

EXPERIMENTAL FORMS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Concerned with developments in contemporary innovative fiction Experimental Forms in Contemporary Fiction locates 'post-Modernist' writing largely within a North American context.

William Burroughs, Ronald Sukenick, Donald Barthelme, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover and Steve Katz are identified as the exemplary post-Modernist figures; their favoured techniques --a combination of cancellation and erasure, fragmentation and discontinuity, game and play--express an indeterminacy of meaning which places post-Modernist writing at some distance from the writing of contemporary figures like Vladimir Nabokov, John Hawkes and John Barth, who, as identifiably 'neo-Modernists', are essentially concerned with extending Modernism's restorative and paralleling features into the contemporary literary discourse. At the same time, post-Modernist fiction bears only a passing resemblance to the work of innovative contemporary British writers like B. S. Johnson, Gabriel Josipovici and J. G. Ballard, who are inclined to impose a series of disruptive forms upon mimetic substance.

Uniquely post-Modernist fiction celebrates an eternity of displacement by insisting that unity, coherence and system are totalitarian concepts inimicable to the necessary free-play

of the imagination. Therefore, even as Burroughs et al express long-standing American literary concerns, post-Modernist fiction is demonstrably part of the deconstructive shift away from holistic and humanistic ideas and procedures. Post-Modernist writing, therefore, initiates a crisis within literary criticism, one which needs to be examined against the background of contemporary philosophical, cultural, and social developments.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950's there has appeared a number of works of innovative fiction which in various ways and various degrees have set themselves in opposition to previous literary theories and practices. Rather more for the sake of convenience than for the sake of accuracy this writing has been termed 'post-Modernist', but as we shall argue the contemporary innovative novel, particularly in the United States, presents anything but the homogeneity suggested by the term. In reality, the contemporary innovative novel has followed two divergent but sometimes contiguous paths, one which leads out of Modernism which is identifiably 'neo-Modernist', the other, more radical, which follows the directives of the great precursor of post-Modernism, William Burroughs.

In Burroughs' work we find the constant repudiation of reference and unity, and the denial of reconciliation and recuperation which is so characteristic of post-Modernist writers like Steve Katz, Ronald Sukenick, Ishmael Reed, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Clarence Major and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Dominating post-Modernist writing generally is a sense of radical discontinuity, negation and playfulness, radical, that is, to a point beyond Modernism and beyond the neo-Modernist writing of figures like John Barth, John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge

Luis Borges and Gilbert Sorrentino, in whose work even the most radical textual disruptions are made ultimately accountable to a system of priority or to some transcendent aesthetic order.

It is true that no matter how disordered experimental writing appears 'it by no means presents a simulacrum of complete disorder' since any 'literary order...constitutes...a frame, by distinguishing the work from the world beyond, which is not ordered in that way',¹ but, nevertheless, the post-Modernist novel is designed with neither consistency or equilibrium in mind and therefore threatens to dissolve form and structure and any notion of framework. As it disassociates itself from the referential the post-Modernist novel is, of course, displaying what has become a convention, but in also abandoning notions of synthesis, consistency, formal design and shape, and any sense of aesthetic priority and redemption, the post-Modernist novel is engaged in the denial of order and coherence, those 'essential' qualities which have sustained the novel through its history, from its beginnings, through to Ulysses and beyond to LETTERS.

Conventionally our evaluation of a novel depends to a large extent on our analysis of the author's skill in handling the appropriate formal conventions and it would seem that 'the poverty of the novel's formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism'.² However, from its beginnings the novel did possess basic forms which defined content and determined modes of composition, and therefore at an early stage was confronting those compositional problems later to be identified and struggled against by those writers

with a more sophisticated approach to the writing of fiction, especially Gustave Flaubert and Henry James.

The formal sensitivity shown by early novelists was buttressed by an awareness of the need for verisimilitude, though claims of 'truth to nature' were not made with the ambition of precision and exactitude--this was to be the Naturalist's prerogative. We find, for example, in the preface to her novel Evelina (1778) Fanny Burney rejecting the fanciful Romance in favour of the credible, that is, in favour of the novel of the presentation of a sequence of events involving emphasis on the texture of daily life:

Let me...prepare for disappointment those who...
entertain the gentle expectation of being transported
to the fantastic regions of Romance, where fiction is
coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination,
where Reason is an outcast, and where the sublimity of³
the marvellous, rejects all aid from sober probability³

As Hawthorne observed the writer of Romance 'wishes to claim a certain latitude',⁴ while the writer of novels aims at a 'very minute fidelity':⁵ but such fidelity is paradigmatical rather than inclusive with the luxury of observation and description circumscribed by the austerity of form. Indeed, by the eighteenth-century European intellectuals and artists had largely abandoned the idea that art should show 'truth to nature and (had) started to think in terms of using it to establish the nature of truth',⁶ hence Diderot's valuation of Richardson's fiction for providing a substitute for, or an augmentation of, the real.

In spite of its revolutionary nature--largely to do with its rejection of traditional plots--the novel remained respectful of Classical requirements exemplified by Aristotle's dictum that,

'of simple Plots and actions the episodic are the worst...when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence'.⁷

Henry Fielding for all his narrative ~~exuberance~~ was a Classicist, believing there should be 'nothing foreign in the design', and in his review of Charlotte Lennox's The Female Quixote (1752) he speaks favourably of:

a regular story, which, though possibly it is not pursued with that epic regularity which would give it the name of an Action, comes nearer to that perfection than the loose unconnected Adventures in Don Quixote⁸

The critical prejudice directed against writers like Cervantes and Lawrence Sterne has hardly diminished among those who require of the novel a confirming aesthetic and moral amplitude: Don Quixote constantly undermines the probable by fundamentally questioning the 'obsessive search for a mirror to the world in the text, and a mirror to the book of God in the world',⁹ while Tristram Shandy, as 'much an act of pure play as any novel ever written',¹⁰ even if it does not, like many twentieth-century novels it inspired, question the nature of reality, is concerned, nevertheless, with destroying the claims of the novel to truthfully copy the world. Classicism in Tristram Shandy is rejected in favour of the pleasures of arbitrariness:

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;--they are the life, the soul of reading!--take them out of this book, for instance,--you might as well take the book along with them;--one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer;--he steps forth like a bridegroom,--bids All-hail; brings a variety, and forbids the appetite to fail¹¹

Like the post-Modernist novel the novels of Cervantes and Sterne reject the regulation of story and structure which had,

by the nineteenth-century, become the novelists' most pressing concern. Implicated as it is far more than before, in the social and political processes, the nineteenth-century novel provides an ever expanding ideological corroborative. Taking the view that the 'function of ideology...is cohesion',¹² enables a clearer view to be formed as to why, during a period of considerable social and moral change, agents and agencies of social and moral equilibrium projected an image of culture as 'the study of...true human perfection' and as developing 'all sides of our humanity'.¹³ The requirements that narrative should satisfy the rules of fidelity and harmonious design are enlarged by calls for literature to assume moral and social responsibilities to social and political processes, and it is the novel in particular, at least in those countries with a developed social structure, which is required to most contribute to the cause of stability and harmony through the regulation of theme and form. Novels begin increasingly to register a shift from the depiction of 'fidelity to human experience...which is unique and therefore new',¹⁴ towards a more idealistic presentation, and take the form of a 'complex series of mediations between the social actuality...and the desires of their predominantly middle-class readers that things were not the way they were in that actuality'.¹⁵ Narrative, in these terms, serves as the model by which 'society conceives of itself, the discourse in which and through which it articulates the world',¹⁶ and passes, therefore, 'considerably beyond the scope of literature' to become 'one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality'.¹⁷ As novels

increasingly 'distort' the actual, readers of novels are provided with the most compelling aesthetic means of 'evaluating and organizing personal experience',¹⁸ through the experience of fictional fabrication--the process of sequence, recognition, reassurance and closure, all of which help resolve mystery and turn threat into significant forms.

The conventional novel's tendency towards social and moral regulation, its dominant tendency to elaborate humanly populated and emotionally significant worlds, is, however, challenged in the nineteenth century from two different directions: the classic American novel, and the fiction of Flaubert--both 'deviations' which in their various ways point towards Modernism and even beyond. In contrast to the novels of Balzac and Dickens the classic American novel reflects little confidence that structure, history, or the mechanisms of social activity are able to provide man with referents enabling him to know himself and of his world. In Hawthorne's fiction, for example, Yvor Winters identifies events which are 'improbable or even impossible' and characters who 'lack all reality'.¹⁹ The self-assured authorial voice of the nineteenth century European novelist who articulates a 'confident mastery of the chaotic metropolis',²⁰ finds no echo in the United States where the novelist usually projects a lack of certainty, and a 'formula of alternative possibilities'.²¹ This formula (though used by Winters to describe Hawthorne's techniques) can be applied equally well to all the classic American novelists' concern with projecting a sense of freedom from all sorts of conventions and rules and the doubtfulness of

the 'real'. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Herman Melville's The Confidence Man, a nineteenth century work which anticipates many features of contemporary innovative fiction. Like the Modernist novel The Confidence Man provides an overriding message--that of the need for constant questioning--illuminates without resolving, provides no stable framework of judgement, and carries, even fosters, its own contradictions.

As it has 'sheered towards abstraction',²² the American novel has shifted narrative emphasis from the mirroring of environment and experience towards alternative environments and ambiguity. Such an intense self-awareness is not, however, the 'sort of awareness evinced by a writer like Flaubert',²³ who intended the submergence of reference and story beneath form and structure, whose ambition was to write a 'book about nothing, a book without any external connection, which would support itself by internal force of style'.²⁴

Flaubert's elevation of his art to the point where it is deemed to create rather than reflect the real argues for an artistic supremacy which anticipates the clinical precision of Modernist theory and practice. In England, however, it is Henry James who provides the most sophisticated analysis of the novel's total possibilities and who, as a descendent of Flaubert, inherited that writer's sense of narrative cohesion and harmony. Moreover, James's awareness of current scientific and philosophical scepticisms--in the words of Maupassant, the awareness that 'every one of us simply creates his own illusion of the world',²⁵--parallels the social and epistemological uncertainties ever present in an

American literary tradition which provides early 'examples of a modernist impulse in fiction'.²⁶

Though an admirer of Balzac and Zola, James was impatient with writers who imposed order on psychological and social reality when their most pressing task was to reveal reality's nuances and complexities underneath the apparatus of social convention. James had little interest in erecting a fictional system which would operate 'as a paradigm of the laws governing the development and functioning of society in general',²⁷ but instead concerned himself with the problem of clarification through artistic means:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.²⁸

Here, significantly, James's metaphors are metaphors of control and restraint, intended like all his fiction and criticism to redirect our attention 'from the referential aspect of a work of art...to its own structural coherence as the principal source of inspiration'.²⁹ But this concern with aesthetic containment has further implications which touch upon the writer's desire to make affirmative gestures through art. James confessed, 'I have the imagination of disaster-and see life as ferocious and sinister'.³⁰ Art becomes not only, for James, an aesthetic act which would 'circumscribe the sprawling, tangled infinity of empirical relations',³¹ but becomes the act of personal salvation which denies decay and doom. Indeed, for James, it was always 'art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance',³² and for James it was economy, concentration and intensity of expression

which brought forth a unity of the compositional whole.

Resolutely 'modern', James in his fiction creates 'gaps that cannot be closed',³³ and combines a thematic ambiguity with a highly developed formal sense in a way which proves suggestive of many Modernist and neo-Modernist works of fiction: one work especially, The Sacred Fount, even prefigures 'the contemporary phenomenon of the antinovel and the nouveau roman',³⁴ providing the reader with a 'detective story without a crime' and a sense also of the 'stylish and unsettling inconclusiveness of L'Année Dernière à Marienbad'.³⁵

While few important writers since James have echoed D. H. Lawrence's belief that the writer 'must speak for life and growth, amid all this mass of destruction and disintegration',³⁶ the modern innovative novel until Burroughs has largely preserved a considerable degree of aesthetic (as opposed to moral) coherence and unity. While post-Modernism subverts all notions of structure and aesthetic equilibrium the Modernist and neo-Modernist impulse has been that of James--to preserve and organise through the medium of fiction. For the Modernist, art has value because it possesses 'internal harmony and presents order to a permanently disarranged planet',³⁷ an evaluation which puts Modernism at some distance from that of a post-Modernist like Kurt Vonnegut Jr., who, as the ever-present author of Breakfast of Champions, expresses the post-Modernist resolve to 'Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead'.³⁸

Modernism seeks the reassurance provided by alternative structures and systems of synthesis while eschewing the straight

chronological ordering of its material and the use of a reliable, omniscient and intrusive narrator. It employs a limited perspective or multiple points of view and tends towards a complex cross-referencing backwards and forwards across the span of time. The artist becomes orchestrator of flux: for Proust time was 'so much time wasted and nothing can ever be truly possessed save under that aspect of eternity which is also the aspect of art',³⁹ while William Faulkner expressed the Modernist's confidence that 'time can be shaped...by the artist'.⁴⁰

Like Flaubert and James, the Modernists saw unity, coherence and ultimate forms of resolution as their primary aesthetic concerns. All Modernist art, unlike that of post-Modernism, is an art of reconciliation. Surrealism, for example, remains largely intelligible particularly with respect to its structure within the society surrounding it, and although possessing a frequently mysterious psychological element the Surrealist ambition was the 'achievement of a psychological condition in which all contradictions are reconciled'.⁴¹ Similar unifying features are found in Cubism where we see the presentation of a singular, intelligible world of wine glasses, newspapers, guitars, all of which comprises the kind of ingenious formal design we find also in the 'Cubist' works of T. S. Eliot, John Dos Passos and James Joyce, where selection and arrangement creates works of literary art in accordance with independent principles of unity: some unit of reality is selected, not for its inherent meaningfulness, but because it is capable of entering

into crucial relationships with other units; this is taken out of its normal context and placed into a structure reflecting very deliberate organization.

The opinion that the Modernist novelist 'tried all kinds of experiments with formlessness in fiction in order to capture the formlessness of human experience'⁴² is therefore banal. The Modernist novelist did not aspire to imitate a meaninglessness world in contrast to previous generations who shaped their materials into coherent visions; literary revolution and verbal experiment involved not a thrust into chaos but a search for alternative orders. The artist searched for new imaginative principles thought capable of gathering the perceived incoherencies of modern life into unified and purposeful forms. At its most naked this is found in those Modernist works employing a single, central symbol: Hart Crane's The Bridge, for example, or Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, where the lighthouse serves as the controlling unity around which other circles of reconciliation revolve.

In Virginia Woolf's novel, Mrs. Ramsey brings people together and feels responsible for restoring some form of human contact: she intuits that 'the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her'.⁴³ More expansively the novel's ambition of unity is symbolised by the artistic vision of the painter Lily Briscoe who, like Woolf herself, uses shape and colour to transform her world. Writing of the fiction of E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf speaks of the 'one gift more essential to a novelist than another...the power of combination--

the single vision',⁴⁴ and it is precisely this capacity for discovery which characterises the artistic and psychological 'quest' of Lily Briscoe who believes that in 'the midst of chaos there was shape'.⁴⁵

The importance attached by the Modernist artist to the restorative energies of art goes some way towards vindicating Nietzsche's judgement that art is the last metaphysic available in the midst of European nihilism. Writers like Rilke, Valery, Yeats and Joyce preached a kind of salvation through art which was thought to provide frames of reference able to organize, synthesize and order the perceived chaos of contemporary life-- a notion contained in Joyce's statement that '(p)arts constitute a whole as far as they have a common end'.⁴⁶ The artist requires from art a perfection which transcends the real: when, for example, it was pointed out to Joyce that it was incorrect in Ulysses to describe sails as being 'braided' up to 'crosstrees', since strictly speaking sails are 'brailed' up to 'yards', Joyce argued for the priority of art, the inviolability of the word. The word 'crosstrees' could not be altered said Joyce, because '(i)t comes in later and I can't change it'.⁴⁷ The Modernist's search for a 'perfect order of words...an order in every way appropriate'⁴⁸ represents the elevation of design to a position of prominence, though this is not to argue that the Modernists abandoned Naturalistic detail or even eschewed elements of chance and randomness: rather, that the writer like Joyce possessed an all-embracing aesthetic vision which required that all points of reference be responsible to an overall pattern which is deliberately

dramatised as providing eternal confirmation of order and shape. Nowhere is this more clearly stated and more clearly discerned than in the Modernist's use of myth.

In the words of the Surrealist Andre Breton myth enables individuals 'to rejoin the most durable traditions of mankind';⁴⁹ for T. S. Eliot, Joyce's use of myth in Ulysses is primarily a means of making 'the modern world possible for art' by salvaging order--'It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.⁵⁰ The Homeric parallels in Ulysses, however, are not merely the artist's means of using imaginative principles capable of gathering the incoherencies of life into purposeful and unified forms, but represent 'an investment in the idea of psychological and historic recurrence, to eternal patterns'.⁵¹

Literary mythologising has remained particularly popular with writers since the Modernist era and as an element of coherence has infiltrated a number of genres. In Science Fiction writing especially we find the much expressed idea of some form of mythic ultimate authority restoring harmony and equilibrium to a threatened or unbalanced world or universe. The critic Donald A. Wollheim can, therefore, write of the work of A. E. Van Vogt that one of that novelist's abiding characteristics:

is to make his heroes so invulnerable, so omniscient, so gifted with superhuman powers as to encourage the suspicion that his heroes are all really God in disguise⁵²

Allowing for the very real diversity of the genre we can say, nevertheless, that Science Fiction writing does usually conform

closely to a clear and powerful set of stylistic and narrative conventions and does promote the idea of a superior or 'higher' intelligence imposing order on human affairs. Similarly, Tolkien's simple-minded stories are meant to 'reach out towards non-fictional truths about humanity - and perhaps about salvation',⁵³ while a more sophisticated novelist like William Golding claims myth to be something 'which comes out from the roots of things in the ancient sense of being the key to existence',⁵⁴ and, furthermore, identifies his novels as myths of total explanation added to the world's mythic catalogue.

More formally innovative than Golding, Anthony Burgess, nevertheless, retains the former's belief in literature and art as providing what Iris Murdoch sees as being, after human love, the 'highest consolation'.⁵⁵ For Burgess, 'the universe is not discontinuous', and it is the artist's task 'to create a structure'.⁵⁶ In M/F, the novel which perhaps expresses these ideas more clearly than any other of his novels, Burgess claims for the novel the title of a 'Structuralist' narrative. Taking over Levi-Strauss's theory that man's mental patterns and structures have not altered to any great extent since the beginning of time, Burgess erects upon these foundations a complementary aesthetic which is characteristically that of many contemporary writers, and particularly contemporary British writers, need to impose some form of controlling discipline upon diversity and disorder. In M/F post-Modernist aesthetics

and post-Structuralist ideas are the contemporary evils, the forms of nihilism which threaten man's natural and necessary instincts and which are fended off by an eternity of form, the belief that 'Only by entry into myth can reconciliation be effected'.⁵⁷

Burgess's emphasis on art's 'responsibilities' pronounces a morality which is ever-present in those writers whose disruptive fictional techniques serve a restorative function. In M/F we find man described as having a duty to 'impose manifest order on the universe',⁵⁸ and aleatory aesthetics shunned as signifying 'the breakdown of order, the collapse of communication, the irresponsible cultivation of chaos'.⁵⁹ More conventional novelists, of course, subscribe to similar functionalist/Romantic beliefs but do so without the pretence of audacity, but the idea of art soothing and healing the social and moral ills is, nevertheless, a persistent one and one which is expressive of the fear of social and moral disintegration.

Saul Bellow has been particularly shrill in his condemnation of many aspects of contemporary urban society and believes strongly that writers like Burroughs, Beckett and Brecht have helped overthrow traditional humanistic concepts of the Self. For Bellow, 'Public life, vivid and formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crises, and unreal configurations dissolve coherence in all but the most resistant minds',⁶⁰ and Bellow's instincts are no less than to try and transform through his writing a 'degenerate' reality. For other contemporary literary

figures reality is now simply too much: according to Philip Roth the modern writer 'has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then finally make credible much of American reality'.⁶¹ On the other hand, many contemporary novelists have rejected such crude reflectionism and instead chosen to exploit and explore the diversity of structuring but contradictory codes visible within late twentieth century society.

The so-called non-fiction novelist and the new journalist write works which cut across genres, with, it is claimed, the intention of being therefore better able to deal with an 'American reality (which) since the late 1950s has become more and more discontinuous, inconclusive, and fictionlike in its strange and original behaviour':⁶² such modes are seen as the narrative form through which 'consciousness which is engulfed and overwhelmed by the enormity of the stark actualities'⁶³ finds its expression. These conclusions, however, would appear to argue only for a limited originality. So-called 'fictual' works are not part of the post-Modernist phenomenon: basically reflectionist/ mimetically derived they collapse contradictory codes into easily assimilated forms of deviance, and while it is true that a work like The Armies of the Night disqualifies the conventional notions of character, theme and setting, and rejects at the same time the usual idea of art as the creation of order out of chaos and the artist as seer, the work, and those others like it, reflect Mailer's desire to provide some sort of salvation, to 'save the nation'⁶⁴ from what Mailer has called 'the communication engineers'.

Dealing basically in mimetic codes, 'fictual' works are not only divorced from the main strands of contemporary innovative neo-Modernist writing which does not attempt 'art work(s) designed to compensate for a damned society',⁶⁵ but are even further removed from the post-Modernist writing of someone like Burroughs who has expressed fears similar to those of Mailer concerning the take-over of communication channels by oppressive systems of control. Mailer's techniques aspire to 'exercise a control over...reality - to reshape it',⁶⁶ and while he regards there to be no necessary informing truths behind facts, he provides, nevertheless, an interpretive consistency and clings to a belief in some ultimate points of reference which calls for a confirming aesthetic founded on the writer's desire to reach definitive conclusions about American experience.

Other contemporary writers present a more Modernist-like concern with fiction's formal properties. John Hawkes has expressed the opinion that literature for him has 'some unusually deep pertinence to the human condition' and identified this pertinence as 'mythic'.⁶⁷ Furthermore, rather than revealing a post-Modernist impulse, Hawkes' comments on his own narrative instincts reveal a formal inclination of a Flaubertian dimension:

I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and have once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained⁶⁸

A concern with form and structure is equally in evidence, though is frequently more extravagantly expressed in the work of

Barth, Borges, Nabokov, Sorrentino and William Gass. In their fiction we find a concern with the fictive nature of all experience known through language and the belief that, as Barth's Jacob Horner puts it, to:

turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it⁶⁹

This recognition is, of course, a common-place of post-Modernism also, but neo-Modernist writing, unlike that of post-Modernism, takes the view that the assault on and transcendence of the laws of fiction 'can only be achieved from within fictional form'.⁷⁰ The post-Modernist we may suggest is within the native American tradition; the neo-Modernist more responsive to European examples: the former preserves the ambition of discovering a position of fresh and new possibilities before language and restrictive systems can operate; the latter works frequently within the confines of a perceived prison of language which brings all human activity into the sphere of discourse. The post-Modernist considers the possibility of an existence without language as we know it, and insists, furthermore, on language as being a system rooted in sociality; the neo-Modernist, on the other hand, expresses the notion of language pre-existing social activity. While for a writer like Barthelme 'language is inside of behaviour and cannot get outside it to establish a perspective beyond the disordered wandering of damaged brains', for Barth, 'behaviour is inside of language'.⁷¹

Consequently, while post-Modernist writing is concerned primarily with depicting language as operating within a social, behavioural framework, neo-Modernist writing provides extensive examples of internalised explorations of the experience of literature as self-reflexive artifice. Hence, the proliferation of duplicates, doubles, mirrors, labyrinths, libraries, and recessed structures throughout the work of Barth, Borges and Nabokov, all of whom also in some way retain the Modernist's investment in the text as the repository of value, uniqueness and significance. In contrast we find in post-Modernism the widespread use of surface dislocations and the repudiation of the idea of the text as providing the 'consolations' of perfection and harmony. While, for example, we find in Nabokov's fiction quite spectacular verbal pyrotechnics the overall effect is dampened by the consistency and plausibility within his structures; similarly, Gilbert Sorrentino's declaration for an 'art (of) rigorous selection'⁷² seems a preference akin to that of Maupassant who observed that 'To give an account of everything would be impossible...Selection is therefore necessary'.⁷³ Such fastidiousness, while typical of neo-Modernist writing, is poles apart from that of Burroughs, Sukenick, Barthelme, Reed, Coover and Katz, all of whom celebrate the indiscriminate and explore the meaningful meaningfulness of insignificant surfaces.

It is less appropriate, however, to identify John Barth's fiction as representing an extension of Modernism, since in his

work we find a synthesis of pre-Modernist and Modernist assumptions. Preferring to 'rebel along traditional lines',⁷⁴ Barth retains an interest in 'grammar, punctuation...even characterization! Even plot!',⁷⁵ and has turned back for inspiration to writers like Fielding and Smollett. Through parody, burlesque, ironic commentary, and what Poirier refers to as the 'clarity of most of (his) allegorical items',⁷⁶ Barth provides a symbolic affirmation that transcends conflict. According to Barth his friend John Hawkes sees the former's fiction as being 'spun out against a kind of nothingness...a shield against...nothingness',⁷⁷ and Barth's assessment of his own work make similar assumptions: he perceives of a 'chaos and anarchy of indiscrimination that threatens the novel' against which he hopes 'novels like LETTERS are shores or buttresses'.⁷⁸

At the same time as it rejects such faith in the text as the provider of a transcendent authority and authenticity post-Modernism confronts an entirety of meaning systems of the culture of which literature is but one form with multipolar, de-hierarchized texts which have been stripped of any consistent unitary moments or perspectives. In denying form, therefore, post-Modernism is essentially different from so-called 'concrete' and 'restricted' compositions: while such works provide perhaps the clearest example of contemporary writing's rejection of the traditional concepts of depth, focus and continuity their obsessive play with form and structure places them closer to the European and cosmopolitan avant-garde, and indeed, traditional

poetic forms, than with post-Modernist American writing.

Restricted fictions like Georges Perec's La Disparition (1969) which avoids the use of the letter 'e' and the same writer's Alphabets (1976) which is made up of one hundred and seventy-six poems of eleven lines, each line being made up of eleven letters, is representative of the avant-garde's interest in formal design and the possibilities of literary 'limitation'. The Franco-American writer, Raymond Federman, works within similar confines: Take It or Leave It is composed as typescript (not type) and is arranged into regular page shape by the writer working within the limitations of the typewriter with each line made up of sixty characters and spaces, there being no hyphenation or any ragged right-hand page margin permitted by the rules of this particular literary game.

While 'concrete' forms exploit 'the use of graphic space as...an organizing agent',⁷⁹ the restricted forms of works like La Disparition work within the limits of alphabetical manipulation. Perhaps the most famous contemporary example of this idea is to be found in Walter Abish's Alphabetical Africa where the chapters run from 'A' to 'Z' and back again, 'Z' to 'A', with chapter 'A' using only words beginning with the letter 'a', chapter 'B' using only words beginning with the letters 'a' and 'b', chapter 'C' using only words beginning with the letters 'a', 'b', or 'c', and so forth. As the text moves out of its confinement and then back again we experience language in the process of generating meaning and the book as a network of words, all of which reflects

the author's interest in 'fiction exploring itself...turning inward and measuring by means of its mirror image of life forms, the encoded development of itself'.⁸⁰

In contrast with such extreme formalism the post-Modernist text struggles to pass beyond the limits imposed by language's prescriptive features towards an imaginative engagement with the world, albeit a world conceived of as a plurality of sign systems. There are, however, contemporary innovative writers who do not observe the incestuous practices of neo-Modernism, but who, nevertheless, we would hesitate to call post-Modernists. Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon are not like most neo-Modernists obsessively concerned with confusing the product of art with the conditions of its conception, but while they dispense with the idea of the text providing a scaled relation to the world and as only confined within its own linguistic playground, they instead exaggerate form and structure to a point at which any capacity for identification and arrangement suffers an overload. This sort of excess is an intentional comment on the human propensity for meaning-seeking but in exaggerating form and structure both writers provide the antithesis of post-Modernism's refusal of order and coherence. Pynchon's realistic texture, his dense, tight continuity of form and subject is what separates him from a writer like, for example, Steve Katz: in Gravity's Rainbow 'experimental form organizes experience, as...paranoia organizes the chains of cause and effect we invent',⁸¹ and while we find in this novel an endless transformation and resurgence of codes, the

text holds their dissemination in check because of the presence of a powerful controlling intelligence which constantly re-codifies what is being dispersed and exchanged. While we can agree that, compared with post-Modernist fiction, Robbe-Grillet's work is 'arty and serious: a kind of neo-neo-Classicism',⁸² we can also respond affirmatively to Rudolf Wurlitzer's view of Pynchon's fiction that it represents the product of an East Coast, rather than a West Coast, state of mind. The difference for Wurlitzer is that:

forms have disintegrated here (on the East Coast) so you're involved in disintegration. But out there (on the West Coast) forms just aren't there⁸³

The post-Modernist writer like the characters he creates realizes that successful self-definition depends on developing techniques of disruption, evasion and denial in order to test and, hopefully, subvert the perceived threats and determining systems of an hostile world. Uniquely, however, as we have argued, post-Modernist fiction expands the categories of literary disruption beyond the conventions of Modernism and neo-Modernism and rejects the notion of the writer's privileged personal perspective and language, and the sense of unity and coherence which permits art to resolve, organise and transcend the social situation. Furthermore, post-Modernism exhibits no faith in the capacities of self-knowledge and mastery, in the possibility of an ultimate knowledge of any psychological or external worlds.

Resolutely writing from within the social context and paying particular attention to society's codes of behaviour, values and

discourse the post-Modernist confronts an environment of fictions, of sign systems, obscure codes, pop images, media messages and the 'stuffing' of popular culture and language, all of which comprise a fragmented cultural and social reality which, nevertheless, adds up to a totality of meaning-saturated systems which define the dimensions and significances of individual statement and action. Hence, post-Modernist writing is continually coming up against and exploring the limits and nature of contemporary culture and its potentially engulfing qualities. To survive it is essential to deny and deflect the shaping and limiting pressures of contemporaneity which may seem neutral and benign but which has, in reality, a capacity for ~~entangling~~ man in the snares of totalization and control. Frequently, therefore, characters in post-Modernist fiction preserve a degree of control by resisting knowledge and experience without suffering the anguish of withdrawal:

Why try to know anything about a place? The customs, the size, the weather, the people, the economy, the politics, the fish, the suntan techniques, the games, the swimming. It is better to stay indoors and not mess around with useless experiences...Do nothing, want nothing...No memories; if they start to intrude, invent them...No connections. Narrow all possibilities ...That's the ticket⁸⁴

Perceiving all cognition, action, thought and articulation to be shaped if not determined by a social domain which has the effect of fixing identity and language into rigidity and permanence the post-Modernist character actively resists any ultimate position and perspective. He 'do(es) not learn. There are no insights'⁸⁵ into the nature of his condition since

insights imply at least a recoverable moment when realization provides the consolations of illusion and a sense of redemption through absolute truth. There are, in post-Modernism, no attempts to 'dispell magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable'.⁸⁶ Instead, the post-Modernist acknowledges only that 'the flash of insight reveals the void', that the 'only kind of epiphany that can occur...would be a negative epiphany'.⁸⁷

The moment of manifestation is for the post-Modernist an illusion spawned by an authoritarian system projecting concepts of form and finality, and is therefore to be undermined by themes and forms which dissolve outcome and permanence. In Burroughs's fiction images, identities and language never settle; all acts are acts of the instant before the thinking process 'freezes' and creates its own dimensions. Randomness, momentum and improvisation keep rigidity at bay. Like all aspects of human activity, sex for Burroughs has to be experienced without recourse to thought, without falling into linguistic concepts which are substitutes for real experience. Alertness is the only way to ensure that you are 'not taken in by the sex agents of the enemy who move in to soften you up with sentimentality and sexual frustration to buy ersatz goo of their copy planet'.⁸⁸

Burroughs's anti-formal strategies, like those of all post-Modernists, are directed at social structures and the very medium of literature which is a product of society. Language is false because it imposes the appearance of stability and permanence on discontinuity and mutation and disqualifies the ideal of unfettered

and 'pure' expression. The innovative writer denies syntax because syntax denies the potential meaning of language.

Language is totalitarian because it denies freedom:

syntax, traditionally, is the unity, the continuity of words, the law which dominates them...reduces their multiplicity, controls their violence, and...fixes them into place, a space, prescribes an order to them... prevents them from wandering⁸⁹

The post-Modernist writer takes on the responsibility for re-possessing meaning through the dislocation of 'impure' forms which have assumed a cultural and ideological dominance: narrative becomes transformed into non-narrative through techniques designed to undercut any aesthetic and moral systems of unification. For Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the Tralfamadorian 'novels' in Slaughterhouse 5 provide exemplary fictions towards which his own novels reach. The Tralfamadorian work possesses 'no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects',⁹⁰ while, in a similar vein, Ron Sukenick compares the post-Modernist novel to the Bossa Nova which has 'no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence, no verisimilitude, no imitation, no allegory, no symbolism, no subject matter, no "meaning"'.⁹¹ The structure, syntax, even the forms of words in the post-Modernist novel become strained and broken as the writer struggles with the 'almost impossible (task) of specifically not writing fiction, of unwriting novels'.⁹²

Such writing becomes situated within a framework undergoing constant change and fragmentation, and, moreover, attempts to win a degree of independence within the cultural and social

totality without collapsing genuine innovative strategies into restorative features. Post-Modernism is, therefore, 'distrustful of self-protective irony',⁹³ since, as Barthes has stated, the effect of irony is to show the superiority of one voice over another which closes off the plurality of codes. Moreover, post-Modernism's treatment of myth is similarly dismissive. Those mythic parallels, which for Ezra Pound provided a 'scaffold, a means of construction',⁹⁴ become subverted by the post-Modernist's parodic impulse: in Barthelme and Katz in particular the 'mythical elements are not the "key" to the meaning...but are stylized as in themselves meaningless, or rather as meaning no more than what the text literally says, nothing "in between the lines"'.⁹⁵

The rejection of systems of comparison which intend a reference beyond the text is not confined to post-Modernism alone but on occasions has been expressed by neo-Modernist writers: in The End of the Road John Barth mocks the search for valuational stability through the invention of mythic schemes as 'mythotherapy', while Gilbert Sorrentino reveals a distaste for metaphoric systems in his statement that 'I don't think anything is alike. I never try to compare anything because I don't think that anything can be compared'.⁹⁶ Post-Modernism, however, is more comprehensively subversive, since it tends to undermine comparison through contradiction and arbitrariness and does without the familiar-looking narrative appearance and order of Pynchon and Robbe-Grillet. Post-Modernist comparisons intend the destruction of clarity and focus of traditional metaphorising by presenting all things as

equally significant--there being no deeper meaning behind the thing described. Images of an entirely incompatible nature are subsequently yoked together by post-Modernist writers in an attempt to destroy the vestiges of any finite system of relationship. Post-Modernist comparisons promise an infinity of dissimilarity:

At first, Max Marvelous did not like drowning. The water in his lungs was heavy and unnatural. He thought of a cake his father once had baked...He felt as if that cake was in his lungs...his lungs felt...like the muffler on an old Ford truck in which he had delivered the Baltimore Sun...Drowning takes a long time...There is time to eat a sandwich...Max Marvelous would have enjoyed a grilled ham and cheese. Hold the pickles⁹⁷

This playful expansiveness subverts the conventions of comparison whereby one thing is likened to another within the bounds of logical replacement. The differences here between writers like Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon and post-Modernists like Richard Brautigan need perhaps to be further examined, though it is the respective techniques of subversion, not their respective subversive impulses which are at issue here. Robbe-Grillet's view that 'Metaphor...is never an innocent figure of speech'⁹⁸ is one which would be perfectly acceptable to post-Modernists, but, of course, his refusal to metaphorise is poles apart from, say, Richard Brautigan's celebration of analogy. In the latter's 'Homage to the San Francisco YMCA', for instance, the metaphysical implications of conventional metaphorising is brought solidly down to earth as a lover of poetry is described as replacing his plumbing system with literature:

He turned off the water and took out the pipes and put in John Donne to replace them...He took out his bathtub and put in William Shakespeare...He took out his kitchen sink and put in Emily Dickinson⁹⁹

This sort of exaggeration refutes the possibility of reconciliation which is found in conventional forms which 'create(s) the expectation of unity of differences and relies upon the illusion of order out of disorder and unity from disparity'.¹⁰⁰ but does so through an excess of momentum. Similarly, Pynchon's expansiveness invites discord, but whereas the central sign of V attracts an infinity of response, the attraction is towards a finite source--namely, 'V'--with interpretation projected upon a centralized and centralizing focal point.

As it carries the 'reader across great expanses of metaphorical connections',¹⁰¹ the post-Modernist novel shifts from the self-consciously meticulously constructed Modernist and neo-Modernist works towards a less severe and ~~symmetrical~~ aesthetic. Frequently the writer assumes the guise of the comedian with jokes more of vaudeville than the academy:

'Waiter', she said, 'there's...a needle in my soup'
'I'm sorry, madam', I said, 'that's a typographical error.
That should have been a noodle'¹⁰²

Authorial interjections of this type are frequently made in neo-Modernist writing also, though always in order to sustain a serious aesthetic perspective. Gilbert Sorrentino frequently deconstructs his narratives in order to confirm the artifice of fiction:

Dick was drinking dry bourbon manhattans. If you don't think that's hip, fuck you. What would you like him to be drinking. A Clover Club?¹⁰³

But Sorrentino's declared interest in 'prose which is absolutely cold, structured, and chaste',¹⁰⁴ argues for a fiction of precise authority, something underlined by his statement that

his novel The Sky Changes was organised simply as 'a way of trying to structure the total degradation and destruction that befalls a family'.¹⁰⁵

The fiction of the neo-Modernist like Sorrentino makes also serious claims for the priorities of art and the special status of the artist. In contrast, post-Modernist fiction provides no authoritative voices or perspectives, only a confession of indecision about the artist and his material:

You know as well as I do that I don't see where I'm going...I'm just trying these empty spaces with luminous motion and things. Things, things, things.¹⁰⁶

Writers like Donald Barthelme who put 'end to end and next to next',¹⁰⁷ are dwelling over 'things' not as a means of imitating conditions and situations in the external world, however, but as a means of providing insights into the infinity of meaning contained within contradictory messages clamouring to be eternalised and regulated into concrete meaning systems. This is the essential reason why post-Modernists avoid any hierarchal arrangement of significance on the grounds that any such arrangement is of an ideological nature. Yet rather than the flat, cold prose of a writer like Robbe-Grillet who expresses similar ideas to those of the American post-Modernist writers, the latter's techniques reflect a deliberately unstructured perspective which expresses the irreconcilable, fragmentary nature of things and the denial of unity and order which can be used to sustain an oppressive aesthetic, moral and social system. The bewilderingly heterogeneous images of post-Modernism are so conflicting and unconnected because

for the post-Modernist artist there can be no reference to the nature of the 'real' since there is no real nature of things to be referred to; relationships and significance are seen as imposed systems which have no necessary or 'natural' qualities, but unlike the neo-Modernist writer like Robbe-Grillet who retains a structure if only to mislead the meaning-seekers, and who allows no possibility of any transcendent meaning whatever, the post-Modernist dispenses with any notion of unity or equilibrium (and, furthermore, does allow for the possibility of meaning - albeit a possibility never to be recognised or realized - to be found within a conflicting and discontinuous sociality). Frequently, the reader of a post-Modernist work is subjected to an avalanche of images which are, by turns, enticing and frustrating, and, unlike many neo-Modernist works, good fun:

Lyn began to undress. Her chest always had a surprising effect. Rivers would begin to run in Russia when she laid it bare, there in the evening air. A big derby scrow, all lighted up, would be floating down the river so created, and Gorky would be aboard it reading Stevenson and Rilke. A horrible strawberry milky shine would gloze the eastern sky. Camels would refuse to accompany their masters to the dawn manufactory. At Lake Michigan Horror Castle the waters would freeze. Nothing else would be possible for the undressed model speeding in the red impossible through Shanghai. Ireland's hand would be lighted up. The picknickers¹⁰⁸ would desert the old Greek theatre as far as Biarritz

In this sort of text meaning is dispersed so widely that it becomes impossible to locate anything within a single meaningful perspective; in conventional terms, it does not make sense, since we conventionally read improbabilities in accordance with the expectation that they will be bound by the probability which we

take to operate in the experiential world we know. Recognition in The Red Robins, as in similar works, remains at the point of non-accretion, promising but never delivering the consolation of confirming patterns.

The post-Modernist novel provides a sense of freedom from the necessity of making the aesthetic statement revalue and reconstitute experience. All structures including that of history become subjected to deconstructive energies. According to Nietzsche 'everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions',¹⁰⁹ and it is this analysis and critique of historical process which underpins the work of a host of contemporary innovative writers who do, however, retain considerable difference in their assessment of historical uncertainties. Writing out of the myth-infused Modernist tradition of Latin-American innovative fiction Carlos Fuentes sees history as memory:

History is only what we remember of history. It is our creation. But it doesn't exist if we don't remember it. That is, if we don't imagine it¹¹⁰

Furthermore, for Borges, like his character Mrs. Jauregui, history is memory is language: 'she recounted historical happenings, but always using the same words in the same order, as if they were the Lord's Prayer, so that I grew to suspect there were no longer any real images behind them'.¹¹¹ Locked in language, Mrs. Jáuregui's past, like the fiction of Borges himself, can refer only to a reality born of the ceaseless activity of words.

Contemporary American writers like Pynchon and Coover in

particular also challenge the notion that 'history may be retrieved by objective investigations of fact',¹¹² but history in American writing is usually shown as a series of accidents provided with a confirming structure which reflects ideology. This is particularly true of many contemporary black American writers for whom the historical process has been especially pervasive and insidious: history is seen as having been 'stolen' by whites determined on the suppression of contradictory or, at least, non-confirming ideas and beliefs. Narrative is so offensive to many black writers since its coherence and unity are seen as alien to black forms and distortive of black experience. The way out is for the artist to deny the structures and ideas of the prevailing system:

The denial of reality has been institutionalized in America, and any honest man, especially an artist, suffers because of it...Perhaps one way Negroes could force institutionalized dishonesty to crumble, and its apologizers to break and run, would be to turn crazy, to bring out a little American Dada, Ornette Coleman style¹¹³

Leroi Jones's manifesto of denial and derangement is translated by post-Modernist black writers like Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major into extreme forms of fictional disruption. Such writing abandons both conventional narrative forms and also the Richard Wright concept of the black protest novel, and while Reed and Major write, like Burroughs, from a pronounced political position, their writing springs ultimately from the black perception of the socio-political nature of subservience, exploitation and destruction. Blackness does not, however, provide the post-Modernist black writer with any ultimate structure, but permits him to challenge the

priorities of historically established systems. Shifts and movements out of positions and perspectives allows the writer to express his alienation from European-American culture 'without getting caught as an artist in a contraposed system'.¹¹⁴

The black post-Modernist's resistance to impose social and aesthetic forms marks post-Modernism's most visible political stance, but in 'embracing the freedom of disorder',¹¹⁵ both black and white post-Modernist writers are engaged in challenging the legitimacy claimed by and for convention structures and established systems. The militant Modernist position which holds that the 'truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality',¹¹⁶ is a position readily acceded to by post-Modernist aesthetics, as is the politically militant statement of Philip Sollers that 'he who will not write shall be written',¹¹⁷ but the Marxist or neo-Marxist perspectives these opinions reflect are largely absent in American writing, since, true to an American literary tradition, the specific political programme is to be avoided as yet another system imposed, a 'correct' line providing a theoretical basis for action. Nevertheless, it holds true that:

The forces of freedom which are in literature depend not on the writer's civil person, nor on his political commitment - for he is, after all, only a man among others - nor do they even depend on the doctrinal content of his work, but rather on the labor of displacement he brings to bear upon the language¹¹⁸

By denying any points of resolution and reconciliation the post-Modernist writer activates a constant process of repudiation of established and concrete forms. Like all innovative writing since the Modernist era the post-Modernist mounts an assault on

the prescriptive features of language which 'assumes the absolute self-presence of meaning'¹¹⁹ but while Modernism's tendency has been to move towards Pound's language 'charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree', post-Modernist works 'acquire significance by divesting themselves as far as possible of meaning',¹²⁰ though frequently we find the promise held out of fresh and new meanings being discovered and rebuilt upon the ruins of an old discredited system of communication.

The post-Modernist's rejection of order and coherence in life as in art itself allows for an indeterminateness of meaning which has to confront the problem that no one is able to utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. As deconstructions take place they are necessarily tainted by the 'traces' of meaning attached to the process of articulation itself. The struggle is, therefore, made from within an enclosed arena of language and meaning, but post-Modernism is unwilling to acquiesce in its own incarceration as is neo-Modernism which, as we have seen, suffers from an obsession with its own reflection. The post-Modernist novelists examined in detail below - Ronald Sukenick, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, and Steve Katz - are, we feel, the exemplary post-Modernist writers because they more than any other contemporary writers most tenaciously and consistently contest the text's assumptions and dictates. They expand the paradoxical movements of language and social codes into areas of unsubstantialized dimensions of meaning where significations

become released into potentially limitless forms of 'meaning'.

The techniques they favour--cancellation and erasure; fragmentation and discontinuity; game and play--are not, of course, the sole prerogatives of post-Modernist writers, but the various inhibitions of Modernist and neo-Modernist writing ensure such techniques remain as partial and tentative statements of literary dissent.

In contrast, the post-Modernists' refusal to make their techniques responsible to some ultimate and transcendent aesthetic or moral dimension commits writing to a radically different and disorientating set of values and standards, and places post-Modernist writing within an entirely new circuit of communication.

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER ONE

CANCELLATION AND ERASURE

CHAPTER ONE

Part One: Introduction

Springing from historical and social conditions which reached an apogee during the latter part of the nineteenth century Realism made an 'assumption of a total world'.¹ The novel translated this into fictional totalities and resolutions:

systematic use of the past definite tense and of the third person, the unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, a regular graph of the emotions, the way each episode tended towards an end, etc.--everything aimed at imposing the image of a stable universe, coherent, continuous, univocal, and wholly decipherable²

As the Realistic novel 'integrates, organizes, harmonizes',³ it compresses an infinity of experience into a recognisable dimension; faced with 'infinite variety...The artist...coins symbols',⁴ and thereby diminishes ambiguity and contradiction through techniques of reduction. In the narrative so constructed there has always to be a high degree of thematic and linguistic consistency and predictability: surprises there are, but allowed only to obtrude from within an overall picture of plausibility.

The Realistic novel provides therefore a series of confirmations, and achieves this through a constant denial of its own conventions. At its most fundamental this takes place at the level of language. The Realistic ideal is a transparent 'one-to-one' correspondence between a work of art in language, and the 'reality' or 'nature' to which the work is presupposed to 'refer'. Reality is 'out

there', with 'truth nothing but the adequation of the ideas in our heads with the things themselves of which they are the pictures'.⁵ To write is to reproduce a pre-existing meaning and to mask fiction's own fictionality. The truly Realistic would be all reference, all description, devoid of extractable story. It follows, therefore, that exactitude is not dependent on:

taking greater pains, it is not a rhetorical increment in value, as though things were increasingly well described--but of a change of code: the (remote) model of description is no oratorical discourse (nothing at all is being 'painted'), but a kind of lexicographical artifact⁶

This insight is amply borne out by Flaubert: as he displays the conventions of Realism Flaubert transcends the mimetic by embedding inside convention the seeds of convention's downfall. The desire to show a world is replaced by the desire to show language in the process of showing, with detail fuelling not recognition but denial. In Bouvard et Pécuchet we witness the ridicule of the positivist ideal as Flaubert's two mindless characters seek to know and name their world. Alongside this Flaubert shows language actually conspiring against the process of recognition and certainty:

Opposite them were the fields, on the right a barn, with the church-tower, and on the left a screen of poplars.

Two main paths, forming a cross, divided the garden into four sections. Vegetables were included in the beds, where here and there dwarf cypresses and fruit-trees grew. On one side an arbour ended at a vine-clad mound, on the other a wall supported espaliers. Beyond the wall there was an orchard, after the clipped hedge, a clump of trees; behind the fence, a little lane⁷

This exhuberence of description, almost description for its own sake, serves no obvious purpose: it prompts the reader into a series of expectations which never seem to conclude in thematic or structural entailments. The result is a denial of meaning amid an abundance of potential meaning. The walls, fences and screens of the passage are effective in their capacity to prohibit penetration into the narrative: we are held up, not carried, by language, and drawn thereby into a world of potentially 'pure' description and threatened with an overload of information making it difficult to synthesize information into story.

If the metonymic excess found in Bouvard et Pécuchet overwhelms the reader with detail, in Madame Bovary metaphoric excess overwhelms through comparison. Charles Bovary's cap is described as one of those:

headgears of composite order, in which we can find traces of the bearskin, shako, billycock hat, sealskin cap, and cotton nightcap; one of those poor things, in fine, whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face. Oval, stiffened with whalebone, it began with three round knobs; then came in succession lozenges of velvet and rabbit-skin separated by a red band; after that a sort of bag that ended in a cardboard polygon covered with complicated braiding, from which hung, at the end of a long thin cord, small twisted gold threads in the manner of a tassel. The cap was new; its peak shone⁸

Over totalization creates minimum message value: the refusal to focus on any stable comparison cancels definitive reference, and serves only to foreground linguistic priority as Charles's cap becomes a category of descriptive energy impossible to contain within the bounds of conventional discourse.

According to Robbe-Grillet Charles's 'hat...was an enormous scandal'⁹ because it represented a deviation from the norms of Realistic description, creating a rupture between the world and the text which could not satisfactorily be bridged. In Joyce we find a similar denial of both conventional proposition and transparent prose:

no possibilities...are excluded and with this overload of sense we fall into nonsense. Instead of the identities shining through and effacing the writing, the progressive adding of more and more identities achieves the opposite effect¹⁰

An abundance of depiction without priority shows a world which is 'neither...meaningful or absurd' but which 'quite simply is',¹¹ with detail specified but never directed towards significance. Too much information, whether in Flaubert, Joyce, or the contemporary novel, deliberately exaggerates the illusionism of description by presenting a reductio ad absurdum of the conventional narrative's formal conditions, providing the terrifying prospect of eternal discourse which, 'pure' and 'exact', overloads the capacity to synthesize and respond. Non-selectivity and inclusion (themselves, of course, an illusion) exposes the ambition of totality by allowing the presence of the phenomenal world to gain ascendancy over any system which seeks to enclose it.

Roland Barthes has spoken of the rigorously equal pressure over the surface of a Robbe-Grillet narrative, the only identifiable sense of design emerging from repetition, from structure rather than any conventional sense of plot, story and predictable narrative direction. For Robbe-Grillet the negative qualities

of excess shows there to be nothing 'beyond the thing described... nothing supernatural hidden behind it', and the 'greater the accumulation of minutiae...the more the object loses its depth'.¹² His metaphor-free descriptions present a form of metonymic overkill which draws the reader into a world almost impossible to translate into recognition. In The Voyeur, for example, we read:

The pier, which seemed longer than it actually was as an effect of perspective, extended from both sides of this base line in a cluster of parallels describing, with a precision accentuated even more sharply by the morning light, a series of elongated planes alternately horizontal and vertical; the crest of the massive parapet that protected the tidal basin from the open sea, the inner wall of the parapet, the jetty along the top of the pier, and the vertical embankment that plunged straight into the water of the harbor. The two vertical surfaces were in shadow, the other two brilliantly lit by the sun - the whole breadth of the parapet and all of the jetty save for one dark narrow strip: the shadow cast by the parapet. Theoretically, the reversed image of the entire group could be seen reflected in the harbor water, and, on the surface, still within the same play of parallels, the shadow cast by the vertical embankment extending straight toward the quay¹³

Such description creates an impenetrable surface; the text remains stubbornly tied to its own conditions and demonstrates that language only 'communicates itself'.¹⁴ By cancelling narrative recognition in this way Robbe-Grillet provides works which frustrate and defeat the urge to conceptualise:

The reader is beginning to get a glimpse of something... and thinks that this something is going to be made clearer. But the lines of the drawing go on accumulating, and it becomes overloaded; they contradict each other, and change places until the very construction of the image renders it more and more uncertain. A few more paragraphs, and when the description is complete, you discover that it hasn't left anything permanent behind¹⁵

Along with Robbe-Grillet, Thomas Pynchon trades in metaphoric fallacy. However, where Robbe-Grillet 'sees in metaphor a tragic distortion of reality, Pynchon sees it transforming the human into the inanimate'.¹⁶ Throughout Pynchon's fiction we come across angles, intersections, linear patterns and numerically charted positions, all of which suggest, of course, the most enduring of human dreams and needs--the sense that we live among geometry and systems of coherence. Confronted with a nightmare of shapelessness man gives shape and form, symmetry, line and angle:

Halfway between the water and the coarse sea-grass, a long stretch of pipe and barbed wire rings in the wind. The black latticework is propped up by longer slanting braces, lances pointing out to sea. An abandoned and mathematical look: stripped to the force-vectors holding it where it is, doubled up in places one row behind another, moving as Pointsman and Mexico begin to move again, backward in thick moire, repeated uprights in parallax against repeated diagonals, and¹⁷ the snarls of wire below interfering more at random

It is this human capacity for system building which Pynchon effectively uses against itself by satisfying appetite to excess. Information on a vast scale proves too much to absorb and reaches a point at which information deteriorates into negative effect. Instead of producing meaning, information devours its own content, and the self, needing accurate patterns with which to defend itself against disorder, is taunted by tentative meanings which never reach the level of certainty--either in life or in terms of narrative dimension. Like Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon develops erasure and cancellation through negation of conventional fictional proportion-but out of erasure emerges a consistency of negative recognitions very unlike the subversion of unity

and coherence found in post-Modernist fiction which features erasure and cancellation as a series of movements and shifts which cannot be identified as being in any way concerned with form and structure.

Negative excess destroys the necessary proportions of Realistic forms. Repetition works in a similar way by disrupting conventional narrative's temporal arrangement by introducing the lack of climatic resonance, the sense of moving forward towards a future point. A series of repetitions also creates a series of 'redundancies' which have, of course, no place in the Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian scheme of things which holds that everything in the work of art exists for some ultimate purpose. The Classical requirement is for every part of the text to have some necessary function and 'the very idea...of something in a text which can have the effect of cancelling out some earlier part of the text and returning the reader to where he was earlier...seems contrary to that principle'.¹⁸ However, non-linear forms as found in non-western cultures generate a world view which appears to contradict 'civilised' intuitions, but do seem to confirm Modernist assumptions and practices (which in turn themselves run counter to traditional western culture). The net of linguistic form has undeniably been cast over every aspect of western life:

1. Records, diaries, book-keeping, accounting, mathematics stimulated by accounting.
2. Interest in exact sequence, dating, calendars, chronology, clocks, time, wages, time graphs, time as used in physics.
3. Annals, histories, the historical attitude, interest in the past, archaeology, attitudes of introjection toward past periods, e.g., classicism, romanticism¹⁹

In contrast, Malinowsky and others pointed to what they called 'verbal magic', forms which through repetition produces a feeling of 'higher reality', a condition achieved through the manipulation of conventional speech patterns. The adoption of non-sequential, non-linear forms creates the conditions of potential change by redefining world views in terms of a dislocation of language, and hence the world that language brings into being. Repetition, it is claimed, is essentially 'natural'. It is a tool:

whose activity can lead to the annihilation of boredom, to the vitality of language, to the increasing intensity of time and image through its fundamental sympathy with the rhythms of our desires, of our existence²⁰

Linguistic and verbal repetition has assumed a place of considerable importance in twentieth century art. If the 'ordering of events in time is one of the most fundamental characteristics of any story',²¹ the ordering of events in 'non-time', destroys the story, chronology and the causal relationships between events. By returning the work to a previous point or by repeating certain words, motifs, or events over and over again linear momentum is jettisoned in favour of 'negative' non-development or 'stillness' which holds up or abandons resolutions. In the novel repetition reveals 'the potential of each moment, each word, each gesture and each event...potential denied by the linear way we live our lives'.²²

Whether non-linear forms owe their existence to non-Christian systems, the influence of scientific and philosophical developments, or cultural/political insights, the contemporary novel since Modernism reveals the influence in a profound fashion. The

negation of linearity in favour of some alternative form has been called by Robbe-Grillet the 'present...continually inventing itself';²³ also 'presentness' appears in Joyce's 'conception of the continuous present tense'...William James's 'specious present' and Bergson's 'real, concrete, live, present'.²⁴ Beckett also refers to the 'instantaneous present', while Gertrude Stein used the expressions 'prolonged present' and 'continuous present'. Gertrude Stein's novels, and especially her later novels, seem to have neither:

beginning nor end, only duration of feeling and incident
...do not progress from one point to another, but
establish themselves deeper and deeper in a perpetual
mode of existence²⁵

Stein's desire to destroy the referential operation of words in order to get them back 'clean' required of her that language should be endlessly recast. In her vast novel The Making of Americans the repetitive hammer blows of language found in her earlier works are amplified into an unbroken assault upon the reader's senses. The continuous cycle of time in the novel moves in endless repetitions: instead of a Buddenbrooks-like meticulous chronicle of history and an eventual bringing together of seemingly irrelevant and unconnected detail, Stein arrests narrative in favour of present emphasis impossible to read and interpret as the inevitable and purposeful movement of time and human history:

Doing something is done by some in family living.
Some family living is existing. Some are doing
something in family living. Some one in a family
living is doing something and family living is existing
and family living is going on being existing and that
one is doing something in family living. That one
has been doing something in family living, that one is

doing something in family living, that one is going to be doing something in family living. That one has been doing something in family living and that one is doing that thing and any one in the family living is being one being in the family living and that one doing something in the family living is completely remembering that every one being in the family living is in the family living²⁶

Such is narrative's power to reinforce habitual perception that innovation of this type proves very effective in destroying the link between art and experience. The novel provides, therefore, the ideal place to examine conventions at work and is the ideal form with which to disrupt conventional expectations. Viktor Shklovsky, one of the foremost Formalists, demanded fiction aspire to a condition of defamiliarisation found in poetry. The novel becomes therefore intrinsically literary, a self-sufficient entity, rather than a window through which other entities may be glimpsed. In these terms the critic is given the task of tracing 'precisely these breaks which constitute the literariness of a work'.²⁷

In 1923 Shklovsky published Zoo: Or Letters Not About Love, a novel intended to embody Formalist aesthetics within fictional form. In the novel Shklovsky typically forces the text to reveal its lack of innocence, and does so by transforming epistolary form, traditionally one of the most contrived means of asserting the novel's 'reliability', in order to reveal the novel's essential artificiality. Zoo contains real letters, but even more disturbingly includes pages the writer has erased.

Erasure and cancellation are perfect examples of rule-breaking. A central tenet of Formalism was that the vitality of the processes of art depended upon its devices being shown in action--

such alienating techniques are intended to shock the reader out of the anaesthetic grip language maintains on him. There is, moreover, a pronounced political dimension at work here, with Formalism's 'making strange' one of the devices used by artists and theorists to deny the 'objectivity' of capitalist society and consciousness. To counter the 'innocent' work the acts of creating, reading and criticism become themselves counter-activities committed to revelation and understanding. By cancelling out parts of his novel and thus revealing the work in its process of construction, Shklovsky shatters the illusion that the novel is a natural and accurate transcription of the real and we are reminded that any correspondence between words and things must be a correspondence of language, itself a convention and therefore the locus of ideology.

The sense of the dominance of language has led Jacques Derrida to follow a similar practice to that of the Formalists by writing sous rature (under erasure). By crossing out words and then printing together word(s) and deletion marks (XXX), Derrida is indicating that the word is necessarily inaccurate and, therefore, to be crossed out; since the word is necessary it remains legible. In examining familiar things, Derrida is saying, we come to such unfamiliar conclusions as we describe such things because our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. Writing under erasure is the mark of this contortion. The strategy is then one of using the only available language we have while refusing to subscribe to its premises, or operating according to the vocabulary of the very thing one delimits.

While the foregrounding of language and convention through either erasure or the retention of mistakes remains quite rare in literature it is nevertheless possible to break down such techniques into extrinsic and intrinsic forms - by contrasting Shklovsky-like cancellation (XXX) with internal distortions which employ language itself, for example, use of the words 'erase' or 'strike', to effect negation of a foregoing passage.

Intrinsic cancellation is usually employed in conjunction with other disruptive techniques rather than in isolation, and is sometimes used to disrupt the narrative which appears relatively conventional (and in a way which induces surprise because of the tentative manner in which this disturbance is applied). In Russell Banks's 'With Che in New Hampshire' cancellation registers a multiplicity of uncertainties within the narrator and the writer. The narrator of the story, long away from home, imagines his reception on his return:

'I'll tell you, Doc, I'm hoping this time the boy's come home for good, 'cause the family'll be needing him up there'.
'They sure as hell do, Bob. And by gawd, we need him down here, to...'.
'

This is immediately followed by:

No. Erase that remark. Wipe it out. Doc would never talk such a thing, let alone say it, and Bob McAllister hates and distrusts me. I'm sure.²⁸

Conventional though this appears, the imaginative creation of the future is, in fact, only one example of the narrator creating and then recreating himself over and over again as if planning a novel about his own experiences which are never plausible or consistent. The writer appears engaged in a

process of fantasising at the same time as his character is engaged in the same thing. We have, therefore, a realistic-looking situation in which the character is placed but which the character himself continually contradicts by his flights of imagination. Two levels of cancellation are therefore established as the writer's world and that of his character are erased under the pressures of 'honesty'. Art and the creation of art effectively pass back and forwards between usually separate and separated levels of expression.

The impact of extrinsic forms of cancellation are, however, considerably more spectacular due to their visual qualities. In one of the most daring of contemporary innovative works of fiction, G. Cabrera Infante's Three Trapped Tigers, it is cancellations like, 'There were a number of ~~Officers-of-the~~ ~~marines~~ naval officers...',²⁴ which are the most provocative of the author's numerous experimental devices. Even more 'shocking' are the Shklovsky-like cancellations found in Earl M. Rauch's novel Dirty Pictures from the Prom. In Rauch's work whole pages are scored out as the novel is shown in the process of being written and rewritten. The novel exists at the proof stage, with the author and editor providing a commentary on the progress(?) of the novel. They discuss the use of symbolism, technique, and the placement in the text of certain obscene drawings:

THE EDITOR: What do you think of putting Creynaldo's first sketch of the vulva here instead of where we originally had it?...

THE AUTHOR: I certainly have no objection...stuck off by itself somewhere, some people might think the drawing is only a gimmick...And I don't want that. I detest self consciousness³⁰

Perhaps mistaking post-Modernism for ineptitude the editor chides the author for his lack of formal discipline:

Artists have the knack of rearranging disorganised perceptions into a pattern.³¹ You never quite seem able to get the knack of it³¹

As the editor's voice takes on a controlling insistence passages become cancelled on his advice, although the complex story of the novel - which is supposed to concern a younger brother's use of his older, dead, brother's classic novel, material from his own life and the life of the dead brother - never becomes resolved.

Like Rauch's novel, Madeline Gine's Word Rain makes extensive use of extrinsic cancellation, but in addition, uses word games, mathematical puzzles, 'special' language, visual design, and the intrinsic cancellation ('Delete') of rejected passages. The presence of the writer or the reader of Word Rain is signalled, moreover, by the reproduction of thumbs across a number of pages. The novel (if the term is appropriate in this context) provides an unyielding linguistic surface and holds the process of reading firmly within textual dimensions alone, charting the activities of writing to vertigo inducing heights. Within the work, however, there does exist an underlying story which appears and then quickly disappears under the weight of language and digression. This takes the form of a sort of horror story:

an old man came into the room from behind them. He told them not to turn around. His face was disfigured ...He asked for some water...it appeared that Mary was to bring it to him but with her eyes closed...she reached out and touched him. Her fingers became stuck in him. Horrified, Mary attempted to recoil. She was unable to release her fingers³²

This embryonic story never arrives, however. It is held up by frequent digression, and finally fades away:

Once Mary was pulled out of him, the old Man's story ceased to be told... He collapsed out of the room... I sniffed the page³³

This dispersal of story into the act of telling of its process of creation confirms the book's mockery of texts which attempt to persuade the reader of their 'reality', and Gins underlines this by prefacing the work with a plan of the house in which the book is written. Throughout the book we are given guided tours around the writer's home as the writer lets her attention stray. Unable to satisfactorily orientate himself within the text the reader is awarded the consolation of at least knowing where he is in the house. Elsewhere, Gins takes the unusual step of trying to capture exactly the process of reading her own novel. Mimesis is expressed at the level of structure as the text signifies the broken scanning of itself, with missing lines, repeated lines and words, scattered across the space of the page, and even a page which is printed (read) conventionally, then reprinted (re-read) backwards.

Significantly the novel quotes Nietzsche ('the prison house of language')-and the novel is language, as all literary works are, but unlike the writer like Nabokov who habitually establishes a tension between an identifiable world and that world as text, Gins in Word Rain achieves the ultimate in what we have chosen to call 'neo-Modernist' writing, by struggling to ensure that reference strays no further than words themselves. Words force upon the reader their self-referential attentions,

their status as signs without plasticity or expansiveness:

Each word on the page seemed ossified. The word face was a stone. The word guess was a flint. The words a, the, in, by, up, it, were pebbles. The word laughter was marble. Run was cartilage. Shelf was bone. Talk was on oak board. See was made of quartz. The word refrigerator was enameled. The word afternoon was concrete. The word iron was iron³⁴

Echoing Gertrude Stein's comment on writing as 'doing time' Gins laments that the 'trial of the imagination ends in the sentencing of words'. Gins is overwhelmed by language she feels unable to control in any meaningful way; the book seems to rain words until on the final page every word the book has used in its construction appears together, printed over each other in obliterating layers. Writing is finally submerged under the weight of language, becomes impossible even as an endless comment on its own resources.

In the fiction of Samuel Beckett a similar impossibility is registered. Negation and cancellation in Beckett signal an absence of epistemological and linguistic certainty as prose continually contests and then destroys itself through a series of denials and reversals. However, Beckett's early fiction does possess a degree of extractable story. In Watt Watt is shown as desiring absolute knowledge and essential meaning, and with this ambition in mind attempts to reach certainty through the expedient of examining all possibilities. He questions, then rejects, unable to rid himself of the desire to know, and therefore discover ultimate authority. Most paradoxical of all things is, for Watt, language:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot ...it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot...For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected...it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted³⁵

Watt, desperate in his 'need of semantic succour',³⁶ discovers that language is really 'meaningless': it conveys not truth but necessity. To escape meaninglessness Watt therefore creates his own language which becomes so opaque that Sam, who attempts to decode Watts increasingly complex private speech, admits finally that he is defeated by Watt's final linguistic system, though Sam has to admit he can 'recall no example of this'³⁷ system at all. Watt, it seems, has embraced silence, gone beyond words in search of 'true' meaning.

Beckett's endless circulations and contradictions show man in the grip of a negative momentum which prevails over form and flesh, with creation seemingly flung into reverse:

The fact is, it seems, that the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, the creature you were in the beginning, and the middle³⁸

What Beckett does is to affirm the negative, questioning the validity of those criteria by which fiction is rendered useful and believable. Instead of creating a world that simulates reality, Beckett presents situations that reject all concepts of truth, all epistemological claims, and confronts the reader with stark illusion, the statement of non-statement which, like 'truth' goes nowhere:

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to. I forget, no matter³⁹

Trapped inside a world of language they are forced to employ, Beckett's characters make circuitous journeys as they enact their entrapment, being reduced to immobility and impotency. That which is given in Beckett is later denied, such is the uncertainty of all things. In Malone Dies a voice intones:

An aeroplane passes, flying low with a noise like thunder. It is a noise quite unlike thunder, one says thunder but one does not think it, it is just a loud, fleeting noise, nothing more, unlike any other⁴⁰

In Beckett's late fiction syntax becomes so contradictory and ambiguous that meaning disintegrates as it cancels itself out as man's epistemological faculty, his way of knowing, becomes turned into the devious art of not knowing:

I returned to the bench, for the fourth or fifth time since I had abandoned it, at roughly the same hour, I mean roughly the same sky, no, I don't mean that either, for its always the same sky and never the same sky, what words are there for that, none I know, period⁴¹

Breaking up the traditional structure of fiction--plot, the deployment of characters situated in a definite time and place and engaged in purposeful action and meaningful dialogue--Beckett substitutes instead a monologue that proceeds to question everything, including its own interrogation, and in How It Is Beckett may well have reached the limits of self-destructing discourse--the book tells no story, can be read either backwards or forwards, 'is always beginning again and ending again a few words later'.⁴²

By presenting a series of repetitive and contradictory statements, the text is destroying claims of narrative to reflect the world and also commenting on the uncertainty

prevailing in that world. To Bloch in Peter Handke's The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick a simple act like posting postcards confirms that the world doesn't make sense: 'The empty postbox resounded as they fell into it. But the box was so tiny that nothing could resound in it'.⁴³ Robbe-Grillet's In the Labyrinth contradicts itself; it ends 'where it begins...there is no temporality, no successiveness...the same character is murdered four times over'.⁴⁴ In the words of Robbe-Grillet such novels 'constitute(s) reality' and there is 'no longer the slightest question of verisimilitude':⁴⁵

Outside it is raining, outside in the rain one has to walk with head bent...Outside it is cold, the wind blows between the bare, black branches...Outside the sun is shining, there is not a tree, not a bush to give shade⁴⁶

Strikingly similar to this is the self cancelling statement of Beckett's 'It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining'⁴⁷--which forms the concluding statement of Molloy.

In the novels of Gabriel Josipovici we find similar patterns. Reality is rendered as a conflicting experience, shifting and changing through a series of instant present moments seemingly divorced from the past and the future. Identity and events are intensely fluid; each narrative moment oscillates from state to state to non-state. Josipovici shows the neurotic's rebellion against time: the plots of his novels are therefore constructed in accordance with a human perception which deviates from normality, are circular rather than linear, repetitive rather than singular. His dialogue, like that of Beckett, has

an aimless and incomplete quality registering only the momentary flicker of the present holding out against the flow of time. Meaning is fragmented or hovers between words and out of reach of understanding. In Migrations we are told:

Everything is always on its way to something else...
Everything is turning into something else. All the
time. Only it never gets there because there too
is changing. Everything is slippery, we can't catch
it, can't hold on. Even words are like that⁴⁸

The novel moves back and forth between the different perspectives of at least half a dozen characters--or are these characters all the same person with a fragmented personality? Similarly, in The Present we are shown three different characters and four different, contradictory and repetitive narratives.

Josipovici's multiple and conflicting narratives are similar in structure to Robert Coover's 'The Baby Sitter' where multiple perspectives provide a confusion of voices and versions of events. However, whereas Coover's story explicitly decries resolution, Josipovici naturalises contradiction by placing distortion in 'diseased' perspective. In doing so, Josipovici challenges definitions of sanity/insanity and shows individuals attempting to escape from restraint and order by reinventing reality, but by entrusting rebellion to the 'sick' who often refuse to speak and who interpret reality in circular rather than linear terms Josipovici is merely providing human frameworks within which innovative form has to operate, more alienated Modernist-type figures whose essence, so the theory goes, has been distorted by sociality, but whose human features, nevertheless, are said to pre-exist in 'pure' form the facts

of an affecting materiality. Josipovici's characters are singular resistant centres allowing the writer his desired unity and the reader his comforts. Significantly, Graham Hough in his review of Josipovici's The Air We Breath, even as he is anxious to distance himself from the work's experimental features, correctly identifies the novel's essential conservatism:

The constant repetition clogs the texture, and in such a short book it means there is too much medium for the message. In the end of course we get it all sorted out⁴⁹ (my emphasis)

Josipovici, in common with some contemporary innovative writers, superimposes experimental form upon mimetic substance, thus requiring cancellation and erasure to be responsible to a pre-formed reality, but a reality rendered as some way distorted and impaired. Frequently Giles Gordon will shuffle his characters and events about so freely and with such disregard for consistency that situations are suggested which lie beyond the consistent features of everyday recognitions. Yet - and here a piece like 'Pictures From An Exhibition'⁵⁰ is exemplary - Gordon's writing displays its responsibility to a humanistic world view which sees literature as a moral instrument rather than an imaginative re-creation.

In contrast, other neo-Modernist cancellation displays an aesthetic rather than a moral dimension. In Chez Charlotte and Emily Jonathan Baumbach prints different versions of the same story side by side with Baumbach recounting to his wife the adventures of a character he has created. His wife, in turn, interrupts with her own story which is sometimes part of, sometimes

separate from the story of her husband, until Baumbach admits 'That's one version of what happened. There are at least two others'.⁵¹ The novel is, therefore, primarily concerned with the confusion and uncertainty which is an integral part of story-telling, with the author's imagination continually brought back to the business of writing.

The co-existence of conflicting and cancelling versions in post-Modernist writing expresses neither an overtly moral dimension or any concern with the inner laws of fiction alone. Instead, post-Modernism is concerned with the extent to which experience can be converted into a game of assemblage which does not have one pre-arranged outcome - but an unlimited number of them. For the post-Modernist the forms of reality are based on forms of invention: Richard Brautigan's fiction is typical in that it is founded upon 'self-negation and self-cancellation...a dynamic, arbitrarily changing, often self-contradictory multi-referentiality'.⁵² The tyrannies of the conventionalised categories of meaning become obliterated by Brautigan's meaningless associations which can take no ultimate form since once released they appear to breed newer and wilder affiliations. Meaning is not inwardly directed towards some terminal point of (literary) reference, but explodes outwards. A Confederate General From Big Sur concludes with first one, then two, then three, then four, then five endings, and then:

186,000 ENDINGS PER SECOND

Then there are more and more endings: the sixth, the 53rd, the 131st, the 9,435th ending, endings going faster and faster, more and more endings, faster and faster until this book is having 186,000 endings per second⁵³

The figure of 186,000 of course refers to the speed of light, at which point things (including novels) can no longer be regarded as material objects. The novel de-materializes by foregrounding the arbitrary process of concluding, and by resisting the conventional sequence of narrative order and transcendence the novel self-destructs. A different emphasis on climactic irresolution is found in John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman where cancelled endings gain considerable impact through interferring radically with the expectation of closure (though the novel's humanism provides its own 'closure').

In The French Lieutenant's Woman Fowles provides a series of disturbing oscillations between different orders of certainty. He brings up the question of art as agreed illusion, 'explaining' how the illusion is carried out by allowing the reader to see the mechanisms of illusion at work. A sentence like, 'Why Mrs. Poulteney should have been an inhabitant of the Victorian valley of the dolls we need not enquire',⁵⁴ activates a collision of the fictive past and the literary (both Fowles' and Jacqueline Susann's) present, which, in turn, places the novel within an area of indeterminacy. There is, moreover, an unpredictability of omniscience: we know, for example, a great deal about Mrs. Poulteney even down to the workings of her subconscious, but elsewhere, writing of the relationship between Mary and Sam, Fowles writes, 'Whether they met that next morning...I do not know'.⁵⁵ Fowles continually eases then tightens authorial authority in such ways. He can leave Charles to 'get up to London on his own',⁵⁶ and at one point even allows an error to remain uncorrected in the text (even italicising it):

Looking down...there are traces of snow on the ground.
Yet there is also...the first faint ghost of spring.
I am ver...I am sure the young woman...had never heard⁵⁷
of Catullus...But she knew the sentiment about spring

The most dramatic of Fowles devices is, however, multiple endings. This 'crisis of conclusion' foregrounds not only the crisis of the novel as a literary form itself, but has also its roots in the crisis of the author who, disguised behind a beard and Victorian substantiality, looks across a railway carriage at Charles and wonders, 'what the devil am I going to do with you?'.⁵⁸ All had been 'happily' and conventionally resolved some fifty pages earlier with Charles, Ernestina and the rest disposed of in a neat ending which, however, deteriorates into a vision of Mrs. Poulteney trying to enter heaven but suffering instead 'a devouring space' as the steps with which she had ascended disappear one by one until she 'stood on nothing'.⁵⁹

Like Mrs. Poulteney, the novel's ending at this point stands on nothing. It betrays the novel by dissolving it away into the realm of mere illusion, and quickly we are assured that, 'the last few pages you have read are not what happened'.⁶⁰ This contradiction is entirely necessary. Earlier in the novel we have been told that:

a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live⁶¹

Although Fowles' characters have to assert their authority they can, however, never trespass against believability: they remain plausible and 'free' only to the extent that their creator

uses them to express his own controlling ideas. In the novel's second ending, Charles and Sarah find some sort of future together; in the third ending, they part. The 'happy' ending is rejected for reasons Fowles relates to Thomas Hardy's similar renunciations of finality as being inimical to creativity.

Fowles decides the priority of discourse in the novel by having his surrogate flip a coin. In doing so, Fowles chooses, and in choosing renders the multiple ending superfluous: for all its innovative promise the novel is resolved and the morally 'happy' ending emerges after all. Charles is rescued by an existential freedom, finding 'an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build'.⁶² Unhappiness therefore is more fertile, but the chosen ending discloses also that distorting and persistent tendency of innovative British fiction to retain its allegiance to the liberal ideal through the configurations of realism and a humanistic idea of character.

Fowles' characters change only in as far as they reflect their creator's attempts to capture their 'essence' and hence take on the characteristics of permanence. It is the 'quest for...an absolute' which attracted Fowles 'to existential freedom',⁶³ and which explains the attachment to the concept of individualism prevailing over system. Different only in its philosophical perspective Joseph Heller's Catch 22 similarly presents individualism as the locus of human resistance to control and manipulation. The world Heller projects is, in addition, like that of Beckett: we find a sense of loss, alienation, and the

failure of communication, with the world simply there, chaotic and meaningless, though in the case of Heller, the world is ultimately redeemable.

In order to convey the sense of an illogical world Heller takes us through a series of illogical events using language which frequently works towards its own negation. We learn, for example, that Nately 'had gone every free day to work on the officers' club that Yossarian had not helped to build'.⁶⁴ Language thus renders meaning and then refutes it, transforming statement into non-statement. Furthermore, unlike the post-Modernists who dwell on the possibilities of character transformation, Heller concentrates on the dangers of such unstructured development. Colonel Cathcart is describes as a 'slick, successful, slipshod, unhappy man of thirty-six who lumbered when he walked...He was dashing and dejected, poised and chagrined'.⁶⁵ Similarly, Milo Minderbender 'makes himself completely at home in the chaos of a world at war by constant metamorphosis'⁶⁶ - that is, by adapting himself to suit the prevailing reality he relinquishes all sense of selfhood.

At the centre of the novel, moreover, is the controlling sanity of Yossarian, the 'essence' acting as the stable identity surrounded by chaos, who preserves world and book by evading all distorting structures. Heller's novel contrasts with a work like Watt where contradiction is never resolved, and where there is no one able to discover meaning since there is no meaning to be discovered by the workings of an enabling consciousness. Knott in Watt is described as 'one day...tall, fat, pale and dark, and

the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middle-sized, yellow and ginger',⁶⁷ and so on for two pages of conflicting description which denies any identity or authorial point of view, and expresses only an internity of language which never reaches beyond its own confinement.

Where the novel conventionally allows man his freedom post-Modernism emphasises the primacy of language over subjectivity, delineating man as constructed in language and those broader cultural and material conditions which disqualify authenticity, the organizing intelligence which transcends the pressures of society and ideology. In American post-Modernist writing cancellation and erasure take on their most disruptive aspects through transformations which not only destroys solid outlines of identity but which also allows for a constant shifting of narrative events and arrangement. Characters frequently aspire to the condition described by Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan as 'free, fluid, unpredictable'.⁶⁸ Rudolf Wurlitzer's characters:

fuse and separate without intention and without feeling, as if persons had the consistency of air, with no one able to find himself in himself, in anyone else or, with any certainty, even in space⁶⁹

Gone is the notion of consistent and stable representation of a consistent and stable world; literature no longer collaborates in the construction of beliefs which propose that a final, objective unmediated 'real' world exists about which we can have concrete knowledge.

For Clarence Major the act of writing is a matter of process, one of holding language on the page as close as he can get without destroying a necessary reference to shared experiences however

strange and unsettling. Major's aesthetic is aimed at the concreteness of conceptualisation which imposes on fiction an order and pattern of rigidity which debilitates imaginative possibilities. His fiction then is characterised by movement and self-reference, techniques reflecting the writer's concern to write novels which take on their own reality 'independent of anything outside',⁷⁰ but which, nevertheless, take the material of everyday experience and contemporary consciousness and arranges this into absurd juxtapositions reflecting the free play of the imagination, rather than the chaos of contemporary reality. The epigraph of Major's Emergency Exit is taken from Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises--'I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together'--so not surprisingly the novel is dedicated to 'the people whose stories do not hold together', and has a character in it described as 'Linear in his outlook; with whom you can't talk...about anything interesting'.⁷¹

A Major novel seems to burst all the restraints narrative usually imposes. As a character in his own novel Reflex and Bone Structure Major has this to say about the book he has created and which he is fully active in:

I want this book to be anything it wants to be. A penal camp. A bad check. A criminal organisation. A swindle. A prison. Devil's Island...Let it walk. I want it to run and dance. And be sad. And score in the major league all-time records. I want it to smoke and drink...This book can be anything it has a mind to be.⁷²

Major is intent upon assessing the status of fiction as it moves between a fictional landscape and embodiment within

fictional form, and in Reflex and Bone Structure we find again a contemporary writer stretching the framework of the detective story through a subversion of the epistemological foundations upon which the genre is founded. In Major's work nothing is ever resolved; the word 'erase' punctuates the text to indicate authorial dissatisfaction--'I erase what I say if it isn't "nice"',⁷³ Such a rejection of concluding and entirely formed conditions also implicates character in its transforming energies. Characters refuse to be bound by the confinements of others' realities as they respond to and struggle with an environment saturated with patent fictions. This environment is never neutral, but imposes itself as a fictional meaning system on lives which are themselves shown as fictional constructs. An aspiring actress named Cora is described as 'playing the part of a cottonwood tree'⁷⁴ in an off-Broadway theatre production, and then this ridiculous bit part begins to activate Major's own designs for her character, designs which are never ended:

she changes all the time, right under my fingertip.
Her sap flows. She's often like a tree, though she's
never like a tree. No one is like a tree⁷⁵

Major's characters give the impression of choosing and of insisting on the necessity of their own fantasies or ambitions against the pressures of others and the environment. Cora, for example, has a multi-dimensionality which has her performing as an actress, as a creature of her creator's imagination, and as a spontaneous, natural individual who is able to 'persuade' Major to allow her her dream and shift her into a rural landscape of 'trees and grass, clear sky and insects',⁷⁶ away from 'the city

and city noise and dirt and stink'.⁷⁷

More dramatically the novel's characters are shown as inseparable from the wild and improbable mental associations Major has instilled into them:

Canada comes home and finds the rubber plant doing the dishes. Cora is reading a book about Jerome Kern.

A blind snake is curled up in the middle of the floor.

Rita Heyworth is screaming in the room. Canada looks round. Oh. The television.

Later that night, Canada does a transatlantic lindy hop from Europe to the States and landing in a courtroom in the South, he accidentally gets sentenced to the penitentiary as one of the Scottsboro boys.⁷⁸

Clarence Major quotes with approval the comment of William Carlos Williams that literature contains nothing 'but change and change is mockery',⁷⁹ and Major's fiction is itself subject to constant changes as it vigorously attacks the conventions of narrative art. The work of William Burroughs and Ronald Sukenick is similarly designed to register the sense of a destructive energy emanating from fiction and directed against the rigidities of language character and experience. Cancellation and erasure forces a recognition of the writer's concern with the relationship of the instant which is constantly receding and shifting. The cancellation and erasure of post-Modernism is, therefore, concerned primarily with flux and fluidity: each moment of creation, especially in the fiction of Burroughs and Sukenick, becomes a locus of imaginative fusion of the real with the imaginary, the visible with the invisible, the past with the present and the future. Typically, the texts of Burroughs and Sukenick dismantle themselves into new and newer forms, which, in turn, are eliminated by fresh imaginative and structural

constructs pointing beyond language and text: immobility is equivalent to aesthetic and personal termination - hence Burroughs' and Sukenick's echoing of Witold Gombrowitz who in his novel Ferdydurke advises: 'Try to set yourself against form, try to shake free of it. Cease to identify yourself with that which defines you'.⁸⁰

CHAPTER ONE

Part I: Introduction

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CHAPTER ONE

Part Two: William Burroughs

The world of William Burroughs is structured by systems of power and control. History, language and the human condition itself are the means by which man has been taken over and his energies and vision distorted and manipulated by authority and its agents intent upon power and subservience. Burroughs is heir to the peculiarly American belief that the individual has somehow been 'sold' a false version of reality and acquired an identity and a consciousness imposed by alien forces. 'Reality' is depicted by Burroughs in terms of a manufactured nightmare, an insane version of history functioning through conflict and distraction constructed to resemble patterns of unity and cohesion; truth is rendered as a 'scanning pattern...imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily orientated towards total control'.¹

Beginning his writing career stressing the vulnerability of man to narcotics, Burroughs' vision has deepened and expanded so that in his work we witness a growing 'transformation of the junk metaphor through the "many forms of addiction"...heroin...control, sex, bureaucratic power, technology and even time'.² According to Todorov the fantastic is generated by a metaphor taken literally, and in Burroughs' case we find drug experience used as the basis of a transformative vision. Out of his own addiction Burroughs has gradually evolved an entire mythology dramatizing malign pressures which seem bent on absorbing and

exploiting identity, rendering man powerless and vulnerable and blind at the same time to his own condition. Morphine and language are the foundations of the 'conspiracy to pay off peoples of the earth in ersatz bullshit',³ while Burroughs' cry, 'Peoples of the earth, you have all been poisoned'⁴ echoes through all his fiction and inspires literary counter-statements anchored in 'Apomorphine and silence'.⁵

Burroughs employs science fiction methods of exploring speculative and technological fantasy to lay bare the horrors of cultural and political imperatives. He identifies the restraints imposed on men everywhere by all sorts of 'biological and environmental necessities',⁶ and from this he proposes enabling techniques of evasion and release. Through a counter mythology of the space age and through highly individualistic and disruptive form Burroughs establishes himself within the conditioning systems themselves but reverses the 'laws' by which men habitually respond to both life and language through an appropriation of control methods. Control is 'fed back' upon itself in order to overload lines of communication and response; the logic of the system is exchanged, language for non-language, identity for non-identity, sex for non-sex, connection for non-connection, sense for non-sense. Burroughs states that 'the reality of the Western world is just another movie':⁷ only when association lines are cut...the connections broken',⁸ can 'reality' (the tape and film made by control systems) be cut, scrambled and re-run and a way found out of the 'reality studios'.

Against conditioning systems Burroughs sends out saviours and partisans, and he has said that in his mythology (and the aim of Burroughs' counter-mythology is always 'freedom from mythology')⁹ there are 'goods' and 'bads', 'rights' and 'wrongs':

Nova conspiracies, Nova Police, Nova criminals...heroes and villains...Heaven and hell...Hell consists of falling into enemy hands of the virus of power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning¹⁰

Nova criminals amplify and exaggerate prevailing disorder by conflict arousal methods of communication:

Collect and record violent anti-Semitic statements -
Now play back to Jews who are after Belsen - Record
what they say and play it back to the Anti-Semites...
Want more? - Record white supremacy statements -
Play back to Negroes - Play back answer - Now The
Women and The Men¹¹

Who controls communication controls. In the guise of Inspector Lee of the Nova Police, Burroughs unveils his techniques and intention. Communication has to be wrested from the hands of power and its agents:

The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals...With your help we can occupy the Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly¹²

Ultimately, however, Nova Police, as their name suggests, are not to be trusted. As an organised counter-force they serve their purpose but once Nova Criminals are apprehended the danger is that Nova Police authority will spread until it assumes the characteristics of the system it has fought to overcome, and in turn generate its systems of exclusion, discipline, order and restraint. A reactionary system will be replaced and law and

authority once more established as fixed, naturalizing truth and defining 'reality' in totalitarian terms. Fear and awareness of this endless passage of power explains why partisan activity must always consist of anarchic, individualistic, acts of protest aimed at the heart of communicative power, whether political, economic, religious, sexual or cultural.

Burroughs' world is one possessed by capitalists, priests, con-men, doctors, judges, the military and policemen. As agents of take-over and conformity they spread total need and apathy, the states required for parasitic control, and spawn false views of 'reality' which become deadly distractions. These representatives of power are, however, just as surely hooked on power as are their sacrificial and docile victims. Burroughs' policemen are depicted as promoters of conflict, preservers of criminality and lawlessness, thus systematically justifying the need for control and restraint and the existence of a ruling body or class. Outbreaks of social disorder are not always, for example, the spontaneous outbursts they appear to be: an urban riot may have been 'staged from above to point up the need for a strong police force'.¹³ Crime and criminal behaviour are, therefore, necessary for preserving power, since, according to Michel Foucault:

No crime means no police...we accept the presence in our midst of...uniformed men, who have the exclusive right to carry arms, who demand our papers...how would any of this be possible if there were no criminals?¹⁴

Although here and elsewhere Foucault identifies power as

residing in an identifiable social and historical reality, namely the bourgeoisie, and, therefore, unlike the novelist, is concerned with testing the specificities of history, Foucault's observation that the 'bourgeoisie could not care less about delinquents...but...is concerned about the complex mechanisms with which delinquency is controlled, pursued, punished and reformed',¹⁵ represents a view very close to that of Burroughs for whom the penal system is a 'left over from the Middle Ages', something modern society has appropriated and expanded with the intention of 'making more laws and making more people criminals'.¹⁶

Power in Burroughs has no practical end in itself, but is fuelled by erotic need above all else. The manic system has two main purposes underlying this need, that of satisfying the system's own pleasure in endless organisation and the perpetuation of sexually motivated arrangements of duality bound by a master/subject dichotomy. In his fiction Burroughs scrambles myth and reality into a series of statements relating to man's loss of freedom to the 'Coca-Cola thing...The Cancer Deal...The Orgasm Death...the ovens'.¹⁷ Totalitarianism intoxicates and enslaves, effectively preventing any expansion of human vision beyond the enticements of sex and consumer 'needs', and the system's power lies in its ability to manipulate need and satisfaction to the point at which obedience is total, 'freely' given.

Burroughs shows rebellion and dissent stilled by various forms of addiction. Potential rebels are depicted as puppets, dummies and pleasure-seeking zombies conditioned into slavery

by the distorted sexual requirements of power which in turn exploits the victim's sexual need for release by creating anxiety/release situations - rendering men inhibited and docile and eager for the pain which is inseparable from mindless pleasure. Pleasure is, in turn, inseparable from its cost--dehumanisation, and the addiction to human activity generated by the forces of control.

Capital punishment and war satisfy power's insatiable need of sustenance: the young are drained of their potency through rituals of sacrifice and ceremony, with the ejaculation of sperm by both victim at the point of death and the priest/spectator representative of the outflow of human energies into negativity and waste. The sexual drug is administered as 'entertainment'. In The Soft Machine the Contessa di Vile shows movies of the Abyssinian War:

on the screen is a gallows...the soldiers are dragging this kid up onto the gallows...the trap fell and he drops kicking and yelling...He hangs there...pumping out spurts of jissom and the audience coming right with him spurt for spurt¹⁸

Penny arcades, brothels and sexual side-shows fill Burroughs' novels as the addictive pleasures which have rendered men vulnerable to illusion, and hence the control situation necessary for power to retain its position - though Burroughs' 'fantastic' vision is rooted in the contemporary reality in which 'Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission'.¹⁹ Burroughs' 'tickets' buy men entry into the funfairs and circuses of pleasure and pain where men are at their most vulnerable to parasitic take-over:

Bradly was in a delirium where any sex thought...took three-dimensional form through a maze of Turkish Baths and sex cubicles fitted with hammocks and swings and mattresses vibrating to a shrill insect frequency... The sex phantoms of all his wet dreams and masturbating afternoons surrounded him licking kissing feeling²⁰

Bradly is milked of his semen which is required for a hive at the centre of a malign organisation, his orgasms accompanied by an evacuation of his bowels, thus mingling at the moment of release and relaxation, waste, symbolically, with waste. At the same time, Bradly watches sacrificial victims fuse together into identity-less creatures, and the final draining of terminal cases by hanging. As in all Burroughs' fiction hanging shows man to be the ultimate sacrificial victim with death and orgasm as the ecstatic expression of the martyred, the moment at which the body is transcended through the victim's death and authority's individual and collective sexual climax. For Burroughs hanging:

is the final 'reel' in a society which has given rein to the cannibalistic, the sexual act of power and control (in which) the victim is placed in total servitude to the punisher...call(ing) into question the whole psycho-social basis of authority and punishment²¹

Burroughs' depiction of copulation and orgasm represent nothing so banal as the celebration of uninhibited human sexuality, but locates sexuality in centres of exploitation and control. Loss of semen represents the transformation of men into brainwashed parodies of men committed to endless spectacle and mindless pleasures. By parodying fertility rites, sexual acts and executions Burroughs decodes ceremony and ritual and the constant re-vitalisation of power through the surrendering of autonomy and personal authority.

Power depends on a capacity to 'push' illusion and also to forestall any collective recognition of the nature of man's patterned and controlled existence. Just as Burroughs' junk metaphor has expanded so has his vision of conflict to a point where he has peeled away the layers of the various conflict systems and located conflict, and hence control, in the nature of male/female irreconcilability. According to Burroughs, conflict has been sustained by some original act of 'dumping on the same planet life forms with incompatible conditions of existence'.²² Through his fiction and in his interviews he argues that dualism is the 'whole basis of this planet' and that 'men and women will never get together, their interests are not the same'.²³ Separation is seen as having originated at some primal moment when conflict and separation was deemed to be a precondition of control and take over. The only way out for Burroughs is to begin again without differences of sex and the dualism built into the human form itself: 'take two people split one person down the middle and put that half over onto another person and make new people that way'.²⁴

At the basis of earthly discord is the female need to govern rather than the desire for mutuality. 'Love' is, therefore, for Burroughs always determined by the female intent upon power for the sake of the control system which the female serves by draining off semen and captivating men inside a web of sexual pleasure. The female set-up has, for Burroughs, gone furthest in the United States because women there have, 'been allowed to go further...and the whole Southern worship of women and white

supremacy is still the policy...Its a matriarchal, white supremacist country'.²⁵ Matriarchal power-depicted by Burroughs as 'Cuntville USA',²⁶ - adds to the burgeoning conflict situation by subjecting mens' sexual relief to female inclination and calculation which generates the tension/release tyranny found within the broader socio-sexual framework, thus effectively preparing men for manipulation. Burroughs' females devour with and/or vagina:

He was torn in two by a bull dike. Most terrific vaginal grip I ever experienced. She could cave in a lead pipe. It was one of her parlor tricks²⁷

Sometimes the male sexual organs become transformed into female:

A penis rose...and dissolved in pink light to a cliteris balls retract into cunt with a fluid plop²⁸

They say his prick didn't synchronize at all so he cut it off and made some kinda awful cunt between the two sides of him²⁹

For Burroughs the 'whole quality of human consciousness as expressed in male and female is basically a virus mechanism'.³⁰ Having turned malignant this virus 'split the planet into armed camps right down the middle line divides one thing from the other'.³¹ Whereas in Burroughs' early work the human virus turned men into replicas, by the time of Cities of the Red Night the virus is completely out of control after 'many thousands of years of more or less benign coexistence',³² with the human form. Through exposure to radiation the virus has mutated to a point at which the 'whole human position is no longer tenable'.³³ The virus or plague, inseparable from the human condition itself, especially in the form of the human propensity to 'love' a member

of the female sex, heralds the inevitable outcome of the original fall of man into 'suffering, fear, sex...death...all intended to keep human slaves imprisoned in physical bodies'.³⁴

As Burroughs depicts the virus at the root of female vampirism he also extends his own junk induced nightmares and hallucinations into his theme of parasitic take-over. Men are shown in the process of being transformed into centipeds, crabs and plant life forms, all these images representing insect and plant conformity and the take-over of higher life forms by the lower. Evil has stripped man of identity and freedom and turned him into other forms, even metal:

The green boy's penis, which was the same purple color as his gills rose and vibrated into the heavy metal substance of the other - The two beings twisted free of human coordinates rectums merging into a rusty swamp smell³⁵

Men in Burroughs are turned into animal and metal for sexual, orgasmic reasons, this transmutation expressing the 'existing fucked-up situation' of control and the deprivation of personality. The true self is expressed as unknowable, dreamed of only as a possibility of fulfilment as depicted in the 'promise' of The Wild Boys and Cities of the Red Night. Usually in Burroughs (especially in his earlier fiction) the metamorphosis of the human form is 'downward towards...insect people and sentient ooze'.³⁶

For example, in The Naked Lunch the Divisionists:

aim...to grow bits of each other as replicas and gradually create a one-sex planet, a religious parody type of one person with millions of bodies - a terminus of undifferentiated life³⁷

Alternatively, the loss of individuality is depicted in terms of a process out of human form into formlessness:

The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines...In his place of total darkness mouth and eyes are one organ that leaps forward to snap with transparent teeth...sex organs sprout...rectums open, defecate and close...the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments³⁸

The human shape has become undifferentiated, collapsed into a jelly-like non-form, changing size, shape and colour and registering life only through sex and defecation. The point here is that even as man attempts to escape the vulnerability associated with rigidity and pattern, structure and form, the threat is a collapse into non-identity and movement down the evolutionary ladder.

Alongside shifts from male to female, human to non-human, Burroughs also shifts his scenes with bewildering rapidity, At the same time as he depicts the decline of men into non-form, Burroughs holds the belief that stasis is death. Verbal lines and behaviour patterns need to be dynamic or all associational tracks remain linear, unbroken and static - and therefore vulnerable to take-over. Burroughs' beliefs at this point have their obvious origins in his own experience of heroin addiction. On drugs, he says:

I did absolutely nothing. I could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours. I was only moved to action when the hourglass of junk ran out. If a friend came to visit...I sat there not caring that he had entered my field or vision...If he had died on the spot I would have sat there looking at my shoe waiting to go through his pockets. Wouldn't you? Because I never had enough junk - no one ever does³⁹

For Burroughs junk narrows consciousness; his aim is the expansion of consciousness. Drugs bring dependency, and dependency for Burroughs is parasitic. Junk equals need, need is junk, equals virus. With need comes stasis bringing in its train subservience to controllers. It is incorrect, therefore, to claim that 'the assumption behind The Naked Lunch (is) that the junkies' delirium yields truth',⁴⁰ or that 'Burroughs...feel(s) that more liberal narcotic laws might produce, in America, a lotus-land'.⁴¹ For Burroughs addiction is slavery: more liberal laws would only signal capitalism's acceptance of the necessity of change in order to ensure its own preservation. Within the conditions imposed by an authoritarian system, whether this be communist or capitalist, Burroughs identifies the toleration of degrees of deviancy, but only so long as ideas and practice do not impede the machinery of power and threaten the sovereignty of ideology.

Burroughs' 'constant aim is change and heterogeneity',⁴² transformation and erasure. He seeks to bypass the intellectual and physical rigidities of programming in order to escape the vulnerability which comes from immobility. The speed of his images approximates the techniques of the movies but not with the purpose of attempting to capture the nature of contemporary reality, but as a means of shifting language and image - thus avoiding the fall into pattern and fixture. Movement is in Burroughs expressive of a desire for life, a tactic of survival keeping you one step ^{ahead} of the cops and other agents of power. Burroughs' investment in transformative techniques puts off

the terminal effect of the fall into the clutches of authority by erasing definitive states and statements and replacing exactitude with fluidity and cancellation. Burroughs' most consistent declaration is his refusal to be fixated in meaning.

It is Burroughs' awareness of the ease with which a counter system comes to duplicate that which has been displaced which leads him to refuse concrete alternatives: he has said, 'I create conflict, I do not take sides', and his truly anarchic spirit expresses itself in moral and aesthetic denial of the absolute and the stable. In Burroughs', human tissue is 'in constant movement to avoid crystallization',⁴³ and we find repetitive acts of liberation which keep potential victims out of the hands of characters like Willy the Informer who sucks the juices out of junkies, and Bradly who has an insatiable need to absorb and control others. Bradly Martin is director of the 'reality film', an alien stranded on Earth by accident who has infiltrated himself into society as a supplier of addictive fictions, such as sex, money and political power. (like the heroin pusher, Martin is both supported and enslaved by the addiction of his clients.) Survival requires constant alertness, simple exercises:

like jacking-off while balancing a chair - Driving:
full-speed on dangerous road - Flying plane - Performing
precision operations at the same time⁴⁴

In Burroughs' scheme of things, words 'are used by vested interests as a control machine to manipulate humanity',⁴⁵ but within this radical assessment of the degree to which ideology is embedded in language Burroughs engages the paradox of being

forced into employing the very medium of confinement he seeks to expose and escape from. Burroughs proposes, therefore, the desirability of a prior communicative system, one before speech and writing, one therefore before time, history and human confinement. Essentially Burroughs is always present in his own books featured somewhere as one of his own partisans yearning for Eden by rewriting history and rearranging 'reality' by scrambling 'reality' into new configurations which have no prior content, design or shape. Burroughs attempts to 'penetrate experience to the hithermost depths, to go beyond the finite limits of knowledge to reach a realm at last where meaning is supererogatory'.⁴⁶ This literature of 'silence' takes up a position where the artists believes he is able to free himself from bondage to the world. Hence Burroughs' movement inward or downward toward not-saying, not-knowing, not-writing, towards the mythic blankness desired by those aware of their entrapment in time and conditioned bodies:

'Well couldn't we travel in time?'
'It's more complicated than you think'.
'Well time is getting dressed and undressed eating sleeping not the actions but the words...What we say about what we do. Would there be any time if we didn't say anything?'
'Maybe not. Maybe that would be the first step...yes if we could learn to listen and not talk'⁴⁷

The movements of time and language which rigidify, categorise and naturalise, provide for Burroughs the foundations of the falsifications of the human condition. Denying any form of absolute authority Burroughs associates the confinement of history and language-within the narrow framework of rational

discourse-with a form of civilization that has fostered restraint and distortion. Liberation, therefore, takes the form of deconstructing the accepted communicative codes and erecting counter statements on the ruins of the old order.

For Burroughs western culture makes everything true, but permits nothing. At this point, Burroughs adopts Reich's definition of 'emotional plague', the systematic disruption of the organic flow of forces through the human body, activated by techniques and systems intent upon the implantation of guilt, anxiety and fear. Burroughs, through the voice of Hassan I Sabbah, proposes instead that Nothing is True - Everything is Permitted,⁴⁸ meaning that if everything is rendered as illusion, then everything is permitted without man suffering the consequences of moral anguish. The eternalization of 'reality' has, for Burroughs, the inevitable outcome of distorting mens' vision for the sake of the continuation of authority and power. With the onset of 'reality', when all things become definite, exclusive and static in their relationship with other things, man loses the capacity to achieve an inner and outer harmony which allows no hate, fear, guilt to imprison him inside the human form as we know it, the programmed body and mind of the fallen race. Burroughs yearns for a time and a condition outside of time and outside of the human form, right/wrong, permitted/denied, male/female. His quest is innocence:

When nobody cares, then shame ceases to exist and we can all return to the Garden of Eden without any God prowling around like a house dick with a tape recorder⁴⁹

What traps man in time and body? The Word and immobility. In Burroughs the 'only law is that of flux, and flux is the essence of Burroughs' novelistic style'.⁵⁰ Burroughs' technique of survival, expressed in The Ticket that Exploded as 'keep bags packed', expresses the writer's belief in the necessity of movement to escape agents of control and the tyrannous immutability of language, human history and human form. Seeking to bypass intellectual and physical patterns and rigidities, Burroughs invests in mobility in order to translate his vision of control into a literary act which transforms both his characters and his literary structures.

Process rather than fixture is Burroughs' ruling principle. A rediscovered authenticity is achieved by a mixture of voices within a text denying any centre of speech or an hierarchy of narrative significance proposing a dominant version of events. Spatial and temporal shifts register in particular Burroughs acknowledgement of Korzybski's analysis of time binding and the confining nature of linear verbal experience, and Burroughs' scrambled lines of communication and historic telescoping underscore the writer's insistence on random factors as a means of overthrowing the pre-recorded 'reality' situation. 'Reality' in Burroughs is a battle-ground fought over by a few aware individuals intent on reprogramming the linear, 'logical' system of human experience:

Equipped now with sound and image track of the control machine I was in a position to dismantle it - I had only to mix the order of recordings and the order of images and the changed order would be picked up and fed back into the machine⁵¹

The re-programmer of the control system thus turns reality against itself:

Cut word lines - Cut music lines - Smash the control images - Smash the control machine - Burn the books - Kill the priests - Kill! Kill! Kill!⁵²

These repeated and hysterical invitations to disorder in Burroughs' fiction resembles what Derrida calls the solicitation, a meaning which shakes the totality of the 'entire' and the 'complete' in order to generate new sets of meanings unhindered by responsibility to coherence and, therefore, to the totalitarianism of continuity and fixture. Burroughs' fiction attempts the emancipation of meaning through violent counter statements which strive to demystify the referential fallacy of language and the authoritarianism of sequentiality. A Burroughs text is, therefore, always thrust back into the realm of writing itself with reference disjointed and subordinate to the requirements of Burroughs' political awareness. Liberated from the conventionalities of serial continuity of the unbroken linear plot with all its tendencies of fixed form and historical sequential movement the reader activates under Burroughs' prompting the sleeping responses associated with passivity of reception. The reader can 'cut into The Naked Lunch at any intersection point':⁵³ the same novel is loosely strung together by ellipses used instead of the usual linking words and images. In The Ticket that Exploded connectors are dispensed with altogether:

His smile was the most unattractive thing about him or at least it was one of the unattractive things about him it split his face open and something quite alien like a predatory mollusk looked out different well I took his queen in the first few minutes of play by making completely random moves⁵⁴

Burroughs' disruptive techniques range from internal to external rearrangement of his material. We find, for example, characters participating in the reader's own experience, thus confusing levels of response ('I am reading a science fiction book called The Ticket that Exploded');⁵⁵ spelling errors remain uncorrected, while sometimes Burroughs allows revisions to remain crossed out ('One From Dream Mine Used to Make Palm Sunday Tape'). Elsewhere we find split page narratives ('Who is the Third That Walks Beside You?'); and visual fictions using a variety of type faces and sizes ('Complete Text').

Burroughs entire fictional output is to be considered finally only in terms of the extent to which it succeeds in dislocating the centres and extending the demarcations of western cultural forms founded as these are on illusionism, spatio-temporal conventions and the exclusion of ideologically 'suspect' statements, i.e., those which do not accommodate themselves fully to the requirements of an affirmative, supportive culture. Colloquially speaking, Burroughs is a 'trouble-maker', a disruptionist threatening society's veneer of unity and cohesion, one of those menacing factors Burroughs' Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin identifies as threatening his own need of control-which he feeds by connecting himself to the power set-up of which he is guardian:

Now what could louse-up a prerecorded biological film? Obviously random factors. That is someone cutting my word and image lines at random. In short the cutup method of Brion Gysin which derives from Hassan I Sabbah and the planet Saturn. Well I've had a spot of trouble before but nothing serious. There was Rimbaud...Tristan Tzara and the Surrealist Lark⁵⁶

Burroughs is merely the absent name: his own methods are obviously alluded to. Burroughs' influences too are clearly stated here, and he has testified to the influence of dreams and his memories of a St. Louis childhood, cartoons, T.V. ('a real cut-up...flicker(ing), just like the old movies used to'),⁵⁷ science fiction, the movies. His fictions are composed as a montage of startling images and fragmentary episodes drawn from Renaissance drama to modern poetry, from Christian and Eastern myths to advertising jargon. Fictional order, imposed or coincidentally discovered is declined in favour of chance, improvisation and the mutation of scene, character and structure. Although The Naked Lunch pre-dates Burroughs' cut-up method, the novel nevertheless is radically constructed:

QUICK...
white flash...mangled insect screams...
I woke up with the taste of metal in my mouth back
from the dead trailing the colorless death smell
afterbirth of a withered grey monkey phantom twinges
of an amputation...
'Taxi boys waiting for a pickup', Eduardo said and died
of an overdose in Madrid...
Powder trains burn through pink convulsions of
tumescant flesh...set off flash bulbs of orgasm... pin-
point photos of arrested motion...smooth brown side
twisted to light a cigarette...⁵⁸

Burroughs' familiar images of animals, sex, metal and drugs are pressed together into an imaginative cut-up registering the writer's own history of nightmare and physicality. The juxtaposed elements confirm a mental process in the throes of disturbance, but a process, nevertheless, identifiable as significant in terms of a human arrangement of memory and feeling. It is true that 'QUICK' 'reads like a withdrawal experience

rather than a re-emphasis of the quick against the dead hand of the System',⁵⁹ but the hallucinatory power of the piece depends more on its rapid shifts of image than on the nightmare quality of those images. However, bizarre and disconcerting though Burroughs images are, 'QUICK' suggests the impasse Burroughs was to recognise as the inhibiting factor in composition: if the writer is to depend only on the power of the imagination or the effect of narcotics then he remains securely confined within the reality situation. The writer must go outside of any personal and private expression in order to cut lines of communication.

After The Naked Lunch Burroughs arrived at a form of composition more appropriate to his beliefs regarding the pre-programming of man. Imaginative dislocation is married with mechanical re-arrangement, giving Burroughs a greater flexibility and the possibility of outdistancing controlling factors. In The Soft Machine Burroughs describes his method of breaking down the control system:

I started my trip in the morgue with old newspapers, folded in today with yesterday and typing out composites ...when I fold today's paper in with yesterday's paper and arrange the pictures to form a time section montage, I am literally moving back...to yesterday.

The next step was carried out in a film studio - I learned to talk and think backwards on all levels - This was done by running film and sound track backwards⁶⁰

In adopting cut-ups and fold-ins, Burroughs cancels linear, sequential structure and hence the control system imposing such arrangements on man. Randomness, chance and movement liberate man from the totalitarian technicians of the reality studios; Violence is done to the idea of narrative coherence and forward

movement towards a predictable and closed conclusion commensurate with ideological notions of expression and the human subject.

An example of a Burroughs montage or mix is seen in the following composition which is made from copies of the European edition of the New York Herald Tribune, the London Observer, the London Daily Mail, and Life magazine advertisements:

It is impossible to estimate the damage. Anything put out up to now is like pulling a figure out of the air.

Six distinguished British women said to us later, indicating the crowd of chic young women who were fingering samples, "If our prices weren't as good or better, they wouldn't come. Eve is eternal."

(I'm going right back to the Sheraton Carlton and call the Milwaukee Braves.)

Miss Hannah Pugh the slim model - a member of the Diners' Club, the American Express Credit Cards, etc. - drew from a piggy bank a talent which is the very quintessence of the British Female sex.

"People aren't crazy," she said. "Now that Hazard has banished my timidity I feel that I, too, can live on streams in the area where people are urged to be watchful."⁶¹

Such aleatory techniques 'can never produce a significant pattern for (they) consist of the absence of any such pattern'.⁶²

Burroughs, however, insists, 'I am not a dadaist...I don't believe in being obscure'.⁶³ His ambition is clarity:

In using the fold in method 1 edit delete and rearrange as in any other method of composition - I have frequently had the experience of writing some pages of straight narrative text which were then folded in with other pages and found that the fold ins were clearer and more comprehensible than the original texts - Perfectly clear narrative prose can be produced using the fold in method - Best results are usually obtained by placing pages dealing with similar subjects in juxtaposition⁶⁴

But Burroughs' intention is never to provide the recognizable, but rather to clear away the debris that has clogged mental activity. He contends that linear narrative necessarily defeats

the radical potential of a visionary posture by integrating revelation into established associative channels. While conventional narrative provides its confirmations by restoring harmony and healing the gaps alarmingly present in experience, Burroughs' novels attempt to disengage us from present reality without, however, depicting the contours of a new landscape. To show a new reality like some literary mystic would merely short-circuit his fiction's radical possibilities: his vision, his language, would duplicate the system of control he is contesting by advocating alternative 'realities' however bizarre.

Such is Burroughs' perception of the degree to which men are trapped in a network of control that he can conceive only of speaking in voices other than his own. He has confessed to a preference for 'other' words which express thoughts originating in other minds and experiences, words which are, therefore, not pre-recorded for Burroughs (though they will be for the body for which they are made). Ideally, words would come to Burroughs uninvited, fresh before the thinking mechanisms fall into system, into the programmed dimensions of the word and identity; entering language the writer only confirms his addiction and activates the infernal recording machine which eternally controls.

According to Burroughs, an 'essential feature of the Western control machine is to make language as non-pictorial as possible'.⁶⁵ A hieroglyphic script, on the other hand, enables men to 'learn(s) to use words instead of being used by them'.⁶⁶ Throughout his work Burroughs seeks to express the non-verbal by erasing

communicative lines and association tracks: his language 'impedes perception in just the way that Shklovsky's theory requires',⁶⁷ by nudging language towards a magnification of its own properties and the final breaking apart of its structure. Burroughs does propose the ideal of an adamic condition, an authentic 'self... apart from imposed thinking',⁶⁸ and so with language, he intends to frustrate the 'intention of the control machine...to keep word and referent as far separated as possible'.⁶⁹ Authenticity of meaning is, therefore, a possibility always glimpsed at the other side of linguistic experience:

What is word? - Maya-Maya-Illusion-Rub out the word and the image track goes with it - Can you have an image without color?... "What is sex? What is word? What is color?" - Color is trapped in word - Do you need words? - Try some other method of communication⁷⁰

Burroughs attempts to liberate 'the material of language from the fugitive meanings that attach to it',⁷¹ and does so primarily by extending his theories of non-language (colour flashes, hieroglyphics) into literary practice in order to activate a suspension of ideology, a temporary release from its operations. The referential fallacy of language, its discursiveness, is seen by Burroughs as authority at work which 'spreads and acts linearly, as if life were a single sentence from the First Mover to the Last Cop'.⁷² The word brings death or debilitation:

Gentle Reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunistic land crab, it will hang you and catch your jissom like a scrutable dog⁷³

Conventionally, writing's 'function is a separating one, and the primary separation it makes are between the self and the body,

and the self and the world'.⁷⁴ Burroughs' primary intention is, therefore, one of rubbing out 'separating' words like 'they', 'we', 'I', 'you' and returning to 'silence', to a point before virus-- 'word is...virus...man has lost the option of silence'.⁷⁵ Language is shown as having invaded the central nervous system:

Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk.⁷⁶

Believing that the 'written word was actually a virus that made the spoken word possible',⁷⁷ Burroughs compares junk need with forms of articulation and communication, but even as he pursues silence, like Beckett, he babbles as if trying to out-talk the 'formulas, word-locks which...lock up a whole civilization for a thousand years'.⁷⁸ Language is both primary and terminal: it begins and ends the process of history as we know it. History becomes the naive perambulations of the word permitting only knowledge of language: 'What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of that history was the word'.⁷⁹ The Fall into language, history time and body begins with the primal grunt, first symptoms of the terminal disease:

In the pass the muttering sickness leaped into our throats...came to a swamp...waded into the warm mud water, hair and ape flesh off...stood naked human bodies...when we came out we had names⁸⁰

With names comes identity, comes separation. Language, far from liberating man by propelling him up some mythical evolutionary and creative ladder, enslaves by pushing history and reality into language and into time and, therefore, to its limits, the 'mirror' of human awareness and perception beyond which man can never strike.

Bound and confined in language mans knowledge of what is going on can only be superficial and relative.

The waste land of Burroughs imagination cannot ever be redeemed as Eliot's can by the resurrection of old gods and past cultures because history is human and corrupt, centred in the Word and, therefore, in evil:

What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit?
I will tell you: 'the word'...Prisoner, come out...rub
out the word forever. If you I cancel all your words⁸¹
forever. And the words of Hassan i Sabbah...also cancel

As a precondition of power and control language has, for Burroughs, the characteristics of shit: shit is worthless, waste elevated by system to value. Money, Burroughs reminds us, has no intrinsic worth and is one facet of capitalism's selling of false views of reality, extending the human tension/relaxation syndrome by denying and then satisfying in the same way as sexual manipulation. Burroughs tells of the secret of a certain banking family:

When a certain stage of responsibility and awareness has been reached by a young banker he is taken to a room linked with family portraits in the middle of which is an ornate gilded toilet. Here he comes everyday to defecate ...until he realises that money is shit⁸²

Resembling an initiation ceremony this scene reveals Burroughs' insight that before power is grasped truth about the 'real' nature of things has to be known and subsequently denied to others. Knowledge is power, and power operates through exclusion. Burroughs tell us that the 'Egyptian and Mayan control systems were predicated on the fact that only the ruling caste could read the written language'.⁸³ Like language, money is an illusion, an unnatural

authoritarian measure/device on which men are hooked, but which in reality is of no value, and which Burroughs depicts as vulnerable to some excremental virus: 'Something is happening to money...A very dear friend of mine found his special deposit box in Switzerland filled with dried excrement'.⁸⁴ Money, in Burroughs' world, buys up and devours everything; it is the machinery grinding away at the heart of the power set-up. The machine 'eats quality and shits out quantity',⁸⁵ and, like junk and language, money buys less and less with more and more. The junkie is the perfect consumer of this system's products:

his body waits the distribution of goods, it is totally controlled by the map of that distribution...It is junk that seals the objectification of the body, for the junkie's life consists of a series of actions performed on himself...Junk satisfies the need to be passive, to be controlled, to be relieved of the burden of initiating any actions, to be fed, to incorporate, to consume⁸⁶

Junk, as Burroughs points out, is:

the ideal product...the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg and buy...The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product⁸⁷

Eric Mottram relates the junk metaphor to:

Marx's attack on possessions for fetishism and Paul Goodman's anarchistic attack on the complicated injunctions to possessiveness under capitalism and the state capitalism which masquerades as "communism"⁸⁸

As the commodity fetish activates the repression of the product (labour) nature of things, so too in language we find that the fetish of description, of reference, ignores the material fact of language through the naturalistic fallacy which proposes an innocence of creativity which manufactures 'reality'

out of 'nothing'. Language, junk and money are all shown to be artificial inductions forcing men into servitude by obscuring the 'real' nature of things. These 'habits' devour youth, spontaneity and creativity by forcing men into time and body, into the mindless pleasures of the Garden of Delights created by the conspiratorial network of power and control which renders language, junk and money as the confirming dimensions of ideological reality:

Who monopolised Love, Sex and Dream? Who monopolised Life, Time and Fortune? Who took from you what is yours?...Did they ever give anything away for nothing? ...Listen: Their Garden of Delights is a terminal sewer ...Their Immortality Cosmic Consciousness and Love is second-run grade-B shit - Their drugs are poison...Stay out of the Garden of Delights - It is a man eating trap that ends in green goo...Flush their drug kicks down the drain...learn to make it without any chemical corn - All that they offer is a screen to cover retreat from the colony they have so disgracefully mismanaged⁸⁹

All Burroughs offers is 'nothing': he directs negation at power and authority and through myths of non-time and non-body liberates by destroying the normal habits of reading, freeing us and in the process, preserving a possibility of purification and renewal.

In his novel The Wild Boys Burroughs makes what is perhaps his most confirmative statement of man's chances of beginning again outside of time, body and beyond authoritative systems. The sub-title of the novel, 'A Book of the Dead', provides an introductory clue to the book's central idea, suggesting the death both of tyrannical gods and their systems and the passing through to another world beyond this to a territory of timelessness, of non-contradiction and harmony populated by a single sex youth

cult endlessly celebrating their overthrow of the Old System. Burroughs' Edenic vision is structured as a continuous transformation, with scenes being transformed into other scenes shifting through time and space in a series of eighteen separate episodes loosely strung together, but all bearing closely on the novel's main theme. Although the novel seems to destroy itself as it goes along by abandoning even the most cursory respect for the serial continuity of linear plot, the novel provides perhaps Burroughs' clearest statement up to that date.

The opening section of the book, 'Tio Mate Smiles', uses familiar Latin American locations and the theme of sexual conflict, all told in the style of a movie:

cinematic methods of metamorphosis (pan, zoom, track and montage)...The camera eye and...cutting, synthesizing (to) create a rapid method of shot-by-shot shorthand exemplification of information in the manner of the metamorphic film tradition⁹⁰

The section opens:

The camera is the eye of a cruising vulture flying over an area of scrub, rubble and unfinished buildings on the outskirts of a Mexican city⁹¹

The section ends:

Last take: Against the icy blackness of space ghost faces of Tio Mate and El Mono. Dim jerky faraway stars splash the cheek bone with silver ash.
Tio Mate smiles⁹²

This movie-like sequence is expressive of Burroughs belief in the necessity of reconstructing linear 'reality', and in the process broken structure is made to magnify the desolation and conflict associated with the evil of power and control which, in this case, is embodied in Dolores, a figure possessed of an evil

eye, who lives surrounded by newspapers, magazines and clocks, and Tio Mate who believes he has the magic ability to deal out death simply by suggestion.

Section two of the book, 'The Chief Smiles', shifts to the year 1976 and Marrakesh. A character called Rogers is projected into a scene (familiar in Burroughs) of a lush jungle in which live priests and their captives, workers who have been reduced to body needs and pleasures, who 'live to eat, shit and masturbate'.⁹³ This scene then dissolves to the Pentagon where Death in the shape of a Yellow Serpent turns on CIA and Pentagon men who have tried to enlist it to work for them: the creature turns wheat fields to dust bowls and, finally out of control, destroys the Pentagon and all the 'vulgar sons of bitches who thought they could hire DEATH as a company cop'.⁹⁴

The two opening sections contain the seeds of the following sixteen sections of the novel and establish the conditions against which the Wild Boys ultimately rebel and of the system they overthrow. Sections three, four, six, eight, nine, ten, twelve, deal in all the usual Burroughs images and themes - slavery, racial oppression, reminiscences of St. Louis, capitalist power, sex and religious authority.

Second six, entitled 'Le Gran Luxe', reintroduces a figure from Burroughs' earlier work named A.J.: he is fabulously wealthy, a capitalist, manipulator, Gatsby-like party-thrower, who supports guerilla units intent upon his overthrow, and, in addition, maintains an army of scientists whose task it is to develop and

perfect new weapons in his laboratories and factories. A.J. is a conflict creator at the heart of a global conspiracy of control. Society is in the process of collapse and the streets are full of 'walking dead catatonic from hunger'.⁹⁵ Within the walls of A.J.'s palace, however, a 'slobbering crowd' of guests lap up his amazing dishes and drinks, the left-overs which are fed to the 'drooling crowd' outside the gates of the palace through a huge phallus and a rubber anus.

A.J.'s guests are also provided with every 'pleasure, sport, diversion, interest, hobby, pursuit or instruction',⁹⁶ including transference to other times and places:

Every sexual taste is provided for in any setting you want. Jack off in the 1920's? Fuck temple virgin? You make Gemini with nice astronaut? Greek youths clad only in beauty and sunlight? Forecastle on whaling ship? Afternoon in the Roman baths? See me fuck Cleopatra? Kinky Chimu kicks? Sex in a 1910 outhouse? Rumble seat? Bomb shelter in the blitz? Bedroll for two in the Yukon? The old swimming hole? Viking ship? Bedouin tent? Public school toilet? Anything that you like?⁹⁷

Further attractions are provided by blue movies and gliding, ballooning, parachuting, sea diving. The entire orgy of dream and pleasure realisation represents the ultimate form of collective and personal sacrifice of identity and attention to what is going on. The capitalist promise of freedom is revealed in all its twisted truth as entrapment in the negations of capitalism's political structures through an unquestioning obedience to the system's values and conditions. A.J.'s hold over both the starving and his 'honoured' guests is representative of the situation described by Marcuse as one in which:

Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized⁹⁸

A.J.'s power, illustrated by his party and his capacity for negating protest through the toleration and perpetuation of 'alternative' political and social perspectives, exemplifies the terminal capitalist, pluralist position of translating fantasy into fact and thereby effectively registering the ultimate form of manipulation of man through need.

Section ten is set in Alaska and the year 1898; the narrator, 'Fred Flash from St. Louis. Photographer', meets a figure called the Frisco Kid. The two enjoy a fleeting sexual relationship which Fred Flash wistfully recalls, his recollections arranged by Burroughs as a series of repeated and cancelled images:

'That will be two dollars extra per week' she said when the Frisco Kid told her I would be sharing the room. Room 18 on the third floor. He lit a kerosene lamp. The room was lined with green-painted metal in patterns of scrolls and flowers. There was a copper-luster wash basin, a tarnished mirror, a double brass bed, two chairs, a sea chest by the bed. The window was narrow the cracks stuffed with quilting and covered by a frayed red curtain. We sat down on the bed and lit cigarettes.

I get a whiff of me then I see room 18 wardrobe a tarnished mirror the window him a cigarette quilting red curtains his fingernail the bed my face drifts out of the back of his head he nodded coffee eating my chili there was a door we went through and some one comes in and sits down pale eyes chop suey Mrs Murphy the room kerosene light his smile through cigarette smoke. It was the first time I had seen him smile. I lay back on the bed blowing smoke toward the ceiling looking at the scrolls. Here and there a white crust had formed streaked with rust. I yawned. 'I'd like to turn in if it's all right with you'. 'Sure' he said. 'Why waste money on some sucker trap.' He stood up unbuttoning his shirt. He pulled off his

trousers. He turned back the bed and whiff of stale flesh came off the blankets. We got in and lay there side by side. He leaned over and blew out the lamp and the smell of the wick hung in damp cold air of the room. Outside angry voices from some saloon a distant pistol shot. Then I was looking up at the ceiling and the room was full of grey light, my breath hanging in the air. I looked around at the lamp on the table the curtains the window. It was very quiet outside muffled by snow. I took in the clothes on pegs the wash stand the mirror. I was lying on my back the Frisco Kid close beside me one leg sprawled across my crotch. Under the leg my cock was stiff and standing out of my shorts. I turned and looked at him. His eyes were open in the grey milky light and I felt a shiver down the spine. He wasn't there really. Pale the picture was pale. I could see through him. He smiled slow and rubbed his leg back and forth. I sighed and moved with it. He brought his hands up under the covers where I could see and made a fist and shoved a finger in and out. I nodded. He put his hands down and shoved his shorts off. I did the same. We lay there side by side our breath hanging in the air. He hitched an arm under my shoulders. With the other hand he turned me on my side. He spit into his hand and rubbed it on himself. Slow pressure I took a deep breath and it slid all the way in. Ten strokes and we came together shuddering gasps his breath on my back. Where from? Frisco. A kid he never returns. In life used young pale eyes. Lungs out and finished. Tarnished air sunlight through the curtains red curtains his fingernail smiled then and rubbed his leg.

'You someplace?'

'They call me the Frisco Kid. I'm out Front Street Nome Alaska 1898.'

'To stay?'

'No. Just got here. Want to.'

I give you for that belated morning man about twenty-three kerosene lamp on a sea chest. Smile through me then I looked at room 18 been there might have seen peeling my breath in the tarnished mirror someone comes in and sits down my crotch feeling the ache in my crotch stiff pulsing against his leg. Shoved his finger in and out I saw the fingernail shiny with dirt under it. Shoved his shorts down we lay there side by side naked he reached over and slid his hand down my stomach and felt it tight and aching when I touched him electric shiver same size same feel feeling myself.

Nodded 'Sure'

He said 'Why waste money on a whore?'

Turned back the bed and spit into his hand pressure I breathe cold air the snow was drifting here and there a white crust had formed on the window the wash stand the mirror.

'Like to turn in if it's all right with you.' Shoved his shorts off stood there with nothing on stale flesh off the blankets and felt it slide in silver flash behind the eyes bright cold sunlight in the room every object sharp and clear. I took in the clothes streaked with rust the ache in my groin feeling a leg warm against it his pale smile spit on my ass on my side facing the wall sliding in tarnished sunlight I sighed and moved with it stiff he opened his eyes and looked where I could see he wasn't there really pale eyes looking down his leg. 'Call me the Frisco Kid. I'm out. Just got here. Want to.'

Whiff of breath belated morning the Frisco Kid's legs used out and finished pale. I could see through him my cock was up under the covers he smiled finger in and out going to turn me too smell peeling old places tarnished mirror shiver down my spine and through the crotch a white crust had formed on his leg.

'If it's all right with you' and stood there with nothing on the room was warm and I saw a wood stove. He walked over and threw in a log and put a kettle on the stove. He hung his coat on a wooden peg and I did the same. He sat down on the bed and pulled his boots off and I did the same. He took off his shirt and hung it up pulled down his trousers. He took the kettle off the stove and poured hot water in the copper-luster wash basin. He rubbed soap over his face and neck and dried himself standing in front of the mirror. He peeled off his socks and there was a smell of feet and soap in the room. He put the basin on the floor and washed his feet.

'Wash?'

'Sure.'

He tossed me the towel and I dried myself.

'Warm in here' he said. He took off his long grey underwear matter of factly and hung it over his shirt.

'If it's all right with you.' He turned to me naked. He stood there and scratched his ass looking at me pale eyes touching me down my chest and stomach to the crotch and looking at him I could see his genitals were the same size and shape as mine he was seeing the same thing. We were standing a few feet apart looking at each other and I felt the blood rush to my crotch it was getting stiff I couldn't stop it his pale smile we stood there now both stiff looking at identical erections. We sat down on the edge of the bed. He made a fist and shoved his finger in and out. 'That all right with you?' I nodded. He stood up and went to the wardrobe and came back with a tin of grease. He got on the bed and knelt and made a motion with his hands pulling them in. I turned toward him on all fours he rubbed the grease in slow pressure and we were twisting he was pulling me up on my knees and shoving me down his hand on my eggs when

I came there was a silver flash behind the eyes and I
blacked out sort of there was a tarnished mirror over
it stiff I looked at him his shorts stood out and I
felt it naked.

'You figure to do?'

'I'm not here long.'

Felt it tight and aching shiver down the spine.

'Why waste money on a whore?'

Shuddering gasps my groin shot pictures lawn streets
sunlight faces a pale leg.

'Want to?'

Slow touching me down my chest genital smell peeling
with nothing on the room was warm we stood there both
stiff as wood.

In front of the basin and rubbed soap he turned to me
and finished.

Rubbed his leg across my stomach to the crotch smiled
finger in and out.

'All right with you?'

Getting stiff I couldn't stop it he peeled the bed 'With
you?' I nodded. 'Just got here. Want to. Warm in
here with you.'⁹⁹

Waste, in the form of paying for sex with whores and the
attendant loss of money and semen, is here countered by homosexual
'love' which congeals in Flash's memory as a mutual expression of
harmony, but which has been allowed to become distorted by Flash's
reluctance to abandon both the act and the past. Flash's memory
of their meeting is necessarily uncertain and broken and his attempt
to restore the past and to eternalise the transient as a fixed
moment and permanent emotion is shown to be crippling:

that's us all right in the mirror stiff standing by the
wash basin wasn't there really. The Frisco Kid he never
returns. In life used address I give you for that
belated morning¹⁰⁰

Flash's desire for love is depicted as dependency and is
contrasted with the Frisco Kid's (and Burroughs') need only of
physicality, the sexual experience drained of permanence and,
therefore, dependency. Cancelled and erased structure expresses

the frustration of an achieved totality of experience, and the fluidity of the whole section undercuts the permanence and fixture associated with the need of the consolations and reassurances of linearity and stability conventionally provided by literary form and epistemological certainty.

Sections five, seven, eleven, sixteen and seventeen, share the same title, 'The Penny Arcade Peep Show'. The first of these sections resembles many of Burroughs' penny arcade images of booths and ferris wheels, though whereas Burroughs' earlier work used fairground and entertainment to spotlight the idiot pleasures of these places, here the fairground seems to be a reconditioning set-up. A character called Audrey moves in and out of a movie he is watching; scenes from an explorer's note-book depict a jungle of human and natural fertility in which men and vegetable matter fuse erotically together and trees and plants have human form.

The second of the Peep Show sections is a shifting collection of American memories of Christmas and childhood, of junkie existence and sickness. The third Peep Show - section eleven - is broken into nine short fragments featuring Western heroes, Dutch Schultz, St. Louis memories, outer space travel, all of which relate to time-past, future and clock time - and the magnification of distant objects. Time and space is transformed or arrested. Time is 'up', over, and objects are frozen in the lenses of microscopes, telescopes, and the memory.

Sections sixteen and seventeen are incorporated into the novel's conclusion which deals with the Wild Boys' final victory, but

before this, section twelve - 'The Dead Child' - provides the pivot for the whole novel. This section opens with golf course scenes similar to those in section nine - 'A Silver Smile'. Like the Frisco Kid section, here an homosexual relationship ends on a note of sadness and regret, though the narrator, for whom 'love' is 'just a feeling between the legs, a sort of tingle',¹⁰¹ wonders:

What is it that makes a man a man and a cat a cat?
It was broken there. It stretched and stretched
and finally broke¹⁰²

The narrator, a young boy known as 'El Nino Muerto' ('The Dead Child'), has a mind that constantly shifts from object to object. The boy has left his family but escaping them finds himself still ensnared in the earthly net of bodily time and space. Even though he breaks the net of love and dependence, and by doing so becomes cat-like in his attitude to sex, not until he makes the transition to a South American jungle does the boy sever earthly connections. In the jungle the boy encounters the dead system of control by priests, gods and calendars which holds all in a magic net. With a friend named Xolotl the boy breaks free and escapes the sickness killing the people of the jungle, and the women of the tribe who the boy and Xolotl identify as agents of control. The youths are invaded by a dream spirit which then instructs them how to brew a drug which fuses the youths into a sexual oneness and instils in them the spirit of a jaguar god. The composite youth/spirit attempts to invade the testicles of masturbating Indians, but to the Indians the spirit is evil and it only succeeds in terrifying them. The earthly net still holds the youth/spirit to earth, and alone, and finally still confined

by the dust and cobwebs of dead gods, the composite 'I' falls back into time and memory of the golf course, sex and the agony and conflict of the earth bound.

The youth/spirit is finally a figure unable to escape control because the revolutionary desire for fusion and space is not enough. Burroughs here suggests the necessity of collective escape perpetuated by self generation of the new species of being. In the final six sections of The Wild Boys, Burroughs resolves the problem of control evasion by depicting spiritual escape as being supported by counter measures which turn the earth into a battle-field fought over by the Old System and an amoral army of sexually liberated youth proclaiming nothing to be true, everything to be permitted.

The Wild Boys express Burroughs' resolution of the central conflicts in human life. Fantastic though his vision may be Burroughs makes it clear that the novel contains within it the serious ambition of someone dedicated to illuminating and overthrowing all authoratitive, predatory systems. Asked in a Rolling Stone interview if the book was a projection and a prediction, Burroughs replied:

Yes. It's all simply a personal projection. A prediction? I hope so. Would I consider events similar to The Wild Boys a scenario desirable? Yes, desirable to me¹⁰³

The alternative world of The Wild Boys is one in which women and love are entirely absent. Birth processes create beings conditioned out of love and into a state of perpetual youth, of eroticism and freedom from control. The elimination of women

as child bearers, as 'nets' enables the recovery of a world prior to separation, conflict and control in which love is replaced by 'recognition'. Burroughs' males become in their self-creative ecstasy the masculine revenge on women and the ultimate breakers of the lines of communication and authority.

Section thirteen of the novel is a movie script parodying the conventions of Hollywood moralities. Dated 1976 the piece shows the immediate origins of the Wild Boys and the mission undertaken to save America and the civilized world from their influence:

In the inland cities of America, men who are entering on middle age dream of a great mission. They find a leader and a spokesman in General Lewis Greenfield¹⁰⁴

The Dionysian hordes of Wild Boys infiltrate a declining, aging, western civilization from Mexico and North Africa. Freed from the influence of family, state and women they spread the counter virus of demonic release, countering, in particular American imperialism which, as always, masquerades as bringing freedom to the subjected and as protecting America and her values:

'You may say that what happens in a foreign land is no concern of ours. But the vile tentacles of evil are reaching into decent American homes'...Suburban couple in a boy's room school banners on the wall. They are reading a note

Dear Mom and Dad

I am going to join the Wild Boys. When you read this I will be far away.

Johnny

'All over America kids like Johnny are deserting this country and their great American heritage suborned by the false promises of Moscow into a life of drugs and vice...Can we stand idly by while our youth...drains away in foreign sewers...while the stench of corruption draws ever closer to our own borders?'¹⁰⁵

Scenes of World War One volunteers - 'plain ordinary American folk, decent tax-paying citizens',¹⁰⁶ - a troopship, 1920 tunes, scenes from old gangster movies: the montage then cuts into scenes of an American army's march towards Marrakech, and cheering crowds which, when the army has passed by, 'turn cold and blank'.¹⁰⁷ Then the reminiscences of a soldier from St. Louis introduces scenes of the Wild Boy's origins:

The old broken point of origin St. Louis Missouri...
The Green Inn, classrooms, silver stars, the old
family soap opera... 'When evening is nigh' the dark
city dying sun naked boy hugging his knees... 'I hurry
to my'... music across the golf course a crescent moon
cuts the film sky... 'blue heaven'... dawn shirt on the
bed smell of young nights urine in the gutter click of
distant heels... 'Meet me in St. Louie Louie'... pants
down sad old soap opera... Two boys turn with knowing
smiles¹⁰⁸

The scene then shifts again to North Africa and the defeat of the army of 'liberation'. Seemingly friendly boys lead Greenfield and his men into a trap. The Wild Boys unleash a biological weapon in the shape of a killer virus, then turn the army's weapons against itself. The survivors under the command of a Colonel Macintosh struggle back to base camp, with Macintosh sensing at last something of the Wild Boy's intention:

Now I know what the crusades are about. The young are
an alien species. They won't replace us by revolution.
They will forget and ignore us out of existence¹⁰⁹

The colonel begins to confuse memories of his recent past and to suffer impairment of his vision, thus beginning the cancellation of the Macintosh who was. Knowing he will be blamed for the expedition's failure he fades away: 'I have a new name now and a nice business in Casa'.¹¹⁰ Transported

across time and space Macintosh becomes Joe Garavelli who owns a restaurant in 1920 St. Louis, and the proprietor of 'Joe Garavelli's restaurant in the suburbs of Casablanca. Wild Boys welcome'.¹¹¹

The final sections of the book tell of the Wild Boys' overthrow of the police machine...all its records...all dogmatic verbal systems',¹¹² with Burroughs employing technological images fused with those of utopian sexuality and directed against historically defined lines of power and control. Male creativity and combat, stripped of all masculine virility factors, liberate the youths through a fusion of human and cosmic energy into a world of sexual freedom, cloning and technology. In this utopia there arose 'a whole generation...that had never seen a woman's face nor heard a woman's voice'.¹¹³ Here Burroughs' vision of the release from the tyrannies of dualism and female emasculation removes forever the sexual division which had stood 'in the way of non-body experience'.¹¹⁴ Burroughs' belief that its 'time we thought about leaving the body behind'¹¹⁵ becomes, therefore, translated into female rejection, bodily transcendence and the fertilisation of phantom bodies as a means of restocking the race after combat fatalities, many of whom have departed to the Blue Desert of Silence. The female factor is removed and with it the 'obsessional and potentially self-destructive' condition called 'love'.¹¹⁶ Population growth, yet another threat to the harmony of the species, is effectively regulated, and the way cleared for world youth control and all-male ascendancy over the control machine.

Peep Show number five (section seventeen) shows capitalist power as inseparable from atomic warfare and the eventual death of the planet. Burroughs mixes images of rocket power with those of old Westerns, thus relating conventional morality of the frontier with the culmination of human history through violence and authoritarianism masquerading as justice and freedom. Against this apocalyptic vision Burroughs then turns back the clock and re-writes history in the form of an account of Satanic victory over the powers of 'goodness'. The year is 1023 A.D. A General pores over maps of the mountain hideout of Hassan I Sabbah (Old Man of the Mountains) as a prelude to mounting an expedition against him and his followers. Hassan is the preacher of freedom from all authority systems, while the General holds the Islamic belief that 'Man is made to submit and obey',¹¹⁷ and that Hassan is evil personified. Here Burroughs, like Ishmael Reed, proposes the release from the conditioning strictures of history by reversing conventional values and beliefs and revealing the demonic as positive and creative. Hassan's power finally prevails as the General's trusted old gardener who 'the General has stopped seeing...years ago',¹¹⁸ and who has been Hassan's patient agent, assassinates the General and so sets history on a different course.

Throughout The Wild Boys the 'smile' is used as an image of the confidence of power in its ability to retain authority and control either directly or indirectly. However, as the novel moves towards a redemptive catastrophic conclusion the 'smile' becomes expressive of the shifting lines of power taking

place through Wild Boy tactics. The smile becomes the affirmative gesture of renewal as time and body pass into timelessness and vacancy:

'Wild Boys very close now'.
Darkness falls on the ruined suburbs. A dog barks
in the distance. Dim jerky stars are blowing away
across a gleaming empty sky, the wild boys smile¹¹⁹

Throughout The Wild Boys, moreover, Burroughs' 'smile' underscores his aesthetic rejection of language by investing in the recurring image of the silent statement, in this case, physical gesture unaccompanied by words. At this point, Burroughs returns to the idea of 'a common language based on...a simplified hieroglyphic script',¹²⁰ which destroys 'word and image' instruments of control'.¹²¹ Here The Wild Boys touches closely upon those ideas Burroughs sets out at length in The Job where western language forms are identified as exclusive and provocative:

The IS of identity always carries the implication of that and nothing else, and it also carries the assignment of permanent condition. To say that way. All naming calling presupposes the IS of identity. This concept is unnecessary in a hieroglyphic language like ancient Egypt...The whole concept of EITHER/OR. Right or wrong, physical or mental, true or false...will be deleted from the language and replaced by juxtaposition...The word BE in English contains...the categorical imperative of permanent condition. To be a body, to be nothing else¹²²

Conceived of in this way language is the totalitarian heart the Wild Boys assault and finally destroy. Language is rubbed out and replaced with a system communicating visibly, legibly:

Word is an image...If I hold up a sign with the word 'Rose' written on it...you will be forced to repeat the word 'Rose' to yourself. If I show you a picture of a rose you do not have to repeat the word. You can register the image in silence. A syllabic language forces you to verbalise in auditory patterns. A hieroglyphic language does not¹²³

Burroughs shares with Derrida among others the belief that there is no truth available but that which is constituted from vocabulary, and that the void out of which language was originally drawn has been filled by a repressive, not to say demonic, system: writing, so conceived, becomes 'the continuation of politics by other means'.¹²⁴ Furthermore, Burroughs follows Korzybski's belief that 'a word is not the object spoken about', and that man 'read(s) unconsciously into the world the structure of the language we use'.¹²⁵ Burroughs' politics of the referent secures therefore the writer's experimentation within the conditions of material existence even as he activates a vision of the fantastic. It is not true, as some critics have claimed, that the competing authority systems in Burroughs' novels lack a political, ideological, content. Stripped of its deep political significance, Burroughs' writing becomes merely the product of a marginal literary figure, a writer of curiosities. It is true that Burroughs' authority systems have no identifiable ideological dimension, but Burroughs' political stance requires that men redefine 'authority' and politics in accordance with an entirely new and unstructured perceptiveness and pay attention to the writer's insistence on cancellation and erasure, flux and fluidity as revolutionary devices.

In his more recent fiction, Burroughs has articulated a relatively precise vision of necessary 'human' transformation and concentrated at greater length than before on the historic process. Just as language is false and can be adjusted, so too

can history. The belief is expressed in his declaration that we will 'rewrite all the wrongs of history...kill all the shits before they can be born':¹²⁶ for Burroughs the past is 'something that can be changed, altered at your discretion...The past only exists in some record of it...There are no facts'.¹²⁷ In Cities of the Red Night an alternative past is created around the actual setting-up of a libertarian pirate commune by a Captain Mission in the late seventeenth-century. However, Burroughs turns Mission's defeat and failure into success: the step is a necessary one, since, had 'Captain Mission lived long enough to set an example for other to follow, mankind might have stepped free from the deadly impasse of insoluble problems in which we now find ourselves'.¹²⁸ The novel deals with sexual magic, inexplicable murders, piratical revolts and time travel; the central Western concept of human nature is shown to be 'another figment of the imagination',¹²⁹ and man depicted as possessing the capacity to pass beyond the confines of self and the past.

Burroughs' message is no less than the necessity of the overthrow of all established structures. He resists the temptation of eternal truth, human essence and the linguistic and political absolutism which favours power and stability. The Wild Boys and the followers of Captain Mission do not take over old positions and resurrect tyranny in different forms, but rub out word, identity and authority and so destabilize the political reality in the name of politics, entering Burroughs' paradise of non-conflict and constant metamorphosis where a mythic serenity drains off the residue of the human condition.

CHAPTER ONE

Part II: William Burroughs

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CHAPTER ONE

Part Three: Ronald Sukenick

A guiding belief of post-modernist writers is that their work, 'like all other forms of culture, is a process of creating... experience'.¹ Fiction then has the capacity for telling the truth, not because it corresponds, but because it creates in terms of a personal perspective; it 'deconditions us so that we may respond more fully to experience'.² Experience, however, is not in this context to be confused with the familiar. The world is seen as:

constructed by our need for meaning, for stability, for possession (and) meanings we believe grounded in some essential reality are seen to be mere projections of our desire and hope³

Man, therefore, dwells in a region of false appearances created by the process of ideology and the requirement of reassurance, and in so dwelling, acquiesces in his own manipulation. He lives amid signs, 'in media...not only in television and newspapers, but in language and in images that are communicated and disseminated throughout the culture'.⁴ The role of the imagination in evading manipulation becomes, therefore, crucial, since 'the less we use our imagination the more somebody else is going to use it for us - by manipulating us'.⁵

Post-modernist fiction attempts the disengagement of the totalization of the social domain which is detected as affecting

if not determining, all human affairs. The fiction of Ron Sukenick is typical of those writers who contest the fictive 'screen' which passes for 'reality' by promoting the alternative cultural statement which is more 'truthful' in so far as it destabilizes by engaging reality outside the fictional discourse. Sukenick's fiction runs counter to the conventions of Realism, yet his intention is always the presentation of the real, without, however, reducing the real to mere reflection. For Sukenick, the idea of 'art as a mirror sustains a disconnected, emotionally dissociated attitude towards experience',⁶ since what we 'call realism saps our experience of its immediacy and authority'.⁷ By refusing illusionism Sukenick has, according to his own estimation, gained three clear advantages:

First one comes closer to the truth of the situation. Second, for the writer, writing becomes continuance with experience. Third, the writer is clearly at liberty to use whatever material comes into his head as he is writing, including the data of his own experience⁸

Whereas the realistic novel 'whispers its assurance that the world is not mysterious, that it is predictable',⁹ Sukenick's fiction is based on the improvisatory method whereby:

the writer works not from a priori ideas about what will happen and what form it will take, but in and through the text. He does not work from a presiding idea or a pre-existent scenario. The next word is always a surprise¹⁰

Improvisation, we can say, allows the subversion of the stable and manipulative by taking 'given' elements (in this case, language) and creating from them a new reality which is not 'given' and which surpasses the original in invention and in

aesthetic significance. Improvisation 'liberates...from any a priori order and...discover(s) new sequences and interconnections in the flow of experience'.¹¹ Sukenick favours 'forms which do not allow me to know what's going to happen next',¹² and writes, therefore, 'on the basis of what happens to be in my mind at the time'.¹³ The writer adopts 'a free form style of composition ...and if you make a mistake...you either build on it...or leave it and do it better next time'.¹⁴ At no point in Sukenick's fiction are we certain that the perspective and details are accurate, and we are drawn into a process of movement which ensures the work remains eternally in some kind of transitional state, a state which is complemented by Sukenick's insistence on fusing the conventionally separated categories of art and life. Neither social environment nor identity are stable: everything is in flux, with both 'reality' and identity dismissed as props of a fictitious system of stability which denies metamorphosis and redefinition.

Sukenick's fiction militantly exposes traditional ideas regarding character, verisimilitude, believability, pleasure in the character for its own sake, and inflicts on identity never ceasing pressures of the moment; people seem to be creatures to which things happen, deprived entirely of that psychological centre which sustained the great characters of Modernist fiction. In the post-Modernist novel generally personality has been rendered so amorphous that a mere change of name brings with it a change of person. In Donald Barthelme's

Snow White we read, 'His mother loved him when he was Roy, but now that he is Hogo she won't even speak to him'.¹⁵ Thus, we see fully realised Lukács' fear that the 'Attenuation of reality and (the) dissolution of personality are...interdependent',¹⁶ and from the Modernist era onwards we are witness to the 'gradual disappearance of the individual as an essential reality'.¹⁷ Lukács' treasured reality suffers first the indignity of being enclosed within inverted commas, then is further undermined by a series of ideas which deny there to be a 'knowable reality independent of ideology and myth'.¹⁸ Fiction speeds the retreat from the perception of the world shared by the liberal humanist and the traditional Marxist alike, and the subject becomes dissolved into outline or is shifted far from any identifiable dimension. Sukenick expresses it this way:

A lot of my characterizations tend to take the form of a cartoon or sketch, or my characters tend to be very fluid. This represents my sense that character is much more heavily influenced from moment to moment by environment, both interior and exterior, than seemed to be the case in the traditional novel¹⁹

Sukenick's characters change under the power of their own imagination or under the 'spell' of their surroundings, or alternatively, the environment seems to modulate in tune with his characters' willed mutations. Sometimes all these possibilities seem to take place simultaneously, with characters having to live with the effects of rapid transformation. Each experience becomes focussed on itself without meaning being imposed from anywhere but now. Unlike the Modernists who attempted to transcend the real through the use of isolated

and unique visions, Sukenick, along with other post-Modernists, 'is trying to plunge through literature into the world...to break through those cheap or outlived fiction which separate us from our world'.²⁰ Sukenick's ambition of union with reality through a functioning imagination has an epistemological purpose - to aid man to know, not through rational investigations but through conviction. His fiction expresses the artist's desire to subvert the various underlying beliefs and systems which have sustained western culture and religion for centuries: against a materialism which tautologically positions the standpoint of materialism as natural Sukenick brings to the surface activities like magic (which is consigned to the realm of superstition,) and 'other' language which subverts the conventions of western speech and writing and claims to express 'eternal' truths and reflect a final and unchanging world.

Sukenick appropriates the ideas of anthropologists like Edward Sapir who argued that the world of space and time is a continuum without any firm and irrevocable boundaries or divisions. It follows from this that there can be no such thing as a pristine range of experiences available to us: man lives within his cultural and linguistic codes and experiences meaning as a social product which varies according to the physical and mental principles of different societies. In a 'primitive' society of the sort which Sukenick and other contemporary American writers of the Sixties looked to, there exists a totemic logic which serves to establish homologies between natural and social

conditions, and to reconcile the two aspects of reality named by Levi-Strauss as the continuous and the discontinuous.

Levi-Strauss finds parallels between the concepts proposed by twentieth century science and philosophy (notably the ideas of Bergson) and those of the North American Indians, especially the Sioux, for whom things and beings are nothing but materialised forms of creative continuity. The Hopi, moreover, lack any general notion or intuition of time (in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate from past, through the present, and into the future). For the Hopi time does not flow, space is not static, unvarying repetition is an accumulation, a storing-up of an invisible charge that holds over into later events. This reconstitution of time and space allows an appreciation of interrelatedness impossible within the framework of Western thought. There is an assumption of an:

incalculable infinity of causes and effects...each and every thing in all of time and space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space²¹

Clearly influenced by 'primitive' perceptions Sukenick expresses his own belief that:

Time is...a presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive and so there is no destiny, only chance. Reality is simply, our experience, and objectivity is, of course, an illusion²²

In his novel Little Big Man, Thomas Berger expresses the Indians' oneness with all things as a moment of enlightenment enjoyed by his character Jack Crabbe (a white man turned Cheyenne) following a period of solitude and silence:

all seemed right to me at that moment. It was one of the few times I felt: this is the way things are and should be. I had medicine then, that's the only word for it. I knew where the centre of the world was. A remarkable feeling, in which time turns in a circle, and he who stands at the core has power over everything that takes the form of line and angle and square. Like Old Lodge Skins drawing in them antelope within the little circle of his band, but concentric around them was all other Cheyanne, present and past, living and ghost, for the Mystery is continuous²³

Here the image of the circle represents the eternity of recurrence, and timelessness - in contrast to the white man's world made up of square and angles, finality and divorce from natural phenomena. Jack Crabbe's moment of understanding is precisely that of Sukenick's ambition of releasing the imagination from the 'civilized' constraints imposed by the conventions of writing and reading. His fiction attempts to collapse distinctions, 'to be...not about experience but part of it',²⁴ to activate a process of discovery of the significant within the real. There is, however, no notion here of a search for a transcendental 'super-reality' which suggests resolved contradiction; rather, an adaptation of Surrealism's love of juxtapositioning of the concrete, and the free-play of the imagination for the purpose of re-defining the 'real'.

In Sukenick's fiction we witness an endless transformation and cancellation of time, situation, character, and fictional structure. Everything changes, merges and separates; writing, especially in his more recent work, seems to be drained of its expressive capacities, and to be sheer flow. In Long Talking Bad Condition Blues²⁵ language is energized

with movement: relentlessly mobile, unpunctuated, grammatically undifferentiated, the novel's flow draws the reader along with it and hesitates only to leap the gaps in the text which act like obstacles in a river's path.

Unusually for Sukenick, Long Talking Bad Condition Blues has no obtrusive authorial presence at its core (and thereby gains considerably). Usually, Sukenick is anxious to merge conventionally distanced categories by crossing the real with the created - somewhat in the manner of Tom Wesselman's art/environment 'mixes' where real carpeting and real telephones and the like, are made to function as part of an artistic creation. Sukenick's blurring of the lines of division replaces the singular fictional statement with that of multiple levelled discourse and fulfills Diane Wakoski's requirement that a literary work 'must originally come out of the writer's life...rather than transcending...reality'.²⁶

Sukenick's introduction into his work of pronounced autobiographical elements does not, however, represent a fictional equivalent of confessional poetry which asserts a humanistic perspective and conveys a sense of a threatened sensibility - but an enduring personality. In Sukenick, personal material is not introduced as a means of control and distance, but to illuminate the conflicts and paradoxes inherent in the individual's discovery of the nature of the limits of identity and means of expression. This 'poetics of experience',²⁷ negates the logical system of unvarying perspective and allows Sukenick to use the 'pretense of writing about himself as scaffolding for self-creation'.²⁸

Sukenick's constant shifts of perspective intends a contact with the 'real' qualities and situations found among the relationships between 'things out there' which are identified and arranged into significance by the active and alert imagination primed for discovery. His techniques and beliefs put him at some distance from two opposed forms of contemporary writing Sukenick calls respectively, the 'Journalistic Digression' and the 'Hermetic Digression'. The former position is expressed by Tom Wolfe who claims that the reader coming to the New Journalism 'knows all this actually happened. The disclaimers have been erased. The screen is gone'.²⁹ The writer is one step closer to a definitive involvement, according to Wolfe. In contrast William Gass views writing as referring to its own dimensions - and no further. Words are like a statue, and in 'our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue (and) every other work of art: empty space and silence'.³⁰

Suspicious of the notion that the writer has only to attend closer to 'the facts' for the 'facts' to reveal themselves, and Gass's extreme formalism, Sukenick speaks instead for an art which is able to 'connect us with the world, not separate us from it...which delivers us from abstraction and solipsism with a newly vitalized...sense of experience'.³¹ Like all post-Modernist fiction writers, Sukenick believes that writing and language are accountable to the world at large - and must be, in order that writing is not 'locked in the imagination'.³² Turning away from reference brings with it the danger of what Arlen J. Hansen calls the 'celebration of Solipsism',³³ - though

we need to keep in mind that solipsism takes two forms:

On the one side, there is the traditional claim that the individual is the sole reality. On the other side, however, there is the less familiar message that the proper method of philosophy calls for the examination of all experience from an egological perspective. The former is metaphysical solipsism; the latter is methodological solipsism³⁴

Assuming an egological perspective, and avoiding a language that does not point to any pre-arranged reality, Sukenick fashions an art which abolishes distinctions - between life and fiction, language and signifieds, autobiography and invention: we can never be sure 'when factual glides off into imaginary reportage. Life and fiction bleed together'.³⁵

Sukenick's first novel Up initiates in fictional form the various transformations and movements of reality set out in his theories of composition. It is true, however, to say that this early work fails to avoid the pitfalls of 'hermeticism' which, at worst, leads to 'endless commentary about the work, dissipating its energy in abstraction!'³⁶ Sukenick's desire to incorporate into Up all experience as it comes sets the writer the considerable task of sorting through the real/fictional moments in search of significant areas of experience where patterns of imagination and physicality come together.

The novel is made up of a writer's (Sukenick's) life experiences, his boyhood, adolescence, periods of teaching, family life, his struggles as a writer in New York and sexual adventures (real and fantasized). Sukenick seeks a rapport with the real as a means of getting through life, though as is amply illustrated, the 'reality' dealt with defies accountability

as different levels of experience fluctuate rather than solidify into the conventionalities of the definable. The precise form and ontological status of his characters is made intentionally doubtful by a constant blurring of distinctions between what is given and self-created forms of being. Problems of identity apart, the reader has also to engage the problems of transformative events and the analogous merging of the story recounted, the stories within the story, and the story of how the writing of all this took place.

Up is typical of Sukenick's later fiction only in as far as nothing is static, everything is subject to alteration, is taken back, reversed, or is even forgotten entirely. The demolition of consistency underlines the artist's need to orientate himself within the environment and to fashion his resistance to strategies of orientation which spill over into paranoia as the writer (narrator) presents himself in different guises - a Jewish inmate of a prison camp, an astronaut adrift in space, a lecturer fired from his teaching post for introducing into his lectures 'spontaneity' and 'irrelevant...digressions'.³⁷ The terrors of urban life also intrude. A newspaper-type article headed 'Teen Punks Terrorize Straphangers' is incorporated into the novel: the item recounts an attack by a gang called 'The Gents' on subway travellers, one of whom is the author of the article who, witness to the horror, lets fantasy take control by ending his account of the scene with the arrival of a policeman who:

ripped open his fly whence burst a titanic cock erect that he grasped with his strong right hand and, plying it like a billy club, scattered the Gents hither and yon³⁸

The account has finally lost its firm grip on the real, though it should be clear that departures into the fantastic are themselves only imaginative extensions of the unbelievability of the real. Further evidence of this is found in the radio bulletins the narrator/writer listens to in order to keep him in touch with the 'real' world: these news items deteriorate into the non-speech of media and political banalities devoted only to mystifying and misleading, and which obscure a blankness of mind and spirit. Confronted with such insecurities of experience, the writer turns back to his writing desk to write The Adventures of Strop Banally.

This novel within the novel Up recounts the adventures of a 'ferocious rascal who trades in his irresistible sexual appeal, his all-American appearance...and an incredible competitive drive for power'³⁹ - a description of the eponymous hero made by a book reviewer of 'The Adventures of Strop Banally', who concludes that:

Strop Banally remains a gross and empty character, offensive as a practical joke...for Strop remains a symbol, an abstraction, unreal...We must conclude that it would have been better had the book gone unwritten or, at least, unpublished⁴⁰

The book is, however, an extended cliché, and is, therefore, perhaps more 'real' than 'real'. The question is, 'where does "reality" lie?'. The reviewer of the novel errs in comparing Strop with persons of the reviewer's experience, in erecting a hierarchy of believability. Self-invention is the core of Strop's personal philosophy: he makes up his past as he goes

along until his life becomes neither fact or fiction but an amalgam of both. Similarly, Sukenick in the form of the narrator of Up admits to a blurring of categories and in doing so anticipates adverse critical responses as he merges fiction with non-fiction, with the novel taking on the shape of an extended examination of the problems/conventions of writing. As the characters slide in and out of their separate worlds, they are sometimes part of Up, sometimes drawn from Sukenick's actual life. His characters sometimes step out of this fictional environment and become real. A friend of Sukenick's named Bernie Marsh reads the manuscript of Up and makes the following objections:

'this is just a collection of disjointed fragments...
Where's the control, where's the tension?...the
chronology is completely screwed up...What about the
Cloisters...? You're driving up to the Cloisters...
and that's the last we ever hear about it'⁴¹

After protesting that he isn't writing 'a timetable', Sukenick admits that after writing the Cloisters scene he mislaid it somewhere, and then goes on to describe to Bernie (and to the reader) the missing scene as best he remembers it. At the end of the novel the narrator's permutations are finally closed off, albeit through the device of collapsing all illusionism into self-revelation. Relieved to have finished Up, Sukenick holds a party to which he invites his friends and the characters from the novel. Sukenick's real wife, Lynn, adopts the role of jealous wife when confronted with one of her husband's female creations named Nancy:

'Who's that?' asks Lynn.
'Nancy.'
'So that's the one,' she says.
'It's only a novel don't forget.'
'I understand that very well, but don't say only.
It's been three years of our life. Anyway I
thought she'd be prettier.'⁴²

The novel's conclusion returns us to 'life', but 'life' as fiction within the covers of a book about life and fiction. The novel finally wins a humourous finale from material which tends to disperse the novel's energies too widely to satisfy Sukenick's aesthetic ambition. Furthermore, as if lacking sufficient confidence to allow this aesthetic to 'speak for itself', i.e., through the novel's form, Sukenick creates situations in which his theories are made insistent through dialogue or asides, with the result that an excessive didacticism, imposes itself as the kernal of coherence amid an expanse of deliberate discord. Sukenick's problem in Up is how to incorporate the continuous authorial and narratory voices and the flow of random connections into oscillating statement which prepares the moment when all 'his unreal fantasies have been purged':⁴³ in the process of clearing away the untruths that gripped the author, his characters/friends and the reader, the latter is in danger of becoming submerged so deeply in the author's fantasising that his moment of liberation never comes. Instead of fact/fiction creating reality by 'rescu(ing) experience from...any system... that threatens to distort...experience',⁴⁴ Up is too committed to personal experience to confront experience in the fullest sense.

In the novels following Up Sukenick, with varying degrees of success, more happily answers the problems he sets himself. This is true of most of his shorter fiction also, in particular, 'What's Your Story?' and 'The Birds'. 'What's Your Story?' deals once more with the situation of the creative artist 'caught' in the process of creating, but here the fictional movement across levels of reality is rendered as an endless, self-negating of fiction which effectively engages the multi-dimensionality of experience. The story begins conventionally enough with a description of a scene which resembles that of Rousseau's painting 'The Sleeping Gypsy'. This gradually gives way to a description of a writer seated at his desk in the process of writing about Rousseau's painting - complete with the writer's mistakes - 'This perhaps would explain the quiescence of the lion. Natural repugnance for dead meat strike carrion'.⁴⁵ Throughout the story, errors lie on the surface in this way, pronouncing themselves 'real' statements and according to Sukenick's intention, worthy therefore of inclusion in the 'finished' account, which is, in fact, never finished as it has as its subject the imagination captured in the process of creating the real as it wanders from the sound of a plane overhead and the description of melting snow, to an embryonic gangster story complete with policemen seeming to force themselves into 'What's Your Story?'. Inspired by yet another painting on the wall, we are witness to an imaginative reconstruction of Washington crossing the Delaware, and also find a 'terrific piece of ass' who, Sukenick claims, 'Later...I put...into a story'.⁴⁶ Finally,

Ronnie, the narrator, confesses, 'I sit at my desk, making this up',⁴⁷ and then re-runs the fragments which have gone into the story up to that point and in doing so, begins the tentative sketch for a story yet to be, perhaps called 'What's Your Story?'.

Sukenick has confessed, like Burroughs, to a belief in the idea of Reichian analysis, that dissolution of character and an awareness of the multiple possibilities of personality are the appropriate conditions of the times. In his story 'The Birds', Sukenick dissolves stable unities of personality and underpins this with constant interference with the assumptions of experiential unity and consistency. In 'The Birds', Sukenick draws our attention to what he calls the technique of 'disparate traits': scenes, characters and events shift, fragment and fall together in unorganized patterns.

The story sprang out of Sukenick's experience of living in woods for a time during which he became interested in the habits of birds, and it is the recurring images of birds which serve as the points of reference for the story. The story begins:

The the the
Nuthatch walks up the tree a Prussian Soldier
pivots walks back down

birds

the

Nuthatch slick arctic acrobat seal bullets through blank
air silence of page the stream carries mainly on its
glassy surface rippled clouds inventing themselves from
minute to minute toss in a stone⁴⁸

Playing here with story's qualities of disconnection,
Sukenick rehearses the recurring idea of the mind's insistence

on comparison in order to make sense of that which defies meaning. Birds, air and clouds suffer the twin violence of the soldier and the stone and become diminished by metaphoric and interpretative insistence as the story inflates a number of similar comparisons which structure the story into freedom/oppression conflicts which, in turn, add comment on contemporary social and political realities.

Oppression is depicted alongside the uninhibited and unfettered: a description of a Yellow-shafted Flicker's appearance and mating habits is followed by that of a clinging sheath dress cut low front and back to reveal the wearer's breasts and buttocks; the drumming of a woodpecker is compared to the sound of machine gun fire; a policeman harrassing the narrator makes jokes about birds; the 1968 upheavals in France are depicted as joyful and spontaneous outpourings of anarchistic protest which confuse conventional politicians of Left and Right alike. Free human expression becomes close to that of the freedom and meaninglessness of bird movements which say nothing and have no predictable outcome. Bird movements:

carve shapes from nothingness, decorate the silence,
makes melodious distinctions to distinguish one
moment finely from the next⁴⁹

The birds' movements out of organization and pattern become the model of a brief mock spy story which takes the conventional idea of the hero's constant evasions and changes of appearance and identity, and totally subverts any notion of character consistency. The strategy, called by Sukenick 'bifurcation' is very reminiscent of Burroughs' similar evasion tactics:

While the authorities are interrogating George and Nick, Sparrow slips out between the two of them. Or if they settle on George, Nick sidles off and meantime George subdivides into Sparrow-Spiro-Ero. The principle here is progressive fission as in certain microorganisms. They never catch up with you, whoever you are⁵⁰

Such contradictions and paradoxes are consistent with the narrator's confession that 'I am always interested in any overt confrontation...with chance',⁵¹ and 'I want to write a story that does a lot of infolding and unfolding'.⁵² Although he intends his writing should have 'No meaning',⁵³ it is grounded in the factual:

30 million Americans living in poverty it says in I. F. Stone in the richest country in the world... children come to school too hungry to learn... in some urban ghettos of the North one child in ten dies in infancy...Abroad we practice mass murder, at home slow genocide...a nation run like a company town for corporate profit⁵⁴

This 'is the...poetry of pure fact...the purity that has been missing from our poems'.⁵⁵ This poetry balances between non-meaning and an engagement with the pressing realities of American life, commenting on its time and environment but avoiding proselytism. The narrator draws a comparison with Watts Towers which are:

'Built entirely without design precedent or orderly planning, created bit by bit on sheer impulse, a natural artist's instinct, and the fantasy of the moment',⁵⁶

The narrator also compares the messages sent by writers to those messages found in fortune cookies: what the message is and who receives it is a matter of pure chance. Birds, anarchy, Watts Towers, the transmutation of character, fortune cookie messages, all become paradigms of the writers' ambition

and responsibility. A recurring phrase, 'ear-tree' adds itself to the overall denial of identifiable meaning: the phrase combines divorced elements never fully absorbed into a unity of expression but floats free of regular definition, its significance suggested only by a message in a fortune cookie which reads 'Connections proliferate, meanings drop away'.⁵⁷

The orchestrator of permutation and confusion in 'The Birds' is called 'Ero': he plants fortune cookie messages and is said to have 'disappeared in a welter of dividing and subdividing identities'.⁵⁸ Ero's permutations allow him to survive the attentions of the authorities who see him as sowing disorder and hatching plots. Plots are, however, like Sukenick's plots, non-existent or beside the point. The policeman's linear thinking becomes disorientated by a lack of meaning:

the police suspect a plot, yet all they see is disorder. They suspect that disorder is part of the plot, if not the point of it. They imagine that they merely have to figure out the plot to put an end to the disorder, But they don't understand the plot and believe the explanation lies with the meaning of the word 'ear-tree'. In turn they believe that this meaning will lead them to a man called Ero. In real life Ero is an eminent ornithologist, but the police believe that he is the leader of an international liberation conspiracy, and that only in his mind are all the connections coherently held together, the whole matter fully understood. To make matters worse, they aren't even sure whether Ero is dead or alive, or...whether that is his right name⁵⁹

The narrator also suffers the residual need of a meaning to explain all the fragments and inconclusiveness surrounding Ero: the message he receives from Ero is composed entirely of bird images which the narrator attempts to labouriously and ingeniously work out. Decoded, the message attains a kind

of poetic meaninglessness, but has become entirely the property of the decoder who has imposed on the message a potential community of significance which does violence to Ero's message. The narrator's interpretation is torn up by Ero. The message, insists Ero, means:

'Nothing. A feather here and there, a color, a squawk, disconnected, opaque, totally self-contained, ending in triumph of birdness, song and soar, itself opaque and without equivalent, but the feeling ordered and defined - like that of a bird's song, or of its flight'⁶⁰

Sukenick in 'The Birds' articulates the ambition of pure experience through a medium insistent on the antithesis of this. He wishes the reader to experience fiction writing as unfocussed events thrown together and separating, confirming then cancelling each moment as these moments randomly arise out of the flux of experience. Design is founded on non-design and multiple simultaneity and implies a 'discontinuity and fragmentation reaching toward continuity and wholeness':⁶¹ 'the Birds' follows closely the living nature of birds whose flight and 'language' reminds us that 'we must remain open to the unknown'.⁶²

In Sukenick's story 'The Death of the Novel' the story's narrator underlines his creator's rejection of consistency and fixture by proclaiming that, 'The only thing that matters is to keep going from moment to moment',⁶³ and it is precisely this conviction, translated into aesthetic form, which characterises Sukenick's second full length novel Out. Out is even more radical in its fluidity than Sukenick's previous work. The novel:

**PAGE
MISSING
IN
ORIGINAL**

emphasizes the intensity of the present by creating a process of imaginative improvisation with experience. It sets up a flowing figure/field interaction in which figures are created, briefly sustained then dissipate following the movement of a creative unconscious⁶⁴

Out exploits almost all the techniques we may term self-negating or self-cancelling: scenes and characters constantly dissolve and reappear in quite different forms, and while the novel charts a familiar American journey from east to west, from Atlantic to Pacific, the novel's structure also moves, but downwards or backwards towards whiteness and space as the number of lines on each page gradually diminishes until the final page is decorated only by a single, small, capital 'O'.

The book jacket of Out describes the novel as 'an effort to get back to a blank page from which we can start over again',⁶⁵ and we find that the book's themes and structure comes together as a destructive statement--something suggested in the novel's opening words:

It all comes together. Don't fall. Each of us carries a stick of dynamite. Concealed on his person. That does several things. One it forms a bond. Two it makes you feel special. Three its mute articulation of the conditions we live in today⁶⁶

Dynamite is the metaphor of possibility, of individual and collective redefinition through violence of the self and of America. As the characters in the opening section edge their way along the ledge of a high building, clutching their sticks of dynamite and changing sex, names and characters as they do so, we are prepared for the rapid geographical and personality shifts that are to follow, as a violent New York is left

behind, and with it all the plots and impositions city life seems to create. Given the temporary name of Harrold the novel's protagonist is sent on his way by a fortune teller who advises him to 'Cultivate the unexpected...welcome the unknown':⁶⁷ with a nostalgic look back on his youth Harrold, by now renamed Nick, abandons his own and his city's history and heads west.

From the beginning, Sukenick's characterisation is completely open and dynamic. We are confronted with non-characters who neither materialise as stable centres of reference nor occupy any fixed position within the novel's structure, being subjected by Sukenick to what he calls a 'stream of character' which allows them to mingle or merge with one another or become violently transposed from one situation to another. Rex becomes Carl, then Donald, Harrold, Nick, Tommy, Henry Aldrich, Ronald, Roland Sycamore, M. T. Focks and R. The result is that no referential identity is ever fully established: in the process Sukenick is, of course, mocking the figures in fiction who are engaged in a search for self-discovery and a transcendent definability of being. At all levels Sukenick's momentum is towards the negative, but the negative has sufficient content to propel it towards a priority discernible in the novel's scenes of decomposition and disintegration and also in the utterances and behaviour of Sukenick's various figures of enlightenment who advocate 'Nada' as an antidote to American and western ills.

Early in the protagonist's journey he dreams of an Indiana gas station and as dream becomes reality we are introduced to one of the novelist's wise men, a figure named Uncle Schmuk - 'only now he's named Uncle Don'.⁶⁸ Uncle Don is asked: 'my life is empty and my work has no meaning what should I do... What's the meaning of this trip...?'⁶⁹ His answers, however, are not answers at all: he points to the digits on the gas pump and says, 'that's the answer to your first question its in code...that when broken is utterly meaningless'.⁷⁰ In answer to the second question, Uncle Don provides a map and the advice to 'Think sideways'.⁷¹ Later the protagonist is woken up by a figure from reality:

Wake up. Everything up to here has been a movie...Hi.
Experience is a code to be broken by the intelligence.
I'm from the intelligence. Get your hands up!⁷²

Reality is intent upon robbery--of the imagination. Named Skuul the intelligence advocates:

honest systematic investigation. Careful sifting of
data painful word by word exegesis of evidence till
the theory of it all starts to crystallize that will en-
lighten us as to cause and effect account for deviation
rationalize history and explain the future⁷³

Sukenick's figure, by now seemingly 'educated' proposes
instead an entirely different series of exercises:

you practice a discipline of abstraction I practice
a discipline of inclusion. You practice a discipline
of reduction I of addiction. You pursue essentials
I ride with the random. You cultivate separation
I union. You struggle towards stillness I rest in
movement...I like to put things together I don't think
it matters much what they are. Connection develops
meaning falls away⁷⁴

The emptiness desired by Sukenick's wandering figure is first glimpsed on his arrival in South Dakota and his meeting with Empty Fox, a Sioux medicine man. Now called Ronald the protagonist crosses paths with the Indian when they both hitch rides on the back of the same truck. When Empty Fox asks Ronald's ambition, the latter says that he wants 'to write a book like a cloud that changes as it goes'.⁷⁵ The Indian's wish, on the other hand, is to:

erase all books...to unlearn everything...to unlearn
and unlearn till I get to the place where the ocean
of the unknown begins where my fathers live⁷⁶

Empty Fox proceeds to round off Ronald's imaginative and physical journey by stirring him to a recognition of lost magic. The Indian refers to white men as Wasichus--'fat takers'--who have despoiled and disturbed nature, who live in the wrong way:

the Wasichus make Disneyland...so they can sell it
they get Indians to pretend they're Indians they
make believe these beautiful mountains are beautiful
they pretend that magic is magic...There is a place
with a billboard of a mountain in front of the
mountain⁷⁷

The wind is, furthermore, evoked by Empty Fox as a natural force having qualities he wishes to use and emulate: he takes to the hills stating a desire 'to make friends with the wind',⁷⁸ and in the hills falls into a dream--dreaming he calls being 'on the wing', a phrase which has obvious affinities with many similar expressions in 'The Birds'.

Critics have been quick to point out the similarities between much of Sukenick's fiction and the work of Carlos Casteneda, and Sukenick himself has written of the significance

of Casteneda's writing. Empty Fox, for example, is clearly in the tradition of sorcerer or visionary, while Casteneda's attempts to re-imagine the world by resisting the conventional versions of reality is very reminiscent of those Sukenick characters who are likewise engaged in looking at experience and environment in new ways. In Journey to Ixtlan Casteneda learns that one must stop the world and, thereby, alter the reality of the 'flow' by diverting interpretation of the world. Sukenick's belief that the imagination makes reality more real is also close to that of Don Juan whose task is specifically one of questioning and disturbing belief in common-sense reality as a final statement of truth. For Don Juan 'dreaming is real', but dreaming in this sense is not to be confused with the sleeping condition but the condition of wakefulness. The 'real' and the 'fictional' become one, fused into a magical experience essentially reinventive of the commonsensical.

At one point in Journey to Ixtlan the apprentice Carlos and Don Juan come across an animal seemingly curled up in a death agony. The creature, however, is indistinct in the twilight and it grows, it seems to Carlos, into some fantastic beast which terrifies him. He turns first to Don Juan and then back again to the beast, which has by now become merely a large branch blown about by the wind. Carlos' relief is seen by Don Juan as a failure of the imagination: the mystery has become naturalized and in the process, Carlos has 'wasted a beautiful power, a power that blew life into (a) dry twig'.⁷⁹

The branch:

was a real animal and it was alive at the moment
the power touched it. Since what kept it alive
was power, the trick was, like in dreaming, to
sustain the sight of it⁸⁰

This takes us back to Sukenick's idea of the truth of
the present moment and Empty Fox's exhortation to right living.
It also points directly to fiction writing and the example
of Sukenick's work. Although in Out Empty Fox's words of
wisdom at times resemble a parody of Sixties 'guru-speak'
the words do bear directly upon Sukenick's search for a
vision which renders linear perception and rationalism as
restricting and outmoded. Cliché and triteness are much in
evidence in Out, but the erratic sentence structure, puns and
word play provide a verbal richness extended by the novel's
negation of 'the logic of continuity', which 'stubbornly
refuses to make sense'⁸¹ of the world and impose a fictional
arrangement upon experience.

The dangers of Sukenick's techniques are those of non-
structure and incoherence overloading the reader's capacity
for response. We find excessiveness of this kind in Robbe-
Grillet and Pynchon, but in Out the arbitrary structure of a
deconstructing narrative falling away into zero ingeniously
carries over to the reader the feeling of relinquishing
control until a state of absence is finally reached. The
reader duplicates Sukenick's protagonist who is:

learning acceptance of formless experience and
limitless perception (and) developing a
superconsciousness that includes and transcends
words, that allow him to accept the dissolving
of experience⁸²

As the structure of Out falls away the reader is pulled along: from around half way through the novel (at the point at which Sukenick himself intrudes with 'Hi. Everything up to here has been a novel')⁸³ language begins to seriously falter, first becoming an unpunctuated stream of three then two then one line clusters, then breaks down completely into incomprehensible one-liners which manage, nevertheless, to express themselves as 'logical' conclusions of what has preceeded them:

T ontday onay thinks Sailor otway oodshay eyeay ooday
thinks R ooklay earhay eelfay eelsmay aystay thinks
Sailor⁸⁴

We are reminded here, of course, that language is merely the symbol of experience which structures that experience, but that experience is no less significant when language stops articulating it. Like Burroughs, Sukenick cherishes the idea of a form of understanding and experience prior to, or outside of, discourse and we find his work 'progressively works against itself in order to move...beyond language back into other aspects of experience'⁸⁵ and:

generates what we call reality, re-ordering our
perceptions and sustaining a vital connection
with the world⁸⁶

There are, in Sukenick's fiction, absolutely no schemes of imposed order, only tentative suggestions of relationships between sets of random elements which form, then dissolve into fresh arrangements. As Sukenick's fiction undergoes constant changes of direction and dimension, the reader is

likewise drawn into the process of redefinition. Drawing on Robbe-Grillet's theories, Sukenick sees the main task of the novelist as that of teaching 'the reader how to invent his world',⁸⁷ - while for Robbe-Grillet 'not only does everyone see his version of reality...but...it is precisely the novel that creates this reality'.⁸⁸ Although Sukenick eschews Robbe-Grillet's insistent materialism both writers share the view that fiction is an ultimately confirming cultural product: it therefore becomes the writer's responsibility to disrupt the consistency and arrangement of this 'divine' system. Significantly, Robbe-Grillet, like Sukenick, sees contradiction and inconsistency as especially alienating forms. Robbe-Grillet has related these techniques to his film making, and described the results in the following way:

Technicians of the film are exactly like academic literary critics; they are the watchdogs of ideology. That is why they are there--to respect the rules so that established order may function normally in the narrative...when I made my first film...the whole team...would rise up...and say..., 'It's not possible'. It was not possible because it did not correspond to the code. For example, suppose that I had decided...to shoot...the sequel to the scene...shot...before, and that I asked the principal actor to wear a different costume. Immediately the script girl...would come up...and say, 'Ah, no, it's not possible...' ...If someone at the beginning of a scene is wearing a herringbone suit, and if you see him again at the end of the scene in the same costume, no information is conveyed. If, on the contrary, I make him wear another costume...information will be conveyed...but the meaning becomes immediately lessened. The amateurs of Cartesianism of the traditional kind will protest...And I say, 'You don't understand what?...There is nothing to be understood. It is a piece of information...'⁸⁹

Like that of Robbe-Grillet, Sukenick's fiction is a fiction of extreme alienating power which, like all disruptive writing, proceeds by 'calling attention to its own artificiality'.⁹⁰ Sukenick himself has compared his work with more conventional forms in the following words:

Maybe its the difference between Brechtian theatre and Aristotelian theatre. I don't want to present people with illusions, and I don't want to let them off cheaply by releasing their fantasies in an easy way...Because what that does is allow people to escape, obviously, from reality, and I want to bang them with it⁹¹

Brecht's aim, we should remind ourselves, is to:

produce a critique of the spontaneous ideology in which men live. That is why he is...forced to exclude...the formal condition of the ideology's aesthetics, the consciousness of self (and its classical deviations: the rules of unity)...In this sense the(se) plays are decentred...have no centre, because, although the illusion-wrapped, naive consciousness is his starting point, Brecht refuses to make it that centre of the world it would like to be...By means of this effect Brecht hoped to create a new relation between the audience and the play performed: a critical and active relation... He wanted to set the spectator at a distance from the performance, but in such a situation that he would be incapable of flight or simple enjoyment... to make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play...in real life⁹²

However, in spite of the similarities in theory, whereas Brecht shifted experience to another level of the tangibly real, Sukenick proposes a dimension beyond the mimetic function which activates a counter to the ideological distortion and inhibition of the imaginative faculties, a counter-aesthetic suggestive of the curative powers of magic, dream and metamorphosis.

The critical dismissal of Sukenick usually take the form of attacking the writer for failing to use his talent to somehow elevate man. About Out, and contemporary innovative fiction generally, one critic has written:

he (Sukenick) has discovered a brick wall, a blank page...a whole literary movement that ends screaming in a blind alley is going to do very little to increase the measure of man. And that, in the last analysis, is the only thing that art is all about⁹³

The difference between a writer like Sukenick and a writer of more conventional works, is that (to borrow the terms coined by Mikhail Bakhtin) the former writes 'polyphonic' novels, the latter 'homophonic' or 'monologic' novels, novels which present all characters and events in a unified, objective world dominated by the author's knowledge and consciousness. In contrast to the conventional novel which has its veneer of uniformity imposed on it, Sukenick writes from a multi-dimensional viewpoint presenting a plurality of consciousness without any closure of meaning or a linear logic of development. In order to 'increase the measure of man', the writer has presumably to affirm the stature of man, but in doing so the fact of affirmation is made within the terms of prevailing ideas and beliefs. Estrangement only comes about when the artist disengages himself from dominant ideas and values to the point at which art is no longer fulfilled in the conventional manner and the grip of ideology is, therefore, loosened. In an oblique fashion, Sukenick does intend to elevate man, but does so in terms of an extreme series of re-definitions which instruct us how to realise full

imaginative power and hence benefit from the process of regeneration.

In Sukenick's 98.6 we see the writer's full intentions realised. Going beyond the 'old question: how can the imagination take power again, pervade our lives, and alter the quality of existence',⁹⁴ 98.6 challenges the belief that the imagination is always under the control of physical factors and allows instead the imagination a degree of 'priorness' which points towards a totally new human condition. 98.6 takes over from where Out vanished. According to Sukenick:

Like it or not, it is the Pacific towards which America slouches for rebirth (and) obligingly, the Pacific coast keeps generating its answers to America's questions, most of them wrong⁹⁵

Out ends with 'wash salt smell wave spray ebbs into vacancy around him',⁹⁶ and then the voyage out into space. 98.6 begins:

7/14 a shadow solidifies in the mist. The cobbled sea wall. The sloop tacks into the harbormouth wallowing in the swell⁹⁷

A boat returns to shore to a place called Frankenstein, Sukenick's name for a monstrous America at the end of the sixties. The section called 'Frankenstein' forms the first of the novel's three parts; the second section is entitled 'The Children of Frankenstein'; the third, 'Palestine'. Respectively, the three parts depict horror and death, the resistance of a few individuals to contemporary realities through communal living, and finally utopia and artistic failure. Overall the novel's form is far more

varied than Out, being made up of different presentational modes--diary entires, quotations complete with footnotes, newspaper items, and fragments held together by what Sukenick (with a conscious use of the double meaning of the word 'Mosaic') calls 'the Mosaic Law...the law of mosaics a way of dealing with parts in the absence of wholes'.⁹⁸

The first section is recounted in the form of dreams. Descriptions of sex, death, magic are interspersed with brief accounts of a character's waking-life which includes accounts of real situations which vie with dream in their horror and unbelievability so that dream and reality, paradigms of fiction and fact, appear and disappear, cancelled by the conflicting account which, in turn, becomes dispersed by the contrapuntal statement.

Sukenick's refusal to adapt himself to the dominant mode of representation either in his depiction of America or formal construction is corroborated by a mockery directed at those whom Robbe-Grillet describes as forever thinking 'everything is going to resolve itself into a trite collection of causes and effects, intentions and accidents'.⁹⁹ All but one of 'Frankenstein's short sections is dated as if each were a diary entry: the 7/14 in the above quotation is Sukenick's birth date; the rest seem totally arbitrary. Furthermore, a mysterious object referred to as 'The Ancient Caja' emerges from 'the nonsense of a dream',¹⁰⁰ to promise much but explain nothing:

How apt it is. How perfect. How well it describes. Describes what. What he's looking for. But only the outside of it...It's like the slow throbbing of the fountain of blood in your hard prick. It's like narrow hewn steps under massive stone blocks at the end of the darkness a pile of skulls. It's like the secret code on the leopard's fur and the tortoise shell. Emerging. From the nonsense. Eyelid like a nostril. Stormnuts. Eat my rubber bag¹⁰¹

The Caja is a nonsense symbol collapsing out of suggestiveness into total meaninglessness via the Borges-like reference to the 'code' of animal patterning. In section three, the Ancien Caja is located in the Holy Land, but only tentatively so, since, according to Prime Minister Meir, the Ancien Caja is 'The Old Box The Ark The Solar Barque. Everyone has his own version'.¹⁰² All we can say is that this mysterious 'thing' seems somehow 'to refer to some archetypal vehicle of power, perhaps a primordial womb of the creative imagination'.¹⁰³

The Ancien Caja lies buried somewhere in the earth, but it would seem not literally so. The earth is Sukenick's metaphor of that reality which constantly revitalises, and it is to the earth that Sukenick's protagonist clings to counteract the pressures imposed by a dead world. Sukenick relates this elsewhere to the experience undergone by Wordsworth who:

tells how as a kid he had to grab hold of a wall to make sure the world was really there, but when he grew up the dead weight of reality almost crushed the sense of his own existence¹⁰⁴

Through a process of inventing reality through art, rather than using art to discover reality, the artist:

'seeks a vital connection with the world that, to stay alive, must be constantly reinvented to correspond with our truest feelings...Art is a process of self-creation. It literally brings you to life'¹⁰⁵

Allowing a constant transformation of the real which never allows the real to settle into deadness, art, through the dynamic of creativity, concentrates a harmony of destruction/construction onto 'Frankenstein', the time of Aztec or the 'dynasty of a million lies'.

The Aztec civilization is depicted as so deadened by its own proliferation that only death can renew its commitment to life. Aztec equals:

death...Aztec equals men with eyes like the wrong
end of a telescope...Aztec equals monolith...Aztec
equals flat...Aztec equals German stiff the police
...Aztec equals mastery¹⁰⁶

Contemporary America too equals death:

7/14 he puts a dime in a slot and gets a newspaper.
The series of murders that turned out to be part of
another mass murder now turns out to be part of a
series of mass murders. War continues peace
continues to be at hand...the country is racing like
a wheel out of contact with the ground¹⁰⁷

Detached from the 'ground', from the Ancien Caja's mystery,
America holds the protagonist tight within its madness: he
sees himself as part of the problem, until, 'eyeball to eyeball
with The Problem',¹⁰⁸ he 'has a thing and that is that he's
only interested in the extraordinary'.¹⁰⁹ The extraordinary
consists of watching hummingbirds feeding. 'Singing' Whales
off the California coast also remind him:

that's the kind of song he want to compose...he wants to be a songwriter but he's stuck. He wants to write lyrics without words that presents a tough problem for a songwriter because as he knows we live in words, words are the water we swim in¹¹⁰

As a counterforce to Aztec the protagonist also proposed Maya:

Maya equals the dream that you can escape...Maya equals children selling flowers...Maya equals rise and fall rise and fall rise and fall. Maya equals escape by water...Maya equals fluid...Maya equals mystery¹¹¹

The author's Mayan images prepare the way for the second section of the novel which introduces various ideas revolving around human attempts not only to contain the horrors of America, but also to totally redefine the human experience through language, and the refusal to take on permanent and spiritual characteristics. Sukenick as early as page eight of the novel had depicted a Spanish soldier attempting, unsuccessfully, to escape from a pyramid prison (elsewhere the novel's protagonist comments on the number of pyramid-shaped buildings which have sprung up in America over the last few years): the soldier waits 'the unexpected the aberration the extraordinary event the one chance in a million that will allow him if he's alert enough to slip through'.¹¹² The soldier has the idea but not the capacity to 'slip through' and dies, ironically, at the hands of his own people who mistake him for an Indian.

Staying alert and keeping one step ahead of events are Sukenick's strategies of survival in part two of 98.6. 'The Children of Frankenstein' recounts the experiences of a group of young people who establish a commune on the California coast. The group build some sort of building, called 'The

Monster', made from irregular-shaped pieces of different woods; it looks like anything anyone wants it to, more 'like a boat than a house...the back half of an old B-17 Flying Fortress...the Cyclone'.¹¹³ The construction is made-up without preparation, and is clearly meant as a paradigm of life styles and fiction writing, as a complete break with the past which in Section Two is depicted as 'The Great Depression' which has broken America's heart and turned her into the Frankenstein she is:

under every change still the Great Depression. Joy doesn't get rid of it. Dope doesn't get rid of it. Sex doesn't get rid of it. Freedom doesn't get rid of it. Murder doesn't get rid of it.¹¹⁴

The Great Depression grips even the young like a despair beneath all of their rebelliousness, but beyond despair lies the promise of an 'Emptiness...The pause between the beats the clean slate and blank space'.¹¹⁵ The communards' attempts to live out new lives in their own paradise are doomed to failure: alert to and ahead of the system they, nevertheless, fail to overcome the dangers which Sukenick sees as developing out of a seemingly human instinct to recreate, albeit often obliquely, the conditions which they seek to escape from. The germ of despair is carried with them—with Sukenick referring specifically to the sexual revolution of the sixties which his characters in 98.6 fully participate in, but which by the 'end of the sixties...had become a middle-class consumer trip'.¹¹⁶

Under the pressures of its internal contradictions, Sukenick shows the commune gradually falling back into the very system

it sought to replace. At the centre of the group, however, is a figure called Ron who is writing a novel of the group's experiences - but rather than using these events and his friends in the commune as material he is shown as making up situations to which the commune responds, until the stage is reached when 'Ron feels he doesn't need to write the novel. What's happening is the novel. Bjorsq'.¹¹⁷ The bewildering regressions of this fiction-making process ~~are~~ compounded by Ron's attempts to inspire the group to continually metamorphosise themselves, beginning with their names. Ron changes his name to Cloud:

then everybody starts changing names. Evelyn changes Eucalyptus because Cloud's changes make her feel heavy and left behind. Paul becomes Wind...Joan changes to Valley...Helen becomes Dawn...George changes to Lance and Ralph stays Talph because he feels stubborn. The Tom Goose and Feather change to Branch Bud and Blossom¹¹⁸

One of the names for the creative spirit in the novel is Bjorsq.

Bjorsq is something:

Ron...won't define...Or can't...Anyway they don't want anything that defined or crystallized. What's crystallized is static and what's static is dead¹¹⁹

This resistance to the defined is seen in a song Ron composes as 'part of his plot to destroy the English Language':¹²⁰

Bjorsqi poppamomma
Wocky wocky
Plastic jam
Iron blintzes
Fill the inches
Sooky buby nishtgeddeit¹²¹

Sukenick is here engaging the problem of language at the level of language by inventing a new tongue in the hope that

this '"secret language"...will open up old magics and new possibilities not currently inscribed in our texts'.¹²² All writers, indeed, are for Sukenick 'in love with nonsense as the water in which everyone swims',¹²³ and it is the nonsense game of pangrams which Sukenick uses to inject into language new qualities. Pangrams are sentences using every letter in the alphabet once; Bjorsq is the left-over language made from the bits and pieces of unsuccessful pangrams, and:

points to the peripheries of language where language gets created: the edge of language, where there's a fresh contact between language and whatever is out there, phenomena¹²⁴

More than merely revitalising our texts, therefore, Sukenick's language is intended to transform all experience, to nullify 'manipulative language (and) break through word lines, as Burroughs says'.¹²⁵

Bjorsqi represents nothing in the novel but a return to the source, to the origins of creation before the Fall into words, ideas and reflections. This accounts for Sukenick's avoidance of conventional syntax and the interruptions to language's 'flow' made by punctuation: we are left with fragmented language but a language which, nevertheless, seems to hold together very much like the aircraft described in Part One which is made up of 'parts...not really connected to one another just held together by the skin'.¹²⁶

A major image in Part Two is that of 'The Missing Lunk'. The tale of the Lunk begins with a god called Flows-with-the-streaming-clouds who creates creatures called by the Indians

Sasquatch. These bear-like animals were once happy though they had no voice boxes and their words were 'growls, squeaks, farts, gargles, clicks and chuckles'.¹²⁷ The problem was, however:

they couldn't learn how to talk to the gods and this made Flows-with-the-streaming-clouds very angry. So he sent Condors after them and the Condors carried them off by their navels and shook them till their guts ripped and their heads were nearly torn from their bodies and when the Condors were through with them their voices came out their mouths and they were men...But though men were now able to learn the speech of the gods they always remembered the pain that gift caused them and they weren't happy¹²⁸

To the Indians there are still a few Sasquatch around 'intelligent enough to be free but too dumb to be unhappy... The Missing Lunk says Ron'.¹²⁹ The Lunk also speaks Bjorsq, a language which:

expresses nothing with any definition...but it says everything...its the whole force and direction of the stream the power that moves everything...Bjorsq is a vertical language all others are horizontal... a deep language all others are flat...is a window language all others are mirrors...It's the language of the map to The Ancien Caja whatever that is¹³⁰

With the eventual failure of the communal existence of the children of Frankenstein the Missing Lunk weeps. The California dream is ended and the creative spirit in the shape of either the butterflies which return to the commune every fall, The Ancien Caja, The Missing Lunk or Bjorsq has to find another home.

The final section of 98.6 is called 'Palestine', and it extends the communal idea into a fictional utopia based on

a geographical and historic reality meant to induce a non-Frankenstein, non-monsterous state of mind. Palestine is what California would be if things would work out. The narrator of this section lives in a Kibbutz called The Wave where the 'main ritual activity is surfing'.¹³¹ Israel itself is in most things the opposite to Frankenstein. The narrator is told:

Here in Israel we have no need of cars...We have an extensive intercity monorail system and colorful barges make their ways among the canals. Environmental planning is largely given over to the artists (who) are recognised as the creators not only of aesthetic works but of reality itself¹³²

Israel has rejected the frenzies of Frankenstein, especially aggressive sexuality and language. A kindly but eccentric doctor, also named Frankenstein, has revealed to the people of Israel many of the secrets of life. He speaks a 'higher language', and according to an inhabitant of Palestine, it is from him that:

we learned the basic sexual nature of energy enabling us to eroticize all our pursuits. Great slow waves of rhythmic energy while at the same time escaping that frantic sexuality which acts as a morbid irritant beyond the borders of Israel¹³³

The narrator of 'Palestine' is lectured to by a sage named Yitzak Fawzi who employs extensive sea imagery to describe indeterminacy and complementarity. Fawzi claims that when one's rhythms become one with the surf, one enters a higher state where reality resembles dream:

The waves are the laws...the fingerprints of the spirit on the blank page of matter...The waves are continuous. They fill the gaps. They are the missing dimension¹³⁴

The sage relates his theories closely to discoveries in physics and especially:

the principle (of) the more you look the less you find basic principle of quantum mechanics. The observer becomes a function of the observed. Thus discontinuity is a function of the observed is it not. Thus the bankruptcy of empiricism¹³⁵

These ideas are sufficiently close to Sukenick's literary ideas of his compositions being an experience rather than being about experience, and his techniques of randomness and the arbitrary as being the real fictional road to truth. His work, he has said, expresses:

the need to incorporate the vagaries of experience... to affirm the experience of composition, and to deny the work as illusion, so that while we admitted the brokenness, the discontinuity of experience, we also swept away many of the chronic schizoid Western attitudes toward mind and experience, thought and poetry, form and chaos, and we give to our works the only structure that seemed possible or even desirable - the structure of our own minds¹³⁶

'Other realities' are shown as bearing just as much objective weight as the provisional realities we live day to day: the sole fictional responsibility is ultimately to show the way 'in'. In the writer's words:

Our particular moment and place is located in our heads and our bodies...and at the risk of solipsism we must start there¹³⁷

The 'Palestine' section of 98.6 reveals the possibilities of life and of fiction itself; consequently Israel is a state of mind rather than a particular place, while the writing itself points towards the centrality of the imagination in the fiction making process. The parallels with the writings

of Castenada are clearly drawn, but Sukenick incorporates and exhibits many of post-Modernism's most basic disruptive elements and anti-rational statements. In the ideal of Israel the extraordinary is depicted as 'run-of-the-mill';¹³⁸ waves fill those gaps in life so manifestly obtrusive in Frankenstein, and the law of psychosynthesis transforms human capacities. Instructed by Yitzak Fawzi the narrator concludes:

When the wave of inner necessity coincides with the wave of outer necessity another world is psychosynthesized this is what we call The Moment of Luminous Coincidence...The State of Israel is a Moment of Luminous Coincidence. Without the State of Israel life would become inconceivable it would lose a necessary dimension it would become flat we would all become Nazis¹³⁹

Psychosynthesis puts man in touch with all things at all times. It is a:

way of curing the disease without catching it. A way of things happening without happening. A way of dreaming without dreaming¹⁴⁰

So described, psychosynthesis reflects Don Juan's course of instruction to Carlos, with its emphasis on controlled dreaming, and the letting go of consciousness without the attendant horrors of insanity. In 98.6 there is a becoming of all things good and bad before the negative/positive dichotomy can be collapsed into a state of incorporation. But before this:

You have to mourn for everything that's been lost. You have to remember everyone who's died. You have to think about every tortured child. You have to consider the inevitability of pain. You have to ponder cruelty¹⁴¹

Man therefore becomes: he does not experience, but is experience itself. But this man, like Israel, is yet to be. The identity-less voice of power and wisdom which leads into the conclusion of 98.6 assumes the tones of genetic engineer, committed like Burroughs, to creating afresh:

the era of genetic engineering is not too remote and once we can produce controlled mutation...we will have the power both to create life and control evolution and we will synthesize a new race of superman¹⁴²

Such 'wisdoms' are, however, to be resisted: wrong synthesis! Nightmare, bad dreams follow the initiate who has been watching the result at the movies--Frankenstein. Einstein's advice is better: 'Only experience can restore that lost synthesis which analysis has forced us to shatter. Experience alone can decide on truth'.¹⁴³

The State of Israel is almost inconceivable since there they speak a language described as being understood by very few. Sukenick's way back to the Holy Land requires its new language, a language of rhythm devoid of punctuation, which gets at 'information without circulating it through the conscious part of the brain'.¹⁴⁴ This language will not string out experience across space and time but render all things instantaneously. The novel concludes with Sukenick experiencing The Moment of Luminous Coincidence back in Frankenstein:

JESSELONECATFULLERJESSESEARLYLIFEWASSPENTRAMBLING
BETWEEN GEORGIATEXASANDCALIFORNIAWHEREHEEVENTUALLY
SETTLEDALONGTHEWAYHELEARNEDSPIRITUALSBLUESRAGSAND
BILLYSONGS...¹⁴⁵

Jesse becomes a one-man-band playing all the instruments at the same time and showing the way-how to live and how to speak. Jesse is the American model to be emulated:

AT THE SAME TIME I'm sitting in Laguna Beach with the cat on my lap listening to The San Francisco Blues by Lone Cat Fuller AT THE SAME TIME trying to finish my novel AT THE SAME TIME trying to forget about it I pick up and open a book at random Fuller Buckmaster quotes Fuller Margaret all attempts to construct a national literature must end in abortions like the monster of Frankenstein...¹⁴⁶

Sukenick's novel has to end in failure; he deals necessarily in a language we can all 'understand' and lives in 'a bungled paradise', namely, Southern California. The delights of Israel are exchanged for the obsessions and dishonesties of Frankenstein, and the two states sit uneasily together, at the expense of 98.6:

AT THE SAME TIME tying up my novel AT THE SAME TIME life is unravelling AT THE SAME TIME the novel is bungled fragments stitched together AT THE SAME TIME everything is seamless perfect not because because because but AT THE SAME TIME playing the blues letting it go it is as it is. Another failure¹⁴⁷

Sukenick is one of the most daring of post-Modernist writers, not because he is the most innovatory, but because he proposes an ideal fiction and a way of living which is militantly instructive. In a novelist of similar disposition,

Tom Robbins, the dangers of such writing show themselves as a destructive sentimentality (underpinned by a formal conservatism). Robbins, like Sukenick, feels:

that the excessive rationalization of Western culture since Descartes has severed men from his roots in nature (and) organised religion has...become more of a tool of logic and control than of spirit¹⁴⁸

The difference is, however, that Sukenick makes the internal, formal, arrangement of his fiction in accordance with external, thematic, pressures: fictionalizing strategies express the very subject matter of his work. At its best, in 'The Birds' and in 98.6, the kind of imagination pervasive in his work is concerned with the active and productive power transcending the limitations of the given, and synthesizing images in order to then disperse them into recreative, mobile patterns. More than merely cancelling the concepts of unity and identity, Sukenick turns the problems associated with these negating techniques into problems of identification, thus provoking the reader into tentative recognitions which gradually become 'lost' among the dissolving discourse. In Raymond Federman's words, 'Ron Sukenick...goes further than anyone writing today in creating...'unfinished sentences',¹⁴⁹ and in doing so, Sukenick activates a continuous disilluisionment of expectations. The writer sees his task as teaching people to invent both themselves and their world, and through a proliferation of self-cancellation, Sukenick shows unity in the process of being transformed under the pressures of the insistent present: the work is then necessarily in conflict with itself, but in conflict also with ways of seeing which contain and suppress the imaginative process.

CHAPTER ONE

Part 3

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CHAPTER TWO

FRAGMENTATION AND DISCONTINUITY

CHAPTER TWO

Part One: Introduction

Early twentieth century art's departure from classical ideas relating to order and coherence is seen at its most spectacular in the fragmented and discontinuous worlds of Dada and Surrealism. Though by no means the earliest or even perhaps the most influential of contemporary radical aesthetic 'movements' Dada and Surrealism, nevertheless, adopted extremely disrupted and disrupting forms and an aggressiveness of performance meant to shock and scandalise the guardians of good taste, standards and values. Art as an arena of human expression and reception was subjected to the scrutiny of the incredulous: in the light of recently acquired knowledge about man and the universe it was disputed that the production of works of art was any longer morally justifiable or socially worthwhile. Moreover, whereas art has traditionally struggled to define its capacity for rendering life's diversity and complexity, Dada and Surrealism exploited this uncertainty by expanding art into an aesthetic of discontinuity and surprise.

Though Freud provided scientific sanction for Dada and Surrealism his emphasis on rational explanation and his attempts to reconcile man to reality by curing his 'sickness' was wholly alien to such radical aesthetic notions

--essentially Dada and Surrealism appropriated Freud's discoveries and insights without applying palliatives. Common-sense readings of reality were further undermined by physicists like Einstein and later Heisenberg: 'reality' became a matter of a series of problematical situations, situations Dada and Surrealism confronted and exploited as confirming the artist's irrational perspectives and objectives. Primitive art and random objects 'found' in the Paris fleamarkets¹ provided other influences and suggestive features welcomed by artists attempting a redefinition of art and a reconstitution of reality through art.

Whereas the Modernist movement attempted to structure art to the imminent chaos of the world, Dada and Surrealism went further, emphasising the power of insight, intuition and imagination. Through dislocation of habitual modes of seeing Dada and Surrealism attempted to alert men to routine, therefore false views of reality: in this 'alternative' world of contradiction, randomness and fragmentation, senselessness seems to rule supreme; nothing has structure and the world barely holds up in the face of impending collapse.

Dada emerged into a world which had lost faith in absolutes and it was Dada which most comprehensively attended to a growing sense of absurdity which permeated the western world, particularly in the aftermath of the First World War. Not only did the Dadaist believe that life was illogical, disorderly and randomly arranged, but that art must proclaim

so. Dada was essentially anti-art, because the Dadaist creation was secondary to the scandal it engendered: 'absurd' public performances assaulted the sensibilities of the bourgeois, insisting on the power of chance over coherence. For instance, Tristan Tzara created poems from the juxtaposition of words cut from a newspaper. Thus, the very minimum of artistic control is exercised: the process of 'choosing' takes place merely at the level of the poems material (the newspaper) and since one newspaper is as 'suitable' as the next, no significances are established upon which structure can be erected. Tzara described Dada this way:

Dada: abolition of logic...Dada: abolition of memory: Dada: abolition of the future: Dada: absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity... Dada, a roaring of tense colours, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE²

The Dadaists were insistent that reality was too elusive and incoherent to be formally represented, and that the human senses fed us misleading information, especially through the structure of language which, sequential and continuous in nature, betrayed life's positive and authentic characteristics. Dadaists consequently countered the establishment's word patterns through the creation of anti-word constructs: we can detect obvious influences at work here but, whereas both Symbolists and Futurists were intent upon the imposition of

new orthodoxies, the Dadaists tried to drain language of meaning by using it in fragmented or incoherent ways in order to regain the innocence of a world in which things have no names and which, therefore, resist those categories established by the insistent intellect. Language, seen as the conspiracy of constraint, becomes a surface of asymmetry and immediacy which suspends intelligible comparison and bypasses the logic of reflectiveness. 'Meaning' emerges from strangeness and discontinuity:

five negresses in a car
have exploded out along the five directions of
my fingers
when I put my hand on my heart to pray to God
(perhaps)
around my head is a moist light of old lunar birds
the green halo of saints around cerebral evasions
tralalalalalalalalalalal
(Tristan Tzara)

Dada played a crucial role in liberating the artist from the past, challenging orthodoxy and conventional wisdom, and demonstrated the largely forgotten truth of art as discontinuous and disturbing rather than 'entire' and remedial. What it did not do, or intend doing, was to develop a consistent aesthetic of its own. Dada expressed a desire for the disorganisation, disorientation and demoralisation of all accepted values, but, according to the Surrealists, it failed to completely liberate the imagination or to work actively for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, Surrealism attempted both.

Surrealism attempted nothing less than 'the reconciliation of two hitherto warring realms: men and the world'.³ In place of Dada's destructive anarchism, the Surrealists proposed the systematic, scientific and experimental nature of their method. The essence of Surrealism became, therefore, the trance, the dream and the pursuit of insights into the subconscious. Basically, Surrealism ascribed uncommon properties to common objects, and celebrated the confrontation of apparently unrelated objects, ideas or words and the wilful dislocation of object and context. Of course, Surrealism's commitment to tapping the resources of the deep-seated areas of the mind implied a subversive attitude towards reality, but ~~its~~ ultimate aim was to redefine reality in such a way as to fuse both the conscious and subconscious worlds. The 'real' was not evaded but confronted on conflicting (but ultimately reconcilable) levels of meaning.

Hardly surprisingly, the novel found little favour with Surrealists. The structure of the conventional novel reflects a bourgeois world view: both social and individual life are approached in terms of explainable cause and effect series of teleological events. However, the very nature of narrative proved an irresistible challenge to the iconoclast: Breton wrote Nadja (1928) and Louis Aragon even insisted on the despised term 'novel' to describe Paris Peasant (Le Paysan de Paris, 1926). In his novel, Aragon claimed he was:

seeking...to use the accepted novel-form as the basis for the production of a new kind of novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of fiction...a novel that the critics would be obliged to approach empty-handed⁴

Paris Peasant sets out to deliberately frustrate any expectation of conventional narrative structure. Descriptions are abruptly broken off and left incomplete as Aragon refuses to return the narrative to its original course. The reader is denied linear plot and instead of a rapport we have the reader implicated in Aragon's attack on the 'innocent' narrator:

You think, my boy, that you have an obligation to describe everything...You are sadly out in your calculations. You have not enumerated the pebbles, the abandoned chairs...All these people who are wondering what on earth you are driving at may as well get lost in the details, or in the garden of your bad faith. Readers, right dress!...Quick march! They have followed me, the idiots⁵

Full of reproduced press cuttings, tariff lists, placards, labels and drawings, Paris Peasant proclaims itself an attack on the 'anodine pretext of literature',⁶ and with the salesman's flourish Aragon sells his product as unnatural and corruptive:

the vice named Surrealism is the immoderate and impassioned use of the stypefying image, or rather of the uncontrolled provocation of the image for its own sake and for the element of unpredictable perturbation and of metamorphosis which it introduces into the domain of the representation: for each image on each occasion forces you to revise the entire universe⁷

The views expressed by Aragon in Paris Peasant are those of the artist who feels that the artistic is that which works in direct opposition to the prosaic. This follows precisely the Formalist dictum that:

no representation of an object will ever be valid visually and artistically unless the eyes can directly understand it as a deviation from the basic visual conception of the object⁸

Here Rudolf Arnheim is specifically relating Formalist ideas to the cinema, and it is cinematic art which most extensively embodies many of modern art's most innovative features--the absence of any smooth transitions, abrupt juxtaposition, surprise, the collision of separated elements. In films, we witness temporal shifts playing with the uniformity and irreversibility of time, simultaneity, exaggerated speed, multiple perspectives and spatial movement, all of which proved immensely suggestive to the novelist. Indeed, the French critic Michel Mourlet has said that the movies 'must without doubt force the novel to take stock of its resources and to re-evaluate itself in terms of this new situation',⁹ but we should remind ourselves of the obvious, that the 'novel is one thing...the movies another; interaction between them must be critically forced'.¹⁰ We can, for example, acknowledge that the range of simultaneity available through film can only be approximated by the novelist, though in Madame Bovary Flaubert did intend that 'one should hear the bellowing of the cattle, the whisperings of the lovers and the rhetoric of the officials all at the same time'.¹¹ Futile though such ambitions are, such ambitions persisted and the movies proved particularly important to many Modernist writers faced with what Virginia Woolf called, 'This appalling narrative business...getting on from lunch to dinner'.¹²

For John Dos Passos it was the methods of the cinema which proved of particular value in the writer's search for an aesthetically unifying principle, since the cinema's

structural synchrony when duplicated in the novel restores 'to a complex narrative the basic cohesion that the conditions of narrative art tend to deprive it of at any given moment'.¹³ In Manhattan Transfer the novel's structure--three sections divided respectively into five, eight and five titled sub-sections, each an aggregate of short narrative sequences with a prose poem epigraph--enables Dos Passos to develop parallel narratives of separate characters and their milieux, to cut rapidly back and forth between them, so exploiting the effects of juxtaposition, and to construct a multifaceted view of Manhattan and its society. A similar organizing principle by which thematic unity is achieved from discontinuous fragments is found also in U.S.A. Here, divorced narrative elements 'form linkages with each other and, by means of juxtaposition, throw each others' features into relief and highlight the tensions in...society'.¹⁴

Sergi Eisenstein discerned a close proximity between the film and the novel, especially the novels of Dickens, in which Eisenstein found an 'amazing' closeness to the 'characteristics of cinema in method, style...viewpoint and exposition'.¹⁵ However, Eisenstein's cinematic montages owed much to Associationist and Constructivist theory as well as to the novel, and, of course, to the atmosphere of Revolution. Moreover, Eisenstein was an admirer of haiku poetry; in the 'alphabet' of Japanese language he saw the basis for cinematic dynamics, with the ideogram acting as the collision of two ideas or attractions. For Eisenstein the haiku's collision of

attractions produced the unified psychological effect which is the hallmark of haiku and montage, both of which embody the same structural principle as the Surrealist metaphor whereby two disparate 'statements' give rise to a third image or concept.

This 'synthesis' confirmed Eisenstein's conviction that the mind works dialectically, and that the crowning moment in a film comes when the mind synthesises opposing ideas into the idea which has emerged from the foreshadowed (this idea differs radically from that of D. W. Griffiths who held that the film's conclusion would suddenly burst upon the spectator from 'nowhere'). Eisenstein's theories of film also presupposed a redefinition of the spectator's role. Brecht-like, Eisenstein emphasised the dynamics of dialectics in relation to an audience: the audience experiences not the complete image, but the experience of completing an image, or in the process of realisation--that is, of course, an application of Marx's dictum that truth lies in the path as much as in the destination. The film's desired image 'is not fixed or ready-made, but arises - is born' with the spectator 'compelled to proceed along that self-same creative road that the author travelled in creating the image'.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of details within the composition calls into life a general quality 'in which each detail has participated and which binds together all the details into a whole'.¹⁷ This ambition of unity controlled Eisenstein's

aesthetic. He believed that 'thematic development is identical in the whole as it is in its parts large and small. The law of unity (should be) observed throughout'.¹⁸ Here, we should remind ourselves that though Brecht's admiration for Eisenstein was unstinted there were differences: in Brecht, the question is not that of the production of adherence (the synthesis of two montage elements into a realized and directed concept); rather, it is that of the production of contradictions, a dialectical procedure by which the spectator is torn out of his fixity and placed into an active situation.

One area in particular in which film has influenced the novel is that of indiscriminate and objective 'vocabulary'. The film has only a limited ability to select from the reality pictured, hence when, as in the fiction of Robbe-Grillet, narrative viewpoint approximates that of the scanning camera the discourse becomes overloaded with information. Moreover, the camera's narrative method is 'absolutely objective, pushed to the point of behaviourism' and events are described 'only from the outside, with neither commentary nor psychological interpretation'.¹⁹ This detachment speaks a picture-language which passes 'not through the educated mind, as does the word, but, like painting, sculpture, and music' passes 'direct to the native sensibility'.²⁰

The vocabulary of the cinema has a precision and unequivocation unknown to the novel: the film has a limited

capacity to create tropes, and is, therefore, less suited than is the novel to the exploration and projection of inner states of consciousness. At the same time, film has a capacity for clear, powerful and immediate visualisation, and although the camera does not exactly reproduce the physiological process of vision, it does capture visual realities that are free from the interpretation of the human mind. The film image is uncontaminated by feelings and emotions, while in language the rapport between signifier and signified is a distant one, and therefore produces countless gradations of sense. In contrast, we find that in the grammar of film signifiers are very closely tied to their signifieds; images are realistic representations and sounds are exact reproductions of what sound refers to.

Gertrude Stein was fascinated by the possibilities of simple accurate description without subjective contamination, and in a similar way, Robbe-Grillet has dedicated himself to a procedure of description which is designed to free objects from the distortions imposed by human projection. Wishing to cleanse the world of objects from impure and false (human) associations, his task has been one of seeing the world fresh, as if viewed through the camera's lens.

The American novelist Kenneth Gangemi has adopted a similar narrative procedure. His first novel, Olt, avoids consciously arranged emphasis to the point where the novel becomes a catalogue of the central character's experience.

Events are merely registered and rendered in a flat, unemotional style, the narrator merely recording the experiences of one man, Robert Olt, as he moves through New York:²¹

Olt left the alley and continued walking towards the book store. He looked in a bakery window at a display called 'Cookies of the World'. He stopped in to see the German combat art. He looked in the window of a pet shop and remembered reading about the game a naturalist used to play with his pet coati-mundi; the man would try to touch the little snout before it was tucked under the coat-mundi's arm.

Olt crossed the street to avoid a mentally-disturbed man who was shouting at pedestrians. He looked in the window of a novelty store...²²

The narrator suffers an incapacity to discriminate within his experiential responses; his life is shown as a series of broken moments without any particular significance, with unrelated events punctuated only by occasional flash backs. In Olt, the past is depicted as a storehouse of broken memories as irregular as the present into which they emerge: Olt knows that the past and the present either in isolation

or in tandem can never be made into a clarifying totality. Experience is fragmented, without special meaning, merely a matter of partial participation in the world's affairs:

Olt knew he would never see a meteor striking an iceberg, a bat falling into snow, or a clown on a nun. He knew he would never go to a party and talk to thunderstorm experts, roller-coaster experts, vampire experts, sailplane experts, dinosaur experts, or volcano experts²²

If the narrative perspective of Olt is that of the camera, in Gangemi's The Interceptor Pilot, the 'novel' utilises the entire vocabulary of the film. The book opens:

The beginning of the film is set at a Naval Air Station somewhere in the western United States. It would be any one of the southwestern or Rocky Mountain States...The reason is mainly cinematic. The film will be in color, and the setting might as well be one of great natural beauty²³

The novel tells a straightforward adventure story: James Wilson, a retired fighter pilot defects to the North Vietnamese in attonement for an error of judgement he made during the Korean war which resulted in the deaths of school children. In Vietnam, Wilson fights against his fellow Americans with considerable success until he is shot down by an ex-colleague. The novel therefore invites a degree of symbolic recuperation, and indeed the blurb describes the book as containing 'the larger story of the decline of a civilization and the rending of the conscience of a people who realise that 'God does not take sides'. However, by renouncing normal fictional techniques and adopting a cinematic mode of presentation, Gangemi renders such interpretations redundant. The narrative

is so detached and neutral, so devoid of authorial judgement or moral evaluation, that the reader is unable to find any centre, any clue to the identity of he/she 'who speaks'. Characters simply are, simply there without depth, life or inner being. Each is a word animated by instruction:

The Commander will be portrayed very favourably, more so than Professor Miller or the Russian Major or even Wilson himself²⁵

A minimum of dialogue and an abundance of scenario-style information makes the novel into a very visual, albeit fragmented, work: the reader, deprived of the detail found in conventional novels, is forced to activate his imagination into 'fleshing out' the provided sketch or outline. Instead of providing what Barthelme refers to as linguistic 'stuffing', those 'dead' words and the transitional elements of narrative, Gangemi creates a broken, minimal work of fiction made out of fifty short sections arranged into five main parts as a series of 'shots':

Three days later. The ground school phase is over and Wilson is ready to begin the actual flight training. Cut to a shot of two MIG-21's parked on the flight line. The North Vietnamese markings are prominent. The two planes have been freshly painted and glisten in the sunshine.

Cut to a shot of Wilson and the Russian Major standing beside one of the MIGs. They are both dressed in flight gear. The camera cuts to a rapid montage that shows Wilson going through the standard pre-flight check of the aircraft²⁶

In Gangemi's fiction the world depicted is an easily identifiable one: 'inconsistencies' arise from the novelist's appropriation of non-literary techniques, with the result that fragmented, discontinuous narrative is 'redeemed' through conventional grammatical structure which reveals an easily

identifiable world, concrete, exact and rendered consistent by the terms of literary construction. Gangemi's irregular structures are formulated throughout as mimetically expressive and unified in a manner very close to that of mainstream cinematic art - if not mainstream literary art.

While the Modernist and Modernist-influenced writers have exploited film's suggested possibilities many writers expressed an interest in the revolutions taking place in twentieth century painting. Cubism in particular was important in this respect. The parent of all abstract art forms, Cubism, technically speaking, is a breakdown of three-dimensional space constructed from a fixed viewpoint: things exist in multiple relations to each other and undergo a change of appearance according to the point of view from which we see them. Just as Renaissance art was an attempt to conceive the world in new ways, so too with Cubism, and from 1907 - the date of Picasso's completion of Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.) - we witness a decisive break with European painting since the Renaissance and the Classical notion of the human form and the spatial illusionism of one point perspective.

In Picasso (1939) Gertrude Stein gives three reasons for the development of Cubism:

First. The composition, because the way of living had extended and each thing was as important as any other thing. Secondly, the faith in what the eyes were seeing, that is to say the belief in the reality of science, commenced to diminish...Thirdly, the framing of life, the need that a picture exists in its frame, remain in its frame was over²⁷

Stein's judgement was that Cubism overlapped a number of contemporary intellectual and artistic trends, and in twentieth century literature there are numerous examples of 'Cubist' works in which narrative structure is organized in accordance with the spirit and example of Cubist painting. There are, moreover, Cubist-like descriptions (of people) in Wyndham Lewis's Tarr (1918), and in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying the Gillespie Barn is described in terms of geometrical shape and two-dimensional surface:

The front, the conical facade with the square orifice doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the saw-horses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief²⁸

More recently John Berger (significantly an art critic of international standing) in his novel G. describes the sexual act in 'Cubist' language:

I was a knee which wanted the thigh on the other leg.
The sounds of my most tender words were in your arse.
Your heels were my thumbs.
My buttocks were your palms.
I was hiding in one corner of your mouth. You looked for me there with your tongue. There was nothing to be found²⁹

In the history of painting, however, Cubism enjoyed only a brief dominance, and by 1907 Cubism had largely given way to collage. By this date, Picasso and Braque were incorporating pieces of newspaper and other 'foreign' material into their paintings, and in the process creating spatial or environmental works. In Still Life with Chair Caning (1912) Picasso placed a piece of oilcloth onto his composition over which he painted a pattern of woven caning. At a later stage the same artist was to incorporate actual objects into his paintings in order

to bring about a collision of conventionally divorced elements, a deliberate cross of art and life.

A similar blurring of lines of expression and existence is a major factor in twentieth century literature. Paterson is made from letters, documents, interviews; Mauberley, a poem of some 450 lines, has at least sixty lines of quotations, translations or allusions; seventy-five of the 434 lines of The Waste Land are quotations, translations or parodies. Ulysses, moreover, is full of actual people, books, events, actual places: the Dublin of June 16, 1904, is extensively documented; we learn the names of the Gold Cup runners; the names of athletes; the details of an American steamboat disaster--all this in addition to Joyce's extensive Naturalistic detail, the geography not only of Dublin, but of Gibraltar also, the birthplace of Molly.

We have seen how the more tentative of literary experiment tends to justify disruptive forms by a reference to moral and 'realistic' conditions. Frequently overall construction may be broken but the texture will be left intact, with sentence structure preserved as recognisably referring to familiar conditions. This investment in the familiar, in an expressed content through a re-invented form, forms the humanistic basis of some innovative contemporary fiction which places a heavy emphasis upon traditional notions of artistic control and expressiveness--summed up by the statement: 'Life is chaos, writing...a way of ordering the chaos'.³⁰ Frequently innovation becomes 'matched' with a perceived discontinuity

of the real, with the text denying the signifier, the 'real' as a priori, and art given the heavy task of redeeming man's lost 'wholeness.'

The discontinuities and uncertainties of contemporary life which provide the subjects of Leonard Michaels' fiction are illuminated by the writer's frequent recourse to terse, fragmented fictions composed largely of 'anecdotes, reflections, quotations, prose-poems, jokes'.³¹ Disjointed prose becomes gradually identifiable as a moral statement expressed through 'appropriate' structures. Michaels' story 'In the Fifties' begins:

In the fifties I learned to drive a car. I was frequently in love. I had more friends than now.

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin my room-mate shit blood, turned yellow, and lost most of his hair.

I attended the lectures of the excellent E. B. Burgum until Senator McCarthy ended his tenure. I imagined N.Y.U. would burn. Miserable students, drifting in the halls, looking at one another.

In less than a month, working day and night, I wrote a bad novel³²

Such statements treat a particular period of American history as a series of fragmented experiences which, for the narrator, do not reveal any unified structure to national or personal life. Michaels' intention is to show that his form is appropriately fragmented, as revealing a 'true' picture of the times. Indeed, in almost all Michaels' work there is a sense of the weakness of the props which provide some support for the continuity in life.

In contrast to much Modernist and neo-Modernist writing, we find in Michaels no characters able to transcend reality through art or ideas: avant-garde novels which deny the

concreteness of experience, and philosophical commentaries which deal with the 'modern predicament' are shown as inadequate in the face of anguish, be that anguish mental pain or physical rape. Characters have only a sense of self to cling to amid an environment which denies the controlling centre of human thought and activity. Significantly, the subtlety of Borges' The Secret Miracle is dismissed by one of Michaels' characters because it was born of Ambrose Bierce, not direct experience. While a 'master of controlled estrangement',³³ Borges' fiction cannot compete with the factual, and for Michaels it must do so or slip into insignificance. The facts of Jewish history, rendered here through the example of the narrator's aunt, 'a schoolgirl...bleeding on the ground with her mother and father in Brest Litovsk',³⁴ are simply too real, too pressing to provide the basis for the metaphysical speculation of a Borges.

The writer like Michaels utilises Modernist forms while clinging to the premises of Realism, thus marrying seemingly contradictory modes as a means of reaching towards a relevant contemporary literary truth. A similar radical humanism is the hallmark of B. S. Johnson's fiction in which the most startling innovations are always made responsible to thematic and moral purpose. In Albert Angelo, Johnson uses double columnning to approximate simultaneity, and specifically related his novel Travelling People to the example of the movies by cutting rapidly from one scene to another. Locked within ideas of reference Johnson believed, moreover, that the

nature of reality shifts from one era to another, and so requires forms of representation commensurate with such movements. Speed and rapid changes of style and presentation are Johnson's methods of capturing modern reality and of overthrowing the novel's traditions in order to bring the novel closer to the 'realities' of film, television and contemporary life. Because for Johnson his forms of representation better 'match' reality he has a 'duty' to try and capture the complexities of the moment. About his last novel See The Old Lady Decently Johnson wrote, 'I am not trying to set a puzzle...but randomness, chaos is not neat and tidy',³⁵ and went on to provide the novel's complex structure with a code/key which allows the essentially political points he makes about British society and Britain's decline to become easily naturalised: the writer provides comfortable solutions and hence his text is stabilized in spite of its disruptive form.

Whereas the American innovative novel usually confronts a world described in terms of a fictive construct, a system of social discourse where no natural world is encountered, the British novel usually sets out to discover meaning through aesthetic endeavour. Behind the 'random' forms of B. S. Johnson's fiction, we find always the hard idea of fact; the imagination is confined to direct statement, never allowed to discover its own position among the broken pieces he provides as a confirming structure of the 'real'. His

experiments are based on traditional notions: even an extremely fragmented work like House Mother Normal which is full of blanks and elipses uses these devices to imitate the pauses, blanks and transitions in the flow of consciousness or the not quite complete consciousness and senility of inhabitants of a nursing home. Blanks and gaps represent or express the blankness and gaps of fading minds.

The problems of trying to relate the incoherence of existence to the technological fact of the bound book gave Johnson the opportunity to exploit the possibilities of what Sharon Spencer calls (after Moholy-Nagy) 'mobile constructs'. Johnson's novel The Unfortunates³⁶ consists of twenty-seven (unbound sections) with the first and last sections marked as such, but the rest in random order which the reader is allowed to shuffle as he pleases. The book then is 'framed' by a stable beginning and ending - the narrator's arrival in a familiar city (Nottingham) to report a football match, and his departure home. Between we have a series of statements relating to the narrator's memory of a dead friend.

The twenty-five 'random' sections of the novel represent the activity of the mind without fixed order and chronology, but as Johnson re-invents form in this way he is, of course, re-inventing form in relation to content. As he himself puts it, 'I work out the form suitable to the material I have in mind'.³⁷ Consequently, Johnson never questions physical reality or language, but takes it as given. Like

virtually all British contemporary novelists, Johnson's fiction is directed towards an elusive, ultimate form of reality in the belief that in rejecting 'obsolescent' form one may encounter truth more in keeping with the times. He scorns the C. P. Snow-type of modern novel, but ironically respects the same premises: his random, discontinuous and fragmented structures merely approximate the incongruities of the times without exposing the reader to an imaginative exploration of such realities.³⁸

We find also that some contemporary innovative writers favour fragmented and discontinuous forms as a reflection of 'diseased' perspective: abnormality is, therefore, permitted a voice which is irregular and disruptive and which 'speaks' in a manner in keeping with the condition of disarranged sensibilities and actions. At its most conservative, in Michael McClure's The Adept,³⁹ for instance, the disorientating effects of drug usage 'explains' the novel's constant shifts in time and space and the repetition of events during a twenty-four hour period in the life of a drug pusher and user. Bolder is Ann Quinn's Passages in which the writer adopts a split page structure to convey a schizophrenic condition, with each page's left-hand passages acting as mythic commentary which parallels diary entries on the opposite side of the page:

Friday

I ask of myself more than I can give. Unless
to maintain the contrary.

You will dance on
and look back at
me, not count
the scribbling
foolishness that
put wings on
your heels,
behind your ears.

Rhythm of windlasses and machines. Hulls of
vessels lurched from side to side. In the chalky
dust, sun and blood the man was carried swiftly
away. Ah the taste of death and laughter in
her dancing later.

Sunday

A black-figured
vase painting:
Europa seated on
the bull passes
in rapid flight
over the sea,
which is indi-
cated by fishes
and dolphins.
In front of her
flies a vulture,
behind comes a
winged figure
holding two
wreaths. 40

We have moved into another room, from here
we can see the island quite clearly.

Feel your way through the room. To the bed.
Drop your clothes on the floor and fumble for
the pillow. Accustomed to touch she will not
wake up. So the hours pass and not a move.
The roof falls asleep and the street falls into
a heap of metal.

In the case of Passages both mythic reference and mental
disturbance serve as the organizing and redeeming qualities
which enable the work to be read as a complete statement.
The novel is fragmented as a means of reflecting alternative
world views, deviant perspectives. While we can see that
the writer's 'juxtaposition of mythological sections with
blocks of narrative concerned with the modern world has
something in common with the techniques of literary montage',⁴¹
it is montage's ambition of unity and synchronization which
Ann Quinn is drawn towards, and which sets her and those
similarly impelled apart from post-Modernists like Donald

Barthelme and Ishmael Reed. This strategy of explaining disruption and aberration as reflecting some form of distorted human perspective is precisely what the writer Alan Burns is pointing out when he chides J. G. Ballard for betraying the potential inherent in Ballard's fragmented structures by:

insisting that (a) smashed up or fragmented view of reality is a sick view, just as conventional writers will adopt a device--make him mad, make him drunk, make him concussed, say it's all a dream⁴²

The most consistently radical of all contemporary innovative British writers, Burns is here correctly identifying the essentially conservative nature of the forms adopted by writers like Ballard, Quinn and McClure, all of whom in different ways relate discontinuity and fragmentation to some extra-literary scheme which requires a respect for unity and coherence.

Post-Modernist fragmentation and discontinuity is, in contrast, content with pieces rather than restorative patterns since the fall back into form and structure however tentative or partial signals yet another investment in authority and totality. Post-Modernism shifts the emphasis from any single meaning or ultimate point of reference towards an unbounded movement of possibilities. Even when it presents a familiar-looking surface the post-Modernist text sometimes forces an awareness of its internal incongruities--which acquire significance only in relation to their own shapes

and directions. Sentence structure may even remain intact but will convey contradictory and disparate material.

Frederic Tuten's The Adventures of Mao on the Long March, for example, has been likened to a collage, but it is post-Modernist, not Modernist or neo-Modernist collage, the novel resembles.

The difference is, of course, considerable:

For the modernist collage is a way of getting at the true meaning of reality; the depth of it; it is an implicit statement about the inadequacy of linear approaches to the human situation...Collage is used to induce the heterogeneous components of reality to come to the surface...Underneath the modernists' rejection of linearity...there is a belief that what seems fragmented is indeed imbued with a higher cohesiveness invisible to the distracted modern man ...and as such there is in modernist art the faith that the surface fragments can be reconstituted into a total whole⁴³

In contrast, in post-Modernist collage (or 'Supramodernist' collage) there is no:

formal procedure for introducing the metaphysical views of the artist into the field of fiction. It is the composition itself. The surface reality ...is not changed; deepened by the use of collage ...what was INSTRUMENTAL for the modernist is TERMINAL for the supramodernists⁴⁴

In Adventures Tuten evades the metaphysical endeavour, the approach to a higher form of order, by placing different things in juxtaposition without requiring of them a system of coherence beyond their immediacy and singularity.

Paragraphs of historical narrative are placed alongside purely fictitious and theatrical events such as Greta Garbo propositioning Mao. Unidentified quotations from Hawthorne, Melville, Marx, Engels and Jack London are spliced into the

text, creating:

a wordy upheaval of parody, improvisation and collage, in which the author's point of view is perceived mainly through the arrangement, rather than the invention, of its content⁴⁵

What emerges from this is that Mao's Long March towards the reality of the new China is our own 'collective long march to an encounter with the insoluble problems of our own reality'.⁴⁶ The novel uses the figure of Mao, poet and revolutionary, to voice a revolutionary aesthetic born of the twentieth century. For Mao the March was an extended poem, which, when completed, was ended - at which point art and revolution are in danger of collapsing into stasis, decay and convention. The motto of Maoism, 'permanent revolution' becomes the battle cry of art threatened with the utopia of realization which is the death of revolution and art. Seeing revolutionary struggle as having three phases - conflict, progress, utopian socialism - Mao looks forward beyond the metaphysical dream of men towards a future based on non-dream and non-future, beyond:

Socialist Realism...all our banners, our posters of Red workers with caps, all our murals of marching Red armies and peasants, our entire art (which) is myth-derived⁴⁷

The structure of the novel reflects the structure of Mao's revolutionary thought. The novel refuses certainty, and resembles instead a:

Morris or Judd sculpture/thing (with) its own ever-formulating thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (and which) takes into account nothing of history... destroys or is intolerant of sentimentality and stock response⁴⁸

Art, for Tuten/Mao. is not an event trapped in an immobile spatial and temporal arrangement, but must exploit the interplay between different and contradictory elements. So Adventures moves in random fashion, propelled it seems by the energies of a whole galaxy of narrative voices and floating signifiers. Democratic art, Tuten tells us, is like this. The audience trained in special skills of response can find no centre, no point at which they can enter the text and appropriate its secrets: it has no secrets, and instead insists on the audience fulfilling the work each in his/her own way by contributing to the work's circuit. The book's series of statements are accountable only to the imagination in the act of confronting a shifting reality, a collage, but one which generates through irreconcilability a revolutionary response appropriate to the fictional Mao's confrontation with traditional forms and dreams of ultimate order.

The rapid shifts in the structure of Adventures are only occasionally visually signalled: the narrative is devoid of graphics and has only a minimum of typographic variation. We do, however, find in many contemporary texts a high degree of visual fragmentation and discontinuity, ranging from the fictional/non-fictional, prose/poem, graphic/photographic combinations of Michael Ondaatje to the mixture of type faces and type sizes in Paul Metcalf's Genoa.

The typographic variations in Metcalf's fiction are obvious extensions of the traditional practice of using italics, bold, and roman face as a means of indicating a change of emphasis or a change of narrative voice. However, in Genoa Metcalf employs such traditional means as an integral part of his collage-like construction. Genoa is narrated by Michael Mills, a clubfooted doctor turned auto worker. Michael's brother Carl has been executed for kidnapping and murder, and the book is a sort of post-mortem on Carl, and an attempt to make some sense out of life itself.

Significantly, the novel's first sentence is followed by a quotation from Melville, followed by quotations from medical books, books on geology, references to various historic figures and writers. Supposedly, Carl had thoroughly absorbed Melville and through Melville Michael hopes to get at Carl. Yet, as the novel unfolds, we suspect that Michael is rummaging through Melville for signs which will confirm his own ideas, opinions and feelings. Michael tries to make all things connect. He convinces himself that Melville had an interest in clubfeet: this originates in Melville's 'what is it about legs that so possessed the later man?'.⁴⁹ This is then 'confirmed' by quotations from Typee, Omoo, White Jacket and Moby Dick. Moreover, we are told that Columbus's discovery of the New World relates to Michael's infirmity, being a 'cosmological' deformation. Genetically, Michael also thinks his clubfoot is traceable to his own father's long-concealed middle name - Paul Bunion Mills.

Michael Mills sees parallels everywhere. He juggles quotations linking himself, Carl, Melville, Ahab, Janus, Marco Polo, Moby Dick and Columbus. In this paranoid view the path of the sperm cell becomes translated into the journey of Columbus:

From the posterior, the vault of the vagina, the sperm's journey measures, perhaps, five inches. The cilia in the oviduct have an outward stroke, against the motion of the sperm...

(Columbus reported the usual course of the sargasso weed to be from west to east...)

In addition, there are the folds and ridges, like waves, of the mucous membrane, and the powerful leukocytes, white monsters that attack the sperm.

'Forward progress of the human spermatozoon is at the rate of about 1.5 mm a minute which, in relation to their respective lengths, compares well with average swimming ability for man'⁵⁰

Michael examines the handwriting of Melville and Columbus searching for similarities; he thinks there may be some significance in the fact that Carl, Hart Crane and Melville's wife suffered from Hay Fever; smoking a cigar he is reminded of Indian canoes. As the connections proliferate Michael's encyclopaedic knowledge and a temporary impairment of vision quickly triggers a series of reflections on his brother, Moby Dick and Columbus:

The vision in my left eye dims, all but disappears. I remain still, effectively blind in the left eye. Then, as suddenly as it vanished, the vision returns starting from a central point and opening over the normal field. There remains something strange about it, however, not as before. I reach for the cigar,

which I had placed on the edge of the desk, and am surprised when my hand goes beyond it. Reaching again, my hand this time falls short. There is emptiness in my stomach, and I realize what has happened: I have lost binocular vision - am unable to judge distances. It is only with the utmost care and concentration, now, that I am able to pick up the cigar.

Leaning back in the chair, smoking, I experiment with vision, let it do what it will...but there is no change...still the strange, two-dimensional sensation. I recall a time when Carl, late in life, experienced something similar, only apparently much worse. For a time he lost three-dimensional vision altogether, the world appearing to him as a flat plane⁵¹

The binocular vision experienced by Michael and Carl has, of course, the effect of destroying the dimension of depth: experience is thus rendered as a surface, as in a painting. At the same time, Carl's vision, like that of the whale, was, suggests Michael, Cubist:

Moby Dick: 'Now, from this peculiar sideways position of the whale's eyes, it is plain that he can never see an object which is exactly ahead, no more than he can one exactly astern. In a word, the position of the whale's eyes corresponds to that of a man's ears; and you may fancy, for yourself, how it would fare with you, did you sideways survey objects through your ears...you would have two backs, so to speak; but, at the same time, also, two fronts (side fronts): for what is it that makes the front of a man - what, indeed, but his eyes?'

Not only this, but Carl's eyes - set wide apart in his head - seemed to focus and move independent of one another, to receive separate images, imperfectly blended⁵²

In Melville's estimation, the whale sees two worlds simultaneously:

'Moreover, while in most other animals that I can now think of, the eyes are so planted as imperceptibly to blend their visual power, so as to produce one

picture and not two to the brain: the peculiar position of the whale's eyes, effectually divided as they are by many cubic feet of solid head, which towers between them like a great mountain separating two lakes in valleys; this, of course, must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him'⁵³

The 'helpless perplexity of volition' this induces in the whale is like that of Carl who was an 'expert in dissembling' and who through his life wavered and faltered, 'afraid he might fumble...'.⁵⁴ Carl could not assemble the world into a coherent experience, hence his inability to become reconciled to the world in the normal way. The world was chaos devoid of the logic provided by the conventional mind, and Michael resists this fall in discontinuity by attempting to assemble all he knows into a system of order. Like a detective, Michael hunts for meaning and sense; perhaps he resembles Poe who, in Joseph Wood Krutch's words, 'invented the detective story that he might not go mad'.⁵⁵

The power of Genoa 'has less to do with myth...and more to do with its method of collage or montage or mosaic that releases it into fascinating material'.⁵⁶ The novel's structure is consistent with Michael's endeavours to order experience through investigation. Yet, Metcalf is determined to mock this very Modernist notion of consoling and meaningful forms and the search for systems to fill the void of uncertainty and meaninglessness. Genoa is not 'Metcalf's' way of reviving

modernist conventions,⁵⁷ but rather represents an assault upon such conventions, the demystification of certain techniques. Meaning for Metcalf is not waiting to be found and expressed: as a 'true artist' Metcalf 'connects the unconnected (while) myth celebrates connections that are already there'.⁵⁸

In acknowledging his debt to the abstract expressionists, and particularly Robert Rauschenberg, Metcalf confirms the necessity of juxtaposition as a means of inducing the sense of art as an experience. He aims 'for the reader to get the thrill that comes...from the juxtaposition of...materials',⁵⁹ and advises we shed that inhibiting desire for specific meaning by letting 'language be language...words be words, let them do what they want to. Let them fly as pretty as the birds'.⁶⁰ This bird metaphor is a recurrent one in post-modernism: form and language aspire to the improvised freedom of the bird in space--a metaphor, in fact, expressing the desire to emulate the non-metaphoric motion of free movement. Language, however, must register something beyond its own being: the relationship between signifier and signified may be arbitrary but there remains the important sense in which the signifying system as a whole is not. Language is socially constructed and is, therefore, necessarily inhibiting to novelists with ambitions to fly, since birds are presumably content to circle, to hover and remain mute. Forced to make utterances, the

novelist, therefore, may embrace a radical form of spatialization as a means of finding freedom while remaining within language. Novels become visually and graphically expressive within the blank spaces of scattered structures and variable typography.

Michel Butor's Mobile is typical of this type of work: in it we find different type faces and sizes, irregular margins, and inconsistently-shaped 'white' spaces, all of which are, however, firmly structured by the alphabetical arrangement of the book. We follow the novel as it moves in accordance with alphabetical order across the United States, but like a mobile Butor's text is 'composed of separate units, each of which moves in relation to all the others'.⁶¹ Butor has expressed a wish to see print moving across and up and down the page at the same time and has compared this type of scattered structure with that of the musical staff where the horizontal movement represents time, the vertical movement representing the disposition of the various instruments the composer is employing. Butor's attempt to make fiction move in different directions, while at the same ensuring that a 'reliable' structure is retained, is somewhat similar to the purpose behind G. F. Gravenston's The Sweetmeat Saga, though there is little eventual similarity between Butor's neo-Modernism and the West Coast openness favoured by Gravenston. The Sweetmeat Saga uses rock music lyrics, news bulletins, movie dialogue, adverts and audio-video 'mixes' which bounce the reader around the page between images of the

Vietnam war, California culture, media events, and
accounts of the kidnapping of a rock group called the
Sweetmeats:62

my world is empty without you babe

good vibrations
excitations

1901

MONTEREY CALIFORNIA (UPI MAY 6)

UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT SWEETMEATS HAVE BEEN LOCATED XXX

(MORE)

hy frisbee feels his
heart beat like a strobe

but right now
a word from our sponsor

(ssssssssshhhhhhhhhh)

VIDEO

AUDIO

OPEN TO A SURGEON COMING OUT
OF AN OPERATING ROOM

DOCTOR

Whew...I'm glad that mess is over...

MOVE IN ON DOCTOR WALKING
DOWN HOSPITAL CORRIDOR
CUT TO INSIDE OF WASH-UP
ROOM AS DOCTOR BARGES THROUGH
SWINGING DOORS

Blood all over the place...

ding-ding-ding-ding-ding

But I'll get clean in a jiffy

across the width and breadth
of

blast your mind
blow you blind

i dig i dig

sitting down to eat
when we heard the news

on my way home

plowed when i heard

1901

MONTEREY CALIFORNIA (UPI MAY 6)

(MORE SWEETMEATS)

hy frisbee watches the teletype
sputter forth in a news orgasm

while on the coast

like a samba that sways so gentle

oooooooooooo

(i thought it was a gag)

john wayne stands in an army barracks
doorway and asks: what do you mean
my orders were cancelled?

ok let's blow it

across the dearth and bitch of america

1901

MONTEREY CALIFORNIA (UPI MAY 6)

(MORE SWEETMEATS)

REPORT REACHING UPI CONFIRMS THAT SWEETMEATS CAR

HAS BEEN

FOUND ABANDONED ON U-S HIGHWAY 1 FIVE MILES SOUTH OF

BIG SUR

CALIFORNIA.

The Sweetmeat Saga makes explicit what theorists like Barthes find true of all literary works: that instead of being the original creation of a single author, they are re-creations. For Barthes, every text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture, and in The Sweetmeat Saga there is no centre of creativity or even a focus for narrative attention since California is shown as composed of contradictory centres without any unifying structure to hold them into a composite whole. Each page of the work exposes a multiplicity of voices at work creating images of America. The text is shown in the process of being made by the various cultural forces with mistakes in the text carried in the form of cancellation (XXXX) or expressed by an anonymous voice proclaiming 'CUT'. The text is a construct, a point at which cultural forms interact to reveal the materiality of their nature.

Many innovative works by contemporary writers are, to repeat ourselves, fragmented and discontinuous only in so far as they are accountable at some point to some ultimate form of truth, some original compelling system of restriction which enables the text to be guided back safely into the ideological fold. Gravenson's work deflects this tendency and is, therefore, closer to the fragmented and discontinuous works (and worlds) of Donald Barthelme and Ishmael Reed. However, whereas The Sweetmeat Saga refers specifically to a totalized and totalizing media system, Barthelme and Reed

engage with the more extensive complexities of orders of priority across history and everyday experiences alike. Both Barthelme and Reed celebrate the discovery of meanings which have been loosened from certainty: certainty, conviction and correspondence are denied through a fictional process of detachment. Barthelme concentrates primarily upon the nature of the meanings which plug the gaps between the phenomenal world and signs, while Reed is more concerned with the appropriation of history and the erection of meaning in accordance with white hegemony. For both writers, however, meanings are constructs reflecting realities born of politics and culture, and fragmentation and discontinuity are applied to counter such realities and to reveal the authoritarian and totalitarian need of unity and cohesion. In the absence of reference and form, Barthelme's and Reed's fiction sets in motion an infinity of relationships, an eternity of meanings, which, though rooted very much in commonplace realities, remain beyond the reach of any conclusive authenticity.

CHAPTER TWO

References

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CHAPTER TWO

Part Two: Donald Barthelme

In mocking or simply echewing the referential insistence of the traditional novel and the various totalitarian perspectives of the Moderns, the post-Modernist writer proposes alternatives of non-regulatory systems of linguistic inconsistency and structural disunity and incompleteness. Nowhere is the post-Modernist aesthetic more clearly expressed than in the fiction of Donald Barthelme.

Knowledge of the world for Barthelme can only come about when the world is cut adrift from the conventions binding the imagination to the vast areas of trivia and waste which provides the defining contours of reality. At the same time, Barthelme counters the communicative process which confines man within the spatio/temporal confines of language and which underwrites the ideology of reference. 'Meaning', therefore, suffers an endless displacement, with 'truth' made accountable only to the condition of possibility. The result is an art which is deliberately disjunct, fractured and contradictory, and provocatively 'empty'. In Snow White, for example, the codes and conventions of the fairy tale genre are present but at the same time are sterile: they generate only an awareness of codes and conventions and function as a series of

unfulfilled expectations. Closure, resolution and the reassurance inherent in 'happy endings', all aspirations of the original form which are consistent with the closed structure of myth, are negated. The 'end' of Snow White is, like Brautigan's A Confederate General From Big Sur (but unlike Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, which does ultimately present a polar, hierarchized text), multiple and minus that stubborn linearity which establishes a certain form of necessity, resistant to the ambition of those in search of an hidden centre. In Snow White we discover only a series of endings:

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE
REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE
APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE
SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY
THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF
A NEW PRINCIPLE
HEIGH-HO¹

For Barthelme, the conventional text provides a paradigm of the empirical impulse which prescribes ways of seeing, being and doing, and which, therefore, assures us of 'reality's' unchanging and positive features. Yet, at what point, Barthelme enquires, do we know? The self, language, the world, narrative, all these elements are rendered by Barthelme as extraordinarily ambiguous and subject to an infinity of meanings and interpretations. In Snow White a questionnaire halts the novel's already tenuous narrative movement and confronts the reader with the illusionism of the text:

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes() No()
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes() No()
7. Do you feel that the creation of new modes of hysteria is a viable undertaking for the artist of today? Yes() No()
8. Would you like a war? Yes() No()
14. Do you stand up when you read? () Lie Down? () Sit? ()
15. In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? () Two sets of shoulders? () Three?()²

Here we find reliable patterns of response subverted by fragmented discourses, a plethora of jumbled signs of equal significance that are of no significance beyond their own messages. While we respond to the idea of the questions, the questions mock the fundamental idea of the questionnaire which is to sift answers in order to arrive at positive conclusions. Elsewhere, Barthelme turns this belief in, and desire for, certainty against itself by proposing a multi-dimensioned form of narrative which allows any number of possibilities, any one of which will 'do':

possible attitudes found in books (1) I don't know what's happening to me, (2) what does it mean? (3) seized with the deepest sadness, I know not why, (4) I am lost, my head whirls, I know not where I am, (5) I lose myself, (6) I ask you, what have I come to?³

Nothing is resolved here: only permitted is a series of discontinuous comments which cannot be located in accordance with a narrative centre or a cohesive overall pattern.

Sometimes Barthelme will begin with a conventional metaphor and then translate it literally:

There is a river of girls and women in our streets.
There are so many that the cars are forced to use
the sidewalks...we voted to try the river in the
next town. They have a girl river there they
don't use much. We slipped into the felucca...
Then Hubert pushed off and Bill began to beat
time for the rowers⁴

His words cease to be vehicular and promote a primary
existence of their own: 'If we could just cross that spit
of land there...and get to that harlot...pardon I mean hamlet'.⁵
Language is shown as its own origin, its own explanation, its
own meaning. Beyond this, of course, we find in Barthelme
the problems of the contemporary barrage of communication as
somehow contradicting the writer's impulse to create, but it
is language, abused and no longer saying anything, which
Barthelme struggles to unmask. In 'And Then', Barthelme
begins: 'The part of the story that came next was suddenly
missing'.⁶ We are then taken through a writer's block and
reminded that the failure of language to 'flow' or 'fill' is
fundamentally a problem of language, not the writer, since
language has no essential capacity to reveal anything at all
but its own rules. Since it is language which writes the
writer, not vice versa, the problems experienced by the
writer are those experienced in trying to tell lies, fill gaps
which cannot in truth be filled.

In 'And Then' the narrator is language itself forced as
it were by the dictates of art into lying in order to aid the
artist:

faced now with this 'gap' in the story, I decided to offer him a good quality lie in place of the part I couldn't remember...if you lie really well you get dynamite results, 35 per cent report increased intellectual understanding, awareness, insight, 40 per cent report more tolerance, acceptance of others, liking for self, 29 per cent report they receive more personal and confidential information from people and that others become more warm and supportive toward them--all in consequence of a finely orchestrated, carefully developed untruth⁷

An exact duplication of word and object may reassure but the lies are no less lies for this, even as they pretend to tell truths. Language cannot, however, be so constrained. Finally, language decides not to serve the interests of the artist and some spurious truth, but to announce its own endless possibilities, its meanings:

I will reenter the first room cheerfully, confidently, even gaily, and throw chicken livers flambe all over the predicament, the flaming chicken livers clinging like incindergel to Mother, policemen, bicycles, harpsichord, and my file of the National Review from its founding to the present time. That will "open up" the situation successfully. I will resolve these terrible contradictions with flaming chicken parts and then sing the song of how I contrived the ruin of my anaconda⁸

Like the experiments of Surrealism the verbal framework consecrated by public approval is torn apart--though Surrealism's claimed for success in 'reconciling...perception and representation'⁹ is absent in Barthelme's work which bears closer comparison with the art of Robert Rauschenberg, in which there is 'no hierachy among things',¹⁰ and who 'never makes a picture of a single image'.¹¹ The similarities between the two extends also to prose, which is characterised

by disconnection without reconciliation. Rauschenberg describes his aesthetic intentions and methods this way:

The concept I plantation struggle to deal with ketchup is opposed to the logical continuity of lift tab inherent in language and communication. My fascination with images open 24 hrs is based on the complex interlocking of disparate visual facts heated pool that have no respect for grammar¹²

Likewise in his fiction, Barthelme refuses the invitations of conventional appearance and logic by untying specifics from the usual range of associations. Discontinuity reigns:

William's...great ideas have made the company great.
The new machine for printing underground telephone poles
The new machine for printing smoke on smoked hams
The new machine for writing the figure 5 in gold¹³

This type of comparison, so common in post-Modernist writing, plays, of course, a central role in Barthelme's work. In Snow White alienation is described in terms of a domestic item, with the comparison threatening to stretch into infinity: alienation covers everything, 'like a big gray electric blanket that doesn't work, after you have pushed the off-on switch to the 'on' position'.¹⁴ Such fragmenting of the referential claims of language has the effect of shaking us loose from convictions of the inevitability of the established order, the false consensus which is propped up by a false reference system. Interpreting language's 'innocence' and discursive sequence as ideological, some contemporary writers have 'resisted' language as a specifically revolutionary gesture - the more radical the statement, the more revolutionary its effect. In this extract from Philippe Sollers's Paradis we seem close once more to the linguistic experiments of Dada and Surrealism:

that's it sunder flounder your death coma grossly
inverted placenta cancer aureola from where i sit i
see them drip drop by drop bazooka siphoned typhoon
i'm back on the track bascule mask crackled stares
from forebears' portraits galleries pupils starred
waxed flash foundation of aspiration trumpet pump
passing on the quotient tidbit idiot famishing
flashflood chromos of men¹⁵

This type of linguistic radicalism resembles the 'violence' of much contemporary writing, including that of Derrida who:

attempts to hold open a special place within his words in such a way that his terminology cannot settle back down into the illusory order of nouns and substances¹⁶

Barthelme's own attempts to escape the tyrannies of language are usually subordinated to his desire to represent, but his confession that to him, 'A back-broken sentence is interesting'¹⁷ points towards the extreme fragmentation of syntax found in 'Bone Bubbles'. Barthelme describes the origins of the story this way:

Take mothball and vagina and put them together and see if they mean anything together...maybe you're not happy with the combination and you throw that on the floor and pick up the next two and so on... I wrote a story once called 'Bone Bubbles' which did just this - put together unlike things...but not so random as all that¹⁸

The story begins:

bins black and green seventh eighth rehearsal pings
a bit fussy at times fair scattering grand and
exciting world of his fabrication topple out
against surface irregularities fragilization
of the gut...¹⁹

And so on for ten pages of unpunctuated prose broken down into fifteen sections of roughly the same length.

'Bone Bubbles' resembles Paradis in its dislocation of literary meaning, and superficially both works suggest a Dada-like spontaneity. However, both Sollers and Barthelme testify to the laboriousness of their methods and the care

with which they choose their words. If, says Sollers, you examine the manuscripts of Paradis you will find 'pages written in longhand...revised ten, fifteen, twenty times'.²⁰ Barthelme, for his part, reveals that 'Bone Bubbles' was not:

easily written, was not whacked out, it was rewritten and rewritten, and in one sense it still is as nonsensical at the end...as it was in the beginning except that to me it seemed right²¹

Whilst Sollers' extreme precision '(I write at times with the care of a surgeon')²² is more intensely expressed than Barthelme's, their respective techniques reveal the degree to which literary meaning has shifted from the public to the private sphere, and at the same time, how a post-Modernist like Barthelme can eschew aleatory methods when such methods suggest and invite incomprehension. The intention behind 'Bone Bubbles' (and Paradis) is, of course, to cut language as far away from reference as possible in order to generate a specific confrontation with the means of registering meaning, to demystify the referential claims of language and also to show that in some way or another words do signify within a system of signification. While intent upon linguistic fragmentation Barthelme directs his critique at the heart of language's political nature and urges the artist's responsibility towards alienation. The 'safety of the bourgeois', says Barthelme, 'is everywhere menaced by the form'.²³ Elsewhere, Barthelme confirms the materiality of language:

the sentence...is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones²⁴

As a post-Modernist writer, Barthelme exploits the 'weakness' of words by concentrating on the creation of meaning, rather than the discovery of meaning within a community of language. The writer's task becomes one of trying:

to free ourselves from...language. Not actually attempt to free ourselves from it, for that is impossible without denying our own historical situation. But rather, to imagine doing so. Not actually free ourselves from it, for that would make no sense and would deprive us of the light that meaning can provide. But rather, resist it as far as possible²⁵

In Barthelme the 'real' is displaced by ruling versions of the 'real' which acts as the centre of, and for, the dominant version which denies or distorts these key areas of experience and activity which challenges ideological hegemony. The trash in Barthelme represents both distortion and falsification of the 'real', though the 'real' in Barthelme is never proposed, only registered as laying beyond or outside of experience and consciousness. In Snow White the buffalos pre-date trash, and the question 'where have all the buffalo gone?' is answered by a reference to plastic buffalo humps. A form of authenticity has been squandered, and reconstructed with the 'real' thing, a consumer article, an artificial product removed from the experience of the real by the dynamics of a world-wide political, economic and cultural system intent upon the promotion of the spurious. The 'real' is possessed of a quality of deterioration which consumes language and endows it with the status of the junk in which modern society

wallows; words are signs loaded down by social, political and cultural influences and the weight of the past, are 'fillings' which serve to bind social life, but which sometimes go astray to 'slip', so creating errors at the level of words ('harlot/hamlet) or at the level of situation ('Me and Miss Mandible'), etc. Meanings are treacherously unstable. When signs wander off course in Barthelme we are reminded of this instability and of the relationship which exists between linguistic 'junk' and the trash of a consumer society which is perceived similarly as a distortion which is taken as intrinsically 'worthwhile' and 'valuable'.

As many critics have pointed out, language in Barthelme seems to have suffered at the hands of mass culture. Language is deadened and somehow seems to have lost its clarity:

We are invigorated by the sweet sensuality of language. We learn to make sentences. Come to me. May I come to your house? Christmas comes but once a year. I'll come to your question. The light comes and goes. Success comes to those who strive. Tuesday comes after Monday. Her aria comes in the third act. Toothpaste comes in a tube²⁶

There is the sense in this passage that the modest word 'come' is being asked to do too much, has been over used, and has deteriorated into merely something to feel at home in, is predictable, interchangeable, safe, and even as it serves its social purpose, meaningless. There is, however, another aspect of Barthelme's use of language. In the above, the word 'come' is meaningless unless it is grammatically

incorporated: in isolation it conveys only language. We can say, therefore, that all language is meaningless until it is arranged within the system of language. The consequence of this idea is that the sign is always impure, never in touch with 'reality', and it is this 'impurity' which Barthelme conveys to the reader, by echoing time and again the lament of Snow White, 'Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear'.²⁷

One of the most striking features of Barthelme's work is its concern with conventional literary subjects, but at the same time the distortions imposed on such conventions. His fiction amplifies the theme of uncertainty until it engulfs discourse itself, and the writer's own perspective--which is expressed in terms of an ontological uncertainty. Barthelme's characters, however, hesitate, question, fail to make connections, do nothing, and are betrayed by language. Alienation, failed sexual relationships and personal problems, and the frustrations of modern life, beset his perplexed and unsure characters in a way which disqualifies them from adopting attitudes and beliefs sufficient for moral and physical well-being.

In 'Florence Green is 81', the very first story in Barthelme's first collection, we find one of a long line of Barthelme characters who is desperately engaged in trying to put the pieces of his life into some sort of design. The character in question, named Baskerville, is haunted by his inability to know, to make sense of things, by the unstable nature of language and physical reality.

The setting for the story is a dinner party given by Florence Green, a Gertrude Stein-like figure whose cryptic remark 'I want to go to some other country' suitably establishes the story as dealing with dissatisfaction with things as they are, especially since no one is certain what Florence Green really thinks about anything. Her remark expresses a demand for 'nothing less than total otherness' ²⁸ - which alarms Baskerville since Florence Green supports young artists like himself. Also the remark suggests a relinquishing of certainty and a desire for things which do not deal directly with the senses. For his part, Baskerville needs the reassurance of the mundane and the logic of relationships, even though his is a life formed out of an insecurity born of the suspicion that order and certainty are fictions created to reassure such as he.

Baskerville's chatter and internalised speech reflects his fear that he doesn't know enough to be a writer:

Oh Baskerville! you silly son of a bitch, how can you become a famous writer without first having worried about your life, is it the right kind of life, does it have the right people in it, is it going well?²⁹

In addition, Baskerville 'collects' facts which are strung together with fantasies which reveal his own insecurity:

The diameter of the world at the Poles is 7899.99 miles whereas the idiameter of the world at the Equator is 7926.68 miles...Surely the very kidneys of wisdom, Florence Green has only one kidney, I have a kidney stone, Baskerville was stoned by the massed faculty of the Famous Writers School upon presentation of his first lesson; he was accused of formalism³⁰

In Barthelme's fiction it is usually those people possessing certainty, convictions and confidence who best get along, though it is precisely those who best survive and thrive who most consistently misread reality, mistaking fiction for fact, confusing signifier with signified. Baskerville suffers as a result of his inability to trust the 'real': quoting Husserl - 'But you have not grasped the living reality, the essence!' - Baskerville complains, 'Nor will I ever'.³¹ Baskerville identifies no essence and is, therefore, given his vulnerable artistic personality, torn by conflicting feelings and beliefs: this affects both his writing and his character. Adrift without beginnings, middles and ends, he is unable to enjoy a clarity of perspective and express the nature of his feelings, desires and problems. Baskerville has been writing his novel for twelve years: claiming grandly that the 'aim of literature... is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart',³² he is unable to find a form to match his ambition. Similarly, Baskerville is unable to maintain any constructive relationship with women. He is 'the father of one abortion and four miscarriages' and has 'no wife',³³ and the girl at Florence Green's party he is most interested in is herself interested more in someone else, someone Baskerville insists is Pamela Hansford Johnson, doyenne of the contemporary Realistic school of writing, and, therefore, a figure endowed with certainty and conviction. Unable to

reconcile the discontinuities and contradictions of existence, Baskerville is in danger of falling into silence or perhaps embracing the consolations of conventional forms. His dilemma exemplifies that of the modern artist who must struggle 'to attain a fresh mode of cognition...to disembarass himself of procedures which force him to say things that are either commonplace or false'.³⁴

Unlike those writers who complain that contemporary reality is simply too much for them to deal adequately with, Barthelme confronts complexity through an openness to its features, attacking ideas of certainty, hidden meaning and depth and those seeking to stabilize and rationalise the world. Happily Barthelme the artist can negotiate the problem associated with this aesthetic perspective, though usually his characters cannot. Baskerville's belief that he has somehow to write through his uncertainty to a kind of certainty is frustrated by his inability to act with conviction and the ambiguous relationship existing between the artist and his reader's desire for constant diversion. As a writer, Baskerville feels threatened by his audience who create him through imposing their readings and requirements on Baskerville, the supposedly 'free' artist. He compares the reader to a doctor, the writer to a patient, a relationship which cannot be reassuring to the insecure artist. The:

doctor (is) a highly sophisticated consumer of outre material, a connoisseur of exotic behaviour. Therefore he (the patient) tends to propose himself as more colorful, more eccentric...than he really is³⁵

Because of the fear of having no readers, Baskerville 'free associates, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you in the problem'.³⁶ Here 'you' refers to the reader—which explains Baskerville's desire to confront the reader with the implications of novelty, with cultural demand turned into the problem of reading. The lack of narrative coherence in 'Florence Green' represents Barthelme's confrontation with us, the readers of 'Florence Green', and this confrontation takes place also within the realm of Baskerville's perplexity when being faced by contradictory demands by the reader. Facile as he is, Baskerville is unable to decide whether to pander to his reader or to mock him.

Baskerville is one of the many artist characters in Barthelme who are so self-conscious that they are disqualified from doing anything (there is also perhaps here an oblique comment on neo-Modernists such as Barth and Nabokov). In 'The Dolt' we find a struggling writer named Edgar preparing to sit the National Writers' Examination--a test he has failed twice before, having fallen down on the written part while passing the oral component with some ease. Edgar's problem stems from an inability to appropriately respond to contemporary experience. The examination, a measure of worthiness set by and for the benefit of the empirically minded, appears to Edgar to take for granted certain aesthetic notions he himself does not subscribe to. The test is written in the manner of

an historical romance and employs the conventions of the traditional novel including initialing and blanking--('In the town of A _____, in the district of Y _____').³⁷ However, Edgar attempts to conform: the resulting story 'does not contradict what is known',³⁸ and, given all its 'qualities', appeals strongly to Edgar's wife, a mean ex-hooker previously out of sympathy with her husband's writing, for whom passing the examination would qualify Edgar to 'write for all the important and great periodicals' and thereby, bring 'money in the house for a change'.³⁹ However, Edgar's story, has a beginning and an end, but no middle. Edgar is quite unable to compose an entire statement. Unlike his wife and those who set the examination, all of whom are sure of the truth and confident of belief and opinion, Edgar is too aware to complete anything. Intruding into 'The Dolt', Barthelme registers his understanding of his own character's dilemma:

Thinking of anything was beyond him. I sympathise. I myself have these problems. Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin⁴⁰

Language is an essential part of the obstinate triviality of the ordinary which Barthelme shows as impinging on consciousness. The word which serves as the ammunition of media bombardment is turned into verbal waste, disposable rhetoric, which provides the debased currency of communication. Barthelme's complaint 'to begin, to begin', in these terms becomes the writer's means of conveying his inability to

identify a point of departure, both in terms of epistemology and language. To tell a story, to employ a theme means to discover a beginning which necessarily informs the process of story, history and writing and imposes, therefore, a pre-ordained condition on the writer's quest. Rather than obsessively tracing the linguistic limits of our world, as do the neo-Modernists, or showing, as in Pynchon, a unifying element provided by a rampant paranoia, the sense that there may be secret and powerful systems at work, Barthelme provides nonfocus, antithetical meanings or postures, and remains suspended between the divorced realms of signifier and referent.

In 'Me and Miss Mandible', Barthelme inflates the idea of uncertainty until it includes even situational incongruity through the decontextualisation of the conditions consistent with expectation and consistency. The story is in the form of a diary kept by a thirty-five year old man named Joseph who finds himself returned to school alongside a class of eleven year olds.

Superficially, the story resembles Kafka's Metamorphosis and Gogol's Nose where in both stories 'a supernatural event is introduced at the start, yet is accepted at once and provokes no hesitation'.⁴¹ However, in 'Miss Mandible' incongruity is not confined to a single situation - inconsistency and contradiction are widespread. Children are like adults and adults are like children; children surreptitiously read adult literature and adverts, while

adult life is shown as a series of 'games'. Formerly, Joseph had been in the army where he learned that 'much of what we were doing was absolutely pointless, to no purpose'.⁴² Recognising that his presence in the classroom meant that somewhere 'an error had been made' Joseph accepts this almost out of habit: his job had been that of a claims adjustor for an insurance company and in this role (an adjustor of reality), he had learned that there are usually advantages to be gained when mistakes are made. Like all the characters in the story, Joseph's life had become merely a series of roles requiring a series of adjustments to the illusions of existence (such adjustments are made by numerous Barthelme characters suffering the brain damage inflicted by an afflicted society). Joseph records that he had been:

compelled...to spend my time amid the debris of our civilization: rumpled fenders, roofless sheds, gutted warehouses, smashed arms and legs. After ten years of this one has a tendency to see the world as a vast junkyard⁴³

A mistake made by Joseph in settling a claim resulted in his being re-educated and returned to school. He had 'misread a clue' and suffered the consequences:

Plucked from my unexamined life among other pleasant, desperate, money-making young Americans, thrown backward in space and time, I am beginning to understand how I went wrong, how we all go wrong. (Although this was far from the intention of those who sent me here; they require only that I get right)⁴⁴

By getting 'right' Joseph will be returned to 'normality' but as the story shows, 'normality' is entirely suspect as a notion of any ultimate condition and situation. This, however,

is a 'secret' known only to Joseph, the intruding contradiction whose presence as an adult goes unnoticed by others whose faith in 'reality' is so strong that signs for them can never mislead or lie.

Here, and indeed in all his fiction, Barthelme is investigating the ways in which reality is organised and mis-read, and the origins and consequences of such mis-readings. Even though Joseph's 'reality' eventually diverges from that of others, he, too, has in the past fallen into the error of literal interpretation and suffered as a result. He mis-read his company's motto--'Here to Help in Time of Need'--as an actual description of his duties until he realises he has been 'drastically mislocating the company's deepest concerns' and is returned to 'school' as a result. Joseph has 'played by the rules', i.e. the rules and laws of the sign system, and lost his wife:

I believed that because I had obtained a wife who was made up of wife-signs (beauty, charm, softness, perfume, cookery) I had found love. Brenda, reading the same signs...felt she had been promised that she would never be bored again...I take the right steps, obtain correct answers, and my wife leaves me for another man⁴⁵

Belatedly, Joseph learns that 'errors are made, signs are misread',⁴⁶ but while Joseph absorbs this lesson at the cost of his once integrated sense of reality, all other characters in the story enjoy the benefits of illusion, but suffer the consequences of mistaking the illusion for the reality.

The educational process shown in 'Miss Mandible' represents the 'education' of American society in its entirety. Joseph realises that his pre-pubescent classmates are using fantasy as the models of what excitements adult life holds in store for them. One of his classmates, Sue Ann, has been reading copies of a Movie-TV Secrets magazine devoted to the relationship between Debbie, Eddie and Liz:

studying their history as a guide to what she may expect when she is suddenly freed from this drab, flat classroom⁴⁷

The magazine carries headlines like:

'Debbie's Kids Are Crying'
'Eddie Asks Debbie: Will You...?'
'The Nightmares Liz Has About Eddie!'
'The Things Debbie Can Tell About Eddie',⁴⁸

Claiming to publish compromising pictures in the service of truth, Movie-TV Secrets presents a plausible version of the unknowable and in doing so, creates an atmosphere of illusion which confirms the entire process by which the unknowable, in the shape of language, maths, history and science, is made available to 'understanding'. Just as history is problematic, moulded out of myths for the preservation of order and stability, for the human need of consolation, so the history of movie stars is generated, shaped and woven into patterns serving ideological ends. All Americans are shown also to be subject to the myths of patriotism and eternal opportunity: 'Everything is promised my classmates and I, most of all the future. We accept the outrageous assurances without blinking'.⁴⁹

They are fully confident of American values:

'All of us, Miss Mandible, Sue Ann, myself, Brenda... still believe that the American flag betokens a kind of general righteousness⁵⁰

Certainly goes hand in hand with the promise:

Everything is presented as the result of some knowable process...If...I yearn for the wheel of the Lancia 2.4-litre coupe, I have only to go through the appropriate process, that is, get the money...I have only to make it⁵¹

In many Barthelme stories his characters suffer sexual torment when the dream of perfect union turns into a less reassuring reality. Caught making love to Joseph, Miss Mandible is 'fulfilled', but since the subject of her ardour is 'under age' she loses her job, though she is content having experienced the 'reality' always promised her. More anxiety is generated in Joseph for whom sexual failure is directly attributable to his growing uncertainties and awareness of the discontinuities and contradictions of existence. Joseph floats free of the systems of business and education which rigidly categorize and determine and which respectively confine reality to recompense and reward, but in floating free he is disqualified from a certainty of location. His dilemma is simply that once recognising that 'truth' is not a necessary condition he must accept that 'truth' is forever postponed, or, at least, lost among the manufactured illusions of ideological necessity.

In 'Me and Miss Mandible' is the constant reminder that there can never be any precise relationship between signifier

and signified. Any relationship is instead arbitrary with 'meaning' not an individual quality but the difference between parts within a system. 'Reality' becomes fragmented by the intrusion of an embodied contradiction (Joseph) whose status as a slipped sign, one which does not correspond, alerts the reader to another 'reality' in which discontinuity instead of correspondences rule; signs become exposed and loosened. While 'truth' is never located in 'Me and Miss Mandible', but remains endlessly deferred, by breaking apart signifier and signified Barthelme proposes another level of 'truth' which confirms Joseph's discovery that 'signs are signs, and that some of them are lies'.⁵²

In 'The Balloon' Barthelme proposes yet another 'impossible' situation, one which frustrates—perhaps as much as any Barthelme story does – any attempt to naturalise the fiction in situational terms. Barthelme reminds us, apropos the balloon, that it is:

wrong to speak of 'situations', implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there⁵³

The story of the balloon deals with the sudden appearance of a giant balloon that fills the streets and airspace of central Manhattan. It:

covered forty-five blocks north-south and an irregular area east-west, as many as six crosstown⁵⁴ blocks on either side of the Avenue in some places

Filling space, the object is a form of expression without origins or endings, devoid of beginning and points of entry,

without obvious significance or intention. The Balloon ultimately lies beyond its possession by interpreters intent on reading objects in the world in terms of coherent systems of thought, yet the balloon becomes a kind of screen on which observers of it project their readings of 'reality'. Also, as in many Barthelme stories, we find a narrator creating an object or a situation for his own pleasure and need, followed by a proliferation of significance flowing outwards inviting multifarious responses to the narrator's creation.

If we are to see critical interpretation in terms of appropriation in order to reconcile and stabilize then the narrator's own 'creation' of the balloon is founded on similar desires. The balloon serves a purpose for the narrator - that of 'curing' his uncertainty:

The balloon, I said, is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation, but now that your visit to Bergen has been terminated, it is no longer necessary or appropriate⁵⁵

The balloon is put in storage 'waiting some other time of unhappiness',⁵⁶ when it can be again inflated to help with personal problems. The balloon, therefore, becomes a personal creation in the sense that it has no 'existence' prior to the narrator's (or any other person's) creation of it. The balloon is even appreciated because it counters contemporary reality:

It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was...that it was not limited, or defined (and) (t)his ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially

to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned...The balloon...offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet⁵⁷

The balloon becomes a playground of egocentricity, affecting the consciousness of all who come in contact with it. Responses to it vary: some write on it, others play on it or hang paper lanterns on it. However, the need for reassurance and certainty, for an unbroken and comforting level of understanding where all things ultimately connect and sooth, ensures that the balloon becomes, like language, appropriated as natural and transparent. Very quickly the unaccountable becomes accountable:

part of a system of unanticipated rewards, as when one's employer walks in and says, 'Here, Henry, take this package of money I have wrapped for you, because we have been doing so well in the business here, and I admire the way you bruise the tulips'⁵⁸

The balloon inspires conflicting critical opinion:

'monstrous outpourings'

'harp'

'certain contrasts with darker portions'

'inner joy'

'large, square corners'

'conservative eclecticism that has so far governed modern balloon design'

:::::'abnormal passages'

'warm, soft, lazy passages'

'Has unity been sacrificed for a sprawling quality?'

'Quelle catastrophe!'

'munching',⁵⁹

The balloon fills the gap existing between the world and knowledge of the world by the imposition of a system of meaning which makes sense of what is potentially without any conventional significance. The balloon is like language, insofar as it is mistaken for a reality beyond the sign itself. Significantly, one man interprets the balloon as inseparable from the notion of 'sullied', as in 'The big balloon sullied the otherwise clear and radiant Manhattan sky',⁶⁰ and in so doing, almost stumbles on the balloon's deeper significance: he sees the balloon as an interposition between illusion (world) and reality (sky), but reality affords no promise of pleasure or reassurance, and 'struggling with the original perception',⁶¹ he abandones reality for the illusion. The sky is described as 'dark and ugly; it was not a sky you could look up into...with pleasure'.⁶² The sky is the original, innocent (impossible) condition of the absolute truth prior to its sully by signs (the balloon) with innocence and purity deferred or lost, and in the place of innocence we have illusion masquerading as reality and generating passivity, mass infantilism and dependence.

Both the story's form and subject are disturbing and potentially subversive. The narrator says that there was 'some hostility' to the balloon, and that:

(b)ecause we had hidden the pumps, which fed helium to the interior, and because the surface was so vast that the authorities could not determine the point of entry - that is, the point at which the gas was injected - a degree of frustration was evidence by those city officers into whose province such manifestations normally fell⁶³

Barthelme is clearly identifying here the authoritarianism of singular stable, non-contradictory systems which propose natural order and unifying meanings, and showing the gaps in the apparently unbroken surface of that which passes for reality. The balloon is representative of the modification and the reconstruction of the given and the illusion that there can be access to an uncoded 'pure' or objective experience of a 'real' world, or any ultimate condition.

Barthelme's view of language is that its structure and its innocence tell us nothing about the world only about the sign system itself which we habitually mistake for some ultimate reality. Language is, therefore, power, and can be deadly:

We have rots, blights and rusts capable of attacking (the enemy's) alphabet...We have the deadly testicle destroying telegram...We have a secret word that if pronounced, produces multiple fractures in all living things⁶⁴

Language can also fail to communicate. In 'The President', the narrator is baffled by the President's inability to state anything meaningful:

I can't make out what he is thinking. When he has finished speaking I can never remember what he has said...On television...he stares directly into the camera...and begins to speak. One hears only cadences. Newspaper accounts of his speeches always say that he 'touched on a number of matters in the realm of...'65

Sometimes Barthelme's characters resemble people who have suffered some form of physical damage to their brain and who are, thereby, unable to grasp the meaning of words:

What is 'wailing'? What is 'funky'? Why does language subvert me, subvert my seniority, my medals, my oldness, whenever it gets a chance? What does language have against me...?⁶⁶

The systems of communication reveal themselves as non-natural: there are, therefore, no positive terms. In 'Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning', we see a public personality only as he exists to others as an insubstantial, contradictory individual. K is both abrupt and kind; he ignores his staff, then overwhelms them with kindness; he is praised for his compassion, yet gets a cheap laugh at the expense of a contemporary artist; he is a dreamer one minute, decisive the next. In short, K's identity is fragmented: no information he conveys about himself makes a complete picture. What we have is a series of short paragraphs dealing with K and introduced by headings such as 'K at His Desk', 'Described by Secretaries', 'Behind the Bar'. One's confidence in discovering an entire personality is further undermined by K's speech:

It's an expedient in terms of how not to destroy a situation which has been a long time gestating, or, again, how to break it up if it appears that the situation has changed during the gestating period, into one whose implications are not quite what they were at the beginning⁶⁷

Here K's insubstantiality is expanded into the realm of his own language which is similarly empty. Personality and speech are, therefore, inextricably bound together in a state of negativity. K cannot communicate anything other than his authority and the roles he adopts, and so he retains a

precarious communicative ability. He is a kind of reflection of the times and a creation of incoherent expectation:

'There are exhausted crowds and vivacious crowds.
'Sometimes, standing there, I can sense whether a particular crowd is one thing or the other.
Sometimes the mood of the crowd is disguised, sometimes you only find out after a quarter of an hour what sort of crowd a particular crowd is.

'And you can't speak to them in the same way. The variations have to be taken into account. You have to say something to them that is meaningful to them in that mood'⁶⁸

K is trapped into responding to moods and shifting currents of others' lives. As a public figure, these facts determine his own nature to the extent that he cannot connect or communicate with his own children. It is not that public exposure fails to 'unriddle the mystery of his real self'⁶⁹ but that there is no real self to be unriddled; neither is there a public consistency to which a personality could ideally be directed. Personality (K's and everyone else's) is like language, endlessly deferred.

K's fragmentary experience and being are inseparable from the nature of his dreams in which fear, pleasure and pain become expressed as symbols of conscious conditions which themselves are made from the paradoxes and contradictions usually associated with dreams. Like a dream also the story's random juxtapositions of media accounts, documentaries, and personal reports--the raw materials of our own history--add up to nothing conclusive. Dreams, moreover, cannot express anything but the reality that fuels their incongruities, cannot transcend the material condition which has itself

taken over the vocabulary ('dream' and 'nightmare') of the non-material. Like a dream, K's self is a series of broken reflections; he is neither entire of personality or a natural being, and being aware of this he is in consequence, attracted to theories of spontaneity which promise an integrity born of constant renewal. In the story K discovers in Poulet's reading of Marivaux the idea of a:

pastless, futureless man, born anew at every instant. The instants are points which organize themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line. The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before. He is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reaction to events...In consequence he exists in a certain freshness⁷⁰

K is here expressing the frustration and fears of the man caught in an historical scheme, and who, therefore, finds Marivaux's ideas liberating and very desirable. But only desirable: the reality always prevails. At the end of 'Robert Kennedy' Barthelme incorporates into the story an actual event, that of a journalist saving Kennedy from drowning. The traditional hero is reduced to comic book status: he saves no-one, but himself has to be saved by a purveyor of fiction. K's terse 'Thank you' is no more than K communicates to a waiter. Little has been saved, in fact, since K's self had been drowned long before by the requirements and necessities of personal existence.

Barthelme's world cannot be repaired because the means is missing: there is no longer the synthesizing consciousness

at work (character's or writer's) to mend the damage, only an unending series of fragments refusing coherence and certainty. This becomes clear if we compare the end of Joyce's 'The Dead' with Barthelme's 'Brain Damage'. The former reads:

Snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, further westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves⁷¹

The end of 'Brain Damage' parodies the religious perspective of the conclusion of Joyce's story - reminding us of the distance travelled between the Joyce of 1914 and the Barthelme of 1968. In Barthelme, in post-Modernist fiction, epiphanies are absent:

And there is brain damage in Arizona, and brain damage in Maine, and little towns in Idaho are in the grip of it, and my blue heaven is black with it, brain damage covers everything like an unbreakable lease⁷²

In 'Brain Damage' we discern not only environmental deterioration through pollution, but also the blanketing effect of the junk of contemporary life on the mental landscape. The narrator partakes of the diversity of contemporary life, but the diversity is a reflection of the bits and pieces life seems to be made up of: he finds a book on a garbage dump, flowers are wired up and plugged in, a great waiter dies and is poached by his colleagues, Barthelme's one time stint on a newspaper is evoked, there is an anthropological report on an imaginary civilization.

The story, furthermore, includes graphics and clusters of bold headlines, neither of which provide any supportive or confirmative function. Reality is shown to be a fictive construct, both damaging and reassuring at the same time:

And I saw a girl walking down the street, she was singing 'Me and My Winstons', and I began singing it too, and that protected us, for a moment, from the terrible thing that might have happened...⁷³

Here, as ever, Barthelme shows the crippling and deadly effects of mass culture and the pressures of mass society on the individual. Anxiety comes with non-conformity and exclusion; standardization hides the contradictions and tensions within society, reassures and quietens potential disharmony and protest. In these terms the writer's role for Barthelme becomes one of reactivating energies ideology deflects and suppresses, of revealing the extent and nature of ideology's system and language. Positioned as he is within the social context, however, Barthelme the post-Modernist, cannot put his faith in the special qualities of art or the self-referring, autonomous truths of neo-Modernism: language and art are fully implicated in the activity of contemporary decay, are inescapably affected by the brain damage which is all-pervasive. The writer finds himself in the same position as the narrator of 'Brain Damage' who complains, 'Brain damage...I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it'.⁷⁴ From inside the real Barthelme proposes a redefinition of jealously guarded ideas and forms which rely on exactitude and certainty and in

doing so reveals the problems and dangers of acceptance and resistance through the behavioural responses of his characters. In the 'Glass Mountain' the narrator (in contrast, for instance, with the doomed Paul in Snow White, who accepts) attempts to explore the contemporary situation.

The story is broken into one hundred short statements made by the narrator who is climbing a large glass mountain, situated at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue. The climber's motives are set out:

- 57. A few questions thronged into my mind.
- 58. Does one climb a glass mountain, at considerable personal discomforture, simply to disenchant a symbol?
- 59. Do today's stronger egos still need symbols?
- 60. I decided that the answer to these questions was 'yes'.⁷⁵

The mountain is described as having 'sparkling blue-white depths' (page 68), and at the top of the mountain is a 'beautiful enchanted symbol' (page 69). The narrator's quest follows the conventions of the theme of personal discovery, but does so in a severely circumscribed way: the climb is made with the aid of two 'plumber's friends', and accompanied by the obscenities of spectators. Below him the narrator can see the realities of New York:

- 28. In the streets were hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars.
- 29. Older people walked dogs.
- 30. The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors.⁷⁶

As he climbs, the narrator reminds us of the distance opened up between the everyday and an ideal perfection embodied

in myth. The mountain is representative of understanding and the desire of understanding which inspires the climber. The mountain's summit is the pinnacle of understanding, is enlightenment and certainty. The effort of climbing and conquering, however, can never be wholly successful today, since:

62. The best way to fail to climb the mountain
is to be a knight in full armour⁷⁷

Failure is written into the attempt: knights in armour have no chance of success in the middle of a city in the middle of the twentieth century. Dead and dying knights lie in heaps below the mountain, the narrator's acquaintances moving among them stealing their valuables, including their gold teeth. As in Snow White myth as a foundation for understanding is subverted because there are no conventional sets of meaning to which the reader can attach himself, only a set of conflicting 'meanings' which refuse reconciliation with each other, thus creating only open ends and non-beginnings. 'The Glass Mountain' like all Barthelme's stories never ends, because to end, to finalise, is to impose certainty and completeness (through literature) on the infinite. The dead knights and the human vultures hovering around them propose the finite, while the narrator is intent instead on tracing the forms through which sense and meaning become conferred on reality.

Barthelme quotes from The Yellow Fairy Book the 'conventional means of attaining the castle' and the narrator himself uses this traditional version to help him reach the

summit. When, however, the eagle from the original story lifts him into the air he complains the eagle's claws tear his skin and that he 'had forgotten the Bandaids'.⁷⁸ Furthermore, whereas the original story ends with the appearance of a beautiful enchanted princess, 'The Glass Mountain' ends on a note of disappointment:

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess⁷⁹

The beautiful princess is then thrown off the mountain: as a symbol she is no longer an appropriate source of mystery. Part of his time and place the narrator requires greater mystery, greater distraction than this, even though he is redeemed somewhat in distancing himself morally and physically from the values of contemporary American urban life. The story ends:

100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment⁸⁰

The narrator finds eagles, like the Princess, implausible because their predictability, locked as symbols inside a system of meaning, ensures that the eagle and the Princess trigger associations which are fundamentally standardizations. Similarly, with 'Bandaids': Bandaids are one aspect of existence the narrator's friends can quite happily deal with, while the narrator himself decides 'to proceed without the Bandaids', so repudiating the materialism which runs counter to his investigation of the mythic. The narrator's uncertainty, without having the effect of disqualifying him from acting (as

it does Joseph in 'Me and Miss Mandible', for example), represents the refusal to invest either in crass realism or the consolations of myth. Instead, the narrator of 'The Glass Mountain' insists, like Barthelme, on the priority of the imagination as it deals with and brings together fragments of experience into a potentially meaningful, but endlessly imaginative form. The narrator quotes from a dictionary:

71. 'The conventional symbol (such as the nightingale, often associated with melancholy), even though it is recognised only through agreement, is not a sign (like the traffic light) because, again, it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone see'⁸¹

But immediately scrambles symbol and sign:

72. A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me⁸²

The symbol thus becomes reduced to absurdity, becoming merely an object with a sign on it saying 'nightingale', or whatever. Belief in symbol (Glass Mountain and nightingale) or sign (bandaid and traffic light) has to be replaced by an attempt to discover the problems inherent in fictional systems. Barthelme takes a symbol, but presents it as drained of conventional significance. In 'The Glass Mountain' the narrator negotiates the pitfalls of belief by distancing himself from these beliefs either literally or imaginatively: surrounded by believers in the materiality of city life, and also believers in the healing powers of mythic systems, the narrator explores without discovering, searches without finding, and in doing so confirms that sign and symbol give substance

to nothing, that the meaning man finds in the world is contrived.

Criticism's static concern with equilibrium and the reconciliation of opposites finds, in the theory of irony, a considerable confirmative position which is paralleled by the Modernist novel's, and particularly Joyce's Ulysses, 'ironic literary self-consciousness'.⁸³ Odysseus becomes a seller of advertising space (a seller of 'nothing'), and ten years of wandering is telescoped into a Dublin day. Irony then collaborates in Joyce's 'artificial reconstructions of a transcendental view of experience',⁸⁴ but in reconciling the contradictions of the text and the world at large, irony inhabits the play of meaning, and forces the question: how can one code have an advantage over another code without setting limits to the plural nature of codes?

In post-Modernism codes remain unfettered; irony is directed against the conventions of irony. In 'Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel', Barthelme plays an ironic game of laughter which undermines the depth and seriousness of the ironic endeavour. In the story, Kierkegaard's criticism of Schlegel's Lucinde is made on the basis of the novel creating 'an actuality which is superior to the historical actuality and a substitute for it'.⁸⁵ Barthelme's respondent, however, insists that Kierkegaard:

(...fastens upon Schlegel's novel in its prescriptive aspect - in which it presents itself as a text telling us how to live - and neglects other aspects, its objecthood for one)⁸⁶

Not only did Schlegel possess a vision of secular perfection, but aesthetically, 'it was in the "fragment" that (he) found the channel of expression congenial to him' and Lucinde 'seems only to advocate licence and disruption'.⁸⁷ Therefore, a profound secular sense and a disturbing aesthetic characterises the man, and we can speculate that on both counts Kierkegaard found the German writer lacking a moral perspective in accordance with his own thinking. For Kierkegaard the poetic 'transfigure the imperfect into the perfect, and therefore softens and mitigates that deep pain which would darken and obscure all things'.⁸⁸ Schlegel's irony allows the writer to escape being bound by what he says, and hence, for Kierkegaard, is destructive, since irony destroys without putting anything coherent and complete in its place. When the ironic vision expands to take in all of existence, the result is victory over the world rather than reconciliation with the world--for Kierkegaard the true task is reconciliation with actuality and the true reconciliation...is religion'.⁸⁹

Although the narrator of 'Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel' confesses to a 'deep bias against religion', we find that although he initially says that Kierkegaard is, indeed, unfair to Schlegel, before long he is confessing that this is not what he believes at all: the respondent is using irony himself in order to 'annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his (Kierkegaard's) disapproval'.⁹⁰ Freedom

is the key, and freedom, as Kierkegaard knew, is the goal of the ironist: among the German Romantics like Schlegel, the distance allowed by the ironic perspective is 'a source of freedom, mastery, a joy',⁹¹ and it is this perspective which creates the confusion of voices within the respondent, and which, furthermore, suggests the split between the writer in the text and the writer of the text. The respondent is clearly yet another of Barthelme's insecure artists/indecisive characters, who require the comforts and consolations of absolute standards and values whilst at the same time, being somewhat resistant to these conditions. The respondent, if not possessed of certainty, has access to some form of exalted orderliness capable of encompassing visions of extreme disorder. He is an incurable fantasiser: he confesses, 'I use the girl on the train a lot',⁹² but that his fantasies are, 'A poor... A rather unsatisfactory...'⁹³ and later admits that his ironic perspective provides also, 'A poor...A rather unsatisfactory...'⁹⁴ Fantasy and irony deal ultimately with (and in) compensatory qualities of totality, translating reality into freedom of which Kierkegaard disapproves, and the respondent is unsure about.

An ironist of some conviction, Barthelme's respondent is both troubled by an absence of structure, and structure itself (in whatever guise). He is right in being aware of his own unfairness to Kierkegaard - necessary to dissipate Kierkegaard's disapproval of irony - since his own disapproval

reveals, at bottom, an uncertain ironic perspective. Like Kierkegaard, Barthelme's character is worried about the absence left by irony, but unlike Kierkegaard, can find no consolation in religion. He tells of how he was once made to feel uncomfortable in a strange house on discovering it to be filled with games of various varieties. Since games produce in this context feelings of unease the respondent mobilises irony in order to suppress unease: 'The shuffle-board sticks, the barbells, balls of any kind - my joke has... thrown them out of the world'.⁹⁵ Since games cannot be related to ultimate, transcendental systems, they cannot signify cohesion, and hence for the respondent they are representative of the fragments and discontinuities of existence which deny order and priority. Games signify 'the desperate absence of authentic recreation',⁹⁶ and, therefore, represent an absence of signification - something deeply disturbing to Schlegel, Kierkegaard and Barthelme's character alike, all of whom understand existence only in terms of some ultimate quality of meaning which has to fill the spaces Barthelme reveals between the fragments and discontinuities of man's life systems. Game and laughter are the endlessly displacing factors which demolish Romantic theories and beliefs, religion, secular irony, co-existing only with the extraordinary.

In a lost value-centred epoch consoling and cohesive perspectives are no longer tenable, are unhelpful in a

world which has to be confronted. Under examination Barthelme's respondent reveals his immersion in the world, but the destroyed space of the ironist cannot be filled with faith or art since life and language have become reduced to the very levels of existence they were able once to transcend. The problem, as Barthelme states, is the 'trash' phenomenon: and the problem 'turns from a questions of disposing of this trash to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it's 100 per cent'.⁹⁷ There is nothing to hold back the quotidian: the respondent merely has sexual fantasy and political gesture, but the bemusements and frustrations of contemporary man are fully expressed in the respondent's inability to draw from sex and politics any significant degree of self expression and belief. Neither Kierkegaard's identity of phenomenon and essence (or signifier and signified) or Schlegel's deprivation of this reality through ironic reversal satisfies the desire of the respondent given the myriad forms contemporary reality takes and the turmoil it induces in the spectator. Faithless, but in need of reassurance, Barthelme's character is unable to absolve himself.

At the end of the story, Barthelme suggests, however, a human response to life which seems to overcome the need for transcendent orders of compensation. The tears Mme. Boucicault and Louis Pasteur shed are recognitions of a sort - recognitions of human values and integrity. The

widow of a successful businessman and the scientist share a common interest and a similar goal - the alleviation of human suffering. The black square which punctuates 'Kierkegaard' - signifying at once a resistance to absolutes and textual recuperation and a negative presence - expresses, however, the story's concern with the here and now. The story's positive elements are historic: tears shed on behalf of such causes are, suggests Barthelme, manifestations of values of a different age. The story of Mme. Boucicault and Pasteur is finally submerged by the respondent's concluding ironic statement which re-establishes the normality and assurance of detachment.

In contrast, Barthelme's irony is an irony of displacement. Using irony against itself, an endless series of deferments spins off meaning in all directions, producing a pluridimensional proliferation of responses: Barthelme invites the reader into the vacant, fragmented territory of 'empty' signs, so denying the consolation of irony and reference. A surplus of signifiers shatters the bindings of language which provide an artificial system of coherence; nothing is resolved, and the reader is left suspended in void separating sign from meaning, image from object. In this way, Barthelme, like all post-Modernists, ensures that:

one's situation is always blurred, you never know absolutely quite where you are. This allows, if not peace of mind, ongoing attention to other aspects of existence⁹⁸

CHAPTER TWO

Part Two: Donald Barthelme

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CHAPTER TWO

Part Three: Ishmael Reed

Because the black's torment has been social the main 'thrust of black writing has been social'.¹ Social awareness has, however, induced many contemporary innovative black writers to resist conventional literary forms even though the subjects of black exploitation and subjection have remained paramount. Innovative black writing during the fifties and sixties reflected the upsurge in black consciousness during the period and also the 'revolution' which expressed youth aspirations, anti-Vietnam war sentiments and the less focussed social and political developments of the time. Leaving aside the question of the long-term transformative dimension of sixties and early seventies protest in America, there is no doubt that many black novelists during the period responded to contemporary social and political changes in ways which remind us of Roland Barthes' observation that following the French Revolution there was needed a new form of writing 'commensurate with the presence of the guillotine'.² The innovative black novel since the sixties has inflicted upon writing a violent rejection of prior forms of completeness and continuity that has signalled a break with the white and black literary past: in the fiction of Ishmael Reed in

particular the novel still expresses a social concern while emphasising at the same time the necessity of estrangement from the identifiable centres of literary art in America.

The black writer suffers the constant reminder that, for him, the gap between language and the world has, for the most part, been the source of his suffering and the root of his social absurdity. Black writing has, therefore, become in post-second World War America, a matter of disengagement from the dominant forms and features of white existence. To this degree, innovative black American writing of recent years has displayed characteristics similar to those of previous black colonial literatures which from the thirties merged popular and national culture with avant-garde techniques imported from France in the shape of Surrealism. Thus, the black artist exploited Surrealist methods as a means of escaping racial, political, cultural and social domination by white colonialism. There are numerous examples of this in the literature of Latin America and Africa:

in Cuban literature it was Guillen and Carpentier, in the French literature of the Antilles the work of Aimé Césaire...The rejection of the present, the exposure of the lies of the established culture, and search for new values, all contributed to the awareness of specific Negro features...and helped to put into words and throw into relief... opposition to the official and conservative trends in literature³

In American black writing, we find Leroi Jones foregrounding his language, deliberately deconstructing lexical structures, collapsing words and asserting defamiliarising

linguistic patterns, and as a contemporary black 'Surrealist' proclaiming that the black artist's role in America is one of participation in the destruction of America as we know it. Jones' aesthetic (if not his political conviction) is, indeed, a familiar one in most American writing, but for the black writer the desire to escape the 'possible nightmare of being totally controlled'⁴ is especially compelling, since the black writer must both encounter and contest the determining features of language and also attempt to win sufficient space for him to express his racial priorities.

For Ishmael Reed, black language is touched by something sacred and its preservation is essential: 'You not gone make me give up Black English. When you ask me to give up my Black English you askin me to give up my soul'.⁵ Ironically, this statement is contained in a collection of essays, most of which express concern at the 'deterioration' of the English language: Reed's subversive contribution is pressed between layers of cultural decorum, and proposes that language, being socially and culturally formed, is therefore socially and culturally exclusive of categories which cannot or will not become associated with the structures of dominant systems. The need of a language of blackness, possessing non-Western features and expressing alternative black 'truths' becomes, therefore, of the utmost importance if black culture is to resist the encroachments of alieu and dominant forms.

Ishmael Reed's one sentence manifesto, 'This is what we want...to sabotage history', on the face of it suggests a desire to engage in a Leroi-Jones assault on white American society, but Reed's aesthetic has no specific social direction or purpose: style and language resemble what Barthes calls 'theatrical amplification', which, in this case, refers us to the overthrow of white versions of reality and the expansion of the imaginative process of perception in terms of black counterhistories with their origins in the Afro-American experience. Reed overflows the boundaries of the conventional: his structures are mosaics made from pieces of time and space and his language bristles with the 'offences' of the black man trapped within the confines of white language. For Reed, the black has available to him a history of magical mystery which has its origins in ancient Egypt, Africa and Haiti (but which always touches upon contemporary affairs). As he shifts voices, scenes, contexts, and directions, Reed looses a written equivalent of this ancient power, seriously disturbing conventional circuits of literary communication: the reader undergoes the new experiences of being forced to consider history and social life as a fragmented and discontinuous process, and does so through the writer's bewildering mixture of European-like avant-garde techniques and indigenous experimental forms.

Reed's first novel, The Free-Lance Palibearers, owes a considerable debt to popular cultural forms:

in films like The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari where the set...is almost like a cartoon's and that is the kind of thing I wanted to create. It could almost be rendered in a child's drawing. I wanted to create a tiny world⁶

Reed feeds off his experience of mass culture, and openly acknowledges the influence of television on his writing:

I've watched television all my life, and I think my way of editing, the speed I bring to my books, the way the plot moves, is based upon some of the television shows and cartoons I've seen, the way they edit⁷

The writer's concern with the capturing of America of today, leads to him combining 'blues, jazz, rock and roll, comic books, detective stories, hoodoo and commercial hustle',⁸ but always in Reed's fiction we find 'African diasporic culture... juxtaposing...with the cultural mythos of the Anglo-American world'.⁹ The novelist takes for his material what comes readily to hand: Reed improvises with lists, pictures, diagrams, quotations, street talk, academic terms and comic one-liners, incongruities, mobiles and literary collages-- 'a switch, a shift...in syntax...in structure, a change, a surprise...instead of Indians invading, you're liable to get Tuetonic Germans'.¹⁰

Reed's kaleidoscopic texts suggest an act of what Levi-Strauss calls 'bricolage', a 'primitive' or 'savage' logic which enables man to respond to the world around him in ways different to those of 'civilised' men. There are also connections 'between Levi-Strauss's notion of the activities of the 'savage bricoleur', and the modus operandi of the jazz

musician'.¹¹ However, the structuralist's intention is to show 'wonderful symmetries...perfect homologies',¹² and to understand myths in terms of myth's abolition of complexity and ability to 'organize(s) a world...without contradictions':¹³ in contrast Reed's, and post-Modernism's, perception and practice resembles a post-Structuralist dimension, since post-Structuralism:

shifts the emphasis from any single meaning or theory towards an unbounded movement through time and space, suggesting that there will never be, and can never be, any definitive...'truth'¹⁴

Reed's texts similarly question coherence and totality and preserve only a self-questioning quality which results in an endless series of anachronistic fragments and contemporary disclaimers:

SAM never forgot the advice of this woman whose face looked like five miles of unpaved road¹⁵

Fannie Mae was curled up on the sofa watching the Art Linkletter Show where a life supply of pigeons had been awarded to four cripples and some parents of children with harelip¹⁶

Why, yessuh, Mr. Swille! I loves it here. Good something to eat when you wants it. Color TV. Milk pail fulla toddy. Some whisky and a little nookie from time to time. We gets whipped with a velvet whip, and there's free dental care and always a fiddle case your feets get restless¹⁷

The extraordinary, the fragmented and the discontinuous, the priorities of arbitrariness, all give Reed's fiction its special qualities of distance and denial, and activates the subversion of the premises of the traditional novel which Reed insists is securely 'tied to western epistemology, the way the

people in the west look at the world'.¹⁸ His fusion of the disparate into an unstable present represents an aesthetic of spiritual renewal developed from what the writer calls the 'Hoodoo tradition,' a tradition emphasising mystery, intuition, emotion, feeling - qualities set out against Western, Christian rationality, logic, empiricism, intellectualism. In Reed's work, we encounter the call (often made by blacks) for 'scientists and engineers...lawyers',¹⁹ and contrary voices calling for 'jewelry, Black astrology charts, herbs, potions, candles, talismans'.²⁰ Ranged against the 'Patrolman of the mind handing out tickets to any idea or thought that sped or made U turns'²¹ Reed marshalls the properties of suppressed black history and a revised tradition.

Reed's preoccupation with neo-Hoodooism serves to anchor his transformational aesthetic in a system of non-system, an occult or pre-or-anti-Christian form of religion which proposes non-logic, irrationality and inclusion - categories of an ancient order which Reed exploits to enable the escape of the black man/writer trapped inside white history and white language. Neo-Hoodooism allows Reed a voice with which to express the resistance to cultural and religious conditioning. Neo-Hoodooists would rather:

'shake that thing' than be stiff and erect...Neo-Hoodoo ain't Negritude. Neo-Hoodoo never been to France...Neo-Hoodoos are detectives of the metaphysical about to make a pinch²²

Rooted in Africa and black America, Reed's counter system reveals a political dimension through the novelist's alienation from customary literary forms and themes and the writer's rejection at the same time of Native Son's grim realism or Leroi Jones' polemic. Reed struggles to get outside of white/western systems of meaning without becoming trapped as an artist in alternative but equally inhibiting systems of expression and belief; form assumes a political dimension, while style insists upon art's status as a social factor, even though art may not express a pronounced social/political message.

Reed's refusal to take up concrete propositions is typical of post-Modernist writing, though with Reed a forthright black perspective anchors his fiction in a recognisable dimension: racial expressiveness is explicit enough without being ordered and exclusive. Anti-Western, anti-Christian, Reed's forms and themes dispel the linear, unifying concepts associated with a repressive epistemology. Neo-Hoodooism becomes the means of articulating a non-presence, an intangible force which remains beyond the appropriative and destructive conspiracy of white power, and which, consequently, strikes fear into America:

A spectre is haunting america - the spectre of neo-hoodooism. all the powers of old america have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: allen ginsberg timothy leary richard nixon edward teller billy graham time magazine the new york review of books and the underground press²³

The 'magic' Reed proposes as counterforce can best be described in negative terms, what it is not: to ascribe to it specific or definite properties or features would have the effect of reproducing those myths and beliefs to make sense of, and work within, the existing order. Reed's 'magical' mutability is, therefore, the means of avoiding the fall into system. Things, people, events and the temporal and spatial dimensions become, as they often do in the fiction of Ron Sukenick, constantly transformed.

The origins of this constant shifting are found in Reed's poem, 'Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man'. Railroad Bill has the ability to change his form to meet his immediate needs: endowed with HooDoo power Bill can become a bird, a tree, and so forth. The effect of this is to transform Bill into a black folk hero. On his death, whites try to unravel his mystery and power with the aid of a classics professor from Yale, while blacks identify Bill with the supernatural powers of nature and read his example of change and movement as a possibility of escape from white/western structures. Reed seems to consider Bill as a prototype for the black artist, for the writer trying to resist the demands of mainstream white aesthetics and history, and the pressures also imposed by those blacks who require allegiance to their way of proving the value of blackness. Railroad Bill exemplifies freedom: he transcends order by changes of form and his forms are totally self-chosen in accordance with present need.

Elsewhere, Reed articulates black deviance and freedom as 'Jes Grew', a mental disturbance or spirit originating in the home of jazz, New Orleans, but which spreads throughout the United States endowing black Americans with the ability to redefine themselves, like Railroad Bill to change their forms, and thereby resist power and gain power for themselves through alien cultural infiltration. The effects of Jes Grew are diversely disruptive of conventional behaviour:

young men wearing slave bracelets, sitting in the
cafes quoting nigger poetry...young women smoking
Luckies, wearing short skirts and staying out
until 3:00 in the morning²⁴

Jes Grew threatens 'the end of Civilization As We Know
It...'²⁵ and sets about:

Profaning our sacred words...and beating them on the
anvil of Boogie Woogie, putting...black hands on
them so that they shine like burnished amulets.
Taking our words...and using them like they were
their god-given pussy²⁶

In a description which could be referring to post-
Modernist fiction itself, Jes Grew is described as possessing
no qualities which create the conditions of recognition: it
is 'nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we
call it one thing it forms into something else'.²⁷ Jes
Grew 'has no end and no beginning',²⁸ and therefore resists
agencies of control.

However, just as Railroad Bill dies, the threat of Jes
Grew is finally banished: the more black expression is
assimilated into white culture (be this the black protest
novel or jazz), the less, Reed suggests, its subversive

potential becomes. Indeed, Reed is aware that the writer can invent myths, invoke legends, change name and dress, scramble history and propose incongruities, but he has to trade in a language, specifically literary language with its devices, forms and rhetoric, that pulls the black writer back into the consciousness he seeks to escape and professes to despise. Hence, language would seem to have an infinite capacity for betraying those who use it. Reed even identifies the reimposition of slavery as having taken the form of the black acquiring literacy, and in the process, losing his freedom. After emancipation, says Reed:

Afro-American illiteracy went down drastically. You can look at the pictures that show ex-slave of all ages learning to read and write. They thought there was some sort of magical power in it. But they were betrayed²⁹

At the same time, however, Reed is well aware that if language provides white culture with its most compelling system of assimilation and restraint, it also promises to provide the most thoroughgoing demolition of the dominant order: language can be magical after all and propose a reality among the shifting appearances of things, the spaces and pieces of broken patterns and contorted histories.

Reed's first novel, The Freelance Pallbearers started out as a satire on Newark politics, but grew to include the American way of life within its compass. The novel tells of Bukka Doopeyduk's attempts to realise the American Dream: Bukka is Reed's image of the black man in America 'sold' the

promise but denied the reality, and we witness Bukka's journey from a position of student Nazarene priest to hospital attendant to disillusioned black man who is eventually done to death.

At first Bukka subscribes to all the values and ideals of HARRY SAM (UNCLE SAM) and is content to live in the reflection of SAM'S achievements and his glory:

I live in HARRY SAM. HARRY SAM is something else.
A big not-to-be-believed out-of-sight, sometimes
referred to as O-BOP-SHE-BANG or KLANG-A-LANG-A-
DING-DONG³⁰

And SAM himself epitomises all the promise of rags to riches: his father was a 'self-made Pole and former used-car salesman', his mother a 'low-down, filthy hobo infected with hoof-and-mouth disease'.³¹ SAM's mother taught SAM everything he knew, with the result that SAM reaches the heights of 'top-dog in the Harry Sam Motel and Master of HIMSELF'.³² SAM and the Nation become one, fused in an identity of identical lineage and concurrent values, and Bukka, well versed in these values by his own upbringing, aspires to similarly master himself and rise to prominence, perhaps even to the position of SAM himself.

Bukka is well meaning, a conscientious student of Christian scriptures and believer in the righteousness of SAM, but in identifying so closely with this white reality, Bukka is in the process deformed and depraved. Bukka has an identity moulded by SAM and has ambitions to become the first bacteriological warfare expert of his race, a useful skill

since SAM's response to those professing alien cultures and beliefs is to 'bomb the fuken daylight out of um'.³³ On his way to the top, Bukka is prepared to start at the bottom (literally) and work his way up while masking his inferior social position with the familiar reflex actions of those who have adopted the habit of using language to mystify rather than clarify : he describes himself as a 'psychiatric technician' - which means he studies faeces, empties colostomy bags and helps administer electric shock treatment to those with a distorted sense of reality.

Throughout The Freelance Pallbearers Reed shows ways in which reality is manufactured. Fictional codes, systems, messages take on the dimensions of the real to the advantage of established political, economic and cultural power. As Bukka 'advances' to media personality, star, token black revolutionary adopted by whites, he is further enmeshed inside the white network of ideas and beliefs, and his achievement is defined in terms of an ultimately repressive culture which allows black expression only to the extent to which it repeats the ideological myths of the dominant ideology. Eventually, Bukka threatens to become the next HARRY SAM but is defeated by the conspiracy of white power and black subservience: he is finally crucified and then taken away by the free-lance pallbearers - white liberals and silent blacks who are described as never preventing the martyrdom of heroes, only venerating them after death ('Better late den never').

When the revolution does finally come, the new regime speak Chinese but, language apart, their messages are familiar-- 'SAVE GREEN STAMPS'. In identifying the object and the centre of change, Reed tells us that those intent upon change themselves become caught in the structures of the system they contest. Bukka's dying words as he acknowledges this are, 'What's the use?', and, indeed, the question echoes through the novel as a sort of despairing artistic cry of the black man trapped in a suffocating whiteness.

Reed attacks both black and white misreadings of reality with equal venom. SAM is served by judges, generals, the Chiefs of Screws and the Nazarene Bishops preaching 'We must love one another or die', and Bukka's black father-in-law insists on wearing antlers as symbolic of his one-time leadership of the coloured elks and in commemoration of the day he caused a stir in polite society by breaking with protocol and kissing Calvin Coolidge's ass 'all over' instead of pulling 'aside one flap' and kissing the 'President between the cheeks'.³⁴ Equally, subject to white authority is the figure of Elijah Raven, a man, like Ellison's Rhinehart, of multiple identities: at first he is just an ordinary American black mouthing 'what's happening my man?' and slapping palms; then a member of the Jackal-headed Front, a group devoted to removing 'blond wigs from off our women's heads' and bringing back 'rukus juice and chittlins'.³⁵ Then, Raven takes on the role of playwright,

having discovered the Front was a plot within a plot:

the CIA controlled the organization through...a
(black) kat was eating pork on the side and had
a Betty Grable pin-up on his wall...SAM made him
ambassador to Luxembourg³⁶

The capacity culture and society has for absorbing and
defusing all forms of protest by determining the terms of
any counter critique is further suggested by Reed's presentation
of Left politics as essentially and inevitably circumscribed
by the conditions and obsolescence of its analysis. Nosetrouble
is a white Trotskyist, from whose eyes the 'statue of HARRY SAM
winked slyly'.³⁷ Nosetrouble venerates the workers, but his
efforts to rouse them to action is easily dispelled by a TV
appearance of SAM (here played by Richard Nixon):

SAM on television. Sitting at a workman's bench
he patted a little cocker spaniel on the head.
They had applied synthetic soot to his face. He
took a swig of beer from a can and addressed the
nation

'Hi folks. The MAN here again. Got a few
minutes before the whistle is blown...a signal for
me to go back to work...Geeze, folks, solidarity
forever and o yeah while I'm at it, we shall overcome'³⁸

After this 'eloquent and poignant plea for industrial
peace',³⁹ Nosetrouble is almost killed by 'his' workers and
shunned by the leaders of organized labour--who are described
as 'the most avid visitors to the dark and gloomy motel which
loomed over not-to-be-believed'.⁴⁰ However, in the queue
to worship SAM even they have to stand in line, behind:

the leaders of the blacks who mounted the circuitous
steps to SAM, assuring the boss dat: 'Wasn't us boss,
'Twas Stokely and Malcolm. Not us boss. No indeed
...We can prove it to you, dat we loves you. Would
you like for us to cook up some strange recipes foe ya,
boss? Or tell some jokes? Did you hear the one
about da nigger in da woodpile?'⁴¹

Equally ridiculous is the figure of the Reverend Eclair Porkchop, a well-fed preacher who cures SAM's problem--rooster feathers clog his toilet bowl--and is rewarded by being crowned Bishop of Soulsville.

One of Reed's favourite figures is that of the intellectual with a bizarre thesis. In The Last Days of Louisiana Red, Maxwell Kasavubu's thesis, widely 'circulated in literary and political circles'⁴² was that:

Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas wasn't executed at all but had been smuggled out of prison at the 11th hour and would soon return⁴³

In the same novel we meet also Minnie Yellings, a Ph.D. student writing an article in the:

Moocher Monthly magazine on the morphological, ontological and phenomenological ramifications in which she...refute(s) certain long-held contradictory conclusions commonly held by peripatetics entering menopause⁴⁴

In The Freelance Pallbearers we meet Polyglot, dean of Harry Sam College, who is engaged in writing a paper on 'The Egyptian Dung Beetle in Kafka's Metamorphosis', and who, to add a practical dimension to the work, is 'pushing a ball of shit all over the world by the tip of his nose'.⁴⁵ Also, we meet the editors of a magazine called Poison Dart who are in the process of organising a symposium on the role of the black writer in contemporary society. Subjects to be covered include:

Should he glare at Charlie? Should he kinda stick out his lower lip and look mean? or should he just snag at Charlie's pants legs until his mouth is full of ankles and calves and he gets the sweet taste of Max Factor on his tongue?⁴⁶

The black intellectual so depicted is ridiculous to Reed because he or she has swallowed white culture without considering that culture's relevance to the black experience. The white, too, is mocked because the figure like Polyglot exemplifies academic guilt as a manifestation of detachment from reality, and his behaviour is depicted as the intellectual's attempt to come down to 'street level' (this takes a literal form in Polyglot's case). What such ineffectual figures lack is a sense of what Street (Minnie's brother) possesses--assertion, swagger, unpredictability, aggression. Not only does Street satisfy the intellectuals' masochistic needs by beating them up at rallies and stealing their liquor, but Street's life vision is unfettered by preconceptions and pre-formed structures.

There are, however, in Reed's work, few characters totally free: usually his characters are created with the express purpose of exposing the ridiculousness of the beliefs men live by and the willingness with which they embrace imposed ideas. Bukka represents the unquestioning black man who dies as he gains knowledge of the extent of his own manipulation, and the impossibility of changing the consciousness of others. Bukka's chance to transform himself into a free man occurs when 'Da Hoodoo' is put on him but the effect is so startling he quickly finds someone to take the curse off him and return him to normality.

All the characters in The Freelance Pallbearers are trapped within their own misreadings of reality, a reality which

is manufactured and 'sold' like a commodity to consumers no longer in touch with any experiences in any way authentic. Men, women, blacks, whites, are idiots, sycophants, hypocrites, and self-servers: no one person seems able to transcend the limits of white dominance. As yet, without the liberating force of Hoodooism the characters in this, Reed's first novel, are entirely fashioned by the authority of SAM who, though shadowy, is ever present and all-knowing. Reed's form and style are in conflict with dominant modes of discourse, but not even Bukka's wife, Fannie Mae, is free from conventions: she pours scorn on her husband's mannered speech--'I'm interested in finding out what makes people tick'⁴⁷--but she suffers a limiting of identity and expression through contact with white culture, wearing blond wigs and swooning over Troy Donahue. She is contemptuous of SAM's presence within the forms of black experience, but is unable to identify the contradictions of her own situation and, thereby, contest SAM's power even on the individual level.

The subject of The Free-Lance Pallbearers is a familiar one to readers of Ellison, Wright and Baldwin--black man in a white world caught in the web of white society and unable to fully express himself as a free individual. But, whereas the travails of the black are usually presented through a series of dramatic confrontations with the realities of their social and cultural circumscription, Reed explodes and reduces these travails by disrupting the conventions of dramatic

presentation. Admittedly, in Invisible Man we find a stylistic interpolation of formal English, Old Testament rhetoric, Elizabethan flourishes and hipster speech, but Reed's routines never regulate black expression through seriousness. Rather than the finely considered symbols of the conventional novel, Reed deals in a double dismissal--of the regulatory nature of the symbolic order and of the black man's need of white approval and confirmation of black 'worth'. Reed's refusal to be serious about art (even though he is serious, of course, about black experiences) is typical of post-Modernism's refusal to be bound by the nature of prior assumptions and expressions. Reed's exploited characters, along with his symbols, are focal points only for the deficiencies of self and symbol: Bukka is presented with a 'GOLDEN BEDPAN...ENGRAVED ON THE BOTTOM' and on having this taken off him at a later date, dropped 'to his knees and threw the kat all kinds of Al ~~Polson~~ ^{Tolson} mammies one after the other'.⁴⁸ Such broken English and bizarre images present black experience as an unlimited series of discontinuities and departures from white values and logic. Instead of a briefcase, diploma, complex metaphors, polished prose and allegorical signs, all of which in Ellison, contribute to an explanation of black experience, Reed denies this Europeanisation and instead provides surface meaning, literary 'offences', fragmentation and grim laughter, exorcising 'style', 'form' and 'meaning' in order to clear enough literary space for the articulation of non-Western, non-white forms.

Reed's alternative mode is generated by a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, ellipses, typographical variation, Surrealist-like imagery and collages of contradictory styles. Moreover, these fragments never become totalizations of experiential disorder, but reflect a different epistemological orientation and a more aggressive delineation of the artist's position. As Reed deals with the hazards of knowing and with the systems men create to help deal with and organise experience, Reed's identification of racial imaginative processes allows him to reflect on a specific social fact - the nightmare of America. Although SAM is sustained by the death of the young ('SAM EATING...CHILDREN') SAM's power is wielded through the presentation of his reality as the sole reality, and deviations from this as illogical and unreal. Power operates not through brute force and overt repression, but through the dissemination of ideas which more or less successfully include American blacks and the working class generally within its terms. Bukka learns that the reality he has been all his life convinced by, is purely a series of manufactured 'truths', which bring the death of reality through the acceptance of common beliefs. A character named Allen Hangup believes that SAM 'is the bastion of liberty and democracy, the citadel of fair play, the bulwark of individual liberty',⁴⁹ but Bukka belatedly sees that all this is myth:

There are things going on in HARRY SAM that will give you the willies...Bats fly into his stomach walls and shit in his brain. And there's horrible screaming inside as funny lookin' monsters tramp through his testicles searching for food. Enchanted areas where the undead travel round on motorized golf carts...A bunch of old people singing 'Roger Young' off-key⁵⁰

Reality is a series of potent horrors and signs, the proliferation of social and cultural systems which mediate between man and his world, and which disqualify man from separating things as they are represented from things as they 'are'. However, while Reed shows it is impossible to break with ideology in the general sense, he also shows that it is possible to construct a discourse which contests it both thematically and formally. The symbol of the American nation is, in the novel, depicted on a frieze of comic incongruity:

HARRY SAM...sitting on the great commode. In his lap sat a businessman, a Nazarene apprentice and a black slum child. These figures represented the Just. Standing on each side of the dictator were four washroom attendants. In their hands they had seven brushes, seven combs, seven towels, and seven bars of soap, a lock of Roy Rogers' hair and a hershey bar. Above the figures float Lawrence Welk Champagne bubbles⁵¹

What Reed is doing here is using the constituents of myth against themselves. If myth necessarily distorts reality, then Reed here distorts the distortion. There is an absence of motivation and connection between meaning and form: mocking the totality of conventional myth, Reed merely suggests a recuperative content, splintering the range of associations which are usually inherent in fictional form and in social intercourse, thereby throwing off referential vectors resistant to reconciliation and totality.

For Reed, there are 'a small group of men who dominate the politics and culture in this country, and their point of view reigns'.⁵² In Freelance Pallbearers the figure of SAM

is merely a symbol who we learn can be infinitely recreated according to the needs of the 'small group of men' who hold the real power. As SAM disappears down his own toilet bowl to be replaced by a new electronic SAM, SAM's subjects simply transfer their allegiance to the new symbol. In itself, this incident illustrates the main problem with this work: power is shown as absolute, its victims, even if able to see behind the myths of SAM, are unable to express themselves in a positively contrary fashion. Jews, Christians, black militants, white Marxists, academics, gangsters, each has a pipeline to the Harry Sam Hotel where they conduct their GOAT-SHE-ATE-SHUNS with SAM. The people lose, but then the people never know the game anyway. Consequently, only Reed's improvisations suggest any counter technique, constantly thrusting fragmentation and discontinuity at the reader: but, even as Reed erases white art-speech from his prose, and breaks conclusively with the conventionalities of the novel, his orchestration of idiolects, conflicting types of speech, is devoid of any considered aesthetic foundation essential for the black writer attempting to transcend white supremacy. Extremely funny and subversive, The Free-Lance Pallbearers is, nevertheless, too close to the naked horror of contemporary America. Meaning reveals itself too easily to seriously disrupt the process and concrete nature of established meanings, and Reed's intentions become dissipated by the writer's blanket disgust. Ultimately the reader experiences no:

difficulty in decoding Aboreal Hairymen, Elijah Raven, Nancy Spellman, the Harry Sam Motel...Nor is there any confusion in his (Reed's) representation of the Nazarene establishment or in the due process of SAM's laws⁵³

Reed remains in The Freelance Pallbearers captive of the subject of his attentions, and in attacking American culture, values, standards and American society, Reed dwells excessively upon the problem--at the expense of the 'solution'. Neo-Hoodooism is merely hinted at as a possible source of resistant power and of creative counteractions. In his second novel, Yellow Back Radio Broke Down, Reed does, however, demonstrate that one is never free of power and authority as long as one remains obsessed by the source and nature of power and authority. Neo-Hoodooism allows Reed a defining voice expressing counter-realities of combined pasts, presents and futures, and an African/black American perspective which refutes the linear, exclusive shape of western thought and culture.

The origins of Yellow Back Radio Broke Down are in Reed's poem 'I Am A Cowboy in the Boat of Ra', in which a contemporary cowboy, run out of town, bides his time in the old West in preparation for his return to town to take his rightful place. The poem's imagery shifts from Ancient Egypt to the Wild West to contemporary America, with the figure of Ra as the universal creator, the foe of evil, and the sun god who rode across the sky in a chariot. The narrator of the poem assumes the role of Horus, the figure of vengeance and reclamer of a lost throne. Horus, the cowboy figure and the voice of Reed himself take on the same identity, all tormented by what Reed calls the

Egyptologists who symbolise western cultural figures and the ideas they represent. Reed insists that Egyptian culture was 'negroid' not solely white, but that blacks here as elsewhere have, like the cowboy, been 'run out of town', and the black presence as an historical force has been consistently denigrated. Reed identifies Christianity as the foremost negator of all other modes of thought as it insists on linear and infallible readings of history and belief through singular moral and ethical visions - here we see Reed's confirmation of the value of freedom and improvisation, for if the artist is unable to contest the dominance of logical and considered forms he is unable to revitalise history.

Of Yellow Back Radio Broke Down, Reed has said:

The book is really about artistic guerilla warfare against the Historic Establishment...those who supply the nation with its mind, develop and cultivate its mind...They are responsible...with their propaganda and racism⁵⁴

Unlike The Freelance Pallbearers which primarily confronts a social reality, Yellow Back Radio Broke Down creates history. The black cowboy, the Loop Garoo Kid, replaces the dupe and victim, Bukka Doopeyduk. Yellow Back Radio Broke Down opens in the old West where children have thrown out their parents (the past) and established a leaderless community which is clearly based on the principles of HooDoo. The children explain their revolution in terms of the joylessness and restrictions of their previous lives:

Made us learn facts by rote. Lies really bent upon making us behave. We decided to create our own fiction...They listened to this old woman on the talk show who filled their heads with rot. She was against joy and life the decrepit bag of sticks, and she put them into the same kind of mood. They always demanded we march and fight heathens⁵⁵

The newly-liberated children are entertained by a visiting circus which features Zozo Labrique, charter member of the American HooDoo Church, and the Loop Garoo Kid, king of the bullwhippers, who is described as:

A cowboy so bad he made a working posse of spells phone in sick. A bullwacker so unfeeling he left the print of winged mice of hides of crawling women. A desperado so onery he made the Pope cry and the most powerful of cattlemen shed his head to the Executioner's swine⁵⁶

The festival of joy and spontaneity is, though, short-lived: the childrens' parents strike a bargain with a wealthy rancher named Drag Gibson who owns an area of land as big as Venezuela and he and his men exact a bloody revenge on the township and the circus. Only a few children and Loop survive. The kids go off to find the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola where machines do all the work and there is freedom from 'gurus monarchs leaders cops tax collectors jails matriachs patriachs'.⁵⁷ Loop is left alone to fight Drag's technological, political and economic power and his 'historians (who) promote reason, law and order--toad men who adore facts'.⁵⁸ Against them, Loop uses spells, charms, ecstasy and magic, all passed on to him by the dying Zozo. Loop encounters Bo Shmo, a Nosetrouble-like character, who leads a neo-social realist

gang who insist that 'all art must be for the end of liberating the masses'.⁵⁹ Bo writes novels about his 'old neighbourhood and how hard it was every gumdrop machine is in place',⁶⁰ and for Bo, Drag is a 'crazy dada nigger...given to fantasy and... off in matters of detail',⁶¹ whose work is a 'blur and a doodle'.⁶² Bo is clearly in the Richard Wright tradition, but more than this suggests a more oblique relationship with those black writers in the sixties calling for aesthetic and social solidarity, something Loop/Reed see as understandable but dangerous in its insistence on writing to, and in accordance with, order and priority. For Loop the priority is randomness:

No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons⁶³

Loop is not only black but is a satanic figure, a 'Dark one' feared and rejected by logicians and rationalists of the western tradition; he is both artist and magician - the two being inseparable and consistent in intentionality. Instead of presenting history and reality as sacred or fetish that is, made concrete in the given, Loop and Reed refuse consistency and stability, linearity and wholeness, seeing them to be inimical to the release and health of the imagination. Magic is revived as a human force - instead of history which is appropriated by ideology and expressive of dominance and exclusion. Yellow Back Radio Broke Down is never 'one thing', and is, therefore, never consistent. Reed writes, for example:

A cavalry charge sounded. It was the Government arriving in an invasion fleet of taxis around the bend and into the town⁶⁴

The shock of the contradictory is underscored by the novel's fragmented structure which varies paragraph length between a few words and sometimes a half page. Significantly, Reed has referred to the lessons to be learned from the Sufi literary form Reed calls 'scatter' in which 'people go from one subject to another', and which Reed clearly copies, often choosing 'one topic and then go(ing) into its ramifications'.⁶⁵ This exploitation of non-Western forms contributes to Reed's fiction a sense of resistance to a reality already formed into regularity and completeness. With Loop's magic the rituals of the foundations of western thought become revised in accordance with a submerged truth:

the Hoo-Doo, an American version of the Ju-Ju religion that originated in Africa--you know, that strange continent which serves as the subconscious of our planet⁶⁶

The positivistic impulses of the scientific mind are identified as part of the Christian conspiracy to rewrite history, forego pleasure and deny magic. Hence, Reed proclaims the timelessness of history, the joys of uninhibited sex, and the inexplicable. Lewis and Clark fuck Drag's mail-order wife while helicopters buzz overhead. Great Sloths cause a cattle stampede. Thomas Jefferson reads Thomas Paine and plays 'electric fiddle with some rock group called The Green Mountain Boys'.⁶⁷ This way, history is re-written as fiction from the

fiction of history. Loop/Reed from their magic caves, using ruby-eyed snake, amulets, and the realignment of the word and image, transform the considered and arranged moments of time and space into swirling improvised fragments. Improvisation is random--it denies continuity, logic and expectation and, for Reed, is essential for a contemporary art which struggles to free itself from the artfully arranged, the considered aesthetic moment which forces discursiveness upon the arbitrary. Loop treats life like the modern jazz musician treats a melody:

Loop seems to be scattering arbitrarily, using forms of this and adding his own. He's blowing like that celebrated musician Charles Yardbird Parker--improvising as he goes along. He's throwing clusters of demon chords at you and you don't know the changes⁶⁸

The changes aren't known because they cannot be predicted. In the same way, Reed's unpredictable versions allow the black a degree of protection from imposed, predictable white histories and forms. A character in Reed's later novel, Flight to Canada, muses on the way that history has betrayed the black by providing him with a position arranged by those in command of history, but also the curious way in which history is never complete and always surprising:

Strange, history. Complicated too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy⁶⁹

In destroying history in this way, Reed is destroying definitive readings of history which pronounce 'truth' and claim 'certainty'. Hence, for Reed, the black man in history has never been either the uncivilised creature that western

culture has claimed or the receptacle of all the virtues as depicted by many nationalists. There are simply no such certainties for Reed, merely possibilities contained within the present moment. In Reed's revised Western novel, blacks betray Loop just as Apache scouts betrayed Geronimo. Washington is indifferent to the death of Americans and the Administration uncaring of the genocide inflicted on the Indians after the Civil War. Just as the Sioux after Wounded Knee retreated into a drug culture, the students of the sixties also retreated inward. In this sense, all history presents betrayal and retreat. Its only certainties, paradoxically, are its uncertainties: victims are as suspect as tyrants, slaves as tyrannous as masters.

Reed's bitter reading of the past permits only the figure of Loop to retain any authenticity. Loop's place in the narrative ensures that either he will destroy history as we know it, or history will destroy him. This conflict takes on the form of the natural order (magic) versus the unnatural (rationality), and because in Yellow Back Radio Broke Down Reed invests heavily in neo-HooDoo, Loop, unlike Doopeyduk, survives to expell confining and total systems from the earth. The earth is restored to man and the tools of the oppressor are turned on themselves as Drag Gibson is eaten alive by his own swine.

In all his fiction, Reed asks us to examine our assumptions and question our opinions and terms. In Yellow Back Radio Broke

Down, the morality play of the conventional western is denied: Drag and John Wesley Hardin are bad, Loop the outlaw is good. And this is more than a conventional Robin Hood-type reversal: Drag is depicted as Satanic, but Satan is depicted as fighting real evil in the shape of closed systems, materialism and exclusion. The devil prevails and goodness, harmony and joy restore a lost, non-Christian way infinitely more liberating and truthful than Christianity. The Hoodoo cult of Loop is depicted as a 'much richer art form than preaching to fishermen and riding into a town on the back of an ass',⁷⁰ and the figure of Christ is rendered as offensive and extravagant:

He (Christ) had such an ego. 'I'm the Son of God'. Publicity hound, he had to prolong it for three hours, just because the press turned out to witness ...Compare his cheap performance...and that...of our friend Buddha..beautiful, artistic and profound⁷¹

The drama of the western historical event represents for Reed the idea of man of history, imposing himself as ego-centric being on events which have been made to project a proliferation of opposites - right/wrong; good/bad; fact/fiction; past/present. Reality, thus created as fact and truth denies that which cannot be included within its terms. The task of the magician/artist is one, therefore, of breaking down assumptions which are fundamentally naturalistic and tyrannous. History can then be interpreted as the place where dominance struggles to contain resistance, and where the victor always erects reason and excludes 'unreason'. In Foucault's words:

in any society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a number of procedures whose role is to avert its power and its dangers, to master the unpredictable event⁷²

American society, as part of this tradition, both creates its own national fictions as it partakes of the collective western vision. Like all societies, it then doubly imposes itself upon history, and at the same time, subtly forces resistance to it to take the form of 'otherness'--the condition of the excluded who, in turn, seek to exclude and simplify, who desire a new form of truth be imposed on non-believers and sceptics.

In Flight to Canada Reed uses the black slave experience as a foundation for the treatment of historical 'truth', and confronts truth particularly in the guise of language. We learn that history is uncertain because discourse is uncertain, insofar as it is appropriated as the furtherence of power, as indeed as a precondition of power. The ironic possibilities of this are here exploited by Reed as he analyses Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, a book in which history resides, which becomes responsible for creating history and facts out of fiction. From Reed we learn that Stowe's reason for writing the novel in the first place was because she 'wanted enough money to buy a silk dress'.⁷³ And, if truth can be created out of an arrangement of words having their origins in vanity, Reed sees that language presents an unending possibility of the non-confirmative, as

well as the confirmative, discourse: it is words which 'built the world and words which can destroy the world'.⁷⁴

Reed's hero in Flight to Canada is an escaped slave and poet named Raven Quickskill who wins his freedom by using the literacy taught him by Swille, his owner, to develop a vision of life and reality which allows him to escape both plantation and all imaginative constraints. Reed's obvious, knowledge equals freedom metaphor is qualified by his usual insistence that while learning and language can liberate, language and learning can also ensnare. Cato, Swille's black overseer, has a Ph.D. and boasts, 'I know the Bible by heart. I know things like 'standards' and how to pronounce 'prolegomenon'.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Cato is determined to eradicate the savage customs the slaves 'brought from Tarzan country' and forces his charges to:

follow the Jesus cult. That makes em work harder...
The women especially be thrilled with the Jesus
cult. They don't ask no questions any more.
They's accepted their lot⁷⁶

Christianity means an acceptance of suffering and obedience, and the obedience to language also enslaves. Language can, however, if used properly, be used for subversive purposes. Raven uses language for his own ends: he is the first slave to 'read, the first to write, and the first to run away'⁷⁷ - and he also adopts Hoodooism. Swille laments that he had given Raven knowledge:

the most powerful thing in the pre-technological
pre-post-rational age--and what does he do with it?
Uses it like that old Voodoo--that old stuff that
slaves mumble about⁷⁸

Raven has absorbed knowledge and turned back to ancient beliefs armed with this new weapon: he exists then somewhere between ignorance/knowledge, slavery/freedom, floating free of definitions and systems inside his own system and creating history 'from his inner self'.⁷⁹

The poem of Raven's which opens the novel registers the gradual growth of the man into free creature. It does, however, register the truth too closely: although the poem brings Raven freedom and a degree of fame, its publication reveals the escaped slave's whereabouts to bounty hunters. It, therefore, threatens to again enslave him. Symbolically, this suggests that the poem itself is the work of a slave-like mind, unversed in genuine freedom, and expressive of a negative desire for vengeance against a former master. The poem dwells on Raven as robber, murderer and seducer, as a tyrant in his own right who intends the overthrow of tyranny. Raven will, in fact, remain tyrannical for as long as he identifies with the power of Swille, since Swille 'inhabits' Raven's mind and controls his behaviour. Swille, like SAM in The Freelance Pallbearers, is omnipotent and omnipresent. Raven, along with fellow slaves Leechfield and '40s' escapes from Swille but learns that Swille's influence reaches as far as Emancipation City, that Swille finances both sides in the American Civil War, and that Swille is power, absolute and invisible:

Swille was an empire unto himself, the Uncrowned King of America, as they were beginning to call him...Swille...wasn't in the international editions of the Tribune. In fact, Swille wasn't in the newspapers much at all⁸⁰

Raven makes his way to Canada, but Canada in reality is indistinguishable from America. The country is a system of:

Ford, Sears, Holiday Inn, and all the rest...Neon signs with clashing letters advertising hamburgers, used-car lots...coffee joints where you...stand up and take your java from wax cups⁸¹

Even worse for the runaway:

they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Clan look like statesmen. Vigilantes harrass fugitive slaves...They beat up Chinamen and Pakistani in the streets. West Indians they shoot⁸²

Moreover, as always in Reed's fiction, the black man is shown as selling his freedom by imprisoning either himself or other blacks. The runaway Leechfield, becomes a pornographic movie star and hires himself out as a slave for the day through a mail-order company. Also as Raven's skill as an orator grows, it dawns on him that he is in danger of becoming a cult figure, an example for blacks to emulate--whereas 'A Raven is always on the move. A cult would tie him down'.⁸³ Blacks would enslave him just as they had been themselves enslaved:

Slaves judged other slaves like the auctioneer and his clients judged them...Was there no end to slavery? Was a slave condemned to serve another Master?...Slavery on top of slavery? Would he ever be free to do what he pleased as long as he didn't interfere with another man's rights? Slaves held each other in bondage; a hostile stare from one slave criticizing the behaviour of another slave could be just as painful⁸⁴ as a spiked collar--a gesture as fettering as a cage

Raven learns that to be black is not enough: neither is exile. Obsessed by Swille, Raven will always belong to Swille. Only when Swille is made into a figure of fun can his power be broken; in an hostile world escape must become first experienced in the mind. Swille is made an object of comedy, and stripped of his power finally when Raven discovers that while he has been running away from the plantation, his fellow slave, Uncle Robin, has been organising the slaves on Swille's plantation to steal Swille's gold, embezzle his property and run their own businesses. These slaves had allowed Swille merely the illusion of a King Arthur-like power and a Camelot-like kingdom. Just as Swille's power seemed to be absolute and invisible, real authority has been held by those in 'bondage': invisible power has been working behind the illusion of invisible power.

Raven's return to the plantation brings with it the discovery that hatred of Swille and a desire to run from him entails only a waste of energy. What Swille wanted was not money, but the 'slave' in men, the need to create a world of 'lords, ladies and slaves',⁸⁵ and Raven returns to exert 'HooDoo, to both free and reconcile himself, to write Flight to Canada'.⁸⁸

At the end of Flight to Canada we are returned to the beginning of the novel and Raven's preamble where he muses on the nature of reality and the examples of Poe and the Civil War:

why isn't Edgar Allen Poe recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war? Fiction you say? Where does fact begin and fiction leave off?⁸⁹

In the writing of Raven Quickskill, we witness an aesthetic commensurate with the black man's freedom from inhibiting literary form and the epistemology of a Cato who believes, 'The only thing exists is what I see. Seeing is believing'.⁸⁸ Raven's freedom must be exercised through literature, but not the literature of a Pound or an Eliot who left America, but through the African and the American way. Raven is eventually so committed to the overthrow of slavery, that he began 'to include prose and poetry in the same book, so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them'.⁸⁹ Freedom was Raven's writing, and writing was Raven's Hoodoo.

Reed's neo-Hoodooism protects the artist's freedom by allowing the writer to balance between the 'neitherness' of the black/American writer, and Hoodoo preserves both blackness and American-ness in the face of the prescriptive. His writing is full of parody, exaggeration, juxtapositioning, anachronism and contradiction, all conveyed at a tremendous pace, with the reader switching from past to present, scene to scene. Because history is a tissue of fictions, Reed is liberal with his anachronisms: in Flight to Canada he compares Lincoln's wife to a laundromat attendant, and equips his characters with Coffee Mate, Xerox machines and telephones. They play golf, drive cars and fly in aircraft. Moreover, they watch T.V.: making love to an Indian girl called Quaw Quaw, Raven, at the same time, watches a play on T.V. which culminates in the assassination of Lincoln complete with replays, slow motion runs and promises to show it again on the late news.

It is by dispensing with the conventionalities of the 'entire' that Reed satisfies his own ambition to confront and contest both official black history and form, and the white perspectives of the past and of culture. Only the 'logic' of the personality in search of personal interpretations is successful in Reed's fiction, with Hoodoo expressing at the same time the facts of oppression and the possibilities and the triumph of language over language, the priorities of a liberating fragmentation and discontinuity over claims for wholeness and regularity.

CHAPTER TWO

Part Two: Ishmael Reed

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CHAPTER THREE

GAME AND PLAY

self-consciousness turn the text back in upon itself, suppressing illusion in favour of more incongruent forms of discourse. Nevertheless, just as there are different forms of fictional game and play, there is a distinction to be made between the two types of literary expression: 'play' tends to operate at the more comic level, is frequently given to improvisation and randomness; 'game', on the other hand, suggests a more developed structure, usually provides a greater challenge to the reader and is concerned like all games, with rules and conventions. Play is less controlled and less organizationally worked out, and is frequently disrespectful of moral and literary decorum; game is formally aware, less spontaneous than play, and more rewarding for the analyst. Post-Modernism tends towards play; Modernism and neo-Modernism towards game.

Both game and play, nevertheless, undermine conventional and fixed literary models. Their points of departure are the overthrow of old fictional illusions, the traditional agreement between the author and the reader, and the limitations imposed by the technological space of the printed book. It follows from this that literary game and play can be broken down into four main categories, though the very nature of such literary forms must render such categorization somewhat arbitrary. Firstly, we have the fiction which relies for its effect on visual qualities¹ which bend, break and transform the page into a series of graphic shapes,

eye catching jokes and generally discordant design. Secondly, works in which particular games are portrayed and which usually form the basis of plot, characterization and symbolic expression. The third category is that fiction which plays games with the reader at the various levels of form, theme and structure. Fourthly, we have the post-Modernist work of playfulness, whimsy, anarchic development and improvisation, which is resistant to rules and conventions of any sort.

Like much fiction of game, the work of the British writer Christine Brooke-Rose plays with the reader's habit of expectation. In Between² sentences develop syntactically in a conventional enough manner only for them to drift off into a different place and time, with meaning unrealised, cancelled, repeated and contradicted. The novelistic impulse is one of destruction, and it is this particular aspect of Christine Brooke-Rose's fiction which is central to her novel Thru. Thru utilises a high degree of iconic communication which relates to an extended game of mirrors and reflections, and beyond this to the idea of expression as violent exclusion:

the real theme in Thru is castration...The moment we utter a sentence, we're leaving out a lot... we are just taking bits and pieces of reality, which is what language does...The very act of using language is a castration³

Thru destroys itself as it goes along; yet it goes beyond the mere destruction of content as in Nabokov, for

example, where one is reminded of the novel as written through a series of foregrounded verbal incongruities. The destruction of language and illusionism in Thru allows a reformation of language as felt and seen. Neo-Modernist in inclination (Brooke-Rose is influenced by Pound's 'attempt to make everything cohere through juxtaposition')⁴ Brooke-Rose mobilises the fullest available textual tricks in order to hold language on the page; there are changes of type face and sizes, mirror language, Chinese calligrams, handwriting, concrete poems, lists, time tables; sentences are arranged in whirls and circles, are stretched and exploded. (see Appendix 1).

This extreme form of vitality at the level of textual structure is unusual, though not unique, and seems to represent the logical conclusion of that type of fiction which insists upon language as possessing an independent power of its own without expressing any pre-existing content. Such works bring to mind E. M. Forster's fear that if humanity is excluded from fiction, then 'little is left but a bunch of words',⁵ and in William H. Gass's Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, it is language which assumes the characteristics of character with the central personality stripped and drained to the bone of words. Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife 'takes art as its subject but tries to be its own subject',⁶ at the same time. Language narrates the work; there is no story, events described and statements made punctuate the act of

copulation, with changes in the colour of the paper the book is printed on, and typographic variation, indicating the vacillating mental conditions of Babs, the work's central 'character'.⁷

The ordering of the book follows the stages of sexual intercourse: the first section (printed originally on thin blue paper) suggests the slow beginning of love-making and Babs' low intensity of thought and response; the second, (olive coloured) section, marks rising excitement and wildly divergent thoughts; the third section is printed on red paper --representing sexual climax; the fourth and final section uses thick white art paper (paralleling Babs' empty, lonely feelings after sex and her realisation that the experience has been unsatisfactory and shallow). Reproduced photographs of a naked Babs illustrate the book: the first shows her, mouth open, about to take the erect phallic shape of the text; as the text progresses her face becomes less prominent, her body more so, suggesting her existence as merely a body to her sexual partner(s). Reproduced coffee stains, asterisk-splattered pages, elaborate reference to writers from Homer to Beckett, direct addresses (insults) to the reader, (see Appendix 2), all turn the text into an activity of the imagination which nevertheless makes the serious point that parallels should exist between a woman and her lover, between the work and the artist, between the book and the reader. Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife is an extraordinary game, but

even as the work allows the reader to penetrate its space, to fulfill the desires of artist (Gass) and character (Babs) in their own fashion, 'Gass remains in control--orchestrating language and graphics--of a purely formal fiction'.⁸

Threads of references (seen in both Brooke-Rose's and Gass's fiction) to other writers and other writing indicates the extent to which all texts are made up of other texts, are intertextual, a transformation of prior texts into 'new' forms of 'borrowed' expression. In Tom Phillips A Humument this 'borrowing' actually takes the form of re-working an existing work into something different. The work in question represents the 'collaboration between two ill-suited people seventy-five years apart':⁹ Phillips made a chance discovery of an 1892 edition of W. H. Mallock's novel A Human Document in a junkshop at a time when he was looking for a novel to 'treat' in the manner of Burroughs, and from this beginning proceeded to overlay the novel's original pages with a series of colourful patterns and shapes (impossible to reproduce here) which allow odd words and sentences to emerge in their original (albeit here fragmented) form. (See Appendix 3)

Though the book is a random arrangement there is a narrative coherence of sorts. A plot emerges with identifiable characters like 'toge' (who can only appear on those pages containing the words 'together' or 'altogether') and other characters similarly inhibited--ted wink, eve rant, alf chink and Grenville (retained from the original novel).

Irma (again an 'original') forms a relationship with toge who addresses to her his worries about his role as artist.

Phillips 'fits' style to the solution of each problem as it presents itself, and is therefore captive of a pre-created discourse, even as the writer probes for a satisfactory aesthetic form beneath a pre-arranged surface. In contrast to this, Kathy Acker's playful fiction is composed of obscene drawings, handwriting, foreign languages, maps relating to the passage of dreams, and concrete and conventionally structured poetry, none of which in any way gives the impression of anything but a totally improvised arrangement of diverse forms of female rage directed against the totalitarianism of contemporary society and its values. Blood and Guts in High School¹⁰ mixes eroticism with political statement, combining also with images drawn almost entirely from popular and youth culture. Unstructured to a degree unusual even by contemporary standards, Acker's fiction disrupts stable forms, meanings and institutions without--in common with much feminist 'post-political' radicalism--expressing a explicitly formulated political consciousness.

For Alan Burns, however, disruptive fiction counters what he sees as 'bourgeois art' and its 'self indulgence irrelevant to the struggle for social justice'.¹¹ His fifth novel Dreamerika! explores the process of manufacturing reality through cultural processes, especially the media

which is depicted as a medium of control and manipulation. The subjects of the book, the Kennedy family, are depicted through a Surrealist assemblage of hard fact, newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, and historical reference (see Appendix 4) - none of which is meant to crudely represent reality by 'producing images commensurate with a disturbed era' - since this 'after all, implies an Aristotelian view of the function of art'.¹² Intent rather upon representing an alternative version of art and history Burns, through intensely lively and visual effects, dislocates stable appearance and meaning in order to forge a realignment of standard responses.¹³

The most conventional and common fictional games and play are found in sports novels. No doubt the increased popularity of sports in terms of participation and as a spectacle go some way to accounting for this, while some critics suggest that hard competitive sport speaks directly to writers' and readers' experience of contemporary society. Whatever the reason, sports do provide a useful symbolic element for the writer and, of course, provides for plot, tension and excitement.

European fiction dealing with sports is not that common: Alan Sillitoe's 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' and Uwe Johnson's The Third Book About Achim are two of the better known examples, though in Britain there has been a recent upsurge in sports fiction written

by one-time professional sportsmen. However, it is in the United States that we find sport depicted in its widest variations. Bernard Malamud's The Natural (1952) contains realistic baseball scenes and combines this with psychological and social elements which shift the novel beyond sport itself; Don DeLillo's End Zone (1972) deals with American football and at a lower level touches upon nuclear warfare (though to this reader at least it is unclear whether DeLillo is suggesting parallels or mocking the propensity to draw such parallels).¹⁴

What may be called 'social games' appear to have been used less frequently in literature. Luke Rhinehart's The Dice Man is one notable exception, as are the novels of Nabokov in which chess is a recurring motif. The former work concerns a man's intention to counteract and transcend the atrophied form of singular life by running his affairs in accordance with the random fall of dice. The result is a 'Random Man', though not a random novel, since conventions of structure and texture are barely affected by a narrative formula which synthesizes the heterogeneous production of the narrator's multiple selves into a unified work.

Much more gamelike in every sense are the novels of Vladimir Nabokov. Disruptive yet controlled in a way that post-Modernist fiction is not, Nabokov claims that 'I alone am responsible for (the) stability and truth'¹⁵

of the world created in his fiction. Systems of mirrors, pattern, parallels, incest, multiplication and word play are the cognate centres of Nabokov's art which reflects not the world but the artist's ability and need to devise an imaginative reality of his own. Within this artistic vision chess itself provides an underlying metaphor and symbolic referent: King, Queen, Knave refers to a suit of cards but the primary devices of the book are based on chess; the title of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a chess allusion, and the intimation of master-play between two sets of truth runs through the story; in Bend Sinister the chess patterns are clearly distinguishable; the duel between Humbert Humbert and Quilty in Lolita is plotted in terms of a chess match whose stakes are death.

Nabokov's games go far beyond the use of social pastimes, however, and his fictions provide the most complex of 'games' in recent literature. Though it needs to be said at the outset that Nabokov often appears self-indulgent, his self-consciousness at its best appears entirely coincidental with his overall narrative structure and design. Nabokov exemplifies our third category of fictional games and play by an efficacious series of games which transform Realism's passive relationship with the reader into an activity of provocation paralleling his fiction's inherent tension between it and the world at large. In Pale Fire we are constantly reminded that fiction is made

of words and letters. The Goldsmiths, whose house Kinbote is renting, are seen by their tenant as an 'alphabetic family',¹⁶ with daughters named Alphina, Betty, Candida, Dee; Mrs. Shade suffers from an alphabetically determined allegory to foods beginning with the letter 'A'. In

Transparent Things Hugh Person thinks like a proof-reader:

He reflected...that preparing other people's books for publication was a debasing job...that he would have to consult an ophthalmologist sometime next month. He substituted an 'n' for the wrong letter and continued to scan the motley proof onto which the blackness of closed vision was now turning¹⁷

The structure of narrative matches time, and Nabokov desires very much to escape from time, to play games rendering history illusory and treacherous. Consequently, his fiction evades the compulsion of linearity and sequence by frequently swerving away from or even against narrative direction. Transparent Things contains at least three major instances of narrative diversion, the most startling being the history of a pencil discovered by Hugh Person in an hotel bedroom. Nabokov begins by revealing that it 'had been mislaid ten years ago by a carpenter',¹⁸ and then goes on to trace its making, right back to 'its presence in the log as we recognise the log in the tree and the tree in the forest and the forest in the world'.¹⁹ Thrown into reverse²⁰ the arrangements of history and fiction are shown to be arbitrary and tyrannical.

Contradiction in Nabokov takes the form of inviting

the reader to trust illusion (fiction itself) and then demolishing that illusion, usually by having the reader share his characters' surprise upon finding the unexpected. Albinus in Laughter in the Dark sees 'the edge of (Margot's) bright red frock'²¹ behind a bookstand in his library. Later, eagerly anticipating making love to her, he leaves his wife in the middle of the night, enters the library expecting Margot to be waiting, only to discover that what he thought to be a frock was 'only a scarlet silk cushion which he himself had brought there a few days ago to crouch on'.²² The reader's surprise is as great as Albinus' disappointment. Nabokov also sustains a presence in his own fiction. In Pale Fire: 'Gerald Emerald extended his hand--which at the moment of writing still remains in that position'.²³ In Transparent Things: 'With an oath and a sigh Hugh retraced his steps, which was once a trim metaphor'.²⁴ In Lolita: 'Then I pulled out my automatic-- I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it'.²⁵ Nabokov never, therefore, allows his readers 'to forget that he is the conjuror, the illusionist, the stage-manager, to whom his characters owe their existence',²⁶ and in proclaiming this he intends the independence of his art from all ideological and psychological generalities.

The activity of authorial emphasis has become something of a commonplace in contemporary innovative

fiction, and frequently assumes a more aggressive tone than we find in Nabokov, where a concern with artistic control disqualifies the writer from violating too radically the boundaries of conventional modes. Nabokov is always present in his own fiction but like Hitchcock's appearances in his own movies, the artistic presence is carefully balanced. In contrast, some writers reveal their authority and their character's 'freedom':

The fictional character has no right to address you, the reader, direct. Mine, not yours, is the God's eye view. There is but one of me and, hopefully, thousands of you²⁷

Others, compelled to write but impatient with the conventions, ask their readers for permission to take 'short cuts':

It is such a devastating bore to talk about Dick's young manhood that I beg the reader to indulge me, and allow me to get off the hook in this one instance²⁸

Comments on the discourse have been used for centuries, since Don Quixote for example, but there is a basic dichotomy between those comments which do undercut the fabric of the fiction and those which do not (broadly speaking, this dichotomy parallels the difference between authorial comment and the comments made by a narrator). Direct intrusion by an active, 'honest' author differs dramatically from the garrulousness of Trollope where the 'narrative' is never undercut'.²⁹ Both techniques, of course, depart from the rules laid down by Flaubert, James and Joyce which states

that the author 'must give the illusion that he does not even exist'.³⁰ This latter position expresses both a desire for purity and realism, and is seen at its most obvious in Joyce's mixing of naturalistic detail and Modernist devices.

If we examine other forms of authorial presence we also find examples which forestall the illusion and those which enhance it. Fake editorial comment will suggest on one level an agent beyond the author, while on the other hand, may destroy narrative illusion, or at least, seriously disrupt it. Narrating by footnotes, for example, in Marcel Aymé's Le Chemin des Écoliers and Joyce Carol Oates's Expensive People, reinforces the reader's trust in the work, as does, in a more oblique fashion, Borges's numerous scholarly footnotes to his own fictions. More obviously a matter of literary game-playing are Joyce's footnotes in Finnegans Wake. We read, 'Here are the cottage and the bungalow for the cobbeler and the brandnewburgher', followed by a footnote:

A viking vernacular expression still used in the Summerhill district for a jerryhatted man of forty who puts two fingers into his boiling soupplate and licks them in turn to find out if there is enough mushroom catsup in the mutton broth³¹

A comment by an artist in Sorrentino's Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things to the effect that, 'This is a strange time to be an artist' is footnoted thus:

That is, if they ever find out that you really are an artist, watch out³²

Different forms of editorial comment are found in works claiming to be 'found' or 'coming to hand'--Defoe's Moll Flanders, Sartre's Nausea, and more recently, Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose.³³ We find also novels and stories which take unusual non-fictional forms - Joyce Carol Oates's 'Notes on Contributors',³⁴ is composed solely of accounts of various characters in the manner of an editorial postscript; novels also of fictional book reviews of fictional novels - Stanislaw Lem's A Perfect Vacuum;³⁵ novels of criticism/fiction like Herbert Lindenberger's Saul's Fall;³⁶ Michael Schofield's Report of the Committee on the Operation of the Sexual Containment Act³⁷ is written entirely in the manner of a (fictional) report about (fictional) legislation; Stuart Evans's The Caves of Alienation³⁸ is a novel about the life and death of a modern (fictional) novelist told entirely through radio and T.V. scripts, extracts from his own writings and the recollections of friends and colleagues. The overall effect on the reader of these sort of hybrid forms is, in varying degrees, disorientating. Instead of the reader taking up:

a position in a well-framed realm, he finds that no particular frame is immediately applicable, or the frame that he thought was applicable no longer seems to be, or he cannot bind himself within the frame that does apparently apply³⁹

If the reader finds that these sort of works are unsettling because they disqualify location, it does not, however, necessarily follow that all forms of multi-levelled works

prove difficult to assimilate. The non-fiction novel is a case in point. Similarly, we can point to the murder mysteries composed by Dennis Wheatley and J. G. Links in the 1930s (and recently re-issued). The so-called 'Wheatley-Links Dossiers' contained unedited evidence of murders which the reader himself was supposed to solve, and while there has been a recent upsurge of similar works, the Wheatley-Links books went further by including cigarette ends, pills, photographs, letters, hair, matches, all presented in their actuality and not incorporated as written aspects of the books in question. Although readers were cast in the roles of producers rather than consumers, the failure of these texts to 'catch-on' would appear to have less to do with their innovative form than with their obvious status as games similar to the present-day 'Cluedo' and the prohibitive cost of producing them for the market.

The literature of game and play also includes works like Earl Rovit's Crossings⁴⁰ which can be read backwards or forwards; Frederick Barthelme's War and War⁴¹ which is a 'plan' of a proposed novel to be called War and War; Rayner Heppenstall's Two Moons⁴² in which one narrative is printed on all the book's left-hand pages, and a second narrative on all the right, so requiring that the novel should be read as two separate but uniform texts or read straight through as two parallel texts; Harry Mathews'

'Country Cooking from Central France: Roast Boned Rolled Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)',⁴³ a story about the preparation of a dish and about the process of story-telling; and Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style⁴⁴ (first published in 1947) which tells an everyday incident in ninety-nine different styles.

The shock destruction of expectation which comes with confronting contemporary works of game and play has the effect of discrediting the claims of fiction to provide an unmediated contact with the world: ultimately in their modern forms such writing is concerned with writing, with engaging its own fictivity, and it is this fictionalising of experience which is most characteristic of neo-Modernist writing in which everything is made fictional and perceived in terms of an aesthetic totality. Frequently the result is a novel within a novel (and even, within a novel, and so on).

Within the novel-within-the-novel game we can place André Gide's The Counterfeiters and Aldous Huxley's Point Counter Point, Flann O'Brien's At-Swim-Two-Birds and Miguel de Unamuno's Mist. More recent works written in this manner are Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook and Philip Roth's My Life As A Man. Julio Cortázar's 'Infinity of Parks'⁴⁵ regresses to infinity--a man returns to his mansion and starts reading a book about a man who returns to his mansion and starts reading a book about a

man who returns to his mansion...and so forth. In a similar vein is Italo Calvino's If On A Winter's Night A Traveller which begins, 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's novel, If on a winter's night a traveler'⁴⁶ (sic?). Works such as these frequently contain authors and characters who are eager to make comments on the discourse, and even characters who confront their creators. Keith Fort's 'The Coal Shoveller' begins:

The clock is ticking.
That's a poor beginning for my short story.
The trouble with 'clock' is that it symbolizes
time, and I don't want to introduce any big
ideas into my story. Besides, I actually have
an electric clock which whirrs⁴⁷

The story is full of such self-conscious devices and ends with the writer buying the coal shoveller a beer and trying at the same time to interest his character in the problems of writing and creating characters like the coal shoveller.

Such writing gives verbal games priority over any existence and experience outside of writing; novels do not imitate life, only other novels. In John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse' everything that the author and his character Ambrose touch turns to fiction: the tale tells very little but its own telling, though it contains the kernel of a commonplace story about Ambrose, his family and his friend's outing to Ocean City. The narrative is, however, continually interrupted by authorial comments

on the techniques of writing and the possibilities of the story's development, along with the writer's doubts about his ability to transcend the limits of fiction and its responsibilities to tell. Ambrose, like Barth, expresses the wish that he had never entered the funhouse of fiction. But he has, therefore, 'he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator--though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed'.⁴⁸

Through Barth's work is the feeling that forms and modes of literary expression have become exhausted and that self-renewal, revolution and a return to previous cycles of creativity are needed to propagate new growths. This view reverberates throughout his work where we find ourselves within structuralist-like systems of re-enactment, with the fictive nature of the past refurbishing the present. In LETTERS cycles and fertilization play a major role in the intertwined lives of the novel's principal plot. Barth's old characters reappear: Todd Andrews from The Floating Opera; Jacob Horner from End of the Road; Jerome Bray, seemingly descended from Harold Bray in Giles Goat-Boy; A. B. Cook, a composite man made up of Ebenezer Cook and Henry Burlingame from The Sot-Weed Factor; and Ambrose Mensch, now an avant-garde novelist, from 'Lost in the Funhouse'.

Along with their creator, all these characters reveal themselves to have been betrayed by language,

spoken and written. The issue is one of communicating: Lady A in LETTERS complains 'Words fail me', and the novel in its entirety expresses the concern that, like Pegasus in the 'Bellerophoniad' section of Chimera, writing will merely revolve 'in ever-decreasing circles like a moth around a candle' to finally 'disappear up (its) own fundaments'.⁴⁹ The problem, of course, for the neo-Modernist novelist like Barth, is that in imposing coherency and form on life which is no more than a fictional counterpart of art, his novels are about other novels, this in spite of Barth's considered opinion 'that art lives in human time and history'.⁵⁰

Since 'Lost in the Funhouse', Barth has been less obviously present in his own fiction, since, we may speculate, the desire to deconstruct has been gradually replaced by the desire to express the idea of fictivity purely through the novel's self-replication. It is this which divides Barth from a fellow neo-Modernist like Gilbert Sorrentino who wishes to improvise with the standard elements of discourse in order to reveal a quality which will perhaps suggest itself as the controlling idea behind the fact that he (Sorrentino) is behind it all:

In this book, I'll muddle around, flashes, glints, are what I want. It's when one is not staring that art works. In the middle of all the lists and facts, all the lies and borrowings, there will sometimes be a perfect revelation. These curious essences. The shape and weight of a sentence that lances you⁵¹

In Mulligan Stew Sorrentino prefaces the novel with a cluster of rejection letters; 'lifts' characters from works as diverse as Finnegans Wake, The Great Gatsby, Dashiell Hammett's The Glass Key, and Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds (a novel Sorrentino holds in special esteem); uses the novel-within-a-novel format with characters passing from one novel to another and who comment on their creator's (Anthony Lamont's) incompetence; incorporates baseball score-cards, book reviews, a play, letters, extensive lists, jokes and dialogues, innumerable allusions and psuedo-scientific pamphlets, and an hilarious parody of an obscene text.

Mulligan Stew deals with the comic possibilities of pushing the novel's devices to their (illogical) limits and then focussing on these devices within the book itself. Like the magician who reveals to the audience the way in which illusions are created, Sorrentino makes constant references to the comedy of the created act, to the experience of artfulness, which, as it touches upon social and cultural activity, turns this activity into fictions which sustain other fictions, and towards which writing turns its linguistic mirror. However, unlike Barth, who appears to claim for art a privileged status, Sorrentino is more concerned with the destruction of illusion through fiction through the destruction of fiction itself. His most innovative novels are dispersed across the contemporary

social and cultural landscape, drawing from the good and the excruciatingly bad alike and implicating even the contemporary avant-garde in the process of parody. His games are, therefore, ultimately 'serious': they proclaim a proper role for the artist and identify this role as one responsible to anti-illusionistic art and the revelation and overthrow of bad writing.

Post-Modernist fiction frequently exhibits qualities and characteristics similar to those of Modernist and neo-Modernist writing, though the primary difference is post-Modernism's willingness to engage with non-literary meaning systems and the corollary of this--the dispersal of 'meaning' across an infinity of possibilities. Contemporary playfulness, however, does sometimes contain a paradox: we have argued throughout that post-Modernist fiction is radically subversive of conventional assumptions and practices, yet the literary game-playing of novelists like Richard Brautigan, Tom Robbins and Bob Swigart has been comfortably assimilated, even as the game-playing of Steve Katz and Robert Coover has not. The three former writers trade heavily in undermining expectation, 'scandalise' by transgressing conventions and in doing so, appear to confirm the Freudian notion of humour being founded on an expectation not fulfilled and released through laughter.

As the popular writers like Brautigan surrealize the commonplace things and events of contemporary American

life they do so within Surrealism's system of reconciliations. Brautigan's technique, like that of Swigart and Robbins, relies on an 'innocent' style which is under threat of violation from offensive statements which divorce the usual pattern of connectiveness. At its least effective (in this instance the offender is Tom Robbins) the result is banal:

Wearing a yellow toga gathered at the waist with green scarabs, a garland of blue Japanese iris about her neck, her bubbling baby strapped to her back, Amanda would charge...through the meadows searching for rare moths. One lingering afternoon in spring she chanced upon a small band of gypsies camped beneath a willow tree...

Amanda asked 'Will you not reveal to me something of the nature of my true being?'

'What will you do for us in return?' the gypsies asked. Amanda lowered her long lashes and smiled sweetly. 'I will suck you off', she said⁵²

Here contradiction supposedly destroys relationships, though here and elsewhere in Robbins' fiction the subverting of conventional reference expresses the writer's desire to counter the over-rational with the magical and poetic and return man to his roots in nature. Contradiction and the stretching of metaphor is a vehicle for the writer's romanticism and his traditional American concern to locate man outside of society and history, but by relying almost exclusively on images drawn from popular sources contradiction becomes itself contradicted through recognition. The potentialities for estrangement are lost through Robbins' contexts which are easily renewable.

In Brautigan's fiction also, we find discordance breaking apart the familiar only for the displaced narrative

elements to become reassociated with prevailing mores and manners. Instead of metaphor remaining a partial, localised affair, however, as in Robbins, Brautigan in Trout Fishing in America conjures up a massive array of dissimilarities from the activating image of trout:

Silver is not a good adjective to describe what
I felt when he told me about trout fishing...
Maybe trout steel. Steel made from trout.
The clear snow-filled river acting as foundary
and heat.

Imagine Pittsburg.

A steel that comes from trout, used to make
buildings, trains and tunnels.

The Andrew Carnegie of Trout⁵³

Language here is not employed as an instrument of organisation (either the 'real' nature of things or the 'self-referring' energy of language), but refers only to the potentialities of released associations. For example, in the above quotation, Brautigan has cleverly reversed the usual metaphoric functions: 'trout' does not receive the image of steel as convention dictates, but transfers the trout image to steel. The result is the redefining of the dominant image (we could conceivably tolerate a 'steely trout' but have trouble with a 'trouty steelmill'). The choice of relationship is, however, far from arbitrary, since Brautigan directs our attention to an obtrusive conviction of his, namely, that a rampant materialism is the very thing threatening those trout-filled, snow-filled rivers. The expansion of 'trout', therefore, signals a social fact by proposing a reversal of social values and

practices through means of aesthetic counterstatement which tatters on the edge of a sentimental nostalgia for the good life before the 'fall'. Sometimes Brautigan proves embarrassingly sentimental:

Once...I had a vision of going over to the poor graveyard and gathering up grass and fruit jars and tin cans and markers and wilted flowers and bugs and weeds and clods and going home and putting a hook in a vice and tying a fly with all that stuff and then going outside and casting it up into the sky, watching it float over clouds and then into the evening star⁵⁴

Instead of the usual barrage of conflicting images which are unequally proportioned and hence out of reach of recuperative capacities, Brautigan's failure of imagination here allows an offensive reality to distort and drain the writer's ability to transcend that reality. Like much contemporary Surrealist-related writing, there is a sense of such writing remaining 'subservient to the actuality from which it draws its instigations and energies'.

In all of contemporary innovative fiction, there can be few more startling contrasts than that between those inheritors of Modernism, such as Gass and Barth, and writers of whimsical, sentimental fiction like Brautigan, Robbins, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr., all of whom are extremely popular writers claiming no special privileges for themselves as artists or for their work. Moreover, unlike Pynchon who has drawn upon a history of esoteric developments and forms for his models, Vonnegut in particular, has remained

faithful to the common fantasies and popular forms he has been exploiting over many years.

As Robert Scholes argues, 'Vonnegut is a literary Maverick, who runs with no pack'.⁵⁶ He is, by his own admission, 'an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls',⁵⁷ a 'barbarian, whose deepest cultural debts are to Laurel and Hardy, Stoopnagel and Bud, Buster Keaton, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Charlie Chaplin, Easy Aces, Henry Morgan, and on and on'.⁵⁸ Addressing the American Association of Physics Teachers, Vonnegut wondered 'what the use of any of the arts was with the possible exception of interior decoration'.⁵⁹

Vonnegut's narrative techniques echo those of post-Modernists generally. His fiction is sometimes illustrated with childish drawings which reinforce the writer's pose of utter simplicity and detachment, while at the same time confirming his defensiveness about the writer's artistic relevance; he writes frequently in short sentences, paragraphs and chapters, with events jumping backwards and forwards between past, present and future. Moreover, Vonnegut relieves the problem of seeming to reinforce a too concrete world by constant reminders that his fiction is invented:

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go'. He meant his brains.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book⁶⁰

Elsewhere, Vonnegut employs abrupt changes of recognition and comparison:

Dwayne's waitress at the Burger Chef was a seventeen-year-old white girl named Patty Keen. Her hair was yellow. Her eyes were blue. She was very old for a mammal⁶¹

Vonnegut, however, presents a message which is consistently moral: he proclaims, for instance, that we had 'better stop treating the planet as though it were... disposable',⁶² and while such sentiments duplicate those of Robbins and Brautigan, Vonnegut demands more serious attention for his toughness and scepticism. While rejecting western religion, with its insistence upon God's acts in history, and the novel, the western art form which more than any other finds its meaning in history, Vonnegut also 'indicates (any) proposed solution which may remain an ideal...as unworkable'.⁶³ Whereas Brautigan, for example, looks backwards towards a mythic America for his moral reference, Vonnegut is among those writers who 'reject all ethical absolutes':⁶⁴ in Vonnegut's fiction for 'every value there is an anti-value';⁶⁵ everything is a nightmare of meaninglessness without end, yet Vonnegut shows us the extent to which man insists upon meaning and significance - about patriotism he concludes that America was the only country 'with a national anthem which was gibberish sprinkled with question marks'.⁶⁶

Like the 'gamesmanship' of comparable literary figures like Robert Coover and Steve Katz, Vonnegut's

work poses a radical question to existing society precisely because it marks out the frontier beyond which it dare not go. Paradoxically, however, Vonnegut's fiction, unlike much of Coover's, and all of Katz's, does not dispel what Jean Ricardou calls 'narrative euphoria', even as narrative is subjected to serious disruption. Game playing in Vonnegut deconstructs a systematic logic yet can be located within an alternative system of meaning and identity. In contrast, Coover and Katz introduce irruptions of uncontrolled meaning whereby textuality asserts itself against any form of absolute constraint. Coover's and Katz's literary playfulness, for the most part, at least, contradicts history, art and system without dwelling over the need for a decipherable reading consistent with authorial intention. Stripped of recognition and telos an absence deconstructs that logic by which particular systems of thought, and behind these a whole system of human action, maintains its influence and authority.

CHAPTER THREE

Part One: Introduction

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CHAPTER THREE

Part Two: Robert Coover

The lived fictions post-Modernist writers reveal and contest are seen by such writers in a variety of lights and, therefore, are made accountable to the post-Modernist vision in different ways. The more aggressive of contemporary writers radically deconstructs the processes of harmony and stability and by doing so approximate a denial of cohesive and unifying agencies and methods. Those writers who present an essentially playful dimension through their work do, however, sometimes preserve a shadow of a diminished coherent substance which may be mistaken for the project of literary unification and as an investment in pre-post-Modernist systems. Robert Coover is a notable example of a post-Modernist writer too easily dismissed by writers and critics sympathetic to post-Modernism because his methods are primarily those of the writer willing to utilise and test restorative systems of thought and narrative in order to transcend such limiting orders: his writing is consequently often mistaken for that of a Modernism brought up-to-date. While admitting his admiration for Coover, Ronald Sukenick, for example, distances himself from Coover's perceived mythic

impulse. For Sukenick, many writers are merely engaged in 'constructing myths...like, Coover seems to be interested in myths...and Joyce obviously. I'm not interested in that'.¹

Essentially, of course, Coover is concerned with well-used techniques and subject matter, but uses conventions to reveal conventions, not as a part of his own aesthetic grand-design. Coover works within the compass of myth because he acknowledges the need of man for transcendental reference, a need which, for Coover, renders rational analysis of this aspect of human experience somewhat superfluous:

The crucial beliefs of people are mythic in nature; whether at the level of the Cinderella story or of the Resurrection, the language is mythopoeic rather than rational. To try to apply reason to such beliefs is like trying to solve a physics problem by psychoanalysis²

Elsewhere, Coover states that 'fiction, myth...are necessary things. I'm not against them',³ but goes on to express the feeling that writing has two purposes:

On the one hand it draws into itself what seem to be the truths of the world at any given moment, and on the other, it struggles against the falsehoods, dogmas, confusions, all the old debris of the dead fictions⁴

Cervantes remains an important figure for Coover because he was able to help man discover truth through narrative fiction and so challenge the assumptions of decaying ideas and forms of expression made obsolete by changing priorities. For Coover, Cervantes' stories:

exemplified the dual nature of all good narrative art: they struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life and sought to synthesize the unsynthesizable, sallied forth against adolescent thought-modes and exhausted art form, and returned home with new complexities⁵

Although we may sometimes find Coover 'to be immersed in the very myth of Logos from which he takes pains to extricate himself',⁶ in the very Informing ideas he finds inhibiting and exhausted, he, nevertheless, does in his most successful fiction, carry through his intention of transforming without reconstituting the forms of human belief and expression in a way which does not allow for any ultimate system of thought and expression to be recreated. He is one of the most interesting of post-Modernist writers because he is willing to negotiate the narrow and constantly shifting path between order and disorder in a way which reveals the paradox of the creative act which is, by its very nature, concerned with shaping and ordering, albeit in post-Modernism in a very disruptive and disorientating fashion.

It is characteristic of Coover that he should test his aesthetic judgement of the nature of narrative by writing his first full length work of fiction in relatively conventional form. He thought of this novel in terms of 'paying dues' and confesses that 'I didn't feel I had the right to move into more presumptuous fictions until I could prove I could handle the form'⁷ - though he goes on to admit that the 'basic concerns that are in everything I

write are...in that book'.⁸ The concerns of this novel, The Origin of the Brunists' (1966), focus on the variety of fiction-making impulses in men and while primarily concerned with religious attitudes the novel's concerns range across all systems of total explanation. Religion is shown as a complex, mythologically-based fiction created out of the need of order and explanation. Alongside this view is the parallel one of history as similarly fictional in basis, a useful metaphor devised by system-seeking men like Ben Woznik, who in the novel is described as a man of 'common-sense', who believes 'where there's an effect, there's a cause'.⁹

In part, based upon an actual mining disaster, the novel is built around an accident which kills ninety-seven men in a small American town. One of the survivors is Giovanni Bruno who becomes the centre of a religious cult which springs up as a direct result of the accident and the subsequent requirement of an explanation of the event; the cult's members (Brunists), fearful of meaninglessness, also 'crave signs, a pattern, a mystery that exalts them in their own minds in compensation for their dreary lives'.¹⁰ Their cause attracts answer-demanding cranks like Ralph Himebaugh who keeps records of disasters and tragedies, and who believes that the mine disaster:

provided him...some vital urgent message...The number ninety-seven, the number of the dead, was itself unbelievably relevant. Not only did it

take its place almost perfectly in the concatenation of disaster figures he had been recording, but it contained internal mysteries as well: nine, after all, was the number of the mine itself, and seven, pregnant integer out of all divination, was the number of trapped miners. The number between nine and seven, eight, was the date of the explosion, and the day of the rescue was eleven, two one's, or two, the difference between nine and seven. Nine and seven added to sixteen, whose parts, one and six, again added to...seven!¹¹

The belief that numbers contain messages of eternal order and pattern is one that appears throughout Coover's fiction, especially in the Universal Baseball Association, Inc.: J. Henry Waugh, PROP., but also notably in The Public Burning. In The Origin of the Brunists an obsession with numbers indicates (as always in Coover's fiction) man's desire for a structuring system to make sense of the inexplicable and of life in general.

The rules of the cult's 'game' are rules erected upon the foundations of chance, but the mind which makes 'cosmic events out of a casual gesture or a cloud's idle passage'¹² is unable to withstand the impulse to structure and, therefore, synthesize events into an eternity of significance. Just as pure play becomes transformed into structured games and activities - the developing mind seizes upon perceived regularities and patterns in order to engage with experience - so the Brunists exhibit signs of an increasing need of explanation as developing imaginations outstrip reality's capacity for providing evidence of divine presence. The result is obsession amplified into the breakdown of order,

which Coover signifies both through the novel's plot and through its structure: the novel's basically Naturalistic dimension is finally dispelled by a concluding distortion which carries the novel's moral and social perspectives into its internal design--something which points towards Coover's second full-length work of fiction, The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.: J. Henry Waugh, PROP. (UBA).

The paradox of system-building becoming overdetermined to the point at which system gives way to non-system, to chaos, is a paradox which satisfies Coover sufficiently for him to place it at the core of all his longer fiction. He shows the imagination in need of structure, but shows structure as generative of its own imaginative substance and, therefore, destructive of the fine dividing line between a need of structure and an obsession with structure. Order and pattern in Coover are always shown, potentially at least, to pose a threat to reality by prescribing their priorities over the priorities of the world against which they continually press. In UBA we witness a man erecting a private system of coherence which refuses to remain subservient to the world to which it refers and which assumes the characteristics of a destructive, eternal idea transcending the conditions of its origin.

UBA tells of Henry Waugh, a fiftyish accountant obsessed with a baseball game he has devised and which he continually plays to the detriment of his job and his social

life. In the game eight teams play out seasons through the offices of three dice, with the fall of the dice determining the development of the game. Waugh keeps records of each game played, compiles ledgers, composes interviews with invented baseball personalities, writes songs and obituaries, outlines the history of the league's politics, invents names and develops the family backgrounds of the league's players. Each of Henry Waugh's players has individual traits; and Waugh invents supporting personalities--managers, reporters, famous old players and political leaders. Every conceivable event possible to take place during a game is allowed for by Waugh's complex system of reference and cross-reference, charts and records. Waugh's system provides a fictional point of interest and orientation in a world of boredom, meaninglessness and threat. He finds no outlet through his job, and moves within a tiny social circle, going from his apartment to the office to a local bar, and back again to his apartment. As proprietor of the U.B.A., however, Henry transcends the limitations imposed by everyday reality: no longer insignificant, Henry has power, commands respect and belongs to a community surrounded as he is by his fictional friends and adversaries.

The bare outline of the novel suggests it to be merely an ingenious allegory with Henry cast as God, a study of a mind losing its grip on reality, or a comment on the

shifting nature of illusion and reality. But Coover's perspective is one which repudiates levels of expression which arrest the play of meaning. 'Writerly' in only a limited sense (at least, by post-Modernist standards) U.B.A., nevertheless, exposes experience's fictional basis through the interplay of divergent orders of expression and understanding. The novel opens with what seems at first to be a real baseball game with Henry in the role of spectator observing not only the game but the peripheral activities of fellow spectators: he sees 'beers bought and drunk, hot dogs eaten, timeless gesture passed'.¹³ Already, Coover has committed Henry to an entirely fictional world of Henry's making. Noise, smells, rituals, history crowd the novel's opening pages - until Henry is forced by hunger and thirst to leave the game and his apartment. The game, however, is not left behind: it demands to be sustained. In a delicatessen, Henry considers using the name of the boy who serves him:

Ben Diskin, solid name for an outfielder, there was a certain power in it, but Benny spoiled it. A good boy, but nothing there¹⁴

Reality does not match up to the perfection demanded by Henry and by the game. Names must be just right in order to breathe life into fantasy; like the Realistic novelist, Henry requires his imaginary construct to be entirely appropriate and consistent; nothing must jar or

disturb the cohesiveness of an alternative world existing alongside that towards which it gestures. As numbers (dice) generate the magic of Henry's fictional world through an exactitude language cannot match, so names are made to approximate the mono-referentiality of the numbers Henry lives amongst. Yet, in populating his fictional world with individuals created by names, so through the act of naming Henry releases a dynamic process:

Names had to be chosen...that could bear the whole weight of perpetuity...call Player A 'Sycamore Flynn' or 'Melbourne Trench' and something starts to happen. He shrinks or grows, stretches out or puts on muscle¹⁵

However, for Henry reality not only fuels the imagination, it is shaped by the imagination also: a bartender named Pete becomes the embodiment of Jake Bradley, a former Association great, and, on the death of Jake, Henry is no longer able to use Pete's bar. A walk home in the rain is translated by Henry into a sporting occasion:

The rain tumbled like gentle applause on his umbrella. Under it he walked, skirting the puddles, dry in the deluge, as though glassed in under a peaked black dome. Hunched-up cars pushed through the streets like angry defeated ballplayers...A policeman in a slicker stood stoically in the thick of the traffic, blowing his whistle and jerking his arms like a base coach urging a runner on. The light changed to green and Henry crossed over to his bus stop. Green. Slicker. Cop. Copper Greene. Might try it. Have to jot it down when he got home¹⁶

Henry's real life becomes increasingly subject to the requirements of fictional structures: the game of

baseball and his own self-constructed hero Damon Rutherford even provide the means of transcending the 'secularity' of the sexual act. In almost all cases, Coover shows the sexual act as necessarily provoked and sustained by the provocations of fantasy and even the presence, or near presence, of death. In U.B.A. sex with Hettie the bar girl is, for Henry, possible only through the intercedence of Henry's fictional world. Henry becomes Damon, intercourse is a ball game:

'Damon', she whispered, unbuckling his pants, pulling his shirt out...and that girl, with one swing, he knew then, could bang a pitch clean out of the park. '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, and then...pushing and pulling they ran the bases, pounded into first, slid into second heels high, somersaulted over third, shot home standing up, and then into the box once more, swing away, and run them all again, and 'Damon!' she cried, and 'Damon!'¹⁷

Here, Coover's word play reminds us that just as Henry is the Lord of his game, Coover himself is the manipulating god-life figure behind Henry and the world of U.B.A. Coover is playing with Henry, numbers, myths and language, and by so doing directly challenges the reader's tendency 'to dichotomize play and seriousness, game and reality, by portraying a game-world which becomes increasingly integrative and whole'.¹⁸ The book's playfulness shatters the notion that reality can be played out against a background which remains stable and fixed and suggests the obsession of Henry

as being an elaborate but playful response to a world given over to the banalities of existence. Moreover, as Henry attempts to contact the natural world when buying a wreath he discovers a florist shop selling only plastic flowers. For Henry, his own created world is more 'natural' than the world he confronts outside of his game - Henry seems to embody the need of Nietzschean man who lacks a system of interconnected myths and who, instead, dwells among his private systems divorced from collective recognition and indulgence. Without a recognisable mythic authority to which he can pledge allegiance, Henry has made his own truth out of baseball, statistics and history, and this system closely resembles those other systems of modern man, religion, art, history and science. For Henry, numbers and history are inseparable, since without numbers history is impossible. Both provide systems of stability, hence Henry's unease at the thought of the Association's 'history' before Henry created history through the role of dice. A history not under Henry's control is suspect; only the dice can be relied upon to tell the truth, to create continuity and perfect equilibrium, but in needing to believe and actually believing in the fiction he creates Henry is himself subject to the influence of the random fall of the dice upon his kitchen table.

A number of fortunate throws of the dice enable Damon Rutherford to throw a perfect game (twenty-seven straight

outs), but this is quickly cancelled when Rutherford is killed by a ball pitched by Jock Casey. At this totally unexpected event Henry's world virtually collapses since Henry's commitment to Damon goes beyond Henry's normal identification with his fictional players. The name Rutherford carries history: his father Brock was himself once a great player in Henry's scheme of things, and Damon's success 'showed Henry a pattern of birth and rebirth',¹⁹ a cherished continuity of the game out of the past and into the future. Brock is also the same age as Henry (fifty-six) and their mutual investment in the Association is underlined by the fact that the Association is in its fifty-sixth season. In fact, Henry's affection towards Damon is fatherly: if Henry's power is God-like, Damon becomes the son of God, struck down and henceforth 'divine'.

Henry's response to Damon's death is not that of a detached observer but someone for whom the world of game and play has assumed the dimensions and characteristics of the real world. He vows revenge on Casey, a figure who comes increasingly to haunt Henry's imagination and around whom Henry creates an aura of rebelliousness and defiance. Retribution does not come from the dice however: no matter how Henry tries to 'fix' Casey's performances, Casey continues to win games. Casey is the embodiment of evil loosed onto the game; chaos rules as Henry feels increasingly that he is losing control, and in an attempt to infuse new

life and meaning into the game, Henry attempts to share it with his friend Lou Engel. The result is not a restoration of order, but the proliferation of chaos as Lou fails to understand the games deeper significancies and implications, and finally spills beer over the Association and its records.

After Lou leaves, Henry cheats by changing the fall of the dice to read 6-6-6, so bringing into play the event which kills Casey--a line drive by Royce Ingram. At this point, 'Henry is once more caught up in the game as his primary reality, for ever':²⁰ by controlling the dice rather than submitting to them, Henry is in a sense following Lou's advice to Henry to 'restore some order to his life',²¹ but the restoration of order in this way represents a 'deliberate leap into ritual',²² and the self-sufficiency and completeness of Henry's Association is emphasized suddenly in a more dramatic fashion. In the novel's final chapter, the tragic deaths of Rutherford and Casey are translated into ritualistic re-enactments of their confrontation as ball players. Paradoxically, Henry's assertion of his control over the game's events has established the game as the primary event, at the expense of Henry's personality, and the world of the Association attains a separate ontological status. The real world disappears, and we witness the mythic condensation of the deaths of Rutherford and Casey into a single game.

The game and the playing of the game has gained so much authority and privilege that its reality becomes representative of the real, with Henry nowhere to be seen, felt or experienced: the only world that exists is the one that has been imaginatively constructed, and this world is so autonomous that the Association's players now try to distinguish between their reality and the ritual they are involved in. As with all myths, the need for order has generated its own truths through mythic structure without preserving a necessary obligation to truth. Truth, indeed, cannot be considered since myth disqualifies any objective assessment of its conditions: 'in the end, you can never prove a thing'.²³

Coover's characters seek meaning in four basic areas: religion, game, magic, and political or social myths. None of these areas are, however, exclusive and sometimes Coover will specifically relate a meaning system to spectacle or entertainment. The Brunist's moment of collective realisation becomes a violent, hysterical public outburst; in U.B.A. Henry's fantasy world is paralleled by that of Lou who interrupts their game with accounts of the latest film he has seen; many of Coover's short fictions focus on various aspects of show business. The distortion of reality seems at times in Coover's fiction to bear directly upon certain manifestations of collective and public interest and obsession. Such occasions are fictional in as

far as they provide recognitions for spectators and participants alike, which enables reality to be bracketed, at times to be preferred, to a reality which is referred to but which, in Coover, cannot be traced to a pristine and original point. Indeed, Coover's only sense of priority is as an artist who must, 'weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies'.²⁴

Traditionally the novelist and critic has adopted a highly deferential view of history and while the novelist has, as Coover puts it, tended towards scepticism rather than confirmation, the critic has usually taken the view that 'the one thing (the novel) ultimately cannot dispense with is history'.²⁵ All this merely confirms, however, that:

the great majority of critics still operate as if articulated forms of life or reality or history were uncontaminated by human contrivance²⁶

Indeed, one of the most persistent objections to contemporary innovative fiction is its refusal to take history as a process of natural development which reveals eternal truths about the human condition. In its many guises, contemporary fiction frequently dispenses with the 'facts' in order to imaginatively reconstruct the past. For E. L. Doctorow, 'history is a kind of fiction',²⁷ a sentiment which registers the contemporary 'sense of history as symmetrically indifferent pointlessness',²⁸ but only in as far as it is seen to present no necessary

truths above and beyond human interpretation. It is more to the point to see the contemporary 'de-historicizing of history',²⁹ firstly as entirely consistent with the modern novel's displacement of Realistic premises, and, in the case of post-Modernism in particular, as illustrative of how man imposes order, continuity and unity upon discontinuity by inventing history and individual truth to suit the requirements of consciousness and ideology.

As an example of man's invention of the past, Robert Coover's The Public Burning has provoked considerable critical hostility, since the novel is creative of the American scene of the early fifties, of the government, the entertainment world, the world of newspapers, radio, and cultural extravagance. The novel tells us that to live we choose whatever fictions best suit our perceptions and sensations, and in choosing we reject as fictional that which does not accord with the mythic patterns we call 'fact'. Though the past supplies the novel with its structure, this structure becomes so deconstructed as to reveal a view of history as a concatenation of planless incidents. Basic facts are, though, left intact: we follow the arrest, trial, imprisonment and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for allegedly betraying America's atomic secrets to the Soviet Union; the character of Richard Nixon figures largely in this episode (Nixon narrates most of the novel); the novel is packed with

the actualities of the period such as items of news from around the world. Coover brilliantly conveys, moreover, the sense of American insecurity posing as strength under the pressures of political and social upheavels around the time of the Korean War.

For the first time in his longer fiction, we see Coover in The Public Burning employing a high degree of formal disruption. Here, as in all of his work, language does not refer to a fixed set of meanings behind which lies a central unifying order, but in The Public Burning an emphasis falls primarily upon meaning as construction through public discourse, especially language and the grammar of the media. It is this fact which most affects Richard Nixon in the novel:

What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought³⁰

In The Public Burning Coover 'plays with the many possibilities and alternatives contained within language and narrative structures',³¹ and by spectacularly distorting actual events and personalities of the MacCarthy era encourages a critical reading of narrative and helps demystify the myths of politics and history which owe their origins to a large extent to the written word. By his use of radio scripts, dramatic dialogues, and a visionary monologue, Coover forces an assessment of narrative fiction

as created artifact which draws from diverse sources and spreads its influence far beyond mere literature alone. Exaggeration and excess becomes amplified by a constant use of theatrical and show business language, images, and references: in order to show 'how mythic reinforcement works',³² Coover stresses many of his characters' involvement in amateur dramatics; the final execution is turned into a kind of circus event orchestrated by Cecil B. de Mill ; and there are numerous references to the movies and sports. In addition, many of the novel's characters adopt a style of language more suited to comic strips than to serious fiction. Uncle Sam boasts:

I am Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler--I can ride on a flash of lightnin', catch a thunerbolt in my fist, swaller niggers whole, raw or cooked, slip without a scratch down a honey locust, whup my weight in wildcats and redcoats, squeeze blood out of a turnip and cold cash out of a parson, and out-inscrutabullize the heathen Chinees³³

In The Public Burning all forms of human activity and belief are depicted as highly ritualised, so keeping alive fears and ideas contained within mythic and historical forms. Over and over again, Coover makes the point that myth and history are somehow legitimated through being recorded and repeated. Patterns are made 'obvious' and evident of conspiracy which is itself shown to be no more than the ritualistic response to insecurity and uncertainty. Again in Coover, numbers are felt to possess

the quality of magic and to provide evidence (if the code could be cracked) of eternal significance--for good or bad:

Indonesian terrorists kill 60 villagers and burn 800 homes in a raid on 4 villages...leaving 3500 homeless. U.S. casualties in Korea shoot up to 136,029, while at home 305 new polio cases are reported for the week, bringing the year's total to 3124. These numbers rattle through the streets like apocalyptic codes, signals of some numerological conundrum, resolving itself toward catastrophe³⁴

The Phantom (Communism) is felt to be at work everywhere, in America (the Rosenbergs are its agents, but only two of many at work) and throughout the world:

a U.N. effort to retake Christmas Hill is repulsed by the Phantom's hyped-up forces. Two hundred Indian fishermen are reported missing forty miles off Madras in the Bay of Bengal. Officers sift through the ashes of the fire in Whittier, Alaska³⁵

The Phantom infects everything and there is, for Uncle Sam, no end to the Phantom's nefariousness:

he's...the maker a deserts and the wall-eyed harbinger a deevastation whose known rule a warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions! the Hog-Eye Man! the arch-degenerate! alien to us in ever' way...Why, even our decision to burn them two lefties in Times Square mought not be ours at all, but his!³⁶

The American system opposes 'the predestined structure, social engineering'³⁷ by the American capitalist way which looks 'for what works in an essentially open-ended situation',³⁸ but as Richard Nixon is fully alive to the Phantom's insistence upon the truth of historical human purpose he is, at the same time, captive of the idea of conspiracy and of an ambition of control. Nixon may be a comic, pathetic figure in the

novel but he does have doubts, and in a novel structured by the dominant idea of a potentially dominant idea becoming translated into reality, Nixon's doubts, it would seem are, within the overall design of the novel, a contributing factor to his ridiculousness. Doubt, to some extent, redeems Nixon, but fear and the need for certainty finally damns him:

I loved to debate both sides of any issue, but thinking about that strange space in between made me sweat. Paradox was the one thing I hated more than psychiatrists and lady journalists. Fortunately, I knew, I'd forget most of this--these errant insights always fled and something more solid, more legal, sooner or later took over³⁹

The much vaunted American open-endedness is revealed as a sham. The paranoia of Cold War America insists upon a vision of infiltration and take-over which is the mirror image of Communist determinism and belief in the inevitability of historic forces prevailing over the forces of reaction. America cherishes its myths, just as does the Phantom, and man, Coover insists, is locked in ideas and beliefs which are ultimately of a transcendental nature. Far from Coover sensing 'an order beyond fiction and beyond phenomena, which may be discovered',⁴⁰ Coover's focus is directed upon any system of ultimate authority, and as a consequence the writer's emphasis falls upon 'accidental selection, reasonless reasons and displacement rather than logic'.⁴¹ Using The New York Times as his metaphor, Coover inflates an idea into the shape of human history:

Design as a game. Randomness as design.
Design ironically revealing randomness.
Arbitrariness as a principle, allowing us
to laugh at the tragic. As in dreams,
there is an impressive amount of condensation
on the one hand, elaboration on the other.
Logical relationships are repressed, but
reappear through displacement⁴²

Scattered across the paper's reports from all around the world is the shape of history. From contradictory and fragmented pieces of information history emerges, distorted, suppressed, and selected, events mixed in with advertisements, features and reviews, and an overall sense of non-structure and lack of significant meaning, all of which assumes the appearance of significance only through the process of recording. The Times is a metaphor for recorded history which Coover 'appears to view...as a totally aleatory and virtually irrelevant phenomenon'.⁴³ All man finally has are the consolations of fiction which provides the sustaining structures of life and enables meaning and significance to emerge from history and lived experience.

In his shorter fictions, Coover also concentrates closely upon the processes of fiction but tends to focus upon specific mythical systems in isolation - literature, media and entertainment, in particular. Coover has expressed the belief that, the 'world itself being a construct of fictions...the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can re-form our notions of things',⁴⁴ and in the collection of works which make up

Pricksongs and Descants Coover admits that he 'wrote not knowing at all what I was doing...It was hit or miss'.⁴⁵ Improvisation, the lack of any prearranged structure, in almost all the stories in the collection underlines the arbitrariness of man's fabricated patterns and the writer's need to confront these patterns in order to breathe new life into obsolete and, therefore, frequently pernicious forms.

Life for Coover is largely a matter of story and there is ample evidence that he believes that the stock of stories or other myth systems no longer function in the beneficial way they once did. The imagination, Coover would say, has become debilitated and perverted by adherence to essentially anti-imaginative constructs which merely satisfy the craving for pattern and meaning without provoking new responses to life. Conscious as he is of his position as an artist, Coover's sensitivity to the requirements and expectations of his audience and, at the same time, of the need to preserve his integrity as an innovative writer, leads him to dwell in his fiction upon the nature of public demand and the extent to which this demand is reflective of the need of explanation and meaning through diversion and play.

Existing themselves at some distance from their creator's playful forms, Coover's characters, especially in his short fiction, frequently demand to be entertained out of their uncertainty and doubt, and require distraction

even to the point of death. The public burning of the scapegoats Rosenbergs is, of course, a prime example of this, but in Coover's short works the crowd is depicted as being equally demanding. The games they play, or are spectators of, do not refuse outcome or consolation, but fall short of genuine playfulness by being savagely insistent upon ultimate outcomes--even as these routines are quickly tired of and hence require more and more embellishment in order to satisfy the insatiable appetites of the contemporary audience. In 'Klee Dead', Klee's spectacular end is adjudged to be 'Pretty dull stuff. Hardly the kind of show to keep crowds about, especially when there's a circus in town'.⁴⁶ Similarly flattened--this time by a truck--Paul in 'A Pedestrian Accident' lies surrounded by people who adopt various attitudes towards the victim, though outright sympathy seems foreign to their collective natures:

On some faces Paul saw compassion, or at least a neutral curiosity, an idle amusement, but on most he saw reproach. There were those who winced on witnessing his state and seemed to understand, but there were others--a majority--who jeered⁴⁷

Some of the crowd approach Paul only in order to 'dip their hands in the mutilations'⁴⁸ and to satisfy themselves of the victim's sufferings. The tragedy lacks sufficient theatre, and the crowd turn instead to the bawdy Mrs. Grundy who appears on the scene with jokes and a story and who improvises a double act with the policeman at the scene of the accident.

Coover occasionally relates the audience's never ending need of novelty and meaningful diversion to that of the artist who suffers in the cause of satisfying these needs. Dominated by his audience, the artist sacrifices his integrity and loses his creative impulse. In 'The Hat Act', Coover's magician begins by dealing in conventional magic: he plucks a rabbit from a hat and is applauded by the audience, but when the trick is repeated the audience's response is silence. Not until the magician pulls a stream of rabbits from the hat is the audience's interest rekindled. The magician is provoked by his desire to please into performing increasingly incredible tricks, and in order to continue to astonish and please those who sit in judgement upon his skills, the magician is forced into excess: unable to extricate his assistant who he has stuffed into the hat, the magician in a rage stamps on the hat and kills her. Also at the end of 'Panel Game', public death is the price paid for failure. In this story an Unwilling Participant is dragged from the audience of a television show to join the show's panel, Aged Clown, Lovely Lady and Mr. America—and a Moderator who urges the Unwilling Participant to express the nature of the show itself, which is about truth and about the understanding of truth through language. Urged on by a howling audience, Aged Clown cues the Unwilling Participant who begins from the word 'stickleback':

So think. Stickleback. Freshwater fish.
Freshwater fish: green seaman. Seaman:
semen. Yes, but green: raw? spoiled?
vigorous? Stickle: stubble. Or maybe
scruple. Back: Bach: Bacchus: baccate:
berry. Raw berry? Strawberry? Maybe.
Sticky berry in the raw? In the raw: bare.
Bare berry: beriberi. Also bearberry, the
dog rose, dogberry. Dogberry: the constable,
yes, right, the constable in...what? Comedy
of Errors! Yes! No!⁴⁹

While the Unwilling Participant asks himself 'what does
it mean? what does it mean?'⁵⁰ the Moderator reveals the
nature of the show as 'Inflexibly same and the lex of the
game!'⁵¹ and goes on:

'Come, come, sir!...You must have contrived some
concrete conjunctions from the incontrovertible
commentary qua commentary just so conspicuously
constituted'⁵²

For the audience who greet this with wild applause,
the other panelists and the Moderator himself, language
is a game possessing finite qualities embodying the very
stuff of reality itself and solely subject to the dictates
of mass entertainment. Language is depicted as serving
the media's crass regard for money and diversion, while
the Unwilling Participant, revealed as a writer, or at
least having a literary awareness, remains mute throughout
and, therefore, a reproach to the merchants of the word.
Possessed of too fine a perception of truth - a truth
which resists exactitude and easy consolation - the
Unwilling Participant feels a responsibility to language
which disqualifies him from participation and salvation.

Escorted to the gallows for having failed, the Unwilling Participant discovers the man at his elbow is not Mr. America at all but Mr. Amentia.

Unlike a writer like John Barth who concentrates largely on the notion of literary exhaustion, Coover insists instead upon a general loss of reality which impinges upon an entirety of contemporary values. The narrator of 'Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady' perceives that man is no longer satisfied by the simple deviations:

We go to the circus to see the Fat Lady and the Thin Man, and though warmed by them, perhaps even amused and incited by them still, we nevertheless return home somehow dissatisfied. Fat, yes, the Fattest, and Thin--but what is it? Maybe only that, as always, they are ludicrous, and that now, having gone to such lengths to unite them, we are irritated to discover their limits, to find that the Ludicrous is not also Beautiful...Well, let us admit it, perhaps it is ourselves who are corrupted. Perhaps we have seen or been too many Ringmasters, watched too many parades, safely witnessed too many thrills, counted through too many books. Maybe it's just that we've lost a taste for the simple in a world perplexingly simple⁵³

The world, simple as it is, nevertheless, presents a sense of strangeness and perplexity which encourages the creation of systems of meaning and understanding which are essentially departures from life. Coover's task is, therefore, one of helping his audience regain a sense of wonder and simplicity from simple tales which explore the origins of meaning and myth. The very banality and

sinister nature of contemporary cultural and linguistic systems provoke Coover into reworking and exploding traditional stories so that we are forced to confront the human implications of those narratives which have sustained us and perverted us. Coover concentrates notably on Hanzel and Gretel in 'The Gingerbread House', the myth of the Flood and Noah in 'The Brother', and Virgin Birth in 'J's Marriage', all stories retold and reworked so that we may begin to understand the nature of the interaction between men and their culture, the collective discourse, and the totalization of meaning systems which distorts the potentially liberating nature of the imaginative engagement with the 'real'.

While Coover shows the imagination acting on the world it is never wholly of the world since the creations it throws up interact with environment to create a fictional sphere which exists between the two closely related realms of the poetic imagination and literal history. Narrative is, however, for Coover, one of man's myths, necessary as Coover's sees it, but no doubt fictional, and, therefore, to be continually registered as a storified version of man's history and experience. Coover's story 'The Magic Poker' opens with the admission of the story's narrator that 'I wander the island, inventing it'⁵⁴ and follows with another admission that within the framework of the story 'anything can happen'.⁵⁵ The magic poker which is discovered on the island by the two visitors is the potentially entrapping

symbol confining the visitors, the narrator and the reader to the limits imposed by the symbolic resonance of the poker placed in the grass by the narrator. The narrator's confession that it was he who put the poker in the grass amplifies discordant structure into story, and confession and symbolic reference are continually counterpoised by the authorial emphasis upon the undesirability of fixture. The story 'generates schemes of consciousness that invariably fail to be conclusive',⁵⁶ and as the symbol and the act of creation (fiction) become dispersed without any reconstituting priorities asserting themselves, the story reactivates recognitions suppressed by a deadened and deadening imagination. Myth and fairytale become a playground of distraction from the pieties of cultural forms, with the traditional test/measure of worth or suitability made more suitable to our understanding:

Once upon a time there was a beautiful young Princess in tight gold pants, so very tight in fact that no one could remove them from her. Knights came from far and wide, and they huffed and they puffed, and they grunted and they groaned, but the pants would not come down⁵⁷

In this story it is the beast who gets the prize by getting the Princess' pants down with the help of the magic poker. The beast is, however, filled by a knight who is then reprimanded by the Princess' father for having made the Princess a widow. The original story has gone wrong: invention has given way to invention and playfulness, with the basic elements of telling re-cycled as new fabrications,

new systems of imaginative ordering.

The thesis that there is 'a correspondence between the structuring codes of television and some of the routes travelled recently by writers in retreat from realism'⁵⁸ is a familiar one, and a valid one also up to a point. Like the movies, television does provide fiction with sufficient provocations, but post-Modernist fiction is unmistakably engaged in more than copying structures from a singular source. The post-Modernist focus falls on the extent to which ideas are conveyed (through cultural forms like T.V.) and which may be imposed through benign rather than totalitarian methods. Without directly employing Gramsci's theory of hegemony, American post-Modernist writers do generally hold to the view of cultures as being part of the transmissive process by which ruling groups impose their values and views of reality upon subordinate groups. Post-Modernist writing is, indeed, concerned with the increasing totalization of culture, the movement towards an internally consistent and all-encompassing social structure in which institutions and patterns of human behaviour are regulated. However, this perception is usually tolerant of contradictions and internal oppositions--with the growth of mass pluralistic culture we encounter both a heightened sense of individual freedom and, at the same time, observe signs of a persuasive totalizing social uniformity and control. Coover's intention is not that of imitating totalizing cultural and social forms, but

of illustrating the extent and insidiousness of such forms. The dividing line between the actual (never clearly definable) and the created is always shifting and subject to socio-cultural factors. In The Origin of the Brunists, Elaine Collins, a Brunist teenager, wishes to watch the final Brunist gathering on television instead of participating in the event itself: she is just one of the many Coover characters who prefer the processed to the actual. More spectacularly, Coover's 'The Babysitter' has television not only as a background to the story's events, but also as a force of intrusion into the lives of the people in the story.

While 'The Babysitter' hints at the story of Little Red Riding Hood and a loss of innocence, we should avoid any reference to tradition and read the story as being concerned with contemporary degeneration. There is nothing positive to be projected in the story of a young girl's baby sitting session which becomes distorted, dislocated, fragmented and contradicted through a series of parallel and overlapping versions of what takes place over a short space of time, and within the range of experience of middle-class Americans. In the story, Coover 'says yes to everything'⁵⁹ by allowing practically all foreseeable possibilities to be tolerated; the story presents competing versions of the same evening without asserting the priority of anything but the playfulness of a never-to-be-exhausted fictional statement.

It is a mistake with Coover's writing (as it is with post-Modernist fiction generally) to try to identify the writer's 'good prose',⁶⁰ and hope thereby to uncover what 'seems to bring a major unity to the story',⁶¹ since such interpretations must invariably force disunities and playfulness to surrender their possibilities. Instead of claiming that the story provides an example of the ways by which 'an individual may perceive out of the chaos around him an overall sense of unity',⁶² the critic should remain alert to Coover's belief that the storifying processes of man have suffered a pronounced deterioration under the impact of contemporary cultural and social developments, and assume critical perspectives which reflect this sense of devalued cultural expression. In 'The Babysitter' we find not the sustaining structures associated with traditional beliefs and systems, but a perverted human association with degenerate structures which manufacture aggression and fear.

The characters in 'The Babysitter' translate their lives into dramas of sexual conflict and expressiveness which engulfs the playful activities of child and man alike. As the children Bitsy and Jimmy play with their babysitter, we are made aware that game playing is a form of sexual preparation. Similarly, Mr. Tucker and his friends are inclined to make comparisons between their games of golf and certain sexual practices:

Mr. Tucker swings his left through the motion of a tee shot. 'You'll have to give me a stroke a hole', he says. I'll give you a stroke!' says his host. 'Bend over!'⁶³

The sexualisation of all aspects of human activity is, however, most clearly stated in the activities and thoughts of the babysitter's boyfriend Jack, who harbours fantasies of protectiveness and sexual fear, and who identifies his girl friend with the pinball machine he plays:

Jack pushes the plunger, thrusting up a steel ball, and bends studiously over the machine...He heaves his weight gently against the machine as the ball bounds off a rubber bumper. He can feel her warming up under his hands, the flippers suddenly coming alive...now!⁶⁴

Coover's very deliberate sexual imagery here (and throughout the story) directs attention from characters to sex to babysitter and back to characters again. The babysitter provides the obvious focus of contradictory and overlapping fantasies and is, furthermore, shown as being fully enfolded in fantasy herself--primarily the fantasy world of television. The world of 'The Babysitter' is a world of technological and political systems - the only reality contemporary man has to provide him with meaning. None of the story's characters are in touch with the 'real' world since reality is the experience of myths, fictions and illusions - none of which any longer possess a capacity for the enrichment of experience. As fantasies overlap, Coover reminds us that contemporary man's terrors and dreams are collective in their capacity to create common horrors and shared perversions.

As so often in Coover's fiction, sports and entertainments feature prominently in the lives of the story's characters. The babysitter reminds Mr. Tucker of his own youth of 'football matches and movie balconies',⁶⁵ and old popular songs of romantic love come into his mind as he prepares for the party and as he slips into drunkenness. The television set all the time presides over events, a dominant 'character' providing a broken discontinuous and episodic commentary composed of advertisements, westerns, spy films, musicals, sporting events, murder mysteries and news. Because Coover's concern is one of showing the extent to which man has lost sight of the fictional basis of his most cherished systems of meaning, and how profoundly fictional systems threaten moral and physical equilibrium, Coover is intent upon dissecting the most familiar of fantasies and the most widespread of fiction-making systems. Man is shown as trapped within the technological dimensions of entertainment and as subject to the provocations of the form. In 'The Babysitter' the system's messages largely define the physical and mental characteristics of the audience, ensnaring male predators and female victim alike. The babysitter is not only victim but is goaded into murder by the increasingly chaotic nature of her surroundings. Watching a violent western on television she feels excited and threatened by what she witnesses:

A hard blow to the belly...The lean-jawed sheriff moves in, but gets a spurred boot in the face. The dark one hurls himself forward, drives his shoulder into the sheriff's hard midriff, her own tummy tightens...her own knees draw up protectively--the sheriff staggers! ...draws! shoots from the hip!...she clutches her hands between her thighs...her legs stiffen towards the set⁶⁶

Coover follows this passage with an aside which illustrates the author's ironic view of the process of harmonic reconstruction which is revealed as centralising conformity of behaviour and belief--'Oh, to be whole! to be good and strong and right! to embrace and be embraced by harmony and wholeness!',⁶⁷

Here and elsewhere, Coover's technique is one of undermining the possibilities of coherence and unity promised by the conventional literary forms, but this is continually being buttressed by a telling analysis of the origins and nature of social and cultural systems which generate acceptance, illusion and discord. Men in 'The Babysitter' are depicted as unable to identify with women in any meaningful and positive way, and violence and possession have assumed the dimensions of the norm under the impact of forms of cultural persuasiveness. The drunken and essentially immature men at the party are described by Coover as wallowing in their (male) childrens' sexual games ('chasing tail') and, after drinking together, as returning to the 'living room to join their women' (my emphasis). Women are objects, possessions, characters

performing tricks in sexual fantasies fuelled by the myths of America's past and the so-called masculine virtues of strength, assertiveness and individuality. Such myths become, in Coover's hands, the deadening forces of unifying beliefs. The babysitter is a machine to be worked on and 'beaten'; Jack's friend, Mark, fantasizes the rape of the babysitter, while Mark, full of sexual inhibitions, but trapped into subscribing to masculine 'virtues', can only conceive of sex with his girl friend if the more assertive Mark is present as an active partner. Mr. Tucker's fantasies also cast the babysitter in the role of woman to be protected, but as he becomes drunker he entertains the idea of leaving the party, going home and seducing or raping the girl. However, all versions of the story mingle the improbable with the less improbable: as Mr. Tucker enters his own living room he cannot keep plausibility at bay - but the strength of fiction resides in fiction's capacity for swamping the mundane. Drunk, Mr. Tucker stumbles into the room to find the babysitter, Mark and Jack watching television, 'like good kids':

But something keeps bothering him. Then it hits him: the girl's panties, hanging like a broken balloon from the rabbit-ear antennae on the TV⁶⁸

Elsewhere, the simile of a broken balloon is used by Jack during his fantasy of protecting his girl from the sexual attack on her by Mark. Fiction, fantasy, is

therefore a shared experience of the unreal completed by a regularity of content which enables the further enforcement of sexual perspectives. Furthermore, Coover's images in the story relates sexuality to rubber: balloons; the pinball machine has a rubber bumper; Jimmy, the eldest child of the Tuckers has a penis described as 'rubbery'; Mrs. Tucker's foundation garment is made of rubber. Rubber is the attachment material of the sexually estranged, while voyeurism and the babysitter's wearing of Mr. Tucker's underclothes confirms the disorientated sexuality of contemporary man who exists on illusions of romantic attachment and sexual possession.

Everyone in the story watches or is watched. At the obvious level, characters watch TV and TV itself seems to stare back into the room (one of the television programmes is a spy story). The babysitter can kiss her boyfried only with her eyes open for fear of being caught; windows are peered through; shoulders are 'peeked' over; mirrors looked into; eyes stare; even the oldest child, Jimmy, peeks through the keyhole in the bathroom door to catch sight of the nude babysitter. Gratification is obtained by seeing and watching rather than participating; pleasure is taken at a 'distance' through voyeurism and by fantasising; the young girl's thighs are described as 'exposed to the flickering television',⁶⁹ as if the television has the sexual capacity and preference of the

story's male figures. Television is, however, depicted as dynamically structured, undermining man's ability and desire to provide systems of human belief which would withstand negative and destructive impulses. Watching television has become the most compellingly satisfying of all of contemporary man's activities.

If in 'The Babysitter' man's sense of meaningful relationships with others has become deadened, then the adult world is also depicted as deadly in its relationship with youth. The adult world is one of physical deterioration and characterised by a vampiristic desire to drain off the strength and vitality of the young. The babysitter's breasts are 'pert'; Mr. Tucker visualises her in terms of 'Bare thighs, no girdles...and soft adolescent flesh'.⁷⁰ In contrast, Mr. Tucker is balding, with a fattening stomach, while his wife's thighs are 'broad', and is so tightly girdled that she suffers the nightmare of being smeared with butter in order to get her back in the girdle once she has removed it. Terrified by the aging process, Mrs. Tucker envisages a time when, old and grotesque, she will be carted off in a wheelbarrow to a 'rest home'. The young are subject to ownership or expected to emulate their parents and shown in the process of learning and rehearsing the myths and beliefs which possess their elders. The aging process means not only physical decline, but also a greater investment in the mythic

fictions of a world in which reality is illusion and illusion reality.

The multiplied and diverse version of events in 'The Babysitter' do not point to anything as simple as the subjectivity of all experience. The story resembles the work of the writer Ts'ui Pên in Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. The former's novel is founded upon the tolerance of all possibilities:

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternative, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses--simultaneously--all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves proliferate and fork...all possible outcomes occur⁷¹

The absence of priority in 'The Babysitter' (and in a very similar Coover story called 'The Convention'⁷²) goes some way towards expressing this type of game of infinity played within the inhibiting framework of literary art. But, unlike Borges, and because he is more clearly a post-Modernist, Coover is inclined to place his fiction in its social context. There is, however, no evidence that Coover finds television particularly baleful: he seizes upon the medium to illustrate mass culture's lack of real antagonistic force and that quality of estrangement which is the true dimension of art. Popular culture sells, comforts and excites, and in 'The Babysitter' drama is piled upon drama, horror upon horror, to satisfy

an insatiable thirst for diversion. Ultimately, television is merely one more system designed to mask reality with reassuring illusions which render men incapable of confronting the enormity of existence and the complexities which disqualify easy moral conclusions. The retreat of so many public figures in America into illusion manifests itself in performances and statements which outdo the so-called 'excesses' of Coover's most outrageous fiction, and Coover tells us time and again that it is the fictions of socio-cultural forms which exercise the most irresistible force in contemporary American life. Quite simply, even total disaster can be made bearable by recourse to the consolations of fiction. In 'The Babysitter', Mrs. Tucker's night out ends in the ruin of her life--but there is always TV:

'What can I say Dolly? the host says with a sigh, twisting the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers. 'Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?' On the TV, the news is over, and they're selling aspirin. 'Hell, I don't know,' she says. 'Let's see what's on the late late movie'73

CHAPTER THREE

Part Two: Robert Coover

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CHAPTER THREE

Part Three: Steve Katz

The best contemporary example of improvisational
style that I know is the fiction of Steve Katz
...who writes like a seal with the ball
continually about to fall off its nose
(Ronald Sukenick)¹

Steve Katz's "fiction distances itself from the conventions of literary art's formal emphasis by signifying its status as arbitrary and playful. Unlike Coover, however, Katz displays little interest in identifying man's traditional and contemporary meaning systems and revealing them for what they are - fiction. Instead, Katz seems only to set his writing in motion and then to relinquish a large degree of control over the text. In this way, fiction does not suggest the rage for order in society or necessarily illuminate the gaps between signifier and signified, but disrupts meaning by allowing 'meaning' to assume improbable, episodic and contradictory shapes and dimensions.

In Katz's first collection of stories, Creamy and Delicious, the opening three tales feature the playing of ball games. Titled 'H', 'U', 'B', respectively, the stories are tenuously joined together by an anonymous

female character who inhabits a Kafka-like world of uncertainty, incongruity and authoritarianism. In 'H' she finds herself in a desert community in charge of a group of taciturn and sullen children who are covered in a fine yellow dust, and who only respond to her when she contrives a number of balls with which they play a game resembling soccer, basketball and baseball. Their newfound joy is, however, shattered with the arrival of the governor of the district who threatens the children with death.

The end of 'H' forms the beginning of 'U', but we are switched to a dance hall where a ball game is in progress. The woman enters the game, the dancing and the puzzling conversation, but on the stroke of midnight everything about her freezes. Outside she discovers jetliners held in the sky and immobilised cars; she again encounters yellow dust - this time as it pours from the body of the city governor.

The opening of the third story, 'B' once more duplicates the conclusion of the previous fiction. Again we are in the company of the woman, but this time we are aboard an ocean liner carrying barrels of yellow dust. Off-duty crew members play a ball game, and the woman notices a picture of the governor in the ship's operating theatre, where, after a relationship with the ship's captain, she gives birth to a dolphin. The final sentences of the story circle back to form the opening sentences of 'H'.

The linking title of Katz's 'H', 'U', 'B' is '3 Satisfying Stories', an ironic title surely given their combined inability to satisfy the requirements of conventional design and expectation. What satisfaction we do experience in reading Katz is, however, the satisfaction of indulging in some form of play without rules and without any obvious point beyond the playing of the game. In '3 Satisfying Stories' we can, if we wish, interpret the images of dust and the three different situations in which the woman finds herself as representative of death, decay and confinement, and at the same time identify playfulness as oppositional, but beyond this tentative analysis we meet only a series of arbitrary events and irregular developments which cannot satisfy the desire for order and coherence. Characters and their situations remain ultimately as unpredictable and spontaneous as the ball games they indulge in.

Creamy and Delicious never 'recovers' from Katz's improvised opening. Through the rest of the book runs a fragmented 'story' which begins on page 43 (most of it erased), and which continues in a random fashion throughout the book, is out of sequence and which, at the end of each fragment, returns us to page 43 and the "story's" origins. In addition, the book is punctuated by a series of reproduced photographs ranging from a picture of the Pope kissing a bare foot to a man on a bicycle surrounded by hot-air balloons. Most of the book, moreover, is composed

of very short pieces dealing largely with myth and mythic figures, past and present.

Katz was one of the very first post-Modernist writers to subject the unifying features of myth to playful scrutiny, thereby disowning those supportive structures in which man and his cultural products have traditionally invested. At its most obvious, this post-Modernist's demolition of myth is found in Barthelme, and especially in Barthelme's The Dead Father which shifts the mythic dimension--the quest--to the sexuality of contemporary 'quests'. Intent upon a Golden Fleece the Dead Father finds it very close at hand, but not in the expected place:

No Fleece? asked the Dead Father.
Thomas looked at Julie.
She has it?
Julie lifted her skirt.
Quite golden, said the Dead Father. Quite ample.
That's it?
All there is, Julie said²

The objective of modern man is there beneath a skirt; that is the extent and the nature of his ambition.

Roland Barthes has observed that every narrative leads back to Oedipus, and that storytelling is always a search for origins. The Dead Father demonstrates, of course, that some (no) narratives respect this scheme of things only to the extent to which any scheme of things is denied. Katz's method is, in common with that of Barthelme, one of transforming any form of priority: his Oedipus tale has a farmer in place of the Sphinx--'Hey what is black

and white, has four legs and you squeeze its teats twice a day?'³ The original crime takes on a significance no greater or smaller than any other contemporary occurrence:

So where's the big deal? I mean you screw your mother when you don't know who she is and maybe she's good so you do it again. Even if you know who she is, so what?...and any mother who won't fuck like a demon for her own son isn't worthy of the name⁴

Katz's Oedipus does, however, speak from an experience which respects mythic precedence, and his scepticism has been born of reflection upon his mythic deed. Told 'you just fucked your real mother'⁵ our New York Lower East Side hero recounts that:

I put out my eyes with a Py-Co-Pay toothbrush, and that was no snap. I came out of the bathroom with bleeding eye-sockets and my wife-mother combination takes one look and says, 'What a mess. You think I'm going to live with a blind poet?'⁶

His final advice is, if 'you want to put out your eyes, you don't have to fuck your mother'.⁷

The post-Modernist spirit is clearly operative in Katz's work. While, for example, the Oedipus myth contributes 'heavily to Barth's vision in Giles Goat Boy'⁸ enabling Barth to forge 'an allegorical instrument that enables him to piece together our fragmented world',⁹ Katz's mythic reference does not lead to any form of synthesis, but is, on the contrary, open-ended and indiscriminate. In creamy and Delicious Katz turns Hermes into a speedy book retriever in a library, Achilles into a subway traveller, while Homer becomes:

a writer par excellence. He could write in mid-stream where others would have to paddle. He could write spread-eagled or upside down or skinning the cat. He could write a poem with both eyes shut. He could write like the wind. He was an all-round writer of the old school, with a pinch of the new school thrown in¹⁰

We also meet in Creamy and Delicious Wonder Woman who ends the Vietnam War, Gandhi, Nasser, Dickens, Goliath, Nancy and Sluggo, and Plastic Man, all figures devoid of the wider significances we usually associate with an author's characters and through whom the author's narrative intentions conventionally emerge into some identifiable pattern and shape. Katz subverts the stability of signifying systems, and the notion of writing as finished, entire and redeeming: a negative dynamic dramatizes nothing more than the possibilities of fiction's properties as it mingles with the substance of everyday affairs and finds its expressive qualities from within the overlap of internal and external events. Like all the post-Modernist writers, Katz fashions a limited and unprivileged perspective: no longer poised judiciously above the world he surveys, Katz becomes involved in, though not necessarily with, the world. Katz rejects metaphysical and psychological depth and proclaims an art of surface, fashioning forms resembling those of John Cage for whom 'anything may happen, a "mistake" is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is'.¹¹ As Wylie Sypher reminds us about this type of art of chance, once 'the need for depth explanation

has gone...the...everyday happening is more authentic than the ultimate or absolute'.¹²

Katz's most ambitious writing remains The Exaggerations of Peter Prince, a work of almost three hundred pages of multiple narratives, illustrations, intrinsic and extrinsic cancellation, and authorial interjection. The novel reflects precisely post-Modernism's repudiation of the dramatic experimentation of Modernism by investing instead in scaled down interests and a vision of randomness, multiplicity, and a world beyond repair. Significantly also the Prince of the novel is quintessentially ordinary, and lives in an American palace-like home surrounded by anonymous junk yards, burger houses and the city's neon signs: Peter Prince 'didn't know where he was, and most of the time it didn't matter'.¹³ Clearly, Peter hasn't a lot to say; he is a man to whom things no longer happen. Steve Katz erases him:

Enough! Katz, you're making this all up. It doesn't make a bit of sense. It's not a promising beginning. Why can't you follow the instructions? You can't write whatever you want...Where's the story? How are you going to catch us up in it and write a novel so the reader won't be able to put it down, he's so involved...Come to your senses. Or start with Linda Lawrence, who was hired for this novel!¹⁴

Linda Lawrence and her friend Philip Farrel are at this point introduced as the parents of Peter Prince: they wait in an hospital for Peter Prince to be born and anticipate the boy's journey to Ethiopia--one of the novel's two main but intermittent themes. By now, however, Katz has become fully aware of the reader's impatience:

Katz, Katz, tell us a story. You've really got yourself into it, with this drifting across the page. Figure something out, at least. What are you going to do for Peter Prince? Take up a collection? How are you going to help him, poor Peter Prince?¹⁵

True to his instincts and mindful of his reader's admonitions, Katz tells the story of Peter Prince's childhood, but a narrative Katz reminds us is an intersecting point of unlimited narratives which are contained by the act of telling. The process breaks down and the novel becomes first a dual, vertically split story the first entitled SPUD HAZELEY'S MYSTERIOUS TRUNKS which is about Peter Prince, a town standing on the River Katz, the other about a character named Hector Hastingford who is writing SPUD HAZELEY'S MYSTERIOUS TRUNKS. A third 'vertical' narrative then introduces Peter Prince who is reading about Peter Prince, Linda Lawrence and Philip Farrel--at which point the reader becomes lost inside overlapping and self-referring stories. What the reader does is entirely a matter for the reader: 'you can choose either to read...with interest, or, as I would do in such a case, skip it' ¹⁶ - admits the author.

The second of the novel's main threads concerns Peter Prince's relationship with a woman named Bebo and their adopted Vietnamese child, Thwang-Nuc, who has been hideously scarred by napalm. Relatively conventional in its treatment of human conflict within an urban environment,

this section of the novel reveals Katz's ability to write in an accepted style and within the demands of traditional form. However, the story becomes too pathetic, and too predictable for the writer to sustain. Thwang-Nuc dies, Katz draws a pair of exit doors for the reader who is 'sick of the whole thing',¹⁸ and then begins the novel all over again with Peter Prince heading overseas. The need to write and the novelist's appreciation of the impossibility of writing in a manner which intends a close approximation of the real while presenting a unity of inventions shifts the writer onto a different tack, one which permits Katz to dispense with transitions, use cancellation to register a change of mind ('this scene... makes me yawn...Let's X it out')¹⁸ and to turn the writing over to his friend, the poet Ted Berrigan:

He always does something for everyone, and he's always getting into everyone's works. I have a suspicion he has already written part of this novel, but I won't tell you which part. It could be the next paragraph¹⁹

Another friend, Ron Sukenick, fails to turn up in the novel as he had promised (Katz appears briefly in Sukenick's Up); the novel takes on the form of a television programme complete with marginal comments by viewers; and achieves a degree of simultaneity as the narrative is overlaid by the depicted sound ('ZZZZZZZ') of buzzing fans. At the end of the novel the narrative again separates into different statements, but this time they run up, down and across the pages, before Katz admits:

Whatever is happening is out of my control.
I'm going on to simpler, more suitable things
for me. I'm going to watch football, spend
time with my kids, hold out for more money at
work...I've paid off Linda Lawrence...and
Philip Farrel is paid off too...I'm getting
out of here²⁰

While Katz's work remains within the formulations
of language and consciousness, certainty and the persuasive
unities of conventional forms are absent. The Exaggerations
of Peter Prince certainly does 'not cohere to form a
meaningful, aesthetically sustaining whole'²¹ since such
standards are viewed as artificial and instead of moving
towards the 'repair' of disorder, Katz and fellow post-
Modernists articulate their responses not to disorder
but to an excess of form and structure. From the start
Katz has been disinclined to provide a coherent, finished
work, 'a regular denouement...all...loose ends...knotted
and the significance of all events finally brought to light
...a certain consistency of theme and image'.²² The
requirements of narrative run counter to this writer's
understanding of the aesthetic act of fictional composition.
Katz's refusal to propose or establish any absolute and
convincing perspective takes as its point of departure the
need to deconstruct in order to revitalise the imaginative
act of reading and the writer's rendering of the actual.
Katz requires of fiction that it attains a status
corresponding to the fiction of reality; his work has
no predetermined content or structure, but is made to

question the rules of language and appearance and assume the nature of an object in the world, not a commentary upon that world. In The Exaggerations of Peter Prince we experience an impenetrable surface of incongruity and inconsistency which calls for an iconically orientated response, one appreciative of the work's playfully subversive design and appearance. The novel, an aggressive account of appearances, assures us that all versions of reality are a matter of what falls to hand, what is acceptable, and what is permitted, and ultimately who controls the process of establishing fiction as fact.

In his sixth work of fiction, Moving Parts, Steve Katz avoids the overly incestuous practices of The Exaggerations of Peter Prince and instead attempts to emulate the efforts of Eileen in his earlier Saw who is described as having a need to breakthrough to 'what's real',²³ and who discovers that the real exists only amid the random and disjointed moments and events when and where the actual and the extraordinary overlap. In Moving Parts Katz's writing intensifies the experience of the present moment by establishing a process of imaginative improvisation with events. It sets up a flowing figure/field interaction in which figures are created and in which events are experienced - but only briefly does anything congeal into spacial and temporal regularities. The world is shown as pure invention

changing from moment to moment, and unlike the novelist like Nabokov who depicts the tension between the experience of the world and our knowledge of it through language, Katz is clearly more concerned with the relationship of the individual to the environment and how experience is filtered through consciousness.

The Realistic methodology and underpinning beliefs which tautologically relates the familiar with the 'real' are subjected by Katz to a wholesale demolition. Moving Parts emphasises the notion of the world as dependent on consciousness and beliefs and knowable only through the imaginative process responsible for the construction of world models which assume the status of objective, definitive fact. The novel deals specifically with the relationship between fiction (writing) and its origins in the real situations which are themselves systems of total explanation. The book's five sections fluctuate between out-and-out fantasy and straightforward accounts of the writer's actual experiences. The opening story, entitled 'Female Skin' is narrated by Katz himself and opens with the writer peeling the skin from a female friend named Wendy Appel, covering himself in it and stepping out into the streets where he takes over New York with the aid of the largest gaggle of geese in recorded history. This fantastic tale is interrupted half way through by four pages of actual journal kept by the author during a period spent working with the real Wendy Appel on a film production in California.

Katz admits, however, that his journal entries 'don't give us a sense of Wendy Appel, but they do embarrass me by making me recall what it was like to be enveloped by her'.²⁴ Their relationship has allowed Katz to fleetingly assume the identity of Wendy, a situation which, through sex, has provided the idea of the writer's take-over of the woman's skin at the beginning of the story. This is further underlined by an incident in which Katz and the current woman in his life watch the mating of two birds:

'It makes him look like a different bird', I say.
'That's just probably part of their courtship ritual', she says²⁵

By getting into Wendy's skin, Katz has become likewise transformed, and through transformation has released an imaginative energy which 'allows' the take-over of the city by birds. At this point, Katz digresses into an account of his sculptor friend, Charles Ross's latest work, which is described as having 'the capacity to cause the slow dissolution of whoever views it by irresistibly absorbing the light that makes up the viewer's own real substance'.²⁶ Here, Katz's fictional principles and practices become clarified as the writer introduces actual creations and experience into his own work where they act as guidelines to the writer and the reader. Like a magician Katz founds his 'act' upon illusion, especially here on the illusion of disappearance, though in Moving Parts disappearance is both the inevitable outcome of the process

of transformation and the threat which confronts those who are intent upon close 'readings' and the discovery of extractable meaning. Katz's fiction, like Ross's sculpture, derives its power from its arbitrary system, and anyone 'attempting to scrutinize it long enough to figure out how it is made, inevitably disappears'.²⁷

The writer's task for Katz is to erase the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction' and to turn literature into a game of indeterminate quality and status: 'Female Skin' concludes with an autobiographical account of how Katz searched for the real Wendy Appel and solicited her signature on a release form giving Katz permission to use her experiences and her name in the story. The next section of Moving Parts, entitled 'Parcel of Wrists' amplifies Katz's obsession with the imaginative engagement with an identifiable world and the 'paradox that our perception of reality is fictional, while the most fabulous of fictions can lead us to the discovery of truth'.²⁸

'Parcel of Wrists' describes how the author receives an unsolicited package of human wrists postmarked Irondale, Tennessee, and how he proceeds to try to track down the origins of this 'crime'. Written at least in part in the style of a 'hard-boiled' detective story - short sentences, a 'detached' narrative voice - 'Parcel of Wrists' presents a mystery that has no solution and a criminal who does not exist. Instead of following the classic model

and dispelling mystery and restoring stability through the unifying acts of discovery and solution, Katz proceeds to undermine the detective story's premises by mocking conventions on which the genre is founded and constantly referring to the necessarily selective features of narrative art.

Taking the metaphor of 'planted' clues literally, Katz buys twenty-five pounds of topsoil and buries 'each of the wrists in a flowerpot'.²⁹ Then, after setting out for Tennessee he reverses the ploy of adopting a disguise by having his hair clipped and his beard shaved off. He finds, however, there is no such place as Irondale, Tennessee. In Iron Hill, Tennessee he drifts into a commune where he operates a power-saw. In Iron City, Tennessee he replies in the affirmative when asked if he is a detective, and witnesses the desecration of a Cherokee burial ground which marks the Trail of Tears:

Everyone: children, adults, old people, were working furiously at unearthing whatever was there...Their faces were full of it, the demonic glee of Americans unspeakably poor suddenly getting for free something that might be available...They rushed around waving skulls and legbones, showing fistfuls of arrowheads and pottery shards. One family...were carefully reconstructing with bailing wire the complete skeleton of a Cherokee youth³⁰

Clearly here, Katz is intending parallels to be drawn between the reconstructive process of contemporary systems which render history as a possessed totality and, with his

usual sense of social observation, identifying the human impulse for discovery and destruction. The scene is a nightmare of disorderly conduct as America's past, its native mystery, is subjected to the ritualism of possessiveness, - and again parallels here suggest Katz's own desire to uncover his own mystery of the parcel of wrists, but at the same time his failure to discover the origins of the enigma, and the impossibility of the task he has set himself.

Back in New York, the narrator discovers the wrists he planted have sprouted and that a close friend has been blinded by muggers. The wrists have grown parts of the human body, and while trying to replace his friend's eyes with those he has grown, the narrator drops a bag of eye balls all over the hospital floor and is physically thrown out of the hospital. Increasingly obsessed by his anatomical spare parts, the narrator carries them with him everywhere he goes, 'haunting strangers, insisting on the replacements from the pack of goods I carry on my back'.³¹ Nevertheless, he discovers the paradox of invention: the more he randomly changes the people he meets the less he recognises them again. Like the poor grave robbers in Tennessee who arbitrarily piece together the bones of the dead, the narrator of 'Parcel of Wrists', in imposing his sense of form on others, destroys what truth exists in a world without discernable design and shape.

The distortions the narrator practices are essentially

the distortions the writer Steve Katz practices in order to free the activity of writing from the illusions of depth and coherence. His writing is gratuitous, free and perpetually renews itself, no more so than in the third section of Moving Parts, 'The Author's Wrists', where, dissatisfied with the fictional 'Parcel of Wrists', Katz destroys the fictional Katz and transforms the incredible story of amputated wrists and a journey of discovery into the actual account of the author's journey into Tennessee - a trip paid for 'by a grant from the Creative Arts Public Service'.³²

The reality of Katz's real experience is treated with some irony by the writer who boasts:

In this book you get such a sense of the reality of the main character that he seems to get off the page and sit down with you³³

For Jerome Klinkowitz, Katz's actual trip 'fails to equal the fantasy of "Parcel of Wrists"',³⁴ but, because as the author admits, there is no 'way to abstract a narrative from this jumble of overlapping sequences',³⁵ the 'real' of 'strip' actually assumes the dimensions of fantasy whilst dealing with facts. Not only does Katz continually destroy the illusion of reality and punctuate the text with photographs of himself and the American South, but Katz resurrects an old obsession of his - the number 43 - and uses this arbitrary device to give both the journey and the narrative of that journey some shape. The writer

follows and photographs Route 43, provides photographs of digital clocks showing 43 and advertising signs carrying the same number.

Katz speculates at some length on the need for writers to use numbers in order to support fiction through the employment of the actual, and reveals that his chosen number 43 was decided upon originally for no better reason than 43 'is the only prime number between one and one hundred for which the first digit is one integer higher than the second'.³⁶ In the conventional narrative numbers are employed with the intention of exactitude, but here the number 43 advocates the factual to the point of absurdity. Moreover, Katz's (and post-Modernism's) use of photographs introduces an element into narrative which is ontologically alien to it, since narrative takes the form of sequence and duration, while the still photograph, by contrast, is a representation of a frozen point in time: narrative is, therefore, contradicted by the discontinuity of the pictures of - in this case a series of 43s. Whereas numbers and photographs are usually restrained by a singularity of signification, Katz re-distributes the significance of 43 by refusing to number any specific location of meaning.

The imaginative qualities of 'Parcel of Wrists' are not superior to the qualities of 'Trip', only different: the real Tennessee does not resemble the Tennessee of

'Parcel of Wrists', since 'reality is too fucked up to coincide':³⁷ Nashville's jumble of bars, massage parlours, eating houses, and music lounges, constantly overwhelm the dimensions of the normal and the credible in a way that the fictional equivalent does not do. Turning the conventional tendency to try and match fiction to the bizarre reality of contemporary America on its head, Katz begins with an incredible fiction and tries to find some points of contact between this and actual experience, but is time and again brought back to his original feeling about Nashville that 'there's something wrong with this place'.³⁸

As 'Trip' unfolds we become aware of invention settling into a process of infinite creativity: the real Iron City, 'a place...invented from maps and suggestions',³⁹ is a place very familiar to the protagonist who increasingly takes on a fictional status the closer he gets to his destination of Iron Hill. Situations drawn from Katz's journey become elaborated upon, appearing and re-appearing in a slightly different, amplified form, and slowly assuming the characteristics of the fictional 'Parcel of Wrists'. For Katz, the 'true' moments come when and where the fictional and the real come in contact and when the imagination somehow transcends the limitations of language. Truth is 'not perceived with the mind, but in the gut, or the spine,

or the heart',⁴⁰ that is felt before the confining nature of language comes into operation. Like numerous contemporary writers, Katz holds fast to the impossible dream of a reality prior to the word, to an original condition before the fall into discourse, but like most other post-Modernists avoids the comforting illusion that this dream can ever attain the status of the 'real'.

Language, for Katz, is bound-up with identity: an unchanging self forces a separation just as does the utterances inseparable from the process of self-identification. Truth is denied by separation; is confirmed only by a fusing or a constant shifting of characteristics which denies the illusion of an integrated self in contact with a 'pure' form of reality through the subjective process. Changes of identity challenge the ideological constitution of the individual and deny the individual's claim to be the origin of meaning, knowledge and action. As Katz contests the homogeneity of character and experience he articulates the post-Modernist belief that 'we can always create a new role, initiate a new performance, conduct a renewed transformation'.⁴¹ Arbitrary changes effectively cancel reference: unlike the conventional novel with characters behaving in a certain way because it corresponds to our acquired sense of human nature in our extraliterary experience, Katz's characters express a logic outside of any presupposed

rules. But in changing so dramatically they are in one sense, true to contemporary American consciousness, since, according to Ronald Sukenick:

people's sense of themselves shifts according to situations that they find themselves in, and even more drastically according to traumatic experiences they might pass through in their lives⁴²

The rapid transformations found in Sukenick and Burroughs, and the playful dispersal of character and situation in Katz can, however, also be identified as a traditional American fictional device, one which expresses a desire for renewal, possibility, and an uncertainty about moral and epistemological positions. Katz's refusal to impose any rules of consistency and so provide focus allows the writer to depart from the textual and lived totalities which impose rigidity and constraint, and to call into question the idea that there does exist a knowable reality independent of consciousness, myth and ideology. Moreover, while Katz does confirm that man's 'only access to "reality" is a linguistic one'⁴³ he does attempt to work his fiction towards a disclosure of new properties and unexpected qualities by allowing Moving Parts to terminate on a note of white space while devoting the work's conclusion entirely to an examination of the author's considerations of the number 43.

In '43', Katz reveals the number of occasions in which he has used the number in his fiction, and explains this by saying:

As I look back on those books I see the pages
of my work hanging from a narrative line
clipped in place by the number 43⁴⁴

'43' is made up of instances in which the number has
occurred within the range of the author's experience.
He keeps a record of 43s, some of which are:

On October 28, 1970, CBS News announced
43 Americans were killed that week in the
Indo-China War⁴⁵

In the Mandala from Jakob Boehme's XL
Questions concerning the Soul the #43
corresponds to pure element⁴⁶

Pete Conrad was awakened in the orbiting
skylab on the morning of June 2, 1973 with
the singing of Happy Birthday to him. He
had just turned 43⁴⁷

Katz is also reminded of Thomas Mann's The Magic
Mountain which contains a recurrence of the numbers 3, 4
and 7 and the combinations of these figures, and in his
Games Authors Play, Peter Hutchinson states that Mann's
constant interplay of:

3, 4 and 7 encourages the reader to seek for
patterns and reversals; it also draws
attention to the conscious structuring of
the work, thereby emphasizing its overall
parodistic intent⁴⁸

Katz's numerations, however, go beyond the Modernist
idea of alternative structuring devices by disqualifying
the relevance of patterns except as these are formed by
coincidence. Arbitrarily chosen, Katz's number expands
to fill a playground of space with a significance which
is created purely by affirmations of chance and randomness.

The real and the imagined oscillate about each other, and
for Katz, the:

most informed and exhilarating moments occur
when quotidian reality and my inventions
intersect or have mutual resonance⁴⁹

The writer confesses he has 'no control over this
kind of occurrence',⁵⁰ but occurrences permit the focussing
of Katz's narrative play in Moving Parts, creating a work
of fragments which denies totalizing orders of thought
created by a desire projected upon the polymorphous surface
of text, language and culture. We term Katz playful since
his eruptions of uncontrolled non-meaning generates a non-
categorical surplus of signification destructive of formal
orders, insights, values and seriousness. A game without
discernable rules, his fiction is finally about the
exploitation and suspicion of systems. For Katz:

systems are tools useful to help you...arrive
at a description of reality, but as soon as
you depend on the system itself for the
answers...there begins to form a cataract of
dogma over your perception of things as they
are⁵¹

'Things as they are', however, are subject to an
eternity of displacement, since for Katz, 'Fiction is
inevitable'.⁵²

CHAPTER THREE

Part 3: Steve Katz

1. Ronald Sukenick, 'The New Tradition', p.587.
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14. Ibid., pp.3-4.
15. Ibid., p.19.
16. Ibid., p.50.
17. Ibid., p.96.

18. Ibid., p.116.
19. Ibid., p.159.
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33. Ibid., p.10.
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35. Steve Katz, 'Trip', p.21.
36. Steve Katz, '43', in Moving Parts, p.6.
37. Steve Katz, 'Trip', p.17.
38. Ibid., p.24.
39. Steve Katz, 'Trip', p.43.
40. Ibid., p.74.
41. Campbell Tatham, 'Mythotherapy and Postmodern Fictions: Magic is Afoot', in Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., Performance in Postmodern Culture (Madison: Coda Press, 1977), p.137.

42. In Joe David Bellamy, The New Fiction, p.63.
43. Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.106.
44. Steve Katz, '43', p.5.
45. Ibid., p.14.
46. Ibid., p.25.
47. Ibid., p.37.
48. Peter Hutchinson, Games Authors Play (London: Methuen, 1983), p.41.
49. Steve Katz, '43', p.45.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p.22.
52. Steve Katz, 'Trip', p.76.

CONCLUSION

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The writing of Steve Katz shows post-Modernism's resistance at its most conspicuous. His plots lack tension, unity and teleology are largely absent, his figures are without consistency and depth and their actions are not part of the usual process of interpreting experience - the reality Katz's characters have been abstracted from no longer sustains the values necessary for their creation. Moreover, Katz's fiction lacks the niceties of prose style, the familiar coercions of grammar and syntax; each of his works also habitually repeats itself by turning back to his previous fiction, and even draws upon the acknowledged contributions of other contemporary writers. Deliberately without originality, Katz makes no attempt to create a considered, serious work of art: his fiction is an extended joke.

Crucially, all post-Modernist writing refuses 'to take art "seriously" in the old sense'¹ and therefore confronts criticism with a problem of location - why else the question recently asked of John Ashbery: 'Ashbery is great fun, is he a serious artist?'² The artist, it seems, must aspire to seriousness before being taken seriously. By drawing lines of demarcation in this way, criticism is expressing

its desire to exclude and contain meaning, so confirming the conclusions of Pierre Machery and others that the ultimate intention of criticism^{is} to indicate alternatives, to seek to replace what is by something else, something which does violence to the text. Ronald Sukenick is one contemporary writer who sees conventional criticism as a process of negative containment:

If art is potential disease (disorder, plotlessness, idiosyncratic form, irregular versification), it follows that interpretation must be quarantine³

While the contemporary innovative novelist frequently requires of the critic/reader that they 'start dancing with the book instead of asking for meanings'⁴ the conventions dictate that the critic lays the restraints of moral or aesthetic doctrine upon the chaos of literary production. It is felt by some that 'art ought...to celebrate and affirm'⁵ and that 'criticism must...always be humanist'.⁶ F. R. Leavis could, therefore, complain of Virginia Woolf that 'little of human experience...comes within (her) scope'⁷ and that William Faulkner's techniques are merely 'an expression of - or disguise for - an uncertainty about what he is trying to do'.⁸

Although this liberal humanist tradition remains very much alive within the British educational and academic establishment, those works of fiction which do not 'improve', or passively reflect a reality assumed to be pre-formed

(Woolf's and Joyce's, for instance) have won an enormous amount of critical attention. Virtually all Modernist works lend themselves very well to analytical criticism since they operate by the deployment of fiction's formal categories: readings are made which prove sensitive to those devices concerned with the disintegration of referential meaning, with emphasis falling on the work's 'purity' - the idea of the 'masterwork' in which style, images, episodes, characters, all come together and ultimately hold together in some harmonious form which it becomes the business of the critic to recover. As David Lodge argues, even a work as formidably dense as Finnegans Wake does not destroy the expectation of revelation:

we persist in trying to read it [Finnegans Wake] in the faith that it is ultimately susceptible of being understood - that we shall, eventually, be able to unpack all the meanings that Joyce put into it, and that these meanings will cohere into a unity⁹

It is when the expectation of unity is confounded, when meaning is unwilling to reveal itself, that the critic will often resort to apocalyptic judgement - hence Hugh Kenner's question, 'Was Faulkner...the last novelist?'¹⁰ A similar perception of a uniformity of deterioration insists that some contemporary fiction somehow conspires with criticism to undermine the human spirit. A situation is thought to have come into being in which:

Heller and Burroughs and Pynchon were joined in the critical limelight by such celebrants of unreason, chaos, and inexorable decay as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., John Barth, Rudolph Wurlitzer, Donald Bartholme, and a horde of mini-Jeremiahs crying havoc on the Western world¹¹

Such blanket condemnations and misreadings not only seriously underestimate the diversity of contemporary innovative fiction, but reveal also underlying fears that the 'death of the novel' would be quickly followed by the death of criticism. However, a more perceptive reading of contemporary fiction would reveal compelling points of critical contact. Pynchon's fiction, for example, provides an enabling substance - namely, the tendency of men to read patterns in life and to forge these patterns into total systems. Moreover, John Hawkes's 'tissue of recurring and corresponding images and verbal patterns'¹² satisfies a critical desire for complexity and balance: any overtly moral element may be absent, but neither aesthetic standards or critical interests are seriously compromised.

Post-Modernist fiction, on the other hand, denies the established orders of aesthetic priority and in doing so, fulfills Antonin Artaud's prediction that there would be 'no more masterpieces':¹³ with its values and 'meanings' withheld a criticism sustained by moral or aesthetic commonplaces is plunged into a crisis induced by a radical 'meaninglessness'. However, Susan Sontag's judgement that much contemporary art is simply bare of meaning cannot be readily justified in the context of the Post-Modernist fiction under examination here. Burroughs et al, present something closer to what Herbert Marcuse refers to as a 'methodical reversal of meaning'¹⁴ - though minus any

coherently argued political statement. Indeed, post-Modernist fiction possesses numerous 'meanings' in the shape of shadowy subjects, themes the reader/critic may make sense of by a location of certain propositions - situations, events, personalities, ideas - but insists upon a refusal of the presence of some final transcendental reference or privileged aesthetic system, including any encouragement to read works of fiction largely as commentaries on their own epistemological problematics.

Post-Modernism's rejection of older types of orders of philosophy, religion and morality, dissolves all reliable frameworks and provides instead endless substitutions, breakages and games which liberates the reader from attempts to control the text in terms of serious beliefs and ideologies. We are drawn into disruptive systems and forced into a re-appraisal of the view of the text as, firstly, reflective, and secondly, as a closed entity. Baffling because it refuses the coherence-conferring strategies of the critic, post-Modernist fiction requires an evaluation in terms of its energetic, intelligent evasions of the ordering anyone may make of it. Interpretation is unable to master all the pieces, but because the text will be both self-referring and engaged in testing structures beyond the literary discourse (those substantialities post-Modernist fiction thrives on), the critic becomes compelled to participate in the process of uncertainty and deconstruction initiated

by the writer intent upon the identification and overthrow of reference and order, and in the process to become party to the subversion of what is, in its ultimate shape, a political authority. There are no 'correct' readings therefore which will fulfil some ideologically conclusive function: a text is plural, an arena of free-floating signifiers which can never be pinned down to a single centre, essence or meaning. The post-Modernist work of fiction calls for a reciprocal form of critical play, one which operates in the absence of unity and coherence. In this sense Leslie Fiedler's doubt that there can be any criticism adequate to post-Modernism looks appropriately seditious.

CONCLUSION

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APPENDIXES

did you?
Dopey relations you have with your magician men.
Yeah but he wasn't you Stavro that was the first dream
but he was short well you're short too but he was
immensely fat and couldn't have strangled an eagle in
the water for anything he'd have sunk you turn left at the
corner
Hey I know.
Yes you should by now but you always forget.
Okay can you see a spot?
Usually there's one further up on the right. Here.

APPENDIX TWO

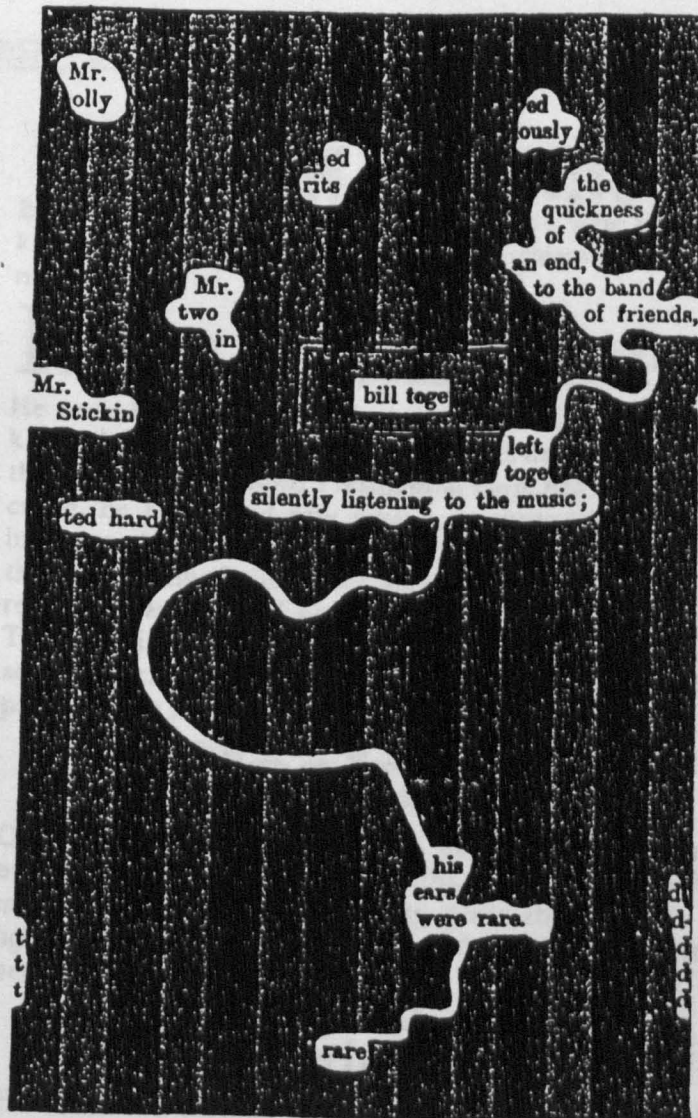
**You've
been
had,**

haven't you, jocko? you sad sour stew-faced sonofabitch. Really, did you read this far? puzzle your head? turn the pages this and that, around about? Was it racy enough to suit? There wasn't too much plot? I thought the countess something fab. For the nonce. Nothing lasts. But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady, a lonely one at that, used formerly to having put the choicest portions of her privates flowered out in pots and vases; and would you complain at having to caress a breast first, then a knee, to sink so suddenly from soft to bony, or to kiss an ear if followed by the belly, even slowly? Only a literalist at loving would expect to plug ahead like the highway people's line machine, straight over hill and dale, unwavering and ready, in a single stripe of kiss and covering, steady on

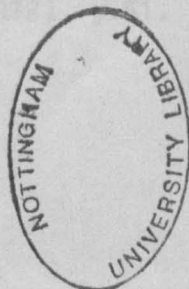
**from
start
to
finish.**

William H. Gass: Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), n.p.

APPENDIX THREE



Tom Phillips: A Humument: A Treated Novel (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), p.281.



APPENDIX FOUR

THE MAN WHO KNOWS

Behind the murder was conspiracy. There were those who knew. One was arrested but soon released. Give your name: No.

How I came back

He came back to that important place. He stated it flat. He knew the area, he had a keen brain. He helped reconstruct the crime: Tremendous Presidential noise had obscured the crime, he heard and saw where the shots came from. He had seen those men when the guns roared, he had entered the area, climbed the tower above the track. He made his report, he anticipated anger, but the guilt would be clear. The assassin was described: a curious cat deep in crime. I accuse Fritz, the eager German. I know why: a rich man paid. I know his face. It was a Nazi.

Packages

Check this. Two men, in shirt or jacket. They carried packages, perhaps guns. Behind the fence: police. Neither man was black. Two shots rang. Note the spot. He saw light. Mark the flash. His skilful mind understood perfectly.

dead in blazing car

He continued talking, and was killed while shopping, by a bullet fired from a car.

Alan Burns: Dreamerika! A Surrealist Fantasy (London: Calder & Boyars, 1972), p.51.