

Robert Coover's Fictions

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"At first," once upon no time, "in an instant half-real half-remembered, the leper is at rest; then he begins his approach."¹ But no: "he has always been beginning, always approaching." The landscape is mythic, perhaps allegorical: the "sun at its zenith . . . dazzling white this figure crossing the molten red flats, his outline blurred by the savage glare" (179). A medieval *Totentanz* "He merely dances on, arms and legs outflung, . . . scratching his helix across the desert floor, . . . his steaming white helix on the burnt red plane. His robe seems not so much a robe as a . . . winding sheet! *Death!*" (180). But, no, the echo is complicated and crossed by the incursions of other echoes which are also to be denied priority. The leper moves in a crazy helix because the narrator, "we," moves us in a "precise, governed" pattern "so regulating our own velocity as to schedule his [the leper's] arrival . . . at our starting point" (180). It is a game, hunt in which the leper is only an object on the geometrical psyche of the hunted narrator. But as the physical distance closes ("Down the last arc segment we glide, closing it now . . . he is close enough now for us to see his eager smile" [181]) the narrator's cool voice becomes less objectively distanced, nervously observant of detail which he tries to dismiss: "tattered ends of his white flesh confusing themselves with . . . his fluttering robe, flake off in a scaly dust . . . translucent layers of dead scaly material, here and there hardened into shiny nodules, here and there disturbed by deep cavities. In the beds of these cavities: a dark substance, resembling blood not so much as . . . as: excrement. Well, simple illusion, blood mixed with pus and baked in the sun, that's what it is" (181). And then the voice becomes hysterical, the voice of Faustus and Everyman: "But now—oh my god!—as a mere few paces separate us, our point of origin—and end!—just visible before us, the brute reality slams through the barriers of our senses: *the encounter is now imminent!*" (181). "The leper, tongue dangling . . . whole wretched body oozing a kind of milky sweat, hurls himself into our arms, smothering us, pitching us to the red clay, his sticky cold flesh fastening to us, me, his black tongue licking my face" (182). One recalls the folk terror, the frequent legends of curse from the leper's kiss. And yet, the narrator seems to seek his destiny even after he has recognized its inevitability and its horror: "Our hands, *my* hands, appear before us . . . extended now for the embrace" (181); "I lie helpless under the sickening weight of his perishing flesh. Then, in the same instant, it is over. Purged of all revulsions . . . we lay him gently on the red

¹ *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York, 1969).

earth, dry his final ecstatic tears" (182). The objectivity and the horror have both been displaced by an unexpected loosing of resignation, charity, recognition and acceptance, St. Francis turning back to give the leper a kiss, or Edward the Confessor bearing the leper upon his back.² And we are within that other tradition of the leper, that of St. Julien L'Hospitalier, the oedipal hunter who came to Flaubert perhaps from Voragine and Langlois and the cathedral window in Rouen, or perhaps only from Lecointre-Dupont's modernisation of an old manuscript;³ so many possibilities because so ubiquitous a legend. The hunter hunted: the noble youth with a blood lust upon whom the great black stag, last of the slaughtered, impresses the curse of parricide; fleeing this curse he fulfills it; doing penance he is himself hunted down by the hideous leper for whom no service is sufficient, no embrace close enough until Julien has given his entire body and the pariah Christ calls Julien to salvation. But if Flaubert's saint and divine leper seem imposed upon the dance of death, upon the leper's curse in a legendary palimpsest, the last phrases of the narrator invert the relationships, invert the assumptions we have had about the pronoun "we" he has used throughout, and seem to fuse him now with the leper rather than ourselves, to force us into his own position by suddenly separating us from it: "We leave him lie and sit beside to wait. Under the desert sun. We wait, as he waited for us, for you. Desperate in need, yet with terror. What terrible game will *you* play with *us*? me" (182).

The desert setting under the noon-day sun (that detail itself sufficient to activate a tradition of daemons and temptation), the leper writhing, offer us an allegorical figure in an allegorical landscape. Yet neither sustain themselves in spite of their richness. The leper is neither Christ nor curse nor defined; the desert is not a place of isolation, dessication, but that place where leper and narrator are united in an apparent covenant of self-recognition. And where *we* will come to them. In the end, each man is Death, each the leper, in that he chooses death: "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 is this the illusion: "has the leper had us all along? did his pace allow two circles? and does it matter?" (181). No, the choice is all one, like the agent of that choice, as the narrator makes clear when he embraces the leper, replaces the leper, to await our replacement in and through him. The narrative "we" is only an apparent shift from one polarity of alliance with the narrator to the other: "We" are three persons in one.

What has happened to the palimpsest of sources, the aborted allegories is that the internal structure of the story has raised its several layers to the light, then absorbed them into a reinterpretation. But the reinterpretation is not that of myths modernised; beginning to sense how it could be created, Coover does not emulate the syncretism of *Finnegans Wake*, but mocks it. The internal structure of "The

² Anthony Weymouth, *Through the Leper—Squint* (London, n.d.), pp. 119-121.

³ A. W. Raitt, "The Composition of Flaubert's *Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*," 19 (1965), 358-372.

Leper's Helix," it will have become apparent, is movement, movement plotted by the rules of a solid geometry upon a surface which is ephemeral time and space: "he has always been beginning, always approaching, it was the glare, just the glare caused the illusion" (179). This movement itself replaces and becomes the allegory of the union of life and death through choice, the dance of death given a new dimension of psychic rather than externalised necessity.

But the geometric movement itself, once recognised as allegory, invokes another analogue which allows us to think of the problem in a new dimension again, as the irrationality of rationality, the self-invalidating of orders, yet the inevitability of pattern.

"The Leper's Helix" appears in *Pricksongs and Descants*, Coover's collection of works which he labels "Fictions." Within these fictions are included "Seven Exemplary Fictions" with a prologue dedicated to Cervantes. This prologue is a statement of aesthetic to which one must return, but for the moment let us merely observe that Cervantes' model was titled "novelas ejemplares," and that "ficciones" is a word appropriated and reshaped to cover his particular mode of cerebral imagining by Jorge Luis Borges. The impact of Borges upon Coover has probably been of major importance: they share an unremitting interest in the loss of self through the act of imaginative projection, and in the attempts to reconstruct (perhaps to recover) that self in the teasingly predictable forms of number and measure. Let us set the inner and outer, spatial and temporal, geometry of "The Leper's Helix" against that of Borges' "Death and the Compass" ("La muerte y la brújula").⁴

Written in appropriately melodramatic style it is a detective story. The first murder victim is a delegate to a Talmudic Congress who has written a shelf of books on Jewish mysticism, hermetic numerology and names. The detective Lönnrot, noting the statement "*The first letter of the Name has been uttered*" on a scrap at the scene of the crime, takes away the victim's hermetic writings to study for a solution. A second and third crime occur at intervals of just one month apart; at each scene, in some form, harlequin costumes, paint swathes, diamonds of color appear ("yellow, red and green diamonds"). The second letter is uttered, then the "last" letter. As though to confirm the close of sequence, the police receive a map of the city marking the points of the three murders as precisely equidistant, forming "the perfect vertices of a mystic equilateral triangle." The hermetic sacrificial murders have been completed. But Lönnrot remembers the inevitable diamonds at each crime, knows that the Tetragrammaton is made up of four letters, JHVH (Jehovah, Yawah), and so refuses to be thrown off, seeking out the equidistant fourth point which will complete the diamond, seeking it on the fourth day of the fourth month, and finding it at the deserted villa Triste-le-Roy. As he travels toward the lonely tryst with death he smiles at the thought that his arch-enemy, the vengeance-seeking gunman Red Scharlach, would give a great deal to know he was in such an exposed spot; then "Lönnrot considered the remote possibility that the fourth victim might be Scharlach himself. Then he rejected the idea . . . mere circumstances, reality, names . . .

⁴ *Labyrinths* ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Ioby (New York, 1964), pp. 76-87.

hardly interested him now." But names interest the reader a great deal, here reminded that the Teutonic surnames both mean "red,"⁵ that detective and criminal, hunter and hunted, here, as in "The Leper's Helix," are doubles, merged and opposed selves.

Finding the villa, Lönnrot circles it, returns to his starting point, pushes open the gate and finds the house "abounded in pointless symmetries and in maniacal repetitions . . . one balcony was reflected in another balcony; double stairways led to double balustrades. A two-faced Hermes projected a monstrous shadow. . . . He ascended . . . to circular antechambers. . . . By way of a spiral staircase he arrived at the oriel. The early evening moon shone through the diamonds of the window; they were yellow, red and green. An astonishing, dizzying recollection struck him." At the moment of realisation he is seized by Scharlach's men. The terms of his equation reverse: the last point of the mystic square which will reveal the secret names becomes the original point (even as Coover's narrator has scheduled the leper's arrival "at our starting point").

Scharlach explains that the villa was where he lay in agonised hiding with a gunshot wound suffered in a raid led by Lönnrot; he lay swearing vengeance "Nine days and nine nights"—a mystic number that might remind us that Satan and his metamorphosed angels fell "nine times the space that measures day and night," that might remind us that Lönnrot is always seen in those nebulous dividing points, dawn and twilight. But a number, too, that reminds us that the three murders were reported as occurring on the third day of each month, but really occurred on the fourth, as Lönnrot learns when he reads: "*Dies Judacorum incipit ad solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis*. 'This means,' he added, 'The Hebrew day begins at sundown and lasts until the following sundown.'" A number that may remind us, too, that the closed triangle was a false solution which awaited the fulfillment of the fourth point. The numbers equivocate, the paradoxically rational symmetries which the detective has built (paradoxical because built upon mystic symbols) tumble upon impact with what he had scorned as "mere circumstances, reality." The first murder was an accident, the wrong man killed in a robbery. When Scharlach learned that Lönnrot was attempting to solve the crime by studying the victim's Hebraic books, he purchased a *History of the Hasidic Sect* and learned the mysteries which he projected into the second and third murders with the knowledge that Lönnrot would discern the necessity of a symmetry built upon patterns of quadruplicity rather than triplicity and so arrive where Scharlach awaited him: "at our starting point." Irrationality, accident are plotted into a mocking paradigm of death, the apparent last point of the "perfect rhomb" is discovered to be in reality the starting point. Or is this so: do not the points exchange position once more to lift a corner of the veil which might conceal a yet more complex order to the events? If the meaningful triples can prove to have been used with duplicity, cannot the quadruplicity itself carry a double message? If the first murder in the Hôtel du Nord (Hôtel du Nord,

⁵ M. Tamayo y Ruiz-Díaz, *Borges, enigma y clave* (Buenos Aires, 1955), pp. 39ff. cited in Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin, 1969), pp. 90-1.

Triste-le-Roy: always these symbolic names so teasing and indefinite) was a mistake made not even by Scharlach but a lackey in a jewel robbery, why did it occur precisely upon a north-south line with the villa where Scharlach had lain three years before? If there was no real order but that of Lönnrot's obsession with complex rational hypothesis, what is the strange portent in the observation that Lönnrot's searching for the name of the murderer in the names of God led "One of those enterprising shopkeepers who have discovered that any given man is resigned to buying any given book" to publish the history of Hasidism from which Scharlach devised his scheme of murder? If Scharlach and Lönnrot are doubles by name, if they exchange roles at that daemonic point of completion of the Tetragrammaton, perhaps their name is one of the names of God,⁶ each Alpha and Omega, another strange trinity whose movements, like those of the leper, narrator and reader in Coover's fiction, allegorises and enacts the interplay in which life and death are united, without desire, with horror, but by choice:

Scharlach [said Lönnrot], when in some other incarnation you hunt me, pretend to commit (or do commit) a crime at A, then a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B . . . Wait for me afterwards at D, two kilometers from A and C, again halfway from both. Kill me at D, as you are now going to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," replied Scharlach, "I promise you that labyrinth, consisting of a single line which is invisible and unceasing."

"Invisible" because like all geometry, it is psychic; "unceasing" because like all psyches it is eternal by self-definition. At D the red twins will meet at the penultimate point of return to A, the "starting point," in a version of that Zenonian paradox of the endless hunt, race, game which so fascinates Borges, which so movingly images an eternal unfulfillment;⁷ point A, Alpha, without Omega, just D, death, another beginning.

I have deflected attention to Borges to make three points. The first, to illustrate the importance of Borges' mode of fiction for the younger, hispanically-oriented American; the second, to show how, in adapting that influence (acknowledged implicitly in the generic label "fictions") Coover does not attempt to imitate it directly, but absorbs its allegorical method, as he absorbs all of his sources, starting-points, into a refiguration which permits the layers to show through just sufficiently to justify the description "palimpsest" for the relationship. Finally, to show that both of the brief fictions which I have described reveal three overlapping senses of the form of experience which persistently ("The Leper's Helix" is one of the earliest works) shape Robert Coover's otherwise varied canon. These forms are game, number (in the sense suggested by the Valeryan epigraph to *Pricksongs* which reads: "They therefore set me this prob-

⁶ Captured, Lönnrot asks: "Scharlach, are you looking for the Secret Name? . . . Lönnrot noted in his voice a fatigued triumph, a hatred the size of the universe, a sadness not less than that hatred. 'No,' said Scharlach. 'I am seeking something more ephemeral and perishable. I am seeking Erik Lönnrot.'"

⁷ "Avatars of the Tortoise" in *Labyrinths*, pp. 202-8.

lem of the equality of appearance and numbers”), and perpetual, repetitive rituals which both destroy and define the self.

We gain some sense of the appropriateness of these three metaphors of experience when we turn to the explicit aesthetic comments Coover makes in the dedicatory prologue to Cervantes mentioned earlier. Cervantes “struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life,” against “exhausted art forms,” and brought forth the novel. The exhausted art form was the Romance which focused on “Eternal Value and Beauty” while the novel turned to character, to exemplary histories of men. But Cervantes’ society was opening out to discover man: “it could no longer be described by magic numbers or be contained in a compact and marvelous design.” Now, Coover finds that we too “seem to be standing at the end of one age and on the threshold of another.” Ours, however, is the opposite of Cervantes’ new age; a return, rather, into that mystic night from which Cervantes was emerging: “We seem to have moved from an open-ended, anthropocentric, humanistic, naturalistic, even—to the extent that man may be thought of as making it his own universe—optimistic starting point, to one that is closed, cosmic, eternal, supernatural (in its soberest sense), and pessimistic.” Cervantes’ revolution in the focus of fiction “governs us—not unlike the way you found yourself abused by the conventions of the Romance.” But if our world has changed, the artist in the *spirit* of Cervantes must reject the authority of his revolution: must use “familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms, and to conduct the reader . . . to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation.” Or, as “*don Roberto S.*” puts it, fiction “must provide us with an imaginative experience which is necessary to our imaginative well-being.” Don Roberto S. is Robert Scholes, a former colleague of Coover’s at The University of Iowa, and the statement is from Scholes’ *The Fabulators*, a study of contemporary fiction which reinforces and helps to clarify Coover’s own aims. In an opening chapter on “the Revival of Romance,” from which Coover is quoting, Scholes comments, apropos of Durrell, that “The tradition he finds thin and constricting is the very one started by Cervantes—the tradition which begins as anti-romance and gradually insists on more and more scientific treatment of life. . . . Zola tried to answer the question, ‘What good is fiction *as science?*’ and worked himself into the absurd corner of the ‘experimental’ novel, a notion he seems to have had the good sense not to believe but merely to use as journalistic puffery for his own productions, much as his heirs are now crying ‘phenomenological’ novel for similar reasons.”⁸ If our world has changed, our fiction must, and Scholes’ casual comment on the old-fashioned quality of phenomenological fiction should be coupled with his distinction of “fabulators” as a useful gloss upon Coover’s description of his own techniques and the vision they are designed to reveal. Fabulation “reveals an extraordinary delight in design. With its wheels within wheels, rhythms and counterpoints, . . . modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy.”⁹ “The return to Being,” says Coover, “has

⁸ *The Fabulators* (New York, 1967), pp. 19, 29. Coover cites from p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

returned us to Design, to microcosmic images of the macrocosm, to the creation of Beauty within the confines of cosmic or human necessity [and one may notice the telescoping of these two terms which is enacted in "The Leper's Helix" and re-enacted in the Universe of J. Henry Waugh], to the use of the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history."

This, then is the credo, these some of the backgrounds, which can help us to properly perceive Coover's masterpiece, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968). And to properly perceive it is to perceive it as formally and thematically the anti-phenomenological novel.

J. Henry Waugh, a fifty-six year old petty bachelor accountant has invented a baseball game played with dice and charts. The novel is an account of his relationship to this familiar double metonymy, a game substituted for a game. He is a genius at games, a mathematical genius who once invented "Intermonop," "a variation on Monopoly, using twelve, sixteen, or twenty-four boards at once and an unlimited number of players, which opened up the possibility of wars run by industrial giants with investments on several boards at once . . . strikes and rebellions by the slumdweller between 'Go' and 'Jail'" (44). But his game-playing originated in and ultimately returned to baseball. For a short time in his life he had gone to the ballpark: "The first game I saw . . . the league's best pitcher that year threw a three-hit shutout. His own team got only four hits, but three were in one inning, and they won, 2-0. Fantastic game. And I nearly fell asleep. . . . at home I would pick up my scoreboard. Suddenly, what was dead had life, what was wearisome became stirring, . . . unbelievably real . . . I found out the scorecards were enough. I didn't need the games" (166). This "reality" is "the records, the statistics, the peculiar balances between individual and team . . . no other activity in the world had so precise and comprehensive a history" (49). And, as Henry remarks to his one friend, Lou Engel, "History. Amazing, how we love it. And . . . without numbers or measurements, there probably wouldn't be any history" (49). "Reality" is defined, rationalised, indeed, created by a history which is number. And in its "game" aspect, the superimposition of numerical limit by rule, reality is controlled by number. An accountant is the precisely correct metaphor for a platonic God who made the world by weight and measure.

But number has another side, mysterious, a pattern beyond the pattern, a will to its own symmetries for which there is no rational accounting. As one player in the Association says, "Numerology. Lot of revealing work in that field lately" (219). And Henry marvels at length about the unconscious but compelling patterns which make it impossible to alter the structure of his league: "seven—the number of opponents each team now had—was central to baseball. Of course, nine, as the square of three, was also important: nine innings, nine players, three strikes each for three batters . . . seven fielders, three in the outfield and four in the infield, seven pitches, three strikes and four balls . . . four bases" (206).¹⁰

¹⁰ Coover's first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) is a complicated exercise in inducing the reader to try to unravel an ultimately misleading complex of numerical signals and portents in mimesis of the numerological madness of the mystic

This doubleness of number is reflected in baseball's own doubleness. If it epitomises statistical balance and comprehensive history, the ultimate rationality of codification, baseball paradoxically "at the same time" involves, as Henry says, "so much ultimate mystery" (45). It was this something discernible yet inscrutable, which Henry felt when he was attending ball parks: "I felt like I was part of something there, you know, like in church, except it was more *real* than any church . . . for a while I even had the funny idea that ball stadiums and not European churches were the real American holy places. Formulas for energy configurations where city boys came to see their country origins dramatized, some old lost fabric of unity" (166).

The double realisation of baseball as game and as mystery rite lies behind a remark by Henry which lies behind the complicated allegories which begin with the unforgivable puns in the novel's title, concluding that the "prop" of the universe is JHW: "Everywhere he looked he saw names. His head was full of them. Bus stop. Whistlestop. Whistlestop Busby, second base . . . Henry was always careful about names, for they were what gave the league its sense of fulfilment . . . the dice and charts . . . were only the mechanics of the drama, not the drama itself." Like Adam, like his own prototype Jehovah, he knows that "the basic stuff is already there. In the name. Or rather: in the naming" (46-48).

Let us look at the names, then, in the several "eras" of the novel, the "realities" which mediate, repeat, absorb one another. First, there is what can be labelled the "continuous era," in which J. Henry Waugh is an accountant. "Continuous," because in it Henry's employer is the German Zifferblatt (clock-dial), the personification of *Ziffer* (number) and its application to time. In this era Henry watches Zifferblatt and his clock, hastens out early, arrives late. He has lost all interest in his job, makes accounting blunders with ledger entries (which terrify him only because he might tragically miscalculate something in the annals of his baseball game), and plays a self-invented horserace game surreptitiously at his desk. He talks to himself, drinks far into the night, rushes home to the baseball game on his kitchen table, and generally worries his fat, shy fellow-accountant Lou Engel, whom, in this Germanic context, one must presumably translate "Lucifer Angel." When he leaves the universe on his kitchen table, it is to abandon pastrami and beer and the labor of the game for brandy at Pete's Bar (where Pete has been renamed Jake because Henry recognised in him Jake Bradley, retired second baseman of the Pastimers [(8)]). Here he has a hearty friendship with a saggily aging B-girl, Hettie Irden—presumably Gea-Tellus, the earth-mother (she's *everybody's* type" [169]). Once Henry brings the celibate Lou to Pete's and offers to fix him up with Hettie, but in the end himself takes her home. Once also he makes the great decision to share his secret game with Lou, but the latter's misunderstanding of the spirit of probability and reality, plus his spastic clumsiness, almost wrecks the Association, and Henry drives him out of his life and restores order—but only at the point where he must institute ritual in place of game. In

sectarians within the book; in *Pricksongs and Descants* the Pauline victim of "A Pedestrian Accident" spends much of his dying hours working at the false puzzle of K 11 seen on a partially concealed truck which has struck him down, and the protagonist of "The Elevator" is obsessed by versions of meaning on the fourteenth floor.

this era it seems clear that Jehovah offers participation to Lucifer, wrests from him the woman in the duel for the earth, repairs the ruins of his universe inflicted by Satan (by the sacrificial death of a player preposterously named to combine the baseball and fertility and Christian myths, Jock Casey).

But in this era, too, the allegory presses least upon our attention, its obviousness buried in the comic actions and reactions of J. Henry Waugh, picaresque accountant. Let us remember truisms for a moment to explain and place the function of the comic absurd in *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*¹¹

‘What terrible game will you play with us?’ asks the narrator at the close of “The Leper’s Helix.” But he has surely learned in the brief but total revisions of his role that game is the opposite of play. Game implies an “end,” a victory sought as the result of obeyed formulae with all of the statistics which Henry leans upon, the prop’s props. Play is endless because pointless, mimesis of or escape from the unpredictable openness of casualty. Plays are defined formally as unexpectedness: the *peripeteia*, the untangling of comic and tragic patterns is, however often repeated, a recipe for the unpredictable, unexpected, incalculable. There are no statistics for drama or child’s play. Play denies the otherness even of that which it may mimic: there are no body-counts at cowboys and indians, no sickness in playing doctor, no funeral or finality at the end of *Lear*. We are gamesters and game, hunters and hunted, and as such we are deprived of that make-believe trying on of selves, masks, new starts which constitute the freedom of play. Even our freedom to make up the rules of the game turns into another measure of containment. These are the polarities between which Coover’s creatures struggle toward definition or—that favorite word—fulfilment.¹²

When he goes to Pete’s (Jake’s—old “Pastimer” he) Bar to relax from his game or to celebrate its triumphs, Henry is playful. He has imposed not only upon Pete but upon Hettie and himself the names and and images of his game. But he goes there as a “player” in every sense. And the players, unlike the statistics, the game, are names. Adopting the name of his favorite, an improbably successful rookie pitcher, letting that projected personality reproject into his own, Henry the aging recluse has a lavishly successful night of sexual play with Hettie.

“The greatest pitcher in the history of baseball,” he whispered.

‘Call me Damon.’

‘Damon,’ she whispered, unbuckling his pants, unzipping his fly

¹¹ New York, 1968.

¹² Coover’s “The Cat in the Hat for President,” *New American Review* #4 (1968), 7-45 is a cultural fantasy using as vehicle politics invaded by Dr. Seuss’s character, a combination of the cosmic politics of *The Universal Baseball Association* and the reworkings of *Märchen* in several fictions in *Pricksongs and Descants*. In this fiction the opposition between game and play becomes paradigmatic. The campaign-manager narrator accepts “the idea that life is a game,” that “Politics in a republic is a complex pattern of vectors,” but also recognises that his own limitation is “a limited sense of humor” (p. 11). The Cat is nominated in a spirit of play, carries on its irreverent, un-American campaign, and when America turns on it and murders it in a cannibalistic righteousness which becomes a rite, the Cat’s spirit enters a whole culture to free it to play.

'Play ball!' cried the umpire. And the catcher, stripped of mask and guard, revealed as the pitcher Damon Rutherford, whipped the uniform off the first lady ballplayer in Association history . . . then, . . . they . . . pounded into first, slid into second heels high, somersaulted over third, shot home standing up, then into the box once more, . . . and 'Damon!' she cried, and 'Damon!'" (29).

Nothing could seem more mediated, and yet this is one of two unmediated moments in the novel. Coover here permits the Germanic allegory of the continuous (and comic) era, to accept and to absorb into its sex play the metonymic baseball metaphor of the game. "Irden," Gea-Tellus, "had invented her own magic version, stretching out as the field, left hand as first base" (206). When Hettie and Henry play ball it is to accept the metaphor of baseball, that merely "mythic or historical form" which Coover's *Prólogo* said literature must simultaneously build upon and transcend. Learning Henry's mythic game vocabulary, she absorbs its geometrical limits into the unlimited world of play, offers him the recognition that the magic in names, words is their limitless possibilities (wasn't he, after all, the one who "Everywhere he looked . . . saw names"?) for freedom from any source they may have had: "I got it, Henry, I got it! come on! come on! keep it up! Behind his butt she clapped her cold soles to cheer him on. . . . And here he comes . . . he's bolting for home, spurting past, sliding in-*POW!* . . . Oh, that's a game, Henry! *That's* really a *great* old game!" (34-5).

But the allegory turns upon its source. On the night before introducing Lou to his Association, Henry has his second bout with Hettie, this time in the role of another player, Damon's rival, the veteran pitcher Swanee Law. As they leave the bar to go home, he thinks, "Earthy. . . . Won't be the same, he realized. No magic" (170). And the following morning he is edging dangerously close to a fatal, Quijote-like awakening:

Not once, in the Universal Baseball Association's fifty-six long seasons of play, had its proprietor plunged so close to self-disgust, felt so much like giving it up, . . . an old man playing with a child's toy; he felt somehow like an adolescent caught masturbating (171).

With this mood upon Henry, Hettie discovers the imaginary nature of his enterprise, and it is with total silence that he rejects her humane understanding as she tries to reassure him of her affection. "Suddenly, astonishing, she bursts into tears. 'Ah, go to hell, you loony bastard!' . . . He heard her heels smacking down the wooden stairs and . . . out into the world" (175). That same night Lou Engel physically and psychically all but destroys the Association, and Henry sends him out of his haven into hell with the appropriate curse: "*you clumsy goddamn idiot!*" Lou's last communication is a call from the office to inform Henry of his dismissal by Zifferblatt, a call highlighted by the final anguished and outraged cry of Zifferblatt which sums up his, ours and Henry's own attitude toward the strange conduct of J. Henry Waugh: "(WHAT THE HELL DOES THIS MEAN-!!)" (210). And, finally, on this same tragic day the dice decree the death of the veteran Jake Bradley, Pete's player counterpart, so that Pete's Bar, too, must be given up forever.

Without the spirit of unmediated play which was only once possible in that magic night game between Hettie and Henry-cum-Damon, the old Pastimer's paradisaical bar has no further function. All is gone, all lost now.

In the original days of the Association there began a breakdown into two political parties interested in capturing the chancellorship of the Association elections held every four years. One was the Bogglers, individualists led by the original chancellor Barnaby North. The other was the Legalists, the party of Swanee Law, the star pitcher whom Damon Rutherford was about to transcend at his tragic death. Play is over, as Henry looks upon play, upon playing with oneself, as disgusting. J. Henry Waugh has joined the Legalists, as his assumption of Law's *persona* for his love games told us. He is an angry God of the Old Testament whose pyrrhic victory now reverses the apparent reading of the German allegory. Hettie goes, like Eve, exiled out into the world of time; the world in which Lou the clumsy angel works for old clock-face, Zifferblatt. And with Lou's call Jehovah is exiled from that world, our world, into the solipsism imaged by his masturbation simile. Hettie's parting words ring prophetic: "Ah, go to hell, you loony bastard!" He did, by staying home. This is the novel's first version of, to borrow a phrase, the disappearance of God.

But with the world in shambles it does not end. And here begins the second and more complicated era of allegories: the era in which J. Henry Waugh is Proprietor of and in closest touch with the Universal Baseball Association. It is the "new Rutherford era" (31), exciting and yet somehow melancholy. "Maybe it was only because this was Year LVI: he and the Association were the same age, though, of course, their 'years' were reckoned differently. He saw two time lines crossing in space at a point marked '56.' Was it the vital moment?" (50). Numbers are having their mystic way again, to remind us that there are within Henry's Association the double aspect of rationalised history and of "ultimate mystery" which Henry found in baseball itself, mysteries ultimately hidden even from the Proprietor.

Let us recall the history of the Association. Under Barnaby North's Chancellorship the first truly great crop of rookies came up in XIX, the greatest being the Pioneers' pitcher Brock Rutherford; indeed, the glorious XX's became known as "the Brock Rutherford era" (22). Now Brock, also fifty-six years old in Year LVI has sired a second son (an earlier one only partially successful) Damon, the magic pitcher who might transcend the father, who pitches a perfect game, who overshadows veteran ace Swanee Law. But as Damon is pitching, on the Extraordinary Occurrences Chart a three-dice throw shows 1-1-1: "Batter struck fatally by beanball." The pitcher, innocent of intent, was the Knickerbockers' Jock Casey. Brock's former team-mate Barney Bancroft, now manager of the Pioneers, and so of the fated Damon, carries on the season; so does J. Henry Waugh. When Lou Engel is permitted to become the only other ever to share in Henry's game, it is at a point in the season when Jock Casey is once again to pitch against the Pioneers. Lou plays to win, and he wins against all logic, all averages, wildly. Henry has been playing the season through since Damon's death without keeping records, throwing and throwing the dice. He has lost imaginative contact with his players (but this is the first instance in which the contact is lost not by Henry's dis-

engagement, but by that of his creatures): “it was strangely as though they were running from him, afraid of his plan, seeing it for what it was: the stupid mania of a sentimental old fool” (176). The “plan” becomes clear when Lou’s rolls of the dice suddenly bring Jock Casey the killer into jeopardy upon the Extraordinary Occurrences Chart. Henry tenses in anticipation of order, throws the retributinal dice and sees “2-6-6, a lot less than he’d hoped for” (198). At this moment Lou spills beer over the Association records and is cast out. After Lou’s departure Henry stands in terror at his crossroads: “Damon Rutherford. . . . it was just a little too much, and it wrecked the whole league. . . . He smiled wryly, savoring the irony of it. Might save the game at that. How would they see it? Pretty peculiar. He trembled. . . . Now, stop and think, he cautioned himself. Do you really *want* to save it? . . . Yes, if you killed that boy out there, then you *couldn’t* quit, could you? No, that’s a real commitment, you’d be hung up for good, they wouldn’t *let* you go” (200-201). Casey stands ready to pitch: “Why waiting? Patient Enduring Casey played the game, heart and soul. Played it like nobody had ever played it before” (201). Waiting Casey stands “alone”: “Sometimes Casey glanced up at him—only a glance, split-second, pain, a pleading” (202). St. Mark reminds us that “at the ninth hour Jesus cried . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” And then the agony is over. Henry picks up the dice: “I’m sorry, boy,” he whispered, and then . . . he set them down carefully One by one. Six. Six. Six” (202). The number of the beast: pitcher killed by line drive.

One allegory cries out for attention. UBA, USA. Rutherford for Ruth, certainly, but also for rue. The Rutherfords, leaders of the Pioneers (read “New Frontier”) are special: “maybe it was just the name that had ennobled them, for in a way . . . they were . . . the association’s first real aristocrats” (12). The Kennedy myth of national renewal aborted is reflected in a series of killings following upon Henry’s assassination of Jock after the death of Damon. Barney Bancroft—latter-day echo of Barnaby North—eventually becomes Chancellor and is assassinated, bringing on a revolt of the Universalists (220). The Chancellor in Year LVI is, like Henry, a Legalist, like LBJ, a paradox: “He looked old-fashioned, but he had an abiding passion for innovation. He was the most restless activist ever to take office. . . . He was coldly calculating, yet supremely loyal to old comrades” (147). And when the season continues in an unprecedentedly gloomy and unpopular course, like Henry he must say: “And there’s not a goddamn thing I can do about it” (150). His heir and alter ego is that grand southerner, Swanee Law. Again, allegory by metonymy. We are directed to read through the layer of the accountant Jehovah the history of the USA in the 60’s, to see the sacrifice of Casey, the consequent helpless commitment of Henry and the Chancellor as Vietnam, to hear the surge of revolution rolling in from the future. Politics and war are, after all, the great American games.

But if Swanee Law, in his symbiotic relationship with the current Legalist Chancellor, focuses analogy upon LBJ, he can show us an even darker layer of the allegorical palimpsest. Nothing will come of nothing. The mystery of history is the regress of its sources, each carefully measured effect having its cause until we arrive at the Zenonian paradox inverted, infinity the ineffable first cause. “To be

good," Henry once thought, "a chess player, too, had to convert his field to the entire universe, himself the ruler of that private enclosure—though from a pawn's-eye view, of course, it wasn't an enclosure at all, but, infinitely, all there was" (156). Theologically, it is safest to assume that the first cause is the will of God; as the chess passage suggests, associationalogically it seems safe to assume that the first cause is the will of J. Henry Waugh. There it began, properly, precisely, in Year I. Or did it? Does that "beginning" only raise the question of inscrutability again, hint at another history, a mirror-corridor in which JHW is only some middle term? The question worries him: "the abrupt beginning had its disadvantages. It was, in a sense, too arbitrary, too inexplicable. In spite of the . . . warmth he felt toward those first ballplayers, it always troubled him that their life histories were so unavailable to him: what had a great player already in his thirties been doing for the previous ten years?" (45). Nothing can come of nothing. "It was, in fact, when the last Year I player had retired that Henry felt the Association had come of age, and when, a couple of years ago, the last veteran of Year I, old ex-Chancellor Barnaby North, had died, he had felt an odd sense of relief: the touch with the deep past was now purely 'historic,' its ambiguity only natural" (46).

"The basic stuff is already there. In the name." What then of the name, the, to Henry, always ambiguous nature of Barnaby North, first Chancellor and so first projection of the Proprietor himself within the Association; or, if JHW is only a middle term, perhaps the prototype of the prop himself? What this name tells us in conjunction with the rise of Swanee Law is that the Association's history has moved from North to South, a steady fall on any map. Or, in Borges' detective story which began at the Hôtel du Nord, a perfect diamond, like a baseball diamond, a return to the starting point. The major portion of Coover's novel takes place in the critical Year LVI, the "new Rutherford era" in the Association. And the allegory is obviously written over the New Testament. It confuses because Damon Rutherford is so clearly the life-bringer, Jock Casey, his killer, is so clearly the Christ. But it is obviously written over the New Testament in which Mark told of the Wise Men "saying . . . we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." And it is in this sacred geography that one can place Henry's baserunner: "Out of the east, into the north, push out to the west, then march through the south back home again; like a baserunner on the paths, alone in a hostile cosmos, the stars out there in their places, . . . he interposed himself heroically to defy the holy condition . . . not knowing his defiance was merely a part of it" (141).

The sun rises in the east; as runner he moves at once toward the north. Lucifer, too, who said in his heart, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God (Swanee Law is a star, Damon only a Rookie): I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north . . . I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14). Is *he*, Barnaby North, original or image of the creator of the Universal Baseball Association? Or neither? Is he the founder because (infinite inscrutability of beginnings, or, mystery which denies beginnings) he is not the father but the son (remembering that, should this be so, the paradox is enacted twice over, Barney Bancroft the Pioneer manager and future Chancellor being his

namesake, whose assassination set off the revolution). So he seems when we recall from the *Acts of the Apostles* "Barnabas (which is being interpreted, The son of consolation)" [4:36].

Scripture speaks parables against the South (Ezekial: 20:45-49), as does American politics, but we must return to the basic metaphors. Like JHW, the southerner is Law—the law of averages,¹³ the opposite of Damon Rutherford who breaks them. "Law knew what he had going for himself: whenever sportswriters interviewed him, they were shown large charts he kept tacked to his wall, indicating his own game-by-game progress ['Pappy'] Rooney [his manager] had to laugh at Law's prostrating himself before the dirty feet of history" (145). Swanee Law the Legalist set against Barney Bancroft and his prototype, Barnaby North, founder of the opposed free party. The rationalisation of history, number, the averages are where Henry, Jehovah, where the Association seem to be going, and we remember that it was Swanee who replaced Damon so tragically in Hettie's favors. But there is a counter-current within the Association as there is within J. Henry Waugh. Damon Rutherford the son is dead, but Barney Bancroft, manager, elder, father-figure to Damon but nominally son to Barnaby North, the child (and yet the mysterious elder) of J. Henry Waugh knows the limits of Henry's and Swanee Law's history. "Bancroft, the rationalist, disbelieved in reason. It was the beast's son, after all, not the father, and if it had a way of sometimes getting out of hand, there were always limits Re: back again, the primitive condition, the nonreflective operating thing: res. His son" (95).

When Damon was struck down, "The Proprietor of the Universal Baseball Association . . . brought utterly to grief, buried his face in the heap of papers on his kitchen table and cried for a long bad time" (76). Well he might, victim of his own laws: "Even though he'd set his own rules, . . . and though he could change whenever he wished, nevertheless he and his players were committed to the turns of the mindless and unpredictable—one might even say, irresponsible—dice" (40). When Damon's fate is rolled the players press around him crying "Do something! But do what? The dice were rolled" (73). And yet, after this time of weeping Henry goes out into the accountant's world, and carries into it his sense of deity: "Feeling sour. Undiscoverable sun at four o'clock in the hazy sky. But a kind of glow in the streets, mocking him. Later, he'd have it rain" (77). God has not disappeared. He is a loony bastard, who thinks he controls the universe. But he has become mad because he has become a Legalist, lost contact with Barney Bancroft's, Barnaby North's boggling world, forgotten the paradox that he once had been able to apply to chess: "Henry enjoyed chess, but found it finally too Euclidean, too militant, ultimately irrational." Chess is game without the magic, without play; he found it "in spite of its precision, formless really—nameless motion" (156).

Names not numbers are the drama, that which defies the predestinarian, "irre-

¹³ Swanee is verbally paralleled to Henry at the appropriate point. "Power and control. In and out. The old eagle, Swanee Law, just reared back and burned them in" (144). After the death of the sexually magic Damon, when Henry, as Swanee, prepares for his second sex bout with Hettie, "Won't be the same, he realized. No magic. . . . In and out, high and low. Just rear back and burn it in" (170).

sponsible" dice to turn formulaic number into mythic formulae. That is what happened to The Universal Baseball Association when JHW *did* something about it and tipped the die which killed Casey. The consequences were cosmic: he ceased to have connection with Hettie, Lou, Zifferblatt, but with his commitment he paradoxically also ceased to have conjunction with his players.

Here we must notice a principal narrative technique: after Damon's death, while Henry is gradually withdrawing himself from his accountant's world, he inversely projects himself into the players to the extent that the interior monologue of Henry, which seems the chief device of the earlier sections as he imagines activities in his Association, becomes a series of interior monologues on the part of individual players through which Henry's direct *persona* emerges less and less often until the day with Lou and Hettie when he surfaces to almost give up his universe. When young Damon is about to pitch in the fatal game succeeding his perfect performance, Henry's imagination works overtime: "'Go out and win one for the old man, son.' Who said that? Why old Brock! Yes, there he was, sitting in a special box In fact, Henry realized suddenly, *it must be Brock Rutherford Day at Pioneer Park!*" (64). That "it must be" takes on a redimensioning ambiguity analogous to the ambiguous status of Barnaby North when, observing the wake for Damon, Henry's consciousness is expressed through that of successive participants in the festivities until it emerges as that of the Chancellor: "Brock Rutherford Day has been Fenn's own idea. The whole UBA was suddenly bathed in light and excitement and enthusiasm. Fenn had foreseen an election sweep. . . . The Guildsmen (read Goldwaterites) couldn't find a candidate. Total mandate. And then that pitch. He wasn't sure what he could do about it. . . . The only conceivable forms of meaningful action at a time like this were all illegal" (104). But "illegality," breaking of the rules and the substitution of sacrifice for chance, commitment for causality, predestination for percentages,—these are phrases to describe Henry's deliberate killing of Jock Casey with the number of the beast from the Book of Revelation: and we might here remind ourselves that Coover's *Prólogo* speaks of fiction as the use of "familiar forms to combat the content of those forms, . . . to conduct the reader . . . away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation." The mediation is so intensified that we are led to search for answers to impossible questions, those which haunt Henry's sense of history: is the Chancellor Henry's *persona* or Henry the Chancellor's? A familiar gambit, echo of the doubleness of Barnaby North, of Montaigne's puzzle about his playful cat. Until we arrive at the mythic era with which the novel concludes, "Damon's Day CLVII."

Now JHW is gone; this the second, the defining disappearance of the god of the game. The world has become a ritual because he sacrificed Jock Casey to save *his* universe, not man's. The Christian myth is re-enacted as a myth of the Beast who is anti-Christ. In this era "Some writers even argue that Rutherford and Casey never existed—nothing more than another of the ancient myths of the sun, symbolized as a victim slaughtered by the monster or force of darkness" (223-4). The New Testament sources of Coover's allegories, like the Old Testament sources, are turned back upon themselves.

There is no narrative interaction now between Henry and his players—they have

absorbed his consciousness both in narrative style and in literal fact: one player named Raspberry Schultz "has turned . . . to the folklore of game theory, and plays himself some device with dice" (234). J. Henry Waugh reduced to a Bronx cheer. He exists only in the tangled confusions of skepticism and ignorance with which the players attempt to understand the meaning of the political parties which in a ritual world have become theological sects, attempt to wring some meaning out of the annual re-enactment of the game in which Damon Rutherford was killed, the game of "Damon's Day."¹⁴ The sun dominates the players and the imagery on this mythic day which closes the novel, and the old interaction between the two levels of phenomena mediated by Henry's consciousness is allowed to appear in reverse just once in a player's joke: "'Pull the switch on that thing, man!' Gringo hollers up to the sun . . . 'Look up . . . cast your eye on the Ineffable Name' . . . 'Do you see it?' 'Yeah.' 'What does it say?' '100 Watt.'" (231-2). They are *all* gone as though they never existed: JHW, Rutherford and Casey. Only Damon remains.

The cynical rookie chosen for the role resents and fears it, lives in a surrealistic shadow land where an apparitional boy demands an autograph, where women surround him, tear at his fly as he struggles through an Orphic threat, reviews the theological debate upon the meaning of the Parable of the Duel which is about to be re-enacted and rejects it all, all but one thing: "Damon the man, legend or no" (221). "Just remember," he tells himself as he dresses for the Duel, "how you love the guy, that second son who pitched such great ball, and died so young" (223) (read JFK).

Dressed, he stands on the mound as Damon feeling the mark of the Beast. He "flexes his fist, staring curiously at it, . . . thinking he's got something special there today" (232), feeling that mark "in the right hand," as before and later "in the forehead" which is the Beast's (Revelation: 13:16; 20:4). The doubter who must enact the catcher walks toward him. "He has read all he can find on the Association's history, and he knows he is nothing" (239); "His despair is too complex for plain speech. . . . He is afraid. Not only of what he must do. But of everything" (238). "He stares at the sky, beyond which there is more sky, overwhelming in its enormity. He, . . . is utterly absorbed in it, entirely disappears, is nothing at all" (238).¹⁵ Perhaps Henry *has* heard Gringo's joking command and turned out the light over the table, for as the doubter contemplates his terror, he realizes that "it's coming. Yes, now, today, here in the blackening sun" (241). And then he arrives at the mound. It is the second unmediated moment in the novel. He confronts Damon and sees that "It's all there is." And Damon sees, too, but inverts the sense of the vision. The joke of the 100-Watt sun echoes an image from Henry's consciousness at the very beginning, when he realizes that sometimes his game is just dead statistics to him, no names: "just a distant echo. . . . But then . . . someone like Damon Rutherford came

¹⁴ Henry's sense of the religious function of baseball, first felt in the accountant's trips to his ballpark (p. 166), has been fulfilled as the only meaning of his game. Now, again, but in a new sense, he doesn't "need the games."

¹⁵ Cf. the constant sense of death which his ancestor Mel Trench lives with (pp. 106-8).

along to flip the switch, turn things on" (14). Damon sees, and gives light and life again: "he says: 'Hey, wait, buddy! You *love* this game, don't you?' . . . Damon grins. Lights up the whole goddamn world. 'Then don't be afraid' . . . he says. And the black clouds break up, . . . and his [Trench's, the battery mate's] own oppressed heart leaps alive to give it one last try" . . . " 'It's not a trial,' says Damon, glove tucked in his armpit, hands working the new ball. . . . 'It's not even a lesson. It's just what it is.' Damon holds the baseball up between them. It is hard and white and alive in the sun" (242).

Two young friends together in a numerical, platonic world which defies cynicism. Damon, the Pythagorean who offered himself for Pithias in the name of friendship to save them both by love. Save them from death imposed by a tyrant.

Paul Trench's unmediated moment of life, like Henry's, is given through Damon. Both are moments in which the tyranny of game is converted into the improbability of play: "you *love* this game," he affirms for Trench; "that's really a *great* old *game*," affirms Hettie. The relationship of J. Henry Waugh and Jock Casey, Coover's God and Jesus Christ, had inverted the Christian myth upon which it was founded. But the third person of Coover's trinity rights it again, or rather rewrites it, with the central holy pun. J. Henry Waugh is inspired, as is his Association, by the presence of Damon, that holy name whose Greek original meant not only the inevitable divine power mediating between gods and men but those souls of the dead whom we honor, especially, explains the OED, "deified heroes." As Henry said, "The basic stuff is already there. In the name. Or rather: in the naming." By naming, Robert Coover converts the dark parable of our insane culture into an affirmation that salvation is still possible through that daemonic sense of play with which he is so richly endowed.