



Ghost Town

Robert Coover

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A nameless rider plods through the desert toward a dusty Western town shimmering on the horizon. In his latest novel, Robert Coover has taken the familiar form of the Western and turned it inside out. The lonesome stranger reaches the town - or rather, it reaches him - and he becomes part of its gunfights, saloon brawls, bawdy houses, train robberies, and, of course, the choice between the saloon chanteuse or the sweet-faced schoolmistress whom he loves. Throughout, Robert Coover reanimates the Western epics of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, infusing them with the Beckettian echoes, unique comic energy, and exuberant prose that have made him one of the most influential figures in contemporary American literature. It is, as The Washington Post Book World put it, "a fast-forward, ribald vision of the American West, a free-for-all that slides from surreal to ridiculous like a circus-goer's grin through a funhouse mirror . . . a heady frisson, a salon entertainment, one helluva ride."

Ghost Town Details

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From Reader Review Ghost Town for online ebook

Maciek says

Not funny ha-ha, but funny weird.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Aint Nuthin But a Ghost Town

"Bleak horizon under a glazed sky, flat desert, clumps of sage, scrub, distant butte, lone rider. This is a land of sand, dry rocks, and dead things. Buzzard country. Minimalism. And he is migrating through it. He is leathery and sunburnt and old as the hills. Yet just a kid. Who likes western comics. Won't ever be anything else. He is alone again in the desert. What he's aiming at is a town over on the far horizon. The town's still out there, sitting on the edge like a gateway to the hidden part of the sky. You'll never git thar, kid. Aint nuthin but a ghost town. It's got no more meanin than writin in the sand with yer dick when the wind's up. To keep goin on, knowin that, sufferin that, is plain stupid. Loco, in fact. But to keep goin on, in the face a such shit, a such futility and stupidity and veritable craziness - that, son, that is fuckin suh-blime."

This Jest Aint Tasteful, Sheriff!

For the first two-thirds of this suh-blime pastiche of the western novel, it seems as if Coover is writing with a degree of condescension for the form. He packs into it his own idiosyncratic preoccupations with sex (powdered breasts, ruby nipples, reddened buttocks, erect penises and explosive ejaculations), violence and metafiction, as if to enrich the original form and make it worthy.

This Aint How It Oughter Be!

It's relevant that some parts of the novel (it's not hard to guess which) first appeared in the pages of Playboy. The kid sounds like a typical reader:

"I dont want to be larnt. I jest aint the settlin-down kind...He is a drifter and one whose history escapes him even as he experiences it, and yet to drift is to adventure and to overstudy one's history is to be ruled by it, and he is above all a free man, intent on pursuing his own meaning even if there is none."

On the other hand, by the time we get to the last 50 pages, there is a change of narrative and tone: Coover ensures that the kid fails to end up with his one true love, the schoolmarm, because she corrects his grammar and forces him to conform with linguistic and social conventions.

He wasn't made for civilisation or propriety or book-larnin. Westerns really are his thing. He reverts to being a character in a legendary tale of violence and ribaldry that resembles puerile comic strips and adults-only Disney cartoons (in which beautiful women - pagan native American princesses, big-breasted, red-headed barroom chanteuses and slender dark-haired schoolmarms alike - are forever available and acquiescent). Ironically, he remains at home, alone, in the desert, rather than in the mythical society of the town beyond the shimmering horizon.

Despite turning his back on the schoolmarm and the town, the kid's imagination continues to be fueled by these fantasies. They are all the kid needs. He doesn't need massive post-modernist encyclopaedic novels. Likewise Coover (as can Rikki Ducornet and John Hawkes and, I would add, Angela Carter) can say and do everything they want to with the novel form in a book that is a mere 147 pages long.

Even when you compare "*Ghost Town*" with the longer "*The Public Burning*", we still see the protagonist, the kid, essentially enter the world of a comic book, though unlike Richard Nixon, he comes out alive on the other side.

Both of Coover's novels feel like a treatment or storyboard for a filmisation of a comic book. It's as if he's writing a novel inspired by each cell of the proposed film. Coover's job is simply to animate the fantasy. And ours.

Like Sumthin Dreamt and Come to Life

"This high-minded overview is disrupted and he is brought swiftly down to earth again and back behind his own two eyes, when before those eyes appears, behind a dust-grimed window of a house well beyond the town centre, a beautiful woman, very pale, dark hair done up in a tight bun, dressed all in black and staring out at him, as though in judgement, or else in longing. He pauses, transfixed by the inviolable purity of her framed visage, like something dreamt and come to life; but as, in a daze, he steps toward her, she fades back out of sight."

Sub_zero says

Ciudad fantasma es, por decirlo de algún modo, un potente western alucinógeno en el que su protagonista (un forastero errante que acaba siendo engullido por un espejismo en forma de ciudad) es víctima de las más estupefacientes aventuras. Un particular homenaje a las historias del salvaje oeste americano en el que Coover, haciendo alarde de una espectacular y desviada imaginación, dispara imparables ráfagas de humor negro, casquería e indudable mala leche. Y aunque en algunos momentos (la mayoría, a decir verdad) no sepas muy bien qué está pasando ni quién está entre las piernas de quién, es imposible permanecer ajeno al demoledor estilo de Coover y a su capacidad para entonar párrafos enteros con una sugerente musicalidad que sencillamente hipnotiza. *Ciudad fantasma* es una obra rara, inusual, extraña y arriesgada... pero de un modo que despierta mi más profunda admiración. Todo un descubrimiento.

Josh says

(3.5) I've read 2 books now by the acclaimed Robert Coover: *The Origin of the Brunists* and now, *Ghost Town*. In the 32 year difference between these two, I found that Coover's style hasn't really changed, but has metamorphosed into something a bit different (for me, at least) like the main character does from crotchety-no name murderous villain to perhaps an anti-hero of sorts among an insane array of characters. This anti-hero is quite the unreliable narrator in quite the unreliable setting. This ghostly **town** reminds me initially of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania in Ramis's *Groundhog Day*. It stays the same as our nameless character goes in and out of it, trying to escape, but then transforms into a Rubik's Cube or lottery glass ball of numbers from 1 to infinity. It's an ever-shifting Tetris-like anomaly, like forging iron ore into steel or a butterfly emerging from its cocoon; as concrete as the process is, you still never know what to expect.

Coover's ability to create an atmosphere is akin to McCarthy (as has been mentioned a thousand times already), but I won't say he's following Cormac's path by any means. He strays away from that sometimes convoluted sense of scenery and creates a scenario unlike anything you've quite read before. The humor is slapstick, in your face, vulgarly impossible and that's what makes it what it is: an overly creative mysterious postmodern farce on the old wild west, Coover style.

Here's a couple examples:

"He is leathery and sunburnt and old as the hills. Yet just a kid. Won't ever be anything else.

It wasn't always like this. There were mountains before, a rugged and dangerous terrain, with crags and chasms, raging rivers in deep gorges, and dense forests, unsociably inhabited. He's known snakebites, mountain lion and wolfpack attacks, blizzards and thunderstorms, frostbite, windburn, gnats and locusts and mosquitoes, grizzlies too, cinch bugs, arrow wounds--a black-haired scalp, hair braided with shells and beads, is strung from his gunbelt, though if asked he couldn't say where it came from, just something that happened, must have. Back then, he was maybe chasing someone or something. Or was being chased, some vague threat at his back, that's mostly what he remembers now from that time, an overwhelming feeling of danger, or else of despair, that filled the air whenever the sky darkened or the trail petered out. He had to bury someone on one occasion, as he recalls, someone like a brother, only the dead man in the hole he'd dug wasn't really dead but kept moving blindly, kicking the dirt away, in fact he was himself the one who kept twisting and turning, the one blindly kicking, he was down in the burial pit with dirt peppering his face, but then he wasn't again, and the one who was crawling out suddenly to flail at the air, flesh sliding off the bone like lard off a hot pan; so he left that place, to go chase someone, or to be chased, or finally just to move on to somewhere else, not to see things like that."

"Now whut's all this ruckus about, Belle?

It's them devil injuns, sheriff! They're jest at it alla time!

We caint git no peace! squawks an ancient hunchbacked granny in a hand-sewn cape and slat bonnet, stroking her beard with gnarled spidery fingers. It jest aint natcheral!

And they fuck dirty, sheriff, says an ugly wall-eyed woman dressed up in a velvet and silk wedding gown, with her fat hairy belly sticking out. Not like decent folk do.

They like t'stick it in yu all over the place, a scar-faced motherly type with a missing ear explains. Ifn y'aint got enuf holes they make some new ones! And she opens up the front of her dress to show him a few.

Now, holt on a minnit, mam!

And lookit the dirty pitchers they drewed all over my butt! says another, raising her skirts, which look more like window curtains, to show him her hairy behind, vividly decorated with a sacred buffalo-mating effigy. It's a ourtage is whut it is!

Now dammit, mam, yu jest git covered up thar!"

I don't think this book, even with my limited experience, is where anyone should start if you're interested in checking out Bob, but I don't think it would turn you off of him either. Initially, I gave it a 3, but after thinking over it a day or so, I might as well move it up a bit: he is an original.

Lukas Evan says

One of the only post-modern westerns that I know of. And, yeah, some might say Cormac McCarthy but he's more of a modernist-primitive or something. Robert Coover, best known for "The Public Burning," takes on one of America's signature genres and recasts the tropes and cliches as a kind of absurdist drama reminiscent at times of Beckett and Kafka. By turns bloody and surreal, Coover hits on a singular mix of the profane and the baroque for his dialogue (conveniently presented without quotation marks, something McCarthy does too), which anticipates "Deadwood." It is hard to tell whether he genuinely likes the genre and is taking it apart out of love or if he has contempt for it and is killing it with irony and farce. At times it reminded me of Jarmusch's acid western "Dead Man." Interesting, at the very least. Other modern takes on the western: McCarthy, of course, "True Grit," "Butcher's Crossing," "The Brothers Sisters."

Brian says

A month after finishing this novel there have been three or four instances where my mind has recalled a scene from the book involving a game of poker. The reasons for the recollection of this part of the narrative are indecipherable. But I think I understand now that this is how Coover's writing works: you are bitten, you are infected, and like a bad strain of malaria, the symptoms of the disease can manifest themselves at any time, for any reason. It's terminal.

Ghost Town is like a mad scientist literary experiment done to perfection: Mark Leyner, Zane Gray and *Candide* fused into a singular work featuring a protagonist who can't escape from the Town. Is he forever leaving the Town or forever heading towards it? Or is the Town following him? Does it even matter?

Because: it is where he is now, and out here there's nothing to stop for, no turning back either, nothing back there to turn to.

I wouldn't recommend this book to just anybody. I would recommend this book to just everybody.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

I'm on record somewhere as having said that novels are inherently and constitutionally flawed. Well, let me submit *Ghost Town* as a candidate for Flawless Novel. Of course -- it's Coover. It may be the simple similarity in setting and the general black humour orientation, but something here tasted like John Hawkes'

The Beetle Leg. But too the tone and prose and mild disorientation suggest this comparison.

Just for your nihilistic entertainment purposes, one of those great nihilistic post-modern passages ::

"He watches himself as though from high above as he strides down this scorched street of derelict banks and saloons, hardware, dry goods, and grocery stores, stables and brothels, laid out on the desert floor like two parallel lines drawn on a slate for the practice of handwriting, his passage the looped, crossed, and dotted text inscribed between, signifying nothing, and he is reminded at this high remove of something a lawman once told him in ancient times. Livin a life out here is shit, son. It's got no more meanin than writin in the sand with yer dick when the wind's up. To keep goin on, knowin that, sufferin that, is plain stupid. Loco, in fact. But to keep goin on, in the face a such shit, a such futility and stupidity and veritable craziness--that, son, *that* is fuckin suh-blime."

If you need to identify a flaw, well, that phonetic spelling of cowboy=talk might drive you nuts.

See Nate D's excellent review for a more learned reading of this beautiful short novel.

Tony says

Round these parts theres a lot of opinyins about that Cormac McCarthy feller and his book about the West and how it kinda explains America. Blood Meridian is the book whar he done it most famously. It's plenty good, and full of murderin and knife-winkin and to-ing and fro-ing. Very American. But then Cormac went and let hisself be interviewed by thet Operah lady 'n then got chummy with all those Hollywood dyrectors and skinny actresses who walk around with their dinners on a pedestal, which I dont wanna sound anti-booby, but sometimes you kin display em to the point of carycatcher. Ol Cormac seems happy enough in that crowd enyhow. Bin awhile since he wrote enythin about brothers 'n sisters out in the shed, or enythin atall really. But back to that Blood Meridian. Its sposed to be the quinteensenshal novel about back then in America and how it got us to whar we ares now. But Cormac left out a coupla things. Like heartbreak and absurdity and that dreamy part o living.

Which brings me to this'un, which I jest read: Ghost Town. This Robert Coover feller who wrote it, he put all that murderin and rustlin and to-ing and fro-ing in, but added all that stuff what makes a feller spit out his coffee from guffawin. Now heres a pitcher of thet Coover feller they put on the back flap of the book Ima talkin bout:

Looks like a nice feller. Real job. Crew-neck sweater. Sweet smile. Somebody's daddy. Votes the republican ticket. Recycles reglar. Probly got a Doctor Grabow in his pocket. Though what t'hells a doctor know about pipes? But as my favoryte flat-picker, David Bromberg, wunst cautioned, dont let the glasses foolya.

This is one sick human. Ifn he only writes down three-quarters of what he thinks, he should be locked up so-in he caint hurt anyone.

This might be a propyrate time to splain why ima talkin thisa way. See thars this Goodreader reviewer name'a Fernoola or somethin like that. She reads all these confusin books and then writes about em using the confusin language thet the arther used. I dont always unnerstand what shes sayin but it sher is purty and, of

more import, its a style that encourages a lot of likes. Now, Im no Fernoola, dont git me wrong, but I figger this is worth a try.

Speaking of Fernoola, when they make a movie outta this'un, Fernoola could maybe star in the role of the schoolmarm, who hez the sheriff's heart. But more I thaink onit, probly not, cause that schoolmarm had a mean streak. The boys wuz talkin on her one day:

Course she aint sweet alla time.

No, yu're right thar, her disposition aint always the easiets t'git on with.

Mosta the time, in fact, sweet aint the word at all.

And ifn it aint the word, mister, you better go fer cover, cuz for yu know it she'll unleash her upbringing on yu.

The marm is a formidable unleasher of upbringins.

Yu aint jest talkin jackshit, podnuh. Wunst I said aint in fronta her and she got me down and warshed my mouth out with lye soap. Thought I'd die a the foamin wet rot.

She whupped me my arse with a yardstick fer near a hour wunst'n all I done wuz t'fuckin split a danged infinnytif.

Whut's a infinnytif?

Wunst, after the sheriff saves her life, agin:

He sets the marm down and, still gazing off toward the empty horizon, cuts away the rag that gags her. If thet warnt the dangedest thing I ever seen, he says. Saw, she replies sharply, spitting the gag away, and she slaps him. A real cracker that makes his teeth rattle.

So, no, I dont see Fernoola in the role of the schoolmarm. We'd need someone a whole lot more peedantic and tootonic. Ifn you see anyone fittin thet deescription, please tell her to report to central castin. ...(Whup!! Now what you gone and done thet fer?)

Whar wuz I?

Oh, this here Ghost Town. I'd recommend this'un to Nathan and Geoff and the rest of thar posse, tho 'posse' is a little high-falutin for thet buncha disreptile puffyguts and dandified turkeyasses and muzzerbul whelps. Or dumsquizzled lardasses, like thet Ian feller. And fer yu'all get appyplexick and go lookin fer some knotted rope to toss over a tree limb, remember that when I say 'no-account varmint' thet I mean it in the best possibul sense.

I've bin reading this Coover feller fer awhiles now, werkin my way through his or-vrah. He's a sick feller, which probly sez more bout me then him. He parodizes diffrent johnrays. He done fairy tales, and child's stories and porno movies. Baseball. Suburbia, whetever that is. He wrote a book called 'Noir'. Wunder whet that's about.

But I liked this'un best. Maybe cuz I felt comfort in the language.

Fellers, yu know how when yer riding on an interstate and thar's a certain sky? Its clear but yet windswept. So it gives yu a feelin of being inside a great expanse. Yer wrist is dangling on top of the wheel; yer bein very male. But you start puddlin up. An she looks at yu, her face a question, and yu jest shake yer head. Or, you wake up after a hard night, bruised and regretful, but yu know somehow it'll be alright.

This'un was like that. Like a dream yu had. Like what we're proud of. Unashamed.

Livin a life out here is shit, he sez. But there's no need to git all ramparageous. Jest appropriate some potables. And when they tell yu something real bad is gonna happen, jest say, I'm glad to hear it. I wuz afeerd everthin wuz gonna be awright.

Nate D says

Roll the knucklebones, spin the roulette wheel, and observe as the Archetypes reshuffle: Saloon and Jailhouse replace eachother by circling the gallows, various traits -- One-Eared, Squint-Eyed, Mestizo, Bespectacled, Handlebar Moustached, Tattooed, Old, Young, Alive, Dead, Outlaw, Deputized -- recompose themselves into every character needed or desired. As such, this is not one Western novel but a mechanism for the construction of such, an existential map of forms, containing everything but offering nothing, or perhaps the inverse. It's hard to claim that a story of so much endless violence and intrigue in an inescapable desert repository of damned souls could be anything but full of plot, but it also seems intent of eschewing the necessity of such. And so the game pieces revolve. But beyond its archtypes, there are also some completely visionary sequences here, haunting and defamiliarized. In addition to oft-cited Beckett, this could be said to resemble the amoral abyss of *Blood Meridian* or the detourned western exhaustions of Rudolph Wurlitzer.

Tina says

This review won't be as thorough as my others, as I completely neglected to review it upon completion! I was more than pleasantly surprised with this novel. Despite all the information on the back calling it "existential", I expected a "terrible" Western (the main reason I suspected this was because the novel was 99 cents and the cover was so bizarre), and what I got was a little gem of a novel that pushed the boundaries of a genre and interposed violence and pastiche with symbolism and phrases that encouraged introspection. You can't really comment on the plot or characters in this novel, because I believe, they are less important than the overall feeling you get while reading it – a novel like this is best enjoyed for its tone and the exercise of trying to figure out just what is going on and why – it would be a fun novel to discuss. I suppose its main focus is on solitude and freedom and how these are often mistaken as the same thing. I also love deserts, and this novel had a lot of them. Overall, it was a great little jaunt into surreal satire.

Some interesting lines I enjoyed:

“... the oppression of loneliness that often attaches itself to freedom.”

“...he found himself on upon this vast empty plain, where nothing seems to have happened yet and yet everything seems already over, done before begun.”

Geoff says

Well cowpokes, this right here's about as perfect a lil novel as you gon' git, out here on this ENDLESS DESERT PLAIN what we call the COSMOS. Cuz as some ol' panty-britches wearin' fairy once pro-claimed, "all this world's a stage" but he a' might probally meant a stagecoach er maybe a gallows, which ifn' ya think about it is pretty much the most common stage you gon' find out here in the gal durn INFINITE OL' WEST, which, like the COSMOS, always has been, always is, always will be, and is always becomin', or just circlin' round all blind and creaky on itself like some wrecked wagon wheel a'turnin' all on its lonesome out there in the dead air, up some sea of blighted horizon where the sun is always risin' or settin' or burnin' directly high noon-like, no shade nor reprieve in this desolate sagebrush-demon'd land until those ETERNAL STARS and DUMBASS MOON come out. But ya can't even get no succor then, cuz that's when the cayotes start circlin' - seems like everything circlin' out here... But but what's thar at the hinge a' that axis? Hell if I know but I can weave ya some pretty damn good yarns 'bout it - that SPECTRAL PRESENCE at the heart of MYTH that ain't got no face an' no name but is everpresent all the way down this cursed human lineage, at all points and all times, like birth or death or fuckin'. Anyhoo, if I wuz as good at wordsmithery as this here Sheriff Coover boy I'd spin you some yarns a'good as he dun, fulla GENRE TROPES and FABULIST PARODIES and jest enough METAPHYSICAL CHICANERY to keep them Ivy League pussies jerkin' theyselves off fer awhile I suppose. But hell, I ain't no wordsmith, and I sure as shootin' ain't no REAL GOOD ART CRITIC. But this book had enough hootin' and hollerin' and fuckin' and killin' ta keep me readin' a spell... An' it also set me a'thinkin' a few times, about the TIMELESSNESS of certain IMAGES, sech as maybe a wide-brimmed Stetson, or a WHITE STALLION, or them injun arrows, or that saloon door a'swingin' or that nameless stranger with a holster a' six-shooters wandering in from them dusty distances, almost like he returnin' from our COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS or DEATH or THE INFINITE or some shit or... Hell, I dunno, but it shore seems we always tellin' ourselves the same stories in slightly altered ways, with the same ETERNAL FIGURES hauntin' em, huh? Like this ol' HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS thing what's made outta all these goddamned words ain't nothin' but a GHOST TOWN always a'shimmerin' over that heat-warped horizon, ready to saunter on up to us, or we up to it, but neither really ever findin' each other all definite-like, just good fer makin' stories outta, I guess... yippee ti yi yay, may you get there some day, pardner...

Jason says

Welcome to Louis L'Amour's garden of earthly delights. The return of the repressed of ten thousand penny dreadfuls. GHOST TOWN. Indeed. Another lysergic funhouse Robert Coover genre realignment. Misarranged guts and bones hither and thither. Perhaps more than any other Coover, GHOST TOWN, whilst I was deployed in its mad field of operations, seemed like something produced by a genius as a down-time lark. Shits and giggles. One could imagine the author having produced the novel exclusively for the twenty-six people to whom it is dedicated. A playful joke for friends. And perhaps it is after all. Maybe it's just that Coover has way more than twenty-six friends. Am I his friend? He definitely feels like my people. GHOST TOWN shares w/ the subsequent LUCKY PIERRE (subsequent primarily in publication date, as it was a book he apparently fussed over for many, many years) a commitment to a vision mimetic of dream: a landscape that shifts and morphs; personages that appear to manifest, dissolve, mysteriously supplant one another; all-out war on stable verisimilitude, logic, physics. Speaking of those personages: maybe the most delicious part of the book that isn't the berserk comic vernacular or the Herculean breadth of misadventure, are the rote descriptions of the great many anonymous and abject characters who show up. A ghost town. Out on the "Terrortory." Populated by these ghastly ghouls, popping up all whac-a-mole. Coover rides hard w/ this one. There is no time whatsoever for longeurs. It's like a person in the middle of a psychotic episode

desperately hunting for an obscure talisman. Full-on. Another hilarious, malevolent, bawdy Coover. Up at the top of his game. And it's a short one. In that sense eminently palatable. As far as that goes.

Frannie Fretnot says

If you liked Blood Meridian, you'll loooove Ghost Town.

I liked it a lot, but like Blood Meridian, found it too difficult to go on once I got the idea. And unlike Blood Meridian, this book is only about 150 pages.

...Couple weeks later I picked it back up again and fell in love with the story. Unlike McCarthy's apocalyptic violence, this is a comical, fantastical violence in what is ironically an even deader landscape.

Clearly I can't explain Coover from the office in between photocopying tasks; you're going to have to read it for yourself.

Mariano Hortal says

Publicado en <http://lecturaylocura.com/zarzarrosa-...>

Zarzarrosa y Ciudad fantasma de Robert Coover. Catas postmodernistas

No hay muchas posibilidades, actualmente, de acercarse a la obra de Robert Coover; si sumamos el desorden cronológico a la selección de materiales, el pobre lector que intente introducirse en su obra y en la figura del norteamericano se puede llevar una sorpresa, y no siempre agradable, por las indudables dificultades que ofrece su lectura; la editorial Anagrama publicó varias obras suyas en su momento pero ahora están descatalogados así que nos quedan tres opciones reales y bastante diferentes; por un lado tenemos la colosal y excesiva La hoguera pública, de la que hablé en profundidad aquí y que podemos disfrutar gracias a Pálido fuego, pero se antoja como una opción abrumadora por su temática, uso de recursos y estilos, todo un compendio que reúne casi todas las estrategias postmodernistas y que necesitaría una explicación extensa para disfrutarla.

Ciudad Fantasma Por otro lado tendríamos las novelas cortas Noir y Ciudad fantasma, Galaxia Gutenberg ha sido la artífice de su aparición, y se caracterizan por la utilización de algún recurso y una extensión llevadera; curiosamente podrían ser una buena forma de acercarse a su trabajo con la debida orientación. Y eso me lleva a este post donde voy a coger Zarzarrosa (descatalogada pero encontrada) y Ciudad Fantasma (novedad de este año) y, como si de una cata de vino se tratase intentaré dilucidar dos tipos de estrategias postmodernistas que usa Coover.

“Ironía, juguetes, parodia, humor negro”

En efecto, una de las características más emblemáticas del postmodernismo literario es este uso de la ironía, junto con el humor negro y esa idea de jugueteo del lenguaje. Se trata de coger un concepto aparentemente serio y parodiarlo, reírse de ello, mostrar su contrario precisamente para abrir nuevas perspectivas de ello. En Ciudad fantasma, Coover utilizó este concepto hasta la extenuación, al fin y al cabo, toma prestadas todas las características de un western (que aparentemente, por defecto, debe estar impregnado de una cierta gravedad, seriedad, dureza) y convierte toda la historia en una amalgama de excesos que el protagonista narra en primera persona en su búsqueda de una ciudad:

“Bueno, chico, ¿y hacia dónde vas de paso? pregunta un tipo acartonado de barba gris con sucios pantalones a rayas, camiseta roja y abollado sombrero hongo. A su lado, el hombre del sombrero flexible lía hábilmente con nudosos dedos unas hebras de tabaco en una fina hoja amarilla.

A esa ciudad de allá lejotes. Su fusil ya no cuelga del pomo de la silla, sino que descansa sobre sus piernas. No me digas.

Pierdes el tiempo, chico. Allí no hay na.

Bueno, igual me vale.

Nunca llegarás, chaval.

No es más que una ciudad fantasma.

Pallá voy.

¡Ja!”

Los excesos, el uso exagerado de la parodia vienen caracterizados por la violencia de los indios, salvajes que apelan a la magia a través de prácticas inhumanas:

“El hechicero le practica unos agujeros en el pecho a cada lado de los pezones y se los ensarta con unas clavijas de madera atadas con cuerdas de cuero, para luego hacerle bailar al extremo de las cuerdas hasta que se le arrancan las clavijas. Si no se desprenden, lo cuelgan al poste central de la cabaña del hechicero, con los tobillos y el miembro viril cargados con cráneos de búfalo (una especie de bendición, le aseguran sus hermanos con compadecidos movimientos de cabeza y guiñándole el ojo sin alegría), hasta que las clavijas se sueltan, mientras los demás guerreros lo pinchan rítmicamente con lanzas y flechas y le graban símbolos religiosos en las nalgas. Afortunadamente, una vez extirpada la primera clavija, le dicen, la segunda no tarda en salir, pero entretanto el dolor es tal que sólo permanece consciente parte del tiempo, con pesadillas recurrentes sobre la podredumbre de la civilización, los horrores del cosmos tal como se representan en el reino animal y las visiones del futuro pronosticadas por su futura esposa: sí, la abandonará; así se lo dice el tremendo dolor que atenaza su corazón.”

Y también vienen por el uso de lo escatológico de una manera grotesca, desenfadada, zafia, ciertamente desagradable:

“Remata el brindis con un eructo retumbante que los demás, rodeándolo, remedan sonoramente. Golpean los vasos vacíos contra las mesas y sirven otra ronda de whisky, que alimenta la creciente agitación.

¡Uaah! ¡Qué pestuzo tan agradable!

¡Como el de un coño caliente en la mano!

¡Pero mirad esos revólveres de plata, fijaos!

¡Y esas botas de postal!

¡Y el cuchillo con todas esas tachuelas!

¡Qué refinao!

¡Un vaquero mu distinguío, hombre!

¡Seguro que también tiene tachuelas en el nabo!”

Aunque parezca mentira, todo esto tiene un sentido, nuestro protagonista busca, como ocurrió en dicha época (y sigue ocurriendo en la actualidad...), el santo grial que le haga crecer por sí mismo, es la personificación del sueño americano, del hombre hecho a sí mismo:

“Me dijeron que por aquí había to lo que se podía desear o incluso imaginar. Me dijeron que había afloramientos de oro entre árboles cargaos de piedras preciosas y ríos del whasky más puro y alegres y preciosas mujeres y hasta la puta fuente de la juventú, y, joer, yo quería un cacho de to eso, ¿quién no? Quería estar, tal como mabían dicho, en el azaroso escenario de una grandiosa gesta. ¿Y sabes una cosa, hijo? Acércate más, me estoy quedando sin aliento.”

Este paleta que no sabe ni hablar (el uso de lengua vernacular es otra estrategia en este caso para conseguir esta parodia) se encuentra con lo más grotesco de lo que estaba buscando, con la decepción y la frustración de un sueño que no es tal y como le habían dicho, así lo refleja Coover más adelante:

“Da un paso atrás y considera todo eso, mira alrededor. El único signo de vida es su propio sombrero en medio de la calle desierta. Se ha equivocado en todo. La ciudad está abandonada. Aparte de él no hay nadie.

Le flaquean los hombros y se da cuenta de lo cansado que está, un cansancio que no sólo obedece a los esfuerzos físicos sino a todas las difíciles reflexiones que ha realizado. En lo único que tiene ahora que pensar es en encontrar algo húmedo para despegarse la lengua del cielo del paladar.”

zarzarrosa-robert-coover-18350-MLA20153124029_082014-FNo hay tal sueño, la realidad es más como una parodia tal y como la pinta Coover: una tierra baldía.

“Intertextualidad” “Reescritura”

La intertextualidad es aquella relación entre un texto y otro y cómo están entrelazados en el tejido de la historia literaria. Los postmodernistas utilizan esta cualidad para coger un texto conocido por la mayoría de los lectores y reescribirlo. Esta reescritura sirve para mostrar matices que no eran visibles anteriormente y se resaltan mejor por el hecho de que el lector conoce cómo era el texto original. Normalmente, estos matices, suelen ser lo contrario de lo original, estas dicotomías obran de manera deconstructiva y buscan, sobre todo, cuestiones de género, raza, colonialismo, etc...

Zarzarrosa es un ejemplo perfecto de este recurso; Coover usó para esta narración el cuento de la Bella durmiente (Briar Rose=Zarzarrosa):

“Tú eres esta llama, que parpadea como una fiebre abrasadora en el corazón de los hombres, consumiéndolos de deseo, cautivándolos con tu radiante y misterioso encanto. Lo que el hada no dice, porque no quiere aterrarla (siempre un lío que luego hay que limpiar sábanas que cambiar), es: Tú eres la Bella. Ella dice: Cuando otros preguntan quién soy, qué soy, tú eres la medida y la justificación de sus preguntas. Quédate tranquila, hija mía. Tú eres Zarzarrosa. Tu príncipe vendrá.”

La típica espera, dormida, a la llegada del príncipe, es utilizada en diferentes variaciones, mucho menos canónicas del cuento y nos saca la perspectiva desde el punto de vista del príncipe (en este caso preguntándose si ella sueña con él, con quitarse el hechizo):

“Y, sin embargo, si bien todo progreso a través del seto se ha detenido dolorosamente y las espinas lo arañan con cada golpe, él continúa luchando incansablemente, dando tajos decididos al seto con su espada, rechazando las ramas que lo atrapan, reflexionando todo el tiempo sobre la bella doncella, profundamente dormida, llamada Zarzarrosa. ¿No sueña nunca con su desencantamiento? ¿No sueña nunca con él?”

Y usa, como no podía ser de otra manera, el punto de vista de Zarzarrosa, precisamente para cuestionarse su propia identidad y la esclavitud que supone ser elegida para ser rescatada, es la forma de dar voz a una mujer que no ha podido tenerla en el cuento tradicional:

“Ah, aquí estás, preciosa mía, dice la vieja bruja, con una risita socarrona. ¿De vuelta para un poco más de lo mismo? ¿Quién soy yo? ¿Qué soy yo?, pregunta enfadada desde la puerta, temiendo entrar pero temiendo todavía más echarse atrás, sin estar segura de que las escaleras que subido sigan estando allí detrás de ella. ¡No es justo! ¿Por qué soy la elegida?”

Cada variante redundante en aspectos que van de lo escabroso a lo mágico y que desenfocan para siempre nuestra visión del cuento para abrirnos a otras posibilidades; parece mentira que éstas se acerquen a una visión más realista de la sociedad en que vivimos, esa sociedad en la que la mujer queda reducida a un cuento, a una imagen idealizada de la belleza ninguneada por el “héroe” que parece el único protagonista.

“[...] ha intentado, hasta cuando se aferraba a la trama principal, contar cada variante como si nunca hubiese sido contada antes, sorprendiéndose incluso a sí misma por lo novedoso de sus enfoques. Ha imaginado, y lo ha descrito para Rosa, un rico surtido de bellas y príncipes, obstáculos, despertares y qué-ocurre-luego, tejiendo una variada colección de monstruos, dragones, ogros, mofas, violaciones, acertijos, asesinatos, magia, lisiados, cadáveres y bebés, solo para observar cómo la insaciable durmiente se estremece y grita y se retuerce de miedo y anhelo, como hada malvada que es.”

Coover no tarda en mostrar el camino de la rebeldía ante esta situación; Zarzarrosa no se conforma con una historia que la relega a un papel secundario, odia el cuento, ¡y con razón! Lo que no está claro es que se pueda librar de ello, como ocurre nuevamente en la actualidad, el poder del heteropatriarcado imperante, a veces consciente, muchas veces inconsciente:

“¿De qué otro modo pasaría estos tediosos siglos? Érase una vez, se dice sonriendo con una mueca, su lado perverso dominando la situación como siempre, un apuesto príncipe y una bella princesa que vivieron felices

por siempre jamás. ¡Pero es terrible!, gritó Rosa. No, no, espera, ése es solo el principio. ¡Pero odio este cuento! Felices por siempre jamás, le reprende el hada, agitando un dedo nudoso del color de un lingote de hierro. Tal vez no valga una higa, hija mía, pero oculta las verrugas, ¡de modo que no te des tanta prisa en rechazarlo! Eres realmente malvada, gime Rosa, que sigue pinchándose sin piedad. Sí, bueno, ¿qué esperabas, bobita?”

No me digáis que no vale la pena leer estos dos libros desde estas aproximaciones. Espero que os hayan gustado.

Los textos provienen de la traducción de Juan Antonio Masoliver Ródenas de Zarzarrosa de Robert Coover para Anagrama y de Benito Gómez Ibáñez de Ciudad fantasma para Galaxia Gutenberg.

Ronald Morton says

So whut brung yu out t’this burnt-out shithole, kid? Whut set yer dumb ass on fire?

I dunno. Dont recall. Feel like I always been here.

I know whut yu mean. It’s differnt out here, it aint like other places--in fact it aint a place at all, it’s more like no place. Yu think yu go to it, but it comes to yu and, big as it is, gits inside yu and yu inside it, till yu and it’re purty much the same thing. Aint thet sumthin! A right smarta things happen but they aint no order to em. Yu could be a thousand years older’n me, or younger, no tellin which, and it might be yestidday or tomorra or both at the same time. Y’know whut it is? I’ll tell yu whut it is. It’s a goddam mystery’s whut.

Much of what I said about Coover's Noir could be said here, substituting the western genre for the noir genre. Coover has managed to capture the general feel and setting of all westerns, populate the barren desert landscape with the archetypical actors of the western genre, and dropped in the midst of it a man scrubbed clean of both his past and with it any sort of motivating force; he is an actor, but mostly he is acted upon : : the scene is set, the players wait in the wings, and the events one expects must come to pass - barroom brawls, cattle rustling, jailbreaks, train robberies, posses; all at breakneck speed, most with absurd logic, savage cruelty, and surreal humor.

And, being Coover, the book is ribald, obscene, but above all it is stylish, wordy, and pristinely executed. Great stuff; deeply funny stuff.
