The Contest Between Public Discourse and Authorial Self in Robert Coover’s The Public Burning

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And what if, I wondered, there were no spy ring at all? What if all these characters believed there was and acted out their parts on this assumption, a whole courtroom full of fantasists?...We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally?” (Robert Coover, The Public Burning)

What is called for is a writing as a counter-reading—that is, as a counter socialization. To put in motion this social productivity: the process by which significance is constructed for others (and for ourselves as others). To motivate and politicize, for the reader, the identity-making process; to make it possible to become less of an exile in our own words—the words we read by writing. (Bruce Andrews, “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis”)

Abstract: Robert Coover’s Novel, The Public Burning, merges fantasy, history, and popular myth to respond to the American Cold War culture surrounding the trial of Ethal and Julius Rosenberg. While serving as a postmodern response to, and rewrite of, the Cold War ideological narratives, Coover’s novel also raises theoretical and practical questions concerning the author’s agency in the twentieth century. This article makes use of the language theories of Bruce Andrews, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Charles Peirce to consider how Coover’s fiction addresses the conflict between the public and private self, authorial discourse and collective ideological discourse. Coover’s novel reflects on these tensions, foregrounding the erosion of an autonomous concept of self and a Romantic notion of autotelic creation. At the same time, it employs a range of strategies (recovery of alternative voices, dismantling of polarities, rewriting) as a form of resistance against the monologic narratives of the Cold War.

In Robert Coover’s novel, *The Public Burning* (1976), the contest between the private and the public is depicted most dramatically in the clash between official discourse and the subversive minority voices attempting to counter it. The rhetoric of the Cold War, and the containment policies that mark it, serve as an appropriate backdrop to reinforce the novel’s chief allegory depicting how the national body implements, and takes over, the private body. Rather than serving as a free medium passing into the public realm, language becomes an ideologically loaded medium that intrudes on the private self. This relationship between the determining public sphere and the self may be seen most prominently through Coover’s narrative technique. Alternating between a composite narrator pieced together from a variety of cultural or “public” voices and the more personal narration of a fictionalized Richard Nixon, the narrative technique depicts the contest between the public discourse and the individual self, struggling to retain autonomy. Nixon, for instance, becomes the ironic victim of a public discourse that he himself, as both a fictional and historical figure, propagated as a vehement anti-communist.

A similar tension persists in twentieth century authorship where the Kantian-inspired perspective of the self as an autonomous subject conflicts with the structuralist perspective of the self as a composite or semiotic self. Despite the charges made by contemporary language theorists against the traditional conception of the author, for poet and theorist Bruce Andrews, the author retains the autonomy and authority reflected by the Romantic’s Genius conception of the author. The dilemma in contemporary authorship is not a question of authorial autonomy for Andrews, but rather the emergence of a hegemonic public discourse. Lacking a perceivable author, the public forum is dominated by unauthored discourse that prevents a democratic forum from emerging. For Bruce Andrews and Robert Coover alike, this public discourse threatens to undermine the autonomy and authority of the individual by infringing upon the private self.

In the history of authorship, the function of the author has changed through its relationship to two interrelated concepts: the autonomous subject and the conception of the public, or more specifically, the public forum. When the ability of the author to function autonomously is questioned, so too is our ideology of individuality that defines the public realm as distinct from the private. The importance for the self to communicate through language is not only a matter of self-identity, but is the essential assertion of autonomy required to construct a democratic public forum.
The L=A=N=G=U=A=E poets and theorists Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein suggest that there are today two forces militating against self-autonomy and the traditional model of the author. First, Bernstein claims that there is a "decline of the public discourse in the public space." (*The Politics of Poetic Form*, viii) This decline was brought on by an onslaught of un-authored (regenerated) discourse that denies the expression of the self by defining the individual according to the interest of an unseen other. Created by political propaganda and underpinned by mass culture and consumerism, the "other" in this sense is the model self (or what Bruce Robbins terms the "mass subject") that serves as a cultural ideal: a centripetal force claiming the common interest and history of a community. Second, Andrews suggests that the decline of the public forum is due in part to the attacks on the author concept from the academy. Specifically, the authority traditionally attributed to the author has been supplanted by the sentiments of contemporary language theorists who would rather shift the authority from the author as a cultural legislator to the inherent structures, or conversely, lack of structure embedded in language (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=E Book*, 242). Andrews asserts:

"If language is primary and everything we felt was central is really prefab and de-centered, then how does individual experience fit in, how can it loosen up these structures and punch through some barriers: If systems are determining, then is poetry just "showing language at work" with language now fashionably defined as a system that "works"? (240—1)"

If there is a demise of the Genius ideology of the author, and the Kantian-inspired ideal of autonomy on which it is based, this condition also seems to precipitate a breakdown in the traditional demarcations between the public and private realms in two ways: first, the private realm can no longer be based on one’s ability to operate distinctly, or creatively, apart from the public sphere (and the cultural determinism it imposes) and second, the public sphere (as a public forum) is flooded with "un-authored" and regenerated discourse which encroaches upon, and ultimately defines, the private (or creative sphere).

If the individual is created by a limited discourse that is in itself not a free medium, but rather one codified by the intentions of others—who were in turn, created by the same medium—the public discourse would seem to create a kind of corrupt, or composite, self. Andrews responds to this issue by calling for a writing as a "counter-reading." That is, to contest the recycled un-authored narratives by reasserting the "I" and to subjugate them to the level of fiction while initiating (or elevating) their own to the level of truth. Nostalgic for an Hellenic-inspired democratic public forum and the Genius conception of the author, Andrews seeks to reopen the public discourse not just by challenging the way meaning is made, but
by the context in which it is made. Whereas the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets are confident that the author can once again regain creative control over the public discourse, Coover’s novel may contend that the public forum cannot be manifested in its democratic ideal. Since this conflict between the public and private is depicted as a conflict between the public and private self in the novel though, Coover suggests that the loss of the public forum may not be at the expense of the author.

I have come to two conflicting conceptions of the “public” here that need to be clarified before reflecting upon Coover’s novel: the public as both a point of reference for a type of collective and, in its more Hellenic-inspired sense, the public as a democratic forum. Bruce Robbins describes the tension between these two different conceptions of the public sphere:

Within the concept of the public sphere, there is an unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tension, between a tight, authoritative singleness (the public as object of a quest for a universal collective subject or a privileged area of struggle) and more relaxed, decentered pluralism (publicness as something spread liberally through many irreducible different collectives). (Robbins, xxi, “Introduction: The Public as Phantom”)

The public, for Coover, is something that is created by the major actors in culture rather than the reflection of a body of people—the public as a democratic forum, what Walter Lippman first coined “phantom” in his influential study The Phantom Public (1925). Michael Warner builds upon Lippman’s studies in his argument that the imaginary reference point of the public was constructed through an understanding of print during the eighteenth century. In “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” Warner suggests how the public is created through the principle of exclusion rather than inclusion:

The “public” in this sense has no empirical existence, and cannot be objectified. When we understand images and texts as public, we do not gesture to a statistically measurable series of others. We make a necessarily imaginary reference to the public as opposed to other individuals. Public opinion, for example, is understood as belonging to a “public” rather than to scattered individuals. (236)

The construction of the public is supported through the mass media by its ability to connote a notion of collective witnessing or national unity. Warner observes how the illusion of public-ness and nationalism merge as a selling point by advertisers: such as “America Wears Haines” and “The Heartbeat of America.”
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in his study. (243) In The Public Burning, this conflation between nationalism and consumerism is suggested often during the pageant in Times Square where “...vast neon spectacles hawk everything from Planters' Peanuts to Patriotism, campaign quips to Kleenex: all direct and glaring evidence of the sheer power of Uncle Sam and his Legions of Light.” (398)

If Times Square reflects a public forum that is dominated by a hegemonic discourse supported by mass media and commercial culture, the composite narrative voice reflects the public discourse and the official discourse that controls it. As the nationalist voice that represents the political interest of the few, the official discourse controls the public forum by relegating subversive voices to minority status. The protest by Justice Douglas and the statements by Albert Einstein, for instance, are co-opted in The Public Burning, but they are often deadened by this controlling discourse in the composite narrative voice. No minority or other potentially deviant publications are used directly as a basis to create the official discourse (certainly though, within this composite voice, countertext surfaces in an attempt to oppose the dominant discourse). Rather, the official discourse reverberates through the mainstream voice of Time.

As the personified National Poet Laureate, Time is not just a pastiche, but a singular perspective supporting the containment narratives of the Cold War and the Manichean perspective it projects. Marked by a desire to over-personalize the news, Time reveals our reliance on narrative to provide a recognizable reality, while correspondingly demonstrating how the official discourse controls the public forum by reflecting it in its image. Time represents the role of the official discourse to bridge the inability of a physical public forum by becoming the medium which culture and the public flows through.

Some would say that such deep personal involvement, such metaphoric compression and reliance on inner vision and imaginary “sources,” must make objectivity impossible, and Time would agree with them, but he would find simply illiterate anyone who concluded from this that he was not serving Truth. More: he would argue that objectivity is an impossible illusion, a “fantastic claim” (“gnostic” is the word on his tongue these days), 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)

Time's promotion of subjectivity over objectivity places the author in a unique position in the division between the public and private realm. By assuming the Genius ideology of authorship, and applying it to the news media, Time inverts the relationship between the public and private realm in the traditional conception of
authorship. Rather than the private sphere contributing to the public discourse as a public forum, a public discourse is propagated by the news media creating the illusion of a democratic forum or public. This role of the press is reiterated, for instance, in the chapter entitled “Pilgrimage to the New York Times,” where Coover explores how the news publication, in mimicking the divine, is able to establish order in a chaotic world:

“Objectivity” is in spite of itself a willful program for the stacking of perceptions; facts emerge not from life but from revelation, gnarled as always by ancient disharmonies and charged with libidinous energy. Conscious or not, The New York Times statuary functions as a charter of moral and social order, a political force-field maker, defining meaningful actions merely by showing them, conferring a special power on those it touches, creating the stations of life that others might aspire to. (191)

As a model of the public forum, the composite narrative voice reflects how the official discourse attempts to take over the public forum by literally controlling the passage of language. From early in the novel, the reader is made aware that the battle between Uncle Sam and the Phantom is not just an ideological one, but one that is measured by the successes of their competing discourses. Control of the public discourse, or language, is a control over reality itself. Justice Douglas’s challenge to the official discourse leads to a disruption in the physical world. His “stay of execution” in Chapter Two is linked with the reports of catastrophes all over the world. The reader is reminded of this unbreakable link between discourse and reality by the metamorphosing sign above Times Square. Manifesting from “AMERICA THE HOPE OF THE WORLD” to “AMERICA THE RAPE OF THE WORLD,” the sign reveals less a discourse out-of-control than one with a designed purpose. (36) The subversive discourse can be both an ironic voice, alluding to the presence of the implied author, or a staging by the official discourse itself. In a Manichean perspective of the world, all senses of identity are left questionable; the Phantom (phantom) other is always masking itself as the real.

In the same way that the official discourse controls the public arena by creating even its oppositional voices, Uncle Sam creates his phantom other (the communist Phantom) to mark the boundaries for the public forum. The suspicion that Uncle Sam may be behind all this, that he essentially stages history itself, is reiterated in the composite narrative voice where subversive voices question how a super-hero could let all this disruption start in the first place:

They even conjecture that the American Superhero may have coaxed Justice Douglas into this brief delay just to heighten the
drama and draw a bigger crowd. After all, is Uncle Sam the maker and the shaper of the world history, or isn’t he? Just as he might have engineered the border troubles, goaded the Phantom into exposing himself around the world, provoked strikes and boycotts and altered a few marquees and billboards himself...Some skeptics are dubious about all these anniversary patterns in the first place. (212)

Symbolized by Uncle Sam, the official discourse masquerades as a composite discourse that “includes” a seemingly democratic collection of voices. The official discourse thus creates the illusion of public participation. This notion that the official discourse is able to manifest a phantom public in the composite voice is reinforced again in the theatre motif pervading the novel. History is prewritten; it is a grand narrative staged by Uncle Sam and, unknowingly at first, by Nixon as well. In the alternating chapters between Nixon and the composite narrative voice, and in Nixon’s desire to change the script itself, the theatre allegory extends from the composite voice to depict the struggle of the individual to operate outside of the text. From one perspective, this struggle is represented by the novel’s reliance on history and its need to distort it. Even the overlaps between the fictional record and the historical one allude to how the individual self is under the control of a phantom public. As noted by several critics, for instance, Coover’s depiction of the Rosenbergs’s peculiar courtroom behavior is inspired by historical record—the Warden in the novel describes them as acting in “symbolic ways—you know, acting like they’re establishing historical models or precedents or something.” (The Public Burning, 407)

The tendency of the official discourse to control the composite narrative voice converges with the theatre motif to create a more encompassing pattern that depicts the infringement of the self by a corrupt public forum. The theatre motif, in other words, reflects a parallel between the condition of the national scene and the textual scene. Subjectivity (symbolized by Time) is less of an assertion of autonomy than it is evidence of how a phantom public can be created:

Not only was everybody in this case from the Judge on down—indeed, just about everyone in the nation, in and out of government, myself included—behaving like actors caught up in a play, but we all seemed moreover to be aware of just what we were doing and at the same time of our inability, committed as we were to some higher purpose, some larger script as it were, to do otherwise. (117)

If the composite voice reflects the construction of a public sphere, Nixon’s narration attempts to reflect the autonomous subject within that sphere. Nixon plays
out the contest between the self and the public sphere through his relationship with the composite narrative voice and official discourse. His role represents the conflict between the autonomous self and an encroaching, perhaps corrupted, public sphere. While Nixon’s narration is separated from the composite narrative voice, both literally in the alternating chapters and by point of view, the two points of narration often converge to connote the presence of the implied author manipulating the text. The theatre motif that reoccurs in the composite voice and in Nixon’s narration is perhaps the most evident link between them. Yet Nixon and the composite voice also share other characteristics that convey a singular point of view. Nixon’s meditations on the mysteriousness of the presidential incarnations are reflected in the composite narrative voice. Furthermore, both voices seem to resort to a type of folk-superstitious logic. And their obsession with finding apocalyptic signs in anniversaries, in particular, seems to suggest that the voices lack autonomy. Most notably, the implicit irony in both narrators suggests a convergence of these seemingly different points of view, one that alludes to the presence of the implied author. While this convergence in the narration contributes to the novel’s allegory depicting a public voice encroaching upon the private self, as I discuss further here, irony may mark the author’s attempt to depart unscathed the very public voices he creates in the text.

These parallels between the two forms of narration set the stage for Nixon’s realization of self and his struggle for autonomy from the official discourse. Although Nixon’s realization of the “power of the word” marks a direction towards self-awareness and a flirtation with the Phantom other, the implicit irony reasserts the presence of the implied author, a presence that undermines Nixon’s moments of self-awareness.

And what if, I wondered, there were no spy ring at all? What if all these characters believed there was and acted out their parts on this assumption, a whole courtroom full of fantasists?...We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally?” (135—6)

The ironical voice surfaces again when Nixon’s speculation about the power of the word is complete. Although Nixon’s observation about the “lie of purpose” endows him with a sense of autonomy and, therefore, equality with the official discourse, his revelation is again undermined by this implicit irony. This inability of Nixon to be reflected autonomously from the text foreshadows his inability to escape the language and the public that shapes him:
This, then, was my crisis: to accept what I already knew. That there was no author, no director, and the audience had no memories—they got reinvented everyday!...I'd understood at last the real meaning of the struggle against the Phantom: it was a war against the lie of purpose! (362—3)

This revelation is undermined not just by the ironical voice, but by Nixon's reliance on narrative. For although Nixon discovers that he lives in a lawless universe, like the nation itself, he is unable to break away from the narrative roles prescribed to him. As suggested in the scene that immediately follows his epiphany, Nixon's discovery of self is less an assertion of subjectivity than proof of his own susceptibility and selfishness. When a woman is raped next to him while he is on a subway heading towards Times Square, his apathy towards her not only conveys his selfishness but also seems to undermine the notion that he will be able to act outside the script: “And then, as they’d dragged the dazed woman out of the seat and spread-eagled her down at one end of the car, it had suddenly come to me what I had to do! I had to step in and change the script!” (363)

By ignoring the distressed woman, it is apparent that Nixon's plans to make a secret trip to Sing Sing prison not only signifies his inability to change the script, but that he was never able to depart from it either. In particular, his exposure to the “lie of purpose” enabled Nixon to fall into the imagined role of his mentor, Uncle Sam. In this role he plays out Uncle Sam's paternalism, lust for global power, and penchant for pageantry:

I saw statues of myself in Berlin, in Seoul, in Prague, Peking, and Peoria. A universal veneration for the hardnosed but warmhearted Man of Peace...Prizes, medals, titles, special investitures, all that shit—meaningless of course, but the people needed ceremony like they needed proteins, and I'd do my duty in this regard as in all others, even as I understood, better than any other man of my generation could, what children they were. (371)

Nixon's proclivity for narrative roles is not atypical. Throughout the novel, Nixon ascribes narratives to Ethel Rosenberg (the other) and, in doing so, casts her and himself in a series of different cultural roles: a fragile victim waiting for her hero prince, the unsatisfied seductress, and the glorified heroine chasing the American dream: “She was the heroines in all those musicals who starve and suffer unnoticed, until one night the star gets a sore throat and can’t go on....”(314) Rather than cast her or himself in an alternative role, after Nixon's revelation of the “lie of purpose,” he finds that he is unable to escape the very narratives in which he has been immersed. During Nixon's meeting with Ethel he observes, “All of this
sounded familiar. Like lines from some soap-opera... Some Horatio Alger novel probably.” (434) The notion that he has fallen from his role but not the script itself is reiterated soon after: “I realized that she was waiting for me to say something. All I could think of were some lines from a play I was in long ago...And they weren’t even my lines!” (440)

Nixon’s meeting with Ethel is an encounter and transformation into the other, yet his initiation into the other does not give him an alternative from narrative itself. Nixon is unable to escape language as a historical narrative or as a grand narrative. More significantly perhaps, he is unable to elude narrative as a repetitive and recycled form. In other words, Nixon is not granted the right to rule over language; he is incapable of detaching himself from the official discourse and the public voices in the chapters narrated by the composite narrative voice. Nixon’s forgetfulness of his parting lines to Ethel (from “The Valiant”) signifies his inability to change the script creatively from the one already written by the official discourse. Ethel finishes his parting lines and, therefore, symbolically condemns him to the official discourse, “Cowards die many times before their death, the valiant never taste death more than once.” (446) Ethel is no longer a victim of the official discourse, but is a part of it. Nixon, on the other hand, is the victim of the very discourse he helped propagate.

Nixon’s surrealistic entrance into Times Square signifies his inability to escape narrative and the reality it created. For Nixon and the composite narrative voice have already written Nixon’s prosecution in Times Square: Ethel literally plays out the very narratives prescribed to her earlier in the novel. During one of Nixon’s many daydreams about the Rosenbergs, he contemplates Ethel’s radical past as a striker. In this episode, when Ethel and her cohorts prosecute a scab, we find a direct parallel to the events in Times Square: “When a delivery truck tried to crash the picket line, Ethel and the girls hauled the driver from his cab, stripped him bare, and lipsticked his butt with I AM A SCAB. My own butt tingled with the thought of it.” (304) Playing the role of the official discourse, Ethel checks Nixon’s attempt to try to cross over narrative itself by doing the same to him. He is literally subjugated to a consumer and propagator of narrative rather than a producer of one.

Nixon’s exposure in Times Square serves to remind him and the reader of his initiation and final relegation to the public sphere; his failure to change the “script” confirms a failure for the individual to escape the regenerating narratives that pervade the text. Paralleling Nixon’s struggle, the public in Times Square has been rehearsing its own role as legislated to it by the official discourse. For despite the disturbances created by the Phantom’s presence (such as the Rosenberg Clemency Float), Uncle Sam manages to tame the masses into a homogeneous whole. In doing so, the phantom public created in the composite narrative voice is literally realized in Times Square.

In awe of the official discourse, this public represents not only the ability of language to control the individual, but perhaps also the presumption that most
individuals willingly accept it. The public's susceptibility to the Master of Ceremonies in Times Square has been interpreted by David Estes to represent Coover's distrust and suspicions of the "implications in the lore of the broad American masses." (245) Certainly, this notion is explored also in Coover's earlier works, such as in his short story "The Pedestrian Accident" from the collection *Pricksongs and Descants*. Coover's distrust of American lore and humor is a critical review of all narratives that carry an aura of truth or significance by their mere repetition, yet could be vacuous in themselves:

The naughty boy who gets away with it, the old man who needn't try, the dumb broad who doesn't know what's happened, plus a little danger, a little violence, anticipation and surprise: these are the things that open the Whale's mouth. (452)

Myth making, the regeneration of narrative, not only propagates untruths but delineates a public by assuming a collective witnessing where we all must participate in the same value system. The public discourse, in its assumption of authority over a myriad of other discourses, infringes upon the private self by enacting a model of reality. *The Public Burning* demonstrates not only how the policy of containment and how the cold war narrative becomes integrated in other cultural narratives, but also how this myth-making process allows narratives to regenerate and create a phantom public and official discourse. Nixon's speech in Times Square is not just a regeneration of his Checker's speech, but also a regeneration of a great number of nationalist myths and Manichean ideologies. The audience in Times Square, like the reader of the novel, is bombarded with the narratives and myths supporting the Cold War narrative of containment: a Horatio Alger American Dream, democratic idealism, and American homogeneity (or what is discussed here as the creation of the phantom public). The narrative excess that marks the book, for instance, demonstrates how the regeneration of narrative can become ingrained into the individual conscience by sheer pervasiveness. The brief success of his speech reflects how the creation of a phantom public is able to affect the actions of a specific public, yet Nixon's final failure also shows how the phantom public could break down in the presence of a real public forum.

When Nixon calls on the custodian of the official discourse himself, Uncle Sam, to expose himself, the phantom public and the Phantom it creates is also exposed. The exposure itself is like the tube shutting down in an old black and white television (a rupture between this world and another): there is a blinding light, a sharp clap of thunder, and then "Blackout!" For underneath Uncle Sam are all the myths and fictions that forge national identity. The unveiling of the official discourse therefore, is also an unveiling of the phantom public. Without the role of the official discourse, the audience in Times Square sees themselves for who they really are: "for the people in their nighttime have passed through their conventional
terrors and discovered that which they fear the most: each other!” (490) In this
return to a more Dionysian self, the audience has never left the script though they
have only changed roles. Similar to Nixon’s own encounter with the other, the
audience’s exposure to the other within themselves does not result in an awareness
of the fictions they have consumed, but a confirmation of their truth. Again, the
sense of reality in the novel is disturbed by the notion that every moment is staged.
When Uncle Sam returns from the western sky, he captivates the audience not with
a glowing orb of truth, but with the illusion itself. For the same reason why a
magician is obliged to return the sawed-off half of his assistant to her whole self,
Uncle Sam uses the glowing orb to dismiss all the “fears and phantasms of the
people’s nighttime.” (494)

In this respect, the division between the real and the imaginary is
undermined by how both spheres must be defined through illusion. Similar to
perhaps the function of narrative itself, the public may be understood by
performance only: it is a temporary frame of reality that must be challenged, and
thereby confirmed, by the next proceeding frame. The composite narrative voice
observes, for instance, “Nothing has really happened, they’re still okay! It’s like
coming out of a scary movie—nothing but camera tricks.” (496) The spectacle of
the executions themselves creates an overlapping of the real (or historical) and the
imaginary. This notion that the real can only be understood through performance
is confirmed in the novel’s Prologue. Despite the grotesqueness of the executions
themselves, the audience continues to participate in the pageant and is entertained
by Uncle Sam’s new “instant replay gimmick.” (522)

The conflicting functions of the public and its relationship to narrative
itself may be explained by considering the public as a sort of “text” composed of
semiotic indices: the public is the illusory space where we find significance through
our connection to it, yet we also find our autonomy and “self” being apart from it.
The L=A=N=G=U=A=E poets, for instance, seek to regain the public as a
democratic forum by unifying both conceptions of the public through the
proliferation of a type of subversive poetics that will reassert the “I” in the public
discourse.

The relationship between discourse and the self is a query addressed by
Charles Peirce. The influential philosopher and mathematician posits that the self
cannot be removed from the semiotic system because it is, essentially, the product
of the very system it interprets. (The notion that the self is determined by signifiers
rather than a transcendental producer of them contradicts the Genius ideology of
the author and, thereby, has spurred many of the “Death of the Author” debates
associated with structuralist thought). Peirce’s semiotics illustrates the conflict
between the authorial self, as an autonomous self, and the public by demonstrating
how language cannot be removed at any moment from either the public or private
sphere.
In *The Public Burning*, the effect of the official discourse on the individual reflects Peirce’s belief that mind is not an insular entity. Unlike Saussure, Peirce gives the signified (the interpretant) endless commutability: “the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.” (Vol. i, 171) Peirce concludes therefore that autonomy must be non-existent: “the individual man, since his separate existence is manifested by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation.” (Vol. 5, 189)

While Peirce posits that the mind is a manifestation of a semiotic system, he accounts for selfhood through the position from which individuals reason through the “formation of habits.” Although some level of autonomy and identity is created through these habits, they are, nonetheless, the products of the language that repeatedly makes itself available. Peirce retains Kant’s notion of subjectivity only as far as the individual may preside over a closed system: “there is no element of man’s consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself....Thus my language is the sum total of myself.” (Vol. 5, 189) If the individual self is created through repetitious language forms (or discourses), the public, represented now as a semiotic system, would simply be a reflection of the body of language that made itself repeatedly available. In *The Public Burning*, for instance, Nixon expresses this cycle by becoming both the product and propagator of the official discourse. What Peirce labels as “habits” are the result of the regeneration (and thereby repetition) of discourses and narratives, which in turn form perimeters around what is interpretable, or the real. In following Peirce’s theory of the semiotic self, the prevalence of a hegemonic discourse (or official discourse) in the public forum results in the emergence of a type of composite or, perhaps, corrupt self.

Unrelated to Peirce’s own theories, the tension between the authorial self and the public-ness of language is addressed by Mikhail Bakhtin who studied how the novelist must assimilate, yet also resist, the public voices in language. Where Peirce envisions a continuous semiotic exchange or “commutability” between subjects, Bakhtin examines the patterns produced in these exchanges of signs:

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works) is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-ownness,” varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (“The Problem with Speech Genres” 89)
In his influential essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin suggests how discourse and the individual are each in a state of flux: "Language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary." (288) The concept of heteroglossia suggests that these two continuums co-exist in a discourse where the self may not be differentiated. For Bakhtin, in other words, the locus of the self appears between the diachronic and synchronic pressures of heteroglossia. Similar to Peirce’s perception of the self as the “sum total of language,” Bakhtin conveys how the personal self not only creates itself through these infringing discourses but may also be created by them as well. The effect of heteroglossia produces what Bakhtin refers to as the “dialogized” word or dialogic voice—the polyphony of voices that are inherent in all utterances. Just as Peirce perceives “individuality” or autonomy as based in self-control and the formation of habits, Bakhtin similarly conceptualizes it in the formation of ideologies extracted from excerpts of the public discourse. For Bakhtin, the dialogized word-voice essentially creates, or at the very least, anticipates the notion of the dialogized self: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—over-populated—with the intentions of others.” (294)

If The Public Burning demonstrates not just the effect of a dominating discourse over the individual, but the intrusion of the public self into the private one, how can Coover himself escape this semiotic determinacy, or quite simply, narrative itself?

In Bakhtin’s consideration of how heteroglossia affects the poet and the novelist differently, the Russian formalist may reveal one way in which the authorial self succeeds in resisting the public-ness of language. While the novelist embraces the polyphony of voices in his work as a representation of a diverse and complex world, the poet struggles to “strip” language from its public-ness in order to place it in his or her unique, individualized, context. (298) The novelist enhances his or her authority by incorporating cultural voices while the poet legitimizes the role of the author as a cultural legislator through a demonstration of autonomy. Perhaps both processes are the same though. If the self is placed under the same pressures of the dialogized word—forming a type of dialogic self—heteroglossia demonstrates its ability to commute endlessly. In other words, if the author is under the diachronic and synchronic pressures of heteroglossia, every act of speech, no matter how regenerative, is altered through context.

Through counter-text, Coover’s novel escapes the infringing official discourse by changing the context in which it is allowed to speak. The allusions to Arthur Miller’s play The Crucible, for instance, coincides with the reader’s tendency to interpret the composite voice ironically. While a dominant perspective is portrayed through the composite narrative voice, it also supports subversive discourse by not only alluding to the counter-text, but also by allowing itself to be read as its own counter-text. The “Intermezzos,” for example, reinforce the ironical
voice and the creation of countertext by interrupting the novel to remind the reader that the novel itself is a performance, one that may differ from the stage upon which it performs. By establishing an ambiguous division between text and counter-text, Coover first reflects the uncertainty and duality that marked the Cold War perspective of the individual: where the division between a communist and an anti-communist (American patriot) is not always clear. More importantly though, as both text and counter-text, *The Public Burning* reveals Coover's ability to escape the corruption of the official discourse through irony and parody: by repeating its performance, yet changing its significance. This play between text and counter-text is quite literally the "counter-reading" which Bruce Andrews has called for. As defined earlier in this article, counter-reading challenges the recycled un-authored narratives that have pervaded the public forum by reasserting the first person voice. In doing so, "counter-reading" in writing allows one to relegate these public narratives posing as truth back to a level of fiction while initiating one's own to the level of truth. In the same regard, if the *Public Burning* portrays the struggle of the authorial self against the semiotic self of the public discourse, Coover retains authorial autonomy by allowing the novel to be only a performance of others, narratives, and history, rather than a script created by them.