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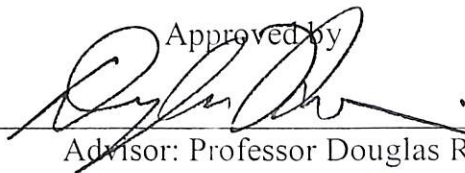
COOVER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA SATIRE: *THE PUBLIC BURNING* REVISITED

by
Drew Mauldin

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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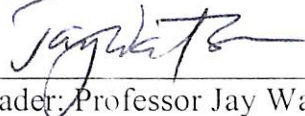
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ABSTRACT

John Andrew Mauldin: Coover's Encyclopedic Satire: *The Public Burning* Revisited
(Under the Direction of Douglas Robinson)

This thesis seeks to explore Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, provide a brief exploration of the encyclopedic form, and subsequently establish *The Public Burning* as an encyclopedic narrative. It seeks to reanalyze the work through the lens of the encyclopedic narrative, primarily utilizing the critiques of Edward Mendelson. In addition, Northrop Frye and Richard Hardack are also cited extensively for their works on the encyclopedic form. While the form has been recognized for the better part of a decade now, there is still a relatively small amount of criticism available on the form and Coover's work has gone relatively unnoticed within the form. I will argue that *The Public Burning* not only fits within the parameters of the form, but also serves as an exemplar of the encyclopedic narrative.

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Introduction to *The Public Burning*

There is perhaps no work in literature that so fully encapsulates the Red scare hysteria of the 1950s as well as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*. Coover successfully captures the fear, urgency, and sense of pandemonium so iconic of the era of McCarthy and HUAC. To limit the work to a sort of historical study, however, far shortchanges its significance. Coover presents a novel, which I will argue is a primary example of the encyclopedic narrative, which successfully captures the essence of American society. Though the novel takes place over the three days preceding the Rosenbergs' executions, the book transcends its historical setting and belongs just as much to the modern reader as to that of the past. Truly, Coover incorporates nearly all aspects of American society in the text. It is a book of explosive ideas, outrageous comedy, and even cynical fury.

A young and honest, at times embarrassingly honest, Richard Milhous Nixon carries the majority of the text's narration. His voice is supplemented by an abstract and fanatic third person voice which seems to be a patchwork of America, drawing inspiration from the "old and young, great and small, of all creeds, colors, and sexes." At one point Coover describes the crowd as being composed of "workers in dungarees, millionaires in tuxedos, pilots, ballplayers, sailors, and bellboys...Silver Stars, Imperial High Wizards, Hit Paraders, Hall of Famers, Homecoming Queens, and Honor Listees" (Coover 355). In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Coover states, "I began to think about recasting the executions as a national circus held in Times Square, the very center of America's knowledge and entertainment industry, and bringing there all the common

and not so-common folk of the nation as witnesses and participants. Fellow executioners” (McCaffery 117).

This carnival motif serves as what Coover terms the central dramatic device for the novel. This national circus allows Coover to extend the text across society; no one is inoculated against the ideas set forth in the text. The execution is a corporate ritual, performed by, for, and of the people. This message is fully conveyed when Uncle Sam cries out to the crowd gathered in the square, “It’s you ordinary folks who’ve made this show possible tonight” (Coover 419). Such universal guilt is a driving force behind much of the text.

In many ways, the circus tent grants Coover the same tools as does Herman Melville’s ship, the *Pequod*. While Melville creates his microcosm in the belly of a whaling ship, Coover composes his in the middle of Times Square—America’s epicenter. Though Coover’s narrative often escapes the attention of critics who write on the encyclopedic narrative, and Coover himself never explicitly claims to have set out to compose such a form, the book not only possesses all the hallmark traits of the form, but does so exceedingly well.

Edward Mendelson, regarded by many as the pioneering critic on the encyclopedic narrative, describes a series of conditions which are exemplary of the form. *The Public Burning* features nearly all of Mendelson’s criteria. In his 1976 essay, he writes that “Encyclopedic narratives occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and national history” (“Narrative” 1267). Mendelson seems to assert that this gray period occurs ten to twenty years following an event; post-mortem yet before the development

and subsequent acceptance of a mythological history. Although *The Public Burning* was not published until 1976, 23 years following the Rosenberg executions, Coover began the project well within Mendelson's loose time frame. By using the narrations of Uncle Sam and Nixon as foils, Coover is able to create duplicate histories within the text, all the while creating a sense of history of his own.

Though it is hard to imagine *The Public Burning* without the narcissistic narration of Richard Nixon, Nixon was actually a relatively late addition to the project. The novel, the writing of which spanned ten years from its conception to publication, began as a type of street theater piece which would stage the Rosenberg executions as a sort of circus act. The impractical nature of such a performance, however, drove Coover to pursue moving the executions to Times Square within the framework of a novel. The circus became the fundamental tenet around which he framed the work. Uncle Sam was tagged as the master of ceremonies from the project's inception. Lacking, though, was a sort of "homely clown" to balance the "grandly brassy" voice of the satire. Inspiration, as luck would have it, struck during President Richard M. Nixon's Inauguration ("Log" 86). Coover had found his clown.

Nixon possessed multiple traits that suited him well for his proposed role as clown, the foremost of which was the proclivity of the real Nixon to behave in ways much of the public, and especially Coover, felt utterly absurd. Nearly seven years into the creation of *The Public Burning*, just as Watergate was hitting the mainstream media, Coover noted, "Nixon himself was outclowning my character" (McCaffery 119). The propensity of Nixon to perform, and quite often say, the absurd lent itself all too conveniently to Coover's character. It was not so much, however, Nixon's falls from

grace, which Coover terms pratfalls, but rather his constant refusal to stay down that so intrigued Coover.

For Coover, the only discernible difference between a hero and a clown is that a hero stays down after the fall. In his essay “Tears of a Clown,” Coover writes, “Clowns are forever creating crises for themselves or falling haplessly into such crises...What is a pratfall, after all, but a two-stage crisis: first trying to desperately prevent it, then trying to get up afterwards?” (Coover 83). And, as Coover concludes, the author gets a lot more mileage out of the clown than the hero. With this definition of “clown” in mind, the author of a book titled *Six Crises* certainly seems a natural fit.

If Coover had any remaining doubts as to whether Nixon would suffice as the clown of his novel, those doubts were undoubtedly swept away upon his reading of *Six Crises*. Nixon’s “secret fund” scandal, which earns significant mention in *The Public Burning*, constitutes an entire chapter in *Six Crises*, deeming it, at least in the eyes of Nixon, a “crisis situation with dimensions far beyond personal consideration” (xii). Nixon, following the discovery of the scandal, wrote to the Republican National Committee “I don’t believe that I ought to quit, because I am not a quitter. And, incidentally, Pat is not a quitter. After all, her name was Patricia Ryan and she was born on Saint Patrick’s Day, and you know the Irish never quit” (Nixon 117). This absurd comment, written to the Republican Committee on the heels of a personal mistake many observers viewed as career-ending, does indeed seem more befitting of a comedic literary character than it does the future face of American politics.

Additionally, Coover was greatly attracted by Nixon's proximity to the Rosenberg executions. Nixon from the outset was a peripheral player in the Eisenhower administration. He was the wrangler sent in to do the dirty work while the soon-to-be President stayed above the fray. Coover writes of Nixon's situation as one "that paradoxically kept him remote and isolated like a fool at court, tolerated by the General but not included in his retinue" ("Tears" 82). This exclusion is illustrated when Nixon comments on a GOP fund-raiser. He initially claims, "I got invited to the speech at their fundraising dinner," but soon corrects himself, saying, "*Our* dinner, I should say" (*Burning* 295). Nixon, Coover continues in his commentary, "ached for that inclusion...and was the very model of futile diligence in its comical pursuit" ("Tears" 82). This "comical pursuit" is very much played out within *The Public Burning*.

In a strange sort of eulogy that *New York Newsday* printed immediately following Nixon's death, Coover writes, "For the uncivil clown, amoral as a child is amoral and capable of the most outrageous mockeries of all that's most revered, is always (by nature not by consequence) an outcast, a lonely self-absorbed figure dancing jerkily at the outer edges of our communal vision, a freak of sorts and set apart" ("Tears" 81). It is ironic then, that this "freak of sorts" becomes the reader's guiding hand in *The Public Burning*. And that, as Coover suggested in a 1979 interview, "Any exploration of Nixon, this man who has played such a large role in American society since World War II, would have to reveal something about us all" (Frick 82).

Coover's Nixon does, in fact, reveal something about us all. The piteous Nixon immediately strikes the reader as odd. Lois Gordon, in her book *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process*, writes, "What is most remarkable is that while most

readers will approach him with some distaste, it is difficult at the end not to feel sympathetic to him.” She continues, claiming, “that Coover accomplishes this may well illustrate his very point about the power of media and language to mold judgment and create history” (Gordon 62). Coover attempts to destroy conventional wisdom regarding the creation of history and truth.

In many ways, as suggested by Daniel Frick, Nixon physically replicates this act of constructing fact, history, and fiction within the text as he scours through the trial records, exhibits of evidence, and testimonies of the Rosenbergs. The warden explicitly addresses the construction of history, commenting to Nixon, “It’s funny, isn’t it Mr. Nixon...How billions and billions of words get spoken every day, like all these we’ve been speaking on the way down here...and for some reason—or for maybe no reason at all—a few of them stick, and they’re all we’ve got afterwards of everything that’s happened” (Coover 409).

This creation of history as a national story or anthem and the ramifications of belief in that myth are of extreme interest to Coover. Coover establishes the relationship between the two in a very curious, yet effective manner. As Richard Nixon gradually pieces together the “histories” of the Rosenbergs, poring through case files and biographies, he occupies the role of both storyteller and historian for the reader. Coover seems to juxtapose Nixon and his creation of case “facts” to the process of fiction making for the author as well as to that of Uncle Sam’s process of creating a national history. At one point, Nixon comments:

What was fact, what was intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words.

Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word. . . . What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally? (Coover 136)

There is perhaps no other sentiment that Nixon so eloquently articulates throughout the book. Even without further evidence, such a fact alone should be demonstrative of how central this theme is to the text.

In McCaffery's interview, Coover describes this creation of mythology as a sort of American civil religion. Uncle Sam grants divine authority to imperial and callous pursuits, at one point claiming, "THE ALMIGHTY WATCHES OVER PEOPLE OF ALL NATIONS. And takes His pick" (417). Religious leaders are also often portrayed as hypocritical. Just before the execution, Eisenhower also invokes the Almighty in support of the nation's actions, proclaiming, "It is, friends, a spiritual struggle...And at such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith: we are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free!" (505). Minutes later Dr. McCracken pronounces Julius Rosenberg dead, the first American citizen ever executed by a civil court for espionage.

By turning an often-forgotten execution into a national tribal ritual, Coover is able to draw attention to both the creation of myth and its power. The encyclopedic narrative provides the ideal format for such an endeavor as it inherently is a case study in nearly all

aspects of a given society. Further, with its positioning as a fulcrum between pre-history and history, it provides the reader with greater insight into the active creation of fact, fiction, and myth.

Introduction to the Encyclopedic Form

While Coover's *The Public Burning* is often recognized as an encyclopedic narrative, few critics have delved further within its pages to provide a more insightful and thorough analysis of the book as such. While Coover's name is often listed alongside postmodern encyclopedists such as Pynchon and Gaddis, there seems to be a great disparity in the greater amount of attention, and criticism, granted to the others. The fact of the matter is that while encyclopedic narrative has been a widely accepted term for at least half a century now, far too little exploration of the form has taken place.

In Edward Mendelson's 1976 essay "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon," he writes, "I want to use the term encyclopedic narrative to identify a genre that is of central importance in western literature, but one that has not been fully recognized" (91). Despite the best efforts of Mendelson and other critics who will be explored later in this essay, it remains that this significant form of literature is far too often overlooked. Therefore, in order to provoke a thoughtful analysis of *The Public Burning* as encyclopedic satire, it is imperative to first provide a more thorough evaluation of encyclopedic narrative in general.

It is generally agreed that the first widely accepted use of encyclopedic narrative began with Dante's *Commedia*. Mendelson includes six other works as primary examples of the encyclopedic narrative. He includes Rabelais' five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and most recently Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mendelson never recognizes Coover's *The Public Burning*, however, as both of Mendelson's more renowned essays

were published in 1976, the first year of *The Public Burning*'s publication, it is very possible that Mendelson was simply unaware of Coover's novel.

Although the encyclopedic narrative certainly evolved from other styles such as the Greek epic and Menippean satire, *Commedia* serves as an ideal starting point to begin exploration of the form. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, writes, "Romantic encyclopaedic forms use human or sacramental imitations of the Messianic myth, like the quest of Dante in the *Commedia*...The *Commedia* reverses the usual structure of the contrast-epic, as it starts with the ironic human situation and ends with divine vision" (315). Here, Frye alludes to the encyclopedic text's relation to both the epic as well as the Messianic myth.

Both the epic and the Bible seem to have great influence on the form which encyclopedic authors give their works. Frye goes so far as to assert that "in every age of literature there tends to be some kind of central encyclopaedic form, which is normally a scripture or sacred book" (315). For Western culture, this book has clearly been the Bible and, as such, has had a profound effect on the literary works produced by that society. Perhaps the most easily recognizable trait passed on has been the cyclical nature of those books. The Bible, which carries the reader from creation to apocalypse, within which, as Frye claims, "is the heroic quest of the Messiah from incarnation to apotheosis." Furthermore, within this are three additional movements: "birth to salvation; sexual from Adam and Eve to the apocalyptic wedding; social from the giving of the law to the established kingdom of the law" (316). This structure provides a very natural sense of progression for the encyclopedia and thus, it is of little surprise that such an organization can be found in many examples of the encyclopedic narrative.

In romantic encyclopedic forms, “sacramental imitations of the Messianic myth” almost invariably appear, according to Frye. Certainly, as will be explored further, Nixon seems to see himself as a sort of savior for the world in *The Public Burning*. This Messianic theme is also directly related to Dante’s quest in the *Commedia*.

Such a Messianic theme inherently resembles many of the themes of the Greek epic. In fact, Frye writes that from a poetic perspective, the action of the Bible can be found in three great epics: the notion of destruction and confinement in Homer’s *Iliad*, the theme of return in the *Odyssey*, and the founding of a new city and order in the *Aeneid* (319).

It is therefore extremely difficult to separate the influence of these two forms within the encyclopedic narrative, although their combined influence is extraordinarily striking. Their presence is perhaps one of the most blatant characteristics of the encyclopedic narrative. Frye places such importance on this that he claims that, when examining the encyclopedic tradition, we should anticipate that the vehicle carrying the satiric epic would be the pure cycle in which every quest must be repeated.

While such a parameter is certainly important in discerning the nature of a text, there must be something more integral and seemingly within the “spirit” of the text which binds together the works of encyclopedic narrative. In “Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction,” Kathryn Hume warns against categorizing literature based on such “tone or flavor.” Hume goes on to state such “qualities are hard to pinpoint textually, and not all readers will come away with the same response” (301). However, such a flavor seems to be explicated in Mendelson’s “From Dante to Pynchon,” when he writes,

“Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (269). This attempt to neatly encapsulate all cultural aspects of a given polity is the backbone of the encyclopedic text. Further Mendelson’s definition provides latitude to gauge the tone of the text, while also providing a fairly objective set of conditions.

Richard Hardack, in his essay “Going Belly Up: Entries, Entrees, and the All-Consuming Encyclopedic Text,” also describes the process, writing that “they are encyclopedic writers, proliferating tales, characters, plots, subplots, displaying massive erudition, a familiarity with technology, industry and arcane but important forms of knowledge” (658). Hardack, like most critics, alludes to the similarities between the encyclopedic narrative and the Homeric journey. He describes the journeys as a sort of pilgrimage seeking absolute understanding of the world. They need not necessarily be physical journeys such as those of Gulliver in *Gulliver’s Travels* and Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, but merely internal journeys such as those in the works of Cervantes and Rabelais. In each, regardless of the internal or physical nature of the journey, there is an effort to systematize the outside world. The characters seem insistent on building their own sort of encyclopedia within the text. It is the phenomenon that greatly contributes to the degree of metafiction that exists within encyclopedic narratives.

Hardack goes on to describe these escapades, or expeditions, as mock-heroic quests in which the author, attempting to catalogue a society, satirizes the attempts of the protagonist to complete the same effort. This attempt to classify the world certainly has roots in what Frye deems “Mennippean satire,” or, as it is more commonly known today,

the anatomy. Frye claims that the Mennippean satire, sometimes called Varronian satire, deals less with individuals and more with ideologies. Frye describes the characters of Mennippean satires as “mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” (309). There is a great deal of difference in the way a character in Mennippean satire feels to the reader when contrasted to the character of a novel. The Mennippean character often seems more staged, almost like that of a morality play. The characters’ names even seem to reflect that at times. For example, the characters in *Peacock*, which Frye notes as iconic of the Mennippean satire, are Squire Western and Thwackum. Such names strike the reader as more distant and objective than more traditional names. The Mennippean satire is more suited to handle abstract ideas and concepts than is the novel, which is highly stylized and more concerned with character development.

This distinct difference in characters seems to have blurred as the Mennippean satire bled into the encyclopedic narrative. In the encyclopedic narrative, where genres, styles, and mythos often appear side-by-side within the text, it is not uncommon to have a character more representative of the novel’s style of character development. Nor is it uncommon, as Mendelson asserts, to have a character who attempts to behave according to the tenets of another genre such as the romance or farce. This merely contributes to the text’s attempted, or perhaps mocked, wholly encompassing nature.

As Arielle Silverman writes in her “Encyclopedic Representations: William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*,” the encyclopedic narrative is in itself “a constant reminder that there is an author and a reader, and thus the reader oscillates between being consumed by the text and stepping away from the text to see its existence as a text” (Silverman 16). The author is both constructing an encyclopedic collection of facts,

genres, and cultures, all the while deconstructing the notion that such an undertaking is achievable.

This apparent contradiction—the attempt to encapsulate a society while also satirizing that attempt, as is the postmodernist’s aim—is extremely well articulated by Steven Weisenberger in his book *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel*. Weisenberger writes:

Encyclopedic narratives have yet to be described in anything more than a précis, and there are lingering problems with the concept itself. Most crucially, a sizable number of encyclopedic narratives are clearly satirical, in whole or part, but what are we to make of the possible contradiction? On the one hand we define the encyclopedia as a generative form, a constellation of objects, events, persons, topics, and frames designed to spur fresh syntheses of those myths (metanarratives) informing it. On the other, I have been defining the postmodern abundance of degenerative satires, with their power for doing violence to such structures of knowledge and their organizing metannarratives. (200)

To put it more succinctly: the postmodernist seeks to undermine, or at least call into question, all perception of structure and order, including that of the text which is used to deliver that message.

In an attempt to minimize such a contradiction in the available criticism on encyclopedic narratives, Weisenberger urges a distinction between “encyclopedic satire” and the classical encyclopedic text. Such a distinction certainly seems helpful if not absolutely necessary. The need for such a distinction can clearly be found in the following quotation. Ronald Swigger, in his essay “Fictional Encyclopedism and the Cognitive Value of Literature,” writes that the purpose of the encyclopedist is to “comprehend and articulate a unified and total vision of the world” (Swigger 352). Clearly, Swigger refers to the classical encyclopedic narrative rather than a postmodern work of Pynchon, Coover, or Gaddis. If anything, it seems to be that these three authors, and countless others, wish to assert the exact opposite.

Swigger is not at all out of line with his contemporaries when he overlooks such a contradiction, however. In fact both Mendelson and Frye also have statements which seem to have the same problematic implications as those of Swigger. The fault seems not to be in the critics, but merely in the proximity to which they wrote on such postmodern texts. As all three penned their essays on the cusp of the postmodernist revolution, with Swigger and Frye publishing before Coover had even finished *The Public Burning*, such a contradiction can be viewed as inconvenient, but not destructive of either author’s overarching argument.

Mendelson, aside from such a slight inconsistency in terminology, provides a remarkably thorough examination of the encyclopedic narrative. Mendelson lays out a criterion which is both objective and easily observable. Perhaps Mendelson’s first, and most significant, requirement of a text to be considered encyclopedic is the place in history which that text occupies. Mendelson asserts that the encyclopedic narrative

necessarily be *close* in proximity to the immediate present but not *of* the present. For Mendelson, that means that the events portrayed in the book take place approximately fifteen to twenty years prior to the author publishing. Thus, Dante began writing in 1307 about events that occurred in 1300; *Ulysses* was written between 1916-1922, but set in 1904; Gaddis wrote *The Recognitions* in 1955 about the years immediately following World War II; and *The Public Burning* was published in 1976 while the text spans a three day period in 1953.

Such proximity in time provides the author the ability to achieve several things. First and foremost, it grants the author the ability to allow characters to make extremely accurate prophecies. For example, in *The Public Burning* Coover is able to stage one of the book's most vivid scenes in which Nixon is sodomized by Uncle Sam, marking him for the Presidency. Coover is able to do so only because he knows that Nixon will actually become the President. In other encyclopedic works, Dante is able to prophesy the death of Pope Boniface VIII while Cervantes allows Don Quixote to prophesy the writing of his own history ("Narrative" 163). Mendelson claims that such "accurate prophecies then claim implicitly to confer authority on other prophecies in the book which have not yet been fulfilled" ("Encyclopedia" 163).

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, this space in time allows the author to also launch an exploration into the creation of history and national mythology, or as Coover refers to it, a national "civil religion." Mendelson describes this as the period between pre-history and national history. Mendelson further writes that "encyclopedic authors set out to imitate epics, but, unlike epic poets, they write about the ordinary present-day world around them instead of the heroic past" (Mendelson 1268). The

construction of a “heroic-past,” however, is of primary interest to the postmodern author. This exploration, far more than the ability to prophesy coming events, is surely what drives the text of Coover.

Also particularly noteworthy in Mendelson’s assessment of the encyclopedic narrative is his assertion that the text must recount a technology or science in full detail. Dante’s *Commedia* provides a full account of medieval astronomy, *Moby-Dick* goes into great detail to provide an understanding of cetology, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* provides an in-depth analysis of ballistics. This trend seems to greatly contribute to the works’ encyclopedic (in the traditional, comprehensive reference work use of the word) nature.

Perhaps the most troublesome of Mendelson’s criterion is his contention that the narrative must become widely accepted as the national “literary monument.” For Mendelson, the work must come close to imitating perhaps the most widely recognized encyclopedic narrative, the Bible. As Mendelson writes, the text must become the subject of “a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible” (Mendelson 1268). Given such a requirement, Mendelson claims that *Moby-Dick* occupies the seat as *the* American encyclopedic narrative. Mendelson, however, seems to provide no substantive reason as to why a nation must have only a solitary encyclopedic narrative, and why there is no reason for the acceptance of additional narratives for different phases of national history.

Indeed, Mendelson’s own criterion seems problematic to his assertion that Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is deserving of classification as an encyclopedic narrative given that he credits Melville with producing the national encyclopedic narrative.

Mendelson skirts the issue by claiming *Gravity's Rainbow* develops the first encyclopedic narrative of international culture. In the next section, I will argue that such a requirement is not only not required, but is also founded upon erroneous logic.

In conclusion, the encyclopedic narrative has undergone dramatic transformation through the centuries, originating out of Mennippean satire and the classical epic and coalescing in the postmodern encyclopedic satire. They attempt to catalogue all aspects of a given society, all the while with the understanding that such is an impossible task. The encyclopedic narrative is inherently a hybrid; a culmination of a variety of narrative voices, genres, and themes. Each narrative must be examined on its own terms, yet there remains a remarkably uniform set of traits which seems to bind the form across authors and nations. It is exhaustive at times, giving lists of Biblical proportions, and often parallels the author's quest for understanding within the text. Ultimately, it is both revolutionary and transformational, challenging, if not wholly altering the perceptions of the reader.

The Public Burning as Encyclopedic

With a broader understanding of the encyclopedic narrative established, it becomes possible to view *The Public Burning* in the context of the form at large. In the following chapter, I will argue that *The Public Burning* not only fits within the parameters of the genre, but that it may very well serve as a literary exemplar of the form. This chapter will primarily compare *The Public Burning* to those fundamental specifications of the encyclopedic narrative, and more particularly encyclopedic satire, outlined in the previous chapter, but will also further explore the subtler nuances of the form.

The structure to be used for this analysis will predominantly draw from the critiques of Edward Mendelson, Northrop Frye, Richard Hardack, and Marty Weisenburger. Mendelson, who presents the most exhaustive and organized framework in his critiques, will be most heavily drawn from. Further, as his assertions have been most widely accepted across the literary community, it seems appropriate to treat his work as the most reputable litmus test of sorts, though at times I will call into question Mendelson's parameters.

In Thomas Edwards' 1977 *New York Times* review of *The Public Burning*, he claims, "As a work of literary art *The Public Burning* suffers from excess: it is considerably too long and repetitive." He goes on to write, "But all vigorous satire is simplistic and excessive, and this book is an extraordinary act of moral passion, a destructive device that will not easily be defused." While most readers and critics alike agree that *The Public Burning* is a seemingly volatile vessel of explosive ideas, its

“excess,” which is described by Edwards as one of the book’s greatest weaknesses, is recognized by others as its greatest strength, and a hallmark of the encyclopedic text. Such a characteristic is, in fact, so fundamental to the work that Thomas LeClair goes so far as to entitle one of his essays “Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*, and the Art of Excess.” LeClair describes criticism such as Edwards’ as “superficial, mistaking functioning rhetorical and formal strategies for self-indulgence or diffuseness or obscurantism and thus losing the profound understanding of the present that the works offer” (5).

LeClair seems to argue that Edwards’s critique is misguided not because of a misreading or lack of intellectual fervor on the part of the critic, but because Edwards fails to view the work in its proper context. Edwards critiques the work by the standards of another genre; he is left unsatisfied by the structure of the work because it does not fulfill his expectations.

The Nature of the Text

Mendelson asserts that the encyclopedic text is often overlooked by critics because it is hard to classify immediately, as the text is inherently both historical and formal at the same time. Encyclopedic works occupy a special place in the history of their national culture while also fulfilling a set of thematic, seemingly quantitative measures. They capture, and in many ways catalogue, the spirit of a specific era in history while also exhibiting many other more specific traits.

The Public Burning spans the three days prior to the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, serving as a fictional documentary of their executions which Coover places in Times Square for all the world to see. There are few phases in American history that could be considered more “historical” than the book’s setting at the pinnacle of the Cold War. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Coover describes why the Rosenberg executions struck him as a “watershed event” in recent American history. Coover claims:

It seemed to me to be the event that most dramatically encapsulated the Cold War madness. We were caught up in something that more resembled myth than reality; and the Rosenbergs, it would seem, no less than the rest of us, were insignificant in every way, except for the manner in which they played out their archetypal role as scapegoats. It was, after all, a scary time. There was a war on, distant and baffling, in Asia; and it was felt that another could break out at any moment along the Iron Curtain in Europe...So it’s not surprising that patriotism was more like a fundamentalist religion (116)

Coover skillfully manages not only to record, and at times alter, the historical record of the Cold War, but to distill the essence of American popular culture as well. Coover’s work is not merely the work of a writer, but as much that of an anthropologist. In the same aforementioned interview with McCaffery, Coover describes his research for the book, stating, “Everything seemed relevant from movie titles to marble tournaments.

If I was to bring the entire tribe to Times Square that night, then they had to be doing all the things the tribe was doing...and if I did exclude it, I had to know what I was excluding, not be ignorant of it" (118-119). Such a statement reveals the extraordinary amount of historical record included within the novel. Many characters within the text speak only in actual quotations, rearranged, while the textual intermezzos are comprised completely of contemporary news snippets.

It is important to recognize, however, that when Mendelson writes of the historical significance of a text, he does not merely mean that the work must present some sort of historical record. Mendelson states that a text's proximity to those events portrayed within also affect its historical standing. Mendelson claims that the encyclopedic text is written fifteen to twenty years after the events of the narrative. Thus, the author is able to "maintain a mimetic (or, more precisely, satiric) relation to the world of its readers, while permitting it also to include prophecies that are accurate, having been fulfilled between the time of the action and the time of writing."

In *The Public Burning*, Coover is able to accurately predict the election of Richard M. Nixon as the President of the United States. Though the idea of "predicting" fact in a fictional novel seems trivial at first, Uncle Sam's choice of Nixon as a soon-to-be President provides a tool for Coover to make some of his most radical cultural arguments within the text. Uncle Sam taps Nixon as the future President, which Nixon has spent much of the book longing for, by sodomizing him in the final chapter.

Uncle Sam exclaims to Nixon, "Come here, boy..I want YOU!...So jes' drop your drawers and bend over, boy—you been ee-LECK-ted!" (530). After Nixon's rape, and

Coover's graphic description, Nixon states, "I recalled Hoover's glazed stare, Roosevelt's anguished ties, Ike's silly smile: I should have guessed." After a few moments, Nixon forces himself to come to terms with the event, eventually stating, "I...I *love you*, Uncle Sam!" (534). Frank Cioffi notes that Nixon seems a shattered fragment of his previous character, clearly on the verge of delusion. He asserts that Coover implies that "in order to succeed in politics, one has to love being a victim; one has to be completely mad" (Cioffi 31).

While such a statement is perhaps true, Coover is far more concerned with providing social critique than he is providing commentary on the plight of the politician. Thomas LeClair writes, "Coover shows how this symbiotic relation between the would-be American hero and the American people makes the hero into an entertainer, the entertainer into a hero, and the folk into the entertained." This observation of performance on the part of the politician allows Coover to make a larger structural argument about the necessity of tribal ritual to maintain order within society. Or, to borrow once again from LeClair, "Coover connects it with atavistic sources of behavior where entertainer and audience are priest and tribe...Satire of 1950's political excess is deepened by Coover's recognition of primal necessities that lie beneath civilized arrangements" (7).

As neatly as LeClair is able to capture Coover's structural argument on the societal need for ritual and communal catharsis, Uncle Sam perhaps does it even better. Immediately following the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, Nixon protests to Uncle Sam, exclaiming, "You didn't have to kill them! You just did it for fun! You're a...a butcher! A beast! *You're no better than the Phantom!*" Uncle Sam instinctively replies, "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 done to 'em onstage in Times Square!" (531). In just under fifty words, Uncle Sam articulates perhaps Coover's largest cultural critique within the work. It is a critique which would have been much more difficult to articulate without employing Richard Nixon as the political clown of the text, a Richard Nixon who had recently been inaugurated as a second-term President of the United States at the time of *The Public Burning's* publication.

Of Mythical Proportion

Though *The Public Burning* fulfills both the "historic" role in its anthropological nature and its proximity to such a historical chapter in the national storyline, Mendelson would most likely still discount the work as being "near-encyclopedic." This is due to the fact that one of Mendelson's first requirements for classifying a work as encyclopedic is very much related to that book's national popularity. It is ironic then, that Mendelson's first requirement seems also to be his weakest. Though Mendelson never explicitly claims where he draws such a requirement from, it seems quite plausible that this idea is inspired by Northop Frye's writings on the encyclopaedic form in his book *Anatomy of Criticism*.

Indeed, Frye does write, "in every age of literature there tends to be some kind of central encyclopaedic form, which normally a scripture of sacred book in the mythical mode, and some "analogy of revelation," as we called it, in the other modes" (315). In

another section, he writes, “In the mythical mode the encyclopaedic form is the sacred scripture, and in other modes we should expect to find encyclopaedic forms which constitute a series of increasingly human analogies” (56). However, Frye writes this not to establish a limiting parameter for those works which can be considered encyclopedic, but to establish the extent to which such central encyclopedic forms influence and inform both the society and literature around them.

Frye is careful to distinguish between “higher” and “lower” criticism, the former being literary in nature and the latter being concerned with strictly historical aspects. Mendelson’s assertion that any work considered encyclopedic must be quickly grabbed by the public and become a national anthem of sorts, seems consistent with Frye’s idea of lower criticism, which, though significant, is not the sole standard by which a text should be judged. Frye goes to great lengths to establish, and subsequently maintain, the difference between the mythological nature of a text and its encyclopedic nature. Public acceptance is, quite obviously, required for a work to be considered mythological, but not for it to be deemed encyclopedic. This concept seems to be ignored by Mendelson.

It is quite possible to have an encyclopedic narrative of mythological standing. It is equally possible to have an encyclopedic narrative which receives relatively little cultural authority in terms of a nation’s mythology. A work’s standing as one term does not affect its standing as the other. Therefore, though Mendelson is correct in asserting that a text’s national popularity is important in evaluating an encyclopedic narrative or satire, and even vital in assessing the mythological nature of the work, its popularity should not be used as an inflexible standard. Clearly, Frye does not assert that once one such encyclopedic narrative has been consumed by a nation, Melville’s *Moby Dick* by

America for example, that any other work must first topple the legacy of the most preeminent national encyclopedic text. It is of at least a curious note, however, that immediately after reading *The Public Burning*, Jackson Cope wrote in a letter to Coover that he had finally sunk *Moby Dick* (“Log” 98). Moreover, in “The Public Burning, Coover’s Fiery Masterpiece, on Center Stage Again,” the author writes, “no writer since Melville has dived so deeply and fearlessly into this collective American dream as Coover has” (Green 5).

Frye additionally writes in his *Anatomy*, “Hence it is in satire and irony that we should look for the continuing of the encyclopedic tradition” (322). While Frye appears to continue to look for examples of the form, Mendelson appears anxious to close the door on other examples, ready to pronounce his list as exhaustive. Mendelson writes, “No doubt there are others, occupying comparable positions in national literatures of which I know far too little to say anything.” But as for those national literatures with which he is familiar, his list of seven is exclusive. Mendelson includes: Dante’s *Commedia*, Rabelais’ five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (“Narrative” 1267).

Such a statement is not only out of line with other critics, but a somewhat dated theory. In the postmodern world of literature, it is almost ridiculous to assert that any one example can serve as the definitive example of a form. Coover is acutely aware that a society cannot be catalogued by an entire body of work, much less one text in particular when he writes *The Public Burning*. It is this attitude of the postmodernist encyclopedic author that Weisenburger articulates in his *Fables of Subversion*. Weisenburger first

defines what the encyclopedia was to previous generations, writing, “the encyclopedia was in its golden age a profoundly logo- and theocentric enterprise...the encyclopedia would be nature’s double, a true simulacrum” (203). Certainly, this idea of a “true simulacrum” is one that would be regarded as impossible by Coover and other postmodernists. Thus, it seems naïve to hold a text written with the purpose of destabilizing such institutions as “history” and singular truth to a standard which suggests that there is a singular example of a narrative form representative of a nation in its entirety.

Employing the Power of Synecdoche

Mendelson next asserts that the encyclopedic text will make extensive use of synecdoche. As Mendelson writes, “Because they are products of an era in which the world’s knowledge is vastly greater than any one person can encompass, they necessarily make extensive use of synecdoche” (“Narrative” 1269). In “Gravity’s Encyclopedia,” he describes this process by giving an example of one or two sciences representing a “whole scientific sector of knowledge” since no narrative can capture all science (162). Mendelson’s observation here is quite astute. Since the author will undoubtedly be unable to capture and catalogue an entire society, community, or body of knowledge, at some point he or she will indeed be forced to rely upon synecdoche.

The Public Burning makes extensive use of both metaphor and synecdoche. Certainly this principle of synecdoche is very much related to an encyclopedic satire’s tendency to be a microcosm of the world. In many ways Coover’s Times Square is similar to Melville’s Quarter-Deck. Both authors attempt to bring the nation as a whole

within the pages of their accounts. Such settings are metaphors for a nation at large rather than a mere scene for the action of the works.

Uncle Sam is also a particularly good example of a character who represents a body of people-at-large within the text. At one point, Coover explicitly points this out to the reader when he writes:

There is this peculiar quality about Uncle Sam: It's as though his many metamorphoses since his early days as an Inspector of Government Provisions have each left, mysteriously, their mark on him. One discovers Ole Tip Harrison's long nose in the middle of his face, little Jemmy Madison's scraggly white hair (or is it Old Zack's or Little Van's? Certainly he's got Zack Taylor's craggy checks and rough-and-ready ways), Willie (Big Lub) Taft's gold watch chain, old Jim Monroe's bony rump still in its—even then—out-of-date pantaloons. Debilities have been shed, donated to museums, or else never assumed (just part of the real-time cover story), Washington's rhinoceros teeth and small pox scars, F.D.R.'s shriveled legs, Cleveland's vulcanized rubber jaw, Abe's warts and Jim Polk's spastic bowels—but virtues and marvels have been laid on, fortified and refortified, many times over: there's the lean virility of Monroe, Jackson and "Stud" Tyler, steadily augmented by passage through the likes of Long Abe, Doc Wilson, and Ike; there's that willful hard-set jaw, shaped by every Incarnation from "54-40 or fight" Polk to Reverend Garfield, Ugly Honest Grover Cleveland, and the Roosevelt boys, not to mention the strange

subtle influences of such as Hamilton and Burr, Clay and Calhoun, Bill Borah, Harry Hopkins and even Ed Stettinus; there's the lofty pride of John (His Rotundity) Adams, the shrewdness of the Red Fox of Kinderhook, the Grecian mouth of Millard Fillmore, and a hand calloused by the campaign habits of everyone from Matty Van Buren and Chet Arthur, the Gentleman Boss, to affable Warren Harding, who once shook hands with 6756 people in five hours. (*Burning* 172)

Other such descriptions of Uncle Sam as a collage of the Presidents are spread throughout the work. Additionally, Uncle Sam is also emblematic of other Americans at times, ranging from famous leaders to the everyday individuals who fill the papers of small-town America. His voice is not so much his own as it is that of the American people. It is, of course, the famous individuals and snippets that stick out most to the reader, however. At one point, Uncle Sam cries, "I am in earnest! I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch; and I *will be heard!*" (149). Such a proclamation instantly strikes the reader as that of William Lloyd Garrison. Such moments of recognition reemphasize that Uncle Sam is an abstraction of America, though perhaps a rather harsh abstraction, rather than a mere super-heroic caricature or mascot of America.

Within the text there are also a great number of more traditional or textbook examples of synecdoche. As Mendelson suggests, it is impossible for an author such as Coover to represent *all* of America, and thus, in spite of his best efforts, it is necessary for

him to rely upon such a device. Predictably, instances of synecdoche are most likely to occur within two specific situations in the text: When the Rosenbergs are being described and when the populace at Times Square is being described. As the reader might expect, Coover regularly employs synecdoche in such descriptions because both the Rosenbergs and the crowd gathered to pull the switch are symbols for larger groups.

Like Uncle Sam, they are abstractions of characters and people rather than the traditional characters one might find in a novel. Before Ethel Rosenberg is executed, a rabbi speaks to the crowd, claiming, "Let the lying lips be put to silence which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous!" (513). Such usage of "lips" is significant because it does not merely reflect Ethel's lips, but any lips considered "traitorous." Such a list of "traitorous lips" would have been quite long in the mind of someone such as Joe McCarthy, who has also joined the Times Square festivities. The Rosenbergs, as far as Coover is concerned, are not only symbolic scapegoats in the book, but also in reality. As mentioned earlier, Coover, himself, deems the Rosenbergs "archetypal Scapegoats."

Richard Walsh observes that the Rosenbergs are intentionally kept at a distance throughout the novel; there is an emotional disconnect between the reader and the Rosenbergs. Although Nixon spends much of the book trying to map out the lives of the Rosenbergs, Walsh points out that this is a selfish attempt on the part of Nixon to analogize the lives of the Rosenbergs with his own, and thus, there is little empathy developed within the reader (332). Within the text, Nixon even believes that the Rosenbergs have taken on roles and represent something other than themselves; they are a façade to Nixon as well.

As he pores through the case file, Nixon makes observations about their behavior at trial. He notes, “Part of what seemed to give the lie to their testimony, of course, was the phony role they’d cast themselves in: the ordinary middle-class American couple, romantic and hardworking, loving parents, being framed by a deceitful and unnatural brother, backed by a monstrous State bureaucracy, victimized by some ghastly error.” In other words, it is the inconspicuous nature of the Rosenbergs that casts doubt on their innocence in the mind of Nixon. In another section he claims, “Even the way they took the Fifth was different from the way an innocent man might take it on principle” (127).

This portrayal of the Rosenbergs as a sort of foil rather than actual living, breathing human beings furthers their metaphorical significance as archetypal scapegoats within the text; it is not just this specific event that concerns Coover, but rather the phenomenon of a tribal need for sacrifice. Indeed, Coover would argue that another such event is not only likely, but almost inevitable. This is what truly angers Coover and makes synecdoche a particularly useful tool within the Rosenberg descriptions.

Additional portions of the book which commonly display the use of synecdoche are the descriptions of the large crowd gathered at Times Square. There seems to be a fairly rational explanation for this: Coover, who wishes to frame this as literally a *public* burning, cannot possibly bring all of America to Times Square. Thus, in addition to his extremely lengthy descriptions of the crowd, he must also rely on the abstraction of synecdoche.

In “Yippee, the Divine Concursus,” Coover describes the crowd gathered in Times Square. He writes:

They’re really piling in now, everybody jamming up together, old and young, great and small, of all creeds, colors, and sexes, shoulder to shoulder and butt to butt, missionaries squeezed up with mafiosos, hepcats with hottentots, pollyannas with press agents and plumbers and panty raiders—it’s an ingathering of monumental proportions, which only the miracle of Times Square could contain! And more arriving every minute: workers in dungarees, millionaires in tuxedos, pilots, ballplayers, sailors, and bellboys in uniform, brokers in bowlers, bakers in white aprons tied over bare bellies. Certainly, this is the place to be, and anyone who’s anyone is here: all the top box-office draws and Oscar winners, all the Most Valuable Players, national champions and record holders, Heisman Trophy and Pulitzer Prize winners, blue ribbon and gold medal takers, Purple Hearts and Silver Stars, Imperial High Wizards, Hit Paraders, Hall of Famers, Homecoming Queens, and Honor Listees. The winners of small-town centennial beard-growing contests have all come, the year’s commencement speakers, class valedictorians, and quiz-show winners, the entire Social Register, the secretariat of Rotary International. The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi. Yehudi Menuhin, Punjab, Dick Button, who isn’t here? Gary Cooper hoves into view...good Americanists like Jack Warner, Elia Kazan, Bob Taylor, Ronnie Reagan and Larry Parks, Budd Schulberg, Ginger Rogers, George Murphy, Adolphe Menjou...Paulette Goddard’s in the crowd, José Iturbi and Consuelo Vanderbilt.

John L. Lewis and George Mikan. Esther Williams turns up in her tanksuit, hand-in-hand with the Oscar-winning cat-and-mouse team, Tom and Jerry—and old Mickey Mouse himself is there, too (356)

Coover's list, however, continues even further. Despite the list's seemingly exhaustive nature, surely there are groups who have been left out. Though the implication is that it is *all* of America gathered at Times Square, Coover refuses to leave any doubt in the mind of the reader.

Synecdoche serves as the perfect tool to further such communal imagery. In another description of the crowd, Coover writes, "Out front, a hundred million mouths open wide, a hundred million sets of teeth spring apart like dental exhibits, a hundred million bellies quake, and a hundred million throats constrict and spasm, gasp and wheeze, as America laughs" (450). The crowd, much like the Rosenbergs and Uncle Sam, represents something much greater than the sum of its parts. The crowd gathered symbolizes not only those individuals brought to New York by Coover, but all of America; not merely America in 1952, but America at any point in history. In many ways, the characters presented are complex versions of the stock characters so common to the medieval morality play. Thus, it is not all that surprising that one chapter within the work is indeed entitled, "A Little Morality Play for Our Generation."

Examining the Historical Record

Another emblematic feature of the encyclopedic text that *The Public Burning* displays is, once again, related to the text's proximity to the historical record, but as it relates to the recording of history, rather than popular acceptance. Mendelson writes, "Encyclopedic narratives occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers consider pre-history and national history" ("Narrative" 1267). Mendelson continues, claiming, "encyclopedic authors set out to imitate epics, but, unlike epic poets, they write about the ordinary present-day world around them instead of the heroic past" ("Narrative" 1268). Though when Mendelson claims that such texts serve as a fulcrum, he means that they are written during the coming-of-age in a nation, are absorbed by society, and subsequently serve as the defining piece of nationally historic literature, he touches upon something that seems much more significant: a starting point for the analysis of the *creation* of national history; a history which is, to borrow Mendelson's language, inherently a "heroic past."

The study of the creation of history and its implications are of primary concern to Coover and such concern manifests itself in many ways within the text of *The Public Burning*. Interviews with Coover are especially useful in illustrating Coover's personal interest in the creation of historical myth. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Coover claims myths "get pushed into dogmas, invested with a force of reality, a sense of literal truth, that they were never meant to have" (Frick 83). This is closely related to what Coover refers to in another interview as "American mythology," which includes "the stories by which we as a people are shaped and guided" (McCaffery 116). Henry Cabot Lodge, in *The Public Burning*, refers to this as the "Voice of America" (225).

One of the primary ways this *creation* is demonstrated within the book is the way in which Nixon attempts to recreate history, poring through the Rosenberg case file in search of truth. Daniel Frick notes, “sifting among the multitude of documents in the Rosenberg case, noting discrepancies in the government’s accusations, looking for pattern and meaning, Nixon’s work mirrors that which Coover did in order to write this historically based novel” (84). There is, however, one fundamental difference. The reader recognizes Coover’s replication as the skeleton of a fictional novel, but Nixon’s reconstruction as an attempt at fact. Coover is actively creating fiction while Nixon is in the process of creating “truth.”

Certainly, though, the reader recognizes the parallels between the author and Nixon. Coover seems to actively draw the reader’s attention to such similarities. Given the excruciating detail Coover includes, one must assume that at some points Coover, just as Nixon does, must have felt, “I was sitting on the floor of my inner office, surrounded by every scrap of information I could find on the Rosenberg case, feeling scruffy and tired, dejected, lost in a surfeit of detail and further from a final position on the issue than ever” (79).

This self-conscious nature of the text as a text and the author as an author is not unique to *The Public Burning*, but is actually common in many encyclopedic works. Rabelais certainly does so when he writes, “So far as I am concerned, I would have every man put aside his proper business...and forget his own affairs, in order to devote himself entirely to this book” (qtd in Hardack 137). Arielle Silverman even asserts, “the encyclopedic form is a constant reminder that there is an author and a reader, and thus the reader oscillates between being consumed by the text and stepping away from the text to

see its existence as a text.” This, Silverman concludes, can be done in several ways: “the author can be present in the action, a character may refer to the author, or finally, the book can refer to its specific nature in some way” (15). Alternatively, it must be concluded that the author may also mirror his work of fiction making within a character in the text, as does Coover with Nixon.

Furthermore, the curious nature of the creation, and then acceptance, of pieces of information as a cumulative historical record is also enumerated by many characters within the work. At one point, Nixon comments on the Rosenbergs, “with such grandstanding, who would not find them guilty? Who or what did he think History was—some kind of nincompoop? A little unimaginative maybe, and yes, eccentric, straitlaced, captious, and rude—but feeble-minded? Hardly” (306). Nixon imagines history here first and foremost as human, but also as preordained; full of purpose and methodical. Later in the text, however, Nixon seems to flirt with a historical epiphany. Nixon says:

This, then, was my crisis: to accept what I already knew, that there was no author, director, and the audience had no memories—they got reinvented every day! I’d thought perhaps there is not even a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness! Perhaps we are all pretending! I’d been rather amazed at myself, having thoughts like these. Years of debate and advisory politics had schooled me toward a faith in denouement, and so in cause and consequence. The case history, the unfolding pattern, the rewards and punishments, the directed life. Yet

what was History to me? I was never one to keep diaries or save old letters, school notes, or even old legal briefs, and I had won both sides of a debating question too often not to know what emptiness lay behind the so-called issues. It all served to confirm an old belief of mine: that all men contain all views, right and left, theistic and atheistic, legalistic and anarchical, monadic and pluralistic; and only an artificial—call it political—commitment to consistency makes them hold fast to singular positions (363).

This train of thought, though, proves to be fleeting, as Nixon soon abandons this notion of random action and reaction, with some cajoling from Uncle Sam albeit, in exchange for his providential perspective of history. Nonetheless, Coover once again challenges the reader's notions by yet again broaching the subject within the confines of Sing Sing prison.

The devil's advocate this time comes in the form of the prison warden. The warden claims, "It's funny isn't it Mr. Nixon...How billions and billions of words get spoken every day, like all these we've been speaking on the way down here, for example, and for some reason—or maybe no reason at all—a few of them stick, and they're all we've got afterwards of everything that's happened" (409). Nixon is unshaken this time, however, and wonders if the warden is mocking him. As for the reader, the warden's point is not so easily brushed away, especially when combined with Coover's use of *TIME* magazine, who in the book is personified as the national poet laureate.

Coover challenges the reader's notions of history and truth. The media, often thought to be an agent of such fact and historical record, is employed within the work to challenge those very notions idealists would like to think such an institution propagates. The narrator at one point comments that "he (TIME) would argue that objectivity is an impossible illusion, a fantastic claim...and as an ideal perhaps even immoral, that *only* through the frankly biased and distorting lens of art is any real grasp of the facts—not to mention Ultimate Truth—even remotely possible" (320). Such a statement seems completely consistent with Coover's personal views.

Coover, who believes that all history is fabricated, all sense of truth created, states in one interview that "the world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction-maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can re-form our notions of things" (Cioffi 34). It seems quite plausible to imagine the national poet laureate echoing that sentiment. It is this self-conscious attempt to draw attention to the creation of the book, made visible in Nixon's attempt to replicate the Rosenberg case file as well as the characters' explicit attempts to discern how history is created that gives the book its metafictional and metahistorical characteristics.

The book's placement in history; *near*, but not *of* the immediate present, grants Coover the ability to challenge the reader's notion of recorded history and fiction-making. After all, Coover must make such an argument after the actual event has occurred, but before the heroic past becomes cemented in the national memory. The reader is consumed by the story, but concurrently forced to view the text as a fictional text; a product of imagination.

A Text of Giants

Another notable aspect of the encyclopedic text is the prevalence of giants. Perhaps the most obvious example is the giant whale in *Moby Dick*. In addition, though, Swift and Rabelais include giants, while Joyce includes a symbolic Cyclops in *Ulysses*. Hardack writes that there is a general distortion of bodies in the encyclopedic genre (134) and Mendelson asserts, “like the giants whose history they include, all encyclopedias are monstrous” (“Encyclopedia” 161). Silvermann also claims the “moments of excess” within the encyclopedic text can be translated as another form of gigantism (16). In *The Public Burning*, the reader encounters a much more literal giant. Although Uncle Sam is never described as being abnormally large, he does possess a larger-than-life quality and immediately strikes the reader as a somewhat terrifying character.

Further, Uncle Sam even comes complete with an arch-nemesis of gigantic proportion: the Phantom. Both characters remain mysterious to the reader, able to shift forms and transport themselves across the country in a matter of moments. While Uncle Sam represents order and the rule of law, the “silent majority” of America as one critic describes, the Phantom represents all that is chaos (Evenson 120).

While there are few physical descriptions of Uncle Sam within the text, there are multiple accounts of how the atmosphere changes when he arrives. Nixon describes one such incarnation that takes place at Burning Tree Golf Club: “One is struck by an inner kind of thunder, a loss not so much of vision as of the coordinates of vision, and a loosening of all the limbs as though in symphony with the dissolution of the features of Uncle Sam’s current incarnation” (83). On several occasions, President Eisenhower

“shazamms” himself into Uncle Sam, implying a transformation into something larger, more powerful. Uncle Sam does not seem extremely large in stature, but large in gravity and immense in power. This idea is reinforced in one of the few physical descriptions of Sam Slick as Nixon claims it felt as though Sam was trying to force the Washington Monument up his ass. Though graphic and vulgar, Nixon’s description certainly captures the gigantism of Sam.

The Displaced Protagonist: Nixon as a Character

Mendelson also asserts that the encyclopedic text usually contains one or more characters that struggle to live according to the conventions of another genre. Given their placement in such a genre, they are universally unsuccessful in that endeavor. As primary examples, Mendelson cites Don Quixote’s attempt to turn the book into a romance and Stubb’s attempt to transform *Moby Dick* into a farce (“Narrative” 1270). Such an attempt is even more explicit within *The Public Burning*. Nixon, as the most central character within the work, immediately sticks out to the reader as “a fish out of water.” In many ways it is Nixon’s ostracization as a character that draws the reader toward him.

Nixon’s alienation makes itself apparent in many sections of the text. As referenced earlier, Coover himself described Nixon “like a fool at court, tolerated by the General but not included in his retinue” (“Tears” 82). At another point in *The Public Burning*, Coover writes:

Not only Democrats, but Republicans, too were demanding my scalp. Eisenhower turned his back on me. It was because of him I was in trouble. I'd had to break up the California delegation and swing the nomination to Eisenhower...and now he turned his back on me! He said he didn't know me well and if I was honest, I'd have to prove it...He made me feel like the little boy caught with jam on his face. Stassen and Dewey told me to get off the ticket. Friends were not at home when I called them on the phone. (*Burning* 307)

Although Nixon is specifically describing his treatment following the revelation of his slush fund scandal in this passage, such statements are emblematic of the character of Nixon within the text as well as his iconic paranoia. In another section, he claims, "He had his cronies, old and new...Whenever I drew near, they stifled their laughter, interrupted their conversations, broke their back-slapping huddle...[H]e liked people around him who were confident and cheerful, and I could never be both at the same time" (261).

In many ways, this figure of Nixon was handed to Coover. Nixon's biography provided as much material for such descriptions of Nixon as did Coover's imagination. In Nixon's *Six Crises*, he writes that following the fund scandal he wrote a letter to the Republican National Convention, claiming, "I don't believe that I ought to quit, because I am not a quitter. And, incidentally, Pat is not a quitter. After all, her name was Patricia Ryan and she was born on Saint Patrick's Day, and you know the Irish never quit"

(Nixon 117). Already, there are hints that Nixon, as both a historical figure and literary character, sees himself in a different context than do his contemporaries.

In “Nixon in Crisis-Land: The Rhetoric of *Six Crises*,” Douglas Robinson compares the Nixon in *Six Crises* to the classic hero myth. Robinson describes the Nixon of the fifties (also the Nixon of *The Public Burning*) as “the poor hometown boy makes good, wins the people’s trust, brings traitors to justice and finally stands bravely alongside the war-hero President in the valiant fight for the cause of Free Men Everywhere.” Yet equally present in such a character of Nixon is the bumbling, paranoid, alien Nixon which Robinson describes as “already germinant in the hero-image of the fifties” (79).

Six Crises, though, allows Nixon the unique opportunity to attempt to choose and control the image of self presented. It becomes quite evident that Nixon actively seeks to portray himself as Hero. In want of a biography more becoming of the romantic hero, however, Nixon is forced to rely on mimetic detail and hyperbole. Robinson cites one example as Nixon’s third “crisis,” Eisenhower’s heart attack, in “which Nixon’s heroic role is to do and say absolutely nothing” (80). Nixon, however, writes some fifty pages on the incident. As Robinson points out, throughout the memoir, Nixon is quick to use the superlative. For instance, he describes a multitude of speeches as “the most important of my life.” He furthers the imagery of the romantic hero by employing the terminology of battle. He describes his meeting with Khrushchev as “virtual hand-to-hand combat” and proclaims to the President, “this is just like a war, General... There will be other charges, but none of them will stand up” (qtd in Robinson 81).

Though the battle is perhaps the most emblematic experience of the hero, also central to his identity is the journey or adventure. Robinson pulls a particularly telling episode from *Six Crises* to exemplify one of Nixon's such "adventures." Describing his motorcade being overcome by a mob in Caracas and being gripped by fear that the shatterproof windows are about to be busted in, Nixon claims:

Sherwood must have had the same thought. He pulled his revolver and said, "Let's get some of these sons-of-bitches." I could see Rodham in the front seat with the sweat pouring down his neck as he pulled his revolver and faced the attackers on my side of the car. "I figured we were goners and I was determined to get six of those bastards before they got us," he was to tell me later. At this point I made a quick decision. I reached forward, put my hand on Sherwood's arm and told him to hold fire. Why I did this at the time, I cannot say, except that I knew instinctively that the firing of a gun would be the excuse for the mob to get completely out of hand. (219)

Once again, it is Nixon to the rescue. Coover seems very conscious of the Caracas incident in *The Public Burning*, especially in the chapter "How to Handle a Bloodthirsty Mob." Once again, we encounter Nixon in a car surrounded by a riotous crowd. This time, however, Nixon has unknowingly been stripped of his status as a hero.

Rather than being in a limousine accompanied by his Secret Service detail, Nixon finds himself in the backseat alone. Nixon explains the incident, claiming:

There was no movement at all: a solid mass of traffic, people, placards, and photographers...I was nervous, so I decided to distract myself by working the *Times* crossword puzzle...From all over the page, words jumped out at me: SOCIALISM...BUCHENWALD...EISENHOWER...FRANKENSTEIN... BLOOD... TENEMENT...REVOLUTION...CHECKMATE—we were stopped dead. “I’ll walk, John!” I cried. I ripped the crossword puzzle out and stuffed it in my pocket, jumped out of the limousine...It took me a panicky moment to realize that their objective was not my Senate Office Building, but only the Supreme Court...Since a mob is stupid, it’s important to confront it with unexpected maneuvers: take the offensive, don’t panic, do the unexpected, but do nothing rash. I knew all this. Nevertheless, I was scared shitless and could hardly think. (207)

The scene concludes with Nixon’s discovery that the crowd is actually in favor of the executions. In fact, one boy even asks Nixon for his autograph and he spots signs that read “DEATH TO THE JEWISH TRAITORS!” and “THE HOT SEAT FOR THE ROSENBERGS—SIZZLE 'EM!” Nixon is no longer portrayed as the cool-headed hero of *Six Crises*, but as a man completely inept in the role of hero. Such a fact, however, remains completely unbeknownst to him.

Christian Moraru even asserts that Coover employs the Horatio Alger narrative as the core intertext for the work. Moraru writes, “Alger’s Dick is the sociological mold, historical forerunner, and embryonic ‘tiny story’ or ‘shorthand’ for Coover’s Dick and his novel” (244). Nixon certainly fashions himself as the self-made man within the text and explicitly references Alger on several occasions. Nixon claims, “TIME has said that I’ve had a Horatio Alger-like career, but not even Horatio Alger could have dreamed up a life so American—in the best sense—as mine” (295). Further, Coover heavily incorporates Nixon’s “Checkers” speech in the text, which is regarded as Nixon’s most sentimental narrative, and which Raymond Mazurek claims allowed the authentic Nixon to relate his “Horatio Alger” past to the American public (39).

Nixon makes numerous other allusions to stories of self-made Americans, at one point comparing himself to Rocky Marciano, the son of Italian immigrants turned heavyweight champion of the world (131). The Nixon the reader encounters, however, comes across much less romantically and, as Moraru writes, “Coover takes great pleasure in letting us know, through Nixon’s voice itself, that the completion-thirsty “Fighting Quaker” was also laughed at as the “Farting Quaker” (245). Though it can hardly be argued that Coover’s Nixon is unsuccessful, he is, after all, named the future President of the United States, he is constantly paranoid, uncomfortable in his own skin. Nixon’s narrative is not at all illustrative of the stereotypical American, self-made, “bootstrap” hero.

Continuing on the motif of the hero’s journey or adventure introduced previously, Richard Hardack claims that the universally male heroic journey is a common attribute of the encyclopedic narrative. Hardack describes this journey as one in search of “chivalric

or absolute knowledge,” which is replicated in the mock-heroic quest so often undertaken by the protagonist of the encyclopedic text. The Public Burning provides a primary example of such a quest.

Though Hardack specifies that this journey may be completely internal, Nixon literally goes on a journey in an effort to piece together the history of the Rosenbergs. However, in opposition to the romantic hero who returns from his odyssey with enhanced perspective, Coover clearly mocks Nixon. It is telling enough that Nixon’s journey will end with him standing on stage at Times Square, pants at his ankles, and “I am a scamp” written on his ass—courtesy of Ethel Rosenberg.

Nixon begins his quest by retracing the biographies of the Rosenbergs and picking through minute details in the case file. At one point he observes, “I realized that the initial letters of the names of the four accused—Sobell, Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Yakovlev—would spell SORRY were in not for the missing O. Was there some other secret agent of the Phantom, as yet unapprehended, with this initial?” (114). At another point Nixon, in reference to his stomach, claims, “Hollow, hollow—like the case against the Rosenbergs” (347).

Eventually, Nixon comes to the conclusion that the Rosenbergs are guilty of something, but perhaps not of espionage as charged by the government. He decides only he can save them. Their pride prevents them from confessing, while the government, with convictions in hand, will not back down. Nixon points out the simple choice that had confronted the jury: “Who was telling the truth, the Federal Bureau of Investigation or two admitted Reds?” (368). His journey continues onward to Sing Sing where he

plans to elicit confessions from the accused atom spies. He explains, “I was convinced the truth lay somewhere in the middle: the Rosenbergs were guilty of something all right, but not as charged. And if the Rosenbergs could deliver their half, I could probably deliver mine” (367).

Nixon, as hero, is now confronted by two tasks. First and foremost, Nixon must seek out the truth. Ideally, he will save Ethel from her imminent execution. As he, himself, points out, “In the Horatio Alger novels, in spite of everything, the heroines were always saved by rich uncles” (315). Ethel, who has no rich uncle, has only Richard Nixon to count on. Secondly, as in the tradition of the hero, his journey should end in sexual conquest. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, writes that the “motif of the difficult task as prerequisite to the bridal bed has spun the hero-deeds of all time and all the world” (344).

Ultimately, though, Nixon will fail at both. Upon his attempt to pull some sort of confession from her, Ethel coolly tells Nixon, “You’re wasting your time. I am innocent. My husband is innocent. We know nothing about any espionage” (433). Already, Nixon appears on the brink of failure. He quickly shirks his first objective, hoping to at least complete his second objective.

While sexual conquest is a feature of the classic hero tale, the lack of sexual fulfillment is a hallmark of the encyclopedic form. “None of their narratives,” as Mendelson writes, “culminates in a completed relation of sexual love” (“Narrative” 1272). Nixon, as one might presume, fails to complete his sexual fantasy with Ethel Rosenberg. This should be completely unsurprising to the reader, however, as even in his

fantasies the act always remained incomplete. As Nixon reviews the case file, his mind is quick to wander and at one point he finds himself engaged in a fantasy centered on Ethel. Nixon recalls the dream, stating, "Her wet body is silhouetted against the dim daylight at the top as though it were naked... 'Get your clothes off,' she says, 'and I'll go get you a towel'... She watches as though admiring me... I know that Jewish girls have no religious restrictions against having... doing... going all the way." Nixon continues in his daydream, "her brassiere slips forward off her narrow shoulders... [S]he strokes me gently." Just as it appears Richard and Ethel will have sex, Uncle Sam exclaims, "Well, I see the old flagpole still stands... You know, son, you'll go blind playing with yourself like that" (318).

Though the actual encounter, or at least the encounter as told by Nixon, unfolds in a slightly different manner, the end result is much the same. Nixon quickly proclaims "Oh, Ethel! I'd do anything for you!" (444), to which Ethel replies: "You *can* do something! You *must!*... You must take me! Here!" (444). Nixon quickly tries to take off his pants, but finds himself awkwardly tangled up in them. He cries, "Th-they're caught on my shoes!" (445). Nixon explains that he is doing his best, which unfortunately, does not seem to be good enough. Nixon is too slow and the scene quickly comes to a close as the other prisoners begin to bang their tin cups on the bars of their cells, signaling that the guards are on the way to transport Ethel.

Nixon as Narrator

In *The Public Burning*, Richard Nixon serves as the foremost narrator. Although he only carries approximately half of the narration, the reader feels an extraordinarily close connection to him. In many ways the Nixon the reader experiences as a narrator and character are two distinct experiences. Coover alludes to this duality of persons when Nixon comments on the difference between himself and the politician—the man and performer. Nixon claims, “If I was going to do this thing at all, I had to do it as Richard Nixon—and not even as Richard Nixon, which was already, even in my own mind, something other than myself, but as just...me” (367). Nixon is very cognizant that he is playing two independent roles—almost equally independent are the roles of Nixon as character and the Nixon who narrates the text.

Thomas Edwards notes in his review, “I rather guiltily found myself hurrying through these parts (Uncle Sam’s) to get back to the narrative of Richard Nixon” (2). Given that Nixon is the most fleshed-out character within the work, this is not surprising. Coover intentionally keeps the Rosenbergs at a cool distance throughout; Eisenhower rarely appears in person within the text and, when he does, is experienced through the untrusting eyes of Nixon; Uncle Sam is inherently a compilation of personalities, vices, and virtues—with whom the reader has trouble establishing a sense of rapport. Thus, in many ways Nixon becomes the most trusted of all voices within the text as well as the most sympathetic character.

Coover is very quick to admit that his Nixon is directly adapted from the public Richard Nixon. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, he states:

I had to get all the appropriate texts and copy them out and then break them all down into the component bits and pieces that could then be collaged fittingly into my book...as my principal narrator who went on at more length than anyone else, it was more a matter of learning his rhythms and mannerisms, while incorporating a number of his key, self-identifying phrases. Getting his voice right. (119)

Coover seems to actually try to capture the spirit and essence of the 37th President. The speeches, writings, and interviews of Nixon served as a blueprint for Coover's principal narrator. Coover, it would seem, drew most heavily from Nixon's autobiographical *Six Crises*. Nearly all of Nixon's "crises" are featured within *The Public Burning*—establishing a great degree of intertextuality between the two pieces. It thus follows that an analysis of *Six Crises*, must then reveal something not only about Nixon as a man, but of Nixon as a narrator and, in addition, Coover's text.

Douglas Robinson's analysis of the rhetoric of *Six Crises* was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, but will be a prominent feature and will help to guide the discussion of this section which compares the Nixon in *Six Crises* to the Nixon of *The Public Burning*. As it will become evident, such a comparison even further evidences this text's standing as an encyclopedic narrative. Though Coover claims that Nixon was ideally suited for the role of the narrator in the work because of his proximity to the

White House and his intrinsic clown-like nature, it will become apparent that there were even additional reasons Nixon was acclimated to fill the role—after all, he had essentially already penned his own hero's quest to serve as a model for Coover's character.

Within *Six Crises*, Nixon presents himself as Hero, scribe, and teacher. Robinson does a very thorough job illustrating this process of self-fabrication by isolating tales within Nixon's narrative and juxtaposing them with the path of the romantic hero. It will be the aim of this discourse to extend that exploration one step further—to reveal the epic of the Nixonic hero in *The Public Burning*. Although there is not sufficient time to explore all of the intertextual references between *Six Crises* and *The Public Burning*, I will draw attention to the most significant.

Of course, Nixon's life—especially before his election as President—is not nearly as exciting or romantic as required of the Hero. Thus, Nixon is forced to rely on hyperbole and illusion. Robinson writes that the first requirement on the path toward heroic stature is the fulfillment of "heroic activity as moral activity." As Robinson writes, "before the hero can act in the cause of right, of course, he must see through false appearances to the workings of good and evil in the universe" (82). To give an example, Robinson goes on to explicate a passage in which Nixon claims to be able to discern Hiss's integrity from his mannerisms and demeanor. Nixon states, "From considerable experiences in observing witnesses on the stand, I had learned that those who are lying or trying to cover up something generally make a common mistake—they tend to overreact, to overstate their case...[H]e had planted in my mind the first doubt about his credulity" (82). One must indeed wonder about the necessity of a justice system with a judge of character and conduct so perceptive as Nixon.

Not surprisingly, this passage seems to have also made a deep impression upon Coover. As it so neatly contributes to Coover's attempt to create a hero epic, it is hardly surprising to find a very similar episode in *The Public Burning*. Here, however, Nixon's powers of discernment are employed as the Rosenbergs take the stand. Nixon claims:

They reeked with guilt. Their arrogance, their clumsy lying, their hiding behind the Fifth Amendment, those obvious Communist links they wouldn't admit to, their obsequiousness, their phony complaints about bad health, their frequent failure to "recall" simple facts, all the political grandstanding—from considerable experience in observing witnesses on the stand, I had learned that those who are trying to cover up something generally make a common mistake...Like Alger Hiss, they'd hung themselves with their transparent deceitfulness, their pompous denials, their pretensions of injured innocence. (127)

Both Nixon the man and Nixon the character have completed the first trial of the hero. Both appear, though, to already be awry—the biographical Nixon attempts to rewrite his history as heroic while the fictional Nixon plays the role of the romantic hero in a satire. It is extremely telling that Coover is able to so easily incorporate Nixon's words in *Six Crises*, a non-fiction work, seamlessly into his satire.

Further, Robinson claims that the hero's next pursuit is "heroic activity as a rite of passage." According to Robinson, this theme has its roots in the Arthurian legend of Percival, who is the orphaned son of a knight. One day, he arrives at court wishing to

join the ranks of knighthood. He possesses neither horse nor armor and all of the knights ridicule him, unaware of his lineage. He must undergo a passage to establish himself as a knight, and in so doing also earns the respect of his associates. Robinson points out that this very much parallels Nixon's position within the Republican Party as the junior Senator from California.

His lofty ambitions are scoffed at and his nomination as Vice-President questioned. Nixon's handling of the hush fund scandal, however, earns him a great deal of credit with his colleagues. In Coover's work, this shift in respect is also explored, with the emphasis being particularly on the "Checkers" speech. Of the speech, Nixon claims, "I decided to work Checkers in somehow...lay out all the monies I'd ever earned: this gave me the opportunity of using a lot of attractive boyhood images. How poor we were, and all of that...I decided to demand that everybody in the campaign publish finances just like me, Eisenhower included. I knew it would piss him off...[B]y God I was *not* going to go to him like a little boy to be hauled off to the woodshed" (Coover 309). As for the speech's reception, Nixon claims, "Ike caved in and called me a 'brave man.' We created the Order of the Hound's Tooth, my own cufflinks gang, and threw a party. Later, in Wheeling, the General embraced me and called me 'my boy' and let me walk on his right side" (311). Nixon's second "Crisis" quickly becomes another rung up the ladder of the hero.

Nixon's third and fourth crises also share great similarities with *The Public Burning's* narrative, but it is in the fifth crisis that the reader is particularly stirred. In *Six Crises*, the fifth section is entitled, "Khrushchev," and it is, predictably, about his special envoy trip to Moscow. Robinson describes this as "heroic activity as descent into the

underworld and conquest of Death.” The true Cold-War warrior, Nixon describes his trip to Russia as one of “virtual hand to hand combat” (qtd in Robinson 83). Robinson, however, notes that Nixon’s romantic rhetoric is particularly restrained in this section and suggests that “confronted with the flesh-and-blood reality of the phantom he has been stalking around the world for, he is brought back to a mimetic awareness of his one romantic excess” (83).

Coover’s Richard Nixon, in contrast, is not so fortunate. The trip to the underworld in *The Public Burning* comes not in the form of an expedition to Russia, but to visit Ethel at Sing Sing Prison—the ultimate lair of evil and deceit. Unlike the Nixon of *Crises* who is able to temper his romantic dreams and expectation, Coover’s Nixon approaches the scenario without the slightest idea of the imminent failure he is about to face. Even his approach to the prison is comical. He arrives disguised in a moustache and asks to be buzzed in under the name Thomas Greenleaf, “Greenleaf. Like the poet” from Whittier (364). As he steps off the commuter train, he is consumed with thoughts of Sing Sing and imagines a local school and playground as an “impenetrable medieval fortress, ringed round with its high turreted ramparts” (359). His heroic hubris overflows as he thinks to himself, “Oh my God! They’ve left me alone to do it all!” (366). In actuality, they have left him to do none of it. Such observations do little to damage his confidence, however. As he gets closer to the prison, he thinks, “I knew I could do it. I felt my strength reach out to embrace the globe. I saw statues of myself in Berlin, in Seoul, in Prague, Pecking, and Peoria. A universal veneration for the hardnosed but warmhearted Man of Peace, the Fighting Quaker” (371). Nixon, of course, will have no

such statues or veneration, but will find himself standing in Times Square with his pants down.

In the end, however, Nixon is rewarded—in albeit a strange and perverse way—for his efforts. Uncle Sam's rape is the figurative coronation ceremony for Nixon's selection as the next incarnation of President. Upon such gratification, it is impossible not to also think back on the defeated Dick Nixon of *Six Crises*. Robinson describes Nixon's sixth crisis—the campaign of 1960—as heroic activity as rivalry for the throne.

Though Nixon loses in 1960, Robinson points out that “we are so accustomed to viewing Nixon as our hero by this point in the book that it seems natural to figure him as the dying King's Crown Prince and Kennedy as the Usurper, the Bastard” (84). This imagery and rivalry are also prevalent in *The Public Burning*. Nixon, in one section, bemoans, “Well, it was clearly worse that I'd supposed—and Kennedy might not be the only one. It occurred to me that a lot of guys had been showing unfound flash of late...But Kennedy?...he had a certain reckless charm, but no discipline, no staying power. I'd never taken him seriously, and assumed Uncle Sam hadn't either” (343, 344). Coover's Nixon will not be upset by the usurper—at least not by the conclusion of the text—but will instead prevail.

In spite of this, his victory comes with a great price. One must wonder if Nixon is even a sane character by the end of the book—or perhaps whether he ever was. Certainly, there seems nothing alluring about his newfound job. It is not incidental, though, that Uncle Sam tells him, “You're my everything, sunshine—you're my boy!” (534). Eisenhower's words once more ring in the ears of the reader.

It quickly becomes easy to lose track of where the historical Nixon and Coover's Nixon begin and end, where Eisenhower and Uncle Sam diverge, and where *Six Crises* and *The Public Burning* separate. His voice grants Coover the ability to further muddle fact and fiction, history and myth. Additionally, Coover's satire flourishes through the clown-like hero.

With all of the given evidence at hand, it seems nearly inconceivable to assert that *The Public Burning* should intentionally be excluded from the genre of the encyclopedic text, regardless of its degree of exclusiveness. Not only does the work meet the vast majority of parameters set forth by critics, in many instances it could be used as the standard. There are extremely few objective measures which the work does not seem to meet. Though it is not possible to discern as to why *The Public Burning* has thus far escaped the fastidious eye of the encyclopedic critic, it is possible to conjecture. This omission of the work from the ranks of encyclopedic will be explored to some extent at a later point. Regardless of the reason, however, this work of such extraordinary proportion seems to demand critical reinspection.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important aspect of a study on *The Public Burning's* status as an encyclopedic work is an analysis of the effects the author is able to achieve through the employment of such a form. Coover is able to offer a masterful societal critique and analysis of both America and society as a whole, as well as challenge institutions such as History and the process of creating fiction, and capture a pivotal period in the historical record. It is these such accomplishments that will be analyzed in the conclusion.

It is evident that Coover began the writing of *The Public Burning* with purpose. Though he was unaware of the form the work would take—he originally thought the work would be a sort of street theater piece—and he had conceived of no characters aside from the carnivalesque Uncle Sam, he had a very clear agenda. In the McCaffery interview, Coover claims that he felt the time had come to “do something with their [the Rosenbergs] story that would reintroduce it into the national dialogue” (116). In his *Public Burning Log*, Coover writes that this “short-term communal memory loss” is, in fact, “common to events that become, once recovered from seeming erasure, the iconic or mythic touchstones of a tribe’s shared stories” (85).

From his writings, it is apparent that this was not a fleeting moment of moral obligation Coover felt toward the work, but rather a tie that would continue to bind Coover to the book’s purpose. Such an obligation proved critical to the work’s completion. Without this sense of purpose it is likely Coover would have simply abandoned the project. In a 1974 letter to his friend, James Ballowe, Coover writes of the process:

There is something wrong about all of this. Something wrongly obsessional. It is not the way to live a life. The trouble is, it has something to do with basic principles. A willingness to surrender to metaphor that is maybe unhealthy. The point is, the book could have been written in 1971-72 and published. But the metaphor was still developing then, it was demanding more, and I, far from its manipulator, was slowly sucked into its power. I kept resisting, of course, because I didn't want to be overswept by events since my characters were all living persons...and somewhere along the way these factors, plus the worth of other projects now delayed, my own freedom (this book has been my ruin financially and I've just about lost all hope for any kind of writing independence)...should have brought me to a useful accommodation, either an early abandonment of the project or a reduction of its ambitions. But this has not been possible. ("Log" 92)

He persisted writing, at one point starting back at the beginning. Coover claims he wrote as taught to him by Beckett—as a vocation rather than a profession (McCaffery 120). The work weighed so heavily upon the author that the night after Coover received news that made the book's publication look doubtful he had nightmares about the Rosenbergs. Remarkably, though, it was the first time he had dreamt of the atom spies throughout the entire process.

It is clear Coover was filled with the sense that this work was more significant than himself—he was devoted to drawing out the social arguments he felt were so engrained within his story. What, then, were the essential maxims Coover felt so compelled to advance?

There is an element in particular in Coover's writing that is geared to expose the degree of American exceptionalism prevalent in the dialogue and actions of collective America. Uncle Sam primarily drives this critique within the text. He, the loud and arrogant superhero of the book, *is* a collection of the American voice. His words are not original with him, but pulled from American culture. As Maltby points out, "his speech radiates the nation's myths" (119). Uncle Sam serves as an effective foil for Coover to point out the weaknesses of American foreign and domestic policy, especially in times of widespread panic.

Coover also seeks to destabilize the authority of history—to assert its inherently subjective nature. As pointed out earlier, there are several ways in which he seeks to do this: employing the subjective voice of *Time* to present "objective" news, recreating the case file through Nixon, and having characters overtly question the recollection of fact in everyday conversation. This issue of myth creation and a national story is inherently tied to Coover's views of tribal memory and action.

This theme of tribal or corporate action—with all of society acting in concert—is perhaps the most prevalent motif within the text. Walsh writes that this phenomenon is, in fact, the most important to Coover and is why he chooses to avoid a novelistic approach to representing the Rosenbergs. He claims that "the cost of such an approach

would have been to alienate the reader from the prevailing mentalities of fifties America, the entire atmosphere of Cold War hysteria that condemned them. It is this phenomenon with which Coover seems most concerned, and in which he seeks partially to implicate the reader” (333). Walsh’s observation is very much on target. Coover does indeed seek to convey the dangers of the tribe and its need for sacrifice and catharsis. It is this reason that it is a *public* burning that takes place in Times Square. It is also, as Coover points out to McCaffery, the reason he even brought himself to Times Square, “guilty as the rest of them” (117).

Further, Coover strives to challenge the reader’s preconceived notion of the novel and what the novel should be. He pushes to make the novel do things one is unaccustomed to experiencing—he combines different forms, including epic, fantasy, opera, cartoon, melodrama, biography, and farce (Gordon 51). Though the plot is written in a traditionally linear fashion, the book possesses an altogether different feel. It is difficult at times to not be disoriented within the gigantic proportion of the text and the near whirlwind pace of Uncle Sam’s narration. This effort to challenge the reader is also consistent with some of Coover’s other works such as *Gerald’s Party*, *A Night at the Movies*, or his experimentation with hypertext (Cope 114, 136).

Coover in no way seems to set out to write an encyclopedic work. In fact, in the Mendelson interview he claims that even after the circus motif had been developed and Richard Nixon and Uncle Sam had been cast as offsetting narrators, he still perceived of the work as a short book (118). It is very apparent, however, that *The Public Burning* is indeed an encyclopedic text. It is quite befuddling how the work has avoided critical analysis as encyclopedic.

Certainly, critics have seemingly alluded to its encyclopedic status in a cryptic manner, yet no one has explicitly proclaimed it as such. Neither, it seems, have they presented any substantial reason to exclude it from this rare group. Critics often write of the book's "mythic frame of reference," (Maltby 97), "encyclopedic texture" (Cope 54), and "an American epic" (qtd in Evenson 105), but refuse to go so far as to write of its stature as an encyclopedic narrative or satire. Weisenburger even writes at length on *The Public Burning* in his *Fables of Subversion*, dedicating an entire section to Coover's book in the chapter of "Political Satires," yet only mentioning it once in passing in the chapter "Encyclopedic Satires" (141, 207).

Given that both of Mendelson's essays on the encyclopedic form were published right before *The Public Burning's* publication, perhaps it missed Mendelson's attention due to coincidental timing. Or, perhaps critics have avoided writing on its encyclopedic nature—as Weisenburger seems to do—because of its overt political nature. *The Public Burning*, however, goes far beyond the world of politics and Richard Nixon. Though the political arena provides the setting for the book, it is by no means merely a political satire. Coover condenses America in its entirety within the pages of his book. Though it is incredibly difficult to discern why Coover's text has remained off the pages of encyclopedic critics, now seems the appropriate time to recognize it in its rightful place within the small group of encyclopedic narratives.

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