

THE LITERARY PLAYFULNESS IN
ROBERT COOVER'S FICTION

罗伯特·库弗小说的 文学嬉戏性

张淑芬 著

罗伯特·库弗（Robert Coover），是二十世纪六十年代以来最有代表性的美国后现代作家之一。本书深入探讨库弗重要作品中呈现出的后现代派文学的嬉戏特质（playfulness），通过文本细读，探讨库弗如何运用后现代派文学技巧，戏仿宗教、历史、神话和经典童话，挫败读者期待。



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前言

罗伯特·库弗(Robert Coover), 现年 87 岁, 是美国当代文坛一位极富创造性和实验精神的小说家, 也是 20 世纪 60 年代以来最有代表性的后现代派作家之一。与托马斯·品钦、威廉·加斯、唐纳德·巴塞尔姆和约翰·巴思一道, 库弗挣脱战后美国现实主义的樊篱, 揭示奇幻多姿的叙述可能性。库弗文本中的叙事策略和精湛技艺, 始终如一的实验主义精神以及其中夹杂着的狡黠幽默和荤秽的打趣, 让他成为“作家中的作家”。库弗的文学创作充满个性化声音, 颇具辨识度。他的词汇丰富, 措辞华丽。他善于糅合各种体裁, 通过运用民谣的、口语化的、仪式化的、戏仿或预言式的语言, 表达他对美国历史、政治和文化等的深刻思考。库弗在同一个文本中同时展开令人眼花缭乱的几个故事情节, 互相交融又彼此独立, 看似简单却又呈现出几何图案般的美感, 令人赞叹。库弗的小说往往表面遵循传统叙事形式, 却刻意在文本内颠覆传统, 用以展现叙述的新视角和多种可能性。在写作生涯早期, 库弗就深信传统虚构模式业已丧失活力, 不仅不能引起人们的阅读兴趣, 也无法启发人们思考。因此库弗运用复杂的元小说结构和不同文学体裁的嬉戏式拼贴, 以此讽喻美国社会种种怪象, 指明作家的责任和作用。凭借这些创新的叙事策略, 库弗试图颠覆充斥着陈词滥调的文体, 使之

重新焕发活力。库弗认为,政治、历史、文化和宗教都是人为构建,作家责任在于利用人们熟悉的神话、童话和圣经故事等叙事形式进行“祛魅”,揭开一切崇高的宏大叙事、元话语的能指疑虑或表征,帮助人们认清其虚构本质。在他的作品中,他重写侦探推理小说、童话故事、神话传奇、圣经故事和美国老西部小说。同样,在《公众的怒火》这部建立他文坛声誉的鸿篇巨制中,库弗杂糅各种文体,戏谑式重新诠释 20 世纪东西方冷战时期美国历史中的重要事件。作为富于创新的后现代派作家,库弗采取各种实验手法来处理虚构形式,创作出一部部经久不衰的文学作品。在颠覆传统叙事的故事中,对历史、政治、神话、宗教及美国社会做出客观评论,为美国文学的重塑做出了巨大贡献。

库弗对文学创作一直保持高昂的热情。自 1966 年《布鲁诺教派的由来》(*The Origin of the Brunists*)问世以来,库弗已发表 11 部长篇小说,7 部中篇小说和 3 部短篇小说集,此外还撰写了不少剧本、文学评论等。《布鲁诺教派的由来》、《环宇棒球联盟》(*The Universal Baseball Association*, 1968)、《对位旋律和分支旋律》(*Pricksongs & Descants*, 1969)、《公众的怒火》(*The Public Burning*, 1977)、《打女佣》(*Spanking the Maid*, 1981)、《杰拉德家的舞会》(*Gerald's Party*, 1986)、《约翰的妻子》(*John's Wife*, 1996)、《鬼镇》(*Ghost Town*, 1998)等作品为库弗赢得了包括威廉·福克纳奖、古根海姆奖、美国艺术与文学学院奖、里氏短篇小说奖在内的诸多荣誉,奠定了他在美国当代文坛的崇高声誉。库弗的大部分作品都在美国国外创作,他孜孜不倦,辛勤写作,为自己制订的工作计划足以让他忙上几十年。许多作家为了迎合大众审美趣味,追求市场效应,放弃个人理想,一味追求商业利益,但市场对库弗来说并没有那么重要。库弗秉持艺术良知,刻意创新,不在意小说是否有丰厚的市场效益或物质回报。他也不在乎自己是否拥有庞大的读者群和大批的追随者,而是孜孜追求艺术的完美,坚持颠覆传统叙事、挑战文学传统的创作之路。像任何一个优秀作家一样,库弗不

求苟同于时代，但他又十分关注现实世界的动态，并通过小说创作及时做出客观评价和回应。1973年库弗在访谈中说：“我直面生活中不愉快的事，不想为人们提供逃避现实的地方。世界本身就是一种构建，我认为小说创造者的作用就是创作更好的小说，以此重建我们对事物的看法。”^①这番话可以用来诠释他的美学创作理念和原则。

库弗曾经在爱荷华大学、哥伦比亚大学、普林斯顿大学等大学任教，现为布朗大学（Brown University）文学创作课程（Literary Arts Program）客座教授。库弗坚持试验和文学创新，在布朗大学创办了“超文本写作”课程（hypertext and hypermedia workshop），并一直担任主讲教授。布朗大学因此在全美“超文本写作”领域占据领军地位。此外，库弗也越来越多地受到了中国学界评论家们的关注，其部分作品也已有了中译本。

库弗的每一部小说出版时，都在文学批评界引起强烈反响，甚至会激怒一些批评家和作家同行。他的某些长篇小说，如《公众的怒火》对美国官方意识形态颠倒黑白、艾森豪威尔内阁政府利用媒体打击异己以及美国民众如惊弓之鸟的冷战心态，极尽嘲讽挖苦。这种大胆客观的描写，让库弗诉讼缠身，麻烦不断。由于库弗极具朗诵才能，朗诵时绘声绘色，十多年来，每次他在各地朗诵此小说的某些章节时，都会引起极大反响。据他说，他还因此上过美国联邦调查局的监控黑名单。他的小说《布鲁诺人的愤怒之日》（*The Brunist Day of Wrath*）也于2014年3月出版。库弗的写作还涉及散文、戏剧、广播剧和文学批评等，他还曾执导过电影。1979年起，他携爱妻迁居美国罗得岛州的普罗维登斯，并受聘在布朗大学任教。

正如同时代的后现代派小说家一样，库弗把游戏策略融合在小说创作中。他的小说中普遍存在的嬉戏性，揭示了他的美学理论与理论家约翰·赫伊津哈、罗杰·凯洛依斯和雅克·厄尔曼以及许多其他理论家所提议的

① Gado, Frank. Ed. *First Persons: Conversations on Writers and Writing*. New York: Union College Press, 1973.

理论宗旨之间的一致性。自从库弗的第一部小说问世以来,文学的嬉戏性早已被公认为其作品的标志性特征。作为富于创新精神的后现代派作家,库弗通过削平深度模式,消解精英意识,让作品平面化、通俗化,从而形成自己的创作模式和叙事话语,揭示现实世界的零散、混乱等生存困境。

本书的研究目的就在于尽可能全面深入地探讨库弗重要作品中呈现出的后现代派文学典型的嬉戏特质(playfulness),通过文本细读,探讨库弗如何运用后现代派文学技巧,戏仿宗教、历史、神话和经典童话,挫败读者期待,激励人们不落窠臼,与时俱进,采用辩证的思维方式看待世界。在此之前我国学界对库弗作品的解读,大多集中在他的长篇代表作《公众的怒火》和短篇故事集《对位旋律和分支旋律》中几篇较为典型的短篇故事如《保姆》和《电梯》等,而忽略了对《布鲁诺教派的由来》《杰拉德家的舞会》这些重要作品的深入了解。希望本书能够借此为有意进一步研究库弗和库弗小说的人们提供一点有益的启发。

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Introduction

The turbulent 1960s witnessed the development and coming-of-age of postmodern American literature, with Robert Coover (1932–) as one of its vanguards. Labeled as a “meta-fictional muse” or “literary polyglot”, an “absurdist”, “avant-garde” and “experimentalist”, Coover has inarguably remained an influential figure in the shaping of American fiction. Since the publication of his first novel *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), Coover has won extensive recognition for his originality and versatility. “Few authors can match his range of styles and subject matter” (Andersen 3). His technical resourcefulness, prodigious energy and innovation, all of which having earned him a place beside Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and William Gass in the rank of “most noticeable practitioners of literary postmodernism and meta-fiction” (Evenson 1), are well evidenced by the dazzling array of styles and subjects of his works. In addition, Coover is a leading advocate of hypertext and plays a key role in founding Brown University’s hypertext program. In spite of this recognition and achievement, Coover remains “a small audience writer” (qtd. in Gordon 17) and his name is never a household word or even a classroom word. While the majority of critics exalt Coover as “one of the most significant authors of the 20th century” and some contend that Coover deserves wider popular audience, there are still a number of critics who have expressed reservations about Coover’s style, especially his unique approach to handling historical data and

historical figures.

However, some critics scathingly attack his works as “ribald” and “depraved”. These polarized reviews and labels to some degree reveal the abiding interest in Coover’s fiction and meanwhile render Coover study even more challenging. Therefore, to examine how Coover boldly pioneers complex metafictional structures, playfully pastiches various genres to lampoon contemporary American society, and how he deftly subverts and reinvigorates literary traditions, will be the focal point of this book and the “game” that I am keen on playing.

1. Robert Coover’s Life and Works

Born Robert Lowell Coover in Charles City, Iowa, he “drifted away” (Gado 144) with his family to the Midwest, first to Bedford, Indiana, and then to Herrin, Illinois, where he demonstrated his versatility and initial interest in writing and particularly in drama when he was still a high school student. The young Coover was well rounded and active in school activities. He was a high-school class president and a member of Quill and Scroll and the school band, and enjoyed parlor baseball games, a hobby later transformed into the central metaphor of his second novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968). Following the lead of his father, a managing editor for the *Herrin Daily Journal*, Coover edited and contributed to various school papers. Coover enrolled in Southern Illinois University and transferred to Indiana University where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Slavonic languages in 1953. In 1951, a mining disaster struck Herrin while Coover was on his way home, and he helped cover the story. This experience may have evoked his idea of blending this central detail into his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*. Upon graduation, Coover joined the U.S. Navy during the Korean War and served as a lieutenant until 1957, the year that saw his discharge from the Navy and proved a turning point in Coover’s life. He began writing short stories, many of which later appeared in his first story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*. Meanwhile, Coover voraciously read the works of many writers,

especially Samuel Beckett, who profoundly influenced Coover and was lauded by Coover as a literary model. Coover admired Beckett for his “odd abrupt transition between different fictional levels... ironic echoes and parallels, funny games with numbers, numbers and logogriphs... the inconsonance between words and their referents... academic gags, abstruse puns, rhetorical parody...” (qtd. in Gordon 12). All those techniques have actually been skillfully adopted and integrated into Coover’s own opuses and textual practices.

Coover launched his literary career with the publication of a series of five poems, “One Summer in Spain” in 1960. In the subsequent years, Coover continued to place several stories in literary magazines, including *The Evergreen Review*, a US-based magazine renowned for its counter-cultural contents and one of the vital venues for experimental fiction. In 1963, “The Second Son” was published in *The Evergreen Review*, which would later provide the basic plot for Coover’s novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*

Coover published his first prize-winning novel *The Origin of the Brunists* in 1966, after he graduated with a Master’s degree from the University of Chicago. Regarded as an impressive debut, the novel is generated from a mining disaster story “Blackdamp”, and considered to be the most conventionally structured of Coover’s works. In this novel, Coover describes the birth of an apocalyptic religious cult, the Brunists, after the sole survivor of a Midwest coalmine explosion, Giovanni Bruno, claimed that he was rescued by divine favor. Using the establishment of the Christian religion as its primary analogue and drawing from traditional fiction, especially the realistic novel, Coover starts the novel from a realistic setting and depicts a host of more than twenty characters. However, Coover reveals his unique attitude toward realism by undercutting the realistic impulse of the book. He fuses realism with the fantastic and portrays the needs of people to seek meaning and order in religion. Ostensibly irrelevant subplots run side by side with the main plot. *The Origin of the Brunists* is also Coover’s attempt to explore how the fictions of religion, history and myth maintain their hold over people. Coover displays his gift in detailed characterization of a diverse Midwestern population and his virtuosity in narrating a

story from a wide variety of distinct viewpoints. All those efforts eventually paid off and contributed to its receiving the William Faulkner Award for the best first novel despite some negative reviews.

Like his first novel, Coover's widely-recognized second novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, evolves from an early story, "The Second Son", a short story that appeared in 1963 and was revised as the second chapter of the novel. Similar in plot to the short story, the novel is more focused and explores, in greater depth, the nature of games and the need of people to seek meaning out of life. In the book, Coover portrays the life of a middle-aged accountant, J. Henry Waugh, who becomes obsessed with an elaborately structured table-top baseball game with complicated record charts. When Henry indulges himself in the game and eventually has difficulty discerning reality from fantasy, he becomes insane. Brian Evenson applauds the book, claiming that "the novel lives up to the promise of *The Origin of the Brunists*". Janusz Semrau rightly reveals the inherent correlation between the novel and Coover's other works by remarking that "the present novel... can be treated as a guidebook to the author's own fiction as well. Many of Coover's central thematic concerns and even formal concepts are ingrained in *The Universal Baseball Association*" (Matuz 50). In fact, Coover's critique of religion and religious zeal, his satire of society, his conviction that history is no more than a fictional construct and man as a "homo luden", and his inimitable approach to blending realistic and artificial modes, remain reverberated in his encyclopedic masterpiece written ten years later, *The Public Burning*.

Coover's next book, *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), is a collection of twenty-one short stories, the majority of which were written and published before the appearance of his first two novels. Although the short fiction represents only a small part of his oeuvre, and some critics claim that his paramount achievements are the novels, the significance of Coover's short fiction should never be belittled. On account of the innovation and experimentation with styles, some of the pieces are anthologized and studied in university literature courses. With an impulse to reconceive and parody older materials, the collection mixes realism with surrealism,

within which are manifold “shifting imagery and a variety of prose styles bears the Coover signature” (Gordon 90). In an attempt to question the conventional narrative tradition, Coover playfully reinterprets fairy tales, biblical stories, myths and fables—which have been conventionally venerated for the truth they contain—and manipulates them into original, unanticipated forms. In his reworking of familiar tales, Coover probes the human needs behind them and comments on the process of fiction-making, consequently making the collection an emblematic metafictional game. Those self-reflexive stories often focus on archetypal roles and moral lessons that people acknowledge as “exemplary”. Through experimenting with multiple narrative possibilities, presenting overlapping contradictory events and open-ended denouement, Coover subverts and deconstructs the traditional narrative and exhibits the amazing power of his vision.

An artist with versatility and immense energy, Coover displays his talents in writing for a movie and plays. He directed and produced the movie *On a Confrontation at Iowa City* and published a collection of plays, *A Theological Position*, one of the four plays which won three Obie Awards. Coover received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship and a Brandeis Citation for Fiction in 1969. He was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1971 and 1974, respectively, during the same period when he was working on *The Public Burning*, the most controversial work by him and published in 1977 after many setbacks.

As Marc Chenetier observes, “The 1970s marked the real birth and generalization of these experiments in form, the rise of parodies, demystifications, the denunciation of systems and caricatures of them, the rise of a powerful wave of experiments slowly changing the accepted novelistic conventions. And in the 1980s there came the beginnings of a vast synthesis, while a partial reaction again the antirealism that had dominated the seventies was also making itself known” (Chenetier 59). The writing of Coover in the two periods is of the best out of many experiments and innovations in fiction.

With the publication of this 534-page magnum opus, Coover cements his prominence in contemporary fiction. Despite the polarized views upon the

publication of the book, *The Public Burning* is now acknowledged as one of Coover's most approved and widely-acclaimed novels. The novel centers on the electrocutions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, convicted atom-secret spies, in Times Square in 1953. Besides, it presents a buffoonish Vice President Richard Nixon and sheds light upon his role in the spy trials. The novel distinguishes itself by using copious historical data and living public figures, by intermingling historical facts and fiction and reworking the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. It is a "historical metafiction" that makes allusions to Coover's earlier novels. Apparently analogous in structure to *The Origin of the Brunists* and *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, *The Public Burning* depicts how the protagonist (Richard Nixon) is obsessed with his game and numerology to make sense out of the chaos within the political context. By restructuring and "stitching together" loads of "tiny fragments", Coover exposes the psyche of Americans in the Cold War period, unrelentingly parodies the American history in the 1950s and accentuates his conviction that history is a fantasy and man a humo luden.

After the release of *The Public Burning*, Coover published short stories in small presses. Only after almost a decade did Coover publish a short novella, *A Political Fable*, by Viking Press in 1968, the same year when Coover was offered a teaching position at Brown University. In 1981, *Spanking the Maid* appeared in the Best American Short Stories of 1981. Following its publication, the shortest fiction collection by Coover, *In Bed One Night and Other Brief Encounters*, came out in Burning Deck, a small press on Rhode Island. It is noticeable that during this period Coover seemed to have shifted his interest to the writing of short stories and novellas. In reality, Coover was recuperating from the excruciating adversaries confronting him when *The Public Burning* was unjustly censured and reproached. He was engaged in writing a larger novel which he finally published as *Gerald's Party* in 1986, after he received a grant from the National Endowment for Arts.

The writing of *Gerald's Party*, which bears strong Coover signature, dates back to 1977 while Coover was working on more than one project at the same time. Parodying a number of traditional narrative forms, most conspicuously the detective

genre, Coover depicts a typical upper middle-class suburban party, focusing on the murder of an enchanting actress and the weird way the guests and the police respond to the murder. It is not only about a parlor mystery run amok but also about the nature of art, a mixture of aesthetic discussions and about philosophical ruminations as well. By mingling such genres as realism, detective story, and fairy tales, Coover jolts the reader out of their expectations and invites them to reconsider the new possibilities of telling a story.

The year 1986 saw the publication of *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This* and *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears*, the former a collection of stories associated with movies to some degree and the latter a short novel depicting an imaginary life of Richard Nixon. On account of the achievement of short stories in the collection *A Night at the Movies* and in his two other books of fiction, Coover received a Rea Award from the Dungannon Foundation for the Short Story. From 1991 to 2010, Coover was particularly active and exhibited his vigorous innovative energy. He sometimes disintegrates the old myths and makes way for the new myths. In *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), he rewrites children's classic stories, such as Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*; he also revisits and dismantles the Sleeping Beauty story both in *Briar Rose* (1996) and in *Stepmother* (2004). Through regressing to the fairy tale, Coover revitalizes the contemporary American novel and offers "a complex narrative for those who prefer the pleasures of the difficult lodged in the delight and befuddlement of a reality far greater than mere realism" (Kennedy 8). Coover retells the traditional myths of the old West in *Ghost Town* (1998), a short novel in which fantasy and reality are intermingled with each other and traditional tenets and iconic imagery of the American West are boldly subverted. Coover displays his propensity for employing the techniques or materials used in his earlier fictions while making some alterations. This practice seems to be verified in a recent interview: "An author's books are in part conversations with the self and sometimes the conversations are extended over several books" (Carroll). In one of his most ambitious books, *John's Wife* (1996), Coover satirizes the restraints of a picture-perfect small town and its residents by telling the story from multiple

viewpoints, a similar practice adopted in *The Origin of the Brunists*. The characters in *John's Wife* are essentially the same group of visitors attending Gerald's party. Coover never clings to the stereotype and is always ready to try his hand at something new. He rekindles his earlier enthusiasm for movies and tells a story related with the movie *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director's Cut* (2002). The same year witnessed the publication of a hotel-related story *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* (2002). Coover's most recent books, *A Child Again* (2005) and *Noir*, published in 2010 by The Overlook Press, are regarded as his latest venture into the field of contemporary fiction.

2. Coover Criticism in the United States

Robert Coover's experimental approaches to fictional forms, versatility and originality in the field of fiction-making have won him critical acclaims. His writing has never ceased to attract critical attention. In spite of the esoteric nature of his writing and the comparatively small readership he commands, Coover is recognized as an important American novelist, short story writer, dramatist and poet. Paul Gray remarks that "Coover has earned his reputation as an avant-gardist who can do with reality what a magician with a pack of cards: shuffle the familiar into unexpected patterns" (qtd. in Matuz 23). Janusz Semrau affirmatively ranks Coover among the most versatile contemporary American authors in an essay focused on Coover's "musicalization of literature" (qtd. in Matuz 23). Larry McCaffery recognizes the "metafictional impulse" (McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* x) in Coover's works and equates Coover's achievement with those of Donald Barthelme and William H. Gass. He thus esteems Coover as one of "the most significant writers to emerge from the 'boom period' of the late 1960s" McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* x). Likewise, Lois Gordon extols Coover's diverse styles and his "uncanny ability to reproduce or mimic verbally the written, spoken, or even kinesthetic styles of literally hundreds of historical or popular figures" (Gordon 16). Moreover, Gordon spoke highly of the rich texture of his works and the appositeness in the