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Brenda Wineapple

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Robert Coover's Playing Fields · Brenda Wineapple

ROBERT COOVER'S fictions demonstrate how diverse perceptions combine and recombine to create meaning. His work, from the early *Origin of the Brunists* (1966) to the recent *The Public Burning* (1977), does not employ language to refer to a fixed set of meaning behind which lies a central, unifying order. Rather, his fictions suggest that meaning resides everywhere and nowhere. It can be located only by a fiction—perhaps the reader's, perhaps the narrator's—constructed in language. Of course, even there, new meanings accrue as we sally into the world of the imagination, a world where interpretation mounts on interpretation and perceptions can constantly shift.

Coover plays with the many possibilities and alternatives contained within language and narrative structures. At the same time, fictions which open a labyrinth of meanings do not therefore imply an absence of ethical strategy or even moral vision. The world of experience exists despite our fictions, and it is a world to which we must always return, even if it is fundamentally incomprehensible. Yet, the imagination gives us our sense of the world, and Coover enjoins us to become aware of the various relationships and perspectives in constant need of reformulation. To live, we choose whatever fictions best sort out our perceptions and sensations. Yet, we often and conveniently forget that our point of view, itself fictional, implies an element of choice. In our forgetfulness, we allow our fictions to overtake our lives:

... We are all creating fictions all the time, out of necessity. We constantly test them against the experience of life. Some continue to be functional; we are content to let them be rather than try to analyze them and, in the process, forget something else that is even more important. Others outlive their usefulness. They disturb life in some unnecessary way, and so it becomes necessary to break them up and perhaps change their force.¹

Coover intends, therefore, to "tell good stories . . . and tell them well" while combating "adolescent thought modes and exhausted art forms . . ." ² He invokes various forms and genres—the fairy tale in "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," the romance in "The Magic Poker," existential drama in "In a Train Station"—to reconstitute their structure. Like Henry Waugh's baseball game in *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), Coover's fictions begin with the acceptance of an embedded structure, even if this structure contains the very assumptions he seeks to challenge.

Thus, the mind engages in a process of discovery to find itself, its fictions, and its limits. The narrators in *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969) seek to illuminate reality, not transcend or change it. Reality itself implies change. Therefore, many of these stories begin with a predetermined structure—a situation, a pair of symbols (a thin man and a fat lady), a perspective—and explore the latent dimensions of that structure. The aesthetic design is neither static nor transcendent. "But can the end be in the middle? Yes, yes, it always is . . ."

(*P & D*, 33)

Storytelling, then, does not lead to a confrontation with any fixed or singular point of view, and it provides no “message.” Rather, it opens the door, to use Coover’s metaphor, onto a horizon of possibilities. He therefore charges his stories, in *Pricksongs & Descants* to

probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history. But these probes are above all . . . challenges to the assumptions of a dying age, exemplary adventures of the Poetic Imagination, high-minded journeys toward the New World and never mind that the nag’s a pile of bones.

(*P & D*, 78)

Probing beyond appearances or beyond mere history does not necessarily deny the impact of history or appearance on our experience. The brute facts of existence—notably death—force us to recognize limits. Thus, the creative freedom of apprehension operates within the “confines of cosmic or human necessity” (*P & D*, 78). When Granny, the aged Beauty who married the Beast in “The Door: A Prologue of Sorts,” declares that her beast never became a prince and that she loves him, all legends aside, anyway, she asserts with Coover that in fiction and in spite of it, beasts remain beasts and death remains death. Notwithstanding that love, laughter, and the imagination remain.

Therefore, Coover’s world neither ignores monsters, on the one hand, nor mystifies them, on the other. The knight in “The Magic Poker” declares that “there *are* no disenchantments, merely progressions and styles of possession. To exist is to be spellbound” (*P & D*, 30); Paul, in “A Pedestrian Accident,” must confront the inexplicability of his coming death. Yet, despite death, the unknown, uncertainty, and the inexplicability of other people, the imagination can create with those limits of cosmic or human necessity.

The combination of imaginative life and mortality makes us recognize that we are all born “hopelessly sentient creatures into the inexplicable emptiness, giving carelessly of . . . bellies, teats, and strength, then sinking away into addled uselessness, humming the old songs, the old lies, and smiling toothless infuriating smiles” (*P & D*, 14-15). Yet, these very songs, lies, and smiles give life another dimension—the dynamism of imagined possibilities. For Coover, then, the creative consciousness co-exists with blindness and emptiness. The imagination does not transcend the facts of existence—Wilbur Klee, in “Klee Dead,” will remain dead in spite of his effort—but can enrich modes of perception and aid in coming to terms with mortality.

In this same sketch, the narrator notes that

. . . we seem impulsively driven to laden up empty space, to plump some goddamn thing, any object, real, imagined, or otherwise, where now there might happily be nothing, a peaceful unsullied and unpeopled emptiness . . .

(*P & D*, 105)

If the self confronts a possible blank in nature and indeed in the blankness

of its own being, such a confrontation provokes creative perception. Death is final, but the imagination, in its seeking, extends the possibilities of life. Its inventions do not rescind mortality but rather discover realms of a "New World."

In "Scene for 'Winter'", one of the "The Sentient Lens" series of *Pricksongs and Descants*, for example, the narrator and reader, linked by the pronoun "we," enter an environment distinguished, at first, by the absence of sound. Yet, as the ear discovers silence, the eye discovers the complex patterns of trees, shadows, and snow in the "quavering stability of light." Light, itself in motion and yet a constant, joins perceiver and perceived. Although "we can be sure only of the surface" (*P & D*, 168-169), once we begin to move in this landscape, we create the "imperceptible violence and motion of shadow" (*P & D*, 169). We perceive the static beauty of the landscape in sounds and images; when we hear sounds, a rabbit appears. However, when we see and follow a man—a familiar face "much like someone we have seen before"—he becomes our sole focus of attention, and yet he remains fundamentally unknowable and impenetrable. The meaning of his smile and of his laugh evades us. Soon we draw away, the man becomes a memory, and we realize he is the rabbit we first observed. Again, sound—the sound of a dog eating—preoccupies us before sound recedes into silence.

The mind has contributed its own patterning—the familiar face of a man—to a scene in which beauty exists but is static. Imagination enters "the virgin planes of groundsnow" (*P & D*, 169) in which we invent ourselves in different forms. At first, and from close range, we saw a sign with the word "men" on it, but that sign referred to nothing. "The lamps are not lit: it is the bright part of the day" (*P & D*, 170); the sun, dazzling and constant, can reveal only what is not there until the imagination creates itself anew in nature.

Once the imagination begins to interact with the environment, a man does appear in imaginative fact. Significantly, that man reminds us of someone else, and memory introduces the notion of temporality. Even if that man is our fiction, our participation in time links him to us. The man grows out of the interaction between our consciousness and the world. The interaction between imagination and environment inspires a dynamism where things metamorphose, and no one thing contains more meaning than anything else for the duration of this activity. The imagination gives life to all created possibilities. Art provides the space for this transference, and although the creative consciousness plays an important role, it is not authoritative. In the end, the silence of winter remains.

Coover does not, therefore, dispense with the notion of consciousness or imagination but rather underscores need for balance. Neither narrator nor character, writer nor reader, self nor environment create independently. On the other hand, he does not go as far as the French objectivist novel, for example, or Donald Barthelme, for another example, in the reduction of the self to the level of all other surfaces. Coover's stories present the mind at work,

discovering the contiguous relations amidst a network of alternatives. In the second "Sentient Lens" sketch, "The Milkmaid of Samaniego," the narrator and reader again conjoin on a spatial landscape, and this landscape represents the field of the story. In it, we notice that

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 & D*, 175)

We bring certain expectations to the landscape, and we help shape that landscape that contains its own intractable texture. In "The Leper's Helix," the third and last sketch in "The Sentient Lens," narrator, reader, and leper interact on a desert, and the three become characters in a dance of life and death.³ Our movement differs from the leper's, it seems, but once an encounter occurs, we merge with him and prepare to continue the cyclical movement. Seeking to avoid death, we learn to embrace it.

Absorbed in our visual registrations, our meaningless mathematics, our hedonistic pleasure, in mere action and its power—how we could have wasted it all! — we had forgot what was to come at the end —had we thought only *thought*, we could have drawn two circles, or ten circles, postponed this ultimate experience, *could* have, but the choice was ours just once, our impulsive first action has become—alas!—a given, the inexorable governor of all that remains—or has the leper had us all along? did his pace allow two circles? and does it matter? for the encounter must come, mustn't it? whether after one circle, two circles, or ten.

(*P & D*, 181)

The narrator of "The Magic Poker" asks "where does this illusion come from, this sensation and 'hardness' in a blue teakettle or an iron poker, golden haunches or a green piano?" (*P & D*, 34). The story itself answers the question, for within it, inventions become "real" once imaginative projections set them in motion. Even the narrator becomes an important character in the figuring of action. He invents the scenario—"I wander the island, inventing it" (*P & D*, 20)—and yet he also becomes invented by it—"I sometimes wonder if it was not he [the caretaker's son] who invented me . . ." (*P & D*, 27). The narrator's existence depends on his invention: without the story, there would be no narrator. In this sense, language joins them, mediates between them, and allows for the possibilities of invention.

Coover writes that "great narratives remain meaningful through time as a language-medium between generations . . ." (*P & D*, 78) and that Cervantes created a "synthesis between poetic analogy and literal history (not to mention reality and illusion, sanity and madness, the erotic and the ludicrous, the visionary and the scatological) . . ." (*P & D*, 77). In both cases, fiction mediates

between two closely related realms and essentially creates a third. As the third realm, the realm of language-medium, fictions are self-contained but not abstract, fixed, or transcendent. Rather, they incorporate within them the imaginative reality of continuous process.

Furthermore, as I have suggested before, the possibilities implied by invention do not suggest a total randomness. The imagination discovers both what is and is not there, both absence and presence. The lack of any divine causation, hyperstatic ideal, or even authoritative narrator allows for repetitions, variations, and creativity within certain parameters. If at the outset of "The Magic Poker" the narrator asserts that he "impose[s] a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness," he also acknowledges that "anything can happen" (*P & D*, 20). As a result, the narrator self-consciously enters the same field of imagination where the characters and images dwell. The wrought-iron poker he places in the grass does not remain in the grass, nor does it stay an iron poker. It changes into a prince, into an instrument of destruction, into the narrator, and it even links sexual activity to writing. But, as an object, it remains more or less constant, for its magic lies in the revelation of attitudes toward it. The narrator places it in the grass and lets the story revolve around it, and the story becomes all the meanings accrued. Any attempt to single one out or the comparable attempt to isolate a specific plot line violates the complex nature of response, itself the "meaning" of the story.

As an analogy for fiction, the magic poker represents the need for imaginative life. It gives rise to our legends, our interpretations, and our plotting of reality, but it must never become static. Thus, a legend herself, the grandmother figure tells the legend of the poker. The poker contains legendary qualities, and the legend always contains alternatives within its form. Any single interpretation of it implies stasis. In this sense, Coover clearly emphasizes the destructive capacity of fictions or rituals which have lost their connection to human response. For example, the common-sensical king appearing in one episode of "The Magic Poker" points out that the prince who slays a monster to rescue a princess merely widows her. Strict adherence to the "desolation of artifact" (*P & D*, 28) and to empty forms represents but needless loss. Thus, the recurrent smashing of the green piano in this story does not suggest a wanton act of violence as much as the introduction of a less effete, controlled, and intellectualized posture in the aesthetic design. At the same time, the design remains aesthetic and does not confuse art and life. By including bathos and burlesque in it, Coover deploys the "language-medium" to create humor; laughter exposes our need for fictions as well as their potential absurdity.

Moreover, the work of art itself corresponds in "The Magic Poker" to the island, invented by the narrator and yet "taking its place in world geography" (*P & D*, 40). It is a place mediated by the world of activity—"I look on a map: yes, there's Jackfish Island" (*P & D*, 40)—in concert with the mediation of imagination—"Who invented the map? Well, I must have surely. And the Dahlbergs, too, of course, and the people who told me about them. Yes, and perhaps tomorrow I will invent Chicago and Jesus Christ and the history of

the moon" (*P & D*, 40). It is a place where the reality of the imagination runs untamed, "naked in the brambly fringe of the forest" (*P & D*, 21), and undoes the artifice of logical order. It is a place inhabited by the imagination, a place inseparable from our approach and departure. Having been there, we as reader, like the characters exploring it, inscribe part of ourselves in its landscape and recognize the inscription as a matter of choice.

Once upon a time there was an island visited by ruin and inhabited by strange woodland creatures. Some thought it had once had a caretaker who had either died or found another job elsewhere. Others said, no, there was never a caretaker, that was only a childish legend. Others believed there was indeed a caretaker and he lived there yet and was in fact responsible for the island's tragic condition. All this is neither here nor there.

(*P & D*, 41)

Another metaphor for the place of imagination—neither her nor there—appears in *The Universal Baseball Association*. Creative renewal occurs on the playing field. In this novel, Coover suggests that realms of the actual and of the imagination interpenetrate but must remain autonomous as well. For Coover, life bears on our fictions and fictions bear on our lives. The interdependence of imagination and actuality, however, assumes their separation. One realm must not be totally submerged by the other. Henry Waugh submerges himself so completely in his fiction that he not only becomes lost to life, but his invention fails him as well. We need our fictions to cope with life, and we need experience to keep our fictions vital. Coover comments that

because individual human existence is so brief, in part because each single instant of the world is so impossibly complex, we cannot accumulate all the data needed for a complete, objective statement . . . And so we fabricate; we invent constellations that permit an illusion of order to enable us to get from here to there. And we devise short cuts—ways of thinking without thinking through: code words that are in themselves a form of mythopoeia.⁴

The fictions which constitute living cannot change or deny the brevity of human existence or the incomplete nature of all knowledge. Yet, these fictions unite us in a common struggle for something more than mere survival and less than rigid absolutes.

Henry Waugh creates a game in which perfection is attainable. He creates this baseball game, played at night after work, in order to "kill time." A fifty-six year old accountant by day, Henry approaches his own aging with growing apprehension. In his game, then, he makes contact with the possibility of immortality and perfection through the incredible pitching career of the young Damon Rutherford. Damon, rookie pitcher of Henry's imagination, can achieve the perfection of absolute zero—a no-hit game.

However, Henry's game depends on chance although Henry himself has created it. The dice ultimately determine the fates of the players, and according

to Henry, "You can take history or leave it, but if you take it you have to accept certain assumptions or ground rules . . ." ⁵ Accepting these, Henry must also accept the throw of the dice which calls for Damon's death and learn that perfection itself implies death. Only plastic flowers, Henry discovers, last forever. "[P]erfection wasn't a thing, a close moment, a static fact, but *process*, yes, and the process was transformation . . ." (UBA, 212).

Thus, the baseball game signifies the life of the imagination, a life whose beginnings are obscure because they depend on ritual re-enactment, transformations, and motion. As such, art suggests an unclosed circuit:

. . . [t]he circuit wasn't closed, his or any other: there were patterns, but they were shifting and ambiguous and you had a lot of room inside them. Secondly, the game on his table was not a message, but an event: the only signs he had were his own reactions . . .

(UBA, 143)

The novel ends as preparations begin for the annual rookie initiation ceremony, which includes the ritualistic re-enactment of Damon Rutherford's death. Damon had renewed Henry's flagging enthusiasm for his game, but Damon's death brought Henry to such despair that he interfered with the rules of the game and "killed" the pitcher "responsible" for Damon's death. By the last chapter of the novel, Henry has been absorbed by his own invention. In effect, he has "killed" himself, and yet the game proceeds without him.

As Paul Trench, the player about to enact the role of Damon's "Avenger," approaches the mound, he mulls over the meaning of this Damonsday, over his own participation in it, and over the meaning of life, or the game, itself. He prepares to play the part of "history's" survivor:

Beyond each game, he sees another, and yet another, in endless and hopeless succession . . . What difference, in the terror of eternity, does it make? He stares at the sky, overwhelming in its enormity. He, Paul Trench, is utterly absorbed in it, entirely disappears, is Paul Trench no longer, is nothing at all: so why does he walk up there? Why does he swing? . . . Why is it better to win than to lose? Each day: the dread . . . He wants to quit—but what does he mean, "quit?" The game? Life? Could you separate them?

(UBA, 238)

He recounts the various attempts he has made to discover some kind of meaning, some rationale. First, he identified with Damon but when he realized that Damon's tragedy gave him morbid pleasure, he could not sustain the comparison. Then, he tried identifying with Jock Casey, Damon's "killer," but this also proved inadequate—"even here, there was something he was enjoying that seemed wrong, a creature of false pride? (UBA, 239). Barney Bancroft, one of the characters most linked to Waugh himself, merely taught Trench "the final emptiness . . . Bancroft *went* on, but gave no reasons. And wasn't that, finally, a kind of cowardice?" (UBA, 238). In fact, Bancroft's death

raises questions about Henry's own disappearance, for no one knows whether Bancroft had been murdered, had committed suicide, or whether his death

just happened. Weirdly, independently, meaninglessly. Another accident in a chain of accidents: worse even than invention. Invention . . . implies a need and need implies purpose; accident implies nothing . . .

(UBA, 224-225)

Since, however, history "can never prove a thing" (UBA, 224), one player concludes that Bancroft, in all likelihood, was shot by a poet.

Trench then faces a world devoid of any ascertainable causality or even meaning. Consequently, he can find no consoling design in society or history. Without any rationale for survival or duty, he finds little purpose in "[c]ontinuation for its own inscrutable sake . . ." (UBA, 239). Thus, Trench becomes

. . . a willing accomplice to all heresies, but ultimately a partisan of none . . .

. . . his mockery encapsulates him, cuts him off from any sense of wonder or mystery, makes life nothing more than getting by with the least pain possible, and somehow to Paul Trench, such a life seems less than human.

(UBA, 240)

Therefore, Trench considers a fundamentally idealist position, a position which he also rejects.

Casey, in his writings, has spoken of a 'rising above the rules,' an abandonment of all conceptualizations, including scorekeepers, umpires, Gods in any dress, in the heat of total mystic immersion in that essence that includes God and his equally. Of course, some say he never wrote it, it's all apocryphal . . . distorted by redactions without number, but no matter, the idea itself remains. What it leads to, though, is inaction, a terrible passivity.

(UBA, 240)

Having found no organizing principle of truth, Trench prepares to participate in the ritual, regardless. As he approaches the mound, he approaches silently—"he can find no words" (UBA, 242). Yet, the figure playing Damon, now Damon, also reflected on the meaning of Damonsday; it is he who will provide Trench with the only adequate response. He tells Trench not to be afraid.

Trench can now enter the game fully. He no longer cares about factions or identities, for no one meaning suffices. There are no sustaining or immutable and knowable truths. The self is diverse, not primal. Although they cannot provide final cause or purpose, history and society do exist. And, most important, time consists of endless beginnings, re-enactments, repetitions, and creative renewal, for time is lived and shared experience.

With Paul Trench, we are restored to life by means of our fictions, and we prepare to act together within the "game," not above it.

prepare to act together within the "game," not above it.

. . . it's all irrelevant, it doesn't even matter that he's going to die, all that counts is that he is *here*, and here's The Man and here's the boys and there's the crowd, the sun, the noise.

'It's not a trial,' says Damon, glove tucked in his armpit, hands working the new ball. Behind him, he knows, Scat Batkin, the batter, is moving toward the plate. 'It's not even the lesson. It's just what it is.' Damon holds the baseball up between them. It is hard and white and alive in the sun.

He laughs. It's beautiful, that ball. He punches Damon lightly in the ribs with his mitt. 'Hang loose,' he says, and pulling down his mask, trots back behind home plate.

(UBA, 242)

Satisfied at last, Trench moves toward home plate. Home plate is a fiction, and knowing this, the Coover character and the Coover reader can replace the mask of necessary illusion. After all, the baseball is hard and white and alive in the sun.

NOTES

1 Frank Gado, editor, *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1973), p. 152.

2 Robert Coover, *Pricksongs & Descants* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 77. All subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text under the abbreviation *P & D*.

3 See Jackson I. Cope, "Robert Coover's Fictions," *Iowa Review*, (Fall 1971), pp. 95-96.

4 Gado, p. 152.

5 Robert Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 49. All subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text under the abbreviation *UBA*.