

# Who's prick(l)ing whom in Robert Coover's fiction?

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The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer? (Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" 131).

For though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man's habit, not the woman's.... [I]t is difficult to judge what we do not share (Woolf 6).

WHAT THE HELL DOES THIS MEAN – !! (Coover *UBA* 210)

## I. THE PLAY OF GENDER

Do males and females play differently? Do they imagine or construct different kinds of games, or engage in similar modes of play with diverse mental and moral strategies in mind? If it be true that the sexes play differently, can such distinctions be extended to the realm of aesthetic play and creative writing? Even to suggest a gender-based criterion for games and play would raise the specter of philosophical essentialism. But if the question is conceptualized in terms of socialization encouraged by the current sex/gender system dominant in western culture, such queries inhabit a different semiotic register. Most parents are familiar with the radical distinction made by toy manufacturers marketing games to male and female children. Boys are bombarded with a startling and ever more technologically innovative array of aggressive playthings – from toy guns, rifles, military mock-ups, grenades, and automatic weapons to Nintendo games depicting vampires swilling blood from the necks of distressed damsels, or "Mortal Combat" war-games in which an electronic man sucks the brains out of his enemy or spits a fire-bomb that incinerates hapless victims. Female children are still interpellated into a hegemonic state apparatus by a dizzying array of baby dolls for cuddling and nurture, or by svelt Barbie dolls that facilitate women's inscription into institutions of commodity fetishism.

It seems clear, from studies conducted by psychologists like Jean Piaget, Eleanor Maccoby, and Carol Jacklin that male and female children bring differently nuanced moral sensibilities to similar competitive practices. In *The Psychology of Sex Differences*, Maccoby and Jacklin argue that the male is, for biological reasons, in a greater state of readiness to learn and display "aggressive behavior,

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basing the argument in part on studies of the relationship between sex hormones and aggression.... Studies of dominance have revealed a greater tendency among males to attempt to dominate one another, and during childhood a boy's aggressiveness has a considerable bearing upon his ability to dominate other boys" (274).

In a chapter on "The Rules of the Game" in *The Moral Judgement of the Child (Le Jugement Moral Chez L'Enfant)*, Jean Piaget observes that although boys and girls are similarly enthralled by a kind of "rule mysticism", girls tend to worry less about legal elaborations and to subordinate arbitrary rules to broader emotional and contextual considerations. Girls' games appear to be characterized by a greater degree of tolerance. Female children are generally more flexible in adapting to situational alterations in rules and are inclined to end a game abruptly if someone is likely to feel seriously hurt or demeaned.

Carol Gilligan, in her groundbreaking study *In a Different Voice*, notes wryly that "the sensitivity and care for the feelings of others that girls develop through their play have little market value and can even impede professional success" (10). Ironically, "if a girl does not want to be left dependent on men, she will have to learn to play like a boy" (10). She must, in fact, learn to strategize and deploy a masculine set of competitive practices devised as a warlike model, however ruthless, for corporate success in a capitalist economy. (Consider Donald Trump's reality show, *The Apprentice*, with its infamous *coup de grace*.) Through sex-differentiated game-playing, "boys learn both the independence and the organizational skills necessary for coordinating the activities of large and diverse groups of people.... In contrast, girls' play... fosters the development of the empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of 'the particular other'" (Gilligan 10-11). Gilligan concludes that the psychology of women, "distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationships and interdependence", evidently "implies a more contextual mode of judgement and a different moral understanding" (22), and that both inform male and female strategies of game-playing.

Of course, these findings do not necessarily imply that all female group interaction is benevolent, altruistic, and cosily nurturant. Studies of prepubescent bullying, as well as adolescent clique formation, suggest that girls, when angry, alienated, envious, or annoyed, torment one another through peer group practices of bonding and exclusion, verbal bullying, and vindictive gossip. Eager to define their identities and social popularity through exclusionary practices, adolescent girls can be notoriously "catty" toward females deemed marginal, awkward, nerdy, handicapped, or just plain weird. Such anthropomorphic bullying is uncannily replicated in simian groups like chimpanzees and orangutans. Whereas male orangutans openly challenge and attack competitors vying for social dominance, female simians adopt subtler strategies geared to shun competitors. The effects of such marginalization can be disastrous, even life-threatening, for victims in the wild.

A classic articulation of play theory can be found in Freud's analysis of the infantile *Fort/Da* game in "The Pleasure Principle" (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*). The child relinquishes its role as passive victim and becomes an active player in the scenario of maternal loss by symbolically casting forth a wooden reel at the end of a piece of string, then retrieving it with a joyous sense of exuberance and delight. Freud ascribes the motivation for such compulsory repetition to an impulsive power instinct and to a need, on the part of the child, to re-assert infantile control over the mother's body – a fantasized source of (sexual) pleasure in "*das Kinderspiel*" (*Jenseits* 12). "These reproductions... always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life – of the Oedipus complex, that is, and its derivatives" (Beyond 39).

Freud is more specific about the Oedipalization of game and play in the third chapter of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (Der Witz)*. Tendentious jokes, he suggests, may be classified in three categories: obscene jokes; aggressive or hostile jokes; and cynical jokes, including those that are critical or blasphemous (*Jokes* 115). All three subsets might be linked with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, insofar as they subvert authority, ventilate hostility, and expose the female body to shameful (seductive) violation. The category of "hostile" jokes would appear to be allied with male aggression: "Brutal hostility, forbidden by law, has been replaced by verbal invective.... By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him – to which the

third person... bears witness by his laughter” (102-103). Such gaming is a transparent simulation of psychic warfare, complete with a complicit audience testifying to its success (Flieger 90-91).

Most clearly associated with the sex-gender system of Oedipal compensation and sexual mastery is Freud’s category of the obscene or pornographic joke, curiously labelled *der Zote* or “smut” (*Der Witz* 81). Smut, Freud insists, is male-initiated and female-oriented, i.e., directed by a man toward a particular woman (“*an das Weib*” [*Der Witz* 82]) who sexually excites him and whom he deliberately tries to arouse. “Instead of this excitement the other person may be led to feel shame or embarrassment... Smut is thus originally directed towards women and may be equated with attempts at seduction” (*Jokes* 97). For Freud, pornographic jokes are a product of masculine libido and implicitly serve as instruments of seduction; they are, in fact, manifestations of male exhibitionism. “If the woman’s readiness emerges quickly the obscene speech has a short life” (99). If, however, the female object refuses compliance, then “sexually exciting speech becomes an aim in itself in the shape of smut” (99). The male libidinal instinct, frustrated by a female obstacle, will become “positively hostile and cruel” (99).

Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people; in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke’s aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.... When the first person finds his libidinal impulse inhibited by the woman, he develops a hostile trend against that second person and calls on the originally interfering third person as his ally. Through the first person’s smutty speech the woman is exposed before the third, who, as listener, has now been bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.

And here at last we can understand what it is that jokes achieve.... They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way.... The obstacle standing in the way is in reality nothing other than women’s incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality (Freud, *Jokes* 100-01.)

In Freud’s theoretical analysis, all game-playing is implicitly motivated by a frustrated desire for mastery and domination – of oneself, one’s environment, or a lost object of Oedipal desire. The joke is, in effect, an instrument of psychic warfare against an enemy, an authoritarian figure, or an inaccessible sexual object. Humor is fuelled by paradigms of conquest and psychological domination, and jokes arise from a male terrain of libidinal hostility. Women, as perverse obstacles to the satisfaction of erotic desire, function as the butt of pornographic humor and suffer the kind of ignominious exposure that gives sexual pleasure to both the (male) joker and his fraternal accomplice. Game-playing, then, can be paradigmatically allied with male dominance and the sex/gender system prevalent in contemporary American and European culture.

Patricia Yaeger notes in *Honey-Mad Women* that although poststructuralist theory has forced us to acknowledge that “sex/gender systems are socially constructed, they are no less potent for this constructedness. To know that we are controlled, our vision altered by the signifying chain, does not mean we can remove ourselves from its meanings” (225). How, Yaeger asks, might women embrace and make auspicious use of the so-called “emancipatory strategies” embedded in humor, when the very semiosis of play “tends to be represented in our culture as a masculine prerogative” (216)? Since play “is an arena of freedom precisely because it undermines coercive boundaries between subject and object”, then the masculinization of the gaming instinct has serious consequences for the female authorship of postmodern fiction (216-217). If play is potentially an instrument for both social and linguistic transformation, how might a feminist interpret the emancipatory strategies implicit in carnivalesque genres? In search of a possible answer, Yaeger cites Julia Kristeva’s essay on “Psychoanalysis and the Polis”, which proposes that the “wise interpreter give way to delirium so that, out of this desire, the imaginary may join interpretive closure” (qtd. in Yaeger 229). But how, one might ask, can a feminist participate deliriously, parodically, or subversively in the violence, traumatic rupture, and implicit misogyny associated with postmodern fabulation?

## II. JOKING WITH ROBERT COOVER

How might a female reader interpret the kind of stylized pornography produced by one of America's most ludic contemporary authors, Robert Coover? The issue is knotty and perplexed. Although one must admire Coover's talent and intellectual verve, a feminist critic might choose to interpret a work like *Spanking the Maid* as a deliberate pastiche both of postmodern praxis and 19<sup>th</sup> century pornography. According to Jackson Cope, Coover challenges his readers to "discern the interrelationships and the differences, the barriers between fiction and metafiction, between pornography (or ritual) and romance" (34). The novella hinges on a single act of sadomasochistic "intervention" on the part of an aging and impotent master who takes perverse pleasure in repeatedly flagellating his complicitous maid. This sadomasochistic ritual unfolds in an aura of mental confusion, a privileged space in which linguistic slippage undermines cultural inscription. The narrator vaguely remembers something "about scouring, or scouring... and a teacher... who called his lectures 'lechers'" (SM 29). Here the slipperiness of discourse dictates a bizarre conclusion: that the scourer shall be scourged, as the lecherous teacher gives corporeal lessons with a stiff phallic rod. Jackson Cope finds in *Spanking the Maid* "nothing kinetic, only pornography simplified into its written essence as repetition. This is pleasure as boredom, a slow enactment of that self-conscious master-slave relationship that is the origin of all original and repetitive enterprises" (55).

*Spanking the Maid* turns on cultural ciphers that suggest a carnivalesque subversion of deeply inscribed power relations: master to servant, male to female, wealthy to impoverished, dominant to submissive, sadistic torturer to masochistic victim. The worn-out rhetoric of Christian submission is parodically recycled in a religious framework of discipline and punishment, whereby the rod of intervention implements the road to behavioral perfection. "True service", the maid tells herself (or has been told), "is perfect freedom" (SM 18). The Christian dictum articulated by Dante, "In His will is our peace", undergoes a grotesque distortion when applied to social interaction between maidservant and master. It eerily echoes the fascist motto, "Work makes free", historically emblazoned over the entrance to Holocaust death-camps in Nazi Germany. (This novella, when first published in the *Iowa Review*, was entitled "A Day's Work"). The maid is naively convinced that she is "doing the will of God from the heart" (SM 24). The "heart part", however, is deliberately confused with the "hard part" of her *gluteus maximus* (SM 66), that Paphian grove purportedly designed by nature to be whipped into submission.

In *Spanking the Maid*, a scene of flagellation and sadomasochistic titillation is compulsively repeated several dozen times, with different transgressions (or none at all) serving as transparent excuses for psychosexual brutality. Both characters in the drama occupy an obscure subject position defined by a game of stylized domination and buttressed by clichés of self-deception. Both protest, mentally and to each other, their mutual lack of responsibility or pleasure. The maid's bottom becomes a *tabula rasa* for the master's inscription of his own dominant ideology on the quivering, submissive flesh of an/other: "Sometimes, ... watching the weals emerge from the blank page of her soul's ingress like secret writing, he finds himself searching it for something, he doesn't know what exactly, a message of sorts, the revelation of a mystery in the spreading flush" (SM 86-87). The mystery sought seems to be the illusory bourgeois ego residual in the master's *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition, of his own coherent manhood and simulated potency in the corporeal mirror of his maid's responsive flesh. Relegating woman to the Lacanian position of *objet petit a*, the male attempts to construct a valorized subject position through parodic simulacra of sexual desire that mimic the kind of promises of gargantuan phallic performance touted on internet spam.

As Freud would remind us, sadism bears a "close affinity with instincts of mastery which have no libidinal purpose" (*Civilization* 76). In acts of sadism, the "death instinct twists the erotic aim in its own sense and yet at the same time fully satisfies the erotic urge.... But even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness... the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the

ego with a fulfillment of the latter's old wishes for omnipotence. The instinct of destruction... must, when it is directed towards objects, provide the ego with the satisfaction of its vital needs and with control over nature" (*Civilization* 81). This profile of sadistic release comes close to Freud's description of the carnivalesque in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, wherein the Roman Saturnalia, modern carnival, and primitive festivals are all brought in alignment in terms of their permissive "debaucheries of every kind and the transgression of what are at other times the most sacred commandments.... [T]he abrogation of the [ego] ideal would necessarily be a magnificent festival for the ego" (81).

The subliminal meaning repressed in Coover's textual unconscious emerges, from a Lacanian point of view, as a pageant of postmodern fragmentation – an exposition of the sheer vacuity of linguistic ciphers, cultural ideologies, and images of bourgeois selfhood propped up by archaic and dysfunctional power relations. In his lust to control nature by releasing his own "death instinct" on the corporeal integument of an/other, the master is enslaved to a servant who gradually becomes more taunting and truculent, torturing him with mocking complicity in the sexual/textual power games he ingeniously contrives with the help of religious manuals. The story unfolds as an oft-repeated dream troubling the master's slumbers. Disturbed by his maid in the midst of an incipient erection, he transfers to her in sleep vestigial anger arising from the unconscious – a bizarre lumber-room cluttered with dust and ashes, broken bottles and mangled toys, bulls' pizzles, belts and bloody sheets, rusty razor-blades, a dead fetus, and a frog. The specter haunting him "turns out to be a woman he once knew on the civil surface" (*SM* 99), or a "sybil" service – "like the kind of callipygomancy, speaking loosely" (*SM* 100). She gives him a lecture – or an "elixir" – "on method and fairies, two dew-bejeweled habits you can roast chestnuts over" (*SM* 100).

The maid who bears the brunt of her master's misogynist fantasies – either imaginary or enacted – assures herself that true service constitutes perfect freedom. She could either resist or demur, but does neither. "She is driven by a sense of duty and a profound appetite for hope never quite stifled by even the harshest punishments: this time, today, perhaps it will be perfect" (*SM* 21). Perhaps, finally, her body will successfully reflect the illusion of wholeness and integration that characterizes the concrete (mis)recognition of bourgeois manhood within the Lacanian symbolic register. As Arthur Kroker and David Cook observe in *The Postmodern Scene*, "The body is a power grid, tattooed with all the signs of cultural excess on its surface, encoded from within by the language of desire, broken into at will by the ideological interpellation of the subject, and, all the while, held together as a fictive and concrete unity by the illusion of *misrecognition*" (26). "Postmodern sex", they insist, "has become an immaculate deception" whereby the "mechanical sex of De Sade's fornicating machine has been changed into its opposite: a site for playing out of the thermodynamics of cynical power" (24).

For the purpose of literary elucidation, the relentless, obsessive-compulsive exercises in the text are erased by the final dream sequences of the master, as the novella dissolves into discursive trauma and hallucinatory fragmentation. The display and erasure of sexual fantasy is a typical postmodern strategy for stylizing violence and for laying bare the mechanism of pornographic stimulation and response. The reader, in other words, is ridiculed for his/her prurient interest in a salacious text that proves to be a shapeshifting illusion, an erotic dream that dissolves with daylight and reality, but nonetheless mocks the hypocritical prurience of a literary audience. As Lois Gordon notes, "Coover parodies traditional religion's efficacy through its dependence (or hold) upon a belief in life's higher purpose or *end*" (165). *Spanking the Maid* offers a parody of hegemonic structures shakily supported by religious belief in masterful authority and by a monstrous social system that arbitrarily empowers wealthy, white, aristocratic males. At the same time, this slippery, oscillating text satirizes, through carnivalesque pastiche, the reader's sublimated emotional investment in sadomasochistic titillation. Who, finally, is left holding the rod of imaginary power? And whose suppressed fantasies prove the butt of Coover's pornographic jest?

In *Spanking the Maid*, Coover is practicing what Jean Baudrillard would identify as an aesthetic simulation of hyperrealism: the "endlessly reflected vision: all the games of duplication and

reduplication of the object in detail.... The real is no longer reflected, instead it feeds off itself till the point of emaciation” (Baudrillard 144).

At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*.... The hyperreal transcends representation... because it is entirely in simulation. The tourniquet of representation tightens madly, but of an implosive madness, that, far from eccentric (marginal) inclines towards the center to its own infinite repetition. Analogous to the distancing characteristic of the dream... this is only the game of censure and of perpetuation of the dream....

There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously – it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality....

It is thus that for guilt, anguish and death there can be substituted the total joy of the signs of guilt, despair, violence and death... the abolition of cause and effect. (Baudrillard 146-148)

*The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* is another paradigmatic Coover text whose involuted structure moves freely, and frivolously, among various diegetic levels of game-playing. J. Henry Waugh, the novel’s (anti)hero, is a 56-year-old accountant akin to James Thurber’s Walter Mitty – a timorous white-collar worker whose neurotic fantasy life equips him with a “masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident, and independent” (Freud, *Group Psychology* 71). Obsessively devoted to his own ingenious invention, “a baseball game played with dice and charts, a double metonymy, a game substituted for a game” (Cope 35), Henry reduces world history to an “incurable diarrhea of dead immortals” (*UBA* 82). He is well aware that the “perfect game”, lodged in the Lacanian imaginary, has always “already sunk away into a kind of unbelievable golden age, long lost, forever inaccessible” (*UBA* 90). Coover’s radically playful, male-dominated text is defiantly propelled by misogynous rhetoric, ethnic bias, and sexist/racist clichés. Political correctness is hilariously skewered, as liberal biases are hoisted on Coover’s playful petards. The arrogant game-master bears a British appellation reminiscent of an acerbic British author; whereas the more unsavory ruffians in this (melo)drama are caricatured via proletarian dialect and Irish (nick)names like Pappy Rooney and Fennimore McCaffree. Such tags call attention to the text’s self-conscious artifice, since Coover, like Henry, is keenly aware that names “could bear the whole weight of perpetuity” (*UBA* 47).

Sexist stereotypes, like ethnic jokes, are prominently on show in Coover’s ludic fabulation. As Kathryn Hume points out, the protagonist “shares his athletes’ acute awareness of the impermanence of the flesh” and “surrounds himself with the locker-room world and locker-room language, a taboo tongue which excludes women” (130). The most amorous moment in this novel occurs when J. Henry Waugh adopts the fantasy persona of a young and potent pitcher, Damon Rutherford, and scores in that “great old game” of phallic prowess with an aging bar-girl, Hettie Irden – a figure identified by Jackson Cope as a contemporary “Gea-Tellus” and superannuated Molly Bloom (37). In describing the couple’s robust efforts at copulation, Coover “subordinates the language of religion, superstition, primitive ritual, and even linguistics to a lengthy and clever sequence in baseball jargon that describes their night of gala and bonanza scoring” (Gordon 36): “And here he comes, Hettie! He’s... bolting for home, spurting past, sliding in – POW! Oh, *pow* Henry!... They laughed softly, hysterically, flowing together. She let go her grip on the ball. He slipped off, unmingling their sweat. Oh, that’s a game, Henry! *That’s* really a *great old game!*” (*UBA* 35).

Henry fears that Hettie, who “invented her own magic version, stretching out as the field, left hand as first base” (*UBA* 35), despite her prodigious talents as erotic playmate, lacks the intellectual acumen necessary to fulfill the role of vice-proprietor of his Baseball Association: “Hettie was probably too unconscious. Whatever she did, it would have to be pretty simple” (*UBA* 41). He substitutes the word “unconscious” for “stupid”, in an effort to temper the arrogance of this implicit jibe. When Henry later propositions Hettie without benefit of Damon’s imaginary intervention, he knows that their union will be crude and earthy, a macho branding of woman as victim: “Just rear back and burn it in” (*UBA* 170). Less of a whore than Henry imagines, the aged and agitated B-girl

vindictively flings Henry's money back in his face, then bawls with invective: "*Ah, go to hell, you loony bastard!*" (UBA 175). And hell is precisely where he is headed, in fictive and fantasmatic terms.

Simply for the sake of amusement and to lift himself from the glooms, Henry devises the grotesque "story of Long Lew Lydell's rape of Old Fennimore McCaffree's spinster daughter in the Knickerbocker dugout in front of five thousand wide-eyed spectators" (UBA 56). This tale of sexual defloration, forcible copulation, scopophilic amusement, and female humiliation is ostensibly salvaged by the couple's shotgun wedding and by a sanguine prediction that the father's masculine honor has remained publicly intact: "McCaffree would be reelected. Raped daughter or no" (57). Sexual violence is merely a diversionary offshoot of locker-room chatter and a *macho* suspension of civilized behavior by irresponsible, sex-starved, postpubescent boys playfully bonding in a baseball dugout. Elsewhere in Coover's Rabelaisian sports fantasy, sex is depicted as a phallic contest of ploughing and seeding, as in the compensatory conception of Brock Jr.'s son, whose birth is ironically contingent on the fateful death of Damon Rutherford:

Young Brock Jr. was among the absent: he'd bolted for home, ... dragging his missus behind him, and... had he heisted her black skirts, and without even taking time to drop his pants, had shot her full of seed: yes, caught it! she said, and even he felt that germ strike home (UBA 93).

Rutherford's maudlin wake inspires other, less connubial sexual activity, including Henry's fantasy of the thrilling gang-bang of a faceless, anonymous female by all the players at Damon's wake. This abject figure functions as a dehumanized and de-subjectivized target of phallic hostility – a woman who is used, abused, and casually discarded: "And oh yes, they seeded her well, they stuffed her so full it was coming out her ears, it was a goddam inundation" (UBA 115). In Coover's sports-scene, men control games of accounting and incorporating, while women function as convenient receptacles for prolific male seed. The thematic center of this novel's diegetic play with possible worlds of sport and ritual proves to be the driving force of male master narrative, interchangeable with narratives of male erotic mastery: "POWER and control. In and out" (UBA 144). "Aw, shee-*it* now! cracked old Pappy Rooney.... Rooney pinched the lady's bottom for luck, drew a dark ace in the hole: That's it! he chortled, *that's* what they're for!" (UBA 160). As Freud acerbically observes of group psychology, it "is only when the affectionate, that is, personal factor of a love relation gives place entirely to the sensual one, that it is possible... for there to be simultaneous sexual acts in a group, as occurs at an orgy" (*Group Psychology* 93). He adds that "homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses" (95).

In Coover's novel, team sport clearly compensates for the contemporary decline of traditional religion. Its sanctified re-enactment of the death drive demands a youthful rite of heroic passage that necessarily ends in ritual murder – through a process bitterly satirized in a trajectory of escalating violence. As Steven Bartlett argues in *The Pathology of Man*, the kind of human aggression anatomized by Konrad Lorenz "is cultivated and fostered through violence-gratifying entertainment and through the glorification of violence in both human entertainment and real life" (143). Bartlett cites several German theorists who analyze contact sports as incipient blood sports that mimic military aggression: "for spectators as well as athletes, the unrestrained freedom to express aggression in sport can be self-reinforcing rather than cathartic, and [can] influence human behavior outside of the arena" (Bartlett 144). J. Henry Waugh is, after all, an erstwhile aficionado of "tabletop war-games" (UBA 44). He once took furtive pleasure in virtual (mail-order) renditions of "mutual defense pacts, munitions sales, secret agents, even assassinations" (44). Abashedly, he confesses that his own fantasmatic practices as scorekeeper and manager of the Universal Baseball Association make him feel like "an old man playing with a child's toy", or "like an adolescent caught masturbating" (UBA 171). In games of love and war, the watchwords are violence and aggression. As Freud conjectures, with the demise of orthodox systems of belief, the isolated "neurotic is obliged to replace by his own symptom formations the great group formations from which he is excluded. He creates his own world of

imagination for himself, his own religion, his own system of delusions, and thus recapitulates the institutions of humanity in a distorted way” (*Group Psychology* 96).

According to Kathryn Hume, “Death has so upset Henry’s fragile sense of meaning that he can preserve it only by making a conscious, deliberate leap into ritual. He sets the dice down to the combination he wants, and kills the bean-balling pitcher, Jock Casey. With passing seasons, this life-for-a-life becomes the players’ central religious myth, a Manichean duel, annually re-enacted” (131) in the manner of post-traumatic compulsion. On Damonsday, the loony bastards enraptured by the group hysteria of game-playing and simulated military combat, by masculine rites and idealistic self-sacrifice, re-enact a sporting event inaugurated by Henry, yet eerily reminiscent of Mayan games once played on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. Like the winners of such ancient competitions, the contemporary hero pays, paradoxically, for the accolades of competitive glory with the price of his own head, even though he may only be, like Damon Rutherford, a fantasy projection of J. Henry Waugh, a timid accountant caught up in numerological god-games theoretically determined by a random throw of the dice.

Hume identifies a mythic “triad of archetypes – victim, sacrifice, scapegoat” (138) at the heart of Coover’s novel. His postmodern satire casts doubt on humanity’s obsession with religious ritual, even as the baseball players humorously debate their belief in an ultimate scorekeeper and conclude that they would be existentially obliged to invent such a godhead should this imagined providential overseer bamboozle them by refusing to exist. Coover’s narrator, enthralled by the trance of group psychosis, protests that “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” (*UBA* 242). Is this scene, as a number of critics have suggested, a ludic celebration of the joy of life in process? Or, alternatively, might it be construed as a cynical commentary on deluded optimism in the face of a group hysteria that pivots on sadomasochistic compulsion? Ritualistic games, Coover insinuates, provide an illusory anodyne for naïve human subjects eager to deny the reality of corporeal abjection and the threat of personal extinction. The novel sardonically implies that contemporary culture has perversely retained the traumatic resonance of religious practice by replicating obsessive (sports and entertainment) rituals, as well as Judeo-Christian misogyny and corporeal denigration of women. Henry confesses that elated spectators at the ball game make him feel “like I was a part of something there, you know, like in a church, except it was more *real* than any church.... I even had the funny idea that ball stadiums and not European churches were the real American holy places” (*UBA* 166). For Henry and for the reader, it “was *more* than history, it was, it was: *fulfillment!*” (*UBA* 66). One suspects a subtle intertextuality between Coover’s novel and Freud’s influential essay on *Group Psychology*, which argues that “mystico-religious or philosophico-religious sects... are expressions of crooked cures of all kinds of neuroses” (*Group Psychology* 95); and *The Future of An Illusion*, which dismisses religion as a “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” (*Future* 55; see also Bartlett, 86).

Henry’s innocuous baseball game predictably escalates into a violent re-enactment of human sacrifice, a “real duel, a duel to the death between Jock Casey and Damon Rutherford”, witnessed by “breathless masses, waiting for this awful rite to be played out” (*UBA* 70). Exhilarated by the spectacle of blood sport, the crowd feels transported by the adrenalin rush of danger and the thrill of *Schadenfreude*. In a remarkable recursive turn of skeptical self-analysis, Henry contemplates an anthropological “solution: turn it into folklore” (*UBA* 102). “There they were, men turned into boys, whelmed by awe and adolescent wistfulness.... Men needed these rituals, after all” (*UBA* 102). The only thing that matters, he concludes, is the “Association, this whole thing, bigger than them all” (*UBA* 108). As Bartlett reminds us, the “human spectator’s enjoyment of violence, brutality, and sadism, as in aggressive films and sports, arouses aggressive feelings”, which lead, in turn, to the formation of “group cement” that “bonds people together into strong, emotionally unified collectives” (149).

In Coover’s parodic narrative, ritual gaming is contingent on the compulsive repetition of a traumatic experience (of group psychosis and homicide) that can never be remembered, only repeated. It offers still another example of Cathy Caruth’s “idea of the mimetic-contagious transmission of

psychic suffering to others” (Leys 16). If a particular text serves as intertextual inspiration for the ritualistic games enacted in Coover’s pastiche, it must surely be Freud’s essay on *Group Psychology*. Coover seems to be writing a self-conscious parody, if not a synopsis, of Freud’s tract when he associates the evolution of J. Henry Waugh’s game with communal “Guilt. The sons banded together. Old man psyche had his hands full, all right” (*UBA* 96). As to Fennimore McCaffree, a self-appointed social psychologist, the “social construct was his central concern, group behavior was his favorite study” (*UBA* 101).

Coover gives a condensed version of Freud’s discussion of the human addiction to war when he has his protagonist enumerate the reasons why the “space race” will never be as popular as military aggression: “War seemed to be a must for every generation. A pageant to fortify the tribal spirit.... People needed casualty lists, territory footage won and lost, bounded sets with strategies and payoff functions, supply and communication routes disrupted or restored, tonnage totals, and deaths, downed planes, and prisoners socked away like a hoard of calculable runs scored. Besides, war was available to everybody, the space race to few: war was a kind of whorehouse for mass release of moonlust. Lunacy” (*UBA* 131). Similarly, Steven J. Bartlett diagnoses war as a “functional pathology” contingent on spurious emotional gratifications: “a state of heightened intensity and pleasurable arousal” comparable to that of extreme sports; “the psychological rewards of a public bonded into a single unit of togetherness, whose troops find... comfort in comradeship, the thrill of danger”; the “life-enhancing joy of being alive in the midst of death”; and the “heightened eroticism of sex in the midst of destruction” (213). Freud’s suggestion of sublimated homoerotic bonding among combatants is echoed in Henry’s grief over Damon’s death, followed by the candid admission: “You loved him. You don’t have to be ashamed about that” (*UBA* 86).

The shadow of mortality haunts Coover’s fabulations, and his characters often resemble Beckettian (anti)heroes trapped in dramatic postures that mimic the theater of the absurd. “[W]hy do we go on?” Henry bellows to his friend Lou, as he conjures the Universal Baseball Association as an agnostic rationale for tenacious perseverance in his self-appointed vocation as team manager and game-player (*UBA* 92). “Play resumed. It always resumes, every dying old bastard’s despair” (*UBA* 93). “Funny thing about real gloom; ... it had a giddy core” (*UBA* 95). One is always lured back into the game by its illusory patina of infinite potential: “Anything could happen still” (*UBA* 201). In his comic folk portrait of the itinerant player and “traveling man” wandering willy-nilly over the American scene, Henry issues a postmodern manifesto of existential angst: “A travelin’ man always longs for a home, cause a travelin’ man is always alone... like a baserunner on the paths, alone in a hostile cosmos, the stars out there in their places, and him trying to dominate the world by stepping on it all” (*UBA* 141). How can a postmodern survivor of cultural trauma avoid “dropping dejectedly into a kind of private sinkhole, having to return to all that commitment and all that emptiness” (*UBA* 141)? “Age. It got them all” (*UBA* 167). Alone in an apathetic, insensate universe, one might be tempted to “suspect the dice of malevolence” (*UBA* 152). It is clear, however, from Coover’s fable that such transcendent projections of hostility onto an indifferent universe would be existentially inauthentic. Henry’s players, like the majority of fragile human subjects on the planet, compulsively seek transcendence, a “rising above”. “Yes, why not?” Henry defiantly asks. “It doesn’t matter: death is a relative idea, truth absolute!.... They’re all going to die. And nothing he can do about it” (*UBA* 241). In Coover’s convoluted universe, quitting is not a viable option, since the game has taken on a life of its own: “Odd thing about an operation like this league: once you set it in motion, you were yourself somehow launched into the same orbit. There was growth in the making of it, development, but there was also a defining of the outer edges” (*UBA* 142). The same thing might be said of all sorts of contemporary games: love, war, violence, aggression, and the reading (or writing) of (post)modern texts.

In much of his fiction, Coover playfully introduces the skill and complexity of an Escher lithograph into the game of metalepsis. He deploys the literary equivalent of Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia”, i.e., the “coexistence in an ‘impossible space’ of a ‘large number of fragmentary possible worlds’ or, more simply, incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon

each other” (Harvey 48). In *Pricksongs and Descants*, Coover’s story “The Magic Poker” draws on Shakespeare’s *Tempest* for its model, but soon elaborates a panoply of mirror images that reflect, refract, and ludically distort the Renaissance paradigm. An island there is, and a Prospero narrator who claims god-like power over his invention. “I wander the island, inventing it”, he tells us. “I make a sun for it and trees” (PD 14). This god is a vindictive *dio boia*, a deity who delights in destruction and carnage as much as in narrative invention. He creates and disfigures, constructs and deconstructs. The world of his making is a fluid and shimmering cosmos of variable realities. Aesthetic chronology is scrambled in an unstable narrative shot through with indeterminacy. A wealthy family once purchased the island and inhabited it. They inhabit it now and tell their children a fairy tale about a princess and a poker. They were never on the island. With time, the fantasy island acquires geographical status in another ontological dimension – to the feigned surprise of the narrator, who claims to have created the two women who visit the island (one of whom doubles as a fairy-tale princess). “I have invented you, dear reader” (PD 31), he insists. Has he? And in what sense does he assert the power of an aesthetic deity engaged in what Rawdon Wilson calls “god-games” that trick, deceive, and bamboozle the readers of a densely embedded, metaleptic story? (Wilson, Chapter 4).

“The Magic Poker” displays a looping structure of contiguous and intersecting ontological levels. In some purportedly real and representable cosmos, two young women land on an uninhabited island and explore its abandoned, disintegrating mansion. They find a poker and take it away. That, however, is only the beginning. The entire text re-enacts the *Tempest*, with Coover-like surrogates presiding. The Ariel figure, equipped with pipe and blue jacket, is, in certain renditions of the tale, a carnivalesque clown with “barbered buttocks”, allied through lower-body poles with the hairy-ballooned Caliban archetype, the caretaker’s son, a “satyr on a not-quite-deserted island... his hairy tuft of imagination left over from a genre abandoned and rediscovered, a beast recognizing the value of fabling” (Cope 33). The paradigm of a fairy tale is subverted in its ludic inversions and materiality. The princess in distress has been thrice married and needs assistance in decanting her torso from its steel-girded golden trousers. Her pants prove impenetrable to the boldest knight’s stout sword. Only the Magic Poker can poke her pants into a laminated puddle and, when the instrument is wielded by Caliban, it affects a grotesque anti-fairy-tale. The Frog-prince is killed, the hapless princess doomed to widowhood.

Ontological levels are so intertwined that, in the end, the story’s genre remains indeterminate. Is it fairy tale or fabulation, realistic narrative or pure authorial fantasy? Has a frog-prince expired, or was he merely a frog? Did Karen play grotesque Amazonian games in a deserted family mansion, cavorting with a green grand piano collapsing as she pounded its keys? Did an Ariel figure materialize through oral titillation or dematerialize through a fierce female embrace? Were Poker and Prince real or imaginary? And can one make any kind of meaningful distinction among diverse ontological planes? At the end of this tale, “a frog dies, a strange creature lies slain, a tanager sings” (PD 35). Is that slain creature Ariel, Caliban, or the Prospero-narrator?

A brash, intrusive, sometimes truculent and sadistic narrator presides, but there seem to be arbitrary limits to his god-like power. He sounds Beckettian in his specious promise: “Though you have more to face, and even more to suffer from me, this is in fact the last thing I shall say to you” (PD 25). Then he continues talking. “But can the end be in the middle? Yes, yes, it always is” (PD 25) he proclaims, in an intertextual echo of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*. As the story exfoliates, the narrator etiolates: “I am disappearing. You have no doubt noticed. Yes, and by some no doubt calculable formula of event and pagination” (PD 30). Has this strange creature, at the conclusion of the story, been slain by another *dio boia*, the wily Robert Coover? Or is it, in fact, Coover’s boisterous narrative persona who lies deconstructively deceased? Lois Gordon’s commentary could be applied to both figures: “Here is a writer-magician, often pulling words, rabbits, or islands out of hats, self-consciously creating myth, wrestling with words and created landscapes – both God-creator of a verbal universe and victim of its emergent arrangements” (90).

“The Babysitter” offers still another example of Coover’s pornographic game-playing through the pastiche of a culture where variable realities circulate in a carnival of real, imagined, and televised

traumatic violence. Coover's writing inaugurates a dialogic paronomasia of cultural static, the white noise of consumer culture that infiltrates and orchestrates Baudrillard's simulacrum model of postmodern experience. The mirror flickers: its images construct a separate ontological reality that reflects and distorts individual sensation in a hyperbolic replication of the so-called "real world". The recursive structure of Coover's text implicates the nested collection of variable realities that constructs our perception of contemporary culture and inscribes us into a consumer society where we ourselves become the commodities marketed. If we perceive the world refracted in a televised replication of itself, we are, in turn, conditioned to modes of perception visually reflected – and relentlessly repeated – in the magic mirrors of film and television. The media are held responsible for generating a narcissistic, fragmentary, and scopophilic culture of dissociative (post-traumatic) consciousness. Its Freudian obsessions are ubiquitous, its "love of looking" everywhere commodified. With the breakdown of ego boundaries among dazed human subjects, cohesive identity is dispersed in a dizzying simulacrum of global dysphoria.

In Coover's story, each character is exposed to the lascivious gaze of an/other, both as voyeuristic subject and as specular object. The (male-defined) scopophilic gaze connotes mastery and determines all. Fierce aggression freely circulates through the inter-cutting of non-chronological film clips jumbled in cinematic *mélange*. The un-named babysitter is the object of lust for her lecherous employer Harry, as well as for a boyfriend who is goaded, either in fantasy or in fact, into bathtub voyeurism and possible rape. The irony of Coover's playful postmodern text resides in its deployment of contradictory narratives whose ontological status remains indeterminate. No single level is privileged as diegetic, since a series of jump-cuts amalgamates fact, fantasy, and narrative fabulation. As in Borges' fiction, incompatible plots emerge without concern for (il)logical possibility. Harry Tucker imagines copulating with a voluptuous postpubescent babysitter and either does, or does not, enact his (im)potent lecherous fantasies. His adolescent rivals, Mark and Jack, may or may not attempt a sadistic gang-bang. Young Jimmy bathes with the babysitter in infantile innocence, while his anxiously aroused father entertains lascivious dreams of a similarly blissful immersion.

Images of violence flicker across a television screen in shoot-em-up Westerns and lurid detective films. A kind of ludic, if not ludicrous, sadism erupts when the tots attack their sitter and tickle her as she rolls on the floor giggling. Pounced on by Mark and Jack, the babysitter ceases to giggle. But the *dramatis personae* in this (melo)dramatic farce are, or are not, exposed by Harry, who may, or may not, fall and hit his head against the bathroom sink. Television enacts a tummy-tightening scenario that excites the babysitter, who cunningly displaces her own adolescent desires downward when she asks Jimmy to soap her back. "You said I could watch!" (*PD* 176) whines the toddler Bitsy, in a precarious moment of scopophilic frustration. She means the television, or maybe the bath; or perhaps the awkward adolescent groping that substitutes for sex. Television is a powerful and subversive teacher in its relentless representation of mindless violence and unmediated sexual brutality. The ingenuous Bitsy is being conditioned to manipulate (and to be manipulated by) erotic desire long before she is able to understand its voyeuristic charge. Her needs are determined by a commodified celluloid culture, and her infantile eyes are being skillfully trained toward an incipient, but explosive and male-modelled scopophilia. She is, in the words of Kroker and Cook, one of those postmodern "babies whose television fare at the age of six includes *The Young and the Restless*, initiating them into the video world of sex without secretions. If babies are born postmodern, it's just because their bodies are lacerated by the language of the key technologies of power" (Kroker & Cook 23).

Just as the princess in "The Magic Poker" cannot divest herself of her golden pants, the bourgeois matron Dolly Tucker is tormented by an inability to stuff herself back into a tightfitting girdle. Like a Thanksgiving turkey, she is basted with butter and poured into her skirt. Her sex-starved host is titillated by the exposure of her flabby figure, just as his son is aroused by the babysitter's nubile flesh. The host's closing quip to a desperate Dolly proves taunting and inscrutable: "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in the bathtub, and your house is wrecked" (*PD* 193). Like a trauma victim too shocked to cope with overwhelming disaster, she responds, hypnotically: "Let's see what's on the late late movie" (*PD* 193). Suffering from anhedonia and

psychic fragmentation, Dolly cannot focus on, or even acknowledge, a domestic catastrophe whose uncanny resonance has already obliterated the scene of trauma from her spousal and maternal consciousness. As Ruth Leys explains, trauma was originally “defined as a situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance” (8). The powerful mental wound “appeared to shatter the victim’s cognitive-perceptual capacities, [and] made the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection” (9). If Bessel Van der Kolk is correct in his “claim that traumatic memory involves a literal imprint of an external trauma... lodged in the brain in a special traumatic memory system”, then traumatic experience “defies all possibility of representation” (Leys 16) – and would account for Dolly’s weird exhibition of post-traumatic amnesia.

Coover’s bizarre conclusion mixes different ontological levels, until it proves impossible for a naive reader to unravel the diegetic filaments of this loop-structured narrative from an intricate texture of carnivalesque fabulation. In such a “heterotopian zone”, Brian McHale would assure us, “hallucinations and fantasies become real, metaphors become literal, the fictional worlds of the mass media – movies, comic books – thrust themselves into the midst of historical reality. The zone, in short, becomes plural... located nowhere but in the written text itself” (McHale 45).

If the reader/narrator/critic can find a corpse floating in Coover’s enigmatic bathtub, it might be that of Harry, the baby, or the unfortunate sitter. The predatory host’s ludic(rous) chant, however, is more reminiscent of a coy lady-bug ballad distorted by an inebriated adult in a farcical play of seduction mediated by that ubiquitous bourgeois voyeur, the television set. If the childish taunt articulates “real” historical trauma, then the end of the story is shockingly grotesque. The media have so completely devoured contemporary domestic life that popular culture absorbs the tale’s diegetic narrative and privileges television images over the drama of human experience and the shock of post-traumatic stress. As in a live CNN broadcast of warfare or terrorism, death and loss are backgrounded, TV representations foregrounded. Learning of the death of spouse or child, the drunken damsel simply shuts down. Exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic constriction, she takes emotional refuge in watching the late, late show. When life becomes more violent than television images that impinge on contemporary consciousness, one’s only refuge may be the unreal ontology of flickering lights and ghostly shadows. Corpses on television are decidedly less threatening and less psychologically ambivalent than horrific figures bobbing in the bathtub, “the sensationalism of spectacle” having been transformed into the “stuff of which consciousness is forged” (Harvey 54). Lois Gordon concludes that in his “ultimate pricksong, Coover descants upon the counterpointing realities and fictions of our lives and the violence, inanities, and sexuality that permeate the media which dictate our conscious and even unconscious behavior... Life contains no resolution apart from its own possibilities” (120).

As Jean Baudrillard searingly observes, the dissolution of television into life, and of life into television, has become “an indiscernible chemical solution” (Baudrillard 55). “TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us”, to such an extent that we begin to witness “a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles” of cause and effect “into one another: an IMPLOSION... of meaning. *This is where simulation begins*” (56-57). Kroker and Cook lugubriously suggest that, as members of a postmodern, post-traumatic culture, we “live on the imploded side of the will to power: the side of empty seduction, dead labour, abstract power, and... the radical disenchantment of the sign. What else explains our taking delight in images of a dead society – fragmented bodies, and video ideology – signs that, at least, we know we are trapped in the ‘joke’ of a cynical history” (131). Certainly, part of the joke for Coover entails an acerbic satire of contemporary culture’s pathological fascination with bloodshed and random violence.

Playing for time, I cannot conclusively answer the question initially raised in this essay, i.e, how a feminist reader might respond to Coover’s playful, pornographic, postmodern experiments. The author is a relentlessly aggressive and manipulative fabulator. His absurdly *macho* (and generally impotent) males emerge as “characters” from a play of signs whose rules can never be fully grasped or mastered by the authorial game-player fashioning a fabulative universe. Coover occupies an

ostensibly transcendent position in the metaleptic god-games he generates to dupe and bamboozle naive readers unprepared for the postmodern roller-coaster ride of recursive diegetic worlds looping into aesthetic Gordian knots and endlessly repeating themselves, in the manner of relentless traumatic flashbacks. Coover laughs at the arbitrary manifestations of a sign-system that points to the Lacanian Imaginary, but he always remains firmly embedded in the textual skein of his own cunning contrivances. In the end, one must continue to wonder who, finally, is practicing postmodern gender/play and who (or what) is making, and mastering, the rules of the game.

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