

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

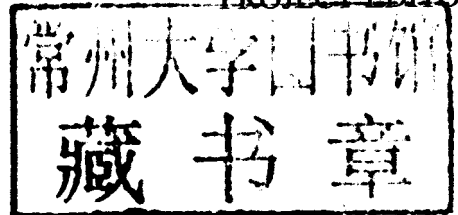
306

Volume 306

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Robert Coover 1932-	1
<i>American novelist, short story writer, playwright, and poet</i>	
Lydia Davis 1947-	71
<i>American short story writer, novelist, and nonfiction writer</i>	
Penelope Lively 1933-	116
<i>English short story writer and novelist</i>	
Norman Rush 1933-	195
<i>American novelist and short story writer</i>	
Zadie Smith 1975-	217
<i>English novelist, short story writer, and essayist</i>	
C. K. Williams 1936-	263
<i>American poet, memoirist, and nonfiction writer</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 313

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 431

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 451

CLC-306 Title Index 467

Robert Coover

1932-

(Full name Robert Lowell Coover) American novelist, short story writer, playwright, and poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Coover's career through 2010. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 3, 7, 15, 32, 46, 87, and 161.

INTRODUCTION

Coover is recognized as an author whose experiments with metafiction pay homage to novelists of the past and serve as textbooks for his fellow writers of the present. He is appreciated by literary scholars and by readers willing to engage in the often-challenging task of parsing his stories for larger meanings within frequently disconcerting surface imagery, and the complexity of his narratives has resulted in an oeuvre that is mostly inaccessible to a casual general readership.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Coover was born February 4, 1932, in Charles City, Iowa, and grew up in Herrin, Illinois, where his father was managing editor of the *Herrin Daily Journal*. Coover also took an early interest in journalism, contributing to his school newspaper under the pseudonym Scoop and working for his father's newspaper into his college years. He began his undergraduate degree at Southern Illinois University in 1949 and finished at Indiana University, graduating in 1953 with a bachelor's degree in Slavonic languages.

On the day of his graduation, Coover was drafted for military service in the Korean War and served four years in the U.S. Navy, rising to the rank of lieutenant. He was discharged in 1957 and immediately set about establishing his career as a writer of serious avant-garde fiction; he spent that summer studying the writings of Samuel Beckett while sequestered in a cabin near the Canadian border. The following year, he traveled to Spain to reunite with Maria del Pilar Sans-Mallafré, whom he had met while serving a tour of duty in Europe. They married in 1959 and spent that

summer touring southern Europe by motorcycle, an experience that led to his first published work, *One Summer in Spain: Five Poems* (1960). The couple lived in Spain in the early 1960s and moved to the U.S. in 1966.

Over the course of his career, Coover has held teaching positions at Bard College (1966-1967), the University of Iowa (1967-1969), Princeton University (1972-1973), and Brown University (1980-present), where he created the "Freedom to Write" program and is currently a professor of literary arts. He has also served as writer-in-residence or visiting lecturer for various institutions including Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin at Superior, the University of Maine, The Poetry Center at the University of Arizona, Brandeis University, Washington University, Cooper Union, the University of California-Los Angeles, Temple University, and the University of Houston.

Coover's work has been recognized with a great many awards, beginning with the William Faulkner Award for best first novel for *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966). Subsequent accolades have included a Rockefeller Foundation grant and Brandeis Citation for Fiction in 1969; Guggenheim Foundation fellowships in 1971 and 1974; an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1976; a National Book Award nomination for *The Public Burning* (1977); a National Endowment of the Arts grant in 1985; a Rea Award for lifetime achievement in the short story genre in 1987; the Rhode Island Governor's Arts Award in 1988; a Berlin DAAD Fellowship in 1990; a Rhode Island Pell Award in 1999; and a Lanna Foundation fellowship in 2000.

MAJOR WORKS

Coover's studious attention to literary form is evident in his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, in which a devastating mine explosion leads to the cult worship of the disaster's sole survivor. Coover's demonstration of the influence of narrative interpretation within the framework of an apocalyptic story marked him as an author to watch among critics and scholars. His next novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), again includes overtly religious elements and focuses on the nature of percep-

tion and authority. The protagonist, J. Henry Waugh, creates an imaginary baseball league and establishes himself as its omniscient and omnipotent ruler, but constrains himself to choosing the players' fates based on a complex interpretation of dice rolls. When disaster befalls his favorite player, Henry breaks his self-imposed boundaries to rebalance his invented world and then seemingly abandons it, at which point the players take over the narrative and, by implication, attain a state of autonomous existence.

Coover set aside the novel form for most of the following decade. His next published work was *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), a short story collection that has become among his most-studied works. The relatively obscure terms of the title both refer to forms of music that serve as counterpoint or embellishment to a main theme. In these stories, Coover introduced what would become a major focus of his work: the re-imagining of classic fairy tales in order to explore the influence of perception and interpretation on both readers and the author. Among the beloved tales brought to unsettling new light are "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Hansel and Gretel."

Coover searched more than two years for a publisher for his next novel, *The Public Burning* (1977), a re-imagining of the historic trial and execution in 1953 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, U.S. citizens convicted of spying for the Soviet Union. In addition to the Rosenbergs, the book includes many other real-life contemporary figures, including President Richard Nixon, who held office from 1969 to 1974 and serves as the fictionalized narrator of portions of *The Public Burning*. Coover's difficulty in securing a commitment from a publisher was reportedly due to the anticipated reactions of the actual living persons portrayed in the book.

In the novel *Gerald's Party* (1986), Coover's ability to disorient the reader is on full display as events unfold in bizarre rapidity and snippets of various conversations mingle like hallucinations. This dizzying bedlam so taxes the reader expecting an orderly, linear narrative that it threatens to mask the incongruent presence of a murdered guest's body on the floor, among and at times under the feet of the persevering revelers.

In the 1990s, Coover resumed his attention to fairy tales with several pieces of longer fiction. The novel *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991) finds the innocent, lovable boy-puppet now grown into a harassed, bitter, and sexually frustrated art professor. Salacious and scatological imagery abound in this novel, described as one of Coover's darker and more difficult works.

Similarly, *Briar Rose* (1996) shatters the idyllic imagery of the Sleeping Beauty tale by adding a backstory of enslavement, rape, witchcraft, and decidedly unchivalrous knightly behavior. In this work, Coover imagines several alternative explanations for how the protagonist entered her comatose state and what could have happened to her during it, what might have motivated the prince who awakened her as well as the many who chose not to, and, once she regained consciousness, what might have happened in lieu of living happily ever after. The novel *Stepmother* (2004) and the short story collection *A Child Again* (2005) continue Coover's focus on fairy tales, combining elements of "Cinderella," "Snow White," and several others in metafictional tales that again delineate in graphic detail the violence at which the original tales only hint.

Coover's most recent novel marks the author's entry into the genre of hardboiled detective fiction. In *Noir* (2010), Coover presents a classic murder mystery but tinkers with perspective through the use of the second-person singular voice. The author's by-now-familiar comfort with graphic violence is again demonstrated, but in this novel the imagery is cast in the gritty realism of detective fiction, with its squalid streets and putrid sewers, rat- and prostitute-infested back alleys, and danger skulking in the everpresent shadows.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In his more than forty years of literary production, Coover has developed a following of scholars, critics, and readers who applaud the vision that his oeuvre demonstrates. However, many of his works are unentertaining, inaccessible, or downright revolting to casual readers, a circumstance that has resulted in what some critics say is an unfortunate underappreciation of Coover's contributions to literature.

Of enduring interest is Coover's experimentation with metafiction and with the typically postmodernist preoccupation with the relationships between language and phenomena. Reviewers note that Coover's stories are replete with cautions against the ensnaring effects of narrated perspective, which threaten to skew the reader's own perception of reality, yet the irony is not lost on the author that he himself creates such treacherous narratives. Discussing the challenges to readers of Coover's work, particularly those disappointed by its coldness, Kathryn Hume explained, "Coover's metaphysics, as well as his penchant for irony in all its forms, helps explain the absence of authorial personality in the fiction. Given his assumptions, human collaboration is metaphorically inappropriate. Hence he makes few narrative gestures that might invite collaboration between reader and author in enjoying something."

Reviewing *A Child Again*, Henry L. Carrigan Jr. described the collection as another worthy addition to Coover's repurposing of fairy tales and concluded, "Coover's sly manipulation of language and his Swiftian sense of irony will appeal primarily to fans of the postmodern fiction of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers—both of whom are indebted to Coover." Discussing apocalyptic themes in Coover's metafictional work, Elizabeth K. Rosen observed, "Calling attention to the fictional nature of our stories, even the ones not typically considered fictions, has been the defining feature of much of Coover's writing, whether those stories are biblical myths, national myths, or even history itself."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- One Summer in Spain: Five Poems* (poetry) 1960
The Origin of the Brunists (novel) 1966
The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (novel) 1968
Pricksongs and Descants (short stories) 1969
**A Theological Position* (plays) 1972
The Water Pourer (novella) 1972
The Public Burning (novel) 1977
Hair o' the Chine (short stories) 1979
After Lazarus: A Filmscript (novella) 1980
Charlie in the House of Rue (novella) 1980
A Political Fable (novella) 1980
Bridge Hound (play) 1981
The Convention (short stories) 1981
Spanking the Maid (novella) 1981
In Bed One Night, and Other Brief Encounters (short stories) 1983
Gerald's Party (novel) 1986
A Night at the Movies; Or, You Must Remember This (short stories) 1987
Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears? (novella) 1987
Pinocchio in Venice (novel) 1991
Briar Rose (novella) 1996
John's Wife (novel) 1996
Ghost Town (novel) 1998
The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director's Cut (novel) 2002
Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell) (short stories) 2002
Stepmother (novel) 2004
A Child Again (short stories) 2005
Noir (novel) 2010

*This work includes *A Theological Position*, *The Kid*, *Love Scene*, and *Rip Awake*

CRITICISM

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[In the following essay, Hume encourages critics put off by the grotesque elements of Coover's fiction to avoid drawing conclusions based on only a few of his works, explaining that Coover is "an intellectual writer, and we need to identify his formative ideas to make sense of his ongoing project."]

Robert Coover has been a conspicuous and highly productive American writer for more than a generation, though he is not among the most celebrated. Many people associate his name with 'the baseball book', or they remember scandalous elements in *The Public Burning*. Once beyond those vivid flashes, non-specialists are not likely to recall much, or if they do, they may dismiss the rest as metafictional games. To this put-down, some book reviewers have added that the works are cold, obsessional, and unpleasant.¹ Since no one doubts that serious talent was engaged in producing *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968) and *The Public Burning* (1977), one might wonder whether Coover lost his stuff, but we might also ask ourselves whether we have perhaps not solved the puzzle posed by his later works.

His metafictionality is inarguable, but is this in fact the core of Coover's work?² What can the metafictional approach tell us about the disturbing and revolting nature of some of Coover's material? I shall argue that Coover's taste for the grotesque is a dominant that dictates what Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* calls metaphoric organization, modes, and myths.³ These in turn point to a submerged metaphysics that expresses itself through images of and attitudes towards bonds and bondage of all sorts. Frye's metaphoric, modal, and mythic patterns shed light on Coover's repeated mob and scapegoat situations, the variations on displaced divinities, and on the lack of warmth and the indifference to both character development and plot. The metaphysics based on bonds that need to be broken helps explain plot patterns and the metafictional impulse. Reading only one or two of the novels gives one little insight into the seriousness and thrust of Coover's metaphysical quest. He is an intellectual writer, and we need to identify his formative ideas to make sense of his ongoing project.

CONJUGATIONS OF THE GROTESQUE

Reviewers frequently use the term 'grotesque' when describing some event in the work under consideration. The grotesque forcibly joins the decorous with the

unexpected. The latter may be gruesome, disgusting, unhealthy, or upsetting. It may even just be the comic and everyday when that is inappropriately thrust into a solemn setting. Because Coover uses the grotesque in many ways, no single definition covers the variety of ways in which he deploys it. Let me, though, list a few characteristics of the grotesque to help clarify our sense of what sorts of things Coover is doing.

Bernard McElroy makes the point that the grotesque is possible only in a grotesque world, a world that looks respectable on the surface, but proves underneath to be what we have feared it to be all along. That such strangeness is indeed intrinsic to Coover's worlds is shown by the frequency of its manifestations and by characters' lack of surprise at these. Almost everyone in the quotidian world of small-town America in *John's Wife*, for instance, has participated in gross and upsetting events; many hardly notice when a giant-ess mushrooms up in their midst. The people do not actually expect such happenings, but when such events take place, they do not feel them to be out of place.⁴

McElroy also characterizes the modern grotesque as featuring the self pitted against a hostile environment, and says the central figure is 'not alienated man but humiliated man'.⁵ In *Pinocchio in Venice*, Professor Pinenut suffers mental humiliation in not being able to outwit scoundrels, and physical humiliations when faced by a young woman who attracts him sexually. We witness the squalid embarrassments of this distinguished art critic and moral commentator being licked clean by a dog after he has soiled himself, and are reminded that in his puppet days, children taunted him about the nose that humiliatingly behaved like a penis.

Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* argues that the grotesque world is the estranged world, and that no name can be put to the powers responsible for such estrangement. At most, agency can be expressed by 'it' as in 'it rains'.⁶ This characteristic helps separate Coover from the many artists with a paranoid vision, especially those with a politicized concept of Control from above. Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer (sometimes), and William S. Burroughs also see society in terms of Control. When Pauline's body suddenly enlarges fantastically, though, no identifiable force is responsible; this just happens.

Coover's fiction utilizes incongruities that range from the comic grotesque (with a frisson of the weird) to nightmarish horror (slightly diluted with levity). Between the comic and serious poles of the grotesque lies a range of polyvalent grotesquerie. These events defy easy analysis because their comic or serious value

is not intrinsic, but is determined by each reader's mental make-up, which in turn rests on ideologies and beliefs outside any author's control. The same work can seem horrible or funny, depending on the reader. Most of Coover's grotesque is polyvalent. This prevents critical consensus forming about the nature of a work, and indeed makes difficult the assertion of any single-minded, unambiguous interpretation. The instability of values also interferes with most readers' satisfaction, because they tend to like works they feel they have conquered and Coover's permit no such self-congratulation.

At the cheerful end of the spectrum, we certainly find some lighthearted moments. When Coover deforms folktales (in *Pricksongs and Descants*) for metafictional purposes, Jack grows up to be the giant and Red Ridinghood's sexually cynical old grandmother proves once to have been the Beauty who married the Beast. The degradations shock us at first, but seem zestfully right upon reflection. Boys do grow up, and Beauty's living into crusty old age reminds us that life is more than youth, and lived experience does not end at 'They lived happily ever after'. In *A Political Fable*, the Cat in the Hat provides comic grotesquerie by magic; the coonskin caps on the heads of delegates turn back into the original raccoons and those animals start copulating amongst the feet of the politicians. The horror of being pursued by a foetus aborted twenty years ago (in *John's Wife*) turns comic when the foetus becomes a bad guy in a western saloon. This infant in arms chomps on a cigar and then demands a suck from his mother. He shoots down the chandelier over the men who make rude remarks, then tells his mother that he has soiled his nappy. 'Top Hat' in *A Night at the Movies* describes a dance spectacle in which dancers in uniform (the repressive forces of order) are imitated and mocked by a solo dancer who is a trickster, a clown, and a loner. After complications, the trickster points his swagger stick at the uniformed dancers and shoots them, executing each one with fancy forms of shooting and different styles of gun. As he takes his bow, his feet—always tapping and moving up to now—come to a halt, a wonderfully disturbing ending. He has become what he murdered—a psychologically serious point—but the slapstick and the staged nature of dance keep the slaughter from seeming too serious. Coover's comic grotesquerie mostly derives from gross sex, body functions, violence, old age, and death. Psychologically, we enjoy seeing their power lessened by being made the subject of play.

Polyvalent grotesque—the middle of the spectrum—describes much of Coover's writing. *Spanking the Maid* illustrates the problem of classification. Repetition without significant increment is normally comic or boring, and the dutiful attempts by the maid to get

her routine right can be seen as wryly amusing. The bondage and dominance elements are mild in that no permanent physical harm seems to be done. However, if a reader's sexual experience does not encompass any positive exposure to bondage and dominance games, the basic situation may just seem disgusting. If the reader is a feminist, the submissive woman seems exploited and stands allegorically for all exploited women, much as Kathy Acker's paternal incest in *Blood and Guts in High School* stands for the psychic demands of patriarchy. A Marxist reader would notice the social difference between master and maid and might interpret their interaction as class exploitation. The signposts of repetition and frustration point us towards mildly grotesque comedy, but many readers will see only fleeting moments of comedy all but overwhelmed by serious issues.⁷

'You must remember this' (in *A Night at the Movies*) offers another invitation to readers to differ over the valence they assign to what might be called the carnal grotesque. Does the multi-orgasmed encounter between Rick and Ilse described in throbbing detail, make Coover's story a parody of *Casablanca* or an exposé of the Hollywood morality code of the era? Is the writing erotic or pornographic, and would grafting this scene into the film destroy its claim to artistic merit? Is creating this symbiotic scene an act of violence done to someone else's work of art, a shocking defilement of a classic? Joel Black analyses many of these issues, and to his mind, that degree of intimate detail remains grotesque when set against quotidian actions and the standards of a classic. 'Gross representations of physical intimacy have the inevitable effect of debasing the ideal of romantic love and of undercutting the supposed autonomy and integrity of the work of art' (p. 85). Black indeed worries that film purists may feel that this 'hardcore revision of *Casablanca* may permanently affect their future enjoyment of the film' (p. 85).⁸ To someone who worships the subtlety of the original, Coover's is a displeasing graffito, an unwelcome reminder of the sweat and grunts and odours of sex. Even to someone who welcomes and enjoys the detail, the intrusion of such physicality into the merely suggestive remains startling.

Let the giantess Pauline serve as a final example of Coover's polyvalent grotesque. She embodies a repressed aspect of the town's sexual past, but why does she start growing uncontrollably? This constitutes her basic grotesquerie, elaborated by the urgency of her needing mountains of food, by her inability to clothe her expanding frame, and by the huge faeces that she leaves in her wake. Pauline as giant has some literary relatives, and contrasting her with these figures shows why she is more ambivalently grotesque. Grendel's mother, in both the Old English epic and John

Gardner's novel, is ferocious and gigantic, but she has always been huge and always a social outcast (at least from human society). Neither the Anglo-Saxon nor the modern version suffers the indignities and insecurities of a major shift in body size and social acceptability. Part of Pauline's grotesquerie, both painful and comic, derives from the awkwardness she experiences. Dog-Woman in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* is another such female giant, but Dog-Woman brings the Wife of Bath's gusto to living as a freak. Moreover, because she grew up to giant adulthood among normals in a small world, she is known and not hunted down as a monster. The women of Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels* constitute the third model, but their gigantism exists only in relation to him; among themselves, they are normal. Dog-Woman could laugh gustily at her size differential, but Pauline is embarrassed and feels vulnerable in the nakedness that no clothes can be found to cover. Coover has often used male nakedness to indicate vulnerability, but here he extends that sympathy to the female.

Beyond comic and polyvalent grotesquerie in the spectrum lies the nightmarish grotesque. When entering this mode, Coover draws on horror-film and horror-tale traditions. We find the narrative viewpoint staring up from an open grave as the con with the apparently living dead is lowered down towards it ('**After Lazarus**' in *Night at the Movies*). In '**The Marker**' (*Pricksongs and Descants*), the protagonist starts to make love to a sexy, loved wife and is caught by the police making love to a decomposing corpse. Also chilling are the nightmare effects achieved in narrative pacing. In *Gerald's Party* and much of *John's Wife*, the events whizz by too quickly for us quite to pin down what is happening. The uneasiness thus generated intensifies painfully when events turn sinister.

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Coover's great set piece of horror-grotesque is the execution of the Rosenbergs in *The Public Burning*.

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. Before it can be broken, the Executioner methodically pulls a switch a second time and again the body leaps from its seat to heave and labor against its shackles. (p. 510)

What makes this grotesque rather than pure horror? It takes place in an estranged world, where both Nixon

and the Rosenbergs are threatened selves facing a hostile environment. Contrasts contribute to the grotesquerie. Showbiz personalities do skits beforehand on the scaffold, and celebrities flock up to pull the lever when the original electrocution does not kill Ethel. Coover causes the grotesque to burst into flower, however, when the Executioner jerks the lever the third time for Julius. Coover notes that the crowd's children were 'fascinated by the first two jolts'. 'They are now bored by the third; they squirm in their seats as Julius's body whips and snaps in its bonds, covering up their ears against the crackling whine, asking "What's history?" and complaining that they want to go home or go see Mickey Mouse or use the toilet' (p. 510). Adult readers may be caught up in the horror of an execution, but are likely to laugh at this accurate description of childish behaviour, with laughter twisted in yet another direction at the very idea of children being present at the execution.

Coover's serious, even horrible, grotesque (as judged by my own reader responses) would also include such sequences in *John's Wife* as Gordon's nude photographs of his senile mother and Daddy Duwayne's sexual abuse of Pauline. Gordon contorts his mother's 'shriveled limbs into bizarre attitudes' but focuses 'mostly on her collapsing face, her gaping mouth, her blankly staring eyes' (pp. 122-23). His friend Ellsworth helps hold her in the poses, but finds the whole process disturbing. When he complains that the result cannot be beautiful, Gordon shrugs, and asserts, 'it might be. And if it can't be, then beauty can't be either. That's all. Now do me a favor, Ell, and hold her arm up beside her cheek' (p. 123). This novel shows many characters at their sweet prime, and then again twenty years later as the lusher, hags, and creeps who are all the normal members of small-town society. In Gordon's mother, we are exposed to a yet later unlovely stage in the ageing of humans. Rodin found beauty in *La Belle Heaulmiere*, but her face suggests that her mind is still alive. If we are to accept Gordon's view, beauty is discernible in any person and any circumstances; that means, presumably, that it could be found in Daddy Duwayne as well as Gordon's mother, a disturbing possibility that is made more real for us by his being treated grotesquely rather than as pure horror. With biblical references he rapes his seven-year-old stepdaughter, who misunderstands his reference to Jericho, and wonders if 'Cherry-go' might be an ice-cream flavour.

No matter whether you read early or recent Coover, you find the grotesque. Tiger Miller is nearly torn to pieces by naked townsfolk. The Cat in the Hat actually suffers a gruesomely detailed and excessively thorough version of that fate, yet both scenes have laughable elements. The proprietor of a baseball sub-

world is a scruffy God living on sandwiches, pizza, and beer. In *Pinocchio in Venice*, we find such monstrosities as the Madonna of the Organs, the Blue Fairy masturbating with the puppet Pinocchio's wooden limbs, and sulphurous language, both English and dialectal Italian. The cowpoke in *Ghost Town* is to be hanged for having turned down the powerful town whore, repulsive to him, who in disguise was the school-marm whom he had found attractive. In his world, magic horses and trains seem normal, but so do gross threats of anal rape and hanging.

In a 1968 interview with Hertz, Coover opines that all great literature is concerned with the nightmare side of life, though he tends to consider tragedy 'a kind of adolescent response to the universe' and comedy a higher kind of truth.⁹ There is a kind of humor in extremity which is even more mature than the tragic response.⁹ Without using the term grotesque, he seems to have this combination of nightmare and comedy in mind that certainly furnishes him with his creative materials. He finishes the interview by agreeing that someone becomes a writer in the first place because he is sensitive to the nightmare side of life. As I shall argue next in discussing Coover's demonic vision, his is a grotesque world, and his fiction responds to this fact.

THE DEMONIC VISION

As far as plot events go, Coover's taste for the grotesque is manifest. How, though, does one get from story elements to metaphysics? In Coover's case, the path leads us first through other aspects of his writing, namely affinity with the grotesque shown in the metaphoric organization of his world, the perspective he engineers between reader and protagonist, the mythic shape of his stories, and the attitude he encourages towards that mythic shape. I did not arrive at these elements simply by brainstorming about Coover's fiction, but rather from Northrop Frye's literary *mappa mundi*. Current critics treat Coover as one of a kind. Frye belongs to a generation more attuned to literary tradition, and the historical depth of his vision provides Coover with a genealogy of kindred spirits. It offers us a means of recognizing Coover's living literary relatives as well. Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* was published before Coover emerged as a writer, but some of his analyses seem so pertinent that one feels they could have been penned with Coover in mind.¹⁰ Frye's discussions of the demonic vision, the ironic mode, the ironic myth, and the authorial ironic attitude all illuminate elements of strangeness in Coover's work. Moreover, Frye's ability to link various aspects of a fictional work lets us make the connection between Coover's grotesque and both his metafictional quest and his shadowy Promethean metaphysics.

Frye calls the two impulses behind literature the naturalistic and the mythic. Naturalism reproduces 'more or less credible facts of life', but storytellers frequently turn to 'abstractly literary' patterns rather than stick to the quotidian (Frye, p. 135). These mythic patterns, in their clearest and least displaced forms, concern gods and demons, and the mythically inflected metaphors tend to polarize into their culture's equivalents of heavenly and hellish images. Frye calls these the apocalyptic and the demonic. Given the degree of unpleasantness in Coover's dominant, he predictably prefers demonic metaphors and demonic mythic narratives.

Consider Coover's penchant for lynch mobs trying to tear someone apart and for scapegoat victims.¹¹ Frye notes that 'the social relation [in the demonic vision] is that of the mob, which is essentially human society looking for a pharmakos' (p. 149).¹² Furthermore, in the demonic realm we often find the 'tearing apart of the sacrificial body' (p. 148). Whereas apocalyptic metaphors include the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage, the demonic parodies that marriage with taboo relations and demonic eroticism. These take many forms, including 'hermaphroditism, incest (the most common form) or homosexuality' (p. 149). Uncle Sam's rape of Nixon exemplifies such demonic eroticism. In this same realm, 'corresponding to the temple or One Building of the apocalypse, we have the prison or dungeon' (p. 150), and fire, instead of bringing purification and enlightenment, becomes the auto-da-fé.

When we move from the metaphors to the perspective we are offered on characters, Frye's theory of modes becomes helpful. How we view characters is a realm of authorial choice, since much of our admiration or disdain for a character is manipulated by authorial adjectives. Frye charts five possibilities. The mythic, the romance, and the high mimetic do not concern us here, because in all three the hero is superior to readers at least in degree. In the low mimetic mode, 'the hero is one of us' in powers (p. 34), and here we find most comedy and realistic fiction, or Frye's naturalism. In the ironic mode, we find a protagonist 'inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity' (p. 34). Kafka is the master of this realm, and Benjy Compson is a famous denizen. Equally at home here are Coover's Gloomy Gus and Professor Pinenut. Frye notes that twentieth-century literature occupies the territory of the low mimetic and the ironic. The ironic apparently loops back towards the mythic on its other side, for parodic and debased versions of the myths appear in the shadows of the ironic realm. Dying gods, saviours, and rebirths dot the Cooverian landscape.¹³

Frye's modes are characterized not only by how we as readers measure the hero against ourselves, but how that hero relates to his own society. In the positive, comic vein of the low mimetic and ironic modes, the main figure is rejected and driven out, but this is seen from society's point of view as a good thing. Frye links our cultural preference for the ironic mode to the popularity of the detective story, the comic-side 'formula of how a man-hunter locates a pharmakos and gets rid of him' (p. 46). In the unhappy, tragic vein of these same lower modes, the figure is driven out, and our sympathies are directed towards this scapegoat, whose experiences may take on echoes of ritual sacrifice. Given that Coover's protagonists shade from low mimetic to purely ironic, we should be less surprised at his penchant for scapegoats than at the clarity with which they present themselves as such. His metaphors are not just demonic but are overtly mythic, not as displaced into quotidian alienation as is common in other writers and protagonists of this era.

Frye's lumbering Ptolemaic literary machine is marred by his reusing terms like irony and ironic for so many different elements in literature, but I shall briefly mention two others, since they both shed light on Coover. One is what Frye calls the darkest phase of the ironic myth, which presents life 'in terms of largely unrelieved bondage. Its settings feature prisons, madhouses, lynching mobs, and places of execution, and it differs from a pure inferno mainly in the fact that in human experience suffering has an end in death' (p. 238). Whether the prisons and gallows are those of *Ghost Town* or Sing-Sing and Times Square in *The Public Burning*, we find such ironic settings over and over again in Coover. Furthermore, as I shall argue later, the term bondage is electrifyingly important; it links his ironic modalities of writing to his metafictional practices, and to his metaphysics.

The other use of the term irony applies to an attitude on the part of the author towards the subject matter. 'Complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements are essential' to this method (p. 40). Frye goes on to talk about 'dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated. [. . .] The ironist fables without moralizing, and has no object but his subject' (pp. 40-41). I mention this because Coover's apparent coldness and lack of affect seem to me part of this ironic attitude and artistic technique. So is the lack of rapport with readers, the lack of instruction as to how we should respond. As one reviewer of *John's Wife* complains, 'As you're drawn deeper into their web of cartoonish villainy, Coover declines to offer a helping hand—you're on your own.'¹⁴

In sum, Coover's choices include every version of what Frye calls the ironic, and his penchant for the