administers pain according to a certain degree. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 33.

> Julius Rosenberg's body is straining suddenly against the straps as though trying to burst from the chair. Air hisses from his lungs. His neck thickens as though swallowing something whole. The leather straps creak and there is a staticky crackling whine in the Square reminiscent of the classic mad-doctor movies—only more close up. The loose clothes flutter and his limbs shake. Greasy yellow-gray smoke plumes from the top of his head like a cast-out devil. Then, abruptly, the whine stops. The body falls back into the chair, limp as a rag. There is a deathly breath-held silence in Times Square.[199]

The switch is pulled two more times, the body struggles again and again. There are several meanings of the Rosenbergs' execution; firstly it is a public legitimization of violence, which directly seeks the approval of the public. The public execution denies refusal of violence to the body, which is largely supported by the crowds of spectators, and is reincorporated into the public domain, thus contrary to the civilizing process. It also involves the notion of death, since concealed death and painless death are not as horrific as a painful and openly visible death struggle. The suffering is drawing the audience to witness the spectacle of death:

> Julius Rosenberg, taking Judge Irving Kaufman and the U.S. Department of Justice with him, enters the record books as the first American citizen ever executed by a civil court for espionage. More records are set to be broken when Ethel Rosenberg takes her turn in the chair, but this one belongs to Julius alone, and, as such things appeal to Americans, it is duly cheered—less enthusiastically up front, where the disquieting presence of Death can still be felt like a sticky malodorous fog, more warmly as it spreads out toward the periphery, traveling like a happy rumor, merging finally into a drunken exultant uproar out at the far edges, where everyone is having a terrific time without exactly knowing why.[200]

The crowd does not shy away from the suffering; they hold their breath in suspense, but still can bear the sight of the bodies in pain, awaiting the truth to materialize. It is a spectacle, where pain provides for the meaning, it is justice, but primarily it is a show. As Michel Foucault points out, "from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its

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[199] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 509–10.

[200] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 511.

glory."[201] The crowds are not horrified by the sights of bodily liquids being cleaned or the smell of burned bodies. Some formerly hidden aspects reentered the society without any embarrassment. Violence is both tolerated but also justified and legitimized through legal process. For Foucault the body of the criminal indicated the presence of the sovereign and his power: "The public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power."[202] The public execution represents direct criticism of the state that needs to reassert its power through de-civilizing practice, originally denounced by ruling elites as barbaric, now a welcomed practice of the ruling classes to regain their faith in the political power on the national front and indirectly confronting the competing Communist regime.

The public execution implies interaction, a system in power, usually represented by a socially advantaged group of people inflicting punishment on other people. Therefore, the execution polarizes two groups and affects the social fabric of the state. It aims to unify the nation against the external enemy, persuade with a well constructed proof chain. Also, the audience accepts the bodily pains on the premise that they bear the form of staged event; the semblance of fictionality is further strengthened by the positioning of the Rosenbergs into a series of circus acts revolving around their private lives, the Rosenbergs being the high-wire number.

Firstly, their body must be subjected to a legal procedure, the guilt must be proved and truth revealed through available evidence. The verdict must be passed. The proofs are secured by the FBI, an organization with an internal monopoly on knowledge, which administers the absolute control over the proofs. The Rosenbergs did not confess, which opens space for doubt, provides them credibility and turns the investigation into a construct. Thus, the Rosenbergs stand outside the legal process, their confession would incorporate them into it; they would represent "living truth," as in opposition to the reconstructed one. There is a suggestion that the death sentence might be revoked if they confess, and so it also becomes a means of coercion:

> It is thought that such an event might provoke open confessions: the Rosenbergs, until now tight-lipped and unrepentant, might at last, once on stage and the lights up, perceive their national role and fulfill it, freeing themselves before their deaths from the Phantom's dark mysterious power, unburdening themselves for

[201] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 34.

[202] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 49.

the people, and might thereby bring others as well—to the altar,
as it were—to cleanse their souls of the Phantom's taint.[203]

In the prison, Ethel and Julius are deprived of any direct physical contact: "They held hands and kissed each other through wire mesh."[204] Their liberty is not only taken away, but their bodily form is subjected to various organized procedures. Their bodies are controlled; they are told when to exercise in the exercise yard or when to have meals.

Even their loneliness and emotional deprivation is a form of exerting pressure on them. Their former life in contrast with prison conditions, their growing emotional coldness signifies decay, renunciation of their lives. They are moved into a special part of the Sing Sing prison, the Death Cells, reserved for those to be executed, they feel the presence of the electric chair, which would equal to the first degree of torture in the Early Modern Europe. The next step is a physical confrontation; part of their head is shaved to facilitate the contact.

ETHEL
(*unmoved*)
Say what you will,
camouflage it,
glamorize it,
whitewash it,
in any way you choose,
but this is coercion,
this is pressure,
this is torture![205]

Since they are traitors of the whole nation, the nation has the right to witness their execution in Times Square, where their whole life is made public and recreated. It is a trial where they are judged by all men, the judicial death extended into the public. Hence, the biggest proof against the Rosenbergs is represented through the execution itself. Foucault writes about public executions: "It was a moment of truth that all the spectators questioned: each word, each cry, the duration of the agony, the resisting

[203] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 3.

[204] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 127.

[205] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 389.

body, the life that clung desperately to it, all this constituted a sign."[206] The judicial truth is reflected physically on the body. Both of them are accompanied to the chair with the words of the rabbi, providing comfort in the God's grace, in the truth that is known only to God, who can prove the worldly justice wrong.

The treason uncovers the vulnerability of the mechanism that should guarantee the security of the whole country. It is a personal offence to expose and ridicule the government and Uncle Sam. The execution rebuilds pride and dignity. The characters of the Rosenbergs are small and powerless while Uncle Sam is mighty. The execution reveals not only the truth but also the reliance of power on excess and exaggeration. The execution reenergized the law, reinforced the formal law and established a direct power relation between the two. Where there is a breach of law, there will be a punishment.

The execution is portrayed as a triumph; it contains various scripted scenes culminating with the burning and death. The show brings the spectator into the right mood, further improved by crates of alcohol that are loaded off helicopters. The bodies of the executed are showing resistance, there is a fight unto the last breath. The gravity of their criminal act coincides with the extreme cruelty of their punishment. The audience even claps the cleaner in appreciation:

> While the cadaver is being wheeled offstage to the autopsy room, the attendant who brought in the ammonia bucket mops up the puddle beneath the electric chair and sponges off the soiled seat, working with self-conscious fastidiousness, aware of all the eyes upon him. The audience with gentle good humor applauds him—he smiles sheepishly, wiping his hands on his pants, and ducks back to his position beside the wall, stage left.

The possible failure of the execution was tackled with the presence of the doctor, who declares them dead. Ethel, whose heart is still beating after three rounds of electrocution, is brought back to the chair and burned again.[207] For Nixon, the sight was insufferable: "Well, poor Ethel—let's face it, she hadn't had it easy either. I'd envied her her equanimity at the end: she'd died a death of almost unbearable beauty. In fact, it

[206] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 46.

[207] *In re Kemmler* (1890) insists on the current to be continued until the condemned is pronounced dead: "[T]he punishment of death must in every case be inflicted by causing to pass through the body of a convict a current of electricity of sufficient intensity to cause death, and the application of such current must be continued until such convict is dead." In re Kemmler, 136 U.S. 436 (1890), https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/136/436/ (accessed September 5, 2023).

was unbearable—that was probably why we'd all fought our way up to the switch when the electrician bungled it."[208]

In a society where the body is sacred and death and other forms of bodily suffering pushed into background, the execution shows the horror of suffering body and reintroduces death. The inclusion of the death sentence into a legal system provides the best support for power, to reflect the nature of the crime in the punishment. The main character is the audience, the spectators; this is a show for them, it seeks their approval, ovation, it returns faith in the system, since seeing is believing. They are participants but also believers in the punishment. Justice has been served, the deaths verified medically and by direct observation, the examples are set, all doubts eliminated; the power of the people materialized and directly witnessed, since this is their public burning, their execution of power.

The Rosenbergs do not protest, their proximity to death allows them to make a public proclamation, to confirm their innocence in the face of death, but they choose to remain silent. They leave no last words, they do not confess or tell the truth, which would be in Žižek's words, "a pathetic gesture aimed at redeeming their image in the eyes of the big Other."[209] For Coover the Rosenbergs are innocent, since they did not sacrifice their desire, they insist on their innocence, and give up everything for the truth they believed. They have probably come to understand that they are part of a larger history, creating myths, a part of an explanation of American failure, a means of returning the United States its lost pride.

Foucault endows public execution with "a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes."[210] At the same time, people witnessing the execution may experience a need for revenge, especially if there is a seed of doubt that may grow into public unrest, since people were looking death into face, felt sorry for the executed, perceived the cruelty of the punishment, and therefore cleared way for the posthumous glorification of the Rosenbergs:

> He [Julius] does not resist; but he does not help them either. His body continues to function, but at some remove from his mind,

[208] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 524. Italics in the original.

[209] Žižek, *Violence*, 43.

[210] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 61.

> as though he has already disowned it, while keeping it operative like some kind of visible metaphor for his anguish: not quite real any more, but something to be admired and pitied at the same time. Against their will, the people in fact admire and pity it, even as they fear it: this frailness—the Phantom's last weapon![211]

Coover suggests that signs of weakness and compassion are not part of the right American attitude and sheer admission of such feelings arouses fear in those who experience them. Moreover, Julius makes it apparent that suffering pertains to the body only; the mind remains untouched, innocent, and therefore the whole meaning of the punishment inflicted on the body is doubted.

The placing of the execution in Times Square is a result of understanding of what Americans desire — a show in the first place. The execution served two purposes: to unify the nation and the exerting of social control and state power. Lastly, it was a message to the enemy, to the Phantom.

The book is primarily not a defense of the Rosenbergs; it is an accusation of the American nation of social degradation. The intrusion of the de-civilizing process is a sign that the American system is losing its grip and, instead of using institutionalized forms, turned back to the medieval spectacle to restore order. Coover criticizes the open acceptance of pain and violence in a society that prides itself on being the chosen nation. The execution is a proof of state weakness, the reversal of the civilizing process: "I [Coover] feel we're dealing with a primitive society here. The point of a ceremonial return to dreamtime is basically regenerative: to recover belief in the tribe and get things moving again. The best social orders run down with time, and so occasionally you have to tear it all apart and start over."[212] Brian Evenson thinks that the violence is an instrument of social healing, a way of unifying a failing society: "[T]he execution of the Rosenbergs is used as something to bring the country together; by shedding blood, society is cleansed and renewed, bound tighter together."[213] However, the renewal does not come through mere acceptance of the bloodshed and a couple of circus acts, as Evenson suggests, since it is not the blood that renews the society, but the sight of blood, a realization of the repulsiveness of the whole affair, the necessity to acknowledge the power mechanism that stands behind the execution as barbarian, to

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[211] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 507–8.

[212] Wolff, "A Sequence of Circus Acts," 54.

[213] Brian Evenson, *Understanding Coover* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 114.

denounce and delegitimize the ultimate violence as a means of justice and impose credible values. Coover brings the whole nation to Times Square to witness its own civilizing downfall. It is consciousness-raising experience. The nation that allowed this to happen must be broken in the first place in order to realize its need for reparation. Violence is instrumental in its ability to remind us what it means to be a member of the humane tribe.

In his epilogue conversation with Nixon, Uncle Sam prides himself on his wickedness and the deliberate killing of the Rosenbergs: "Sure! It ain't easy holdin' a community together, order ain't what comes natural, you know that, boy, and a lotta people gotta get killt tryin' to pretend it is, that's how the game is played—but not many of 'em gets a chance to have it done to 'em onstage in Times Square!"[214] Nixon realizes Uncle Sam's depravity, steering away from the ideals he believed in when he was a boy. America becomes morally corrupt and its democratic values doubted. More importantly, through the controversy of the Rosenbergs' trial Coover suggests that the national interest is not always moral and legitimate; referring to the American foreign involvement that is no longer sustainable. Finally, Nixon suffers a select treatment by Uncle Sam: "Come here, boy," he said, smiling frostily and jabbing his recruitment finger at me with one hand, unbuttoning his striped pantaloons with the other: "I want YOU!" (. . .) So jes' drap your drawers and bend over, boy—you been ee-LECK-ted![215] Richard Nixon has been singled out by Uncle Sam as his next incarnation. Through his pain, he admits being in love with Uncle Sam, who has just disclosed his darker and corrupted side.

Coover resuscitated Nixon back to another, alternative life in his work *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* (1987). Although his name is never mentioned, the character's name is a direct reference to *The Pubic Burning*, where Nixon recalls being called Gloomy Gus in his youth and also, in the epilogue, Uncle Sam calls him Gus as well.[216] The book sees Nixon as a professional football player who is doomed to death right at the start of the book. His life is full of conquered women and football, but Gus himself resembles a factory product incapable of any creative endeavor. In this text, Gus—Nixon is the one to play his part, without any

[214] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 531.

[215] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 530.

[216] Coover, *The Public Burning*, 534.

personal reflection or possibility to actively engage in his life, unlike Nixon, the Vice President.

In *The Public Burning*, Coover reinvented the spectacularity of the public execution and resurrected the characters of the Rosenbergs so that they could re-experience their suffering, this time publicly, only to attribute to this particular moment in human history the significance it deserved after it has been consciously repressed by the civilized society. What Coover actually suggests is that life is not and cannot be recreated by a simple concatenation of facts. He challenges the way people tend to attribute a meaning to events we call historical. Coover moulds the basis into a more formidable shape that suits his purpose, thus challenging the way facts represent the truth and suggesting that truth is the least reliable thing.

6 On Perversion: *Spanking the Maid*

Perversion is usually associated with some conduct that goes against the standards, against what is considered acceptable and moral. Not only is a perversion in opposition to the reasonable, but one of the widely-accepted beliefs is that it also subverts the law. However, this misinterpreted notion of perversion has already been disproved, but the revolutionary potential of perversion persists.[217] To gain at least a general understanding of the mechanism behind perversion, one has to retreat to the times of violence imposed by the primordial father, as introduced by Freud in his collection of essays *Totem and Taboo* (1913). The killing of the primordial father awakened the sense of guilt in the band of brothers and gave rise to the Oedipus complex, subjugating instincts to certain social restrictions and to law in general, which provided moral framework for human activities: "Society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt."[218] The words of Freud confirm that Oedipus complex is what keeps the law alive. Perversion offers the hope of liberation or defiance both of the law and the father. In psychoanalysis, perversion should be regarded as a structural category devoid of any discriminatory or biased practice, and just like psychosis and neurosis, it has to do with the insufficient function of the father.

Pervert's world is that of a failing or nonexistent father and a strong bond with his mOther and her *jouissance*, that is, her totality of enjoyment.[219] Bruce Fink asserts that "the Other is not whole; his mOther is lacking in something, wants for something."[220] The knowledge of the mother's lack and the finality of separation from

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[217] Perversion is not politically subversive and cannot be, since perversion is generally repetitive and thus oriented towards tradition. Transgression is one of the means perversion seeks the Law of the Father, but it never becomes revolutionary, since it only provokes the limits of the mOther's *jouissance*.

[218] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 146.

[219] A domain of mother's *jouissance*, mOther, shows an attempt to make the Other pronounce the paternal law. See Bruce Fink, "Perversion" in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, eds. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 38–67.

[220] Bruce Fink, "Perversion," 49.

her are disavowed in the pervert's mind. It is through transgression that the pervert establishes his contact with the law. However, the transgression does not reveal that the law of the perverse, which is centered on *jouissance*, is only an imaginary construct; only its violation can reveal this. Therefore, the pervert pokes at the law to effectuate the Law of the Father and at the same time disturbs that of the mOther.[221] Hence, disavowal and transgression are two principles governing the world of the pervert.

However, the mOther's world cannot be disturbed, since no lack could be visually recognized and because the thought is not with the absence but with the presence. Therefore, the pervert needs to create his own absence, a lack, into which he can place his own fetish and thus disavow castration. In fact, his patch-up of the lack makes the lack of his mother even more visible. His effort to tame the *jouissance* brings disavowal that substitutes the Law of the Father but enables him to become a subject. The pervert insists on the *jouissance* he gained from his relationship with his mother, the mother often being replaced with a fetish. This enables him not only to acquire the position of a subject but also to place himself in the social world. Speaking from his practice, Jacques-Alain Miller concludes: "The worst pervert is he who speaks in the name of morality. The true perverts, the ones you never see in analysis, are the judge, the priest, and the professor – all those in a position of authority who control the jouissance of others."[222]

In the Lacanian sense, desire implies lack, it is an acknowledgment of the absence of something that is missing, thus desire is defined by the search for an object lost. The lack involves the necessity for its acceptance and therefore this absence allows for doubts and inquiries. While the neurotic in his search for desire may open some space for innovation, the pervert denies change because he does not have to search for the lost object; he disavows lack. The pervert knows his way to sexual enjoyment what the pervert questions is whether his enjoyment corresponds to what is considered right. Jacques-Alain Miller clarifies: "In classical psychoanalysis, perversion is not a raw instinctual drive; it is cooked, so to speak, not raw."[223] Perversion itself should be

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[221] See Molly Anne Rothenberg and Dennis Foster, "Beneath the Skin: Perversion and Social Analysis" in *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–14.

[222] Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Perversion," in *Reading Seminars I & II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 318.

[223] Miller, "On Perversion," 310.

apprehended through the accepted standards of sexuality, which are usually represented by the biological reproductive function. For Freud, every such activity outside those standards is perverse, and therefore pleasure-seeking for its own sake is perverse as well. Hence sexual enjoyment can be obtained only outside standard sexual relationships.[224]

According to Miller, perversion is an instinctual drive that deviates from the norms of human sexuality since it does not seek totality in a person. The exchange of desires pertains to the human desire only, that is, one's desire aims at the other's desire and it is not selfishly oriented towards the body and pleasure. The Other is repositioned only after our ability to elicit the question of Other's demands.[225] The pervert does not require or rather denies the other the capability of questioning its desire. The other has to play its role, and if it were to provoke the question of its desire, it would cause a fatal fall of all that the pervert has carefully built. The pervert needs a stage, an actor, a puppet, and a proper setting to be perversely gratified. Moreover, another stronghold of the pervert is the knowledge of other's desires. This knowledge enables him to remain in control, gives him access to manipulation, and provides instructions.

Contrary to this, there are situations in the life of a pervert that require the presence of the Other. Miller asserts that "[t]he Other is necessary in perversion."[226] Some perversions, such as exhibitionists, need the gaze of the Other, which reflects the shock but also discovers and acknowledges the erection. In this case, *jouissance* comes through the Other, which is at the same time recognized as the Other.

In its nature, love is sadomasochistic since the ideal of love cannot be reached. Love as an ideal is a reflection of our desire to be loved by the Other and the same reflection is demanded from the Other. The situation is different in sadomasochism. The sadistic side represents my perception of the other as an object and the masochistic side represents my perception of me as the object for the Other, which holds the position of a subject. The sadist enjoys his position of being detached and disinterested, yet enacting

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[224] See Sigmund Freud, "The Sexual Aberrations," in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (London: Imago, 1949), 13–50.

[225] This means that the Other is capable of arousing a question, perceived as a subject, the other is only objectified.

[226] Miller, "On Perversion," 317.

control. A sadist does not provide his flesh but rejoices at seeing and controlling the flesh of the other. His relationship with the other remains thus sexually void.[227]

Strangely enough, the French philosopher Michel Foucault did not provide any complex work on sadomasochism but in his interviews he often tackled the topic with his usual openness and expertise. The remarks on the phenomenon of sadomasochism are present in his texts "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" and "Sex, Power and Politics of Identity," both present in the first volume of his essential works *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1994).[228] Foucault defines the sadomasochistic relationship in terms of mastery rather than violent suffering. Sadomasochism is essentially an artistic practice of the proper infliction of pain. He also stipulates the terms of the contract, which does not set a penalty for its breach. On the contrary, openness brings innovation and maintains excitement, excluding sexual pleasure.

For Foucault, sadomasochistic practice is a creative process, since it enables its actors to perform new acts on their bodies. It has nothing to do with freeing the accumulated aggression and ensuing violence. Foucault speaks of "the desexualization of pleasure."[229] He breaks the relationships between bodily pleasures and sexual pleasures and insists that pleasure can be reached in many different ways and does not necessarily have to include sexual pleasure. Also, he defines sadomasochism as "the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations."[230] He compares them to social power which is created through institutions and therefore its social penetrability is low. On the other hand, the sadomasochistic relations are variable. The sadomasochistic game uses the roles, but does not insist on their finiteness; however, the idea of a game is crucial. There are rules and the pitch is strictly given; crossing its limits is guarded through agreement. Sadomasochism brings the spectacle of power relations being artificially reproduced to bring pleasure: "It's a process of invention. S&M is the use of strategic relationship as a source of pleasure."[231]

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[227] See Kirsten Hildgaard, "The Conformity of Perversion," *Symptom* 5 (Winter 2004), https://www.lacan.com/conformperf.htm (accessed September 15, 2023).

[228] Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2020), 141–156.

Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power and Politics of Identity," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2020), 163–73.

[229] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (London: Penguin, 2020), 165.

[230] Foucault, *Ethics*, 169.

[231] Foucault, *Ethics*, 170.

6.1 Violence as a Game: *Spanking the Maid*

Robert Coover is no novice to the practice of game-playing. He likes to explore variations of themes no one has dared to tread yet. This time he challenges a sadomasochist relationship that for most of his experienced critics, recognizing the book format from an adult bookstore, falls into the category of pornography; for example, Alan Friedman is not afraid to call it a "belletristic masturbation (. . .) He [Coover] tackles this preposterous pornography with the seriousness of art."[232] Indeed, the illustrations of the first edition bear more than anything else a striking resemblance to the objects found in the cabinets of curiosities, both educational and entertaining in purpose.

Although the element of the game is present in almost every novel, Coover openly attributes the game character to his collection of short stories *A Child Again* (2005).[233] The stories incorporate fairytales with puzzles, occasionally dragging the reader to participate in some organization of violence. Again, Coover starts with something familiar, only to give it a proper twist that retells the story his way, confronting the childhood fantasies, changing the point of view, tearing characters away from their ideal setting and thus exposing void concepts created by the original tales. In his short story "Riddle," which turns out to be a puzzle, five men are to be executed. The lieutenant in charge reveals their stories and provides their names and occupations only to finish his account with a puzzle. The order of the condemned, their names, and the right point of view reveal the hidden message: LUCHA FUTIL.

His story "Heart Suit" consists of thirteen heart cards, attached to the back cover, which may be read in any order. The story revolves around some stolen pastry and the search for the culprit. The reader may leave it to chance, which character will be sent to the gallows by the King of Hearts. Yet the reader is condemned to repetition since the last card ends with another thievery of the Queen's tarts. Coover's playful approach sometimes grows monstrously terrifying yet some of them reveal themselves to be only

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[232] Alan Friedman, "Pleasure and Pain," *New York Times*, June 27, 1982.

[233] This is a collection of previously published short stories that appeared in *Iowa Review*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *New York Times*, etc. Some of them appeared in Coover's earlier short story collection *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969).

games. A critic, Michael Upchurch sums it up: "Yes, there are games being played here — but they're ingenious games, games that stir the soul."[234]

Coover's novella *Spanking the Maid* (1981) was conceived in the autumn of 1977 in Spain, where Coover retreated while awaiting the publication of his novel *The Public Burning* (1977). The work originally appeared in the literary quarterly the *Iowa Review* as a short story, counting 27 pages under an all-purpose title "A Working Day."[235] In 1981, the American writer and guest editor Hortense Callisher selected Coover's story to be published in *The Best American Short Stories*. In her introduction, she describes Coover's work as a combination of "exquisite repetitiousness of porn [and] (. . .) Robbe-Grillet's cinematic stop-time."[236] The short story under its original title was republished in a retrospective anthology *The Best American Short Stories of the Eighties* (1990), representing timelessness and complexity compressed into a limited space. The short story, although almost unchanged in content since its first publication, underwent some significant genre and title development. Although it is called "a novel" on the front page, its length condemns it to the category of a shorter genre that of novella; in fact, Alan Friedman insists in his review that this must "be a printer's error."[237] To call it a novel brought the liberty for its publication since short stories and novellas are rarely printed individually, either its length being too little or too much. *Spanking the Maid* was also reprinted in *The Mammoth Book of Short Erotic Novels* (2000), where it is highly appreciated for its length as being "the perfect form for literary erotica, allowing writers to develop their characters to greater depth beyond the gymnastics or hydraulics of the sexual act in all its myriad varieties."[238] However, to downgrade it to mere pornography would mean that the book has no other purpose than means of sexual stimulation. Of course, the change from a potentially harmless title to a sexually explicit statement did not help to prevent such assumptions, but like in the case of *The Public Burning*, it made its mark in the literary world more visible.

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[234] Michael Upchurch, "'A Child Again': Alice, the Pied Pier and Bluebeard Play New Games," *Seattle Times*, December 16, 2005.

[235] Robert Coover, "A Working Day," *Iowa Review* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 1–27.

[236] Hortense Callisher and Shannon Ravenel, eds., introduction to *The Best American Short Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), xv.

[237] Alan Friedman, "Pleasure and Pain," *New York Times*, June 27, 1982.

[238] Maxim Jakubowski and Michael Hemmingson, eds., introduction to *The Mammoth Book of Short Erotic Novels* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 2000), ix.

By calling it a novel, Coover suggests that there is more to it and that deeper meaning cannot be restricted by length. Again, Coover questions the conventions not only with the use of sexual language but is also pushing the boundaries of the genre. Two characters, the maid and her master, control every line of this novella, perfectly navigating in the provided space and exploring the nature of their somewhat peculiar relationship.

The playing field of the whole novella is restricted to two rooms, the bedroom and the bathroom. The maid rehearses her way into the room, concentrating on her task, avoiding anything that would make her master vulnerable or herself questionable; it must be a game played right. The illusion must be perfect. Her gaze must be reduced to the paraphernalia she is entitled to; her language circumcised in the same way, she must become the other that raises no questions:

> She enters, deliberately, gravely, without affectation, circumspect in her motions (as she's been taught), not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her, but advancing sedately, discreetly, glancing briefly at the empty rumpled bed, the cast-off nightclothes. She hesitates. No. Again. She enters. Deliberately and gravely, without affectation, not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her, not marching as if leading a dance, nor keeping time with her head and hands, nor staring or turning her head either one way or the other, but advancing sedately and discreetly through the door, across the polished floor, past the empty rumpled bed and cast-off nightclothes (not glancing, that's better), to the tall curtains along the far wall.[239]

She is a witness to all that is personal and embarrassing; she has access to the disagreeable truth. Just as the philosopher Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel claimed:

> No man is a hero to his valet; not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet – is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies.[240]

The maid is a moral valet to her master in the Hegelian sense, not allowing any thoughts of his possible corruption. She is not moral valet only to the outside but also to her inner self, not allowing any demeaning opinion of her master to preoccupy her head. Also,

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[239] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 9.

[240] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 404.

she constantly verbally formulates her inner confession. A practice known as *exagoreusis*, a process of constant questioning of one's self, was one of the forms that was used in Early Christianity to reveal the self, and that Foucault defines as "an analytical and continual verbalization of thoughts carried on in the relation of complete obedience to someone else; this relation is modeled on the renunciation of one's own will and of one's own self." [241]

It seems she is skilled with the words that make up her world and have relation to her profession. In fact, she is trapped by the language that defines her through her social position, especially the word "bucket". The light spills into the room "as from the bucket (. . .)" and while opening the curtain, "[b]uckets of light come flooding in," to her utmost horror. Also, nature assumes a clean and crisp look, especially in the morning. Her work is about his desire and pleasure, her own is the submission and humbleness.

The master knows what he wants from her; her clothing must be impeccable and her equipment as well. Her dress undergoes a close inspection: a black uniform, an alpaca skirt, a starched white apron, a lace cap, garters, and flannelette drawers. Also, her behavior is subjected to strict rules:

> "Let me be diligent in performing whatever my master commands me," she prays, "neat and clean in my habit, modest in my carriage, silent when he is angry, willing to please, quick and neat-handed about what I do, and always of a humble and good disposition!"[242]

Every violation of the rules brings punishment. This punishment is controlled; there is a manual that must be followed, every instrument must be used precisely, and the pain distributed and measured according to the manual. The violence is not an act of rage or some instinctive impulse. Her impeccable behavior becomes her desire and thus her lack; her master possesses the knowledge of the desire of the other and can make use of it.

She controls the light, lets the sweet air in, the same air he so violently sucks. To him, the night is maternal, when he awakes at night "hugged close to the sweet breast of the night" into the hard new day.[243] The maternal night lets him make use of his fetish,

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[241] Foucault, *Ethics*, 249.

[242] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 44.

[243] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 11.

his mother substitute: "Things that oughtn't to be there, like old razor blades, broken bottles, banana skins, bloody pessaries, crumbs and ants, leather thongs, mirrors, empty books, old toys, dark stains."[244] When he draws the curtains open, the room "seems almost to explode with the blast of light" and the master "finally welcomes its amicable violence."[245] Hence, her is the creation, his is the destruction, yet "she makes a maid's oppressive routine seem like a sudden invention of love."[246] Like an impatient child, his first thought in the morning belongs to his maid and her unavoidable failure.

In the morning the maid, catching her master unawares, objectifies the master through her gaze and her knowledge. What she sees when noticing his erection makes him realize what the Other sees in him, that is, a lustful man. On the other hand, it is he who creates her, who opens the door to her Otherness, who awakens shame, an overwhelming fear in her, and a proper shame it is:

> "Oh!" she cries. "I beg your pardon, sir!" He stares groggily down at the erection poking up out of the fly of his pajama pants, like (she thinks) some kind of luxuriant but dangerous dew-bejeweled blossom: a monster in the garden.[247]

Therefore, the erection is in the eye of the beholder. Her admiration stems from all that is natural, both plants in the garden and her master's blossom.

Her wish is to elicit "[s]ome response, some enrichment, some direction . . . it's, well, it's too repetitive."[248] The sadist in her master knows what is her weak point and her desire. Therefore, this knowledge provides access to the other's desire which makes the other vulnerable and prone to sadistic humiliation: "He means to give her some encouragement, to reward her zeal with praise or gratitude or at least a smile to match her own, but instead he finds himself flinging his dirty towels at her feet and snapping: 'These towels are damp! See to it that they are replaced!'"[249] The pervert performs through knowledge; he does not humiliate the Other but the other that is known to him.

The perfection lies in the ability not to provoke the question of the other's desire. The maid is the other, she must play her role perfectly, since without perfection there is

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[244] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 28.

[245] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 16.

[246] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 24.

[247] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 22.

[248] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 28.

[249] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 26.

no satisfaction. Any indication of inaccuracy brings down the whole stage. The maid must be taught not to profess her desire to become a professional in her *métier*. Also, her crying, shaking, and emotional disturbance add to the fantasy and trueness of the other's desire.

To know the other's desire means to be in charge of the knowledge. The master, the sadist, exerts his power; he is in control of her and every situation; he makes good use of it and therefore can humiliate her: "All life is a service, he knows that. To live in the full sense of the word is not to exist or subsist merely, but to make oneself over: to some high purpose, to others, to some social end, to life itself beyond the shell of ego."[250] The master believes that renouncing himself serves something higher, an abstraction that speaks through his deeds.

Sadism is about carnal possession; the master controls her flesh although he remains detached and fleshless. Their intimate relationship is imbalanced and not mutual. The maid is the other; being a professional she must not compel the question of her desire in the subject, since the master is the only one in the position of knowledge. The maid, the other, is further objectified through the wardrobe mirror:

> "Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" She is all hot behind, and peering over her shoulder at herself in the wardrobe mirror after the master has gone to shower, she can see through her tears that it's like on fire, flaming crimson it is, with large blistery welts rising and throbbing like things alive: he's drawn blood![251]

She becomes objectified into her flesh not only by her master but also through her own observation in the mirror. She sees herself as an object of his teaching, "her punishments serving her as a road, loosely speaking, to bring her daily nearer God, at least in terms of the manuals."[252] Her rather fascinated observation of her beaten behind brings her an almost satisfactory masochistic feeling.

Also, the master has been taught and often dreams of his younger days when he was schooled with a cane by his teacher or severely lectured on humility. Of course, the teacher only served the purpose of performing his duty, "called it his 'civil' service."[253] The sadism behind the punishment becomes repressed and dissolved into the general

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[250] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 24.

[251] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 68.

[252] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 51.

[253] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 11.

task of providing education and serving the public interest. A pervert never admits it; disavowal is fundamental to the world of perversion just like transgression.

Perverts usually deny their own agency, to them it is a mission, a task they were entrusted and therefore they do not demand power, since they just exercise the will of some higher authority. The maid deserves her punishment, since she broke the rules; he is a forced executor of the divine will: "A kind of holiday from the divine government of pain. Certainly, he does not enjoy it nor (presumably) does she. If he could ever believe in her as she believes in him, he might even change places with her for awhile, just to ease his own burden and let her understand how difficult it is for him."[254]

The master feels the burden and understands his position in the hierarchy: "But he, lacking superiors, must devote himself to abstractions, never knowing when he has succeeded, when he has failed, or even if he has the abstractions right, whereas she, needing no others, has him."[255] He unifies his desire with the law, since he is the one to decide, but at the same time responsible for her education, his success as a master depends on her. Since his desire equates with the law, he can push on the limits of the law. He does not feel any conflict between his nocturnal bestiality and daily sacrifices. The maid often discovers various objects inside and under his bed; sometimes they are moving and she even discovers "a dead fetus and drops it down the toilet, flushes it. 'I found it in your bed, sir,' she explains gratuitously (. . .)."[256]

The nature of the master's sadism is particularly visible when he forces her to reveal her desire through his ignorance, even though he is just testing her. This way he provokes an action that proves her voluntariness to the act:

> She stuffs her drawers hastily behind her apron bib, knocks over the mop bucket, smears the mirror, throws the fresh towels in the toilet, and jerks the blanket away again. "I—I'm sorry, sir," she insists, bending over and lifting her skirt: "I'm sure I had them on when I came in..." What? Is he snoring?[257]

When the maid strives for perfection, she commits errors as if by mistake, by omission. When she intentionally and visibly disobeys and makes blatant blunders he ignores her and climbs to bed instead. The maid becomes desperate and seeks a solution in the

[254] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 72.

[255] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 25.

[256] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 65.

[257] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 96–97.

rehearsed pattern; she enters the room, makes herself look untidy, and provokes him into action only to be ignored. He does not command her to serve as his flesh; she offers herself and reveals herself only to be refused and left unsatisfied. The master makes her reveal her desire only to humiliate her and prove that she, in fact, is disorderly and hence puts forward his knowledge.

The master knows the other's desire but not his own. This reality has to be concealed from the other; the access to the pervert's desire must be denied to the other. Therefore, the other is in the position of not knowing the desire of the pervert, which gives way to anxiety and tension. Perversion is a compulsion, the master needs her blunders and thus every new morning that makes him think of her "is a bloody new birth."[258] It seems that the master dreams of a walk in the garden, but there is a fear which prevents him from stepping out; his compulsion confines him to the house where he has to perform his heavenly duties as if he was controlled by some external force:

> Has he devoted himself to a higher end, he wonders, standing there in the afternoon sunlight in his slippers and pajama bottoms, flexing a cane, testing it, snapping it against his palm, or has he been taken captive by it? Is choice itself an illusion? Or an act of magic? And is the worst over, or has it not yet begun?[259]

Their relationship can exist only through a practice of perversion, love or sexual fulfillment of their relationship is impossible. The perversity offers an escape, through it it enables a denial of the impossibility of love. Finally, the master resumes his position to admit that perfection is just an illusion he is compelled to seek. Kirsten Hyldgaard says that "[p]erverse acts are clichés" that can never become true acts in analytic intervention, since they disavow any lack.[260]

At one point, the maid suggests a reversal of their relationship: "But she only wants him to change his position, or perhaps his condition (. . .), he's not sure, but anyway it doesn't matter, for what she really wants is to get him out of the sheets he's wrapped in, turn him over (he seems to have imbibed an unhealthy kind of dampness), and give him a lecture (she says 'elixir') on method and fairies, two dew-bejeweled habits you can roast chestnuts over. What more, really, does he want of

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[258] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 15.

[259] Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 78

[260] Hildgaard, "The Conformity of Perversion."

her?"[261] This means that she is not socially bound by her role and at the same time this is an act of transgression that never becomes an act of revolution, since the master disavows any lack. The maid and the master have their manual, which gives them boundaries, and helps administer pain through various instruments:

> Sometimes he uses a rod, sometimes his hand, his belt, sometimes a whip, a cane, a cat-o'-nine-tails, a bull's pizzle, a hickory switch, a martinet, ruler, slipper, a leather strap, a hairbrush. There are manuals for this. Different preparations and positions to be assumed, the number and severity of the strokes generally prescribed to fit the offense, he has explained it all to her, though it is not what is important to her.[262]

In his novella, Coover traps two characters in two rooms they cannot abandon, let alone allow them a walk in the garden. Each day the characters are subjugated to the same routine, to a cyclical repetition of an endless pattern on the road to perfection. Their pervert urge provides them with no or little pleasure, their thoughts being on fulfilling their duty and following the manual. Their common goal unites them but also forces them to continue their violent game, since they are governed by compulsion, an urge to fulfill their duty, which denies the simple enjoyment of the blossoms in the adjoining garden.

Some critics suggest that the story hides an important message, a misunderstood metaphor. The bipolarity of characters often finds its representatives in the real world, being applied to social relationships or an act of artistic creation. Coover works with a comparison that may provoke some sinister thoughts, the master "staring gloomily at her soul's ingress which confronts him like blank paper, laundered tiffany, a perversely empty ledger"[263] or a bed sheet that resembles a "blank sheet of crisp new paper."[264]

For example, Larry McCaffery develops the idea that Coover's novella "can be seen as a metafictional exploration of the writer's relationship to his art, with the maid ('made') being the medium that is spanked/worked by the master/artist."[265] He opposes freedom and disorder to slavery and order: "This ultimate fear of life's transformation

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[261] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 100.

[262] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 45–46.

[263] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 81.

[264] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 36.

[265] Larry McCaffery, "And Still They Smooch: Erotic Visions and Re/Visions in Postmodern American Fiction," *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 20 (May 1984): 280

into inertness and physical disorder (. . .) makes us slaves to the systems we construct to impose order in our lives and take our minds off our own approaching deathly punishment."[266] What McCaffery has in mind is our subordination to the Oedipal law that provides for social structures and transforms us into more socially accepted individuals. To break away would provide liberation both from the structures and our restrained feelings. Unfortunately, McCaffery ignores Coover's method of discourse between the two protagonists, discarding it as a mere sexual metaphor. William H. Gass is clear on that point when he asserts that novels have been analyzed as works of philosophy rather than works of fiction, "middens from which may be scratched important messages for mankind; they have predictably looked for content, not form."[267] The return to the primordial law or the way of letting loose of the instincts is accessible through the perverse that may only seemingly hold possibilities of freedom, restricting its protagonists to an enclosed space they often provoke but never leave.

McCaffery suggests that there is some restraint to free the maid and the master from their assigned roles and once they are free they are ready to be their true selves. This means that there must be some real self-imposed upon us that we have to reach for or rediscover: "It implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion that hides the secret."[268] The maid renounces her Self and contemplates her obedience through her inner monologue and the master subjects his Self to a higher purpose. However, Foucault makes clear that this run for authenticity should be substituted for creativity, that is we "create ourselves," not rediscover them.[269]

The key to understanding the relationship between the maid and the master could be to reveal new possibilities of pleasure without them being sexually oriented. That means to strip pleasure of its sexual shell in the Foucaultian sense. This could result in creating new possibilities of pleasure that would be desexualized and therefore open to a creative change. Still, the maid and the master, being nameless bearers of their socially assigned positions, experience limitations in which their status traps them.

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[266] McCaffery, "And Still They Smooch," 280.

[267] William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 25.

[268] Foucault, *Ethics*, 247.

[269] Foucault, *Ethics*, 262.

It seems that the position of the master and the servant sufficiently proves the power relations involved, that is, the position of dominance is made clear. The master is made dominant but not to the point of total oppression or total dominance. That is to say, the servant is not completely dominated, since there is some freedom and resistance in her acts; the mere facts that she can say "no" or simply choose not to enter the room suggest there is freedom in her choice.

This is what Foucault had in mind when talking of power as a strategic game, which inherently includes a possibility of change with fluid rules that allow for such reversal. Foucault used sadomasochism to reveal it as "the eroticization of strategic relations."[270] Thus sadomasochism offers, contrary to institutional strategic relations, a possibility of role reversal and easier penetrability. The power game between the master and the maid offers possibilities for reversal, the rules are not finitely oppressive. Their strategic power comes through their perverse practice and thus opens the space for its fluidity. The master and the maid do not admit gaining any pleasure from the act; this may be due to their denial of the legitimacy of the practice of generating pleasure or part of their self-denial.

As Foucault clarifies, sadomasochism (S&M) is not about suffering, but about the master exercising his mastery, and from this perspective spanking is a corporal punishment in an educational process: "The master can lose in the S&M game if he finds he is unable to respond to the needs and trials of his victim. Conversely, the servant can lose if he fails to meet or can't stand meeting the challenge thrown at him by the master."[271] This is what makes their game compulsively repetitive; there is no orientation towards some fixed goal because the attention is mainly on the process of the game. The success of the game is not guaranteed and the possibility of failure provides for the necessary drive in the game. The boundaries in the game are given by the ability to withstand pain. However, the game does not always stop there, since the pleasure comes from the transgression. There exist manuals that tell how to impose pain, but the rules of the game are never legally binding.

Boundaries must be recognized by both participants and the acknowledgment of them keeps the idea of a game, which can be interrupted or stopped: "Nevertheless, looking over her shoulder at her striped sit-me-down in the wardrobe mirror, she wishes

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[270] Foucault, *Ethics*, 169.

[271] Foucault, *Ethics*, 151–52.

he might be a little less literal in applying his own maxims: *he's drawn blood!*"[272] The maid often protests that the master will draw blood as if to suggest where the boundaries are. Once the master draws blood, the beating stops:

> The whip sings a final time, smacks its broad target with a loud report, and little drops of blood appear like punctuation, gratitude, morning dew. "That will do, then. See that you don't forget to wear [the drawers] them again!" "Yes, sir." She lowers her black alpaca skirt gingerly over the glowing crimson flesh as though hooding a lamp, wincing at each touch. "Thank you, sir."[273]

The fact that the master respects the boundaries strengthens the bond between the maid and the master and endows it with trust. However, the limit reversed as "not to draw blood" signifies transgression, as Bob Plant points out, "the possibility of transgressing the rules of the game – or of letting the game 'play us' – brings its own special pleasures to the proceedings."[274] Also, by not ascribing any specific identity to his characters, Coover suggests that the maid and the master are completely overtaken by the game; in this view, their true identity could be restrictive. Their game is a goal in itself; they give themselves to the game and the mechanism of the game prevails. In the beginning, the maid has the freedom to repeat her entrance till her master wakes up, but with the game on her authority gradually vanishes. The maid is compelled to the game just like her master; he has to exercise his mastery while she has to respond to his challenge. Their game overtakes them, becomes coercive and everything that comes with it must be accepted, since it is a part of the game. They fail to step out of the game and regain their identity outside the game, and Coover himself does not allow such an option; again, his characters are trapped in a funhouse with the torturing proximity of the dewy garden.

The novella is often defined as a take on nineteenth-century Victorian pornography, however, back then sexuality was seen as a gate to our repressed self, not as a force helping to artistically create the self.[275] Still, the repression and the curiosity

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[272] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 34. Italics in the original.

[273] Robert Coover, *Spanking the Maid*, 62.

[274] Bob Plant, "Playing games/playing us," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 5 (2007): 541.

[275] Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover*, 154. Jaroslav Kušnír, *American Fiction: Modernism-Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and Metafiction* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2005), 86.

to discover the hidden truth about ourselves helped to bring about the discourse of sexuality.

The original title of the short story "A Working Day" suggests that there is something outside the daily toil, that there might be something after work, and that sees work as an activity that encompasses an amount of professionalism where one has to objectify himself/herself to professionally fulfill the working task. The garden could be easily accepted as a place where pleasures could be experienced outside the institutional power relations but also as a place outside compulsive gaming. Alan Friedman in his review concludes that Coover's book is, "in its own way, a celebration of the decay of love."[276] However, downgrading Coover's book to a mere romance that did not evolve as expected is a huge misfire on the side of the *New York Times* critic, which stems from the misunderstanding of Coover as an author and therefore creating faulty expectations that must be left unfulfilled. The right conclusion would be that through his novella Coover provides a creative vision of the new possibilities of pleasure.

[276] Alan Friedman, "Pleasure and Pain," *New York Times*, June 27, 1982.

7 A Lacanian Reading of Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party*

7.1 Introduction to Lacanian Theory

An avid reader of Freud, Jacques Lacan was the author of some most thought-provoking psychoanalytical ideas of the 20th century. However, his ideas penetrated other fields of study from literary criticism to film and social theory. Stemming from the Freudian triad of an id, ego, and a super-ego, Jacques Lacan builds upon the psychoanalytical discourse, extending it with his own triangular principle, that of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. These 'orders' or 'registers' that form the basis of his classification are supposed to position the individual, and its subjectivity both within itself and the external world that is the language or the Other.

Lacan starts with the concept of mirror stage as a means of "I" formation. Just as an infant is capable of perceiving its own complete image in the mirror for the first time, it marks the beginning of identification precisely when the transformation starts to take place that assigns an image to a subject. Therefore, through the reflection of self in its totality there comes the unification or the acceptance of the previously fragmented internal self with the created image, "Ideal-I". The image (*imago*) serves to form a relation between the internal and the external that is the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*. Thus, the self defines itself against the external, that is, the Other. As a result, the subject becomes objectified through identification with the Other: "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality (. . .) and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development."[277] The mirror stage provides the subject with a complete image that substitutes the previously

[277] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 4.

fragmented and disconnected body and is essential for the construction of subjectivity.[278]

The intrusion of the external force brings the first experience with subjectivity. The totality and wholeness of the self is reached through an image, that is, the Imaginary. The self can only be defined through an image that the external world reflected back. Therefore the subject is not an originator of itself; the Other is. The center of subjectivity lies in the outside world and it is the image that stands behind this separation. The subject does not possess control over its self, since this function is assumed by the external world. As a result, the subject is alienated from itself: "Alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order. Alienation is the imaginary as such."[279] The Imaginary is a means of reinforcing the originally retrieved image only to reach totality of self. It is a continuous attempt of the individual to diminish the Other only to become the sought-after image. This continuous attempt results in increased interaction with the external world. It represents the desire to solidify one's image only to become its own perfection.

The Symbolic is formed through contrasting values to those of the Imaginary. The Symbolic involves motion, diversification, and a high level of sociability. It encompasses the unconscious, the language, and otherness that is not suppressed. Malcolm Bowie, the author of a monograph on Lacan concludes that the Symbolic is "the order in which the subject as distinct from the ego comes into being."[280] Often defined as a system of signification, the Symbolic is a structure of meanings the subject is born into and therefore has no control over it. Lacan's triad is a complex matter; the conflict is a constant condition and the possibility of appeasement within one's own mind is impossible.

Although it may seem the two orders, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, are often seen as contrasting even antagonistic, they are mutually interdependent, each containing the traces of the other. The source of the antagonism between these two comes from the third order which is the Real. It is the Real that brings tension between the two but never equilibrium. The Real is the order with the biggest stability; it is always present

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[278] See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative as of the function of the I," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 1–7.

[279] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book III. The Psychoses 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

[280] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 92.

and cannot be removed: "For the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it."[281] The presence of the Real can be perceived both in the inner and the external world as opposed to Freudian perception of "reality" that is socially constructed.

The Real can never pass the threshold of the Symbolic, since it lies outside the language. Briefly, the Real can never become the language but feeds the network that propels it. Thus the Real may stand not only for the lack in language but also for something that cannot be penetrated by language, it is "'what resists symbolization absolutely."[282] Finally, subjectivity is obtained as a result of mutual interaction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic and therefore is not self-evident. Physical body does not automatically involve subject; subject has to rise from the two orders in the common field of language and thus we are subjects of language. For Lacan, language is a Trojan horse, an impersonation of an offering that once accepted, "colonizes us."[283] In fact, Žižek associates the Real with monstrosity, trauma, and displacement, since its core is nonexistent, only defined by its deformed effects that produce objects denominated as *objet petit a*.[284] Speaking of the monstrous, the concept of lamella should be mentioned. Lamella embodies the libido, a hole in the Real, it is rather "the 'undead' lamella, the indestructible-immortal life that dwells in the domain 'between the two deaths,' that emerges as the ultimate source of horror."[285]

According to Lacan, a sense of lack exists in every human being. *Objet petit a* represents this lack; it is a cause of desire that is propelled by some unconscious fantasy.[286] Desire is the driving principle behind the quest for the objects that could bring the totality of enjoyment (*jouissance*), which is in its nature unachievable, since it

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[281] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits,* trans. Bruce Fink, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 17.

[282] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 66.

[283] Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2007), 12.

[284] Lacan developed the concept of *objet petit a* as a response to the Other, stemming from the Freud's 'object.' He distinguishes between 'the little other' ('*autre*') and 'the big Other' ('grand Autre'). See Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity*: *Theories of the Self from Freud to Harraway* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 46.

[285] Slavoj Žižek, "A Hair of the Dog that Bit You," *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, eds. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, and Francoise Massardier-Kenney (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 66.

[286] Jacques Lacan, "The Deconstruction of the Drive," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho–analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 161–173.

is located outside the reality, beyond the pleasure principle. Both concepts, that is, *objet petit a* and *jouissance*, are approximations to the lost world of the unsymbolized/unspeakable Real. The Symbolic fails in some aspects to reach totality through its system of symbols. This deficiency is a never-ending source of desire, the longing for the Real. As far as the desire represents the Symbolic it is verified, that is, reflected through some culturally accepted symbols. While the desire in the register of the Symbolic can be satisfied, *jouissance* is unattainable. The *objet petit a* serves to fill the void between the two desires.[287]

As Boothby points out, *Jouissance* lies "beyond the pleasure principle."[288] It has nothing to do with the excessive pleasure, but rather with the trauma that is more painful than pleasant. Since it is equated with the Freudian superego, it entails an ethical obligation of sadistic nature. Building on Freud's differentiation, Lacan specifically differentiates between the ideal ego, Ego-Ideal, and superego. If ideal ego constitutes the ideal self-image, then Ego-Ideal represents the big Other that is the center of one's endeavor, the "Ideal I" we would like to reach. Finally, superego undermines one's strivings as it propels an individual to pursue the impossible and the nature of it, as it already has been said, is sadistic and cruel. As Lacan declares, it is not a battle between the Ego-Ideal and superego in which the latter should be mitigated. Lacan bridged the abyss between the two with the concept of desire. Ego-Ideal imposes demands that meet the rational standards acquired in the education and that leave no space for the law of desire, whereas superego makes us feel guilty for not following our desires. For Lacan, "[t]ransgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law."[289] Therefore, it is desirable to let the perverse superego roam free as far as the symbolic law controls the field. This generates a certain degree of subversion that at the same grants the Symbolic its existence.

Although Lacan has never dedicated any of his seminars to the subject of love, he kept referencing it many times. Contrary to Freud, for Lacan love is illusionary having a detrimental effect on the subject, which seeks in vain a way of its completion through unification with the object of its love. As such, love is imaginary, since the

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[287] See Jacques Lacan, "The Paradox of *Jouissance*," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 167–242.

[288] Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 109.

[289] Lacan, "The Paradox of *Jouissance*," 177.

subject seeks love in the other, which is nothing else than a projected image of the subject. Lacan asserts: "As a specular mirage, love is essentially deception. It is situated in the field established at the level of the pleasure reference, of that sole signifier necessary to introduce a perspective centered on the Ideal point, capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen."[290] Thus love is transference, nothing else than a mere search for the ideal ego in the face of the other that belongs to the register of the Imaginary. Lacan equals the negative effect of passionate love that the subject experiences as suffering to an affect. The subject must free itself from the negativity of passionate love in order to avoid damage to its psyche, "a sort of psychological catastrophe."[291]

Love happens in the Imaginary. Love is narcissist since the subject seeks its reflection in the other and aims to merge with the other to be complete. The self seeks to satisfy the lack through the other; it is the desire for the wholeness of the self, since love is based on the lack, that is, on something that is missing, nonexistent. The love itself is nothing that is passed on to the other. The Symbolic mediates the response from the other and as a result establishes communication between the two. Through revelation love rises from the Imaginary register into the Symbolic, ideal ego becomes the Ego-Ideal: "Love, the love of the person who desires to be loved, is essentially an attempt to capture the other in oneself."[292] Love therefore stems from the Imaginary but is created through language. Lacan asserts: "Without speech, in as much as it affirms being, all there is *Verliebtheit*, imaginary fascination, but there is no love. There is inflicted love, but not active gift of love."[293] The Symbolic endows love with bidirectional activity that denotes the subject. However, the subject is unrelenting in pursuit of the affirmation from the other. Since the subject is aware that love is an empty reflection it casts on the other, the consequences might be devastating.

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[290] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho–analysis*, 268.

[291] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 112.

[292] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, 276.

[293] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, 276–77.

7.2 Death and Desire in *Gerald's Party*

Often described as a detective story, *Gerald's Party* (1985) indeed displays all attributes that a proper detective story should have: an epitome of a detective a "tall moustachioed man in a checked overcoat and gray fedora (. . .)"[294] with a French sounding name Pardew, an innocent beautiful victim, a round of suspects, a number of murder weapons, harsh police investigation methods, guns, some more dead bodies, and a final 'summation gathering' that reveals the murderer, sort of.

In his 1985 review Charles Newman described the novel as a "Parlor Game" or "English Parlor Mystery."[295] The first refers to the wordplay, the second to that traditional genre of an English detective story. However, what Coover serves here is a totally carnivalesque story that uses mystery to undermine all possible literary conventions. The metaphysical detective story subverses the traditional detective story but at the same time keeps it close through a series of complex ties that reflect the fundamentals of postmodern fiction. It questions the basic aspects of truth, reality, desire, death, subjectivity, art, and love. Although the murderer is revealed, it is by no means satisfactory, since the conclusion is reached through a questionable signifying chain which reflects the readers' incapability to decipher the text itself. Although some clue on how to solve the crime is provided by Inspector Pardew, when he remembers his daringly unconventional methods in the Case of Vengeful Fetus and the case of the pre-historian (!), who is both the victim and the killer, causing death of others through thorough knowledge of constructed social reality, that is, the Lacanian Symbolic register.

In fact, Jacques Lacan tackled the detective genre himself in his famous "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (1954–1955). It is based on a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, who not only helped to conceive the genre of detective fiction but also, as Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney aptly noticed, "the kind of playfully self-reflexive storytelling that we now call 'postmodernist'."[296] Coover had already

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[294] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 19.

[295] Charles Newman, "Death as a Parlor Game," *New York Times*, December 29, 1985.

[296] Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story," in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, eds.

practiced the art of metafiction in his short story "The Babysitter" (from *Pricksongs and Descants*, 1969) that works with different layers of fiction and reality blurring the lines occasionally.

Gerald is a middle class man, a father of one, living in a suburb with his wife. He belongs to a generation of baby boomers, a patriarchal group usually associated with overprivileged white males; as Margaret Gullette says, "they're not women or minorities or homeless schizophrenics."[297] Gerald is an experienced party host, his friends are a mixed pack: lawyers, doctors, but also actors, artists, directors, and a couple of neighbors. Fantasies and dreams constitute an important part of the story, and there are also musings on the nature of art and life itself. One of the guests, the director Zack provides a description of his play that could be as well used to describe the party that is "really a kind of metaphysical fairy tale, a poetic meditation on the death of beauty and on the beast of violence lurking in all love."[298] The party is going well, food and drinks are served abundantly. Gerald is a skilled womanizer and there is a young woman called Alison he is enamored of and who was the sole reason for the party.

"'If that's what life is, Gerald, just a hall of mirrors,' she'd mused (. . .) 'then what are we doing out there in the lobby?'"[299] Gerald's love interest, Alison, remarks about the play-within-the-play they saw on the night they met. The reference to a hall of mirrors, or a funhouse recalls the short story "Lost in the Funhouse" by John Barth (from *Lost in the Funhouse*, 1968). It seems that funhouses are for lovers, but not always. Funhouse is a place for the wildest fantasies, but also for deepest fears. Gerald has no control over the happenings in his house; in fact, his storytelling is a maze itself and the reader chooses the way out. At one point Gerald's wife remarks " . . . it's almost as if . . . (. . .) . . . You were at a different party . . ."[300] Just like Ambrose, the main character of Barth's story, who was left alone in the funhouse, Gerald practically fails in his love endeavor and cannot find his way out of the story and is therefore forced to repeat it. Alison disappears in the various rooms of the house and Gerald has no power

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Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 6.

[297] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, "'Xers' vs. 'Boomers': A Contrived War," *American Scholar* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 107.

[298] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 264.

[299] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 110.

[300] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 331.

to save her from the transformation that necessarily must follow, because that is what always happens to the first-timers.

The victim is Ros, a young actress, "[n]ot a very good one. Her problem was, she could never be anyone on stage but herself. Mostly she was in chorus lines or shows where they needed naked girls with good bodies."[301] As we learn, Ros was an orphan, an object of male desire and abuse since she was ten years old. She had various sexual adventures with most men at the party, including Gerald, who remembers her willingness to participate in any sexual fantasy. She is just like a mirror reflecting their need for being sexually desirable and Roger, her insanely jealous husband, was no exception. Having no parental love and no one to symbolically relate to, Ros sought admiration from various men who encouraged her sexual advances and appreciated her looks; she "was famous for her breasts."[302] However, her position was that of a bystander, since someone else was in charge of her body and desire, because "in the end you could persuade her to do just about anything, (. . .)."[303] She readily accepted the pleasure of the Other that positioned her in the centre-stage and stimulated her.

It is unknown what her expectations from the Other were but, as Gerald remembers, "Ros, I recalled, had once, while sucking me off, paused for a moment, looked up, and asked me to teach her (. . .) about marriage, and I had felt as inadequate then as I did now."[304] Thus, her male counterparts were mostly unresponsive, since it would threaten their narcissistic image. She felt fulfillment only when desired, only to provide a feeling of completeness for the Other. By marrying Roger she positioned herself as a wife in the world of the Symbolic that would provide her with a socially accepted image and therefore resolve her internal conflicts and transform her pleasure into a realistic one. At the same time her marriage developed into a symptom, Roger had bouts of violent behavior that could easily turn into an act of violent *jouissance*. She was an easily available substitute object of love. Ros identified herself with the other's desire; she became the *jouissance* of the Other. According to Kirshner, *jouissance* "has a deadly aspect, in that it operates without regard for the welfare of the individual, for

[301] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 35.

[302] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 26.

[303] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 11.

[304] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 174.

his or her own meaning or symbolic identity."[305] As a consequence, she denied her subjectivity that can be preserved only in the Symbolic. Also, as we learn, as an actress she had an extremely bad memory, and often misspelled words: "At the first rehearsal, she'd come bouncing down the stairs and crossed over to the guy who'd brought the news, reached into his pants, and given him a twist that had sent him yowling and stumbling into the wings. 'No, no, Ros!' the director had shouted. 'You're supposed to grab up the clock and wind it!'"[306]

She assumed an image of a woman whose goal was to please and be loved, but she also expressed a realistic desire to be a good wife. The idea of being loved made her vulnerable and accessible as the deposit of the other's desire, "[b]ackstage, of course, her thighs were pillowing cast, crew, and passing friends alike, (. . .)."[307] She was not a subject of desire but desired to be desired. As we learn she was never a separate entity, since "[i]t was a long way from the stage to her dressing room and, as often happened, she just didn't get that far,"[308] she was "not a girl hugging, but hugging, girl-shaped."[309]

In fact, Ros's personality cannot be revealed through language; she is the non-existent center that is defined by that which is external to it: "None of us noticed the body at first. Not until Roger came through asking if we'd seen Ros."[310] Her name has to be spoken and formulated so that her body, lying in the middle of the living room, can materialize in the minds of the guests. Although Ros is deeply mourned by everybody, in hindsight she is easily reduced into organs, mainly her genitals and breasts that "were her public standard, what we knew her by."[311] She is desubjectivized, her position mostly instrumental; in Žižek's terms "a machine[s] of *jouissance.*"[312] Furthermore, Ros is more like an apparition that does not possess a solid shape though everybody primarily defines her in terms of her physical qualities; even her chalked

[305] Lewis Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire: The *objet petit a* in Lacanian Theory," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 53, no. 1 (February 2005): 85.

[306] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 141.

[307] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 12.

[308] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 67.

[309] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 82.

[310] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 7.

[311] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 38.

[312] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 231. "The woman's body is thus transformed into a multitude of 'organs without a body', machines of *jouissance*, while the men working on it are also desubjectivized, instrumentalized, reduced to workers serving these different partial objects (. . .)."

outline changes shapes and positions during the investigation. In the end Ros's body is turned into fragments, limbs packed in plastic bags, commodified. Ros posed as the *objet petit a* for others, in fact one of her most successful plays was that about *Lot's Wife*, in which she was covered in salt and "they invited the audience to join in, and the same crowd kept coming back night after night to lick the salt. True believers."[313] In the play, Ros became an object of worship, which reflected her aim to become other people's desire.

Also Gerald crafts his object of desire: "I poured, glancing across the busy room at Alison, now profiled in a wash of light cast by the hanging globes behind her — like a halo, an aura — and I knew that, crafted by love, that glow of light would be with me always, even if I should lose all the rest, this party, these friends, even Alison herself, her delicate profile, soft auburn hair (. . .)."[314] Alison truly is Gerald's cause of desire, *objet petit a*, but she is not just the desired object, she is the ephemeral embodiment of something fantastic that sticks to the object of our desire. His relationship to Alison is twofold; she is the ideal of his own social construct but at the same time grants him desirability. Alison herself is the desire that can never be satisfied. Even if Gerald fulfilled his sexual longings, the little that would remain untouched by the sexual satisfaction, the aura or glow caused by love, is subjects' desire. Alison identifies with Gerald's fantasy, special and unique, since it can never be satisfied. However, Gerald denies his desire to be grounded in the Symbolic and is aware of the fact that having Alison will not bring him closer to being complete, since it would cause disappointment and shift him to another Symbolic object.

Alison dreamily fantasizes about theater; she and Gerald have "strange intense *sympathy*"[315] between them, which is observed by Alison's husband. He confronts Gerald during the party, when both the investigation and the party are in full swing. He confesses that their relationship arouses destructive feelings in him and asks Gerald for help:

> 'I want you to give Alison what she wants,' her husband said. 'Or thinks she wants . . .' 'But I —' 'On one condition.' (. . .) 'I want you to teach me about theater,' he said. (. . .) 'I want to find my way back to her,' he said simply. 'And I feel somehow

[313] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 37.

[314] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 8.

[315] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 173. Italics in the original.

> it's the key to it all.' (. . .) 'You could start,' I suggested, 'by letting her down.'[316]

Consequently, Alison is thrown into the reality, molested and abused; she becomes part of the theatrical. The encounter with the reality, which is devoid of all fantastic illusions, changes into a nightmarish experience and causes not only her emotional disillusionment but also humiliation. She turns into the theatrical/comical/farcical act herself. Initially, Alison almost masochistically welcomes her predicament in order to remain an object of Gerald's *jouissance*; she wants to be approved of, to pass the initiation ritual. She falls for the Symbolic when she initially conforms to the damsel in distress stereotype. She passively accepts her role and expects to be rescued by Gerald. She continuously disappears in the house of mirrors, only to undergo new and ghastly horrors. Gerald is too late to realize this: "I should have known: all those wisecracks, the traffic up and down the stairs (had somebody mentioned bondage?), Alison's husband staring fearfully down them (. . .)."[317]

After a string of abuse that gave Alison insight into the Real she comes to realize the necessity for transformation: "'No, I'm the novelty act here tonight, allow me,' she cut[s] in acidly and snatche[s] up the bowl of whipped cream."[318] When she offers to take the bowl of whipped cream into the dining room, she denies her former self, an act she has to do in order to free herself from Gerald, her *objet petit a*. At first, Alison becomes the object of male desire, which rapidly changes into the object of male violence. In order to regain her subjectivity, she has to enter the Real and become the destructor of the desired object, that is, herself.

"Our angel descends!" exclaims Zack Quagg, the director, when Alison is escorted home by her husband, dressed in a red pants suit that is too big for her, her image dismally reflected in the hall mirror.[319] "'Theater,' he said frostily, 'is dead'",[320] claims Alison's husband and as the too big pants fall down from his wife, he uses this opportunity to pull a string of colorful kerchiefs from her buttocks, which provokes laughter from the crowd, even from Gerald and his wife. With this act, Alison's husband reaffirms the rule of the Symbolic but also becomes part of the show

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[316] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 173–75.

[317] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 249.

[318] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 290.

[319] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 310.

[320] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 311.

demonstrating his sense for timing and peripety, thus mastering the theatrical he wanted to get hold of at the beginning. It is only now that we learn that Alison's husband, who was regarded as a mysterious figure throughout the evening and seen by the cunning director Zack Quagg as a potential ignorant investor, is a preacher.

Gerald's treatment of Alison in the course of the evening perfectly illustrates the separation between the Ego-Ideal and superego in Lacanian terms. Ego-Ideal stands for Gerald's rather pale and veinous wife, his moral and legal obligations towards his family and the watchful big Other. Gerald tries his best as a father and husband, yet he frequently fails to reach his wife, when she needs him in the kitchen. On the other side lies the obscene superego that lures Gerald into the sacred cave, that is, the longing for Alison, his sexual fulfillment under the auspicious eye of her husband and sometimes his wife. The controversy lies in the ambiguous nature of sexual and emotional betrayal, namely, what the extent of Gerald's guilt is or how far the reader is willing to accept it. Gerald's sexual longing for Alison is unfulfilled although they frequently come close and have some steamy intimate moments. Even the adventure with young Sally Ann, the daughter of Gerald's friend Victor, who is infatuated with Gerald, is a trap, when Gerald mistakes her for Alison. The agency of the big Other is inevitable, when Gerald is amorously locked with Sally Ann, under the approving/ignoring eye of his wife.

The reader is left with two opposing views. Morally, the sanctity of marriage was not breached, since Gerald never completes the intercourse. However, the narrative offers enough proof to confirm his guilt both on a sexual and emotional level. The reader can either experience moral satisfaction or indulge in some juicy sexual fantasy. Transgression can work only if both conditions are present, that is, the Ego-Ideal and the superego. Generally, Law can survive as far as it is fueled by the touch of the perverse. The rule of the Law is confirmed on several levels. Emotionally, Gerald often thinks of his wife in some tense moments; she is both a commanding authority and a safe haven. Also, the only complete intercourse happens between Gerald and his wife in the empty house, after everybody leaves. The need for transgression is recognized; the reconciliation between the two happens in the parting scene, when Sally Ann leaves:

> 'Gerry?' I realized Sally Ann, hanging back from the others, had taken my hand. 'Try not to be so sad, Gerry, it's for the best, believe me — but I promise I'll never forget you!' Her eyes were full of tears and they were tumbling down her cheeks. 'I— I was blind until you opened my eyes to love . . . !' She tried to say something more, but it was choked off by a stifled sob. She

> kissed my mouth and went running out the door. My wife looking on, smiled and took my arm. There was a loud spewig sound behind us, someone gagging. 'Young love . . .!' she sighed.[321]

The emotionality of the moment is accepted through the presence of the big Other which affirms its superiority. With the exclamation of unripeness and naivety of love, Gerald's wife apprehends Sally Ann's love in Freud's terms, as a unifying force, creative rather than destructive in its purpose, a dream come true.

Originally, Roger understood love only through the Symbolic, that is, constructed social reality and so it was easy for him to accept it as a literary invention: "[W]e learned our lines about love," he says.[322] When Roger fell in love with Ros he identified her with the ideal ego. He felt his ego to be complete and thus his feelings were completely narcissistic. When he denies being possessive of Ros, he denies recognizing her as a separate entity; to lose her would mean to lose a part of his image, a crack in his perfection. Also, through his love he asserts his own value, that of a desirable object.

> 'He said she left him completely stupid, an illiterate, a wolf-child, a man utterly without a past, she invented him where he stood — it was as if he'd been concussed, suffered some kind of spectacular fusing of his entire nervous system, reducing it to the simple synchronous activity and random explosion of a newborn child.' (. . .) 'He was terrified, He said it wasn't that he needed to possess her, it wasn't even selfishness, not in the way one would think. And he didn't feel protective, didn't feel kind or generous toward her, didn't especially want her to be happy or successful or feel fulfilled — it was something much more immediate than that, something much more frightening, it was something almost *monstrous* . . .!'[323]

Roger's desire was not limited to the Symbolic, in which case it would legitimize his passion for Ros. On the contrary; Roger created Ros as the object of his strivings for absolute passion while not recognizing her as an independent other. She was a fantasy objectified, which inevitably led to his passage to the act, that is, madness and suicide attempt.

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[321] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 318.

[322] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 79.

[323] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 79. Italics in the original.

Similarly, Vic, a writer and Gerald's old pal who fell in love with Ros, confesses to Gerald that "'[m]y head was useless, she blew a hole right through it. No will. Everything was body.'"[324] Vic asserts that he ended his affair with Ros, because she was another man's wife but admits he still followed her, and his present girlfriend Eileen is a substitute, whom he beats occasionally. Vic conformed to the Symbolic but shows symptoms and anxiety. Even Alison's husband recognizes destructive forces of love when he says, "'I know, it's the chemistry of it that most disturbs me. How it warps everything so you can't trust your senses. It's like some kind of powerful hallucinogen, transforming our conventional reality into something stark and dangerous — I always feel as though a hole is being opened us in the universe and I'm being pitched into it.'"[325] Similarly, Žižek likens the Lacanian lamella, an embodiment of the libido, to a hole, "it stands for the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension, as the primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities (. . .)."[326] The lamella desperately tries to break through the imagination to the inconceivable. The Real is the manifestation of nothingness, it indeed is the hole that causes everything the subject believes to disappear, and to define it means to create borders around it. Gerald recalls a moment when his little son Mark asked him: "Is the hole the empty part in the middle, Daddy, (. . .), or the hard part all around?"[327] The lamella is for Žižek an alien, it is a remainder of primordial loss that resurfaces being hidden, untouched from the Symbolic, it is the return of the "pure life instinct; (. . .) immortal life; irrepressible life (. . .)."[328] It is no coincidence that both Roger and Vic have professions that are deeply rooted in the Symbolic order and language, so the encounter with the Imaginary resonated all the stronger. Love inhabits the Imaginary, but is conceived through the Symbolic.

Finally, Inspector Pardew identifies Ros with the Goddess-like figure he sees in his dreams: "A kind of possession, really. Like all lovers everywhere, I was given to violent extremes of passion and desire, but they had no living object. Though my beloved was less even than a phantom, I loved her more than life itself, which without

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[324] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 92.

[325] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 171.

[326] Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 64. Description of lamella as an organ that gives body to the libido.

[327] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 25.

[328] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 197–98.

her was unbearable, and more phantasmal than my dreams."[329] Inspector's dreams disappear after he consults a psychiatrist who provides an interpretation of his dream, allowing him "to return to the waking world (. . .)."[330] Pardew can regain his subjectivity only by turning to the register of the Symbolic after his dream is reshaped through the language. Ros represents Inspector's *objet petit a*, his unique cause of desire, but he slips towards the *jouissance* when he examines the dead object of his desire, "hooded by Ros's silver skirt like a monk;"[331] thus his fantasy is physically enacted by probing into dead Ros's vagina. Indeed, the Inspector did not know Ros as a living human; she was truly a creation of his own fantasy, something that is unattainable and out of reach.

Coover intentionally decelerates the murderous cycle with tales and stories that he twists and frees from their expected patterns. Inspector Pardew recounts "The Case of the Vengeful Fetus," a story of domestic violence in which a heavily drunk husband strikes his pregnant wife in the stomach and, as a result, she goes into labor. "'The fetus used the only weapon at its command: false labour'," concludes the Inspector.[332] The man dies in an accident *en route* to hospital, in which the woman dies some moments later. Inspector contemplates the case: "'Was the fetus attacking its assailant or its host? This was perhaps a subtlety which, in its circumstances escaped it. Certainly it achieved its ends, and though it could be argued that it had acted in self-defense, it seemed obvious to me that the true motive, as so often, was *revenge*'."[333] In the words of Lacan, the fetus inflicted revenge on its parents who are responsible for its future entrance into the register of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, since a baby in the womb experiences the Real, that is, the undivided world.

In Lacanian terms, the fetus escaped the Imaginary and retained its subjectivity since it did not pass the mirror stage, where it would meet its "Ideal I," the future source of fragmentation and striving. The fetus through an authentic act of false labor cuts itself off from the future object of its self-reflection, its mother. The mirror stage is a metaphor itself, typically fulfilled by a parent. In the case of the vengeful fetus both

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[329] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 219.

[330] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 220.

[331] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 39.

[332] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 302.

[333] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 303. Italics in the original.

parents die, the fetus is stillborn — a harelip. The cleft between "I"/"Ideal-I" that originated in the mirror stage is seemingly healed through the Symbolic only to confirm the continuing fragmentation of the subject. The medical condition of the fetus suggests the future inability to command the language appropriately and to fully enter the register of the Symbolic.

Also, the case of an ice pick reflects the relationship with the language in the Lacanian sense. At first, there is only ice, melting in the pitcher. Soon, a conversation between Gerald and Inspector Pardew transforms it into murder weapon: "'But excuse me, you were speaking on an ice pick, I believe . . .' I started. 'No . . . ice!' It was a cheap trick. Not to say a complete absurdity. And yet (I was finding it hard to catch my breath), hadn't I just been . . .? (. . .) 'You think she might have been killed with an ice pick, do you?' I shot back, though I felt I was blustering, inventing somehow my own predicament. Where did all this come from?"[334] Once it changes into an ice pick, its symbolic meaning is readily accepted by both parties just like the gifts of Danaoi, a comparison Lacan used to describe the colonizing tendency of the language.[335] The reader is thrown into the Symbolic at full speed. The ice pick disappears and reappears, the lingering smell of its violent nature spreading around the house. It only becomes neutralized and regains a positive significance when the true nature of its origin comes to light: "'One of the Old Man's favorite tricks,' [the policeman] grinned. 'His probe, he calls it. Stick it in, see what surfaces. You know.'"[336] The ice pick is there to test the conventions and probe the social and intersubjective. The Symbolic is the ice that can easily melt into an ice pick reflecting the democratic nature it lends to the language.

Finally, the Lacanian approach uncovers the motivations and strivings seemingly buried under various layers of metafictional reality, providing for a new interpretation of the funhouse fiction. Indeed, Coover's writing is exhausting, since he relentlessly treats his characters with cruelty, dead or alive. Gerald's cause of desire, Alison, initially accepts her role assigned to her by the Symbolic, passively expecting to be saved by Gerald. However, after suffering a string of abuses, she embraces her subjectivity, destroying herself as the desired object. On the other hand, Ros, the actress and victim, was treated as a sexual commodity, passed around ready to serve as the

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[334] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 28.

[335] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 61–62.

[336] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 306.

pleasure of the Other. As a result Ros was stripped of her subjectivity, turned into fragments, and distributed to bystanders. Alison leaves the place on all four "wearin' the biggest smile," with her husband striding "stiffly out the door, a final ripple of appreciative applause trailing in his wake," while Gerald remains in the house of mirrors he has to recreate, unavoidably facing yet another deadly party cycle.[337]

[337] Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 312–313.

8 Conclusion

Since the 1950s, many scholars have attempted to tie violence into a universally valid concept that could be generally applied to literary works featuring scenes of violence. They soon discovered that a simple definition does not yield to a satisfactory result and aimed toward a systematic theory of violence of their own provenience. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, "Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."[338] Taking Arendt's quote from a different perspective, thinking about violence cannot be restrictive, that is, it should not seek to provide boundaries, since this would avoid and leave some parts of it unspoken. Also, it would mean deliberately giving up a part of the freedom, limiting the discourse to one direction only, and forgetting about the causes of violence.

My study aimed at analyzing violence in the novels of Robert Coover, published between 1966 and 1986. These twenty years reflect Coover's creative and personal development. With his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), he sent his readers an explicit message and proved his capability to master the traditional approach, only to abandon it and focus on his own style and technique that brought public attention but also sparked several debates. I have purposefully avoided Coover's second novel *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), because it would not provide the necessary handling space and opportunity to develop the theory of violence in its complexity. Also, it would probably share a theoretical background with Coover's first novel.

Also, it was vital for me to include a historical background that would reflect the impulses and influences in Coover's career and to introduce works of literary criticism that offer external view of his work. The goal was to reveal the skills of Coover not only as a writer of fiction, but also as a writer who can successfully transpose humanities into his works.

Therefore, my work's primary aim was to uncover the mechanisms by which the violence in Coover's novels operates. As a writer, Coover does not succumb to randomness; his actions are meticulously planned and executed with utmost precision. First and foremost, Coover is a controller of language, that is, every word is

[338] Arendt, *On Violence*, 51

orchestrated and forms part of a cunning schema that willingly subverts the reader's expectations.

One of the first tasks of my work was to provide a coherent summary of the available literature on violence and reveal the strategies their authors used to tackle literary violence. The opening step was to identify the key concepts that originated from various works of fiction and were transformed into abstract theories. However, they often needed to respond to the new forms and approaches that especially postmodern authors introduced and, therefore, most of them limited themselves to more traditional and culturally readable forms of fiction. Some authors inadvertently emphasized the difficulty of theoretically grasping violence and thus uncovered their works as singular constructions.

This triggered the need for an investigation into the studies about Robert Coover that discuss the essential elements of his fiction. Surprisingly, although most of them treat Coover from theoretically diverse perspectives, none of them mentioned the role of violence or acts of violence that so often appear in most of his books. The theoreticians dealing with Coover as a writer avoided or discarded the questions of violence, often enclosing him into the postmodern territory, an expression Coover personally found void. All these studies took Coover for a metafictional innovator who openly admits fictionality and artificiality of his stories, exposes the language, and functionally undermines the multitude of structures most people take for sacred.

Thus, one of my critical/theoretical tasks was to explain the uniqueness and meaning of Coover's use of violence. My work did not intend to produce a rock-solid, commonly accepted definition of violence but merely to pinpoint patterns and role of violence through a careful analysis of the four representative novels. Also, it did not engage only with the representations of violence but also with language that is violence and language as a tool of violence, which divides and alienates. Coover does not limit his use of violence to one specific direction or genre but finds it in many aspects of life, that is, in small-town communities, marriages, and work relationships, and he does not even shy away from the larger beasts, such as state power or political structures.

The broad-ranging aspects of Coover's work went hand-in-hand with the necessity to seek a suitable theoretical basis to decode Coover's ideas into a more viable theory. However, it did not entail merely inflicting a theory on his works. Coover's ideas were allowed to penetrate the theoretical filter, capturing all that was essential and revealing ideas that could be both revelatory and painful. Therefore, various theoretical

approaches of researchers from other fields of study were applied in an innovative and novel way, thus enlarging possibilities of discourse and offering new insights applicable to postmodern literature.

In Coover's award-winning novel *The Origin of the Brunists*, which takes place in a small mining town named West Condon, the mining disaster becomes the first act of violence that is readily assigned meaning and accepted as a divine message. This triggers a whole series of events, leading to more violence and the emergence of a religious cult. The mining disaster, which could also be interpreted as a case of systemic violence, causes disruption in the social life of the whole community, changing its structure. The second act of violence, a case of foundational violence, occurs when a young girl is hit by a car, and this death comes incorporated into the emerging cult as "The Sacrifice." Finally, the book ends with an apocalyptical scene on the Mount of Redemption, an example of collective and sacrificial violence. Therefore, all presented violence is assigned meaning and contributes to the mythical and founding background of the religious cult.

Coover's most famous novel, *The Public Burning* (1977), replays the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In a single act of violence, that is, the execution, it exposes and tests the power system that relies on uncivilized practices and public spectatorship. Coover brings the whole nation to face the unpleasant truth but also to show how power and justice are exerted. Although most critics discussed the political side of the novel and the question of the guilt of the Rosenbergs, Coover's intention was to revive the historical event that slipped from the public memory but also expresses his opinion on the death penalty in general.

The shortest of the presented works, *Spanking the Maid* (1982), was often labeled as pornography, but the truth is often in the eye of the beholder. However, Coover goes further than that. He portrays an intimate, socially and spatially restricted relationship between the master and his servant. Their relationship resembles a perverse game that is for both participants compulsive, yet they still believe that perfection in their relationship can be obtained. In this novella, perversion becomes a mission and punishment is the well-deserved execution of the divine will. Unfortunately, compulsion restricts them to the provided space, and a liberating walk in the garden remains an unreachable enjoyment.

Finally, *Gerald's Part* (1986) starts with a murder that happened outside the space of the novel and becomes real only when the body is discovered and pronounced.

It is probably one of his most difficult books to read, since Coover's obsession with multileveled, often elliptical dialogue that well portrays the ambiance of a party forces the reader to re-read and search for the meaning and hidden clues continually. The party revolves mainly around love, desire, and violence. Therefore, Coover's characters were mainly discussed in my work from the Lacanian point of view, in which women are turned into objects of male desire and machines of Lacanian *jouissance*.

Violence in Coover's work is never random or used as an element intended for a malicious embellishment. It is surprising how easily violence slips from the public view and comes readily accepted without any assigned meaning. My work seeks to do it justice, and reveal and speak of it as a crucial part of Coover's work. Unlike his realistic fellow writers, Coover does not only create images of violence but also stresses the importance of language as the primary source of unspoken violence. There are always two levels in Coover's novels: one that is narrative and the other that deals with the language. Coover fights the language with repetitions, omissions, and sketch-like dialogues; he bends it, cuts it, and sometimes even avoids it. One cannot help but notice how much effort he puts into the acts that should be self-evident.

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the issue of violence in the four novels by Robert Coover that were published between 1966 and 1986. It strives to examine violence not only as a representation, that is, image that in the traditional approaches becomes the only viable way of reflection but violence that dwells in language and violence that is transmitted and upheld through it. Violence in American postmodern literature has never been a subject of thorough examination. It was always discarded as a wicked interlude, a play on words or an act of malevolent creativity. The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that violence has its meaningful place in Coover's postmodern novels of and its meaning can be explained through various theoretical approaches such as those of Jacques Lacan, Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Žižek, Michel Foucault or René Girard. Furthermore, Coover's fiction can be approached and treated in several ways. The first, as it has already been mentioned, is the theoretical one, that is, to read Coover's fiction through various political, socio-economic and psychoanalytical concepts. The second approach entails language that Coover uses not only to stress its violent nature but tortures it to his needs, that is, language that *is* violence.

Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá násilím v románech Roberta Coovera, které vyšly v rozmezí let 1966 až 1986. Práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat násilí nejen jako reprezentaci, tedy jako obraz, který je často vykreslen a který se v tradičních přístupech stává jedinou cestou jak o něm hovořit, ale prozkoumat také násilí, které spočívá v jazyku a násilí, které je jazykem vytvářeno a uchováváno. Literární věda opomíjela téma násilí v americké postmoderní literatuře a v tomto směru se násilí nikdy nestalo předmětem žádného hlubšího zkoumání. Násilí v postmoderní literatuře bylo často zlehčováno jako jakási zlomyslná mezihra, hra se slovy nebo autorský čin škodolibé kreativity. Cílem této dizertace je prokázat, že násilí má v postmoderní literatuře své významové místo a že je jeho význam možné vysvětlit prostřednictvím různých teoretických postupů za využití teorií Jacquese Lacana, Hannah Arendtové, Slavoje Žižeka, Michela Foucaulta nebo René Girarda. Existuje tedy několik způsobů jak přistupovat k Cooverově tvorbě. Prvním je již zmíněný přístup teoretický, který tedy spočívá v náhledu na jeho tvorbu skrze politické, sociologicko-ekonomické a psychoanalytické koncepty. Jako další se nabízí přístup prostřednictvím jazyka, který Coover používá nejen k vykreslení jeho násilné povahy, ale zneužívá ho ke svým potřebám a vytváří jazyk, který se stává násilím.