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This book cheers innovation. But sometimes convention must serve, even though it doesn't say enough, because convention is all there is. I would like to thank Professor Robert Murray Davis who quality-checked this dissertation impeccably, and who gave me the approval and independence my neurotic ego needed to keep on keeping on. I don't know if this damages his reputation or enhances mine.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this study to Emily, whose earliest visions of her father pose him at the kitchen table, hunched over the typewriter, smoking cigarettes.

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CHAPTER I

Breakthroughs, Disruptions and New Short Fictional Forms

In a sense I feel like the bearer of yesterday's news, but in case you haven't heard, there's been a revolution in American fiction. The novel -- the old novel -- put up some resistance on the strength of its tradition, but chained as it was to an over-developed sense of theory, restrained by its insistence that it accurately reflect some facet of social reality, it proved too brittle to resist and too formulaic to accommodate itself to the innovative efforts of two decades of insurgent fiction writers. As recently as 1960 the novel offered itself as a prefabricated home which a writer could furnish, perhaps remodel slightly, but which he could not build from scratch. Then the onslaught began. In terms of subject matter Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and the New Journalists refused to continue efforts to write fiction as if it were real, so they wrote about reality as if it were a novel. In terms of technique John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and writers of "exhausted" fiction began exaggerating, parodying, exposing and undermining the conventional methods of narration. Still other writers like Bernard Malamud and John Hawkes delved into

allegory, myth, fable and other pre-novel conventions, breaking clearly if not cleanly with mimetic narrative. Each effort opened up a new front on which writers continue to conduct an aggressive guerilla war against the bastille of novelistic tradition.

Surprisingly hot on the heels of this innovative fiction has come a barrage of excellent but uncoordinated critical commentary. For example, while critics of contemporary American fiction agree that the term "novel" is obsolete for their purposes, its removal has created a quandary in our critical vocabulary. Metafiction, critifiction, superfiction, parafiction, surfiction, fictitious discourse, disruptive fiction, anti-realist fiction, black humor fiction, fiction of the absurd, fabulation. Each term denotes a generic concept and each concept overlaps -- at least partially -- each of the others. Agreement among critics occurs primarily when discussing what American fiction of the 60's and 70's is not -- it is not a collection of novels -- and disintegrates when attempting to define just what that fiction is. My purpose here is nothing so ambitious as to correct any deficiency there may be in our critical overview of contemporary American fiction. In fact, readers of this fiction are repeatedly made aware of the paradox that hard-edge definition is distortion, that it is, as Tony Tanner observes, "the beginning of rigidity, and rigidity is the beginning of rigor mortis." Yet I do wish to point out that each of the above terms has been applied to both book-length fictions and shorter fictional forms, and this, I think, is a mistake. Whereas critics thus far have tended to analyze the fictions of this variously labelled movement as reactions

to the novel tradition, many writers, finding the forms of novel-length narrative too bound to tradition to accommodate their fictional impulses, have sought refuge and friendlier footing in shorter fictional forms. And it has often been the explorations and achievements in short fictional forms which have liberated the applied imaginations of contemporary writers, facilitating their innovative accomplishments in book-length fictions.

Robert Coover's Pricksongs and Descants (1969) is indeed a book of innovative fiction, and it should and has been studied in relation to other volumes of disruptive fiction, metafiction, fabulation, etc. But it is also a book of short fictions, and should be studied as it relates to the tradition and conventions of the short story and tale. The same applies to John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse (1968), Donald Barthelme's Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (1968) and City Life (1970), William Gass' In the Heart of the Heart of the Country (1968), and Ronald Sukenick's The Death of the Novel and Other Stories (1969). And since all these volumes of innovative short fiction were published within a three-year period, they should also be studied in relation to one another. Each volume is a part of the macro-movement of innovative, anti-traditional fiction; each, of course, is an integral part of the literary development of its author; and together they constitute a generic development of significance, a breakthrough in new short fictional forms. By analyzing the specific innovations practiced by each author and the contributions of these innovations to their respective volumes, I hope to clarify the tactics and strategies of this one campaign

of the revolution in American fiction writing.

1. The scope of the new fiction;
the ceremonies of the new character.

Critics of contemporary American fiction, trying to name that fiction, have created a funhouse of labels in which we can easily get lost unless we keep the cause of this effect in mind. It is not just whimsy or academic diversion (although, let's face it, neither are they negligible), but the radically innovative and different techniques used by contemporary story-tellers; in short, a quantum change in narrative dynamics. Such a leap is not unprecedented; I am thinking of the narrative revolution in 18th century England. It too had arrived well before the literary world could settle on its name. Remember "comic-epic poem in prose?" Yet such radical literary developments do not occur often. And just as the rise of the novel signaled a revolution in the intellectual thought and consciousness of Western civilization, and prefigured the eventual middle-class political revolutions, so too these new developments in narrative reflect and predict a rocking of the extra-literary world. Our tale-tellers now speak beyond the impasse of depleted novelistic technique. Their language can guide our culture beyond the impasse of the depleted middle-class revolution born with the novel. We are trying to name that language, and that's the cause for the funhouse of terms.

Unlike the medieval romance which emphasized plot, employing stock characters as the agents of action, and the moral fable which emphasized abstract theme, the novel gave an unprecedented prominence

to character from its very beginning. Underscoring the central function of character, many 18th century novels are still known by titles which single out their protagonists: Moll Flanders, Roxana, Pamela, Clarissa Harlowe, Tom Jones, Amelia, Roderick Random, etc. Henry James realized and developed this centrality of character as completely as anyone. In tracing the process by which his fictions came into being, James cites the germ of his novel not as plot, relationships, or setting, "but altogether in the sense of a single character."¹ As the sense of this at-large character crystallizes, names, places and actions attach themselves to the person, and the novel evolves outward, organically. For James, fully realized character is central, seminal and indispensable; character is fiction. Yet much contemporary fiction, both book-length and shorter forms, illustrates the thesis that characters are under house arrest within their fictional environments. Robert Coover's short fiction, "In a Train Station,"² is a clear example of situation superceding character. There are three main characters, Alfred, the Stationmaster, and an unnamed sacrificial victim, all caught in a treadmill of behavioral conventions, enacting and re-enacting the same 54 minute ritual which ends in murder. Alfred is clearly tried, even repulsed by his own participation in the senseless rite. He refuses to concentrate and absentmindedly finishes off a piece of chicken of which he is supposed to eat just one bite so it can last through a day's series of enactments. But the treadmill keeps spinning and the Stationmaster sees to it that the maneuvers continue to their murderous conclusion no matter how inept an assassin Alfred proves to

be.

The changing function of character is perhaps the most widely recognized earmark of contemporary fiction. It is a relatively objective trait, easily observable and discussable, and it serves as a good measure of the extent of the transformation which recent fiction has undergone. Henry James is dead. Few serious writers accept his notion that the materials of fiction are the accoutrements of fully conceived character, and most reject the traditional concept of character possessing psychological depth and emotional credibility. Charles B. Harris views the proliferating use of anti-Jamesian, two-dimensional characters as one of a chapterful of techniques which constitute "The Aesthetics of Absurdity."³ Studying American fiction of the 1960's, Harris recognizes a group of innovative writers whom he calls novelists of the absurd. At times, he seems to struggle with his own evidence, arguing that the abrupt changeover of narrative techniques results from the incorporation of the themes of the existential novels of the 1950's into the narrative texture of the novels of the absurd.⁴ Understandably -- Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd was published in 1971 -- Harris is ambivalent about whether the novel of the absurd evolved smoothly from its literary predecessors or if it radically disrupts that line of development.

Even so, besides seeing the reduction of character to caricature as a means for conveying the "ultimate absurdity of life," Harris observes how two-dimensional characters with comical names contribute to many authors' attempts to highlight the artificiality

of their fiction.⁵ Such is the case with the characters' names found in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 (1966). Nearly every name, such as Mucho Maas, Genghis Cohen and Manny Di Presso, is a pun or verbal joke. And as Robert Murray Davis illustrates, when we do encounter a relatively straight name -- John Nefastis -- it turns out to be an anagram for "isn't safe."⁶ Whether by broad pun or subtle word game, we are repeatedly reminded that there is an author writing a fiction and having fun with the names of his characters. Such an acknowledgement marks a break from the tradition of realistic fiction which plays down its own artifice. Harris goes on to indicate how two-dimensional characters prevent reader identification and consequently sabotage many of the traditional uses of point of view character. The reader of contemporary fiction is apt to find himself cast in the role of an amused observant of cosmic catastrophe. But not to worry; life is portrayed as a pointless comedy, not a senseless tragedy.

Raymond M. Olderman published his study of American fiction in the 60's, Beyond the Wasteland, one year after Harris. He too recognizes the emergence of two-dimensional characters but views it as part of an overall movement to resurrect the traditional devices of romance.⁷ What prevents the fiction of the 60's from repeating previous accomplishments in a well-worn genre, he contends, is a strong blurring of fact and fiction and the pervasive influence of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. While the controlling metaphors for the traditional American romance are lost Eden, American Adam and the American Dream, the controlling metaphors for the novels of the 60's,

Olderman asserts, are derived from Eliot's poem: the image of the Waste Land and the unconsummated wait for a quester who might heal us and our world.⁸ Despite the undeniable impact of Eliot's masterpiece, it is improbable that the poem has had as much direct influence as Olderman attributes to it. Nevertheless, as a critical metaphor the analogy facilitates much valid analysis and observation about character and its relationship to setting.

In the fiction of the 60's Olderman sees the rebirth of the adventurer, the picaro and the quester, although the hero's quest itself is static. The search for identity which so often blue-prints the novels of the 50's is present but muted in the fiction of the following decade. Although often important, a cause for anxiety and insecurity, that search is not the central quest. The new character, Olderman observes, must live without any certain knowledge of self-identity.⁹ And this observation can be extended: in some cases, characters must continue without any certain knowledge of any sort. With little if any introspection, these two-dimensional characters pursue their quests through high-speed, haphazard actions and conflicts with their physical, social and institutional environment. Olderman agrees with Harris that such characterization aborts sympathetic reader identification in the usual sense, but he also argues that it effectively and purposefully reduces character to a vehicle for the study of the real subject: the hostile and inane environment, the Waste Land itself.¹⁰ Instead of the setting helping to compose the portrait of the lady, the cartoon of the lady is now used to illuminate the landscape.

Whereas Ihab Hassan has demonstrated the mythic pattern of withdrawal and return in the novels of the 50's, the return being the central character's affirmation of participation in life, Olderman observes how this pattern is minimized in the fiction of the 60's. When protagonists do participate in life, as when Yossarian flies his missions, they do so without any usual sense of moral conviction. At the end of Barth's The Floating Opera (1956/67), Todd resolves to continue living mainly because there is no airtight reason to kill himself. He rides the rhythm of his heartbeat into the future because it is the strongest force of the moment. Many other characters are similarly waist deep in the muck of the Waste Land, and since there is no escape, neither is there the conventional return or affirmation. Fictions of the 60's often begin in a jail, an insane asylum, a POW camp or a mysterious room, the characters are sometimes locked within the fiction itself, and the new quest consists of finding a way to live within the Waste Land, not of discovering an escape hatch.¹¹

Even when there is an abundance of linear, geographic movement, as in Pynchon's V (1963) or Jerzy Kosinski's The Painted Bird (1965), the change of environment merely exposes the journeyer to more of the same. So despite Benny Profane's travels up and down the East coast, he is merely yo-yoing, riding the shuttle through a homogeneous cross section of inanity. Kosinski's nameless boy is dominated and abused by backward-thinking, sadistic farmers and peasants in every village he visits. Yet this paradoxical static motion which is operative in book-length fictions, actually becomes the subject and theme of "An Encounter," a recent, radically innovative two-page

"minute fiction" by Robert Coover.¹² Here we meet a pronomial character called "he" who runs through a maze of rooms from which there is no exit. Each room leads to another identical room and although he runs frantically, exercising constant movement, the movement is static in this "encounter with sameness."

it was the same the same doors the stairs up and
down it didn't help to stop it was worse so he kept
running he kept talking puff puff through doors
through rooms faster he said faster it streaked by
up stairs down oh where will it all end he cried
(p. 48)

A similar situation is illustrated with more conventional syntax in a Steve Katz short story, "Nino," originally published in his 1971 collection of short fiction, Creamy and Delicious.¹³ For three consecutive days Nino, a virile young fisherman, has boarded a bus bound for the city, lured there by the lights and his desire to escape the seashore. But when the bus finally pulls into the station and the door opens, "he smelled the salt air. Other passengers seemed to have left by the rear door. He stepped off the bus. It has happened again. It was dark. He was home" (p. 116).

Kosinski's boy, Pynchon's Profane, Coover's encounterer and Katz' Nino all travel through the plurality of sameness, but they bear little else in common except the circumstance of their gender. For Profane, Norfolk, New York City and the borscht belt each has its own characteristic varnish; it is beneath the veneer that all places are the same, just as the same sewer system flows beneath all New York City neighborhoods. Since Profane has no purpose to be anywhere in particular, none of the settings is a destination in the usual sense. They are

all rest stops for those like Benny who are on their way to nowhere. But for Coover's encounterer, every room is literally identical with the same doors, the same stairs, the same layout. And he is not only going nowhere, he comes from nowhere. The narrator begins his unpunctuated two-page story without regard for even the scantiest details of background information.

here's what happened it was pretty good
all the rooms were empty
he walked from room to room they were all empty
(p. 47)

Obviously, Coover's minute fiction is something new, and any comparisons between it and a book-length fiction are not really valid. V, as innovative as it is, is still linked to journalistic detail by nature of its medium while "An Encounter" is more closely allied with poetic symbol. Still, it is a breakthrough in Coover's management of character that Jerome Klinkowitz sees as signaling "a radical disruption" in the generic development of the American novel.

In Literary Disruptions, published in 1975, Klinkowitz provides a clearer overview of American fiction of the 60's and 70's than had previously been afforded. He outlines four basic schools of American fiction which vied for public and critical attention during the Vietnam War and Nixon years, and then adjusts his primary focus on the fourth category which is the most recent to emerge.¹⁴ At the beginning of the Vietnam War, Klinkowitz sees the Bellow-Updike-Malamud triumvirate as heading the legions of serious novelists. These are the last exponents and practitioners of the selective-detail, realistic novel, a generic pattern of narrative originally and definitively

cut in the 1920's by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. Although these realistic novelists present a solidly liberal point of view, that position has by now become reactionary since it is the same point of view which has accommodated America to twenty years of cold war, ecological irresponsibility and the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation. From this stump American fiction branches out in three directions: one regressive, one progressive, one revolutionary.

The regressive school, Klinkowitz argues, consists of writers of "exhausted fiction" led by Barth and Pynchon. For them, the conventional devices of narrative -- scene-by-scene construction, realistic dialog, selective use of symbolic detail and fully conceived character -- are used for purposes of parody and burlesque. It is a practice of a "baroque" technique, defined by Borges and Barth as "that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature."¹⁵ Although the New Journalists employ the conventional techniques of novelistic narrative, Klinkowitz is kinder to this school of tale-tellers, viewing Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin and especially James Simon Kunen (The Strawberry Statement and Standard Operating Procedure) as progressive writers. The blending of supposedly objective political and cultural realities with techniques designed for subjective fiction moves American fiction closer to its sorely needed breakthrough. As Klinkowitz views it, this breakthrough arrived in 1967-68, and it can be witnessed in the fiction of Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, Amiri Baraka, James Park Sloan, Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Gilbert Sorrentino and others.¹⁶

Unlike the New Journalists and writers of exhausted fiction who re-synthesize and momentarily revitalize old forms, the disruptive fictionist burns his literary bridges behind him, innovates new modes of narrative, and perhaps most important, eschews the illusion of realism in favor of the affirmation of fantasy.¹⁷

Again, the use of character serves as a clear indicator of the qualitative distinctions between exhausted and disruptive fictions. Although Klinkowitz treats Pynchon more leniently than he treats Barth -- whose major infirmity he diagnoses as a "castrated imagination" -- he nevertheless faults Pynchon because his fictions over-indulge in characterization and plot.¹⁸ Indeed, the hundreds of characters and ganglionic plots of V and Gravity's Rainbow (1973) are accommodating illustrations of the Borges/Barth definition of baroque. Pynchon purposely prevents his reader from keeping track of the characters and remembering what has happened. In other words, he sabotages the conventional fiction reading experience. And unlike Faulkner who approached a similar position in Absalom, Absalom! (1936), Pynchon refrains from inserting chronologies, geneologies, maps or other "helpful" addenda which would enable the conventional reader to sit in his usual, comfortable reading chair without shifting cheeks.¹⁹ Still, Klinkowitz judges this as revisionist at best, and cites Coover's The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968) as the disruptive text which irreversibly transformed exhausted fiction into a distinctly new genre.²⁰

Throughout the first seven chapters Waugh is the character who links Coover's fiction to realism. Although much of the narrative

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amplifies the baseball game which he invented, Waugh himself has an apartment, a job, a girlfriend. And the life of his fantasy is kept in check by the economic and emotional demands of his social reality. But in the eighth and last chapter of UBA, Waugh -- the protagonist -- disappears, absorbed without a trace by his own fiction. Gone too are the dice, the operative mechanism or reality principle of the game. And it is this moment which Klinkowitz hails as the emergence of "a new life for fiction" since it licensed Coover and other writers to project fantasy within reality, while releasing them from the obligation to distinguish between the real and the fabulous.

Certainly, Klinkowitz is onto something here, but if there was never anything quite like UBA previously published, similar effects had been achieved as early as the 1950's fiction of John Hawkes. Although we have launched into a Space Age of sorts rather rapidly, to pinpoint the first moon walk as a literal giant step for mankind is corny and melodramatic. Klinkowitz does not go quite this far, but his critical view of an explosive literary disruption does seem a bit overenthusiastic.

On the other hand, a number of contemporary writers strike quite a pugnacious pose when discussing their attitudes toward the traditional use of character in fiction. Richard Kostelanetz, in his brash aesthetic manifesto, "Twenty-Five Fictional Hypotheses," asserts that

Words need not be the building blocks of fiction;
or sentences the glue, or paragraphs the frames,

or human beings the characters; for realized fiction, no matter how unusual, cannot but create its own subject, its own style, its own "events," its own life.²¹

Raymond Federman, whose book-length fictions, Double or Nothing (1972) and Take It or Leave It (1977), he prefers to call fictitious discourses instead of novels, similarly eschews the term character. Henceforth, he predicts, "fictitious beings," and not well-made characters, will populate fiction; furthermore, they will be nameless, illusory and unpredictable word-beings.²²

A more sober and comprehensive view of the new ceremonies served by character in contemporary fiction is provided by the French critic, Jean Ricardou. Although Ricardou discusses the specific responses of Alain Robbe-Grillet (La Maison de rendezvous, 1965) and Robert Pinget (Le Libera, 1968) to the traditional notion of Balzacian character, his observations apply well to similar efforts of American writers.²³ Ricardou lists the basic components of Balzacian character as surname, social role, nationality, parentage, age and physical appearance. Although not perfectly interchangeable, "Richardsonian" or "Jamesian" can be substituted for Balzacian without too much lost in the translation. Of course, character ultimately consists of more than this, but it is such sociological and police-file type of data from which character is built. Ricardou then divides the various attempts to undermine such conventional characterization into two lines of attack: fission of unities and fusion of diversities.

Fission of unities occurs when one or more of the elements of character are dislocated. Usually this operates in one of two ways:

a constant name is connected to ever-changing roles, or a constant role or pattern of behavior connects an ever-changing name. Although the former is probably more dominant in the nouveaux roman school of French fiction, American writers have also tinkered with this technique. Joseph Heller experiments mildly with this technique as early as Catch-22 (1961). Milo Minderbinder is not only an officer in the American army, a commodities broker, the mayor of Palermo, Carini, Monreale, Baghiera, Termini Imerese, Cefali, Mistretta and Nicosia, a major in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, Assistant Governor-General of Malta and the Vice-Shah of Oran,

but also the Caliph of Baghdad, the Imam of Damascus, and the Sheik of Araby. Milo was the corn god, the rain god and the rice god in backward regions where such crude gods were still worshipped by ignorant and superstitious people, and deep inside the jungles of Africa...large graven images of his mustached face could be found overlooking primitive stone altars red with human blood.²⁴

In Trout Fishing in America (1967) Richard Brautigan extends this technique to the brink of its practical limit. The title character of this book is at one point an aristocrat who consorts with Maria Callas, at another a woodsman who was acquainted with Lewis and Clark, and still later a figurehead around whose image college-aged communists rally. But the phrase itself also designates an outdoor sport, a mythical geographic place, a pen nib, a hotel, the title of Brautigan's book, and ultimately something like the lost American Dream.²⁵ Here then is an incredible dispersing of character into setting, plot and central metaphor. Hence the words, "Trout fishing in America" become the most frequently repeated phrase

in Brautigan's book, and consequently supply a refrain-like coherence to what might otherwise be perceived as an incoherent narrative. And at the same time, trout fishing in America is uncategorizable since at any given moment it can be any of the elements of fiction while refusing to solidify into any one of those elements. Tony Tanner is very impressed with this book, and he feels that Brautigan's style here approaches an ideal form of fiction he calls "skywriting."²⁶

Tanner's thesis is that the American writer faces the dilemma of asserting his own patterning powers so as to escape the prison of inherited conventions, while at the same time avoiding the pitfall of becoming imprisoned within his own patterns and visions. Writers must project their own innovative routes of escape without letting those projections solidify into definition, since definition produces rigidity, and rigidity is "the beginning of rigor mortis."²⁷ And so for Tanner, skywriting is the ideal. It recedes immediately after it is read, and it does not trap anyone or anything in its vision. Clearly the type of radical fission of unities practiced by Brautigan is one method which approaches skywritten fiction.

The second procedure employed to accomplish a fission of unities -- using a constant social situation to connect a series of diverse names -- is illustrated in Double or Nothing, Federman's previously mentioned "fictitious discourse."²⁸ This is a funny book which seems even funnier in summary. Except for the first ten pages, numbered 0 to 000000000.0, and a page-by-page index/table of contents at the end of the book, Double or Nothing is the haphazard soliloquy of a thoroughly mashuginah fellow who plans to lock himself in a rented

room for one year with 365 boxes of noodles and sundry other supplies, during which time he intends to write a novel. In between considerations, computations and digressions on such things as how many squeezes to a tube of toothpaste and how many wipes to a roll of toiletpaper, the writer/narrator tries out possible fictional alternatives for his projected novel.

His plot is to be about a 19 year old orphaned French Jew's first year in America. As the narrator blocks out his novel and fills in some central scenes, the boy's name changes and flipflops between Jacques, Robert, Solomon, Boris, Dominique and Raymond. More than once the boy's name vacillates within a single sentence.

The second macro-tactic used to undermine conventional modes of characterization, fusion of diversities, occurs when normally distinct and separate elements of character are blurred or purposefully confused.²⁹ Here too, there are two usual methods by which this is accomplished. The first can be seen in the conclusion to Gilbert Sorrentino's latest and as yet unpublished novel, Synthetic Ink.³⁰ The final chapter, "Perfect Gifts," is an eight page parody of a last will and testament, or maybe a Christmas list, which names over 400 characters -- 414 if I counted correctly -- and bequeaths to each a rather imaginative gift. Such a profusion of names alone is sufficient to prevent a reader from distinguishing individuals or remembering who inherits what. Yet this is far more interesting and funnier than a telephone directory. By exploiting the similarity of certain names, and by awarding a gift to one person which sounds like the name of another person, Sorrentino thoroughly fuses normally

diverse elements while he amuses his reader. For example, he awards "for Mickey Roast, a roaring blaze; to Brutal Mickey, a Mickey Finn; to Mickey Finn, Finn Hall; to Finn Hall, the peace that passeth understanding." At other times, an entire sequence of names and gifts will blend together because of an overpowering pun or joke which Sorrentino stretches to its limit. In the following list the word beings lose their individuality to a mass of candy bars and bubble gums.

for Clark Barr, Fifth Avenue; chuckles and snickers for Baby Ruth; for Powerhouse Gabe, a chunky coquette; for Bleary Fleer, double bubbles and baloney; an old walnetto song for Nuttsy Goodbar; a juithy fwuit for Thweetie Tham and for Dudley Milk a billet doux from a nubile nymph shyly signed "forever yours"; to the nut brown lass, a velvet sky 'gainst which is flung the Milky Way; to the Yonkers Kid, a drink in the Sky Bar; the three musketeers color by Technicolor to the Orange Girl of Venice; and to Private First Class Kill, late of Leadership School, his own bazooka, monogrammed.

Later, Sorrentino uses apples ("Apple Mary," "Miss Mackintosh," etc.) for similar effect. Yet even when names in sequence are not fused by pun, they often relate closely to names appearing elsewhere by dint of similar sound or attribute. Scattered throughout the list, for example, are the Jew of Malted, Jube the Jew, Abdul the Protestant Jew, Jewish Jerry, Jerry the Jitterbug, Joky Joyce, Joyce the Jewel, Rudi the Juke, the Jukes Sisters who are bequeathed to the Skerrenbock Brothers, and the Jewish wife pledged to the Christian soldier. Obviously, characters here are merely names, and the names become sounds, and in these sounds the reader is invited to find patterns

of pun, groups of jokes, alliances of alliteration. As a note of interest, there are two characters mentioned whose names echo that of the author: Gibby Senatoro is awarded "ten years of unemployment checks," and lucky Guido Torroncino is granted "Hilda Marzipan."

When a single character performs a variety of actions simultaneously, or enacts a sequence of unsequential actions, then that character also serves to fuse conventionally distinct and diverse elements. This second method of fusion of diversities is practised by Coover in several stories published in Pricksongs and Descants. "The Elevator" consists of fifteen mini-chapters, each narrating what happens to Martin as he enters an elevator in an office building where he works.³¹ In the first uneventful segment, Martin arrives early and rides the self-operated elevator to the basement where it is "empty and nearly dark. . . silent and meaningless" before riding up to his office on the fourteenth floor. In the fourteen other segments -- one for each "story" of the building? -- other possible realities transpire. Martin is seduced by the saucy elevator operator. Martin is humiliated and unjustly labelled "Mart the Fart" by his nose-pinching co-riders. He is beaten up by a bully; he beats up his accuser in an act of vengeance. Clearly, all of these actions cannot happen at once, nor can they occur sequentially. Rather, they present fifteen possible realities, all fused in the character of Martin.

If this selective survey of the new employments of character has served a purpose, it has been, I hope, to sketch the general scope and perimeters of recent American innovative fiction, of which

short fictional forms are a part. Fiction has moved away from mimesis; surface detail has given way to symbolic metaphor. It has escaped the confines of hard-edge definition and stable point of view; absolutes have yielded to relativities. As Raymond Federman declares, "Fiction is not a representation of reality, it is A REALITY", one of many possible patterns of perception.³² It no longer submits itself to the laws of cause and effect; for every action there is not an equal and opposite reaction. Space is not always linear and geometric; time is not necessarily chronological or sequential. American fiction has finally outpaced the patterns, perceptions and sense of form derived from a Newtonian universe, and entered the age of Einstein.

2. The American short story
and new forms of short fiction.

The short story and tale were recognized (at least implicitly) as generically different from the novel and romance long before Brander Mathews proclaimed himself the first critic to make such a distinction in 1901.³³ Even so, compared to efforts and accomplishments made in the area of theory of the novel and romance, very little has been achieved in the study of the theory of short fiction. Short stories tend to be viewed, taught, and consequently viewed again as miniature novels if they are mimetically drawn, or as miniature romances if they tend toward fable. Even William Peden's recent book-length study, The American Short Story; Continuity and Change, 1940-75, treats its material thematically and chronologically, without much consideration given to generic form or innovative efforts within that form. At a time when McLuhan's declaration that the medium is the

message has fallen from a profundity to an oversimplified but basic premise upon which more sophisticated notions of perception and form are built, Peden's critical approach is negligent, particularly when he applies it to a group of contemporary writers he calls the "Innovationists."³⁴ Although Peden may be more conservative than most critics of contemporary fiction, he is exemplary in that he has not devised a set of critical tools specifically for the analysis of short fiction.

Surrounding the novel, however, is a dense atmosphere of theory, and critical studies are rarely completed without at least passing consideration of form and structure. This imbalance of developed critical theory belies the generally accepted if infrequently expressed prejudice which considers the novel of greater artistic merit than short fiction on the generic chain of being. And until recently, accomplishments within these respective genres could justify such a prejudice. Yet by the 1960's, critical theory of the novel had become almost overdeveloped, and this led to two consequences: one, it made the novel too brittle, too resistant to change, and many fiction writers, operating under the imperative to innovate, resorted to short fictional forms where possibilities within form remain less depleted and where radical innovation is easier to sustain; two, even the sensitive critics who grasped the significance of this innovative short fiction have tended to discuss and evaluate it as a reaction to the tradition of the novel. Although such an approach is often fruitful, it is sometimes misleading, and if volumes like Lost in the Funhouse, Pricksongs and Descants, Unspeakable Practices,

Unnatural Acts, and City Life are to be analysed legitimately, they also must be viewed within the context of the theory and tradition of short fiction.

Although the American short story proper evolved during the ascendance of the realistic aesthetic as practiced by James, Crane and Bierce, it was preceded by the more fabulous tale which never relinquished all of its influence. A homicidal maniac or a governess who doesn't do windows but does do exorcisms, too sensational or improbable to be passed off in novels which reflected "reality," could always claim precedence in Hawthorne or Poe and be legitimately accommodated to serious short fiction. Yet even when mimetically executed, using realistic details to develop credible event, the short story, by nature of its characteristic brevity, is more closely linked to poetic symbol than journalistic detail. The traditional short story writer offers an image of experience which is small in scope, but developed in sufficient depth to be established as an emblem of a larger world. In this way a single situation is made a symbol of reality.³⁵

Even character in the modern short story often performs symbolic services. Discussing the scope and intents of "nonvulgar" short fiction in general and the genesis of "The Real Thing" in particular, Henry James explains how he began the story, as he began his novels, with the impression of at-large characters. Yet although the stout Major and his mannerly wife are the original characters who suggested the short story to James, they were quickly

decentralized, assuming the position of counterparts to the cockney woman servant and the garlicky Italian. And all four of these characters are static. They represent positions and aesthetic alternatives, they are modeled ideas which play out their conflict in the mind of the illustrator. It is this donnée, the idea, which the story illustrates, and rather than let fully conceived character create its own fictional environment, James molds character and modifies situation to illustrate his idea.³⁶ Consequently, when we study innovative short fiction we would do well to measure it against James' notes on "The Real Thing" rather than his preface to Portrait of a Lady. That is, these new forms should be studied as innovative fictional illustrations of ideas and not just as radical departures from three dimensional characterization.

James' concept of donnee is, in many ways, a refinement of Poe's earlier theory of "unity of effect." For Poe, the literary strength of the prose tale lay in its ability to deliver the impact of its totality unto the reader, and everything in the tale, from the first sentence onward, should be designed to evoke this preconceived "single effect to be wrought out."³⁷

Yet regardless whether the single effect is an intellectual idea or a lyrical response, until the 1960's very few of the techniques capable of achieving such effects had ever been tapped. Although the general themes, the tones, the points of view of American short fiction vary from decade to decade, recent breakthroughs in structure, form and narrative dynamics have reduced the accomplishments of the genre in the first half of the century to what now

looks like a narrow range of formal possibilities. The plots may have emphasized external event or internal tensions, the general tone had vacillated between grim resignation and defiant rebellion, themes were sometimes implicit and ambiguous, sometimes explicit and overt; but with few exceptions (notably Faulkner) all short fiction shared the basic structure of linear development of credible events leading to an appropriate end. And it is the failure of pre-1960 writers to transcend such a pattern which led Philip Stevick to view short fiction in the first half of this century as formulaic and predictable, "the most conservative art (form) of mid-century."³⁸

And whether the characters and events dramatized what Washington Irving called "the familiar and faithful scenes in common life," or enacted incidents far removed from the middle-range of experience, the authors always asked us to suspend our disbelief, to accept the short story as a reflection of reality. A story might show us a recognizable young man who quits his job at a supermarket (John Updike's "A&P") or an angry Southern town mob turning a lynching and castration into a picnic (James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man"), yet in either case the fiction strives for the illusion of objectivity and verisimilitude by suppressing the scaffolding and frame of its artifice. Contemporary writers, however, not only subvert these familiar conventions, highlighting the fictionality of their craft, but they also cut themselves loose from what is perhaps the single most characteristic feature of the modern short story: the moment of revelation, the turning point, or the epiphany.³⁹

"Pattern," says Arnold Kettle, "is the way life develops."

And fiction, in the broadest sense, is fiction precisely because it shapes life with a pattern. A patternless narrative of life, if such a thing were possible, would aspire toward pure chronicle. A narrative which merely fleshed out a preconceived skeletal pattern is essentially a moral fable. And those narratives which allow the seemingly inherent patterns to emerge gradually from the life of the fiction form the mainstream of the realistic novel tradition. It is precisely this pattern, the author's worldview, which distinguishes one novel from another, and, for the critic, formulates the basis for his judgments and evaluations. No two writers possess the same worldview, hence no two novels reveal identical patterns. The exception, of course, would be if two writers each subscribed to the same external philosophy. Yet writers who merely subscribe to someone else's system of thought, without adapting or adjusting, are likely to be considered first rate only by other disciples of the same system.

Hence novels and other booklength fictions have tended to illustrate, subtly or overtly, the operative principles in human behavior and social event: the way the author sees the world. And although there are theoretically an infinite number of possible patterns to discover, the author usually presents his or her view as the correct one. Not all patterns are equal, however, and given the aid of retrospect to take the human-political situation into account, it is easy to see that some patterns are more liberating, more appropriate for its time than others. Hence McTeague presents the rather reductive notion that it is the violent and greedy savage

barely beneath the veneer of the civilized self which is the causal agent of the events of the fiction. In The American on the other hand, the friction between the inertia of a decadent tradition and the human capacity for sacrifice directs event.

So if the novel reveals the pattern which the author has come to perceive in life, the modern short story has chronicled the moment at which a character comes to recognize that pattern. At least, it usually focuses on the moment when a previous and simpler pattern is irreparably shaken, the point at which the character's experience and perception of reality are too complex and bristling to be contained within the patterns which previously structured his consciousness. This has been done in realistic as well as fabulous modes. We see the narrator of Twain's "History of a Campaign That Failed" -- a classic piece of short realistic fiction -- irreversibly changed because he was possibly involved in the shooting of a man who may have been a Union soldier. Yet young Goodman Brown is no less affected by those he thinks he saw at the satanic sabbath ritual. Nor is this strictly a 19th century phenomenon.

But for one group of writers at least, this is no longer the purpose of short fiction. It has become increasingly evident that "discovering" the pattern of life is ultimately a futile and maybe worthless pursuit. It is something that Walter "and that's the way it is" Cronkite now does when he shows us the news. Yet not only is this pretentious, it may well be dangerous. It is authoritarian, potentially totalitarian, the stuff on which the cold war

was built. Consequently, we now have short fictional forms without characters, or with characters but without introspection, or with characters who learn nothing, who are the same at the end as they were at the beginning. The epiphany, the moment at which the secret meaning of things floods the consciousness of the point of view character, is either parodied or abolished.

A frequently anthologized and often premier story of freshman introduction-to-literature courses is Joyce Carol Oates' thriller, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Although originally published in 1966, this fiction has served me well as classroom tool which illustrates much about the basic form of the short-story genre. It portrays a young girl, Connie, on the threshold of a major turning point in her life. The text itself separates rather neatly into two sections: an exposition describing Connie's distasteful home life, in other words, the narrative's illustration of where she has been; and an amplified narrative of the events of one Sunday morning which launch Connie to where she is going. We see Connie as we see the protagonist of so many conventional short stories, at the comma between the two interrogatory clauses of the title. And it is because of this that Connie bears a familial resemblance to young Goodman Brown, to the boy in "Araby," to Mabel Pervin and to literally hundreds of other point-of-view characters from widely read short stories. Certainly the setting and many of the images (tight jeans, transistor radios, hamburger hangouts, etc.) mark this as an early 60's story, and the introduction of the demonic Arnold Friend removes the fiction from the middle range of experience, but it is,

in most other respects, a thoroughly conventional fiction which competently accommodates contemporary language and motifs to a well established, formulaic pattern. Connie's illumination has perverse consequences, and it is likely that she is about to be murdered as her tale ends, but she has had her previous and innocent perception of herself and her environment painfully ripped from her mind right in front of us, and once again we are witnesses to what Joyce called epiphany, and what behavioral psychologists now recognize as the moment when the constructs of our primary socialization crumble.

Shortly after Oates filled her old bottles with new wine, a group of American authors began writing short fiction which defiantly broke the bottles. For example, Alan Sondheim's short fiction, "*TraditCollege*," published in Kostelanetz' brash 1973 anthology, Breakthrough Fictioneers, like most pieces in the volume, circumvents rather than updates the tradition.⁴⁰ There is no main character, no narrated action, no turning point. The fiction is presented in the form of a "coarse catalog," and on one level it is simply a parody of the course descriptions which appear in any number of college class bulletins. Among the twenty courses listed are "Basic Basketweaving"; a seminar titled "Reading/Writing/Arithmetic" where "pagination is presented as an 'approach' to the new mathematics" and even "several books are distributed"; and "Sexual Attitudes on Campus," a class described as an "investigation into *TraditCollege* sex and what can be done to improve the situation." Yet within this highly abbreviated, 1500 word fiction, Sondheim manages to condense a near epic history of political strife, guerilla outbursts, murder, splinter groups,

"recriminations and counter-recriminations."

Students at *TraditCollege* can enroll in such "coarses" as Freeskool, a study of the first "splinter enemy," Hilldale or Correction-Institute, classes on the second and third splinter groups respectively. Other classes amount to little more than direct military training and indoctrination such as "The death of a student," a required "coarse" which "hardens the young volunteer and reminds the old." And even the most pompously academic seminars manage to relate their studies to applied military tactics, as in the following entry.

Is it upon the account of the fabulous story, that a certain man, ravishing a woman that was there worshipping the goddess, was torn to pieces by dogs: and hence this superstitious practice arose, that men enter not in?: A seminar discussion of this most interesting of Plutarch's answers. Special attention given to "answers-in-question-form," with four periods devoted to Wondering. An onslaught in the direction of correction-institute is also planned. Miss Forsythe, C 901, Pd 6.

Using only one-fifth of the amount of prose prescribed by Henry James in his 7-10,000 word formula, Sondheim still exploits the brevity of his fiction and aspires toward a unity of effect. By opting for an image of experience which is panoramic rather than limited in scope, Sondheim sacrifices in-depth development and resorts to telegraphing bits of information which not only imply a complex sense of history, but suggest that *TraditCollege* is in an active state of open war with its rival factions who are also fighting among themselves. Hence "*TraditCollege*" both captures

and parodies the texture of macro-political intrigue, while exposing the educator/indoctrinator role which American colleges and universities often serve. Finally, Sondheim manages to convey the impression that this is the enemy's course catalog which we are reading, and that *TraditCollege* may well be on the losing side. The innovative narrative techniques of the fiction undercut the traditional, authoritarian stance of the school, and a final note informs students that the course "Winter and Summer" is necessarily cancelled because the instructor, Mr. Cotton-Young "was taken Captive shortly before this catalog went to press, by several 'rounders' of hilldale."

Another innovative short fiction which sustains its own comic life at the expense, to some extent, of universities is Donald Barthelme's "Porcupines at the University."⁴¹ Here, however, there are two major characters, the perplexed and paranoid Dean of a Southwestern university, and Leroy Griswold, a wrangler. There is also a third person omniscient narrator who tells of the events which bring the lives of these two characters together. What initially moves this fiction beyond the range of the conventional short story is that Griswold is a "porky-pine" wrangler driving his herd of four or five thousand head across the country to "the great porcupine canneries of the East."

The narrative structure of this tale is highly abbreviated but, on the surface at least, seemingly conventional. In about 1500 words the narrator renders a montage of eight scenes which constitute the events of the fiction. Although the scenes are not numbered, extra spacing on the page marks each transition.

The first scene depicts the Dean and his wife Paula spending a peaceful evening at home when a scout barges in the door to announce that there are thousands of porcupines "three miles down the road and comin' fast." Then switching to a backdrop of "Dust clouds. Yips. The lowing of porcupines," the second scene introduces Griswold -- his arm full of holes inflicted by quills when he tried to brand his animals -- as he wrangles his herd across the West and fantasizes about the easy life and fancy women he hopes to enjoy once he reaches the East. Subsequent scenes alternate in their focus upon the Dean and the wrangler; the former as he prepares for a violent confrontation with the porcupines which he believes are trying to enroll in his university, the latter as he continues to fantasize about his appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, his engagement at Caesar's Palace, and his songs climbing the charts. The two lines of development converge in the sixth scene when the Dean, armed with a Gatling gun which he borrowed from "a concrete slab in front of the R.O.T.C. Building," confronts Griswold and his herd as they stop to rest on the football field. After assuring the embarrassed Dean that they will not enroll the herd, Griswold and his assistant wrangler ask directions to New York City, and the confrontation is over. The confrontation, but not the story. The final two scenes depict the Dean returned home to his wife, and the porcupines "gittin' along" the Cross Bronx Expressway amid the bemusement of motorists.

Obviously, there is much broad humor here, and some of it is pointed. There is, for example, a pattern of parody directed at the Hollywood grade B Western. While delivering his report to the Dean,

the scout is "pulling porcupine quills out of his ankle," and on his way to head off the herd, the Dean mounts the Gatling gun on the back of a mule-drawn wagon and covers it with canvas. The motifs here are strictly cavalry and Indians, the narrative montage is quite cinematic, but the porcupines just as clearly are not an allegorical representation of mistreated Native Americans.

The Dean's overreaction and the innocuous absurdity of Griswold and his beasts point up a second pattern of humor which satirizes the position of university administrators during the activist era of the 1960's. Paula suggests to her husband that the porcupines be allowed to enroll in "Alternate Life Styles," but the Dean balks, claiming "We've had a lot of trouble around here. The cops won't even speak to me. We can't take any more trouble." Yet neither are the porcupines a symbol for activist students. They do not represent or embody any one thing in the world outside of this fiction. At the very end of the story, the motorists on the Cross Bronx Expressway observe the porcupines, which look "like badly engineered vacuum-cleaner attachments," and they react much as we do as readers who encounter a herd of porcupines unexpectedly in this fiction. They puzzle, "Are these porcupines wonderful? Are they significant? Are they what I need?"

"Porcupines at the University" bears many of the earmarks of allegory and moral fable, but ultimately it eludes such classifications. It resembles a story like "The Jewbird," but Malamud's fiction is closer to the conventional moral fable formula.⁴² Schwartz, the talking Jewbird, is obviously fantastic, but he embodies all the

stereotypical characteristics of a first generation American Jew, and as a fictional device he facilitates depiction of the story's theme, that anti-semitism is often a form of self-hatred, that those most victimized by anti-semitism, like Cohen, are often scarred into anti-semitic behavior. Hence Malamud's story breaks with reality, but finally folds back upon it, offering itself as a fiction which suggests an analysis for a phenomenon of ethnic social psychology. Yet Barthelme's herd of porcupines has no real life counterpart. Within the fiction they trigger paranoia in the Dean, daydreams of love and glory in the wrangler, and wonder in "the citizens in their cars." They are the device which makes the fiction possible, but "Porcupines" is not a fiction which lends itself to thematic analysis, mainly because it does not illustrate a paraphrasable theme.

"Porcupines at the University" exemplifies contemporary short fiction in several ways which question the very purpose of fiction. Most conventional short fiction is about something, usually an abstraction: the discovery of love, the inevitability of death, the recognition of evil, or the acknowledgement of some principle of reality. Yet a fiction like "Porcupines" will not provide a pat answer to the question, "what's it about?" and as such it exhibits a characteristic which Philip Stevick recognizes as working "against subject."⁴³ A second feature of "Porcupines" and the new short fiction in general is one which functions to block analysis.⁴⁴ This occurs when neither the narrator nor any of the characters serve as a surrogate spokesman for the author; there is no definitive point

of view or serious discussion of ideas which might help the reader analyse the motives or events of the fiction. Yet perhaps the trait that comes closest to being a common denominator among innovative short fiction writers is that like Barthelme, they refuse to depict a meaningful ordered world within their fiction.⁴⁵ And there is nothing that has caused me more delight as a reader, or more frustration as a critic, than this feature.

Until recently, most critics have categorized the absence of conventional meaning in innovative narrative as "absurdist fiction," as if absurdity were a single but shared point of view. Yet clearly no one could get away with making such a claim for non-absurdist literature. It has become a syllogism that fiction makes sense to the extent and in kind that the world of experience makes sense to the author. The world "made sense" to Fielding, to Thackeray, to Huxley. Yet even the half-serious student of literature should be able to distinguish between the world views expressed in Tom Jones, Vanity Fair and Brave New World. It is a gross oversimplification to lump all three works together as "novels of sense." And today, when the only people around who still profess an understanding of a sense-making world are the Southern Baptists and Moonies, surely the remainder of us cannot be heaped in a pile and labelled absurdists. Nor is it any less reductive to homogenize the various efforts and accomplishments within contemporary short fiction by calling it all "fiction of the absurd." It is increasingly apparent that there are as many visions of absurdity as there are versions of order; there are many craters on which to stand on the dark side of the moon, and

each of the collections of short fiction which I will soon discuss expresses a vision of absurdity with its own scope, its own texture.

In order to complete my introduction to the new directions of short fictional forms, I want to discuss one more recent story. "Female Skin" by Steve Katz is a composite of narratives which accomplishes two things.⁴⁶ It tells a fantastic and hallucinatory story about a fictional character, Steve Katz, who surgically removes the skin of one Wendy Appel, dons it himself, and eventually, with the help of the largest flock of geese ever witnessed, takes over New York City before returning the epiderm to its rightful owner. But it is also a story which chronicles its own composition.

Unlike the "Porcupines" story, which uses a montage of scenes for its structure, "Female Skin" is a collage of narrative techniques. It patches together first-person fictional narrative, journal entries, and confessional narrative in such a way that the linear textual surface leads the reader from the story proper, into the life of Steve Katz the author, and finally back to the original fiction. In addition, there are even less familiar techniques such as the paragraph which consists of sixty-two, 3 and 4 word, rapid-fire questions and which seems to serve as a sort of anti-transition between the fictional and autobiographical segments. At the same time, the distinctions between the fiction and the chronicle are often blurred. Wendy Appel turns out to have been an actual fleeting acquaintance of Katz, and the 13 journal entries, dated August 16 - September 3, 1971, relate their initial meeting and their ensuing brief but intense emotional involvement which transpired while they

worked together on the production of a low-budget Hollywood film. At another point Katz is discussing his in-progress short fiction with his artist friend, Charles Ross.

"There's even a scene in which I go to see you," I tell Chuck. "I'm dressed in Wendy's skin."

"I hope I don't notice any difference," he says.

"The last line before I leave you is, 'He didn't notice any change in me. I didn't notice any change in him.'" (p. 169-170)

And sure enough, the fictional segment resumed and the N.Y.C. coup narrated, Steve Katz the character shows up at Ross' studio.

"Do you notice any difference in me?" I ask. "I'm wearing Wendy's skin.

Chuck shrugs and puts on his coat. "No I don't. Let's go have dinner."

He didn't notice any change in me. I didn't notice any change in him. (p. 173)

Although clearly divorced from the realm of possibility, the fiction "proper" is narrated matter-of-factly, and with the assumption that the skinning procedure is surgically quite feasible. Katz, the narrator/surgeon, is continually making note of the clock time, as if in keeping with scientific procedure. ("I made the first incision at 7:15 A.M.... It was 9:37. I was in the street, decked out inconspicuously in the absolute skin of Wendy Appel... It was 3:43 P.M. We had the city under our control."). He also offers enough vivid anatomical detail to make the impossible seem real. He discusses how her breasts "popped like grapes out of the peel," and how when the de-skinned Wendy laughed, her laughter displayed it-

self as a "lovely sequence of muscle spasms from her belly to her face." But if the narrator's voice tends to stand between subject and reader, and if the reference to clock time and the use of vivid detail serve to impose the illusion of verisimilitude on his irrealist subject, then Katz quickly pulls the rug out from under his own feet. As soon as the narrator slips into the "absolute skin of Wendy Appel," then the fiction is suspended and the narrative technique changed.

Before resuming the story again, after a lapse of six pages, Katz relates the negative reaction of his wife Jingle when he read her the first part of "Female Skin," reprints the journal entries, describes a pair of sparrows which he observes from a window of his writing studio, and talks about the responses of Peter Campus, Ross, and Annie Hickman, three friends with whom he discusses this fiction in progress. The connection between the fictional and confessional segments of the narrative lies in Katz' comments immediately following the journal entries. The entries record the strong emotional and physical attraction Katz felt for Wendy, and their inability to have a satisfying relationship largely due to the psychic scars Wendy received from a sado-masochistic relationship she had with an unnamed former lover. After the last reprinted entry Katz writes, "These journal entries don't give me a sense of who Wendy Appel is, but I can recall what I was like when I was enveloped by her." And so the narrative about wearing Wendy's skin becomes a free-wheeling metaphor which fictionally illustrates this concept of being enveloped by another person.

When the fantasy is resumed, the scientific, methodical narrator immediately notices some changes in himself.

I had given no thought to what I would do once I was wearing the skin. I try not to live that way. I try to think out my moves and know where I'm going. Not the case in Wendy's skin. I was lost. . . In this other skin I couldn't tell what was happening. (p. 170)

And after the day's adventures in Wendy's skin, including the takeover of City Hall and Gracie Mansion, "the one most meaningful act" of his life, Katz returns to Wendy to tell her all about it. But she stops him.

"O you don't have to tell me. It's so boring. Don't you think I know what it's like to be in my own skin?"

There was silence. We stared at each other. We stared beyond each other. I knew I was in the presence of a total stranger."

And so the fictional Steve Katz too knows what it is like to be enveloped by Wendy Appel, but he still doesn't know who she is.

Yet more than anything else, "Female Skin" is about its own narrative frame. The rapid changes and collisions of narrative technique, the resumption of suspended modes, these are the sequential development of the fiction as much or moreso than plot and central conflict. "Female Skin" is almost a tailor-made exemplum of Richard Pearce's concept of "surfiction." The narrative point of view is volatile, not comfortably situated between subject and audience, and Stephen Dedalus' notion of narrative is replaced by "an erratic image where the narrator, the subject and the medium are brought into the same imaginative field of interaction, an image that is shattered,

confused, self-contradictory but with an independent and individual life of its own."⁴⁷ "Female Skin" also illustrates what I perceive to be the two major impulses within contemporary American innovative short fiction. The first is the hallucinatory element, the thrust of the imagination onto the printed page, liberated from any obligations to reflect probable or possible reality. A herd of porcupine, revolutionary geese, a tale-telling spermatazoon or people who wake up to discover that they're made of wax: these are the rule rather than the exception, and the reader of new short fictional forms soon comes to accept the impossible as likely. The second is the exoskeletal thrust, and this is witnessed in fiction which calls attention to its own structure and composition. It can do so by way of novelty and originality, as with Sondheim's "coarse catalog" or Barthelme's series of one hundred numbered statements in "The Glass Mountain," or the composition of the fiction can be discussed on the surface of the text as Katz does. In either case attention is focused on its own artifice, its own fictionality, its own subtle techniques and cheap tricks.

The fiction I will discuss in the following pages exhibits both hallucinatory and exoskeletal qualities. These are not new facets of fiction; in fact, they are inherent to the fictional process. But in the short fiction of Barth, Coover, Barthelme and others, the hallucinatory and exoskeletal elements find their way to the textual surface with unprecedented intensity and frequency. And since the balance of these qualities varies from writer to writer, they often provide

a workable measure for placing the short fiction of one writer in relation to the efforts of another.

Notes to Chapter One

¹ Henry James, "'Preface' to The Portrait of a Lady," reprinted in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 1-16.

² Robert Coover, "In a Train Station," in Pricksongs and Descants, by Robert Coover (New York: Dutton, 1969), pp. 98-104.

³ Charles B. Harris, Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd (New Haven: College and University Press, 1971), pp. 17-32. See especially p. 22.

⁴ Harris, pp. 19-21.

⁵ Harris, p. 27.

⁶ Robert Murray Davis, "Parody, Paranoia, and the Dead End of Language in The Crying of Lot 49," Genre 5 (1972), pp. 367-77.

⁷ Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Wasteland: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 6.

⁸ Olderman, pp. 8-10.

⁹ Olderman, p. 15.

¹⁰ Olderman, p. 16.

¹¹ Olderman, pp. 17-18.

¹² Robert Coover, "An Encounter," in The Stonewall Book of Minute Fictions, ed. Robert Coover (Iowa City: Stone Wall Press, 1973), pp. 47-8.

¹³ Steve Katz, "Nino," in Creamy and Delicious by Steve Katz, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 109-20.

¹⁴ Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975).

¹⁵ John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic 220, no. 2 (August 1967), reprinted in Surfiction: Fiction Now... and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 19-34. See especially p. 30.

¹⁶ Klinkowitz, p. 2.

¹⁷Klinkowitz, pp. 8-18.

¹⁸Klinkowitz, p. 12.

¹⁹William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, 1936. The Modern Library edition prints a two-page "Chrcnology," a three-page "Geneology," and a double-page map on unnumbered pages following the narrative proper which ends on p. 378.

²⁰Klinkowitz, pp. 16-18.

²¹Richard Kostelanetz, "Twenty-Five Fictional Hypotheses," Panoche (special "Future's Fiction" issue, 1971), reprinted in Surfiction, pp. 283-86. See hypothesis #V, p. 284. The italics are mine.

²²Raymond Federman, "Surfiction - Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in Surfiction, pp. 5-15. See especially "Proposition Three - The Material of Fiction," pp. 11-13.

²³Jean Ricardou, "Nouveau Roman, Tel Quel," Pour une theories du nouveau roman (Paris, 1971), translated and reprinted in Surfiction, pp. 101-33.

²⁴Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (New York: Dell, 1961), p. 244. Chapter 22, "Milo the Mayor," is a hilarious example of fission of unities.

²⁵Richard Brautigan, Trout Fishing in America (New York: Dell, 1967).

²⁶Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-70 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 411.

²⁷Tanner, pp. 17-18.

²⁸Raymond Federman, Double or Nothing (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1972).

²⁹Ricardou, p. 108.

³⁰Gilbert Sorrentino, Synthetic Ink. To date, only portions of the novel have been published: The Masque of Fungo: Flawless Play Restored (Chicago: Black Swallow Press, 1974); "Art Futures Interview of the Month: Barnett Tate," New Directions 30 (1975); and "Perfect Gifts," Seems, 5 and 6 (special "American Cheese" issue, Summer 1975), pp. 94-101.

³¹Robert Coover, "The Elevator," in Pricksongs and Descants, pp. 125-37.

³²Federman, "Surfiction - Four Propositions," p. 8.

³³Brander Mathews, The Philosophy of the Short Story (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), pp. 15-19, 22-35, 73-77, reprinted* in What Is the Short Story, ed. Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1961) pp. 36-41.

*as "The Philosophy of the Short Story"

³⁴The American Short Story: Continuity and Change 1940-75 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1975). In Chap. 8 Peden devotes a ten-page subsection to the Innovationist writers, claiming that they flourished briefly, but collapsed when writers like "Malcolm Cowley, Irwin Shaw, and Herbert Gold... rallied to the defense of character, situation and place" (p. 177). See chap. five of this study for a rebuttal of Peden's position.

³⁵Richard Kostelanetz offers a similar argument in "Notes on the American Short Story Today," Minnesota Review V (1966), pp. 214-15.

³⁶Henry James, The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947) pp. 102-04, reprinted as "On the Genesis of 'The Real Thing,'" in What Is the Short Story, pp. 26-28.

³⁷Edgar Allan Poe, review of Twice-Told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Graham's Magazine, May 1842, reprinted as "On the Aim and Technique of The Short Story" in What Is the Short Story, pp. 4-13.

³⁸Philip Stevick, "Introduction" to Anti-Story, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pp. xi-xii.

³⁹Stevick, p. XIV. Kostelanetz also recognizes the boycott of epiphanies by post-modern short fiction writers in "Notes...", p. 216.

⁴⁰Alan Sondheim, "*Tradit College*," in Breakthrough Fictioneers, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Brownington, Vermont: Something Else Press, 1973) pp. 24-27.

⁴¹Donald Barthelme, "Porcupines at the University," New Yorker, 46 (April 25, 1970), 32-33, reprinted in Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Dell, 1972), pp. 132-36. Recently this story was included in the volume Amateurs by Donald Barthelme (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), pp. 129-37.

⁴²Bernard Malamud, "The Jewbird," in Idiots First, by Bernard Malamud (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1963), reprinted in Innovative Fiction, pp. 48-57.

⁴³Stevick, pp. XVIII-XX.

⁴⁴Stevick, pp. xx-xxi

⁴⁵Stevick, pp. xxi-xxii.

⁴⁶Steve Katz, "Female Skin," New Directions 30 (1975), pp. 162-73. A slightly revised version of this story is the opening fiction of Moving Parts by Steve Katz (New York: Fiction Collective, 1977). My quotes follow the New Directions text and pagination.

⁴⁷Richard Pearce, "Enter the Frame," in Surfiction, pp. 47-57. See especially p. 48.

CHAPTER II

Tripping the Moebius Boardwalk:

Barth's Lost in the Funhouse

Already the subject of two book-length studies, a dozen dissertations and hundreds of critical articles, John Barth and his fiction have been discussed, analysed, interpreted, praised and condemned. While most critics have nominated him for the rank of great American novelist, negative assessments have issued from those critics who most value innovative narrative dynamics and breakthroughs in fictional form. To Jerome Klinkowitz, Barth's castrated and mechanical imagination caused him to narrate himself into a corner, hemmed in by the walls of stale conventions. And according to Richard Kostelanetz, Barth's fiction is mired in "pseudo-scholarship," and it is only fiction which moves "decisively beyond" such a position which responds vitally to the writer's predicament in contemporary America.¹ Yet when each hostile critic assembled his anthology of revolutionary fiction, John Barth was included in both collections. There are 16 contributors to Klinkowitz' Innovative Fiction (1972); a balladion of 101 writers whose work appears in Kostelanetz' collection, Breakthrough Fictioneers (1973); and John Barth is the only author whose short fiction was judged sufficiently innovative to appear in both col-

Such contradictory responses from the same critics are partially due to the fact that their harsher evaluations are directed toward Barth's first four novels, while they respond more favorably to his 1968 "series" of short fiction for print, tape, and live voice, Lost in the Funhouse. Yet even within that volume Barth, by design, is ambivalent toward the conventions of traditional short fiction. He can and does write the sensitive and conventional short story, "Water Message," faithfully following Freitag's Triangle to a Joycean epiphany without a trace of authorial self-consciousness. But as his series of fictions progresses, Barth repeatedly treats the conventions of his craft as if they were the gimmicks of media hype.

1. Moribund what-have-yous and the vigorous new

Of the 14 fictions in Lost in the Funhouse, "Water-Message" is most likely to satisfy the reader of conventional short stories. The tale is accomplished, but familiar: a 3rd person narrative account of Ambrose, a sensitive pre-adolescent and his growing awareness of the mysteries of life. It is complete with what the narrator of "Title" calls "incidental felicities and niceties of technique: the unexpected image, the refreshingly accurate word-choice, the memorable simile that yields deeper and subtler significances upon reflection."³ Like so much of Barth's fiction, "Water-Message" is a story about knowledge, and the tension of the plot is sustained by Ambrose's exclusion from that knowledge. Even when Ambrose is finally privy to a secret fact, in the form of a message in a bottle

washed upon the beach, it is not the missing link which explains his life, but a blank note. Ultimately, even known secrets remain blank mysteries.

The story is full of information withheld from Ambrose, and since he is the point of view character, withheld -- at least on a superficial level -- from the reader as well. His brother Peter and Peter's classmates tease Ramona Peters "for a secret reason." The Arnie twins, who support themselves by scavenging through the contents of East Dorset garbage cans, "lived God knew where." Peter's secret club, the Occult Order of the Sphinx, centered on "secret handshakes, secret passwords, secret initiations, ... dark facts known to none but the members" who "judged Ambrose too young for membership and forbade his presence at their secret meetings" (p. 44). During one of these meetings the excluded Ambrose discovers the note in the bottle. The young boy genuinely believes himself to be on the threshold of a momentous revelation: his "voice shook ... heart shook ... his face perspired" (p. 52-3). Yet reading "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN" on the top line, and "YOURS TRULY" on the bottom, with only blank space inbetween, Ambrose's anticipated revelation is exposed as nothing more than someone's practical joke.

In the first published version of the story (Southwest Review, Sept., 1963: 226-37), the note Ambrose finds is not blank, but bears the message, "It was Bill Bell," which has no apparent relevance to anything else in the story. Upon reading it, the boy reacts incommensurately to his years; he is overwhelmed by the realization that his future will never yield any more knowledge than the present. But

in the 1968 version, Ambrose is not nearly as pessimistic.

Ambrose's spirit bore new and subtle burdens. He would not tattle on Peter for cursing and the rest of it. The thought of his brother's sins no longer troubled him or even much moved his curiosity. Tonight, tomorrow night, unhurriedly, he would find out from Peter just what it was they had discovered in the Den, and what-all done: the things he'd learn would not surprise now nor distress him, for though he was still innocent of that knowledge, he had the feel of it in his heart, and of other truth. (p. 53)

In fact, as David Morrell observes, the one real truth which Ambrose does not perceive "is that he will never learn the absolute knowledge he expects, that he will forever be as confused and uncertain as now."⁴

Counterbalancing Ambrose's adult sensibilities, "Water-Message" effectively evokes the embarrassments, anguish and fantasies of childhood. Several of Ambrose's elaborate fantasies are detailed wherein he imagines himself an Odyssean hero and magnanimous lover. Yet these are clearly distinguished from the East Dorset "reality" of the story. Although engaging, Ambrose's fantasies are labelled as daydreams, and at this point Barth refrains from exercising any hallucinatory impulses in his fiction.

Many of Ambrose's fantasies, however, revolving as they do around his own death and his role as a lover, help to highlight the twinned thematic concerns of sex and death which reappear throughout the volume. The "facts" to which the adults of the story refer, but which remain a secret to Ambrose, are allusions to the facts of life. When the members of the Order surprise Tommy James

and Peggy Robbins in their clubhouse, Ambrose is excluded from the reason for the lovers' embarrassment, and he is further mystified by the members' hoot-and-hollering when they discover a used condom in the Den. But Ambrose is just as mystified by the facts of death. The overgrown lot where the boys romp is described as being dotted with decomposing gray rats and starlings, fieldmouse bones, and

stuck on twig-ends or flung amid the creepers,
ugly little somethings in whose presence Ambrose
snickered with the rest. (p. 46)

So, though by no means hackneyed, "Water-Message" is a familiar record of a young mind seeking knowledge of love, death and self. But there are other grounds for its familiarity besides its perennial themes. With its concerns of childhood awareness, Ambrose's growing alienation from his playmates, his attraction to an older woman and his fantasies, the story echoes Joyce's "Araby." Michael Hinden even cites several phrases and psychological perceptions conspicuously patterned after similar passages from A Portrait of the Artist.⁵ When Ambrose tries to tell his mother that she has raised him for a sissy,

his sigh stuck in his throat, and such a hurt came
there that he remarked to himself: "This is what
they mean when they say they have a lump in their
throat." (p. 40)

Compare that to a similar discovery made by young Stephen Dedalus.

And when Dante made that noise after dinner and then
put up her hand to her mouth: that was heartburn.

But if the narrator of "Water-Message" appears to reverence

Joyce and pattern his tale on the formula of the modern short story, the tellers of subsequent tales in the volume recant such tributes. The anonymous inventor of prose fiction, who narrates the last piece of the series, seems to be referring to "Water-Message" when he confesses

Once upon a time I told tales straight out, alternating summary and dramatization, developing characters and relationships, laying on bright detail and rhetorical flourish, et cetera ... I know my trade. But I fear we're too far gone now for such luxury. (p. 171-72)

Even as early as the title story, "Lost in the Funhouse," the narrator interrupts his fiction about the problems of a sensitive adolescent to ask, "Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?" But the narrator of "Title" is the most irreverent, flying into a fury at the thought of the conventions which are masterfully and unabashedly executed in "Water-Message."

On, God damn it; take linear plot, take resolution of conflict, take third direct object, all that business, they may well be obsolete notions, indeed they are, no doubt untenable at this late date, no doubt at all. (p. 109)

As Barth informs us in one of the "Additional Author's Notes" which preface the volume, "Title" is a triply schizoid monologue. A narrating voice conducts an interior dialog with itself about three interrelated topics: the impossibility of continuing a meaningful love affair, of writing a meaningful story, and of living in a

meaningful civilization. The assumptions which inform the speaker's consciousness are bleak. Love, art and life are sorely debilitated; lovers, artists and plebes are desperate. Further, "the worst is to come. Everything leads to nothing" (p. 102). "Two Meditations," Barth's innovative one-page fiction which precedes "Title," is also in a sense, its antecedent action. The second meditation declares that "the wisdom to recognize and halt follows the know-how to pollute past rescue" (p. 101), and serves as a reminder that knowledge arrives only when it's too late to do anything but cause anguish for the knower. The challenge for the anguished narrator of "Title" is to make nothingness meaningful, "to fill the blank." And it's a challenge of heroic dimensions, for failure means "the end is at hand": the end of love, the end of art, the end of civilization.

Yet "Title" is not the last fiction in Lost in the Funhouse, although it is, on one level, Barth's death sentence for the conventional short story, declaring that if such fiction is not dead, it should be. And if the speaker knows that "all that business" which formerly made for competent fiction is now "tiresome," "untenable at this late date," if we are indeed "too far gone now for such luxury," what, besides anguish and impotence, remains?

The narrator outlines four possibilities. The fourth, which may be the most likely but is clearly the least acceptable, is silence. Silence means "General anesthesia. Self-extinction" (p. 106), no more fiction of any sort, and much of the impetus which moves "Title" through to its conclusion is an heroic effort to avoid capitulation to silence. The first sentence brings the story "past the

middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end" (p. 102) and all of "Title" except the first sentence is a conclusion in search of an acceptable denouement. Silence is unacceptable, and the narrating voice forestalls its glacial aggression by filling the blank, spewing language on the page, filling the silence with sound, the future with activity, even when there seems no purpose in continuing. But if there is a suitable denouement to this fiction about the dilemma of fiction, it is to be found in one of the first three possibilities outlined.

The first possibility, the narrator tells himself

is rejuvenation: having become an exhausted parody of itself, perhaps a form ... may rise neoprimitively from its own ashes ... The second ... is that moribund what-have-yous will be supplanted by vigorous new: the demise of the novel and short story ... needn't be the end of narrative art ... The end of one road might be the beginning of another ... The (third) possibility is to turn ultimacy, exhaustion, paralyzing self-consciousness and the adjective weight of accumulated history --- against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new. (p. 105-106)

Rejuvenation is practiced by Barth in "Petition," an epistolary short story in the form of a single, extended letter to the King of Siam, and to a lesser extent in "Anonymiad," where prose fiction is revitalized by setting the tale at the time of the invention of prose fiction. But the narrator of "Title" calls rejuvenation "a tiresome prospect." Barth's failure to achieve the second possibility essentially constitutes the grounds on which critic Jerome Klinkowitz excludes him from a select group of truly "disruptive" writers, although "Two Meditations" and "Glossolalia" are certainly highly poetic

fictions which do seem to open new avenues into unsettled regions of narrative. Still, oblivious to the accomplishments of those pieces, the speaker of "Title" finds the second possibility appealing, "but scarcely likely at this advanced date." The third possibility strikes him as "a nauseating notion" but it is the alternative which most closely echoes Barth's own aesthetic as expressed in "The Literature of Exhaustion."

More than just a commendation of Borges' fiction, Barth's essay is an examination of the contemporary state of narrative forms as an emblem of the state of contemporary culture. After defining the condition of exhaustion as "the usedupness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities,"⁶ Barth goes on to chastise those authors who write not as if the 20th century didn't exist, but as if the great writers of the 20th century never existed.⁷ The important writers of our decades, he feels, should "turn the felt ultimates of our time into material and means for his work,"⁸ and this is accomplished "when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in."⁹ The reaction of the narrator's stomach notwithstanding, this is precisely the paradoxical achievement of "Title." By complaining to himself about the impossibility of going on, the narrator has indeed gone on, filled the blank, and written a story, an innovative story, about the impossibility of writing a story.

Such is the general thrust of so many of the specific narrative innovations of Lost in the Funhouse. Narrators and characters continually refer to the fiction in which they're encased, drawing the

readers' attention to its complex workings. Klinkowitz calls this regressive parody because the fiction itself is so overtly concerned with the obsolescence of previous accomplishments within narrative. But his judgment is directed toward content, not form. Barth's fictions in Lost are often markedly exoskeletal with a highlighted foreground. Beginning with the title story where the narrator keeps intruding upon his own narrative, through "Title" where the intrusions are the narrative, and on to "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad," which allow a resurgence of content to the textual surface, Barth constructs funhouses of fiction, some of which are so complex that they threaten to lose their own narrators. One immediate effect of this practice is to remind the reader of the fictionality of much of that milieu we call reality. But the full impact of and causes for such innovations become clearer when we study the volume as a whole.

II. Fallopian tubes, fiction, and other funhouses

In terms of theme and statement, Lost in the Funhouse condenses and recapitulates much of what Barth had already illustrated in his four previous novels. In terms of technique, however, Lost in the Funhouse breaks from his previous work and marks a turning point in his development as an author. Even more than his first four novels, it delights in elaborate design over which the tellers exert a forceful authority, and as such it conforms to Robert Scholes' definition of fabulation. Technically, many of the fictions are intended to be heard, not read. Magnetic tape technology and live voice, as well as traditional print, combine to make Lost in the Funhouse both a

book and a mixed-media production.

The first fiction of the series, "Frame-Tale" is actually a cut-up, a strip of paper reading "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE" on one side, and "WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" on the other. If this strip is cut from the page, twisted once, and attached end to end, it forms a geometric curiosity known as a Moebius strip. The text of the strip then reads "Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began ..." etc. It is cyclical and continuous, without having either beginning or end, and as such, the "Frame-Tale" announces the relationship of the stories within this series. Yet the interdependence and cyclical design of these fictions must still be established. Barth achieves this by exploiting a feature indigenous to a "series" of fictions: he interweaves the volume with orchestrated patterns of themes, situations, metaphors and verbal phrases, each of which is repeated from tale to tale. The major themes revolve around the conflict between participating in life and creating art, and the paradox that knowledge yields uncertainty. But finally, theme, content and even structure are contained within the central metaphor of the funhouse, or labyrinth. Stories up through "Lost in the Funhouse" concern characters lost within literal and metaphorical mazes; from "Lost in the Funhouse" to "Anonymiad" the stories are themselves elaborate labyrinths. The entire volume, in fact, is like a moebius boardwalk of funhouses leading both author and reader from the conception of the individual to the origins of fiction and back again. Critical investigation of the various funhouses as they appear

from story to story can reveal how their movement from content to structure parallels the artist's withdrawal from life into the arcade of fiction.

The first prose tale of the volume, "Night-Sea Journey," is set in a fallopian tube, and its text is the monolog of a tale-telling spermatazoon. Like all the characters and narrating voices of these stories, the nameless sperm finds himself in a maze without a map. The night-sea, with its dark passages, is the physical funhouse in which he is lost. But being lost is as much a state of mind as a physical condition and the teller's predicament is compounded by the labyrinth of ethical considerations and metaphysical doubts which afflict his consciousness. Like Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, Ebenezer Cooke, Giles Goat-Boy and other characters from Barth's previous novels, the sperm is stricken with a severe case of cosmopsis, an incurable form of intellectual's palsy resultant from an overdose of knowledge.¹¹ He is so aware of the relativity of values and of the various and equally possible accounts of his circumstances that he lacks conviction, even doubts his own existence. "Is the journey my invention," he asks.

Do the night, the sea exist at all ... apart from
my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is
this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am,
who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport?
But how can I be both vessel and contents? (p. 3)

Like Ambrose, the petitioner, Echo, Menelaus and the anonymous minstrel who follow, he is lost in a disorienting funhouse of intellectual considerations and is rendered paralyzed, doubting even his own identity.

He gives voice to these considerations in the recesses from swimming.

Two measures onward and upward, flailing with the rest, then I float exhausted and dispirited, brood upon the night, the sea, the journey, while the flood bears me a measure back and down. (p. 3)

This contrapuntal alternation of active swimming and contemplative floating reflects a basic theme and pattern of the entire volume: the vacillation between participating in life and love, and countering such futile activities with fiction and art; quitting the funhouse of life to construct funhouses of fiction. The sperm, of course, does not write fiction during his recesses from swimming, he analyses the circumstance of his existence. Yet his meditations, verbatim, form the text of the tale, and as most contemporary fiction attests, human life, except for biological activity, is a complex of fictions, and analysis of life is analogous to the fictive process.¹² This point is made repeatedly in subsequent stories.

The swimmer's painful awareness of the matrix of fictions which could explain his night-sea journey is compounded because his labyrinth is also a hecatomb in which he is the sole survivor. Having outlived his fellow swimmers, he has inherited all the explanations devised by his generation. The sum of his knowledge is as great as it can be, yet it forms no illuminating designs. Most of the explanations lack imagination and parallel our standardized human ontologies: he and his race are designed for swimming; they are driven by Love to reach the Shore; their swim is without purpose, but its absurdity must be embraced (as opposed to "going under"). Yet since he finds swim-

ming "at best not actively unpleasant, more often tiresome, not infrequently a torment" (p. 4), the narrator remains unconvinced, has no commitment, and is burdened with the suspicion that his "night-sea journey is without meaning" (p. 4). The intellectual melodrama of his dilemma, however, is deflated by his being. He is, of course, a sperm, an honest intelligent sperm at that, but there is no reader-identification, even when the little fellow is most anguished.

Just when he is irrevocably lost in the maze of theories, one hypothesis gains credibility. And because the reader knows enough facts about the sexual process to explain what vexes the narrator, we can see that this explanation is not only the most imaginative, but very close to the truth. Even though he scoffed at the theory when it was first espoused by a late companion (one of the first to drown), the narrator reconsiders the doctrine when he suspects that he is the sole survivor of his generation, the "tale-bearer" of his race.

In his opinion ... nearly everyone's fate was permanent death; indeed he took a sour pleasure in supposing that every 'Maker' made thousands of separate seas in His creative lifetime, each populated like ours with millions of swimmers, and that in almost every instance both sea and swimmers were utterly annihilated whether accidentally or by malevolent design ... However ... he professed to believe that in possibly a single night-sea per thousand, say, one of its quarter billion swimmers (that is one swimmer in two hundred fifty billions) achieved a qualified immortality. (p. 7)

Although Robert Scholes contends that the funhouse, for Barth, symbolizes the confusion of knowledge which precludes the discovery of true meaning, this is not exactly the case. The sperm does discover the meaning of

his night-sea journey, but only when it is too late to use that information as a guide to his own behavior. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, the "wisdom to recognize and halt follows the know-how to pollute past rescue." (p. 101) The sperm-teller is on the verge of a transformation and his knowledge will vanish with his former being. The next generation of swimmers must once again speculate haphazardly about the meaning of their journey.

As he capitulates instinctively to the beckoning of the ovum, the narrator's final, desperate hope is that the being he engenders will have "a private legacy of awful recollection and negative resolve" and the will to "terminate this aimless, brutal business" (p. 12), the strength to say nay to night-sea journeys.

As one critic observed, "Night-Sea Journey" fictionally illustrates a biological moebius strip through the notion that "Makers and swimmers each generate the other"¹⁴ (p. 8). And since the succeeding story concerns an unnamed infant, the possibility is suggested that Ambrose is the Maker engendered by that sperm. "Ambrose, His Mark" is the first of three stories which comprise an Ambrosiad. Since the Ambrose stories are directly related by content, I will discuss them together, after first examining the intervening fictions which appear between them. Suffice it to say that "Ambrose His Mark," despite several unusual features, is a conventional, print-oriented story using scene-by-scene construction, consistent point of view, dialog, characterization, and selective-detail realism to narrate the incidents which lead to Ambrose's receiving his name.

Following as it does such a traditionally-told tale, the next

piece, "Autobiography" is abrupt and unexpected, despite the motifs which link it to the two previous stories. It is a monolog with only a minimal, cryptic plot, no setting and no characters except the disembodied, narrating voice and the "visible but silent author" required on stage for its designed presentation. Subtitled "A Self-Recorded Fiction" it is the first story within the moebius sequence to cut its dependence upon the medium of print, intended as it is to be heard as a monophonic tape recording. Habitually punning and muttering in riddles, the narrating voice speaks of its own conception and identity from within a labyrinth of doubt and second-guesses. No sooner does the speaking begin than the voice interjects "My first words weren't my first words. I wish I'd begun differently" (p. 33). The first word is actually "You," and the voice, in general, assumes an audience, in fact, provides the puns and clues to its identity for the sake of its audience. Yet at times it questions that initial assumption.

Whether anyone follows me I can't tell.
Are you there? If so I'm blind and deaf
to you, or you are me, or both're both. One
may be imaginary. (p. 33)

At another point, the voice even doubts its own existence. Tony Tanner sees this fiction as consisting of free-floating words which "never encounter any necessity so they can drift on in self-canceling and self-undermining recessions as long as the voice lasts."¹⁵

Although the voice does float, there is a ground situation to which it is anchored. The riddle of its circumstances is soon solved: the voice is a story, speaking of itself; Dad is Barth; Mom, "A

mere passing fancy who didn't pass quickly enough" (p. 34), is the tape recorder. The voice is further obligated to relate its ramblings to the previous and subsequent fiction in the series. Like Ambrose, the story speaks of its own infancy and is as self-conscious about its title as Ambrose of his name. Like Echo, the story is all voice and no body. And like the sperm of "Night-Sea Journey" the voice is dissatisfied with its existence, and speculates whether its entire life is not an incubation, a prelude to an undesirable birth. Whether "still in utero" or not, the story is undone by its failure to fulfill its heroic potential. "Your crippled hero's one thing, ... your heroic cripple another" (p. 36). After suicide is aborted, the voice in vain implores first listeners, then father to turn it off. Unable to extricate itself from the cruel funhouse of its existence, the voice has no alternative but to "mutter to the end, one word after another" (p. 37) in order to preserve what's left of its sanity.

Recognizing that "the alternative is madness" (p. 60), the narrator of "Petition" also turns to language to save his sanity. He is an American "Siamese" twin, tormented to the brink of his endurance by the physical bond which connects him, belly to back, to his vulgar brother. The petitioner describes himself as "withdrawn even solitary: an observer of life, a meditator, a taker of notes" (p. 59), hardly physical in his existence. "I neither perspire nor defecate," he claims, "but merely emit a discreet vapor of neutral scent, and tiny puffs of what could pass for talc" (p. 59-60). His twin, on the other hand, he depicts as a paradigm of physical vulgarity. He "belches up gases, farts in my lap ... humps his whores"

(p. 60). In short, they have nothing in common save "the womb that bore, the flesh that shackles, the grave that must soon receive" (p. 60) them. Desperate, the petitioner's appeal for help takes the form of a letter which flatters, then requests the King of Siam to order an operation which would separate the incompatible brothers.

The twins have been variously interpreted as the mind and the body (Morrell), language and life (Tanner), self-scrutiny and instinct (Hinden). The petitioner's situation is also analogous to that of the artist, or the artistic imagination, leashed to the world of physical reality where art is expressed in pornographic acrobatics such as those performed by the brothers and Thalia in their nightclub act, The Eternal Triangle. That each of these interpretations is valid attests to the pronounced allegorical thrust of the fiction, and the allegorical elements, together with the narrator's idiosyncratic perspective and peculiar language, make the petitioner's predicament more comical than pathetic.

Counterpointing the apparent fictionality of the story are its claims to historical authenticity. King Prajadhipok of Siam was indeed at Ophir Hall in White Plains, N.Y. on April 21, 1931, preparing to undergo a cataract operation.¹⁶ The petitioner's references to Chang and Eng Bunker, the 19th century prototype of Siamese twins, are also steeped in verifiable facts. Such claims to historical authenticity not only serve to foil the bizarre fiction of the subject matter, but they suggest an additional, unstated fact: the first successful surgical separation of physically joined twins was not performed until 1955. At the time Barth wrote "Petition" medical

science had developed a means to extract the petitioner from the imprisonment of his physical funhouse; but at the time the letter is dated, the desperate twin is 24 years deep in his labyrinth.

Although the petitioner's situation in life was never an exercise in freedom, the "present crisis" arose when both brothers fell in love with Thalia, their show-business partner. To Barth, the lover and the artist are diametric opposites, the lover epitomizing participation in life, the artist withdrawing from life to create fictional alternatives. When the petitioner desires most to participate in life, when he falls in love and has his "first experience of sweat," he is most agonized by the maze of genetic and physical circumstances which prevent such a participation.

To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable. Your Highness may imagine with what eagerness His reply to this petition is awaited. (p. 68)

And so, apprehensive, his voice stops, like so many 20th century American voices, waiting for a redeemer to heal its wounds.

Nowhere does the dichotomy of artist and lover receive more explicit treatment than in "Lost in the Funhouse," the third Ambrose tale and the pivotal fiction of the series.

For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion. (p. 69)

And so the very first sentences of the story establish Ambrose's alienation from the community of lovers. Yet Ambrose's inability to participate in life was already established by the lesson he learned

while forcibly excluded from the meeting of the Occult Order of the Sphinx in "Water-Message." And the possibility that he might develop into an artist is foreshadowed in the first Ambrose story, "Ambrose His Mark."

"Ambrose His Mark" was originally written in 1960 and intended as an early chapter in The Seeker or The Amateur, a novel about Ambrose Mensch which Barth never completed.¹⁷ Set in 1930 Maryland, the story concerns an extended German-American family, the latest member of which, a baby boy, is yet unnamed. The climactic incident resolves this situation when a swarm of bees settles around the infant's eyes, and the family decides to name the boy Ambrose after the saint who had a near identical childhood experience. But while the bees covered the mouth of the saint, who grew up to be a great speaker, our Ambrose is swarmed on the port-wine birthmark near his eyes, and the family hopes that this portends great vision for the boy. When, in "Water-Message" the prophetic swarming comes to fruition, Ambrose's ability to see only makes childhood more difficult and confusing. The grove of honey locusts where the children play, named the "Jungle" by Ambrose, is a physical labyrinth reflecting the maze of ambiguity in which Ambrose, the seeing child, is lost. Made mysterious by "a labyrinth of intersecting footpaths," the Jungle is a key visual image linking the fallopian tube of "Night-Sea Journey" with the boardwalk funhouse of the title story.

Yet "Lost in the Funhouse" is not merely a story about a boy lost in the confusion of adolescence. As a metaphor, the funhouse is a vehicle encompassing many tenors. It is life, and it is fiction.

It is the ramshackle universe whose operator has fallen asleep. It is both "palace of art and palace of pleasure," as well as the matrix of all possibilities which can infect the human mind with cosmopsis at any given moment.¹⁸ Yet it is also something more specific: a type of fiction of which this story and the subsequent tales of the series are examples.

Like the schizophrenic voice of "Title," the third-person omniscient narrator of "Lost in the Funhouse" knows his trade. He is capable of sustaining his fiction through the competent use of narrative conventions, but he cannot resist popping into the foreground of his story to explain, expose and criticize his practices. Ambrose's story is continually interrupted by these intrusions of authorial self-consciousness. At one point, after discussing the conventional functions of the beginning of a story, the narrator -- in harmony with the other whining narrators of the volume -- interrupts his interruption to gripe about the failures of the first 5 pages of this fiction.

So far there's been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a theme. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven't even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse. (p. 74)

Clearly, this "funhouse" is not of the boardwalk variety. Its referent is the story, and the metaphor accentuates its architecture as an edifice of fiction. And like a funhouse, the story "Lost in the Funhouse" is designed with twists and turns, dead-ends, and forced re-

gressions.

After establishing Ambrose in contrast to the lovers, the opening paragraph launches into a brief guideline on the use of italics as a typographical technique in fiction. The second paragraph includes a similar digression on initials and blanks as a trick of the fictionist's trade capable of enhancing "the illusion of reality" (p. 69). A discussion of the use of evocative detail as an aid to characterization and a means of drawing the reader into the realm of the fiction is followed by practice of the very principle. But as the narrator incorporates visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory images into his description of the car ride and picnic, the reader is possessed of a writer's awareness of these tactics due to the preceeding exposition. In this way the story sabotages the conventional use and effects of these techniques but in the process creates new effects and functions for italics, blanks, sensory detail, etc. Just as when Ambrose, lost in the guts of the boardwalk funhouse, spies its machinations through a seam in the plywood, so the reader becomes privy to the secrets of narrative techniques. And if they can no longer create an illusion of reality, they are invested with a new ability to enhance our understanding of fiction.

The boardwalk funhouse is advertised by Fat May, a mechanical laughing lady whose laughter, issuing from "a hidden loudspeaker," beckons Ambrose into the funhouse the way the ovum beckoned the sperm to the fallopian tube. "You couldn't hear it without laughing yourself, no matter how you felt" (p. 76). And like the sperm, Ambrose too is on verge of a transformation as he enters her realm. Though

"he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (p. 94), he vows to design and operate funhouses for others. He will be an artificer, and his funhouses will be his fictions. And if writing fiction is like constructing a funhouse, then reading fiction should be analogous to being a wandering lover. But it doesn't work. Funhouse fiction cultivates an operator's consciousness in the reader. The reader doesn't just wander through the fiction, he is aware of its design, and that design, however elaborate or complex, is exoskeletal and observable on the textual surface.

Still, "Lost in the Funhouse" is not, like Santiago's fish, all skeleton and no flesh. For all its innovative energy it remains a story of initiation. Ambrose realizes that "There was some simple, radical difference about him; he hoped it was genius, feared it was madness, devoted himself to amiability and inconspicuousness" (p. 85). "He understands more than he should, the world winks at him through its objects, grabs grinning at his coat" (p. 85). Ambrose's traditional initiations into his cultural and genetic legacies are failures. His first sexual encounter occurred when he was 10 years old during a game of "Master and Slave," and was marked by "an odd detachment, as if someone else were Master" (p. 81). At his baptism, which was postponed until he reached bar mitzvah age, Ambrose "contrived by a strain like defecation to bring tears into his eyes - but felt nothing" (p. 85). And "at the Boy-Scout initiation campfire he only pretended to be deeply moved" (p. 93).

In fact, most human behavior in the story is exposed as a series of pretensions. "Magda pretended to be uninterested in the

diving" (p. 79), while Ambrose praises Peter's diving in "feigned admiration." And Amby spends much of his time in Ocean City hobbling around the boardwalk, faking a limp to conceal an erection. The entire funhouse, and all of Ocean City, are finally facades which mask a reality of sex and death. The "whole point" of the funhouse is to expose the underpants of upended women; the "whole point" of Ocean City is the gritty "slap slap of thigh on ham" going on under the boardwalk. Everything else, the "restaurants and dance halls and clothing and test-your-strength machines, (were) merely preparation and intermission" (p. 86). Yet, whereas all the other characters are willing to suspend their disbelief and act their part in this sequence of masquerades, Ambrose cannot. He is stricken with the curse of the sperm and ill-at-ease within the cycle of sex and death. Knowing the operative principle of human behavior, he resists capitulation to it.

Watching Peter and other divers, Ambrose knows that

whether you hollered Geronimo! or Sieg heil!, held your nose or "rode a bicycle," pretended to be shot or did a perfect jackknife or changed your mind halfway down and ended up with nothing, it was over in two seconds, after all that wait. Spring, pose, splash, Spring, neat-o, splash. Spring, aw fooey, splash. (p. 79)

And such, according to Barth, is the extent of individual freedom within the confines of the human condition. Once we are restricted to diving, the possibilities within that form only serve as reminders of our limitations. Ambrose is not only aware of this, he's dissatisfied with it, and that's why he gets lost in the funhouse.

Lacking Theseus' ball of thread, his only recourse is his resolve to design "a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled" (p. 93). However, if the boy can escape from one labyrinth by becoming an artist, he is not assured that his vocation will not lose him in another. Very likely he could find himself in a dilemma similar to that of the author-narrator of his fiction.

Although the point of Ambrose's lesson is established fairly readily, the narrator has difficulty devising a method of his physical release from the funhouse. Yet instead of working out the logistics of character and event on scratch paper, the process increasingly crowds the plot. After considering and dismissing several unacceptable means of getting Ambrose out, the narrator resumes his complaints.

A long time ago we should have passed the apex of Freitag's Triangle and made brief work of the denouement; the plot doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires. The climax of the story must be its protagonist's discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search (p. 92)

Finally, finding the requirement of devising a denouement a mere annoyance, the narrator contrives a preposterous escape involving a blind Negro girl and suddenly Ambrose is with his family back in the car on their way home.

David Morrell correctly recognizes Ambrose's decision to reject the funhouses of life in favor of constructing funhouses of fiction

as the turning point of the book.¹⁹ The stories following "Lost in the Funhouse" are no longer focused on the problems of narrators as characters, but on the problems of characters who are no more than narrators. And the fictions themselves are elaborate, innovative constructs through which even the perceptive reader is often hard-put to find his way.

"Echo," intended for monophonic recording of Barth's voice, interweaves details and events from the lives of Narciscus, Tiresias and Echo, and consequently knots the narrative into a macrame of their corresponding abstracts: Beauty, Truth, and Art. Resembling a pre-Ocean City Ambrose, Narcissus spends his life darting through "the bimboed and bebuggered bush ... where ladies beckon every way and gentlemen crouch in ambuscado" (p. 96). Even when he retreats into Tiresias' cave he "loses bearings" (p. 95), the dark passage recalling both boardwalk funhouse and fallopian tube. Blind Tiresias, of course, sees all except the "unseeable," and, not immune to cosmopsis, even he "has gone astray; a voice not impossibly his own has bewildered him" (p. 99). Echo, Narcissus' opposite, is like the post-Ocean City Ambrose: "she turns from life and learns to tell stories" whereby she "amuses others and preserves her reason" (p. 97). Yet, this doesn't mean that Echo is free. Deprived of the ability to speak her own words, she selectively "edits, heightens, mutes, turns others' words to her end" (p. 97). And while practicing her art, she must somehow maintain an allegiance to both beauty and truth. The possibilities of point of view, the impossibility of pure accuracy, and

the permutations of language stand before Echo like a labyrinth of narrative choices. She can only repeat the same story, one that, like the diving is "finished before it starts" (p. 100), trying a new mode of narrative with each telling.

Regardless of whose words she repeats Echo is both vehicle for narration and title of the narrative. As she effaces herself completely to become a disembodied voice, her narrative approaches a point where "none can tell teller from told" (p. 99), message from medium. And in this case, "Echo" is Echo's message. Barth takes the content of this fiction from Robert Graves' The Greek Myths, but revises the myth to the extent that Echo is not merely incapable of speaking for herself, but likewise unable to modulate in her own voice; she can only repeat the words of others in their voices.²⁰ Hence, as Barth explains in Additional Author's Note #4, "the words of 'Echo' on the tape or the page may be regarded validly as (Echo's), Narcissus's, Tiresias's, mine, or any combination or series of the four of us's" (p. x). Such a fusion of diversities -- four individual characters channelled into one voice -- creates a maze of possible perspectives in which the story can be read. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" Barth describes why he finds labyrinths so appealing.

a labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice... are embodied, and -- barring special dispensation like Theseus' -- must be exhausted before one reaches the heart.²¹

This is exactly the function of the framework of "Echo" which stands between the reader and the heart of the story.

The three fictions which follow are "Two Meditations," "Title"

and "Glossolalia." "Title," the "triply schizoid monologue" which I discussed earlier, achieves its sense of architecture by having a narrator with two voices -- occasionally a third -- and a threefold subject. Arithmetically then, there is a set of (at least) six narrative lines which simultaneously are developed, intertwined and finally fused into a single fiction. Any single statement which we read, therefore, may apply to one, all or any subset of those narratives.

"Two Meditations" and "Glossolalia" are the briefest fictions in the series, and each is very much like a poem. "Two Meditations," printed on a single page, is a 210-word fiction consisting of two subsections, "Niagara Falls" and "Lake Erie." The first depicts a sequence of eight moments when potential energy explodes into kinetic, usually in the midst of domestic security or apparent tranquility. Household accident, natural disaster, homicide, revolution, the bursts of energy take many forms; yet all are linked by paragraph and pattern, and any one can become a metaphor for the rest. "Lake Erie" opens with the declaration, "The wisdom to recognize and halt follows the know-how to pollute past rescue," then follows with several abbreviated situations depicting knowledge, its late arrival, and anguished knowers. "Glossolalia" is a series of six dramatic monologs set to the tune of the Lord's Prayer. The speaker of each, as well as the overall intention, are identified by Barth in one of the lengthy Additional Author's Notes. The first is Cassandra's warning to the unheeding Trojans that the Greeks will conquer their city. The second, presumably, is a verbal version of a message coded into the "pointless patterns" of a robe woven by Philomela. It records

the crimes committed against her by Tereus and beseeches her sister to seek revenge. The third speaker is Crispus, the man referred to in Corinthians, 14 who speaks in tongues. Here, speaking in English, he bemoans the fact that while he curses God, people "take my horror for hymns, my blasphemies for raptures" (p. 111). The fourth monolog is also a translation. It is a bird's warning to the Queen of Sheba of Solomon's treachery. The fifth is an example of speaking in tongues, Martian actually, uttered by an unidentified psalmist. The pattern of the first four speeches suggests that there is a message of critical import in the fifth, but its language is impenetrable. The last speech is Barth's and it summarizes the themes of the first four: examined closely enough, the simplest surface may reveal a grim complexity; and within the most "guileful art" are the "Ill fortune, constraint and terror" (p. 112) which inspired it.

"Life-Story" is one such-generated guileful fiction. As the hyphenated title indicates, life and art converge in this story whose action transpires in the passages between author and narrator, narrator and character, character and reader. It is a story about an author who suspects that the world is a fictive construct, that he himself is a character in a novel,

that the years of his childhood and younger manhood weren't "real" ... but a mere "background" consisting of a few well-placed expository insinuations, perhaps misleading, or inferences, perhaps unwarranted, from strategic hints in his present reflections. (p. 122)

Being an author, he attempts to write a fiction about a writer afflicted with the same suspicions who contemplates a story about a

similarly beset writer who etc. Consequently, the protagonist of "Life-Story" is the author of a story whose protagonist is the author of a story and so on. All of this sounds very much like the "Frame Tale," yet none of these stories ever get written. All of the perspective narrators are faced with the same unanswerable questions: "What were to be the consequences of D's -- and finally E's -- disproving or verifying his suspicion, and why should a reader be interested" (p. 114); and "What sort of story is it whose drama lies always in the next frame out" (p. 117)? It is a consideration of these problems which constitutes the text of "Life-Story," not the narrators' intended tales.

Having followed such a moeboid passage to the center of "this monstrous fiction," the readers, we "dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastards" (p. 123) are suddenly addressed directly by the main character of "Life-Story." Being convinced of his own fictionality he realizes that his life not only was begun by an author, but that his continued existence is dependent upon his reader's persistence. Having no control over his author, and oppressed by the labyrinth of narrative problems pursuant to writing such a story, he even challenges his reader to murder him. Yet, in a reversal of Ambrose's escape, he is extricated from his imprisoning maze of fictions by love. While Ambrose finds release from the funhouse of life by aspiring to write fiction, the protagonist of "Life-Story" is saved by a return to life and love. As midnight rolls around, so does his birthday, his wife who smothers him with kisses, and the beginning of another year of his life.

The last two fictions of the series are also the lengthiest, and more than any other of the stories, "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad" are the "truly astonishing" funhouses envisioned by Ambrose at his moment of dissolution. Yet for the operators, these funhouses have become prisons; and the cycle started by the sperm, having twisted once, turns back upon itself.

As a title, "Menelaid" of course announces the story of Menelaus. But it also contains two puns: many-layered and many-laid. The second jokes about Helen's profligacy; the former more importantly announces the sevenfold frame-within-frame structure of this 14 part fiction, which reflects, not accidentally, the 14 fictions of the entire volume. In the first section Menelaus addresses the reader. In part II he tells the reader how he told Telemachus and Peisistratus about his long awaited sexual reunion with Helen a full 7 years after the end of the Trojan War. But this tale (III) involves Helen's demand that she hear the story of how Menelaus captured Proteus (IV) which in turn leads to Menelaus' account of how he met Eidothea, Proteus' daughter. So Menelaus' encounter with Eidothea, as he told it to Proteus, begins part V but she persuades him to rehearse the final incidents of the Trojan War (VI) which then inspires Menelaus to narrate, perhaps for his own understanding, the seminal causes of the war in part VII. His explanation carries over to a second part VII and then the last 6 parts count down, unfolding the frames until Menelaus finishes his story to his comrades' sons, and finally, is once again speaking to the reader. Consequently, in the middle sections it takes a paragraph of dialog tags for the narrator to identify correctly who said what

to whom.

" ' " ' " ' "Speak!" Menelaus cried to Helen on the bridal bed, 'I reminded Helen in her Trojan bedroom," I confessed to Eidothea on the beach, 'I declared to Proteus in the cavemouth," I vouchsafed to Helen on the ship, 'I told Peisistratus at least in my Spartan hall," I say to whoever and where - I am. (p. 150)

And since "Menelaid" is intended for "printed voice," the complexity of its architecture also leads to playful but calculated typography and punctuation, such as the following.

" ' " ' "		" ' " ' "
" ' " ' "		" ' " ' "
" ' " ' "	WHY?	" ' " ' "
" ' " ' "		" ' " ' "
" ' " ' ":		" ' " ' "

(p. 148)

Paradoxically, the dialog tags and punctuation are both parts of the confusing structure and keys to understanding the confessions.

Yet Barth has done more than devise an exercise in reader concentration or construct a literary test-your-strength machine. Though "Menelaid" may confuse the reader, it causes Menelaus to lose his identity, and the fiction is designed to convey the texture of the story-teller's dilemma in contemporary society as Barth sees it. At one point, while desperately trying to maintain his grasp on the ever-changing Proteus, Menelaus laments "When will I reach my goal through its cloaks of story? How many veils to naked Helen?" (p. 140). Lost in a self-constructed funhouse of fictions, Menelaus prays to reach his Helen as vehemently as the sperm prayed to resist the ovum.

Ambrose's escape route from the funhouse of life has forked into the equally imprisoning labyrinth of fiction.

When Menelaus went to the beach at Pharos to extract from Proteus information on how to win Helen back, Proteus was uncooperative. In order to loose himself from Menelaus' grip, Proteus proceeded to change himself into a lion, a snake, a leopard, a boar, salt water and a bigbole leafy tree. When these transformations failed to shake Menelaus, Proteus then planted the seed of undoing in his mind.

What gives you to think you're Menelaus holding
the Old Man of the Sea? Why shouldn't Proteus
turn into Menelaus, and into Menelaus holding
Proteus? (p. 139-40)

Menelaus reasoned that if Proteus was real, then the outward shapes which he held tight in his hands were illusions. Yet if the tree and lion were real, then Proteus, and Menelaus too were the fictions. Menelaus could not understand why Helen, from among all her suitors, chose him, and Proteus, he hoped, would supply the explanation. But Proteus confirms Helen's original answer, that she loves him, an explanation which Menelaus previously rejected as a lie. It was his nagging insistence that she come up with a better reason that led Helen to run off with Paris and set in motion the Trojan War. But now, forced to accept as true what he previously dismissed as fiction, and faced with the possibility that he and/or everything is a fiction, Menelaus accepts all fictions as equally possible. As Tony Tanner observes, when Menelaus fears that even the Helen he holds is one of Proteus' disguises, he expresses "a precise analog of the suspicion

that even Reality is a Fiction."²² Bitten by the bug, Menelaus is certain of nothing; he is lost in a matrix of fictions. And this is not just a theme of the story, it is the purpose for and intended effect of its elaborate structure.

Menelaus, like the artist lost in his fictions, cannot break through to a sense of reality and participate in life. The last link to life which remains, paradoxically, is the ultimate fiction, "Proteus' terrifying last disguise, ... the absurd, unending possibility of love" (p. 162). To pursue that possibility wilfully would be to complete the moebius circuit of the volume.

In the final story, its narrator, the anonymous inventor of fiction, returns "to an innocence outgrown" not by retracing his steps, but "by coming full circle" (p. 174). As he completes his ninth and final fiction, "Anonymiad," and prepares to launch it to sea in a wine jug, his prose evolves into a love-letter to Merope, the sweetheart of his youth.

I wish you were here. The water's fine; in the intervals of this composition I've taught myself to swim, and if some night your voice recalls me, by a new name, I'll commit myself to it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae, to attain you or to drown. (p. 193)

The postcard diction suggests Ocean City and the title story, but the images of swimming, the beckoning female voice, and the sea at night clearly connect the end of "Anonymiad" to the beginning of "Night-Sea Journey." Having twisted once with "Lost in the Funhouse," the moebius interrelationship of this series of fictions is complete. How-

ever, the minstrel is but recently a swimmer, and only with the completion of this tale has he developed such a commitment to love and life.

"Anonymiad" is the first-person account of the rustic origins, early romance and subsequent maroonment of a man who was once Chief Minstrel in Agamemnon's court. The minstrel is not only the inventor of prose fiction, but during his nine year banishment he also invents ink, an alphabet, chapters, the concept of a theme, the in medias res device, and coins the cliché "busy as a beehive." In fact he has explored and exhausted every literary possibility within his means. He uses his last goatskin and his last amphorae to record and launch his last work, which happens to be the last story of Lost in the Funhouse.

"Anonymiad" consists of nine parts, a headpiece and tailpiece enclosing seven chapters. But chapter III is cut out for lack of space, and chapter I½ is added to catch up on events which did not fit into chapter I. The writer's usual method of composition and publication is to drink an amphora of wine for inspiration, write his fiction on goatskin, then "hump the jug and fill her up with fiction" (p. 164). But in preparation for this final piece, his instinct got the best of him and he caroused with the jug first and spilled the soured wine on the sand. Losing control of his craft and discipline, the minstrel cannot construct his funhouse as symmetrically as he planned. But this, perhaps, is a final consequence of his development as a tale-teller. That development, essentially, is the subject of the "Anonymiad," and it echoes many of the situations of previous narrators in the volume.

Expressed in the headpiece, the minstrel's motto, "From bed to verse," reflects both the now familiar turn from love to art and, if read as the phonetics of a Jewish accent, the underlying assumption of universal pejoration which suffuses the volume. Chapters I, I $\frac{1}{2}$, and II chronicle the narrator's meteoric rise from amateur swain to Chief Minstrel. Like Ambrose, he experienced a certain detachment during his early sexual frolics. Early too was his propensity toward art and alienation from life. "While other fellows played with spears," he says, "I learned to play the lyre" (p. 166). And although he never felt comfortable with the conventions of minstrelsy, could never "come out straight-faced with 'Daughter of Zeus, egg-born Clytemnestra'" (p. 166), he found his verse in vogue and soon became the Bobby Burns of Mycenae. But as his success grew so did his estrangement from Merope. Chapter IV chronicles the turning point of his life. Left in Mycenae during the Trojan War, the minstrel was commissioned by Agamemnon to keep tabs on Clytemnestra. When Aegisthus caught on, he marooned the poet and enforced his exile from the funhouse of life.

Chapters V, VI and VII report the minstrel's initial freedom and ultimate imprisonment in the funhouse of fiction. "By the seventh jug, after effusions of religious narrative, ribald tale-cycles, verse-dramas, comedies of manners, and what-all, (he) had begun to run out of world and material" (p. 187). After filling two more amphorae with realistic prose fictions and "comic histories of (his) spirit," and catching up to the contemporary post-realism movement in the process, the minstrel lapsed into a state of despair, exhaustion and silence. What snapped him out of this and gave him the strength to

write his final fiction was an amphora, not impossibly his own, washed up on the shore of his island. Like the water message Ambrose finds, this too is blank, the script has run, the text unreadable. Yet, in spite of the fact that to the rest of the world he is writing in tongues, it revives his hope that communication is possible and inspires him to address the world once again.

In the tailpiece, the narrator bemoans the fact that his "Anonymiad" is a failure. He has run out of space and goatskins, ruined his last amphora of wine, reduced his "masterpiece to a chronicle of minstrel misery" (p. 193). Yet his original "wish to elevate maroonment into a minstrel masterpiece" is the same wish Barth had for Lost in the Funhouse. Seeing the writer as alienated from life, lost in a funhouse of fiction, he too wanted to make the isolated artist a hero, but ends up urging himself and the artist back to life. I can't think of a more wonderful way to fail.

Most of the weaknesses of Lost in the Funhouse are redpenned by Tony Tanner in his review essay, "No Exit." Having gone "astray in possibility," the volume lacks a "sense of actuality"; the fictional alternatives Barth explores are as paralyzing as they are liberating. These critical objections are valid, but they are based on Barth's aesthetic intentions, not his performance. Tanner goes on to claim that

what one notices about Lost in the Funhouse is that it is not a funhouse, but a series of depositions about building, or not building, funhouses.... Meanwhile no stories get told, no funhouses get built on their ground of no ground.²³

Hopefully, I have offered an alternative outlook. The funhouse is a metaphor for the human predicament, the heart of which is obscured beneath layer upon layer of facts and ambiguity. It is fun "only for lovers" and can be negotiated not by mastering knowledge, but by capitulating unselfconsciously to love. The funhouse also blueprints the structure of the fictions which lead the writer out of the labyrinth of life. Although the content of these fictions may boggle down in "depositions about building, or not building, funhouses," their structures are "incredibly complex yet utterly controlled" mazes which eventually imprison their operator and finally propel him back to life and love with a commitment he previously lacked. Once one gets accustomed to Barth's metaphor, there is funhouse after funhouse to be encountered in the volume, although finally they indeed may rest on air.

Notes to Chapter II

1

Richard Kostelanetz, "Introduction" to Breakthrough Fictioneers, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Brownington, Vermont: Something Else Press, 1973), p. xii.

2

"Autobiography" appears in Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somers (New York: Dell, 1972). Breakthrough Fictioneers includes Barth's "Help."

3

John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 104. First published by Doubleday, 1968. All future quotes follow the text and pagination of the Bantam edition.

4

David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 90.

5

Michael Hinden, "Lost in the Funhouse: Barth's Use of the Recent Past," Twentieth Century Literature 19 (1973), pp. 109-10.

6

John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic 220, no. 2 (August, 1967), as reprinted in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 19.

7

"Literature of Exhaustion," p. 22.

8

Ibid., p. 27.

9

Ibid., p. 30.

10

Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 10.

11

For an extensive discussion of cosmposis and how it affects Barth's characters and fiction, see Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1977).

12

Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 393.

13

Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," Iowa Review 1, no. 4 (Fall, 1970), pp. 111-12.

14

Hinden, p. 112.

15

Tony Tanner, "No Exit," Partisan Review 36, no. 2 (1969), pp. 293-99. See especially p. 294.

- ¹⁶ Morrell, p. 86.
- ¹⁷ Morrell, p. 89.
- ¹⁸ Tharpe, pp. 96-97.
- ¹⁹ Morrell, pp. 92-94.
- ²⁰ Morrell, pp. 83-84.
- ²¹ "The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 27.
- ²² Tanner, "No Exit," p. 298.
- ²³ Tanner, "No Exit," p. 297.

CHAPTER III

The Theory & Practice of Constructive Anarchy:

Coover's Pricksongs and Descants

Although Barth would like to cast the writer in the role of heroic Theseus, he knows the limitations of his metaphor, and fiction, for Barth, ultimately serves a sober purpose as therapy which sustains the individual on the brink of the abyss, as an alternative to the unending negotiations with an unnegotiable reality. But for Robert Coover, fiction potentially can change the world by altering our perceptions of it. Its mythic powers, however, are defused by familiarity, adulterated by cultural assimilation. When a culture's language, values and rituals support and propagate its myths, then fiction becomes conventional and stripped of its ability to open new doors of perception. Whatever its author's intentions, it essentially works toward a confirmation of established authority. It tends to see and say things the way they have been seen and said up to that very moment, and redundancy never emancipates. Fictionist and critic Italo Calvino underscores the parallels between generic innovation and political transformation when he observes that a new analysis, a new course of action, a new idea "cannot be known as long as the words and the concepts for saying

and thinking it have not yet been used in that particular juxtaposition. .. arranged in that particular order, in that particular sense."¹

When fiction achieves such a magic permutation of language and event, it is invested with a flood of pre-conscious meaning, meaning which had previously remained unspoken in the individual or collective consciousness. These notions seem romantic. They are. So is Coover. And they express the values which Coover finds in the fiction of Cervantes, and the hopes he has for his own volume of short fictions, Pricksongs and Descants.

Coover's technique is to synthesize conventional elements into innovative patterns. Images, characters and situations from fairy tales, fables, Bible stories and popular culture are shoved into new linguistic environments, viewed from unfamiliar perspectives. Such displacements sever these motifs from the meaning and power of their original contexts, subvert the orderly systems within those contexts, but if we no longer live in an orderly world, the writer must undermine the material and techniques which sustain that obsolete notion. By exposing the artifice of his fiction, Coover hopes to destroy the reactionary function of conventional narrative and to deprogram his reader from responding to such narrative in conventional fashion. By projecting unexpected hallucinations into familiar fictional scenarios, he aspires to furnish his reader with the mythic equipment needed to reform his notion of things.

1. The imperative to innovate and exemplary innovations.

Coover operates under a mandate to innovate, an imperative which

derives as much from the debilitated constructs of our culture as from the exhausted forms of his craft. The two, for Coover, are inseparable, and he makes this point explicit in a 1973 interview.

We have come to the end of a tradition ... our ways of looking at the world and of adjusting to it through fictions are changing ... our basic assumptions about the universe have been altered, ... Our old faith ... our old sense of constructs derived from myth, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories, and other fictions which help to explain what happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have ... has lost its efficacy.²

Our old patterns of perception, enforced by what Coover calls, in the "Dedicatoria y Prologo" to Seven Exemplary Fictions, "unconscious mythic residue," are still very much in presence, handicapping the individual's efforts to function creatively in our environment. For example, in "The Wayfarer," the last of the Seven Exemplary Fictions which constitute a book within a book, a cop narrates how he battered, shot and killed a roadside bum largely because he could neither command nor understand him.

This wayfarer is as inscrutable as Bartleby, even moreso since the narrator lacks all sensitivity. Dust-covered and inert, he merely sits on the side of the road, his dull eyes unresponsive to the narrator's questions and abuses, even the proddings of his rifle. The policeman's inability to understand this enigmatic hobo makes him feel faint, and he was on the verge of swooning when he reminded himself that "Duty, a proper sense of it, is our best teacher: my catechism

was coming back to me."³ The sense of duty and prescribed orders are the ingredients of the narrator's mythic residue which enables him to function, but only through destructive channels. When, after being shot in the chest, the wayfarer finally spoke, his words, like his silences, were indecipherable to the residue-poisoned cop.

He spoke rapidly, desperately, with neither punctuation nor sentence structure. Just a ceaseless eruption of obtuse language. He spoke of constellations, bone structures, mythologies, and love. He spoke of belief and lymph nodes, of excavations, categories, and prophecies. Faster and faster he spoke. His eyes gleamed, Harmonics! Foliations! Etymology! Impulses! Suffering! His voice rose to a shriek. Immateriality patricide ideations heatstroke virtue prediction - I grew annoyed and shot him in the head. (p. 123-24)

Although the narrator executed his orders (and the wayfarer), he may not have done so in time. Ignorant of the design in the constellation of the wayfarer's words, he heard that pricksong nevertheless. He straightened his tie, reported the incident to headquarters and jotted down the vital data for his report, but still was nagged by restlessness, his old sense of stability upset by his encounter with the wayfarer and his words. In order to reinforce his mythic residue and assuage his doubts, he contemplated the traffic.

Uniformly it flowed, quietly, possessed of its own unbroken grace and precision. There was variety in detail, but the stream itself was one. One. The thought warmed me. It flowed away and away and the unpleasant images that had troubled my mind flowed away with it. At last, I sat up, started the motor, and entered the flow itself. I felt calm and happy. A participant. I enjoy my work. (p. 124)

Like the skiers at the close of Barthelme's "Brain Damage," the cop is ignorant of the danger he and his culture are in. Fearing the salvation offered by new modes of perception, he opts for total immersion in the traffic - symbolic of the dreck of technological culture - in order to counteract the wayfarer's pricksong: a fictional form able to encompass those new modes. Interestingly, it is not the pricksong itself which we read, but the authoritarian figure's unwittingly revealing account of it.

Throughout the Seven Exemplary Fictions, Coover's portrait of contemporary America depicts her "standing at the end of one age and the threshold of another" (p. 78). Of course, every present is posed between past and future, but to cross this particular threshold requires a quantum leap in the individual's perception of reality, a feat which can only be accomplished through fiction. In each of his book-length fictions Coover is concerned with communal gatherings of characters. A death-watch outside a collapsed coal mine, a sell-out crowd at a baseball game, and the gala attendance at the Rosenberg execution are each invested with a sense of tribal ritual, imparting to its delegates - even those selected as sacrificial victims - a sense of religion or design of which they are a part. Acknowledging his debt to sociologist Emil Durkheim, Coover reveals how such meetings repress individual freedom but exhilarate the individual with the power of the group, what Durkheim calls the "collective effervescence."⁴ Both wars and anti-war rallies so affect their participants.

Such gatherings, Coover contends, yield notions about our existence which are then translated into myth, and eventually solidified

into the concrete and institutional constructs of society. But whatever form becomes established, it "is necessarily entropic: eventually it runs down and is unable to propel itself past a certain point."⁵

This, for Coover, is the current state of an exhausted Western culture.

When it does that, it becomes necessary to do everything that has been taboo: wear women's clothes, kill the sacred animal and eat it, screw your mother, etc. A big blast reduces everything to rubble; then something new is built. Primitive societies, wiser than we, actually set aside a time to do this on a cyclical basis.⁶

But in post-modern culture such phenomena are not scheduled regularly. They are infrequent, often staged by media manipulators, and coopted by commercialism. Instead, it is the legacy of the artist to create the new myth without the benefit of Dionysian festivities.

Artists recreate: they make us think about doing all the things we shouldn't do, all the impossible, apocalyptic things, and weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies.

Realizing this gave me an excuse to be the anarchist I've always wanted to be. I discovered I could be an anarchist and be constructive at the same time.⁷

Before tracing how Coover translates this destructive/creative purpose of fiction into his own tales it is helpful to understand his love/hate relationship with Cervantes. Coover sees America's current state of debilitation as paralleled to conditions of Spain in 1600, Don Quixote as a paradigmatic fiction of constructive anarchy, and Cervantes as his patron saint. With acknowledged oversimplification Coover casts Cervantes as the captain of the vanguard of the last quantum

change in the human perception of reality. His fiction took his culture "from a Platonic notion of the world - the sense of microcosm as an imitation of the macrocosm ... of which we could perceive only an imperfect illusion - toward an Aristotelian attitude It marked the beginning of realism."⁸ Don Quixote is, to Coover, the ideal fictional accomplishment since it aggressively attacked obsolete notions and successfully "returned home with new complexities." Yet Coover is not Pierre Menard; it is not the letter but the spirit of the Quixote which he hopes to reincarnate in his own fiction. For although Cervantes' narrative breakthroughs initiated new discoveries of self and world, those same techniques now lock the self in a perceptual prison. The current-day writer is as tyrannized by the forms of the novel as Cervantes was "abused by the conventions of Romance" (p. 77).

Although by no means a social realist, Coover remains concerned with our sense of social reality. Similarly, he abjures the current state of our myths while maintaining an abiding respect for the power of the mythic process. Hence, Coover's playfulness with design, his allegories and "microscopic images of the macrocosm," his "use of the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological" do not mark a return to Platonic mystification. Rather they are ironic means to an end, challenging "the assumptions of a dying age" (p. 78).

Coover, like Barth, acknowledges the limitations of human perception and the unbounded complexity of any single instant of the world. Both writers consequently recognize the human impossibility of negotiating the whole of reality without drastic oversimplifica-

tion. "To hope to behave as though this were possible," claims Coover, "is to invite paralysis through crushing despair."⁹ Barth, of course, is no stranger to such paralysis, and he calls it cosmopsis. Using Jacob Horner as his guinea pig, Barth experiments with mythotherapy as a solution but finally rejects myth on the grounds of its reductive operations. For Coover, however, myth, as a compass of consciousness, "is a useful - even necessary - means of navigating through life."¹⁰ It is when our myths fail to be functional that "it becomes necessary to break them up and perhaps change their force."¹¹

"The Brother" and "J's Marriage" clearly, although somewhat stiffly, illustrate Coover's theory and practice of constructive anarchy. Both are based upon familiar biblical sources, both concern pregnancies and carpentry, and both are set at a moment when the finger of God touches the mundane and alters the world. There are other reasons to view them as companion pieces within the volume.

The text of "The Brother" is the run-on interior monolog of a man easily recognized as Noah's younger brother. His words recount the events leading up to the present moment: seated on a hill, threatened by the rising waters, his pregnant wife drowned in the deluge, the narrator finally understands why his cranky brother built that "damn boat" in the middle of a dry field. Seen through his brother's eyes Noah is more the village idiot than God's choice as the worthy survivor of the human race.

... God knows how he ever found out to build a
damn boat lost in his fog where he is Lord he
was twenty when I was born and the first thing
I remember was havin to lead him around so he

didn't get kicked by a damn mule him who
couldn't never do nothin in a normal way
just a huge oversize fuzzyface boy ... (p. 93).

While Coover doesn't ignore the construction of the ark and its menagerie of animals, he counterpoints these details with the brother's building of a cradle with "little animal figures cut in it and polished down." By redirecting emphasis from the survivors and their constructs to the victims and their lost artifacts, Coover changes the story from an illustration of divine victory to song of human defeat.

"J's Marriage," the third-person account of a broadly educated and cynical carpenter whose lovely but frigid wife one day announces that she is pregnant by an act of God, provides a similar twist. If the general situation is based upon the Annunciation and birth of Christ, the details and attitudes are of Coover's making. J is the contemporary cosmoptic intellectual, mired in the conviction of "the total impossibility of any imaginable kind of ultimate happiness," who insists on negotiating experience without superimposing any patterns of meaning. Upon hearing his virginal wife's proclamation,

J took ill, suffered frequently from delirium,
... he couldn't imagine whatever had brought a
God to do such a useless and, well, yes, almost
vulgar thing.... Every day while prostrate in bed,
he turned it over and over, and in feverish
dreams the mystery set his brain on fire and
caused tiny painful explosions behind his eyes
that sometimes kept going off even after he was
awake.... Finally, he simply gave in to it,
dumped it with the rest of life's inscrutable
absurdities, and from that time on began to
improve almost daily. (p. 116-17)

Even when he witnessed the birth of his son - the central moment of Christian history - J resists the temptation to pattern life with mythic meaning.

It was - that moment of the strange birth -
J's most mystic moment, his only indisputable
glimpse of the whole of existence, yet one
which he later renounced, needless to say,
later understood in the light of his over-
wrought and tortured emotions. (p. 118)

From this point on the story does not focus upon the growth and life of his wife's son, but hastily sketches J's decline, his faltering memory and bladder, his ignoble death with "his face in a glassful of red wine on a tavern table."

Coover does not alter his source material as radically as does Barthelme in Snow White, but he does modify his material substantially to evoke new meaning from an old story. Neil Schmitz essentially sees these fictions as ingenious gimmicks which supply new interpretation of biblical material, "but once the trick is grasped, all that remains is an irreligious jest."¹² Margaret Heckard, using Schmitz as her straw dog, claims that by emphasizing "what such a situation would mean in individual human terms" Coover has demystified the original myth and scraped away the supernatural muck surrounding it.¹³ Yet what neither critic observes is that the brother stands at the threshold of post-deluvian culture, J at the door of Christian culture, and neither possesses the mythic understanding necessary to make the transition. J is as poorly equipped to understand his wife's pregnancy as the cop was to make sense of the wayfarer. Both are crip-

pled by mythic residue. For the reader, Christian myth blocks an understanding of Joseph or Noah's brother as human victims of divine circumstance. But for J, nihilism and cosmopsis - the results of his education - form the residue which short circuit his understanding of Christianity. These fictions, then, make two sallies: one against the readers' foreknowledge of the Bible story, the second against the characters' foreknowledge of the ways of the world. Coover's readers are one group of individuals in need of new myths to help them forge a cultural revolution, his characters are another.

The most explicit parallels between reader and character are drawn in "Panel Game," the first of the Seven Exemplary Fictions and the earliest written selection in Pricksongs and Descants.¹⁴ Here Coover draws his fiction not from the wells of literary story, but from the polluted waters of popular culture. "Panel Game" is a choppy, fast-paced scenario of a baroque television quiz show complete with a riddling, image-conscious Moderator, "Bag shape corseted and black suited, behind desk/rostrum, blinking mockmodestly at lens and lamps, practiced pucker on his soft mouth and brows arched in mild goodguy astonishment" (p. 79); the panelists: Aged Clown, Lovely Lady and Mr. America; a live audience which when "cued to Thunderous Response, responds thunderously" (p. 80); and even cameras which "swing, bend, spring forward, recoil" and lights that "boil up, dim, pivot, strike" (p. 80). Although the Moderator, panelists and audience seem unfused, the entire scene is presented as near total pandemonium.

Hooting and howling. Moderator collapses
into easy laughter. Lamps pulse. Lady shyly

reveals belly. Not crimson at all, but
creamy with a blush of salmon pink. Shouts
and whistles. Hooboy and zams. (p. 81)

In the midst of this apparent chaos is an empty chair on the panel which Coover fills with a spectator, Bad Sport, "dragged protesting from the Audience." Unlike the other characters Bad Sport is acutely aware of his ignorance of the rules of the game. Frantically he clutches at clues, seeking design and meaning in the antics of the contestants, the riddles of the moderator. When the Aged Clown relates an anecdote about a "three-spined stickleback," Sport thinks:

Stickleback. Freshwater fish. Fresh-
water fish: green seaman. Seaman: semen.
Yes, but green: raw? spoiled? vigorous?
Stickle: stubble. Or maybe scruple. Back:
Bach: Bacchus: baccate: berry. Raw berry?
Strawberry? Maybe. Sticky berry in the raw?
In the raw: bare. Bare berry: beriberi.
Also bearberry, the dog rose, dogberry. Dog-
berry: the constable, yes, right, the con-
stable in ... what? Comedy of Errors! Yes?
No. (p. 80)

Further, Bad Sport is almost immediately revealed as an alter-ego of the reader: "And the Bad Sport, you ask, who is he? fool! thou art!" (p. 80). From this point on the narrator, who relates the action of the quiz show in the form of stage directions, refers to Sport in the second person, simultaneously addressing both character and reader.

Since this is a game, "THE BIG QUESTION," with someone in charge, the notion is sustained that there are rules to be followed and meanings to be discovered. The Moderator's cryptic comments ("Muteness is

mutinous and the mutable inscrutable") and the limericks and versified riddles at the end of the story sustain this notion. Even some of the narrator's prose is infiltrated with Cat-in-the-Hat rhythms and could easily be typographically rearranged into verse.

Unexpected / crash of laughter. / Lady
blushes, / lowers lashes. / Moderator, /
crimson with giggling and with tears in his
eyes, / cries: "Good God. I / should hate
to conceive of it otherwise!" (slashes mine, p. 85)

Yet Sport fails to discern the design within these proceedings. His death by hanging is the consequence he must pay. Lovely Lady's belly dance, the Moderator's rhyming and the Audience's contrapuntal howling all appear to be segments in a pre-ordained ritual ending in sacrifice.

At this point, however, the critical reader stands before the text of the story precisely the way Sport stands before the words of the Moderator. As we try to interpret the characters (the Moderator as the high priest of pop culture) so Sport conjectures about the metaphorical identities of the contestants ("Lady: beauty, excitement, life itself"). Neil Schmitz reads this story as a parody of New Critical textual analysis.¹⁵ But as the Moderator finally reveals, the name of the game "is La Mort," and the allegory here is not so two-dimensional as merely to skewer academic games. A television quiz show, a literary test, the whole of reality for that matter may not change, but our perception of them is mutable. If pop culture is perceived by some in the garb of meaning, Coover's fiction, by projecting selective hallucinations, strips the game to its naked absurdity.

Much Ado About Nothing is the title which escapes Sport's memory. If Coover has reassembled his shattered game into a "new complexity," it is one which reveals how the death of a sacrificial victim is the necessary end of a ritual needed to sustain the notion of meaning for others.

One of Coover's favorite techniques is to depict some facet of human behavior as a decadent ritual reinforcing the death-orientation of the culture rather than redirecting its energies in creative channels. "In a Train Station" (the Fourth Exemplary Fiction) transforms the small talk and little pleasantries which transpire in a small town railroad station into such a ritual by portraying the perfunctory actions and verbal exchanges as a prescribed prelude to a violent murder. Unlike Sport, Alfred, the point of view character, knows that he is playing a part in a perverse rite, knows his lines and the rules too well, and is repulsed by his own participation. But under the constant prompting of the powerful Stationmaster, Alfred is unable to remove himself from this theater of psychopathic behavior. The Stationmaster gives Alfred his cue: "How's the tomatoes doin' this year?"

"Aw, well as kin be expected. Need a - look!" Alfred spins suddenly around to confront the Stationmaster, his pale blue eyes damp as though with tears. "Don't ye think maybe this time I could--?"

"Need a little," intones the Stationmaster softly, firmly.

Alfred sighs turns back toward the gate, works his jaws over the chicken. "Need a little rain," he says glumly. (p. 101)

Here, too, the name of the game is La Mort, and the victim is a stumbling drunk who blasphemes two of the most sacred precepts of the

Puritan culture, cleanliness and godliness, in one slurred pricksong.

"Our fazher" he cries out, then sucks the
spittle off his lips and swallows it, "our
fazher whish art 'n heaven ... 'n heaven ...
is eating hish own goddamn chil'ren!" (p. 102)

Despite hearing these taboos violated, Alfred is incapable of playing out his role of executioner. But the Stationmaster compensates. He peremptorily decapitates the drunk, disposes of the body and sets the clock back 52 minutes. Once again, it is show time.

As Alfred's story illustrates, smashing the old myths and exposing the inefficacy of accepted patterns of behavior are not immediately exhilarating. Like Barth's schizophrenic narrator in "Title," Coover seems to tell his reader, "you may not find the revolution as bloodless as you think." To go from ill-equipped to well-equipped requires passage through a corridor with no equipment at all, and the immediate effect of that voyage is the terror of the self lacking all tools to order, pattern and interpret experience. This may enable Faulkner's young boy to encounter the bear unafraid, but it often draws blood from the characters in Coover's fictions. In "The Marker" Coover uses gothic hallucination to illustrate one such passage from familiar domestic intimacy to public perversion.

After marking his place in the book he's been reading, undressing, and turning off the light, Jason is secure in the knowledge that he is about to make love to his enticing wife in the darkened privacy of their bedroom. Whatever the text of that book, it has left Jason totally unprepared for the violent disruption of his expectations which follows. First, disoriented, he cannot find the bed or his

wife in the dark. When, after several groping attempts, he does locate her and his passion resurges, a squad of policemen, as if on cue, barge into the room and turn on the light. Horrified, Jason discovers that his wife "is rotting ...,"

The flesh on her face is yellowish and drawn back toward her ears.... Her lips are black and her blond hair, now long and tangled, is splayed out over the pillow like a urinal mop spread out to dry. There is fuzzy stuff like mold around the nipples of her shrunken breasts. (p. 91-2)

The chief police officer, like the authority figures throughout the volume, is the reactionary enforcer of traditional morality and serves to undermine any efforts to order these new perceptions, however bizarre, in creative patterns. He punishes Jason for violating the taboo of necrophilia by pounding his genitals "to a pulp with the butt of his gun." With Jason, his tools smashed, still writhing on the floor, the officer then delivers a lecture which blends a quaint, via-media enlightenment with hard-boiled intolerance.

"I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their own turn by the innovations which created them. I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them. In spite of that, however, some things still make me puke!" He turns, flushed to his four assistants. "Now get rid of that fucking corpse!" he screams. (p. 91)

Here as elsewhere, Coover reminds us we've been reading dead fictions, living by decadent notions, humping corpses. And even when

glaringly confronted with evidence of our participation in the death culture, we are often prevented from passing beyond realization to solution by internal residue and external authority, both of which block inroads to higher consciousness. Still, despite the bleakness of his assessment, Coover depicts the situations not as a tragedy, but "a comedy from which, once entered, you never returned... (with) ... its own astonishments and conjurings, its towers and closets, and even more pathways, more gardens and more doors" ("The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," p. 19). And, as always, he still maintains that with the right stories, with updated mythic equipment, such a comedy can be encountered creatively.

"Klee Dead," the one Exemplary Fiction I have not yet discussed, is, in several ways, the least exemplary of the seven. It is also, I imagine, a fiction which many contemporary writers must be tempted to write: fiction as an act of conscientious objection. The story concerns a self-conscious narrator's rambling reports of the death of Wilbur Klee, the uneventful life of Millicent Gee, and the cliché-ridden life and death of Orval Nulin Evachefsky. But it is the narrator who is the conscientious objector. He resists the temptation to do what fiction has always done; he refuses to arrange the material of his story into a pattern.

Without supplying any details concerning his background as a character, the narrator repeatedly makes the point that Wilbur Klee is dead. In the very first paragraph the narrator belies his role by acknowledging that the fact of Klee's death has been established "too soon. It should come, after a package of hopefully ingenious prepara-

tions, at the end" (p. 104). Even though he tells his reader that Klee jumped from a high place just before he died, the narrator dodges the mandate to draw a conclusion.

if you wish to assume a cause-and-effect relationship - that he is dead because he jumped from a high place - well, you are free to do so,... Certainly, there is some relationship: the remains of Klee, still moist, are splattered out in their now several and discontinuous parts from a point directly below the high place from which he jumped only a moment before. But that's as far as I'll go, thank you. (p. 106-107)

He goes on, paradoxically, to argue against involvement in arguments concerning the cause of Klee's death. To do so would imply that "Klee had died to save physics." No, finally, all the narrator is willing to admit is that

Wilbur Klee was Wilbur Klee, that's where it starts and ends. And already I may have pushed too far, perhaps that's not his name at all, I may have made it up, very likely in fact, given my peculiar penchant for logogriphics - (p. 107)

Wilbur Klee is presented as a name, his death as a fact, but all the other language which the narrator expends on him serves as anti-characterization. By conceiving of Klee as word-being and killing him off with his first sentence, Coover sabotages Klee's growth into character.

The same anti-fictional principle operates in the non-relationship among the larger "discontinuous parts" of the fiction. Nowhere is the narrator willing to acknowledge any connections between Klee,

Gee and Evachefsky. Mentioning Millicent Gee, who is not dead, reminds the narrator of her son who wears a "clovergreen suit and stove-pipe hat with its ostrich feather." Yet after introducing these two characters the narrator apologizes.

To tell the truth, I wish I hadn't brought him up in the first place. Please forget I mentioned him, if you can. What's more, I'm not entirely sure why I told you about Millie. Certainly, she can have nothing to do with Wilbur Klee. (p. 106)

Orval's life is traced in a more traditionally coherent fashion: childhood on a farm, military service, business school, marriage, career, and death by suicide. Psychological motives for his suicide are even made apparent (guilt: he thought he gave his pregnant wife venereal disease). Since Orval impaled himself on a parking meter when he jumped from the 37th floor of the federal building, it would seem that the explicit circumstances of his life were similar or parallel to the mysterious circumstances of Klee's. But the narrator would deny even this. The transition between Klee's death and Orval's life is established awkwardly.

But enough of Klee! It's time for an assessment of some kind, time, as it is so enigmatically put by the storybook people to wrap it up and call it thirty, to prophecy by the clouds and sign off... but I am reminded for no clear cause of the case of Orval Nulin Evachefsky. Let us hope for some link, some light, and drive on. (p. 107)

This hope, however, is finally futile. Conceding that "we are left virtually with nothing," the self-effacing narrator apologizes to his

readers, offering us circus tickets as meagre compensation for "A good fifteen, twenty minutes shot to hell" (p. 111).

Still, despite the narrator's resistance, the critical reader cannot help but to find some patterns within the gap-filled story. Like Millie, who possibly collects non-human objects in the several floors above her basement apartment, the narrator too seems "impulsively driven to load up empty spaces, to plump some goddam thing, any object, real, imagined or otherwise, where now there might happily be nothing, a peaceful unsullied and unpeopled emptiness..." (p. 105). And as long as he does that, his resistance, like Alfred's, can be but partially successful. He can offer us tickets, but of course we cannot take them. We can only take what meaning we can draw from the information contained in the story itself.

The essential reality of the world may not change, but our perception and mythic construction of that reality are potentially mutable. For Coover, it is the quest of the fictionist to use "familiar myths or historical forms to combat the content of those forms." And it is with this thought in mind that he closes the "Prologo" to the Seven Exemplary Fictions with the vow

to conduct the reader... to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation. And it is above all to the need for new modes of perception and fictional forms able to encompass them that I, barber's basin on my head, address these stories. (p. 79)

2. Allegories, epistemologies, and prestadigitation.

The Seven Exemplary Fictions I have discussed, together with the three "Sentient Lens" pieces, represent almost everything Coover had invented up to 1962, when he switched his efforts to writing The Origin of the Brunists, his first novel. They are the survivors of some forty stories, "some of which were realistic or naturalistic," which he originally planned to publish in a collection of exemplary fictions.¹⁶ But as Pricksongs and Descants evolved more clearly in his mind, only these ten remained relevant to his crystallizing concerns with myth, human perception, and change. The other ten fictions of the volume, then, are specific innovative responses to a metaphor which unified the collection. Ranging from the mildly innovative allegories, "Morris in Chains" and "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady," to the more disruptive epistemological experiments such as "The Magic Poker" and "The Babysitter," these fictions are multifaceted glass houses which expose the sex life of their inhabitants: the pricksong of the imagination and the "death-cunt" of actuality.

As defined by the O. E. D., pricksong and descant are largely synonymous terms. Both refer to popular forms of medieval music usually having syncopated melodies. The difference is that pricksongs, which were "pricked" on parchment, are a later form of descants, which were unwritten and largely improvisational. This specific musical denotation applies generally to what Coover calls "the masculine thrust of the narrative and the lyrical play around it."¹⁷ But Coover also personalizes the metaphor and puts that dimension of its meaning to

use in the first fiction of the volume, "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts."

"The Door" reassembles familiar motifs from "Red-Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "Beauty and the Beast" into a three-part narrative concerning an imminent ritual of the imagination. The three narrative lines are sequential in the text, but they occur simultaneously with respect to the same external moment: a character, styled after Red Riding Hood, pauses before the door of her grandmother's cottage, about to encounter "phantoms springing from the sun's night-tunnels to devour her childhood" (p. 18), about to enter a comedy from which there is no return. We read a subjective, third person account of the thoughts and actions of the woodsman, "Jack become the Giant," apprehensive as his daughter is about to leave the world he has created for her; a stream of Granny's consciousness as she reviews her violent sex life and awaits the arrival of her granddaughter; and an account of the initiate herself as she flashes upon the comedy of terrors which awaits her beyond the door. The simultaneity of these segments is established by the use of an action from one segment as an incidental detail in another. Hence the young initiate hears the chucking of the lumberman's axe; her knocking ends Granny's soliloquy.

Like "Night-Sea Journey," "The Door" evokes the feeling that its scene is not an isolated moment, but a crucial point in an endless cycle, the twist in a moebius strip which turns the whole thing back upon itself. The three characters, spanning three generations of the same bloodline, outline the cyclical process which will see grand-

daughter succeed grandmother as bride of the beast. The daughter has inherited an immature understanding of life from the hack fictions of her woodsman/father. By singing "the old songs, the old lies" he had

given her her view of the world, in fragments of course, not really thinking it all out, she listening, he telling, and because of her gaiety and his love, his cowardly lonely love, he'd left out the terror. (p. 14)

The woodsman fears that he has rendered his daughter ill-prepared for her scheduled initiation. But helpless to remedy or delay, he can only vent his frustration on the trees.

Granny is impatient, but not apprehensive. She, too, once tip-toed through the "flux and tedium" of epidermal reality, listening to "lumpen ballads of deodorized earths cleansed of the stink of enigma and revulsion!" (p. 16). But now, "The old Beauty who married the Beast" (and a parody of Molly Bloom), she summarizes her life as concubine to the mythic imagination.

... yes and I have pawed in stewpots with him and have paused to watch him drop a public turd or two on sidewalks and seashores in populous parks and private parlors and granddaughter I have been split with the pain and terrible haste of his thick quick cock and then still itchin and bleedin have gazed on as he leapt other bitches at random and I have watched my own beauty decline my love and still no Prince no Prince and yet you doubt that I understand? and loved him my child loved the damned Beast after all (p. 17)

The bride of the beast, however, is not immortal. As soon as the mythic imagination effectively impregnates our perception of reality,

those perceptions begin to lose their responsiveness, give birth to the singer of the next generation's inherited package of pre-conceived patterns, until, post-menapausal, they are no longer viably creative. Still, Granny has "veils to lift and tales to tell," tales which will enable her granddaughter to love the terrible truths beyond phenomena.

Even before the ritual begins the granddaughter glimpses the grim complexities beneath the idyllic surface of the cottage.

And the cottage, didn't the cottage have a harder edge, the vines a subtler grip on the weatherboards, and wasn't the air somehow full of spiders? She trembled. The old well seemed suddenly to hide some other well, the garden to speak of a stranger unimagined garden. (p. 18)

Her consciousness, constructed from "the old songs" of her father, is already leaking. The flood of pre-conscious meaning behind it is only a story away.

As its subtitle implies, "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts" is more than Coover's myth about the interplay of fiction, human perception and actuality; it is also the point of entry into the house of fiction which follows. Like Barth's funhouse, Coover's edifice is an "elaborate game, embellished with masks and poetry, a marshalling of legendary doves and herbs" (p. 18): an emergence from the consciousness-cluttering "flux and tedium." At the end of "The Door" the sun jerks westward and propels the initiate over the threshold, sweeping us along with her as we turn the page. But Coover is more concerned than Barth with the return to actuality after an encounter with his fictions. If, in one of the rooms, we should find a magic poker he

placed there, we may be able to take it home and use its magic creativity in our dealings with daily life. On the other hand, should we make the tour and find nothing, then we are left with the last lines of the book: "THE MANAGEMENT REGRETS THERE WILL BE NO REFUND."

The Seven Exemplary Fictions are the vault near the center around which the rest of the volume is designed. Many of the other rooms are labryrinthine, presenting plots which proliferate into possibilities, characters which splinter into multiple identities. But several tales are more two-dimensional, and these are Coover's attempts to allegorize the antagonism between imaginative force and cultural substance. Although nearly all the fictions in Pricksongs have some allegorical thrust, "Morris in Chains" and "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady" most clearly use fable-like narratives as political metaphors to interpret contemporary experience.

"Morris in Chains" is narrated by a government official who informs the nation that Morris, fugitive shepherd and ecologic criminal, has finally been captured. The spokesman's report, however, is spliced with parenthetical excerpts from Morris' consciousness, "recorded" during the pursuit and capture. The resulting stylistic contrast in these alternating segments parallels the conflict between shaggy Morris, his herd of sheep and the songs he pipes; and Dr. Doris Peloris, the crack urbanologist assigned to the hunt, her squad of data-analysts, and the computerized technology at their disposal.

Called by the narrating spokesperson a "wily old cock," and charged with irresponsibly fluting his "simple song against our science" at random throughout the city, Morris is clearly an avatar of the prick-

song. And Doris Peloris possesses many of the characteristics which, in a different context, would qualify her as an epic heroine. Brilliant, confident and victorious, a master of tools who speaks with "machined precision," the Doctor epitomizes the orthodox virtues of her culture and she embarks upon a mission to insure that "The studied dissonance upon which our modern State is painstakingly structured will not be so easily corrupted" (p. 48). Yet in this context the epic hero is the butt, though not to be taken lightly. For she is also the death-cunt, dedicated to defending the established order and securing an unthreatened sense of actuality. Speaking to her staff about the hallucinatory powers of Morris' "one-note calls of hemlock pipes," Dr. Peloris exposes herself as an enemy of the imagination.

But is our children, to speak in the old way, whom we must consider. There must be no confusions for them between the old legends and conceivable realities. It is they who oblige us to grab up, once and for all, the contaminated seed of our unfortunate origins. (p. 49)

Morris, of course, is no match for Peloris and Co. Even during his final months of freedom he was driven underground, avoiding capture by escaping through a subterranean sewer system. Although an avatar of the pricksong, Morris is no longer capable of resisting a computer-monitored reality. Despite his earlier minor victories (he inspired other outlaw pipers, seduced one of the Doctor's assistants) he is, at the time of his capture, old and tired: an exhausted narrative mode.

Morris, like Granny, is in need of a successor. But even had he succeeded in impregnating the actuality the Doctor defends, his coup

would not have precluded the eventual need for a new exponent of the pricksong. Coover makes this point explicitly in "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady" where he broadens his scope and uses the circus as his allegorical vehicle to illustrate the economic domination of published fiction and of society-at-large.

The bulk of "Romance" is narrated in the form of a mock-documentary: excerpts of testimony by the principals are connected by narrative filler which provides a background for the quoted statements. The base situation is a self-conscious variation of the love triangle from clichéd melodrama: the circus Ringmaster is actively opposed to the budding love between his side-show stars. He goes so far as to monitor the Fat Lady and Thin Man's nocturnal activities. Whenever the Thin Man grows excited, according to the Fat Lady's testimony, the Ringmaster "'looks down at my Man and says: That's one muscle too many! And throws cold water on it-'" (p. 41). Motivated by love, the Fat Lady aspires to lose weight, the Thin Man to build muscles, and neither endeavor is good for business; hence the Ringmaster's motives for enforcing his rule of abstinence.

The Ringmaster is introduced by the narrator as "the best of villains! : he is a trafficker, a businessman, a financier, a Keeper of the Holier Books" (p. 140), and at this point Coover's allegory is made apparent. The Ringmaster is the orthodox capitalist whose ethic is profit; the circus is a microcosm of a Dow-Jones ruled society and accountant-governed publishing houses.

When the Ringmaster, in order to preserve the status quo, arranges to sell the Fat Lady to a rival circus, the entire rank and

file stage what amounts to a spontaneous communist revolution. Rising as one at midnight, they execute their boss and install "the Fat Lady and the Thin Man as Representatives of the Common Proprietorship" (p. 141). The insurrection, at first, is a perfectly executed act of constructive anarchy. The performers forge "a circus without a Ring-master."

All of it just happening! Acts coming on spontaneously, here, there, it was wild and exciting and unpredictable! (p. 142)

And as the form of the circus changes, so too the performers break out of their assigned roles and cultivate new talents. A juggler rides an elephant; the clown plays in the band. But if the Thin Man and Fat Lady succeeded where Morris failed, their victory is short-lived. "The black and white truth of the circus ledger," like moldy mythic residue, reinfects their consciousness. The Fat Lady tries to regain the pounds she lost, the Thin Man to lose his muscles; both grow irritable, their love wanes. When the Thin Man moves to the old Ring-master's van and renegotiates the old deal with the rival circus, the cycle is complete.

Although this finishes the allegory, Coover's narrator still has something to say. To rescue his metaphor, he contrives a happy ending to the story: the Thin Man, deposed, contrite, is reunited with the Fat Lady. Yet once salvaged, the symbol of their union "has lost some of its old charm" (p. 147). The narrator recognizes that to supply such an ending is to participate in the illusions of a corrupt circus, but that is what he opts to do. Transforming himself into a barker

for the show, he fast-talks a countdown to doomsday.

and riding on a unicycle (crack!) whatsat
rocket you carrying there George watchout!
(crack!) and high above without a net those
flirters with death (crack!) defying the
lawza gravity (drumrolls and whipcracks!)
You say it's a new secret weapon yer workin
on for the guvmint George? well howzit
work? (crack!) nothing but her teeth folks
between her and the other world! (fanfare!)
and his trained thoroughbred Arabian hawses!
(crack!) now don't tell me you're gonna
light that big thing in here George! (crack!)
and rode by the Thin Man and the Fat Lady
haw haw giveum a big hand folks (crack!)
look out! (p. 149)

These two allegories, with their social/political emphases,
sketch the larger context within which the other fictions are set.
Yet Coover is more specifically concerned with the individual's per-
ception of that social complex, and the epistemology of perception is
the subject of many of his stories.

Coover's most innovative fictions in Pricksongs are those which
use narrative dynamics to reverse the conventional role of the reader
in fictive communications. In social realist fiction, the thrust of
the overall point of view (not necessarily that of the narrator), is
one of accommodation. As the fiction is read, both character and
reader are gradually guided toward a single understanding of the life
of the fiction. This understanding is comprised of certain pre-
existent notions of reality which the point of view urges the reader
to undertake. One effect of this is to eliminate, as much as possible,
any irony caused by discrepancies of knowledge among character, reader,
narrator and even author. When, after quitting his job at the "A &

P," Updike's Sammy "felt how hard the world was going to be... hereafter," we share his realization. But one thrust of many innovative contemporary fictions is to generate as much of this irony as possible. In "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl," Carl perhaps has made love to Swede's wife, Quenby; to his fourteen year old daughter, Ola; to both; to neither. The outboard motor has failed, leaving Carl and Swede stranded on the lake at night; or perhaps Swede has sabotaged the engine so he can murder Carl without any witnesses. These ambiguities are exploited, not resolved. Irony is used to shove factual conditions back a pace, forging elbow room for the imagination and requiring the reader to seek those areas where the author's patterns and his own patterning powers can coalesce. And it is through that union of self and not-self that the jism of the pricksong flows, altering our way of seeing things.

Coover's earliest efforts to emphasize the interplay between his readers' perception and the fiction he's writing are represented in the three "Sentient Lens" pieces of the volume. In each of the three a first-person plural narrative describes the approach of an isolated, mysterious character: a man who urinates in the snow, a milkmaid, a leper. Yet at any given point during these approaches the only constant we can depend on is that apparency is apparitional; our next perception may negate all our previous ones.

Our perspective within each story is dependent upon those of the narrators; they are our lenses and they are keenly aware of their lack of omniscience.

The snow has folded itself into drifts, or perhaps the earth itself is ribbed beneath, cast into furrows of fallen trees and hums of dying leaves - we cannot know, we can be sure only of the surface we see now, a gently bending surface that warps and cracks the black shadows of the trees into a fretwork of complex patterns... ("Scene for 'Winter,' p. 168-69)

Many of the descriptions can be sub-divided into perception and cognition. The landscape before the narrator is first seen as an abstract design of shape and form which then crystallizes into a recognizable constellation of things. With the narrator of "Scene for 'Winter'" we journey to "a small open space, nearly flat, the familiar chiaroscuro configurations unbroken by unspearing forms" (p. 169). Upon a second look, however, the indefinite configurations are recognized as a city park with lamp posts, benches, and restrooms. Once a scene is recognized, subsequent perceptions provide details which make it more vivid. Yet the narrator, like a hand-held camera, is mobile, and as he moves our perspective changes, what "we see now" changes, and the matrix of possible patterns within our perceptions changes as well. At certain moments, the environment suddenly assumes new meaning. The man who urinates an unread message in the snow in the park is first observed from a distance and his most prominent feature is his smile, "creasing his weathered cheeks with humorous deep-cut grooves" (p. 171). But as the distance between the lens and the man shortens, "we see for the first time that his smile is not real, but painted: his real mouth turns down while the smile, what we thought was a smile, remains, obstinate and impersonal, on his weeping face" (p. 173).

Our perception of the milkmaid in "The Milkmaid of Samaniego" undergoes no less dramatic a metamorphosis. Only here it is not a painted smile which steers us to false assumptions, but expectations and impressions inherited from Aesop and other fabulists. "Milkmaid" begins with the premise that although she cannot yet be seen, a milkmaid with a pitcher of fresh milk on her head is approaching.

It's almost as though there has been some sort of unspoken but well understood prologue, no mere epigraph of random design, but a precise structure of predetermined images, both basic and prior to us, that describes her to us before our senses have located her in the present combination of shapes and colors. (p. 175)

And as the maid appears and draws near we only see those details which lend vivid support to the "predetermined images:" her face is high-boned, her hair peat-colored, her stride heavy-bodied. Yet as she continues to approach the lens, she reaches a point which triggers a quantum leap in our perception of her.

as we observe yet more closely, we discover that it is not a pitcher at all, though it has seemed like one, but actually real eggs, six dozen at least, maybe seven, all nestled in a great raffia basket (p. 177)

At this point, however, hallucination rules and the eggs are not real. They hatch, and the milkmaid-become-eggmaid is surrounded by hundreds of chicks which grow into fat white hens, "still fatter yellow-sows," and finally a barnyard of animals all of which have issued from her basket. These, too, in turn, disappear, and we are left at the end with a remnant of our original pre-conception: a milkmaid crying over

spilled milk.

The narrator of "The Leper's Helix" tries to compensate for the unexpected surprises which shattered the pre-conceptions of the points of view in the first two "Sentient Lens" fictions. He is mindful of the "savage glare" of the illusory sun and he discounts some appearances as chimera.

His robe seems not so much a robe as a ...
a winding sheet: Death! we cry inwardly,
but beat back the (alarming!) absurdity.
It's the sun, only the sun, the glare,
heat - (p. 180)

Both the narrator and leper are in constant motion, a choreography calculated to provide the reader with a 360 degree view of the subject, so that no one perspective can dominate our perception of him. Starting at opposite points on the circumference of a circle, the narrator rotates around that circumference while the leper scratches his helix through the center of the circle as indicated in figures 1 and 2.

. (A) Leper

. (B) Reader/Narrator

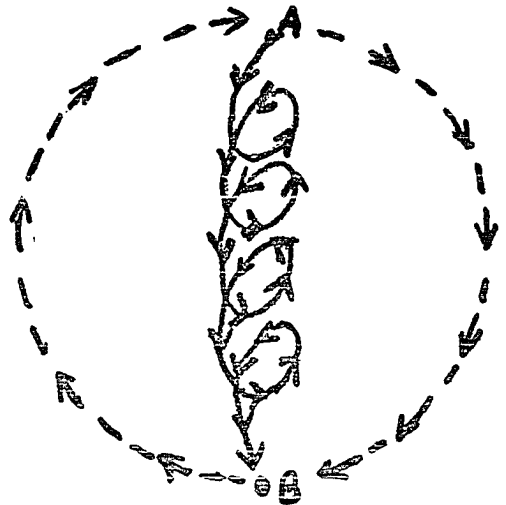


Fig. 1: Starting points

Fig. 2: Charted courses

Even the velocity of these movements is computed so as to synchronize the arrival of the leper at point B with the return of our lens to its starting point. Yet the precautions against illusion and the aids to full-dimensional perception are ultimately futile.

Absorbed in our visual registrations, our
meaningless mathematics, our hedonistic
pleasure in mere action and its power -
how could we have wasted it all! - we had
forgot what was to come at the end! (p. 181)

In an effort to use scientific procedure to perceive the totality of the leper, the narrator has boggled our vision with details of rotting flesh and blinded us to any meaning beyond that phenomena. Without such meaning revealed there is no way to understand the final embrace of an oozing body, the kiss of a frothing mouth. The leper, like Heller's Snowden, holds a secret: ultimate reality is something very like protoplasm. Everything else is a matter of projected patterns of meaning. And the more creative the patterns we project, the more creatively we can deal with the perishing flesh of existence. Yet by refusing to seek pattern beyond phenomena and dismissing insight as illusion, we can only succumb to death's embrace.

For Coover and other post-modern fictionists, facts do not constitute reality, but a veneer which hides reality. This point, however, is often misunderstood. In his revised volume on the contemporary American short story, William Peden claims that Pricksongs and Descants reworks the worn conflict of "reality vs. illusion."¹⁸ Yet his assessment represents not only a drastic oversimplification, but also a serious distortion. Particularly in his more elaborate short fictional

experiments with plot and point of view, Coover uses irony to dissolve the dotted-line borders between illusion and reality. There are five fictions in the volume - "The Magic Poker," "The Elevator," "The Gingerbread House," "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl," and "The Babysitter," - which use innovative narrative dynamics to urge the reader to forsake the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy. By presenting several simultaneous but contradictory narrative possibilities, these stories do not ask their readers to choose the "true" account from those that are suspect. Rather, as Margaret Heckard has observed, "They invite the reader to apprehend this shimmering multitude (of possible plots) all at once, not to take a multiple choice quiz."¹⁹

Each of these five fictions is structured around the paragraph, or cluster of events, as the narrative unit. They range from the fifteen numbered components of "The Elevator," to the one hundred six unnumbered segments of "The Babysitter." Such a technique facilitates an effective disruption of chronological order by separating the narrative continuum into its component units, and reshuffling. Thus, in "The Gingerbread House," paragraph 30 relates a confrontation between the young boy and the witch, while the last segment, 42, depicts the boy and girl frolicking about the gingerbread house, enthralled by its "heart-shaped and bloodstone-red" door, still ignorant of the "sound of black rags flapping" within. The opening segments of "The Babysitter" concern the Tuckers' preparations for their evening out, the arrival of their babysitter, and the 7:30 p.m. musical variety show on their television. And by the final segments, the

late-night news is wrapping up, hence framing Coover's story within a general chronological progression. But the events which possibly occur during the course of the evening are fragmented and discontinuous. There are, for example, six paragraphs narrating a minor tickling episode. Yet none of these are arranged consecutively, and most are separated by two or three pages of text.

Coover's use of the paragraph as narrative unit allows for more than a cubist rearrangement of chronology. As several critics already have observed, in fictions where Coover uses this technique more than one character exerts authority over the plot, more than one imagination patterns and interprets the events.²⁰ The reader is not accommodated to any definitive point of view, but pushed in the opposite direction, urged to expand his or her vistas by encountering the "external reality" of the fiction through the overlapping and interplay of multiple imaginations. It is as if each paragraph "belongs" to one character; the details and events revealed therein are consequently subject to the preconceptions of that mind. Unlike previous uses of multiple point of view, the purpose is not to establish one as a norm against which to measure the others. No single version of the plot is more correct than the others; nor is there a relativistic premise which insists that all fictions are equal. Rather, the one assumption common to these catacomic stories is that fiction, by its nature, is epistemological: a story is a system of knowledge which patterns experience. By allowing this principle to operate on his characters - rather than discursively dissecting it - Coover illustrates how some characters can encounter the plot more creatively

than others. By implication, of course, the same applies to people and experience.

"The Magic Poker" is the first of these fictions to appear in the volume. The events of the plot and details of the setting set forth in its fifty-five paragraphs are variously shaped and given meaning by three agents: the narrator, Karen, and Karen's sister. Making no pretense to hide his presence, the narrator is quick to remind us that he is responsible for inventing the island setting, for introducing the sisters into the story, for placing the poker where they will find it and creating the atmosphere of ruin and decadence.

In the loggia, I have placed a green piano. I have pulled out its wires, chipped and yellowed its ivory keys, and cracked its green paint. I am nothing, if not thorough, a real stickler for detail. I have dismembered the piano's pedals and dropped an old boot in its body (this, too, I've designed: it is horizontal and harp-shaped). The broken wires hang like rusted hairs. p. 23

The setting itself is a familiar one. The mansion, observation tower, guest cabin and docks might once have housed characters from a 19th century novel. Yet by being so obtuse, the narrator unsuspends our disbelief. Conventional fiction, like the constructs which the narrator invents, has been vandalized and reduced to dysfunctional debris.

Despite the ease with which the narrator fills the page with words, his confidence in his own control over the story soon erodes. "At times," he says, "I forget that this arrangement is my own invention.... It is one thing to discover the shag of hair between

my buttocks, quite another to find myself tugging the tight gold pants off Karen's sister" (p. 33-4). Originally intent on exposing artifice as artifice, he senses his own absorption into his fiction, and fears that his "invented island is really taking its place in world geography." In exposing one type of fiction as obsolete, he enacts Coover's principle of constructive anarchy by inadvertently creating an innovative fiction capable of serving as a doorway to reality. The only fiction over which the narrator has total control is fiction which is no longer a viable conduit for the pricksong.

In this case, the spirit of the pricksong is manifested in the bestial caretaker's son who haunts the premises. But after introducing this mythic character, the narrator is alarmed by his inability to control and locate him.

But where is the caretaker's son. I don't know.... This is awkward.... Didn't I invent him myself...? Didn't I round his back and stunt his legs and cause the hair to hang between his buttocks? I don't know.... To tell the truth, I sometimes wonder if it was not he who invented me... p. 27

Here is an important difference between Barth and Coover: Barth's fun-house is not haunted; all of its apparitions are designed, projected and controlled by the operator. But it is possible, at least, that autonomous spirits inhabit Coover's house of fiction. Further, if two sisters, or a reader, should encounter such a spirit, it just might follow them home.

Of the two sisters who visit the narrator's island, only Karen can see the caretaker's son. Even though he is as real as anything

else within the fiction - maybe moreso - Karen's sister is blind to his existence because she wants to believe in 19th century fiction. She finds the island "a sad place" and she can't comprehend why anyone would let such a place deteriorate, never mind that its destruction might be necessary and constructive. Her life, too, littered with the rubble of three broken marriages, agonizes the sister by its failure to fulfill the patterns of a romantic fiction. Wearing tight, gold lame pants and high-heeled sandals, she is as ill-dressed for a hike on the island as she is ill-equipped for life. Karen, by contrast, strides confidently about the island, always leading, suitably attired in canvas shoes and a casual dress.

Instead of the caretaker's son, Karen's sister sees a dapper, pipe-smoking prince. Her long-awaited healer is released not from a toad's body, but from the rusty poker which she finds embedded in a public cluster of grass. Actually, four separate paragraphs narrate four possible incidents pursuant from the sister's discovery of the poker. In one, she picks up the poker but drops it when she notices it is covered with bugs. In another, she kisses the poker and gets a mouthful of rust. But in the other two instances, her kiss releases her suave savior. Karen, too, is depicted with the poker in several hallucinatory scenes. Yet she uses it not to fulfill a fairy-tale formula, but as a prop in a series of slapstick routines.

(Karen) puffs on the iron poker, blowing imaginary smokerings, then turns it into a walking stick and hobbles about imitating an old granny chasing young children.

Next, she puts the poker to her shoulder like a rifle and conducts an inspection of all the broken windows... p. 35-6.

In other instances Karen uses the poker to smash an unbroken window and, when she bangs it against a stone parapet, to release the caretaker's son.

Both sisters project their imagination onto the poker. But the sister trapped in the tight gold pants uses the poker self-indulgently to reinforce her residue-polluted view of the world, while Karen uses it to help destroy the lingering constructs from such obsolete fiction. Finally, after all is said and done, then unsaid, undone, and said once more, a very conventional thing happens. Karen takes the poker down to the water, washes the rust from it, and places it in their boat. Thus the poker, having played its part in fantasy after fantasy, and "sparkling with flecks of rainbow-colored light in the sunshine," is removed from this island of imagination and taken home with the girls, its magic restored.

The other paragraph-structured stories also exploit the ambiguities created by that structure to explore the relationship between fiction and human perception. "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl" uses its thirty-seven clusters of events to fragment and reshuffle details from several incidents: Carl the tourist and Swede his guide stranded in a boat on a lake at night; Swede's wife and daughter, Quenby and Ola, at the barbeque pit, awaiting Swede's return from a hunting trip; Carl's possible sexual encounters with both Quenby and Ola. But seven of the paragraphs serve to narrate the evening when, for Carl's benefit, Ola recited a story about her daddy and her cat. And it is

Ola's story which dominates Carl's perception of Swede. Similarly, the young boy and girl from "The Gingerbread House" have inherited their vision of the forest from the old man's stories. But the tale he tells them does not prepare them for reality, it insulates them from it.

The old man tells them a story about a good fairy who granted a poor man three wishes. The wishes, he knows, were wasted, but so then is the story. He lengthens the tale with details about the good fairy, how sweet and kind and pretty she is, then lets the children complete the story with their own wishes, their own dreams. Below, a brutal demand is being forced upon him. Why must the goodness of all wishes come to nothing? p. 69

Consequently, when, after a series of paragraphs which alternate in tone like a sequence of counterpointed songs of innocence and experience, they finally encounter the gingerbread house, the children can only perceive its sugarplum veneer, not the grim complexities just the other side of the heart-shaped door.

"The Elevator" concerns Martin and the elevator which has transported him every workday for the last seven years from the lobby of his office building to his office on the fourteenth floor and back again. But the story itself is also an elevator, Coover its operator, and with each numbered narrative segment the doors open revealing a brief fiction which molds our perception of Martin. A parody of the meek white-collar worker, Martin is locked into a routine existence, confined to a claustrophobic life style just as he is imprisoned with the elevator, "this tight cell." Still, he finds in

the elevator a microcosm for the whole of reality.

This small room, so commonplace and so compressed, he observes with a certain melancholic satisfaction, this elevator contains them all: space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class. p. 129

Each of the fifteen segments, then, explores a possible position Martin might occupy within that cosmos, although clearly, the system is closed, and his possibilities are limited.

Martin is most victimized in segments "2" and "8," where Caruther, a blustering co-rider, propagates the notion that it is Martin who daily fills the elevator with intestinal gases. The other passengers capitulate to Caruther's boisterous version of reality and join the derision. Other paragraphs, "3," "6," "9," and "12," depict Martin in a more fortunate position: on the floor of the elevator embracing the saucy operator. Yet these instances are only made possible when the cable snaps and the elevator is hurtling downward to destruction. And those instances in which the elevator is self-operated only serve ironically to underscore Martin's lack of control over the direction of life. "Martin, without so much as reflecting on it, automatically takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works" (p. 133). Martin is either humiliated by someone else's hack fiction, or he manages to project his own pornographic fantasy at the expense of his life. It is not until the final paragraph, where he chooses to take the stairs, thus exposing himself to another vehicle of ascent, another dimension of reality, that Martin manages to escape literal or metaphorical death.

Halfway up, he hears the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash from below. He hesitates, poised on the stair. Inscrutable is the word he finally settles upon. p. 137

If "The Elevator" is structured around the conflicting fictions of Caruther and Martin, "The Babysitter" yields even more authority over plot to its characters. The babysitter, her boyfriend Jack, Jack's friend Mark, and Mr. Tucker all storify their experience. Beginning with the routine events of a mundane evening, each character is allowed to fantasize and shape that evening into his or her own set of events, character and conflict.²¹ Throughout the story, usually in the background but occasionally emerging to the fore, a television casts its images into this maze of fiction, and the act of changing channels becomes a metaphor for Coover's structure. With each paragraph he switches from one character's fantasy to another's, and the resultant text is a series of fictional fragments, each with a different "author," all paraded before the outside perceiver, the reader.

The babysitter's version of the evening fluctuates between pederastic playfulness and paranoia. She coaxes little Jimmy Tucker to wash her back while she's in the tub, or she lets the Tucker infant drown through her negligence. She washes Jimmy from the waist down, "entranced by the spectacle of that pale little thing down there," or she shakes the crying baby so violently that she kills it. Mr. Tucker's fantasies are essentially pornographic. Returning home on a flimsy excuse, he finds the babysitter in the tub; he joins

her. Or, he finds her making love to her boyfriend, whom he replaces. Mark's fictions are exercises in sadism: rape, murder, elimination of witnesses. Jack, too, has sexual designs on his girlfriend, but his fantasy takes the form of melodrama. When Mark or Mr. Tucker abuse his girlfriend, Jack jumps to the rescue.

By the next to last paragraph, the Tuckers return home after an uneventful evening. The party was boring, the kids are asleep, the news is on the television. It's time to pay the sitter and take her home. But this does not negate the bizarre events of the previous one hundred paragraphs. For the reader, they have all happened. A character is known not only by what he does, but by what he is capable of doing. The reality of the evening is not simply a journal of what happened, but the totality of what might have happened. And despite its complex, Byzantine structure, "The Babysitter" emerges as the most American story of the volume; not merely because of its subject matter and motifs, but because the story renders the texture of life in contemporary America where we must find meaning and a creative way to be amid an elaborate hecatomb of fictions.

Coover summarizes the inefficacy of popular fictions and the need for innovative ones in "A Pedestrian Accident," a fanciful and funny story which returns to conventional scene-by-scene construction. The base situation concerns the main character, Paul, who, run over by a truck, is rendered paralyzed and mute. The conflict arises when an ineffectual policeman arrives on the scene, determined to ascertain "what happened here." Since Paul cannot speak on his own behalf, the officer is dependent upon the testimonies issued from the gathering

crowd of onlookers.

The truckdriver is quick to volunteer his version of the accident which characterizes Paul as a "Crazy goddam fool... just burstin for a bustin!" Yet, perhaps because his language is so hackneyed, his fiction has little effect on the perceptions of the crowd. Instead, it is Charity Grundy, "seventy, fat and bosomy, pasty-faced with thick red rouges," (p. 188) who emerges from the throng to set the record straight. She identifies Paul as "Amory! Amory Westerman!" and then, at the insistence of the policeman who demands "The story," and goaded by the spectators shouting "Tell! Tell! Tell," proceeds to narrate how she and Amory met and became instant lovers: "a coupling unequaled in the history of Western concupiscence" (p. 194). Transcribing her words, the officer fills thirty pages of his notebook, and Charity Grundy's erroneous fiction becomes the official public record. So much for the ability of popular fiction to reveal the truth.

Lying underneath the truck, surrounded by the curious and the inept, Paul is stricken with an acute case of deja vu. He also feels "like one chosen" (p. 184), as if his accident was the first stage in a vaguely familiar ritual. Although the center and first cause of all the commotion, Paul remains coolly detached from it and plagued by a set of unanswered questions which no one else asks: was he carrying a book when he was hit; where was it; what was it? Did he have a green light when he crossed the street? Why is no one concerned about who had the right of way? Paul feels that the lettering on the side of the truck may be the clue he needs to understand what

is happening. But from his severe angle of vision all he can see are the cryptic letters "KI" and the number "14." Later, when the truck is moved and its message becomes readable to Paul, it is nothing but senseless commerical dreck which fails to solve anything:

MAGIC KISS LIPSTICK
in
14
different shades (p. 204)

At the end, deserted, still waiting to die, Paul wonders, "How much longer must this go on?... How much longer" (p. 205)? Mrs. Grundy's story reveals more about herself than Paul, and since it is accepted as accurate, it precludes the search for a more responsive fiction which could mythically explain the meaning of Paul's experience.

Throughout Pricksongs and Descants Coover repeatedly nails conventional fiction for its failure to incite its readers to new perceptions of reality. Yet such an indictment fulfills only half of his ambitious, aesthetic intentions, and Coover seems to doubt whether he or anyone else has forged new forms of fiction that succeed where conventional stories fail. He confesses as much in "The Hat Act," the concluding fiction to the volume. Like "Panel Game," "The Hat Act" is written as a scenario describing a popular form of entertainment, in this case, a magic show. The magician, like the narrator of "The Magic Poker," struggles to keep his act under control, his audience happy, and eventually, he is so absorbed in his own illusions and need to succeed, that he unintentionally murders his lovely assistant.

Beginning with conventional magic -- pulling rabbits and doves from his hat-- the magician soon exhausts the possibilities of such tricks. To recharge the dwindling applause from his audience, the magician resorts to baroque variations of standard illusions.

Snaps fingers over third hat, withdraws a fourth hat, again identical. No applause. Does not snap fingers. Peers into fourth hat, extracts a fifth one. In fifth, he finds a sixth. Rabbit appears in third hat. Magician extracts seventh hat from sixth. Third hat rabbit withdraws a second rabbit from first hat. Magician withdraws eighth hat from seventh, ninth from eighth, as rabbits extract other rabbits from other hats. Rabbits and hats are everywhere. Stage is one mad turmoil of hats and rabbits. p. 241

This trick, which might be an analogue for a Thomas Pynchon novel, draws laughter and applause from the audience, but it requires all the exertions the magician can muster to clear the stage and re-establish control. And it is this pattern which governs his entire act. Driven by a desire to please, the magician resorts to increasingly bizarre tricks which become more and more uncontrollable, until, finally, failing to extract his naked assistant from his hat, the magician "hurls hat to floor, leaps on it with both feet. Something crunches. Hideous piercing shriek" (p. 255). Coover realizes that fiction, whatever its intrinsic merit, cannot succeed unless it is read. Yet catering to popular tastes --at least at this point in American culture-- is destructive to aesthetic integrity. In trying, the artist may be doomed to failure, obscurity, or both. But for Coover, there is no choice but to don the barber's basin, "and never

mind that the nag's a pile of bones" (p. 78).

William Gass observes how Pricksongs and Descants, like the experiments in shorter forms conducted by Barth, Barthelme, Beckett, and Borges (we might add Gass to his list), is designed to yield knowledge concerning "the art of narration, the myth-making imagination."²² Robert Scholes, too, notes how metafiction often "tends toward brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction."²³ Yet just as the Quixote is more than an attack on Romance, Pricksongs is more than an expose of myth. Consciously innovative, Coover runs through the vast areas of permutations and combinations of narrative and language, purposely shunning previously consummated innovations, seeking what Italo Calvino calls the "click" which will enable readers to release suppressed critical attitudes which, in turn, might unlock the cell of society's common inheritance: its legacy of freedom. Ultimately, Coover may get no closer to the truth than Barth approaches an exit from his fun-house. But he believes it is out there, beyond phenomena, and that fiction is a means of discovering that truth. "The more our homes are well-lit and prosperous," writes Calvino, "the more their walls stream with ghosts."²⁴ As a Romantic, Coover may be more ambitious than successful, but in Pricksongs and Descants he seeks and often finds a new vocabulary, giving those ghosts a voice and bringing them back into the chorus of collective consciousness.

Notes to Chapter III

¹Italo Calvino, "Myth in the Narrative," Esprit (Paris, April 1971), translated and reprinted in Surfiction: Fiction Now... And Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 75-81. See particularly pp. 76-77.

²Frank Gado, First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1973), pp. 142-43. The entire interview with Coover covers pp. 142-59.

³Robert Coover, Pricksongs and Descants (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 121. Originally published in 1969 by Dutton. All future quotes follow the text and pagination of the New American Library edition.

⁴Gado, p. 156.

⁵Gado, p. 157.

⁶Gado, p. 157.

⁷Gado, p. 157.

⁸Gado, p. 143.

⁹Gado, p. 152.

¹⁰Gado, p. 152.

¹¹Gado, p. 152.

¹²Neil Schmitz, "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," Novel 7, no. 3 (Spring, 1974), p. 213.

¹³Margaret Heckard, "Robert Coover, Metafiction and Freedom," Twentieth Century Literature 22 (1976), pp. 210-27.

¹⁴Gado, p. 151. "Panel Game" was written in 1957, at the end of an era which the media is still trying to pass off as "the Golden Age of television." "The Marker," written in 1960, is the second oldest.

¹⁵Schmitz, "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," p. 214. See also Neil Schmitz, "A Prisoner of Words," Partisan Review 40 (1973), p. 132.

¹⁶Gado, p. 151.

¹⁷Gado, p. 151.

¹⁸William Peden, The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-75 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1975), p. 181.

¹⁹Heckard, p. 220.

²⁰Arlen J. Hansen, "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies 19 (1973), p. 13. See also E.H.W. Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast: The Fiction of Robert Coover," Hollins Critic, 7 (1970), pp. 1-11, especially p. 10.

²¹Hansen, p. 13.

²²William Gass, review of Pricksongs and Descants by Robert Coover, New York Times Book Review, 19 October, 1979, p. 5, reprinted in Fiction and the Figures of Life by William Gass (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 105-109. See particularly p. 107.

²³Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," Iowa Review 1, no. 4 (Fall, 1970) p. 107.

²⁴Calvino, p. 78.

CHAPTER IV

"In contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways
under our feet": The Evolution of Form in
Barthelme's Fictions

One of the roles of conventional modernist fiction has been to smuggle life from the social reality of its environment and use that life as the material of its narrative text. The surface meaning of that material is then connected by patterns of abstract meaning, encouraging Aristotle and Plato to shake hands. Yet for the post-modernist writer, there is no such truce; the conventional connections are no longer serviceable for contemporary life. To see the surface phenomena of fiction or life as congealing into the old philosophical patterns is to subscribe to obsolete fictions which separate us from - rather than connect us to - reality. The dilemma for the contemporary writer in America is double-edged. His art, like consciousness, can easily capitulate to the bombardment of meaningless information which defines American culture. Or, if he avoids the dreck, his fiction can become stranded in an ozone of abstractions.

Donald Barthelme responds to this dilemma with exploratory fictions which attempt to transcend the banality of quotidian America by placing its material within new narrative frameworks. The conventional

modernist short story transcends the banality of its material by way of epiphanic structure. But as Philip Stevick has observed, reliance on epiphany underscores a faith "in the possibility that an intuitive self-knowledge can cut through accumulations of social ritual and self-deception."¹ Unfortunately, Charles Manson's pathological behavior was based on something very like an epiphany experienced while listening to a Beatles' album. Fortunately, Barthelme's fiction is not concerned with epiphanies, possibly doesn't believe in them, certainly is not structured around them.

During the late 1960's no one wrote more effortlessly through the paper barriers of the short-story form than Donald Barthelme. If John Barth built funhouses of fiction using the materials he inherited and catalogued from a long lineage of story-tellers, and Coover used the same basic materials but broke them up before reassembling them into the blocks of his narratives, then Barthelme made his own bricks. In his essay, "The Myth of the Post-Modern Breakthrough," Gerald Graff offers a sobering reminder that many of the elements of Barthelme's fiction, such as his use of irony, follow a long line of literary precedents.² But when we look at the narrative dynamics of the stories in Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (1968) and City Life (1970), it becomes clear, as Stevick argues, that the difference between Barthelme's fictions and the conventional modern short story "goes to the roots of the narrative act itself, is a difference in what it means to tell."³

Among the ways that Barthelme can tell a tale are:

1. a sequence of 100 numbered sentences ("Glass Mountain");

2. a single twelve-page sentence or sentence fragment ("Sentence");
3. a sequence of anecdotes related by association ("Brain Damage");
4. a question-and-answer format ("The Explanation" and "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel");
5. liberal use of illustrations spliced into hallucinatory descriptions ("At the Tolstoy Museum");
6. a dense sequence of associational images connected without regard for syntax or grammar ("Bone Bubbles");
7. a series of anecdotes, descriptions and testimonials loosely related to the same objective "subject" ("Paraguay" and "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning").

Shall I go on?

8. a sequence of captioned photos and illustrations ("The Expedition" and "A Nation of Wheels");
9. a parody of expository forms ("On Angels");
10. a parody of popular informational prose ("Man's Face: A New Novel in Forty Coaxial Chapters");
11. minimal fictions which use only the barest of narrative technique and structural form but manage to tell rich imaginative tales nevertheless ("The Balloon," "The Police Band," "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" and many others, especially those in UPUA).

In short, Donald Barthelme has invented and practiced more different ways to tell than anyone in the history of American letters.

At the same time, it is the recognizable forms of language and behavior from American social reality which usually fill the innovative forms of his fictions. Although, as a journalist, Barthelme exercises considerable poetic license, he chronicles the quotidian and the curious in our culture far more consistently than other writers of innovative short fiction. "Panel Game" is conspicuous within Pricksongs and Descants because its materials are drawn not from literary stores, but directly from the mass culture. The title story from Lost in the Funhouse occupies a similar position in that volume. But Barthelme repeatedly fills his fictions with life lifted from "the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under feet."⁴

It has been argued that Barthelme is really more concerned with linguistic realities than with American behavior and city life.⁵ But there is no real contradiction here. If we examine what distinguishes our culture from all previous ones it can be seen that one of its unique earmarks is a lack of silence. Certainly, silence can still be experienced, but usually we must make an heroic effort to achieve it. Occasionally, at night, if I am lying in bed, with the television turned off, if the refrigerator isn't humming too loudly, if the traffic has mysteriously slacked off, I might experience five or ten minutes of something very like silence. But in general, our lives are filled with more sound, and more language than the lives of any previous generation. And much of this language issues not from people, but from personalities, people trained in the ability to use words to say what they don't mean. Advertisers, commentators, politicians, over-voices, character-types from sit-coms, hysterical disc-

jockeys: it is their words which fill our life with sound. And it is those sounds, the CROWD NOISES, MURMURING, YAWNING, RETCHING, TENDERING OF EXCUSES, RHYTHMIC HANDCLAPPING, HOWLING, and MOANS, which clutter the silence with deafening noise, which, as William Gass puts it, cripple our consciousness.⁶

The titles of both UPUA and City Life underscore Barthelme's concern with behavior.⁷ Yet it is through his innovative forms that Barthelme transcends the banality of the actions and words which fill his fictions and our lives. That is, by writing about dreck, Barthelme runs the risk of adding to the dreck pollution of our culture. As an artist, he is not immune to brain damage. But the construct of his fictions, when successful, not only exposes trash as trash, but often places it within the framework of an intrinsic design where self-contained meaning can transcend the meaninglessness of its material.

The more overt attempts to achieve this transcendence are those collage-structured fictions which proceed by a process of accrued sentences, images, incidents or paragraphs. Yet his more frequently practiced technique, especially in UPUA, is the absence of technique.

1. Minimal fictions and insurgent backgrounds

All but two of the fifteen fictions in UPUA are highly abbreviated narratives, not superficial or skimpy tales, but rich, complex stories of contemporary life which use as few conventional devices of narrative as possible. These minimal fictions are the aesthetic inverse of a Thomas Pynchon novel. They are anti-baroque,

even though they tell about a baroque reality. Plot and characterization especially are purposely underdeveloped and simplistic. Much of the background and setting are sketchy in explicit development, though rich and ambiguous by implication.

Speaking of the openings of many post-modern fictions, Stevick recognizes what he calls a "chilling, almost pathological directness of beginning...".⁸ His observation is particularly pertinent to Barthelme's minimal fictions, and this can be seen by sampling the first sentence or two from stories in UPUA and City Life.

Again today the little girl come along come
along dancing doggedly with her knitting
needle steel-blue knitting needle. She knows
I can't get up out of this chair theoretically
and sticks me, here and there, just to make
me yell. "This Newspaper Here," UPUA p 32

The balloon, beginning at a point on Fourteenth
Street, the exact location of which I can-
not reveal, expanded northward all one night,
while people were sleeping, until it reached
the Park. "The Balloon," UPUA, p22

I went to the bank to get my money for the day.
And they had painted it yellow. "Can We Talk,"
UPUA, p106

Kellerman, gigantic with gin, runs through the
park at noon with his naked father slung under
one arm. "A Picture History of the War," UPUA,
p134

Yes, a dog jumped on me out of a high window.
"The Falling Dog," City Life, p41⁹

Although some of Barthelme's stories, like "The Dolt," begin with the mundane and end with the bizarre -- in this case the eight-foot

tall son and his chain mail of transistor radios --, most are born with a comically grotesque incident. As with my first example, the leisurely "come along come along dancing" overture, if present at all, is quickly interrupted by the disturbing image, the "steel-blue knitting needle." With the second sentence, the stab is made. By the third sentence, violence is history. In terms of plot, these minimal fictions begin immediately. What might eventually be a climactic incident in conventional fiction has transpired while the readers "were sleeping," sometimes before the fiction actually begins.

Nor is this an updated in medias res device. Subsequent and extended digressions which fill in the antecedent action are not forthcoming. Whatever historical background emerges - with the notable exception of "See the Moon" - is dependent upon the resources of the reader, not the explicit details of the text. Because they tend to illustrate a central metaphor, minimal fictions resemble fables. That metaphor, however, is not the glittering moral of the story, but usually an illustration of one facet of the individual's relation to the culture-at-large. Nor is the material of the fiction purely fabulous. Much of it is borrowed from the mass media and social environment. Yet it is, like the son manqué, hallucinatory, recognizable because of Barthelme's exaggerations, the nature of which are often revealing.

The settings of minimal fictions are almost always recognizable, but occasionally rendered unfamiliar by anachronisms and cultural displacements. By locating his story in "real" geography -- most often New York City -- Barthelme frees his fiction from the need to develop

setting, further contributing to its minimalism. Once it is established, in the third sentence of "Report," that the narrator "was sent to Cleveland to talk to the engineers," the external setting is virtually completed and Barthelme can concentrate on the internal landscape of the mechanistic mentality which he ascribes to the engineers. This accomplished, the story is over.

Nearly all peripheral characters as well as a few of the protagonists are monolithic, two-dimensional at best, quickly known by revealing gestures and statements. "Nothing mechanical is alien to me," says the head engineer; Edgar, for the third time, is preparing to fail the National Writers' Examination; "Shotwell keeps the jacks and rubber ball in his attache case and will not allow me to play with them"; "The mayor took a little pill from a little box and said, 'We'll see.'" Broad strokes like these further release the fiction from laboring with the conventions of modernist narrative.

Finally, very little happens in the usual sense of plot development. Within a single sentence a balloon covers the greater part of midtown Manhattan. In another single sentence -- the last one of the story -- the balloon is deflated, transported and stored somewhere in West Virginia. Hence the conventional elements of "The Balloon" are, for the most part, taken care of in the first and last sentences of the text. This frees the remainder of the fiction to parade a sequence of abbreviated reactions to the balloon before the reader. The parade, of course, becomes the point of the tale. And when something does happen, it is narrated as briefly as possible. The changeover in Administration in "The Police Band," for example, is accomplished within

a parenthetical qualifier: "The Commissioner (the old Commissioner, not the one they have now) brought us up the river from Detroit" (p. 76). By taking care of most of the conventional elements of his stories so expediently, Barthelme can then give selective amplification to any one element of his fiction. By examining the single amplified facet of each of these minimal fictions a reader can arrive at some conclusions concerning its unity and its relation to the other stories in the volume.

Several of Barthelme's minimal fictions are clearly statements about the role of art in contemporary America. In "The Balloon," the narrator is the only real character. The other word-beings, even within the fiction itself, are acknowledged as hypothetical representatives of attitudes and reactions to the inexplicable balloon. Initially perplexed, people argued about the meaning of the balloon, but eventually they came, "in a curious way, to locate themselves in relation to aspects of the balloon..." (p27). Hence they accommodated themselves to the inexplicable without reaching a rational understanding of it. Even though the narrator confesses that the balloon "is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure" occasioned by his "sexual deprivation," it is nevertheless a successful work of art. Although misused by children, misinterpreted by critics and engendered by horniness, it still evokes creative and individualized responses from the public-at-large, feelings which would not normally be given exercise in the daily routine of city life. As an artifact, the balloon bears a resemblance to anti-realist, post-modern fiction, Barthelme's in particular. Rather than reflect, it sullies the reality of the Man-

hattan sky, but that sky

was dark and ugly; it was not a sky you could look up into, lying on your back in the street, with pleasure, unless pleasure, for you, proceeded from having been threatened, from having been misused....And so, while this man was thinking sullied, still there was an admixture of pleasurable cognition in his thinking, struggling with the original perception.(p25-6)

And not only does it offer an alternative to the perception of the abusive present, but, like truly great art, it stands as a model for more creative, less restrictive life styles of the future. As the necessity to maintain the current state of actuality reduces opportunities for flexibility, the amorphous and indefinite balloon

was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon ... offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. (p28)

As a whole, despite Barthelme's parodic renderings of attempted interpretations of it, his balloon must be interpreted nevertheless as his notion of ideal contemporary art. It serves as a therapeutic outlet for the artist's otherwise frustrated creative impulses, its indefinite shape evokes different responses from different people, and it offers an alternative to an unattractive reality without ignoring those conditions of actuality which oppress the imagination.

Two other minimal fictions in UPUA are also concerned with the ability of art to transform a repugnant social reality. Yet "This

Newspaper Here" and "The Police Band" remind us of the ability of the system to resist and repress such efforts through malice, stupidity, or both.

"This Newspaper Here" uses three typecast secondary characters to sketch the social milieu in which creative art must function. The "nice little girl from down the block" is quickly revealed as a socially-manufactured sado-fascist. Trained "under laboratory conditions" in the practice of torment, she responds to the paraplegic narrator's complaints about his social security check with renewed violence.

The little girl jabbed again hitting the thin thigh that time and said "we know exactly how little it is and even that it is money down the drain why don't you die damn you dirty old man what are you contributing?" (p. 33)

- The government agent who investigates the narrator for printing the counter-culture newspaper is a caricature of the gestapo officer and another practitioner of the unspeakable. And the representative from the academy, a professor who is "well educated reads good travels far drinks deep... (and) talks to dolphins" (p. 34), is blind to what the narrator tries to show him in the newspaper.

I said look there page 2 the amusing story of the plain girl fair where the plain girls come to vend their wares but he said "on my page 2 this newspaper here talk about the EEC." (p. 34)

Once the complicity of the government and the academy in the repression of art is established, these characters disappear from the story.

The newspaper, "warm at the edges fade in fade out a tissue of hints whispers glimpses uncertainties" (p. 38), like the balloon, is indefinite, evoking different responses from different people. Similarly, it serves as therapy for the artist. "Making this newspaper here I hold a prerequisite to eluding death," claims the narrator. But most important it opposes and threatens the mechanistic and violent life practiced by the peripheral characters. A "thing of great formal beauty," some of its paragraphs consist entirely of punctuation and typographical quirks. Yet not only does it remind its readers of the reality of the printed symbol, it also serves as propaganda, countering the propagandistic content of social forms. "It is true that I dislike their war," the narrator states with pride, "and have pointed out that the very postage stamps shimmer with dangerous ideological radiation. They hated that" (p. 37). Still, to distribute his off-beat publication, the narrator must resort to commercial channels. He sends the paper through the mail and prints "HOTELS-MOTELS NEED TRAINED MEN AND WOMEN AMAZING FREE OFFER on the wrapper. As a disguise" (p. 36).

A third metaphor Barthelme uses to explore the potential of contemporary art is the jazz music of "The Police Band." According to Francis Gillen, this fiction "deals with the futility of art in a time of chaos"¹⁰ and indeed, the narrator admits that the band was "a very romantic ... idea that didn't work" (p. 79). But Gillen's interpretation emphasizes the failure of art, not the insensitivity of the authorities who control its distribution, and the latter, more accurately, is Barthelme's target. Although originally intended to

convert "emotion stolen from busted-up loves, broken marriages, the needle, economic deprivation" (p. 78) into creative music, the band was never allowed to wail in the midst of a riot. But when the emotions accumulated from city life are not expressed through artistic and creative channels, they can only fester and eventually erupt into unspeakable practices. And the new administration, believing that "Rage must be met with rage," proclaimed the inefficacy of the band without trial. Still, the story ends with the narrator's affirmation of the power of music.

We have a good group. We still have emotion
to be used. We're still here. (p. 79)

Several of Barthelme's minimal fictions in UPUA recognize the word pollution in American culture: a preponderance of meaningless language which prevents the individual from negotiating experience creatively, and actually promotes destructive behavior. In "Report," for example, the engineers are governed by a programmed moral sense which considers war a "process," ending a war "an abort." They endeavor both to destroy language and to use it destructively. Among the latest weapons they have developed are "rots, blights, and rusts capable of attacking (the enemy's) alphabet..., the deadly testicle-destroying telegram..., (and) a secret word that, if pronounced, produces multiple fractures in all living things in an area the size of four football fields" (p. 61). Justifying this linguistic warfare the chief engineer uses language which belies his inability to see any human value in his scheme of reality: "you must realize ... that the whole thing represents a fantastic series of triumphs for the

multi-disciplined problem-solving team concept" (p61-2).

The relationship between behavior and modes of rhetoric is further explored in "The President," "Game," "Can We Talk," and "The Dolt." Policemen, a waiter, an infant, the narrator's secretary and other characters are introduced in "The President" merely to faint and depart from the fiction. And this epidemic of fainting seems to be the inevitable consequence of meaningless political rhetoric. Although no one knows what the new President is planning, "everyone is convinced that he will bring it off" (p. 135). Similarly, the narrator's girlfriend -- one of several Sylvias in the volume -- although totally subsumed by the President's aura, cannot express the nature of his appeal.

"He is a strange fellow, all right. He has some magic charisma which makes people--"
She stopped and began again. "When the band begins to launch into his campaign song, 'Struttin' with Some Barbecue,' I just ... I can't..." (p. 150)

Sylvia's consciousness, like her thumb, has been reduced to "a fiasco of tiny crusted slashes" by the sharp edges of pop-top culture. Unless referring to his height -- the President is forty-eight inches high at the shoulder -- the narrator too is baffled by the chief Executive and can only describe him in the most abstract terms: darkness, strangeness, complexity, newness, smallness. But he is aware of his inability to describe the President and this leads him to have reservations about the man as a leader. Specifically, the narrator recognizes a lack of meaning in the President's speeches.

When he has finished speaking I can never remember what he has said.... One hears only the cadences. (p. 152)

It is precisely these cadences which mesmerize the public, giving them the conviction that President is the right man for the period. But the lack of meaning in his words triggers their lapse of consciousness and the fainting epidemic.

Near the end of "The Dolt," the incompetent writer resigns himself to failing the National Writers Examination. Just when his wife, evincing sympathy for the first time, tries to console him:

... the son manqué entered the room. The son manqué was eight feet tall and wore a serape woven out of two hundred transistor radios, all turned on and tuned to different stations. Just by looking at him you could hear Portland and Nogales, Mexico.

"No grass in the house?" (p. 72)

Edgar's problem, as a writer, is not that he can't pass an obviously ill-conceived exam, but that he cannot connect language to the American reality that his son so glaringly embodies, not even "to badmouth" it. Once Edgar's neurosis and his fading relations with his wife are expeditiously established, the bulk of the text is a transcript of Edgar's ill-fated story: a 19th century-style Romance about war and the loves of royalty in Prussia during the reign of Friedrich II. Edgar's story, unwittingly a self-parody, has a beginning but no title, and an ending but no middle. And even if he could somehow connect the

pieces of his story into a design of meaning, that meaning, like that of the words "Brand, tuck, glave, claymore," would be contained in archaic names for an obsolete tool.

For Edgar and those of us who sympathize with him, "Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin" (p73). To begin, for Edgar, is to ride his language away from his immediate reality, but to reach no alternative destination; to wind up back where he started, speechless. In a similar linguistic predicament, the G.I. narrator of "Game" reaches the same analysis but expresses a different attitude. Although under orders to shoot Capt. Shotwell, his fellow officer, if he observes him behaving strangely, and despite Shotwell's appearance in bathing trunks with a Beretta strapped to his calf, "trying to span with his two arms outstretched the distance between the locks" (p. 117), the narrator avoids verbal consideration of his immediate situation.

I was moved to comment, but did not comment,
comment would have provoked counter-comment,
comment would have led God knows where. (p. 117)

"What is strange," he asks, but does not want an answer. Further, if he and Shotwell converse about their situation, they may agree to lob their warhead without due cause as an alternative to the monotony of their existence. Consequently, the narrator uses a diamond to scratch long, objective descriptions of natural forms and artifacts on the walls of the underground cave, riding language to a demilitarized zone of his mind. Shotwell, too, when he is not playing jacks, reads Introduction to Marketing which diverts his linguistic attention from the

potential hostilities of the present.

"The Indian Uprising," "Edward and Pia," "A Few Moments of Sleeping and Walking," "Can We Talk," "A Picture History of the War," and "See the Moon" compose a group of six fictions in UPUA which resemble minimal fictions in that they abbreviate much of what conventional narrative amplifies, but contain much more peripheral activity, so much more that the background, which is panoramic and public, moves into or near the same plane occupied by the foreground, which is restricted and private. At times, as in "A Picture History of the War," there is a distinct alternation of narrative lines which simultaneously suggests the possibility of connections and conveys the jolting abruptness of discontinuity. In general, these fictions vacillate between the urge to make connections and the grim knowledge that such efforts are dishonest, futile, or both.

Many of these modified minimal narratives present narrators and/or main characters whose personal problems, often related to horniness, impotence or sexual rejection, are contrasted with a baroque social spectrum busy with hallucinatory and attention-grabbing activity. Of course, the narrator of "The Balloon" also suffers from sexual deprivation, but his story is more monodynamic. The peripheral activity in the city is limited to a smattering of reactions to the balloon. The text of "Can We Talk," however, -- the briefest in UPUA -- is filled with rapid-fire, semi-related activity which diverts attention from the narrator's personal dilemma. Although he leans dangerously out of a window, feigning suicide to capture his girlfriend's attention, he also reports his other daily activities, most of which are

spiced with hallucinatory details: he makes a withdrawal from his bank, where the money has been painted yellow; he buys artichokes for lunch, and negotiates with the produce clerk for a single leaf of lettuce; he visits the home of some friends, where the disassembled parts of a vacuum cleaner lie on the floor in alphabetical order. The narrator of "The Indian Uprising" is also emotionally involved with a less than receptive woman. But as he sits "getting drunker and drunker and more and more in love" there is a brutal and bizarre insurrection taking place around him. Neighborhoods burn, captured Comanches are tortured, Jane, the narrator's friend, is mugged by a dwarf. These narrators do not have a jazz band or a newspaper to absorb their frustrations and convert them into creative energies. Nor do they have any defense against the dangerous anarchy of their daily lives. The frustration of their personal lives complicates the chaos of their public experience. The chaos of their public experience precipitates the crises in their personal lives.

Similarly, Edward's and Pia's disintegrating love life is given no more exposure than the quotidian activities of their social lives. The Edward and Pia stories, written in third person narrative (less than one-third of the fictions in UPUA and City Life use this mode) and simple, declarative sentences almost exclusively, are filled with narrated events. But rarely are more than three or four consecutive sentences expended on a single incident or situation. Predictably, this produces an acute sense of discontinuity and choppiness, as if the events in their life, like sentences, are separated by periods.

Pia slept on the couch. She had pulled

the red-and-brown blanket up over her feet. Edward looked in window of the used-radio store. It was full of used radios. Edward and Pia drank more sherry. "What are you thinking about?" he asked her and she said she was wondering if they should separate. (p86-7)

Although Pia is pregnant and she and Edward share a hectic social life, their personal relationship has become jaded and sexually inactive. The second Edward and Pia story counterpoints more social activity with recountings of Pia's dreams and Edward's attempts to objectify them into meaning. Yet neither the subjective dreams nor the objectively-rendered string of social events yield information to lead the depleted lovers out of their personal impasse.

"There are worms in words!" cries Kellerman's father in "A Picture History of the War." "Worms in words... agitated by the warmth of the mouth" (p. 146). The general's metaphor works in two ways: language is rotten, and it is filled with larval energy. Kellerman would like to tap that energy to communicate with his father who remains, throughout the story, naked and nostalgic for a bygone era of international belligerence. Specifically, Kellerman's personal life is complicated by his desire and inability to receive forgiveness and the facts of life from his father. But his life is cluttered with public activity as he makes the rounds of the park and bars in the city, and the text of the fiction is cluttered with a history of an ambiguous European war, narrated with relish from the general's point of view. At several points Kellerman is on the verge of using language to make a human connection with his father. But as he propels his string of confessions or questions "Past (his) teeth, with

with their little brown sweaters knitted of gin and cigar smoke... Past (his) lips with their tendency to flake away in cold weather--" (p. 139), he is abruptly interrupted by his father's history of the war or by his own trip to a ginstore, insurgent elements of the background which sabotage Kellerman's efforts to deal with his personal dilemma.

The narrator of "See the Moon," the last fiction in UPUA, enjoys an insulation from the hectic routine of unspeakable practices which escapes Barthelme's less fortunate tale-tellers. His rambling story, "this little briefing here" as he calls it, is addressed to his unborn child who may not be so privileged.

I don't want you unpleasantly surprised. I can't stand a startled look. Regard me as a sort of Distant Early Warning System. Here is the world and here are the knowledgeable knowers knowing. What can I tell you? What has been pieced together from the reports of travellers. (p. 172)

Perhaps to keep his briefing free from misleading and confusing data, the narrator self-consciously keeps secondary characters, even Gog's mother, minimally developed.

Ann. I'm going to keep her ghostly. Just the odd bit of dialogue:

"What is little Gog doing?
"Kicking."

I don't want her bursting in on us with the freshness and originality of her observations. (p. 164)

Despite such efforts, the story is not consistently discursive, but filled with descriptions of the "souvenirs" pinned to the narrator's

wall, autobiographical fragments of his experiences in college, Korea, and marriage, transcribed phone conversations with his first son, and an extended account of the interviews and experiments he conducted with one Cardinal Y. The narrator feels that he failed as a parent to his first son, not through neglect, but because he subjected Gregory's formative mind to too much misguided scientific apparatus. "Pro-creative Playthings at one end the Educational Testing Service at the other" (p. 168). Gregory, subsequently, dedicated himself to "electron-spin-resonance spectroscopy," unsettling his anti-scientific father and instigating the present apprehension he feels concerning the approaching birth of his second child. Consequently, the text of his "briefing" is highly unscientific, a sequence of semi-related fragments which momentarily surge into the foreground and fade back into his memory. This is minimal autobiography and it is the father's hope that these disconnected elements, like the souvenirs pinned to his wall, "will someday merge, blur -- cohere is the word, maybe -- into something meaningful" (p. 159).

As individual stories, these six fictions do not lend themselves to explication. But together, they impart resonance to each other and rest upon some common notions about language and love, conformity and creativity, public anarchy and personal crisis. Perhaps intuitively, Barthelme illustrates an inverse relationship between the degree of participation in the life encouraged by the culture and the creative abilities of the individual. Like the narrator of "The Indian Uprising," the individual can barricade himself behind the things which fill his daily life: "window dummies, silk, thoughtfully planned job descriptions..., wine in demijohns, and robes" (p. 11). But such barricades

neither reveal much about nor offer protection from the hostile arrows of reality. Immunity can only be obtained through creative expressions of the self, either through love or art. Barthelme's most successful artists and lovers are also least adversely affected by the peripheral activity teeming around them. The newspaper editor seems hardly affected, even mildly amused by the abuses of the little girl and the visit from the government investigator; Edgar, on the other hand, flies into a rage at the appearance of his son. Further, those stories which unleash the activities of the background to the forefront of the fiction usually feature main characters whose efforts to remedy their personal lives are crippled by the clutter and distractions from their urban environments. Kellerman ends his story with another urgent sequence of questions about the facts of life, but his inquiry is a minor muffle within the larger chaos of sirens, hoses, "huge pieces of apparatus," and hundreds of firemen looking for a fire and clogging the streets. In "The Balloon," however, where the background activity remains subdued, the narrator can effortlessly expand his giant balloon, dismantle it, and solve his sexual frustrations in the process.

Finally, these fictions do not urge a total, solipsistic withdrawal from the world-at-large. Close to such isolation, the characters in "Game" are potentially the most destructive. It is balance, an impossible balance, which must be maintained between the need to create personal meaning and the necessity of participating in the meaningless riot of city life.

2. Unlike things stuck together: fragment-sequences
and collage fictions

The two fictions from UPUA which I have not discussed, "Alice" and "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," share curious textual topographies which set them apart from the other pieces in the volume. On the surface, both consist of a series of short paragraphs and statements arranged in sequence and subtitled or spatially contained on the page. Although eccentric in the company of minimal fictions, this collage technique evolved into Barthelme's dominant mode of narrative in City Life. This is not to say that Barthelme abandoned the devices of minimal narrative by 1970. "The Policeman's Ball" and "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" are pedigree descendants of the form. "The Falling Dog" and "On Angels" are close variants. And even the ten stories in City Life which we might properly call collage fictions retain many of the characteristics and aesthetic premises first devised in his minimal fictions. Speaking of the question-and-answer format used in "The Explanation" and "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," for example, the answerer recognizes "that it permits many valuable omissions: what kind of day it is, what I'm wearing, what I'm thinking. That's a very considerable advantage" (p. 80). But these collage fictions replace the internal minimal structure with an exoskeletal superstructure which outlines the formal perimeters of the text and serves as a membrane between the self-reflexive reality of the fiction and the "exquisite mysterious muck" which surrounds it.

Before discussing the ways in which the collage principle enables Barthelme to highlight and capitalize on the artificiality of

his fiction, I should note that on one level at least, such structures remain a mimetic device which enables Barthelme to reflect the varied texture and creative potential in our urban environments.

Speaking of collage, Barthelme has said,

... New York City is or can be regarded as a collage, as opposed to, say, a tribal village in which all of the huts (or yurts, or whatever) are the same hut, duplicated. The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may be also much else. It's an itself...¹¹

And collectively, the collage fictions of City Life further explore the social-oriented thematic concerns of the minimal fictions in UPUA. The narrator of "Views of My Father Weeping" vacillates repeatedly between participation in inscrutable external circumstances and withdrawal into a realm of personal and imaginative contemplation. And by cluttering its narrator's consciousness with trivia, "At the Tolstoy Museum" effectively and humorously demonstrates the invalidity of specification. But mostly, by refusing to disguise the components of his fictions beneath verbal mortar, Barthelme reminds us that his fictions are constructed, that if the nation-state is a "creation of that muck of mucks, human consciousness" (p. 172), then collage fictions, which comment on the "other reality" from which they come, are the creations of the fiction-spinning imagination.

"Views of My Father Weeping," the opening fiction of the volume, is a case in point. The story consists of a sequence of thirty-four vignettes, each separated one from the other by a large dot. Half

of these vignettes concern the narrator's search for the truth about the circumstances of his father's death and compose what has been recognized as a parody of the pulp detective thriller¹² complete with the conflicting testimony of witnesses, the appearance of a mysterious woman and the character with the insidious-sounding name (Lars Bang). But ratiocination does not serve the narrator and Barthelme as it did Dupin and Poe. Attempting to sort out all the external evidence, the narrator gets tangled in it and is unable to verify whether his father drunkenly hurled himself in front of the horses, or the aristocrat's coachman maliciously ran him down. The very last segment of the fiction consists of the single abbreviated word, "Etc.," indicating the ongoing futility of his search.

The remaining sixteen components of the collage are brief, imaginative projections of the narrator's vision of his father. He usually envisions his father as a child, sticking his thumb into cupcakes, writing on the wall with crayons, shaking pepper into the sugar bowl and playing dress-up. In these sections too there is doubt and unreliable evidence. Despite the obvious resemblance, the narrator almost wishes it were not his father whom he envisions weeping and desires "some sort of test, voiceprint reading or" (p. 14) other form of objective proof. Of course, if such proofs are unreliable in his search for external evidence, they certainly are not serviceable to his dream visions.

Conventional textual criticism readily helps us understand this fiction in terms of the central contrast between these two categories of vignettes. In the first the narrator desires to know the truth

but cannot find a consistent pattern in available external evidence. In the second, he wants to deny the patterns which emerge from the solipsistic evidence of his own hallucinations. It is certainly the tensions between these two modes of knowledge, or phases of consciousness, or the right and left halves of the brain, around which "Views" revolves.

But what do the collage structure and the specific sequence of its fragments add to our understanding of the fiction? If "Views" was divided neatly into two halves, with all the detective-story fragments in the first half and all the hallucinatory fragments in the second, or if the fragments alternated detective, hallucinatory, detective, hallucinatory throughout its text (neither of which is the case), the conclusions reached through conventional explication would not be radically altered. Whatever the impact of the sequence in which Barthelme orders his fragments -- and this is what collage fictions often emphasize about themselves -- it floats through the nets of most systems of literary criticism.

I suggest that the sequence in which the pieces of the fiction are ordered, like improvised chord progressions in music, are largely responsible for the pleasure derived from collage fictions, although its contribution to the semantic meaning of the story -- the part which criticism usually deals with -- is slight. If I might abbreviate the categories of fragments in "Views," A = the narrator's search for external clues concerning his father's death, B = the narrator's internal visions of his father's life, then the order in which the story is narrated can be presented as follows:

A - A - A - B - A - A - A -
B - B - B - A - A - A - B -
B - A - B - B - A - A - B -
B - B - B - A - A - B - B -
A - B - B - A - B - A - "Etc."

Clearly, this is a simplistic scheme of limited critical value, but considered as a supplement to close textual reading it discloses certain narrative information which textual reading alone misses. There are, for example, sixteen points in the story which shift our attention from the ratiocinations of the detective to the hallucinations of the solipsist, or vice-versa. Other sequences of the same fragments could yield a minimum of one and a maximum of thirty-four such transitions. But more important, Barthelme's arrangement is patterned so that the shifts become more frequent as the story progresses. Further, while six of the first seven fragments (and nine of the first thirteen) relate the narrator's indulgence in the "exuviae" of city life, the latter half of the fiction traces his increasing absorption into the visions of his own imagination. The import of this trend becomes clearer when compared to the end of the last story of the volume, "City Life." There, Ramona is also faced with an unsolvable mystery, not the death of her father, but the virgin birth of her son. And rather than increasingly withdraw from the streets into a map of her own making, she accepts, without delusions, the invitation offered by the city to join its palpitating muck.

From the millions of units crawling about on the surface of the city, their wavering desirous eye selected me. The pupil enlarged to admit more light: more me. They began dancing little dances of suggestion and fear. These dances constitute an invitation of unmistakable import -- an invitation which, if accepted, leads one down many muddy roads. I accepted. What was the alternative? (p. 173)

Most of Barthelme's characters share a similiar conflict. They are pulled by conflicting desires to participate in and withdraw from the life around them. If the character also happens to be a successful artist, the problem is solved. The artist withdraws from life to create an artifact which then becomes a part of reality. But there are fewer artists in City Life than in UPUA, and the few there are, like the climber in "The Glass Mountain," are unsuccessful. Further, Barthelme develops this conflict not as Barth does in "Night-Sea Journey" or "Anonymiad," through explicit interior discourse, but through the form and structure of the situations in which he places his characters. The tension between the self-reflexive reality of his collages and the "other reality" which informs those fictions parallels the conflict which exists silently within his characters.

Besides the exoskeletal structures which emphasize their artifice, many of Barthelme's collage-fictions are filled with obviously fabricated material. There is no Tolstoy Museum. The Paraguay Barthelme writes about is not a country in South America with "a capital city named Asuncion. This Paraguay exists elsewhere" (p. 30). "Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment" ("The Glass

Mountain," p. 74). Yet contrary to these acknowledgements is the profusion of what Philip Stevick calls "mock facts": fictional, even preposterous statements which adopt "the tones, the syntax, and the rhetorical orientations of factual prose."¹³ Ultimately, these mock facts enable Barthelme to establish the invalidity of specification, a premise fundamental to his fiction and prerequisite to creative participation in life.

Consisting of a prologue and fourteen subtitled fragments, "Paraguay" combines elements from the foreign-visitor, travelog, and dystopia genres to produce a veritable encyclopedia of mock-facts. At times this Paraguay resembles Tibet, New York City, or El Dorado, but the "elsewhere" it exists, presumably, is not in world geography, but on the printed page. Consequently, the epistemology through which the reader comes to know this nation is governed by the order in which Barthelme has his narrator, the foreign visitor, supply us with information. In the next to the last section the narrator tells us about a wall which cordons off part of the city. Behind the wall is a field of red snow which glows as if lighted from beneath. If there is a pith of truth within the complex of information provided by the narrator about Paraguay, then it would seem to rest within this equally-submerged red glow. But when the traveller asks his guide, "What is the point of this red snow?" he receives no definitive answer and concludes that it "seemed to proclaim itself a mystery, but one there was no point in solving -- an ongoing low-grade mystery" (p. 39). We learn that "there is a particular scale -- 66, 67, 68, 69 degrees -- at which intercourse occurs (and only within that scale)" (p. 31-2);

that Paraguayan "art is dispatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps... Each artist's product is translated into a statement in symbolic logic" (p. 34); that Paraguayans periodically shed their skin; that "There are crimes but people chosen at random are punished for them" (p. 38); that "Everything physical in Paraguay is getting smaller and smaller" (p. 38). But ultimately, the subject of "Paraguay" is the inefficacy of factual knowledge.

After cutting his fiction off from the physical world in the opening fragments of "Paraguay," Barthelme uses the final section, "Departure," to reconnect those tissues. "We began the descent (into? out of?) Paraguay" (p. 40) reads the last sentence. The parenthetical uncertainty creates enough ambiguity to suggest that this Paraguay exists everywhere, that life itself is an ongoing, low-grade mystery cluttered with facts which are irrelevant to its solution.

"At the Tolstoy Museum" further elaborates on the over-abundance of trivia and its irrelevance to (for lack of a better word) truth. The museum, its contents, and the behavior of its visitors are described in five, short, spatially separated sections which are interrupted and spliced with nine illustrations. The first section introduces the museum, which holds "some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy," and affords the narrator, a frequent visitor, the chance to rattle off a series of facts he has memorized about the Russian author.

Tolstoy means "fat" in Russian. His grandfather sent his linen to Holland to be washed. His mother did not know any bad words. As a youth he shaved off his

eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier. He first contracted gonorrhea in 1847. He was once bitten on the face by a bear. He became a vegetarian in 1885. To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backwards. (p. 51-2)

In the second section the architecture of the museum is objectively described. The fourth and fifth fragments focus on the visitors who attend lectures, examine pictures, and consider "the 640,086 pages (Jubilee Edition) of the author's published work" (p. 59).

The museum, cluttered with portraits, packs the narrator's mind with facts, which in turn clutter the fiction as he spills his factual "knowledge" into the text. Yet at the center of the story, in the third fragment, is a refreshingly uncluttered and simple fable of the bishop and the three hermits. The tale, unlike the facts about the author and the museum, is not true. But it is better than truth: it is myth. It is Barthelme's rendition of Tolstoy's story which originated as a folk tale, and like true myth, the power of its sequential events loses little in translation. As at least one critic has already observed, the theme of the fable is clear: each person must speak his own language.¹⁴ Determined to teach the hermits the Lord's Prayer, the misguided bishop insists on the letter and not the spirit of language. And although the narrator "was incredibly depressed by reading this story. Its beauty. Distance" (p. 56), he doesn't realize that he is a victim of the same fallacy as the bishop. Inundated with facts about Tolstoy, he can see only surfaces, his understanding crippled by the invalidity of specification.

The illustrations which accompany the text, such as the drawing

of Tolstoy's coat (which is as large as a two-story house), serve obviously comic purposes and give the fiction the look of a mock-brochure. But two illustrations in particular, those captioned "The Anna-Vronsky Pavillion" and "Museum plaza with monumental head" (p. 57-8), comment ironically on the text of the story. In an interview, Barthelme identified these drawings as "early (1603) investigations of perspective,"¹⁵ and indeed, the narrator is overly concerned with a single, restrictive point of view. These 17th century studies convey the impression that all visual perception of the external world emanates from a single focal point deeply recessed in the lower center of the page. But the page, of course, is really flat, its 3-dimensionality an illusion, possibly a dishonest one. And neither the narrator's collection of trivia nor the lines of the drawings can be traced to a valid point of illumination.

"Views of My Father Weeping," "Paraguay," and "At the Tolstoy Museum" demonstrate, through theme and structure, that data, whether accumulated during an afternoon or a lifetime, is banal; that it is a barricade rather than a passage to meaning. The next five collage fictions, beginning with "The Glass Mountain," explore metaphorical routes of escape from the muck as well as the possibilities afforded by such withdrawals. They include two of Barthelme's most militantly innovative fictions and in effect, are an attempt to transcend banality, not merely to expose it.

"The Glass Mountain" is a sequence of one hundred consecutively numbered sentences and sentence fragments. Within this exoskeletal frame is the narrator's account of his attempt to climb a glass moun-

tain located "at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue." More accurately, the numbered statements fall into three categories: the narrator's step-by-step account of his climb, his observations of city life below, and statements quoted from literary sources such as John Masefield and A Dictionary of Literary Terms. Francis Gillen suggests that the numbering of the sentences helps to emphasize the discontinuity of surface meanings.¹⁶ But at this point the narrator and the volume are climbing away from surface meaning, and the progression of integers from one to one hundred is more suggestive of ascent, however ironically intended. With each subsequent fragment, the climber moves nearer the top, the reader nearer the end.

The climb out of the muck, however, is not easily achieved. "The best way to fail to climb the mountain," we are told in sentence 62, "is to be a knight in full armor -- one whose horse's hoofs strike fiery sparks from the sides of the mountain" (p. 70). The following sentence gives a list of the knights whose bodies lay heaped at the base of the mountain. Clutching a plumber's friend in each hand, the narrator is better equipped than his antiquated predecessors. However slowly, he can inch his body up the side; it's his mind that lags behind and periodically sinks its attention to the array of greed, ecological vandalism, self-abuse, and sidewalks "full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder" (p. 68). But it is not enough to make rainbows of excrement or a politics of drug addiction. His avowed purpose in climbing the mountain is to encounter "the beautiful enchanted symbol" at its summit. Presumably, such a symbol would enable him to ascribe

meaning to the dreck below. But this is not the case. In Barthelme's world, symbols are disenchanted. After quoting A Dictionary of Literary Terms which makes the usual distinctions between a symbol, such as a nightingale, and a sign, such as a traffic light, the narrator then casually mentions, "A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me" (p. 71). And when he finally attains the summit and finds his symbol, he is terribly disappointed.

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess.

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances.

99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her.

100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment. (p. 734)

Although he has attained the top of the mountain, his final thoughts, like the princess, plummet downward. Not only did he fail to transcend the debauchery of the streets, he actually brought it with him on his fictive climb.

Written in question-and-answer format and spliced with five black opaque squares each occupying half a page, "The Explanation" and "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" are companion fictions which further develop the exploration for meaning in spite of the meaninglessness of surface phenomena. In the former, Q clearly tries to indoctrinate A, to systematize his consciousness and program him for a computerized world. Q refers to the opaque square as a machine capable of changing the government, but constructed

... not because we confidently expect them to do what they are designed to do -- change the government in this instance -- but because we intuit a machine, out there, glowing like a shopping center.... (p. 78)

He runs A through several rapid-fire litanies and uses the most mechanistic methods of instruction to brainwash his uncooperative pupil.

Q: There are ten rules for operating the machine.
The first rule is turn it on.

A: Turn it on.

Q: The second rule is convert the terms. The third rule is rotate the inputs. The fourth rule is you have made a serious mistake.

A: What do I do?

Q: You send the appropriate error message.

A: I will never remember these rules.

Q: I'll repeat them a hundred times.

A: I was happier before. (p. 84)

But A is not interested in engineering surface phenomena into a system of behavior which provides continuity but no meaning. And he actually subverts Q's attempts to indoctrinate him into such a system by interesting Q in his fantasies about a nude girl with a bruise on her thigh. Score one for psuedo-pornographic fiction.

In "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" A thoroughly dominates Q and refuses to answer his inane questions.

Q: How is my car?

Q: How is my nail?

Q: How is the taste of my potato?

Q: How is the cook of my potato?

Q: How is my garb?

Q: How is my button?

Q: How is the flower bath?

Q: How is the shame?

Q: How is the plan?

- Q: How is the fire?
Q: How is the flue?
Q: How is my mad mother?
Q: How is the aphorism I left with you? (p. 92)

A's silence, as a form of protest, enables him to control the conversation and launch into a four and a half page lecture on irony and its ability, when "directed against the whole of existence," to project an actuality superior to the one it obliterates. "Irony," he claims, "is a means of depriving the object of its reality in order that the subject may feel free" (p. 94). It is a vehicle which can transport the ironist instantly to the top of the glass mountain, even above it, where his imagination is free to project its own visions, its own world, unimpeded by shopping centers, dogshit, or laughing aristocrats. It is this "Solipsism plus triumphantism" which A offers as an alternative to Q's machine.

As Joyce Carol Oates and other critics have learned, it is often spurious to assume that any one character is a surrogate spokesman for the author who created him. And when Arlen Hansen argues that A speaks for Barthelme, that City Life urges the annihilation of the imperfect world through imaginative fiction, he steps into the same pitfall.¹⁷ A is the dominant voice at this point in the volume, but clearly his is not the final word. No sooner does he celebrate the liberating powers of irony than he begins, ever so slightly, the sobering journey down the muddy roads which beckon Ramona at the end of the book. He is troubled by Kierkegaard's criticism of a novel by Schlegel, which he takes also as a criticism of himself. Schlegel, in his novel Lucinde, "has constructed an actuality which is superior

to historical actuality and a substitute for it" (p. 95). But Kierkegaard objected.

What is wanted, Kierkegaard says, is not a victory over the world but a reconciliation with the world....the distance between the new actuality, higher and more perfect than the historical actuality, and the historical actuality, lower and more imperfect than the new actuality, produces not a reconciliation but animosity. (p. 96)

Theoretically, A is more successful in his efforts to transcend the dreck-polluted world than the mountain climber. But he is gnawed at by the suspicion that Kierkegaard is right, that solipsism is a cynical retreat, that although irony can create a realm of meaning, it cannot reconcile that meaning to the world outside the fiction in which we all must live. As "Kierkegaard Unfair" ends, animosity bristles between Q and A.

The contribution of the question-and-answer format, which serves as the frame for these fictions, can be understood more clearly when compared with the following story, "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend." Although presented within a minimal, not a collage fiction, the relationship between the Phantom and his friend is analogous to that between A and Q, except that the point of view lends more sympathy to the friend than the question-and-answer format yields to Q. The friend views the Phantom's retreat to the cellars of the Opera less an escape than a self-imposed imprisonment, and he urges the Phantom to "risk life above ground." When the Phantom reneges on his promise to try (life above ground), the friend is disappointed and suspects

that the Phantom doesn't like him. Nevertheless, he sits on the curb and vows to wait for the Phantom "until the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gravy of common sense once more" (p. 107).

The Phantom, the Answerer, and the mountain climber each attempt to transcend the muck of surface existence. But for Barthelme, such efforts -- including his own attempt to synthesize "a new reality" through collage narrative -- are both heroic assertions of the artist and foolish romantic retreats. What the question-and-answer format allows is an intensive exploration of the conflict between these two attitudes by isolating the discursive elements from setting, background, and peripheral activity.

While the Q and A fictions are uncharacteristically discursive and ideological, "Sentence" and "Bone Bubbles" exist almost independently from the semantic meaning of their words. They exhibit a strong quality of what Tony Tanner calls foregrounding, language which draws attention to itself, not its referents.¹⁸ Self-reflexive, difficult to discuss, almost anarchic by standards of the conventional short story, these two fictions represent the closest Barthelme comes to practicing a narrative which ignores historical actuality.

"Sentence" is a sentence, a rambling ten-page sentence, about a sentence "aiming for the bottom" of the page where it might "rest, or stop for a moment to think about the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence" (p. 109). Yet in order to consider those questions, "Sentence" must continually make comparisons between its self-evolving subject and all too familiar scenes from our domestic reality such as the local community's "secret blackball" of our remaining

lives and "the vigorous wars of attrition (waged) against our wives" (p. 113). Consequently, despite its efforts to isolate itself from "the run-mad skimble-skamble of information" (p. 117), "Sentence" is perhaps unavoidably contaminated by "an amazing amount of exuviae" (p. 114). Although unsuccessful, the narrating voice of "Sentence" draws strength from his failure.

a disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones. (p. 118)

"Bone Bubbles" more successfully cuts itself off from the meaning of its words and consequently from the dreck-filled world to which that language refers. Yet coming as it does after "Sentence," its success seems hollow and paradoxically anti-climactic. The text consists of fifteen clusters of images and phrases, each cluster reading like a sequence of sentence fragments smuggled from various articles or advertisements, removed from their original context, and placed in new frameworks. Without connectives or transitions, these phrases and images are so dense that they challenge our conventional reading habits which depend on the sentence as the basic unit of semantic meaning.

free offer last gesture smooth man of position
purely cinematic vice slap and tickle zippered
wallpaper two beautiful heavy books, boxed
hears noise goes to window 220 treasures from
11 centuries fixer great and stupefying Ring
minimum of three if it hadn't been for Y. I
would never would have gotten my lump...
(p. 125)

We could guess where the seams between these component phrases should be, might even recognize the original source of several phrases. But the transition from image to image is so abrupt and unexpected that semantic meaning is irretrievably obscured beneath the surface of the text and the text is a paradigm of foregrounding. Once we commit ourselves to reading "Bone Bubbles," we must react, sequentially, to each image, submerging ourselves in the self-reflexive reality of the fiction. If Barthelme's purpose is to transcend the inscrutable world of existence, however, then his success in "Bone Bubbles" is paradoxical. He has escaped the pitfalls of general experience where data obscures knowledge, but he has landed in an analogous linguistic realm where meaning, obscured by language itself, is still inaccessible. Having discovered this, City Life is now ready to commit itself to the land of brain damage. This commitment begins in "Brain Damage" and is affirmed by Ramona in "City Life."

At first glance, "Brain Damage" seems little more than a hodgepodge of odds and ends: a shuffled deck of ten prose fragments, five columns of headline type, and six illustrations. And because of the variety of its components, its text is more exemplary of collage narrative than any other fiction in City Life. The prose fragments themselves are varied in subject and style. Some, like the description of the waiter's funeral, are brief humorous anecdotes. Others, like the brief cultural portrait of the Wapituil, read like stand-up comedy routines. Still others, like the confessions of the newspaper reporter and the closing song of brain damage, are strong poetic pieces which could stand by themselves as prose poems. But as a whole,

"Brain Damage" sketches the perimeters of the world of phenomena, a trash-laden realm where people are damaged by commercialized spirit teachers who promise a "new life of achievement, prosperity, and happiness" (p. 135); where people debate over whether or not to "plug in" blue flowers; where the attention of dreamers is riveted to the reality of pennies in the gutter; where corrupt reporters perpetrate hack fictions which cater to special interests; where we ski "along on the soft surface of brain damage, never to sink, because we don't understand the danger" (p. 149).

Of course, we have seen this world before in nearly every fiction of the volume, especially in the early pieces. But this is a return with a difference. Having inherited the aesthetic experiences of climbing the glass mountain, obliterating actuality with irony, and exploring the nether-realms of "Sentence" and "Bone Bubbles," the narrating voices of "Brain Damage" can survey the sights and sounds of the dreck-cluttered world without the naivete of the museum visitor or the tension of the mountain climber. Waiters are described exchanging tips of increasing monetary denomination. Elevator girls shove food in one another's mouth. Behavior in general is incremental in rhythm, ritualistic in form, but void of meaning. The headlines underscore the intensity and futility of the language and behavior of the public-at-large, and the illustrations depict bizarre contortions of bodies and severed heads. But this time there is no attempt to climb above the confusion. In the second prose fragment, the narrator relates a discussion he and his friends had concerning whether or not to wire the green ends of some blue flowers to an electrical

current. "The humanist position," he tells us, "is not to plug in the flowers -- to let them alone.... The new electric awareness, however, requires that the flowers be plugged in, right away" (p. 136). And this debate might just as well apply to post-modern fiction. Connected to the electricity of city life it would most surely be burned to a crisp. But the narrator, considering this conflict, speaks with a marked lack of anxiety.

My own idea about whether or not to plug in the flowers is somewhere between these ideas, in that gray area where nothing is done, really, but you vacillate for a while, thinking about it. The blue of the flowers is extremely handsome against the gray of that area. (p. 136)

The same sense of comfort informs all of the scenes Barthelme describes in "Brain Damage." Anything but innocent, his narrators are aware that both capitulation ("The Tolstoy Museum") and escape ("The Glass Mountain") lead to failure, that it is only against the gray background of vacillation that the dreck of our culture can play a part in aesthetic designs. "WHAT RECOURSE?" the bold print asks. None.

"Elsa and Ramona entered the complicated city" (p. 151). With this simple declarative sentence Barthelme begins "City Life," the last fiction of the volume. What follows, in eighteen brief chapters, is a series of unaccentuated events in the lives of these two girls, "all (of which) are treated on the same level of fact as if all were equally important."¹⁹ This is short fiction as a minimal novel, and Barthelme's ability to assume the role of uninvolved, unself-conscious third-person narrator speaks for his acquired talent to invest his fiction with the phenomena of city life without being agitated.

Elsa and Ramona hang curtains, they enroll in law school, Elsa and Jacques get married, their wedding is interrupted by a bomb threat, Puerto Rican painters come to paint the apartment, Ramona bears a son ("just an ordinary virgin birth"), Moonbelly is awarded "a gold record marking the sale of a million copies of 'Cities Are Centers of Copulation'" (p. 170). All of these events are narrated in the same flat declarative style.

Elsa flings herself into this maze of activity without much thought, protected by the epiderms of ignorance and innocence. She marries Jacques, the political revolutionary, but sees no contradiction in sharing her bed with Charles, the white-collar junior executive. Ramona, on the other hand, (to her dismay) is sexually inactive, and she lacks the naivete to surrender to the flow of city life without a fight. She kidnaps Charles from Cleveland and sequesters him in her bedroom (without sexual success). She indulges in "extralegalities" and cynically engages "in hilarity at the expense of the law" (p. 158). Eventually, faced with the unexplainable birth of her son, Sam, Ramona is subjected to the scorn of students, friends, and high-ranking clergymen. But instead of recoiling from such rejection, she is strengthened by it. The narrator of "Sentence" tells us,

(... it is not by success alone that one surmounts life, but that setbacks, too, contribute to that roughening of the personality that, by providing a textured surface to place against that of life, enables you to leave slight traces, or smudges, on the face of human history -- your mark)
(p. 111)

Although uncomfortably close to an old fashioned platitude, this is

the lesson that enables Ramona to accept the unsolvable mysteries of the city and to join in the "little dances of suggestion and fear."

Barthelme, like Ramona, accepts the invitation of the "many muddy roads" without delusion. The alternative, for both, is failure. Following a pattern similar to Lost in the Funhouse, City Life returns art to the meaningless realm of life with renewed but sober dedication. Nor is this decision one of defeatist resignation. Ramona knows well that in the midst of the muck there are moments of sublimity, "as when Moonbelly sings, for example, or all the lights go out" (p. 172).

If only we could re-create that paradise! By, for instance, all forgetting to pay our electric bills at the same time. All nine million of us. Then we'd all get those little notices that say unless we remit within five days the lights will go out. We all stand up from our chairs with the notice in our hands. The same thought drifts across the furrowed surface of nine million minds. We wink at each other, through the walls.

At the Electric Company, a nervousness appeared as Ramona's thought launched itself into parapsychological space. (p. 172-3)

In moments like that, the banalities of existence fuse into patterns of momentary meaning. In the collage fictions of City Life, Barthelme throws out his nets, ready to catch that meaning and hold it for centuries longer than its transitory life.

Notes to Chapter IV

¹Philip Stevick, "Scheherazade Runs Out of Plots, Goes On Talking; The King, Puzzled, Listens: An Essay on the New Fiction," TriQuarterly, 26 (Winter 1973), p. 345.

²Gerald Graff, "The Myth of the Post Modernist Breakthrough," TriQuarterly, 26 (Winter 1973), pp. 383-417.

³Stevick, "Scheherazade," p. 333.

⁴Donald Barthelme, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 28. First published by Farrar, Straus, 1968. All future page references are provided parenthetically in the text and follow the pagination of the Pocket Book edition.

⁵R.E. Johnson Jr., "Bees Barking in the Night: The End and Beginning of Donald Barthelme's Narrative," Boundary, 25 (Fall 1976), pp. 71-92.

⁶William Gass, "The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon," Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York: Knopf, 1970), pp. 97-103.

⁷Robert Scholes discusses this point in "Metafiction," Iowa Review, 1 (Fall 1970), pp. 100-115.

⁸Stevick, "Scheherazade," p. 335.

⁹Donald Barthelme, City Life (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), First published by Farrar, Straus, 1970. All future page references are provided parenthetically in the text and follow the pagination of the Pocket Book edition.

¹⁰Francis Gillen, "Donald Barthelme's City: A Guide," Twentieth Century Literature, 18 (January 1972), p. 44.

¹¹Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in Joe David Bellamy, The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 51-52.

¹²Gillen, p. 40.

¹³Philip Stevick, "Lies, Fictions, and Mock-Facts," Western Humanities Review, 30 (Winter 1976), p. 5.

¹⁴Gillen, pp. 41-42.

¹⁵Klinkowitz, p. 47.

¹⁶Gillen, p. 45.

¹⁷Arlen J. Hansen, "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies, 19 (1973), pp. 8-10.

¹⁸Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 8-10.

¹⁹Gillen, p. 39.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Ongoing Explorations

In the early sixties, the American short story had slouched into the dubious posture of "the most conservative art of mid-century."¹ Formalized reflections of life, short stories followed conventional patterns to a limited range of revelations, varying only the surface details of plot, character and setting. But verisimilitude no longer served to connect fiction to the real world. It merely reflected, and in the process, insulated experience in a layer of habitual perception. By 1971, however, short fiction had emerged as one of the most innovative art forms, actively exploring ways to reconnect fiction to experience. Particularly during the three-year period, 1968-1970, that experience was confusing, violent and polarized: the demonstrations in Chicago and the election of Richard Nixon; the celebration of Woodstock and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; the Tet offensive and the marches on Washington; ghetto riots and campus casualties. The conflict between old conventions and new innovations was everywhere, perhaps glaringly epitomized in the courtroom confrontation pitting Judge Julius Hoffman against Yippie Abbie Hoffman. Yet, in the same time span, there was another revolt, one which took place on the racks of booksellers, and which,

in the long run, may have a more lasting impact on the development of American consciousness.

Ronald Sukenick's The Death of the Novel and Other Stories (1969)² and William Gass' In the Heart of the Heart of the Country (1969)³ joined Lost in the Funhouse, Pricksongs and Descants, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts and City Life in their attack on the conventional short story. Despite their apparent diversities, the one common denominator of these volumes is their impulse to explore -- through the practice of innovative narrative dynamics, illustration of theme, and thinly-veiled discursive dialog-- the medium of fiction and its ability to shape, and misshape, experienced reality. Dissatisfied with the limitations of modern realism and the inefficacy of epiphanic formulae, innovative short-fiction writers practiced exoskeletal and hallucinatory techniques with unprecedented intensity, self-consciousness and sophistication. Barth's complexly structured funhouses of fiction, Coover's paragraph-structured stories, Sukenick's double-column narratives, and Barthelme's minimal and collage fictions constitute a collection of new ways to tell. Coover's allegories and many of Barthelme's minimal fictions metaphorically explore the ability of fiction, not to reflect the surface of experience, but to equip the individual with the mythic tools needed to negotiate experience creatively. And most of Barth's narrators in Lost, whether they ramble on about a fallopian tube, a boardwalk funhouse, or a wrestling match with Proteus, reflect the author's own fears that he is lost in a labyrinth of fiction, unable to relate his craft to the world which surrounds it.

As a literary form, the volume of short fiction also reintensified its aesthetic potential as a sequence, rather than a collection, of stories. Failing to appreciate this, several recent critics have cited a definitive character of one story in a volume as the surrogate voice of the author. Yet, in Lost in the Funhouse and City Life, as well as in the volumes by Sukenick and Gass, the component fictions are arranged in a patterned sequence. The sperm in "Night-Sea Journey" wants desperately to resist participation in the life-cycle, but is impelled toward the ovum. The anonymous minstrel of "Anonymiad" wants desperately to be reunited with his adolescent sweetheart, but is marooned from love and life. The fictions in between these two (the opening and closing pieces of the volume) explore various positions between those polar dilemmas. The opening fictions of City Life similarly establish a world of surface phenomena hostile to fiction. The subsequent stories take us on a climb up the glass mountain in search of a less polluted environment, but finally return us to the streets. In each case, the sequence of the fictions composes an exploration which searches for but fails to find an alternative to life, but like an improvisational break in jazz which, when it circuitously returns to the original melody, makes the melody sound stronger, richer and less familiar than when we heard it last, similarly returns to life with a greater awareness of the creative possibilities within it.

Another feature of the sequence of short fictions which these volumes exhibit is internally generated resonance. Critics studying the works of William Faulkner have written much about the historical

and panoramic resonance created by the common setting of his novels. They all exist within the fictional milieu of Yoknapatawpha County. Yet the sequence of short fictions allows the kind of resonance within a single volume that it took Faulkner a lifetime of novels to generate. Ideas, images and situations repeat themselves with slight variations from story to story. Distorting mirrors and confusing mazes punctuate Lost in the Funhouse as do doors and apertures in Pricksongs and Descants. Ultimately, these images are more than symbolic passageways between fiction and life. They are also recurrent motifs which lend the volume an internal unity independent from its semantic statements about or reflections of the world-at-large.

It is tempting to conclude that the years 1968-70 witnessed a generic explosion which blasted away the remnants of formulaic short stories and cleared the ground for innovative constructs of short fiction. Such a conclusion is not far from the truth. But Donald Barthelme's Come Back, Dr. Caligari (1964) and Amiri (A.K.A. Leroi Jones) Baraka's Tales (1967) are collections of exoskeletal and hallucinatory fictions which predate the volumes studied here. And many of the individual fictions in the 1968-70 volumes, such as Sukenick's "The Permanent Crisis" and Coover's "Panel Game," were first published in the late fifties and early sixties. Nevertheless, we can safely say that American short fiction in the late sixties underwent a spurt of innovation unparalleled since the achievements of the 1920's.

There has been only one book-length study of contemporary American short stories, William Peden's The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-75. It is a sweeping survey with a wide-

angle vision, and it discusses hundreds of short-story writers. Peden recognizes the "Innovationist" movement in late 1960's America, but, partially because of the breadth of his scope, he condenses his discussion of Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Gass and Brautigan into a ten-page subchapter. Peden claims that although the Innovationists flourished for a while, they wilted when writers like "Malcolm Cowley, Irwin Shaw, and Herbert Gold... rallied to the defense of character, situation and place."⁴ Yet, if conventional short stories were no longer viable as an art form in 1968, why should they suddenly regain their potency several years later? More accurately, what Peden notices is that commercial publishing houses, with very few exceptions, stopped marketing radically innovative fiction. However, despite the fact that rejection slips are now issued by accountants who can reap more profit from Irwin Shaw than from Ronald Sukenick, many of our most imaginative writers continue to publish exploratory short fictions with small presses (such as Swallow and The Fiction Collective), in little magazines (such as Fiction and Seems), as well as in the more established journals (like TriQuarterly and The New Yorker). Even the innovative writers whose fiction is printed by the established firms are increasingly critical of the system through which their fiction, and art in general, is distributed. Barthelme's "Paraguay" and "This Newspaper Here" both take the distribution of art as part of their subject. The publishing industry is one of the allegorical tenors of the circus in Coover's "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady." In an introduction to an anthology of stories from the Fiction Collective, Coover elaborates on his attitude, as an innovative

writer, toward the publishing industry.

America is, at best, a strange place for an artist to work in. On the one hand there is the illusion of artistic freedom, constitutionally protected; on the other, there's the operative dogma of the marketplace: will it sell? In America, art --like everything else (knowledge, condoms, religion, etc.)--is a product. ... there is no relation between what is good and what sells, nor between what (the artist has) made and how it's used by the market managers.... No need for censorship: trust the general banality of the marketplace.⁵

Obviously, this does not mean that all books published by commercial houses are inferior art, or that all small press publications are masterpieces. Barthelme, for example, continues to publish some of the best innovative fiction of the seventies with a major firm, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. But it does indicate that the system through which art is distributed should play a larger role in our critical overviews. The book merchants will not always deal our best contemporary fiction and often we must make an effort to find it. The short fiction of Steve Katz is a classic example of the caustic reaction of the accountant's ledger to the pages of innovative fiction.

Katz has published two books of short fiction: Creamy and Delicious (1971) and Moving Parts (1977). The former is more radically innovative, although the latter, by no means conventional, is a superior work. Creamy is a free-wheeling collection of twenty-seven stories which prematurely celebrate a victory of fiction over life. Twenty of the pieces are "Mythologies," arranged in clusters of five. These are Katz' improvisational recreations of characters lifted from classical and biblical mythology, literary and social

history, and even comic books. By the time Katz finishes telling the tale of each character, the only detail which links them to their original identity is their name. Like Coover's "The Brother" and "J's Marriage," each mythology is an exercise in fictional deprogramming, an attempt to destroy the original myth and replace with a personalized, often bawdy version.

Don't believe any of those stories you had to read in college about Faust, the big scientist who wanted to know all the shit in the world, so he turned on with the devil. Don't believe all that. It's a big put-on, and maybe some of it is almost true, but none of it is really true, and if you fall for it you deserve to be pasted up on the wall like a wallpaper pattern.⁶

By the time the narrator sets the story straight, Faust is a lascivious bumpkin farmer who spends more time plowing his neighbors' daughters than his fields. Yet no sooner does the narrator offer his own Faust legend then he exposes that fiction too as a lie. "Even this story fudges a bit...", he admits. "You can't seem to say anything about Faust without lying a little" (pp. 32-33). In other Mythologies, Sluggo is a "gulch-riding bandit" and Nancy "the gayest shot in the West"; Dickens is known as "The Dickens," an hermaphroditic guru who becomes a Hollywood star; and Apollo is a "beauty guy" who wears hip huggers and t-shirts and meets Daphne, a thirteen year old Black maid, in a brothel. Each Mythology is irreverent to its source, yet self-conscious of its own fictionality as it strives to use parody to connect itself to experience.

The last fiction of the volume, "Blossoms," is even more radically hallucinatory. Like Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising," "Blossoms"

is set in the midst of a mysterious and brutal insurrection. The narrator is the leader of a platoon on a seek-and-destroy mission which, on one level at least, is a campaign to perpetrate the practice and theory of conventional fiction. This becomes clear when the narrator's man Friday, "Hank" Thoreau -- shouting "Don't you ever look around at the damage we've done?" -- dismantles his own body while he resigns his commission.

The last part he gave me was the head, partially disassembled, eyes and cheeks and teeth hanging loose. His final gesture, one so indecorous I still don't understand it, was to dislodge the genitalia, and cork the mouth with his own partially erected cock. "There," he said. "Now I've returned all the equipment I borrowed. Goodby." He left. I was numbed. There in my arms I held all the parts of Henry David Thoreau. (p. 200)

Thoreau resigns not only from the mission, but from physical actuality. And Katz, as a writer, joins in his resignation. He turns in the "equipment" of conventional fiction, which he too borrowed, forsaking the traditional attempt to depict and reveal the meaning of events and times which conspire "to make meatballs of men."

Creamy and Delicious is hallucinatory, funny, but sometimes difficult for the reader, especially "In Our Thyme," fragments of which appear in typescript on interfacing pages between other fictions. Yet, although the book was not budgeted for a promotional campaign (and was out of print six months after its release), it was distributed by perhaps the most established publisher in the business: Random House. However, as the seventies progress (regress?), there are decreasingly fewer opportunities for writers like Katz to distribute their fiction

through established commercial channels. But because of the influence of the 1968-70 short fictions of Barth, Coover and Barthelme, there is currently a glut of exploratory fiction appearing in little magazines or issued in limited editions by small presses. Not much of it is great art, but some of it is very good indeed. Moving Parts, published through The Fiction Collective, was partially financed by Katz himself. It too is radically innovative, but it is a more mature book than Creamy and Delicious, and it directs its efforts to the difficult task of realigning fiction with experience.

Abruptly fluctuating between hard-core fantasy and untampered chronicle, Moving Parts completely skips over the middle ground of selective-detail realism. At the same time, its five fictions -- liberally spliced with photographs--, repeatedly underscore the paradox that our perception of reality is fictional while the most fabulous of fictions can lead us to the discovery of truth. "Female Skin," the first tale of the volume, is a case in point. Periodically noting the time, the narrator factually reports how he removed the skin from one Wendy Appel, wore it himself, and, with the help of the largest gaggle of geese in recorded history, staged a takeover of New York City. Yet he interrupts his tale in the middle to reproduce four pages of journal entries which chronicle a brief period in 1971 when the author, working on a film in California, actually became acquainted with Wendy. Although the journal entries fail "(to) give us a sense of Wendy Appel," the more fabulous fiction compensates by creating its own reality and metaphorically rendering the experience of being enveloped by another person.

The sequence of fictions resonates this rhythmic alternation throughout the volume. "Female Skin" is followed by "Coda With Release," an autobiographical account of how the author searched out this same Ms. Appel and solicited her signature on a release form giving him permission to use her name in the story. Next, it's back to fantasy with "Parcel of Wrists." Here the narrator receives forty-three "clean and odorless" human wrists in a package postmarked Irondale, Tennessee. Before embarking on a journey to find his benefactor, he plants the wrists in flowerpots. Upon his return, the wrists have sprouted, soon blossom and bear anatomical fruits: lips, eyes, chins, etc. But "Wrists" is followed by "Trip," a travelog which records the author's attempt to follow in his fictional character's footsteps. Once in Tennessee, the author, like his character, discovers a commune, and the coincidence serves to emphasize the interrelation of fiction and reality.

This commune is dedicated to the virtues of... the soybean. No mention of this appears in Parcel of Wrists. There must be two different communes. One is an invented commune, the other is an invented commune; this commune is conceived in the mind, this commune is blown from the mind of Adam.⁷

In all, Moving Parts, like so much exploratory short fiction since 1968, is a funny book about the creative mingling of fiction and actuality. Yet its theoretical concerns are never too close to the surface nor obscured beneath laborious technique. If it seems to confuse, it is only because it challenges our outmoded concepts of reality just as Katz writes on through the paper barriers of the short story form.

Perhaps publishing houses will continue to ignore exploratory fiction. Perhaps someone will commission a survey which will discover a large enough specialized audience to make innovative fiction economically feasible. But in either case, the developments forged by Barth, Coover and Barthelme, and further explored by Sukenick, Katz and more recently Sharyn Skeeter and Russell Banks, will not be eradicated. This is fiction which proudly displays its labyrinthine structures and acknowledges the fictionality of its hallucinations. It is fiction which knows it exists within a network of dead fictions, a catacomb which comprises our perception of actuality. But most important, it is fiction which can help us laugh at that catacomb, and possibly perceive a new cranny, a previously unnoticed passage, a more creative way to be.

Notes to Chapter V

¹Philip Stevick, "Introduction" to Anti-Story, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. xii.

²Ronald Sukenick, The Death of the Novel and Other Stories (New York: Dial Press, 1969).

³William Gass, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁴William Peden, The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-75 (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1975), p. 177.

⁵Robert Coover, "Statement," in Statements 2: New Fiction, eds. Jonathan Baumbach and Peter Spielberg (New York: Fiction Collective, 1975).

⁶Steve Katz, Creamy and Delicious: Eat My Words (In Other Words) (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 29. All future quotes follow the text and pagination of this edition.

⁷Steve Katz, Moving Parts (New York: Fiction Collective, 1977). Each story is numbered separately, so that each of the five fictions begins on page one. The passage cited here is from "Trip," p. 62.

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