

Politics as Metafiction: Reading Robert Coover’s Political Fable in the Age of Trump

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It would not be hard to write an essay that treats *The Cat in the Hat* as a fable for the United States in the age of President Donald Trump. An unpredictable and charismatic figure in a trademark red and white hat (the Cat) blasts onto the stage, upending the unwritten rules of decorum with his wild antics to the simultaneous delight and befuddlement of his constituency (“Sally and I”) all while hectoring nay-sayers (the fish) fret and declare that this is quite irregular and should not be tolerated until things get out of hand and order is reestablished, but not without a sneaking sense that allowing this to have happened at all is a frightening transgression (“Now, what should we do? What would you do if your mother asked you?”). Thankfully, one of America’s most influential experimental writers already did it for us, in 1968, when Robert Coover published *The Cat in the Hat for President: A Political Fable*.¹

Coover’s delightful little fable is the story of Mr. Brown, a longtime political operative given the thankless task of ushering his (nameless) party through a campaign against a seemingly unbeatable opponent. But before nominating a candidate, the convention is thrown into disarray by the arrival of a famous outsider: the Cat in the Hat himself, declaring “I Can Lead it All by Myself!” Soon the Cat, along with his VP pick, Sam, his shady campaign manager, Clark, and his excitable campaign surrogates Joe and Ned, transforms the convention into a surreal circus, captures the nomination, and creates electoral excitement for the previously moribund party.² On the campaign trail, the Cat’s antics only escalate, wowing the public, driving his opponent

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¹Robert Coover, *The Cat in the Hat for President: A Political Fable* (Foxrock Books, 2017). First published in *New American Review* in 1968, released by Viking in 1980 as *A Political Fable*, and republished in 2017. Recognizing the resonance with recent events, Coover gave a reading in October 2016, and the new edition features a MAGA hat on the cover. See Connor Sullivan, “Professor Reads Prescient ‘68 Election Satire,” *Brown Daily Herald*, Oct. 27, 2016.

²To wit, upon securing the nomination, the Cat rollerskates onto the stage balancing a fishbowl on an umbrella, which he proceeds to drop, flooding the entire convention and allowing everyone to be swallowed up by the fish until they are ejected by shouting the magic word, “Voom!”

literally insane, and causing innumerable headaches for poor Mr. Brown. But finally, the Cat's antics prove too wild and unpredictable. After an incident in which the Cat "raised the pentagon off the ground, and spun it like a top," word spreads of "an Army-centered takeover plot" and the defection of the moderate wing of the Cat's party to the opposition (58). To avoid humiliating defeat, Brown orchestrates the Cat's assassination at the hands of a mob made up of nearly every imaginable constituency: "the White Citizens Council and the Black Nationalists, the local Minutemen, Klan, Nazis, Black Muslims, and Zionists, the National Guard and the VFW, the different student groups, the local churches, sheriffs, shopkeepers, cops, Mafia interests, farmers, Cubans, Choctaws, country singers, and evangelists, in short, all the Good Folk of the valley" (61). They convene at a rally where Sam is shot and the Cat is skinned alive, burned at the stake, and eaten by the angry, naked, fornicating mob, whose ingestion of the Cat's meat leads to a mass hallucination that according to Brown outstrips even the wildest acid trips. Brown's party then reconvenes and nominates its original candidates, who win by positioning the Cat as a martyr whose "death shocked the nation" (67). And although the story ends with the Cat dead and the milquetoast candidate Boone elected president, Brown registers a note of fear. Clark represents a threat of a reemergence of Cat-ism: "Legend has it, it's he who has the real Cat's Hat, and that inside it are twenty-six other Cats, ready to be sprung on an unsuspecting world" (69).

It is a wildly absurdist story, and certainly not appropriate for children, but it is also Coover's most direct and accessible political statement. What makes *The Cat in the Hat for President (CHP)* worthy of attention from a political science audience is that its resonance with recent political events signals, but does not in any way exhaust, its underlying wisdom. It is, after all, a political fable. And like any skilled fabulist, Coover excels at capturing enduring features of the human condition in playful and deceptively simple tales that make these obscure mechanisms visible. Coover has created a wise fable that is endlessly applicable to novel political circumstances by tapping into enduring truths about the nature of democratic politics.

As numerous scholars have noted, *CHP* shares themes and motifs with many of Coover's more well-known works, including apocalyptic orgies, public rituals of sacrificial scapegoating, and the chaotic production of civic mythologies.³ In this way, *CHP* represents the clearest application of core Cooverian themes to the sphere of electoral politics. Yet, perhaps owing to its (undeserved) reputation as something of a footnote to his more celebrated *The Public Burning*, neither Coover scholars nor political theorists have attended to the distinct political insights available to a careful reader of

³Kathryn Hume, "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic," *Novel* 12, no. 2 (1979): 127–48; Kathryn Hume, "Robert Coover: The Metaphysics of Bondage," *Modern Language Review* 98, no. 4 (2003): 827–41; Douglas Robinson, "Visions of No End: The Anti-apocalyptic Novels of Ellison, Barth, and Coover," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 13 (1981): 1–16.

CHP.⁴ Coover's writings have received little—if any—scholarly attention from political theorists or philosophers, and among Coover scholars, *CHP* itself has not been the subject of sustained engagement.⁵ Without diminishing the salience of these shared themes, this article seeks to show that there is much to learn from a patient investigation of *CHP* on its own terms.

Since its initial publication, a number of readers have indeed noted its continued resonance with contemporary politics, but have not treated this as much more than a charming curiosity. For example, a review of the 1980 reprinting suggested that it was “perhaps even righter for Election ‘80 than it was for the more issue-centered nightmares of ‘68,” and in a brief article for the Election 2016 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, David Haven Blake described *CHP* as “a forgotten relic of the 1968 presidential campaign” that is nonetheless “wondrously attuned to the carnival aspects of the Donald Trump campaign.”⁶ And despite its status as the book that “stands with *The Public Burning* ... as Coover's most overtly political work,” few scholars have given sustained attention to *CHP* as a source of significant political insight, instead drawing on it in the context of more comprehensive interpretations of Coover's work.⁷ Among these scholars, there is an implicit tension in the treatment of *CHP* as an example of Coover's political ideas. Those, like Brian Evenson, who read it in the context of *The Public Burning* have tended to see it as exemplifying that book's critique of the “the carnival of American politics”⁸ or even a kind of “treatise on the paranoid style,”⁹ implicitly suggesting a liberal ideal in which destructive myths can be replaced by a more reasoned approach to politics.¹⁰ Others, such as Lois Gordon and Kathryn Hume, have drawn on *CHP* in service of more radical interpretations

⁴Evenson reads *CHP* as “clarifying or focusing on issues that might otherwise have been lost in *The Public Burning*'s greater concerns and more complex texture” (Brian Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003], 140).

⁵Most of the direct scholarly engagement with *CHP* has been in the context of comprehensive monographs about Coover's work, but even in these texts, the authors devote only a few pages to it, typically in chapters accounting for his ostensibly minor works. Cf. Richard Andersen, *Robert Coover* (Boston: Twayne, 1981); Lois Gordon, *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983); Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover*.

⁶David Haven Blake, review of *A Political Fable*, *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1980; Blake, “The Carnival Campaign: How a 1968 Short Story Foresaw 2016,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 30, 2016.

⁷Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover*, 140.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Thomas Alden Bass, “An Encounter with Robert Coover,” *Antioch Review* 40, no 3 (1982): 299.

¹⁰As will be discussed below, this vision of liberal politics is most clearly articulated by Margaret Heckard, “Robert Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 22, no. 2 (1976): 210–227, although Heckard does not explicitly cite *CHP*.

that highlight the liberating potential of Coover's postmodernism, in which the Cat represents a revolutionary figure upending traditional politics and social mores.¹¹ Yet, neither of these sets of interpretations devote significant attention to the specific political ideas at work in *CHP*, instead integrating it into interpretations grounded in more supposedly major or representative works. By focusing on a careful interpretation of *CHP* itself, and taking seriously its function as a unique political fable, this article offers a critique of both of these visions as well as a novel political interpretation of the text that is more Platonic than liberal or postmodern in orientation.

Taking its resonance with contemporary politics as a starting point, we can observe that although its composition was explicitly inspired by the chaos of US politics in 1968, *CHP* is less essentially tied to the specific anxieties of the politics of the day than *The Public Burning*, which depicts a fantastical reimagining of the Rosenberg execution and features Richard Nixon as a lead character (*CHP*, v–ix). Whereas *The Public Burning* draws us back into its moment, *CHP* functions as a fable for democratic politics that transcends the particular circumstances of its creation, thus inviting readers to project its insights onto contemporary politics. It is thus a text through which we can interrogate our political moment, come to a deeper understanding of how we got here, and think about what we can do in the future. And if nothing else, it is a delightful tale that helps remind us we are not crazy for feeling like everything is crazy.

Furthermore, if we take up the suggestion of its subtitle and approach *CHP* as a political fable on relatively straightforward terms—a moral tale told with elements of fantastic unreality to illuminate something about reality, which instructs the reader in their conduct of life—we can begin to unpack its distinct political insights.¹² It might not tell us exactly what it is Trump has tapped into, or what precise forces brought about his rise, but it is a reminder not to delude ourselves into believing that he is a purely aberrant bug in our system, nor that his fall will be enough to exorcise whatever it is he represents.

As a fable, *CHP* works on at least two levels. First, it shows us something about the power of celebrity, spectacle, and cynicism to upset the expected order of electoral politics. It serves to confirm that this is neither an entirely new nor a terribly surprising feature of US politics. But what makes *CHP* a work of deeper significance is how it depicts what I am calling “politics as metafiction”—the ways in which the practices of electoral politics mirror the practices of metafiction, and how the unselfconscious participation in these practices enables some of our most destructive tendencies as a political culture. Metafiction, as defined by William Gass, refers to the practice of

¹¹Gordon, *Universal Fictionmaking Process*; Hume, “The Naked and the Mythic”; Hume, “The Metaphysics of Bondage.”

¹²Its function as a fable is largely underappreciated by Coover scholars. For example, Cope does not even mention *CHP* in his chapter on fairy tales, scripture, and fables in Coover's work (Jackson I. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986]).

constructing texts “in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed.”¹³ These practices of intertextuality are extended beyond literary creation into the very construction of human subjectivity in the world, encompassing realms such as religion, history, and most centrally for our purposes, politics. Coover uses his work to demonstrate this fundamental intertextuality of human life, and *CHP* is no exception.

This is a particularly relevant insight amid fears of a “post-truth” era in US politics, which some commentators have laid at the feet of postmodern writers and thinkers such as Coover.¹⁴ But to proclaim the dawn of the post-truth era, there must have been some point when truth was the dominant currency in politics, and Coover rejects precisely that assumption. Rather than eroding the supposedly factual foundations of our political culture, Coover’s picture of politics as metafiction helps to dislodge the fantasy of a purely fact-based, rationalist politics. By highlighting the metafictional elements fundamental to our politics, *CHP* helps us see we were never much of a veritocracy to begin with. With this insight in hand, the more challenging question is what we should do about it. Coover’s fable suggests a variety of answers available to readers willing to think critically about our current Cat-in-the-Hat moment.

The next two sections outline how *CHP* demonstrates the ease with which democratic peoples are wowed by celebrity and spectacle, and how democratic politics are manipulated by cynics and ideologues. The subsequent two sections will turn to the matter of politics as metafiction, outlining both the concept of metafiction and the practices of metafictional politics. The concluding sections tie these threads together to suggest we should read the text as offering a quasi-Platonic vision of politics, in which consciousness of the metafictional nature of democratic politics creates a responsibility to guard against the kind of violent chaos clothed in promises of liberation by Cats and demagogues alike.

Celebrity and Spectacle

Most immediately, *CHP* is a fable about the power of celebrity and spectacle in electoral politics and a warning about the dangers of a political system that can be co-opted by the allure of a charismatic figure with a flair for the dramatic. The story suggests it is surprisingly easy to short-circuit the expected patterns of electoral politics, precisely because those patterns are far less solid and reliable than we tend to believe. It is on this level that the novel most clearly resonates with the Trump phenomenon.

¹³William, Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1979), 25.

¹⁴Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018); Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

The Cat uses his celebrity to capitalize on the barely sublimated carnival nature of democratic politics. At first, his candidacy is treated as a lark, with few taking it seriously enough to oppose, instead having a grand old time with the Cat's antics at an otherwise dull convention. And the media fall all over themselves for the Cat, as spectacle is their stock-in-trade (17). He is embraced as a thrilling outsider with a refreshing disregard for politics as usual, with Brown declaring, "this balmy flaunting of the rules of the game was to become a pattern, if not in fact, the message of his whole Presidential campaign" (13). But of course, Coover's fable would not be terribly significant if it simply told us that democratic politics tends to be spectacle laden and celebrity obsessed. We could learn that by reading Tocqueville, Plato, or any newspaper.¹⁵ A more subtle insight emerges when we consider the significance of his choice of candidate.

By casting a beloved figure from children's literature as his agent of political chaos, Coover taps into the surprising ways that desires for radical transformation are interwoven with a longing for the nostalgic and familiar. The Cat is a figure whose fame is a comfort for the anxious and weary, who evokes happy memories of the simpler times of childhood, and yet simultaneously one whose candidacy stokes fantasies of complete social and political upheaval. As Sam explains to Brown, "He's fresh and original, and famous, too. A whole new generation of voters has grown up on his tales. He's a living legend" (21). The Cat is given the chance to wreak havoc on the normal modes of politics precisely because he is a beloved institution of American culture. Among the most consistent themes throughout Coover's work is his exploration of the ways human vulnerability simultaneously motivates both radical instability and deep longing for order.¹⁶ The political implications should be obvious to anyone who has considered the role economic anxiety, cultural dislocation, and backlash to social change played in the rise of Trump.¹⁷ Coover suggests we long for change and thrill to the possibility of radical transformation while simultaneously seeking the comforts of familiarity.¹⁸

The fuller significance of this aspect of the text will be developed in the discussion of the idea of politics as metafiction. For now, to see the way Coover

¹⁵One of the best and most surprising analyses of celebrity politics in America is David Haven Blake, *Liking Ike: Eisenhower, Advertising, and the Rise of Celebrity Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). And as noted above, Blake is also the only person I am aware of who connected Trump and *CHP* in print.

¹⁶Cf. Hume, "The Naked and the Mythic."

¹⁷Cf. George Saunders, "Who Are All These Trump Supporters?," *New Yorker*, July 11 & 18, 2016; George Packer, "Hillary Clinton and the Populist Revolt," *New Yorker*, Oct. 31, 2016.

¹⁸It is worth recalling, the most politically transformative presidents of the twentieth century were the scion of a political dynasty (FDR) and a beloved Hollywood star (Reagan). This is precisely the pattern Coover highlights in *CHP*.

fleshes out his picture of spectacular, celebrity-fueled demagoguery we must peek behind the curtain to the actors who enable the rise of the Cat.

Cynics and Ideologues

Title notwithstanding, *CHP* is less about the Cat himself than about the forces and figures enabling his rise and ultimate demise; the Cat remains as oblique to the reader as he does to the characters. He is presented almost exclusively in public performance, and in the one private conversation we see, his words and actions are nearly indistinguishable from his public-facing antics. But behind the Cat's candidacy stand two very familiar figures: the cynic (Brown) and the ideologue (Clark), who serve to highlight the ways that demagogic figures like the Cat are underwritten by the fusion of a dangerous ideological will to destruction and the cynical current powering so-called Establishment politics.

Although ostensibly the hero of the novel and voice of reason throughout, Brown is a pure political cynic. There is no suggestion of principle or public-spiritedness. He describes his approach to politics this way: "practically, of course, there are no issues in politics at all. Not even ideological species. 'Liberal,' 'conservative,' 'left,' 'right,' these are mere fictions of the press, metaphoric conventions to which politicians sooner or later and in varying ways adapt" (5–6). Brown's approach to politics is pure gamesmanship, and his initial "objections to the Cat in the Hat had been of a merely practical sort" (3).¹⁹ Other than finding "delight in the illusion of democracy in action" (8), winning is his only concern. He admits to never fully understanding the Cat's appeal, merely going along so long as the polls looked good (44–45). And his ultimate turn against the Cat was motivated not by concern for the public good, but by fear that he might lose.

Unlike Brown, who is presented largely sympathetically, the most straightforwardly malevolent character is Clark, the Cat's "political visionary" (22) whose motives and designs are obscure, but unquestionably frightening. Clark is a true believer in the transformative power of the Cat, but he is never presented as idealistic or naive. He is instead an uncompromising self-styled prophet who is either invested in a revolutionary project of creative destruction or some kind of nihilist interested in chaos for its own sake:

But what does it *matter* that there's destructiveness, Mr. Brown? The question is rather: *what* is being destroyed? The Cat breaks the rules of the house, even the laws of probability, but what is destroyed except

¹⁹In *The Public Burning*, Coover's Nixon is a similarly amoral politico: "I had won both sides of a debating question too often not to know what emptiness lay behind the so-called issues ... only an artificial—call it political—commitment to consistency makes [men] hold steadfast to singular positions" (Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* [New York: Grove, 1977], 362–63).

nay-saying itself, authority, social habit, the law of the mother, who, through violence in the name of love, keeps order in this world, this household? Ah no, mess-making is a prerequisite to creation, Mr. Brown. All new worlds are built upon the ruins of the old. (29)

The threat of violence is always just below the surface, such as when Clark explains that his invitation to join the campaign is not so much an offer as a threat: “*There are no terms.... It is happening, Mr. Brown. Are you with us or not?*” (30). This suggestive undercurrent, which Brown had been willing to overlook at first, becomes explicit as the campaign falls apart and Clark nonchalantly affirms his plans for “total violent disruption” (60). And if this is not clear enough, the final words we hear from Clark are a chilling distillation of the all-too-familiar tendency of revolutionary visionaries to dismiss the human costs of their ideological designs: “What’s more important? Physical survival of an accidental human horde or idea survival? So what if nations more barbarian than ours defeat us militarily? Probably we should just lie down and let them come. Because sooner or later, they’ll get it, the exemplary message will sink in” (60–61). We never learn exactly what idea will survive or what “the exemplary message” is. Between Brown’s nonideological approach to politics and Clark’s completely obscure radicalism, Coover crafts a fable wholly free of identifiable partisan content.

The Cat is thus not a creature of the Left or the Right, but of the fusion of celebrity, spectacle, cynicism, and revolutionary zeal to which all democratic parties and movements are susceptible. *CHP* thus suggests we are prone to such conflagrations in our politics for reasons that transcend ideology and are woven into the very fabric of our political culture, perhaps into the nature of democracy itself. Coover’s political vision is thus aligned, at least superficially, with Plato’s critique of democracy.²⁰ But to appreciate the most substantial political insights of *CHP*, we must move beyond plot and explore how the structural components of the text help develop insights about the most fundamental elements of American political culture.

Politics as Metafiction

CHP is among the clearest and most precise expressions of an insight essential to Coover’s worldview: the degree to which fiction making and interpretation are at the very core of all human experience.²¹ As Larry McCaffery explains:

The metafictionist begins with the assumption that we are forever locked within a world shaped by language and subjective (i.e. *fictional*) forms developed to organize our relationship to the world in a coherent

²⁰For a similar connection between Plato and our political moment, see Andrew Sullivan, “Democracies End When They Are Too Democratic,” *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2016.

²¹Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover*; Cope, *Robert Coover’s Fictions*.

fashion.... Our participation in the world involves the projection of our deepest hopes, fears, and needs onto reality in various fictionalized forms. These forms are embodied in cultural and ideological discourse, which play a crucial role in shaping the individual's response to reality.²²

CHP takes this metafictional conception of life and locates it squarely in the realm of US electoral politics. This is not to suggest it is the exclusive insight of postmodern metafiction that what we experience as reality—especially in politics—is built upon fictions, myths, and illusions. Whether it is Plato's advocacy for noble lies, Machiavelli's instruction to keep the people "satisfied and stupefied," Burke's praise of "pleasing illusions," or Edmund Morgan's assertion that "Government requires make-believe,"²³ there is a widespread recognition that politics is, among other things, a practice of crafting and interpreting fictions. Politics as metafiction is thus not a wholly novel vision of political life. Rather, Coover's presentation of politics as metafiction puts his work in productive conversation with these thinkers and texts, offering a new way to help comprehend a phenomenon that has been recognized over centuries of political thought and practice, but remains difficult to grasp, hard to explain, and nearly impossible to live with conscious awareness of on a day-to-day basis.²⁴

The simplest way to describe this phenomenon is to say life is constituted by social constructs. Yet as we all know, it is easy enough to declare something a social construct, but much more difficult to comprehend how it goes about being constructed and how to exist in light of this awareness.²⁵ This is where exemplary fictions like *CHP* are of such value to philosophers and citizens alike. Reading *CHP* helps to open us up to the ways in which our experience of ostensibly empirical political reality is mediated by countless myths, fictions, and imagined entities; and furthermore that despite our experience of

²²Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 6.

²³Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 382ae, 414b–417b; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 30; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 67; Edmund Morgan, *Inventing the People* (New York: Norton, 1988), 13.

²⁴David Roochnik, "Responsible Fictions," in *Responsibility*, ed. Barbara Darling-Smith (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 15–26, connects this insight to a wide range of thinkers, from Homer and Aristotle to Hume.

²⁵Searle, for example, describes the challenge of perceiving and analyzing "the invisible structure of social reality" (John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* [New York: Free Press, 1995], 5–6). And Haslanger describes the difficulties and complications associated with what she calls "the debunking project" of attempting to bring about conscious awareness of social constructions in order to undermine false perceptions of naturalness (Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 113–38).

these as exogenous to us, we are in fact active participants in the creation of these fictional elements of our civic lives whether we know it or not.

In addition to drawing readers into awareness of the metafictional dimensions of political life, Coover's presentation of politics as metafiction is likely to be particularly useful in our political moment by highlighting two key elements of this phenomenon. The first is that politics as metafiction is fundamentally democratic, insofar as we all participate in dialectical fiction-making, through processes of interpretation and remaking in light of those interpretations. The second is that we are never crafting new fictions whole cloth. Our political fictions are always reliant on preexisting materials of our world, whether factual or fictional, and thus can never be purposefully constructed wholly anew, in large part because we are always doing it together whether we know it or not. Metafiction helps remind us that neither the fictional world of our literature nor the fictional world of our waking life is a world of pure imagination. And despite familiar notions of a socially constructed world, what Coover and other practitioners of metafiction do that is relatively novel is to make awareness of the fictional undercurrents of life explicit for both readers of and characters in their work. Through both form and content, they demonstrate to us that we are living in a world mediated by fictions that are partially of our own making. We may know on some level that myths and fictions underlie our experience of reality, but reading a metafictional text like *CHP* helps to bring about a kind of conscious awareness of the narrative and conceptual instabilities of life.

In short, what *CHP* suggests is not simply that politics is a system with fictional elements at its core, but that the practices of electoral politics make politics itself a metafictional enterprise.²⁶ It is not that Coover is using metafiction to reveal the fictions of politics. He is instead recasting politics as metafiction by revealing the mechanisms of simultaneous creation and reinterpretation of symbols, figures, and narratives in politics.

Ambiguity and Interpretation

The Cat is a compellingly ambiguous figure, upon whom supporters and opponents may project nearly any political meaning. We are given ample reason to suspect the Cat is simply a buffoon. At no point does he so much as speak in coherent sentences, let alone betray any sort of comprehension of the political significance of his candidacy. It would be reasonable to speculate, as Brown does, that the Cat is not entirely aware he is running for president (53; 62–63). If the Cat has no idea what he is doing, then any radical transformation will be due either to the machinations of operatives like Clark and Brown, or to the forces that led the voters to support such a

²⁶McCaffery, *Metafictional Muse*, 26.

transparently unfit candidate.²⁷ In this way, Coover subtly shifts responsibility away from the celebrity figurehead and toward both political operatives and popular majorities, all of whom participate in the project of creative interpretation of the Cat.

As noted above, one of the most delightful bits of intertextual flourish in *CHP* is the way Coover embeds interpretations of Dr. Seuss stories as political fables within his own *Political Fable*, like a kind of nested doll, which is drawn on both in the construction of the text itself and within the world of the story. The Seuss books exist in the world of the novel, but they are stories about a real Cat (26–28). They serve as sources for the Cat’s behavior, words, and personality (his entrance in the convention is a riff on *The Cat in the Hat*, and his spraying of pink paint is a riff on *Comes Back*), and the characters in *CHP* also recall the books to help them comprehend the Cat. As mentioned above, Sam calls the Cat “a living legend” because “a whole new generation of voters ... has grown up on his tales” (21). Brown comforts himself with the knowledge that in the books the Cat “always cleaned up his own messes” (30). Thus Coover and his characters simultaneously draw upon their interpretations of the Seuss texts in a kind of collaborative construction of *CHP*’s political fable. And like the characters in the novel, we are reacting simultaneously to our conceptions of the original texts as a background for interpreting the Cat as he acts in the space of the text.

In this way, *CHP* suggests that the key to politics is the art of interpretation, which itself involves not just reading, but the persuasive retelling, of texts. Thinking of politics as metafiction in this way may help us comprehend some of the more peculiar and maddening elements of our political culture. *CHP* highlights the ways in which candidates are themselves kinds of post-modern texts: they craft narratives about themselves, about the country, and about “the people” which are constructed from the existing stock of narratives, symbols, and figures littering US political history and culture. These metafictional texts are then received and interpreted by citizens who both project meaning upon these texts and use them to craft new collaborative texts through mechanisms like grassroots activism, participation in opinion polling, and voting behavior. These create campaign “narratives” that then affect candidate and voter behavior.²⁸

We can see these metafictional processes clearly if we recall that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were perhaps the two most well-known nonincumbent candidates in history. In this context, everything seen by voters

²⁷Coover’s other Nixon book involves an analogous concern with the cynical political employment of a perhaps unaware figure: Robert Coover, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears* (London: Minerva, 1989), 85.

²⁸Joan Didion lamented such narratives as distortions of factual reality imposed upon the public (Joan Didion, *Political Fictions* [New York: Knopf, 2001]). Maureen Whitebrook criticizes her analysis as naive in terms that align with my reading of Coover in *Identity, Narrative, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2014).

was interpreted against the backdrop of preexisting narratives and perceptions about the candidates. Voters were not simply reacting to the campaigns as they unfolded, but contextualizing everything in terms of conceptions formed through memories of the previous administrations, half-watched episodes of *The Apprentice*, and countless hours of subliminally internalized headlines and chyrons. We might also recall the truism that the only damaging gaffe is one that reinforces a perceived weakness or plays into a preexisting narrative.²⁹

Brown explains to Clark that a politician's greatest asset is "meaningful or potent ambiguity" (26). Coover thus suggests we desire the ability to freely interpret because there is a certain power in interpretation. It is the act—whether conscious or not—of bringing meaning into the world and imposing a kind of order on the semblance of chaos. This is precisely what is so powerful about the Cat according to Clark, who provides an example to show how the stories are ambiguous enough to be interpreted in whatever way is most pleasing to the reader: "For Joe, the two stories are parables of the foibles of diplomacy, the first being about the effectiveness of air power, followed by technological recovery, the second about the eradication of the, uh, Red menace by atomic power" (27). The political function of interpretation emerges as an even more prominent theme once it becomes clear that the characters are not merely interpreting the Seuss stories, but are constantly creatively interpreting the Cat's actions on the campaign trail. Just as Coover massages Seuss's text to draw out political meaning, thus inspiring readers to do the same to his, so too do the campaign surrogates massage the Cat's antics for their underlying political significance: "What the Cat's trying to say, you see, is that things aren't always what they seem, life is unpredictable, and so to thine own self be true, because you can fool all of the people all of the time, but not ... yes, that's right, now you're getting it" (48). Among the subtler points suggested here is that interpretation is an act of complicity on the part of the operatives, and presumably any supporters who engage in similar interpretive projections: "Not only did the Cat's acts insist on a lot of interpreting ..., but after suffering through a couple of his spectacles, people simply needed the reassurance of normal human beings around them" (48–49). These surrogates not only provide plausible interpretations of the Cat's absurd antics, but they also implicitly work to convince voters that there is nothing terribly outrageous going on. If "normal human beings" are speaking on behalf of the Cat, he can't be that dangerous, right? The novel suggests that normalization is a product of interpretation.

The power of ambiguity and interpretation thus propels the Cat's success. The Cat remains oblique enough to be a repository for any and all political ideas. Although Clark supports the Cat in service of "a total revolution"

²⁹Recall that "potatoe" hurt Quayle because he was already perceived as dim, but it did not hurt egghead Obama to say he had visited fifty-seven states. See Dan Amira, "A Taxonomy of Gaffes," *New York Magazine*, June 14, 2012.

(25), he encourages this purposeful ambiguity, recognizing that the Cat is a powerful political force precisely because he is a figure upon which anyone can readily project their own ideas. And for all of Clark's clearly malevolent machinations, there is reason to wonder if he is not also wildly projecting. The Cat is, in other words, a walking fable that the people are all too happy to interpret in ways that fit their preferences or temperaments.

In the context of electoral politics, when campaigns speak of narrative and messaging, they are tapping into this underlying truth about the metafictional nature of democratic politics. We want political phenomena to cohere into a patterned narrative that encompasses our experiences, observations, principles, and desires into something that can be affirmed by supporting a candidate. Projecting hopes and fears onto a candidate is a perfectly ordinary political practice that may not seem to require a conception of metafiction to comprehend. Yet what a conception of politics as metafiction helps us see is the way citizens, candidates, and the media all participate in the democratic process of collectively writing and reinterpreting our civic fictions. We are constantly engaging with the world through the lens of imaginative fictions and then encountering new phenomena, which we interpret in light of those fictions. Coover's fable thus depicts democratic citizens as readers engaged in the metafictional project of the dialectical creation of new meanings out of unstable, yet shared, texts.

The final act of interpretive projection in *CHP* reframes the Cat as a heroic martyr after his death. This allows Brown to propel his original candidates to victory in a kind of sorrowful tribute campaign to the Cat, who is honored by the new president with a new national holiday. To appreciate the significance of this ultimate act of political metafiction, we need to look carefully at the climactic scene of the novel—the violent public execution of the Cat—and what it suggests about the story we tell ourselves about America.

The Story of America

The hallucination brought on by eating the Cat is a revelation of what we are unselfconsciously doing as practitioners of metafictional politics. The emergence of the Cat is a particularly spectacular manifestation of our practices of metafictional politics, but what he reveals is that our politics is always and everywhere a practice of metafictional fabulism. This, Coover suggests, is what it means to tell—which is to say, cowrite—the story of America.

In what is perhaps the most magnificent passage in the novel, following the wild orgy that accompanied the burning of the Cat, which he describes as “the Great American Dream in oily actuality” (64–65), Brown recounts the hallucinatory visions brought on by eating the Cat's meat:

The vision was all red, white, and blue, shot through with stars, bars, and silver bullets. The whole hoopla of American history stormed through our exploded minds, all the massacres, motherings, couplings, and

connivings, all the baseball games, PTA meetings, bloodbaths, old movies, and piracies. We lived through gold-digging, witch-burning, lumberjacking, tax-collecting, and barn-raising. Presidents and prophets fought for rostrums by the dozens. We saw everything, from George Washington reading the graffiti while straining over a constipated shit in Middlebrook, New Jersey, to Teddy Roosevelt whaling his kids, from Johnson and Kennedy shooting it out on a dry dusty street in a deserted cowtown to Ben Franklin getting struck by lightning while jacking off on a rooftop in Paris. It was all there, I can't begin to tell it, all the flag-waving, rip-staving, truck-driving, gun-toting, ram-squaddled, ring-tail-roaring, bronc-breaking, A-bombing, drag-racing, Christ-kissing, bootlegging, coffee-drinking, pig-fucking tale of it all. (65–66)

Lest we mistake this for mere flight of postmodern absurdity, Coover plants the suggestion that this wild trip through American history is a function of the Cat's centrality to the American story:

And through it all, I kept catching glimpses of the Cat in the Hat, gunning Japs out of the sky over Hollywood, humping B'rer Rabbit's tar-baby, giving Custer what-for at Little Big Horn, pulling aces out of his sleeves in New Orleans; now he was in a peruke signing the declaration of Independence with a ballpoint pen, then in a sou'wester going down with the *Maine*, next leaping with a smirk and a daisy in his teeth out of the President's box onto the stage of Ford's Theater, inventing the cotton gin, stoking Casey Jones' fires, lopping off heads at Barnegat with Captain Kidd, boo-hooing with Sam Tilden and teeing off with Bing Crosby. (66)

Whatever it is that the Cat represents has been with us from the very beginning, hiding in the darkest corners of our history. The story of America, as revealed in the Cat-meat-fueled vision, is one that takes the vile and disgusting, the violent and base, the bodily and shameful and sanitizes and repackages them into the myths and rituals and ideals that constitute the civic religion we call democracy. And the Cat is the representation of the spirit of chaos and disorder that is momentarily unleashed only to be reintegrated into the civic and moral fabric of the nation. There has always been a Cat, there will always be a Cat, but it is essential to the American sense of self that we disavow any and all knowledge of or fealty to the Cat. Everything the Cat represents is woven into the fabric of the American character. Like the innumerable commentators who have warned us against treating Trump as a thing that has happened to us, Coover suggests that the Cat is part of our political culture, our national character, our civic religion that goes by the name of democracy. And it is not meant to be a compliment.

Lest we forget, it was not by appeal to the better angels of our nature that the Cat was defeated, but instead by the threat of a military coup and the actuality of a public execution. The Cat is not defeated by the forces of reason, moderation, and decency, but is instead viciously murdered (and eaten!) by a depraved mob whose actions had been orchestrated by the very forces of political cynicism that helped propel the Cat to prominence. Thus, the

danger of the Cat seems not to be in what he might or might not actually do as president, but in what his candidacy does to—or brings out in—the people; perhaps what it reveals about the true nature of the democratic character. And this is likely to be Coover's most important insight for comprehending the current political moment.

Coover's fable is not in the business of directly answering what it is the Cat represents, but rather of putting us in mind of patterns of behavior that invite us to confront that question. Whether the spirit unleashed by the Cat is the spirit of *ressentiment* in the liberal democratic character, the nihilistic underbelly of the spirit of equality, the longing for order amid the psychological dissatisfactions of freedom, or the logical conclusion of decades of organizing politics around "ultra-revanchist songstresses of domination and violence," the point is the same.³⁰ What it is about the American character that both enabled and ultimately destroyed the Cat is not exorcised by his demise, but is once again subsumed in our collective willingness to sanctify our pathological will to violence through rituals of civic religion.

As noted above, *CHP* is but one among many works in which Coover displays what Kathryn Hume describes as "a penchant for lynch mobs trying to tear someone apart and for scapegoat victims."³¹ The recurrence of these tropes helps situate *CHP* within Coover's larger worldview and clarify the scope of its political teaching. Because apocalyptic, sacrificial conflagrations are as much a hazard to small mining towns (in *Origin of the Brunists*) and fantasy baseball enthusiasts (in *Universal Baseball*) as they are to presidential elections, such violent chaos is not particular to the nature of American politics, but rather a tragic feature of the human condition. Coover highlights the propensity for outbreaks of chaotic violence fueled by our darkest tendencies to occur wherever previously stable fictions break down. Whether it is possible to overcome such darkness, or at least prevent its most cruel manifestations, is the key question. We might interpret *CHP* as indicating nothing can be done about periodic devolutions into chaos and violence. Such a reading suggests the Cat is like a political hundred-year flood: the best thing to do is to keep our heads down and try not to get caught in the storm. There may be no way to definitively discount such a cynical reading, given the nature of cynicism to be reductive and dismissive of any attempts to dislodge it.

³⁰These are the likely perspectives of Nietzsche, Tocqueville or Plato, Fromm, and Cory Robin, respectively. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Plato, *Republic*; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969); Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, 1994); Corey Robin, "From Reagan to Trump: Donald Trump's Brand of Reaction Is Particularly Noxious, but It Sits Comfortably in the Reagan Tradition," *Jacobin Magazine*, Aug 1, 2016.

³¹Hume, "Metaphysics of Bondage," 833. She further notes that "a related triad of archetypes—victim, sacrifice, scapegoat—is fundamental to his vision," and that "the Cat in the Hat is all three—victim, sacrifice, and scapegoat" ("The Naked and the Mythic," 138).

But against such tendencies, Coover consistently positions himself as a moralist who believes in human agency.³² Against such defeatist visions, Coover recoils at the cruelty of sacrificial violence and finds in the entropy of human society a space and inspiration for constructive, even moral, action.³³ To fully appreciate what Coover's fable has to teach us, we must therefore explore what it suggests moral political agency might look like.

What Have We Learned?

The clearest lesson from this fable is that if we want to comprehend the emergence of an absurd demagogue, we should look to the varieties of cynicism in our politics, the outsized adoration of celebrity, and the will to violence, spectacle, and myth making interwoven into the American character. So, what should we do about it? Some readers have discerned a radical teaching in *CHP*, whereas others read it as a hopeful plea for liberal rationalism. I am unpersuaded by both interpretations and will make the case for a Platonic (of a sort) reading.

The Radical Reading

Partisans of a radical, postmodern reading, such as Lois Gordon and Kathryn Hume, see the Cat not as a terrifying harbinger of celebrity-fueled neofascism, but as a force for liberation who "remind[s] us of our self-imposed chains, and as a society, we kill them rather than admit that we have enslaved ourselves to lives of pointless drudgery, and bound ourselves to contemptible social and political rituals."³⁴ This reading implicitly sides with Clark, whose radical program might "free people from their dependence on history and all the other structures and illusions that have inhibited and depressed them."³⁵ The analogy to contemporary politics is clear enough. Trump supporters longing for radical transformation would endorse this reading, along with leftist radicals who speculated that Trump could inadvertently "bring the revolution immediately," by destabilizing the system.³⁶

³²Cf. Frank Gado, ed., *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 152–57.

³³Heckard persuasively reads Coover's moral vision as fundamentally humanist, concluding that "the heart of Coover's fiction ... [is] freedom from stifling literary conventions, from doctrines and sweeping assumptions about human nature, from anything that prevents the individual from becoming clearly conscious of his own consciousness" ("Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom," 226).

³⁴Hume, "The Naked and the Mythic," 140.

³⁵Gordon, *Universal Fictionmaking Process*, 143.

³⁶Matt Wilstein, "Susan Sarandon: Trump Might Be Better for America than Hillary Clinton," *Daily Beast*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/03/29/susan-sarandon-trump-might-be-better-for-america-than-hillary-clinton.html>.

Yet this reading ignores the evidence that Clark is a malevolent figure with no regard for democracy, decency, or human life. And there is simply no indication, either in the text or in Coover's larger body of work, that he endorses such a destructive and callous vision of politics. Instead, Coover's work consistently pushes readers to empathize with the kind, the sensitive, the reasonable, and the naive, and to recoil at the ways they are made victims of malevolent forces beyond their control or comprehension.³⁷ Coover reliably sides with the decent folks who get forgotten and mistreated amid the grand sweep of sociopolitical myth-making, suggesting *CHP* should be read as warning against exactly this kind of radical utopianism.³⁸ In other words, Coover urges his readers to answer Clark's rhetorical question, "What's more important? Physical survival of an accidental human horde or idea survival?" (60) in favor of the human horde.

Within the context of *CHP*, this emphasis on decency emerges through Brown's friendship with Sam, who is the only character for whom Brown expresses any kind of real affection. Whereas everything surrounding the Cat is presented at a fevered pitch of lunacy, the pace slows down to let us experience their friendship in a quiet moment of conversation (51–53), perhaps to build just enough emotional investment to share in Brown's devastation at Sam's death: "Sam's should have [shocked the nation], but no one paid much attention to it; it was like a normal and almost proper supporting casualty. I wept like a goddamn baby about it. I kept seeing Sam's gentle face with that hole in it" (67). Sam's undeserved end is the kind of invisible sacrifice of innocent victims that makes Coover recoil at the chaos longed for by radicals like Clark. And, indeed, the liberal rationalist reading of the text can be most persuasively built by focusing on Sam.

The Rationalist Reading

The rationalist reading advocates curing our addiction to spectacle and casting off our illusions to create a more rational democracy. In this reading, Sam is the tragic hero: a believer in reason and moderation doomed by his naive faith in decency. Refusing to go along with the

³⁷Heckard, "Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom."

³⁸A great example is "The Brother," Coover's sly rewrite of the Noah myth, told from the perspective of Noah's decent and hardworking brother who thinks Noah is crazy, but helps build the ark out of fraternal affection. But when the rains come and he seeks shelter in the ark, Noah turns his back on his desperate kin. We then experience with the brother the discovery of his dead wife and leave him on a dry hilltop, soon to be swallowed up by the flood along with the rest of the sinners. As Heckard observes, the moral force of this story comes from the way Coover turns our attention to "the suffering of the everyday people who were left behind to drown." See Robert Coover, *Pricksongs & Descants* (New York: Grove, 2000), 92–98, with Heckard, "Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom," 219.

assassination plot, Sam believes reason can prevail: “Sam had his [flaw]: he believed in reason. He came there to *talk* to those people, for Christ’s sake! Oh, poor sweet Sam! ‘*Violence* solves nothing!’ he cried out, standing in front of the cat, and somebody shot him in the head” (62). Sam is a victim of his own fundamental decency. Although a more radical or cynical disposition might have saved him, we empathize with him in his victimhood precisely for his refusal to succumb to the vices that saved Clark and Brown.

The rationalist reading shares with the radical reading a hope for liberation, but one of a distinctly milder sort. The rationalist seeks liberation from celebrity-obsessed, spectacle-laden politics fueled by cynical or ideological manipulation through the assertion of clear-eyed reason against the politics of myth making. Consciousness of the fictional undercurrents of our political order, this reading suggests, empowers us to cast off childish dependence on illusions and craft a new politics in the light of reason. Thus, Margaret Heckard reads Coover as offering “freedom from ... anything that prevents the individual from becoming clearly conscious of his own consciousness.”³⁹ This is the reading for beleaguered liberals longing to escape the supposed “post-truth” era in American politics. But for Coover to lament the post-fact society, he would have to demonstrate some hope for a fact-centric world. Instead, Coover’s emphasis on the permanence of fiction making in human life undermines the rationalist reading.

Rather than craft his metafictional tales to guide readers out of a life of illusion, Coover emphasizes the degree to which “the force of myth and mythopoeic thought is with us for all time.”⁴⁰ This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a fact—even a happy one—about the human condition:

There’s no sense in decrying this fact; on the contrary, it is a useful—even necessary—means of navigating through life. In part because individual human existence is so brief, in part because each single instant of the world is so impossibly complex, we cannot accumulate all the data needed for a complete, objective statement. To hope to behave as though this were possible is to invite paralysis through crushing despair. And so we fabricate; we invent constellations that permit an illusion of order to enable us to get from here to there.⁴¹

Suggesting a future without illusion would cut against these sentiments and at least point toward an illusion-free life, of which perhaps only the incurable cynic Brown seems capable. This capability will serve as the core of the Platonist reading. But first, we must deal with Sam.

Just as the radical reading ignores the cruelty of Sam’s demise, the rationalist reading ignores his complicity and foolishness. Since Clark is a villain in the rationalist reading, it is significant that “it was Sam, more than any of

³⁹Heckard, “Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom,” 226.

⁴⁰Gado, *First Person*, 152.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

us, who carried Clark's special message to the world" (50). Sam is the Cat's most effective surrogate, deploying "just the right soft-sell manner" (53), like any political operative putting a smiling face on malevolent designs. He is as prone to cynicism as Brown, but tempered by weakly liberal principles and strategic naiveté. As a term-limited governor, Sam extended his career by hitching his wagon to the Cat with transparently weak justifications: "He's something of a nut, it's true, or at least that's the way he chooses to come on. Yet it's a charismatic kind of zaniness.... He's funny. He's captivating. And ultimately I think he's sane" (21–22). Sam is thus what Niebuhr calls a foolish child of light, whose naive optimism leads him to fail to perceive not only the true wickedness of "children of darkness" like Clark, but also the corrupting power of self-interest in himself.⁴² He was unprepared to face the chaos unleashed by the Cat and found himself destroyed by what he had helped create and foolishly believed could be controlled. This is less a mark of tragic heroism than Frankensteinian hubris. Sam is better understood as a cautionary tale of foolish complicity than a hero of rationalist resistance.

The Platonist Reading

Given the weaknesses of the radical and rationalist readings, a kind of Platonist reading is more fitting. In particular, *CHP* aligns with Plato's insight that politics will always involve fictions and myth making, from noble lies to shadows in the cave, and that it is incumbent upon those with agency over the myths to be just, wise, and responsible.⁴³ Unlike the radical and rationalist readings, this reading returns our focus to Mr. Brown. I am not suggesting Brown is a philosopher with a well-ordered soul erotically directed toward the good, but merely that he shares with Plato's guardians the wisdom to see beyond the shadows in the cave and the agency to direct them. As Brown asserts: "Politics in a republic is a complex pattern of vectors, some fixed and explicable, some random, some bullish, some inchoate and permutable, some hidden and dynamic, others celebrated through flagging, usually collective, sometimes even cosmic—and a politician's job is to know them and ride them" (6). Brown is not the kind of godlike myth-maker Coover depicts in *Origin of the Brunists* or *Universal Baseball Association*, but is instead a potential caretaker of civic myths. And as Lois Gordon notes, he is unique among the characters in

⁴²Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.

⁴³My reading of Plato is largely in line with David Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's "Republic"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) and David Roochnik, "The Political Pessimism of Plato's *Republic*," *American Dialectic* 2, no. 2 (2012): 92–116; and perhaps to a slightly lesser degree, Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). It is thus also similar to Sullivan, "Democracies End."

CHP in that he understands not only the fictional currencies of politics, but also the limitations imposed by human nature itself insofar as “people cannot be completely transformed, that the psyche is not formless and empty.”⁴⁴ Brown’s wisdom comes from recognizing the power and limitations of political fictions. People can neither be radically transformed through political will, nor can they be liberated from their reliance on fiction. This is why Socrates makes the philosophers return to the cave and rule amid the shadows.⁴⁵

But, of course, the practices of fiction making can be dangerous, both to individuals and political communities. As Paul Orlov notes, “a pattern prevailing throughout all of Coover’s novels” is that the creation of civic and religious myths “often lead[s] to the scapegoating of individuals sacrificed for what society considers its common good.”⁴⁶ Coover also repeatedly depicts people trapped in their own myth making, calling to mind Socrates’s offhand remark that perhaps even the guardians can be persuaded to believe the noble lies.⁴⁷ McCaffery explains Coover’s warnings about political mythologies:

The chief danger ... [is] the danger of dogmatizing beliefs, the danger of taking self-generated fictions too literally, the danger of relying too completely on fragile, oversimplified systems (such as historical or political perspectives) and of not seeing how utterly inadequate they are to deal with the enormously complex, constantly shifting nature of reality.⁴⁸

Yet despite his recognition of the destructive potential of civic myths, there is an undeniable strain of public-spiritedness in his depiction of myth making.⁴⁹ Reliance on destructive or dead myths may bring out the worst in us, but Coover maintains that “the only way to struggle against myth is on myth’s own ground.”⁵⁰ He thus places great responsibility on the shoulders of those conscious of the process—they must neither cravenly appropriate nor

⁴⁴Gordon, *Universal Fictionmaking Process*, 145.

⁴⁵Plato, *Republic* 519d–520e.

⁴⁶Paul A. Orlov, “A Fiction of Politically Fantastic ‘Facts’: Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*,” in *Politics and the Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, ed. Adam J. Sorkin (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 112.

⁴⁷McCaffery, *Metafictional Muse*, 4–5, 26.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 86–87.

⁴⁹As Coover explains in an interview with Frank Gado, “we are all creating fictions all the time, out of necessity. We constantly test them against the experience of life. Some continue to be functional; we are content to let them be rather than to try to analyze them and, in the process, forget something else that is even more important. Others outlive their usefulness. They disturb life in some unnecessary way, and so it becomes necessary to break them up and perhaps change their force” (Gado, *First Person*, 152).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 153–54.

cynically abdicate the responsibility to craft and direct civic myths. Coover asserts, “the fiction maker’s function is to furnish better fictions with which we can re-form our notions of things.”⁵¹ And as McCaffery notes, “the point is not at all *to do away* with metaphors and fictions,” but rather, “to replace them with fresher, more vital constructions.”⁵² While we know from the attractions of the radical reading that myth makers may get swept up in the thrill of creation, succumbing to apocalyptic fantasies of the sort peddled by Clark, the thrust of Coover’s moral vision—in *CHP* and elsewhere—is to shore up our resistance against these temptations.⁵³ Against such tendencies, Coover suggests the marker of a “better fiction” is neither its nearness to a more objective reality nor its ability to transform society, but rather its capacity to help us avoid cruelty and destruction.

Because our politics will always be built upon an edifice of delicate fictions and because the enduring features of our democratic character make it likely we will be faced with more Cats, *CHP* suggests that those conscious of these mechanisms must try to hold the chaos and potential for cruelty at bay. It is a warning to those, like Brown, who see the fictions for what they are. We cannot beam sunlight into the cave, nor can we drag all the citizens out into the light. Our best hope is to recognize the limitations of political circumstance and human nature; to ensure that the shadows are just and the illusions are life-giving ones. Unlike Plato, Coover’s vision relies not on philosophers guided by the light of reason, but rather on readers and writers guided by sensitivities to the characters with whom they have been entrusted. As Richard Andersen notes in his interpretation of *Pricksongs & Descants*, Coover “introduces to literature the role of the reader as an active participant in the fiction he is reading” as a tool for sensitizing readers to the need to guard against the cruelties made possible by unthinking reliance on destructive mythologies.⁵⁴ As participants in politics as metafiction, we are all simultaneously crafting and interpreting the fictions that surround us. And those, like Brown, who are both conscious of the myth-making process and positioned to have agency over those myths, must proceed with care. They must be sensitive readers and careful writers, refusing to get swept away by wild flights of fancy or succumb to the pleasing illusion that fictional systems have an objective power over us.

Conclusion

The Seuss books present the Cat in the Hat as a force of nature appearing out of nowhere to disrupt the kids’ lives. Coover subverts this element of the

⁵¹Ibid., 149–50.

⁵²McCaffery, *Metafictional Muse*, 27.

⁵³L. L. Lee, “Robert Coover’s Moral Vision: *Pricksongs & Descants*,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 23, no. 1 (1986): 63–69.

⁵⁴Andersen, *Robert Coover*, 24.

stories, presenting the Cat as a product of both widespread political forces and elite actions. Thus, if *CHP* really does have something to tell us about Trump, it is how it helps us comprehend the larger forces at work in his rise.

The novel helps us recognize that despite our wanting to see figures like Trump and the Cat as aberrations upon our political culture, they are in fact products of it. Neither Trump nor the Cat should be thought of as a virus attacking a healthy body; instead, the United States was susceptible to infection owing to a preexisting condition. In this way, partisans would be advised to be mindful of how nonideological Coover's fable is: as we have seen, Brown's party is never named, Clark's revolution is neither clearly right nor left, the murderous mob is as diverse as possible, and the Cat speaks only in nonsense. In other words, Coover suggests the Cat is a hazard, not of any party or ideology, but of American democracy itself.

Furthermore, instead of dragging down the partisan infrastructure with him, Coover's fable suggests we will find it surprisingly easy to reintegrate any such episode into the just-so stories we tell about ourselves, never grappling with the underlying forces for which we are ultimately responsible, nor with the twenty-six other cats hiding in that hat. Thanks to the steady hand of the cynics and the public willingness to be led into interpretive projection, a semblance of order is restored without addressing the unstable undercurrents the Cat had uncovered. Again we see echoes of the present, in which Trump is heralded as potentially ushering in a radical transformation, either by exploding hypocrisies of political culture or by destroying the GOP. Despite progressive hopes that his downfall will bring down the structures that enabled his rise, *CHP* suggests the system is equipped to absorb the intrusion of a figure of phenomenal chaotic power, although it is far from clear that this should be taken as any kind of compliment.

Owing to these tendencies in our politics, at the end of the novel the only character we can really hope may have learned something from the ordeal is Mr. Brown. We get the sense he has gained some kind of wisdom and that should the Cat come back—as Coover hints he will—Brown would act differently. At least, we hope he will. And it is in stoking this uncertain hope that Coover hands off the baton to us. We cannot say for sure what Brown has learned or what he will do, so we are gently prodded by Coover to answer for ourselves what learning from this episode, and what proper action in the face of the Cat, would look like. Coover leaves it open precisely to invite us to imagine ourselves in the position, because we are in that position: What would you do if your mother asked you?

And, of course, as any child knows, the Cat in the Hat Comes Back. An anxious public, with their taste for celebrity and spectacle, will allow themselves to be drawn into the orbit of a charming and ambiguous figure promising fun and political transformation. They will, at least at first, pay little mind to the potentially destabilizing effects of the candidacy, nor to the frightening designs of the shadowy ideologues propping up their thrilling savior. All the while, political elites—some too foolish to see the danger and others

too cynical to care—will line up to help build an infrastructure to propel the candidate. The most frightening impulses of the demos will be unleashed until eventually the candidate is swallowed up by the storm of his own making. And before anyone has the chance to examine the forces that brought all this to light—to say nothing of their complicity in it—the whole affair is reabsorbed into the soothing civic mythologies that underwrite politics as usual, and the participants go along their merry way unwittingly prepared to do it all again in due time. And they'll say nobody ever saw it coming.