

THE FOLKTALE: MYTH AND FORM

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Abstract: Unlike Barth, Coover assumes that his readers already count themselves among the intellectual elite that enjoy the exoteric pleasures of post-contemporary literature. That assumption precludes the necessity of Barthian didacticism, but it does create different problems for the writer who must entertain this audience. While Coover need not persuade his already converted readers of the value of performance literature or of the necessity of careful reading, he must address their demand for innovative techniques even as he tries to use these techniques for his own peculiar aesthetic purposes. More specifically, Coover typically attempts to fulfil his sophisticated audience's desire for the unusual at the same time that he argues for the value of literature that he argues for the value of literature that appeals to the dark elements of our psyche. For in his reconstruction of...folktales and Bible stories, in his construction of tales from elements of popular culture, Coover seeks to reveal human motivations and desires that are timeless, that inhabit, in Borges' words, "that concave basin which is the collective memory" (33); furthermore, those timeless desires he focuses on involve fear, greed, lust, violence--those elements of the collective unconscious civilization seeks to repress. The final type of story considered here includes metafiction like "The Magic Poker," "The Gingerbread House," "The Elevator," and "The Babysitter," stories made up of many individual narrative units that contradict each other and defy the reader who wishes to put them together logically. Throughout this collection of metafiction, Coover disorients his readers, not merely by suggesting that traditional fictional modes are worn out, but also by suggesting that for all their sophistication and rationality, readers of contemporary fiction are nonetheless susceptible to the fears, cruelties, and primitive passions which are at the heart of "simple" fairy tales.

Key Words: Metaphor, urbanologists, stream-of-consciousness, musings, Bible, metafiction, Pricksongs, Descants and Consciousness.

I. Introduction:

Like Barth, who uses the metaphor of the circus performer to make a case for the value of performance literature, Robert Coover offers the reader of "Klee Dead" his tickets to the circus in order to make up for his failure to explain the phenomenon of death and of Klee's suicide: "I'm sorry. What can I say? Even I had expected more. You are right to be angry. Here, take these tickets...I owe you something and this is all I have."¹ On the surface, it seems that Coover is likewise attempting to change his reader's expectations that literature reveal truths about reality, to make them accept entertainment as the ultimate value of literature. But his apologetic proffering of the circus tickets suggests that its vagabond performers can fulfil some need in the reader that he himself has failed to fulfil, for circuses are made of more than virtuosi jugglers; tight-rope walkers and men shot out of cannons defy not only the laws of gravity, but death itself, and these performers thus appeal to us on an unconscious level. Or at least they used to, Coover implies, before readers became too sophisticated for such simple metaphors. In "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady," for example, Coover suggests that the reason these two circus favourites no longer serve their function as romantic symbols is that the audience is too jaded by its experience with symbols: "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 simple"(147).

And the urgency with which Coover confronts his reader and tells his tales suggests that he, like Italo Calvino, writes fairy tales "not out of any conviction that some essential, mysterious element lying in conviction that some essential, mysterious element lying in the ocean depths must be salvaged to ensure the survival of the race."²

II. The Mythic Consciousness of Robert Coover

In *Pricksongs and Descants*, Coover tells essentially three types of stories to achieve his rhetorical goals. In stories like “Panel Game,” “A Pedestrian Accident,” and “Hat Act,” Coover depicts the relationship between the performer and his audience in ways that do not particularly flatter the reader in order to make him question his own motives for reading contemporary fiction. Other stories are relatively simple parodies of fairy tales and Bible stories that force the reader to re-evaluate both the original myths and the forms that contain them.

The conflict between the intellectual and the primitive, between reason and instinct, provides both theme and form for Coover’s “Morris in chains.” Though this story does not fit neatly into one of the categories above, it does provide a type of frame for the other tales in the collection by showing the degree to which civilized readers repress the primitive. Morris, an old shepherd of a dwindling flock, is pursued through sewers and the national park system by a group of scientists and urbanologists dedicated to freeing the world from “the sin of the simple (49). While the urbanologists are busy categorizing, processing data, controlling the weather, and ordering Morris’ disorder, Morris’ “mad poetries” are concerned with earthy things--sex, the rebellion of his castrated ram, and the joy of piping a song.

And in his appeal to primitive...harmonies, Morris Threatens to corrupt the “studied dissonance upon which our modern state is painstakingly structured”(48); Morris must be silenced in order that there be “no confusions for them [the children of this modern state] between the old legends and conceivable realities”(49).

But it is through the contrast of the scientists’ report, written in matter-of-fact, technical language, with Morris’ poetic, stream-of-conscious musings that Coover suggests the failures of a technologies society, for despite the urbanologists’ claim that Morris was captured because “simple song” had no chance “against our science”(47), Morris’ song is far more compelling than the report’s computer speak. Although the report is far more “readable”--it is clearly written, abides by grammatical conventions, and accurately depicts and orders the events of the story--it is nevertheless sterile and devoid of personality. Morris’ musings are more difficult to process, but as this description of a national park suggests, his language is infinitely richer and more satisfying:

Third national they calls it but spite of that it’s clear I’ve
took a hankerin to it all right don’t plot my track in but
seems as how we come on it often enough: silver poplars and
old beeches blowin wisted measures in the green breeze the
mingled elms and hazels and westerlies shiftin the flickerin
shadows ans a clean brook for moonbathin and drownin the lice
in and wander in ivy tendrils and foxglove and colocasia
mingled with the laughin acanthus and a sweet bluegrass bed
half foot spongy(50).

Morris is drawn instinctively to one of the few pastoral spots left in the nation, and his poetry reflects not only his appreciation of its beauty, but also his gratitude for its simple fulfilment of his needs--a place to bathe and a place to sleep. And the tourists who gather there sometimes fulfil other natural needs that have become increasingly complex as society has become more urban: “then top of all that why now and again on lucky days I even experiences an occasion to stick the old staff amongst the tender herbage as the poet says: a hurried little tourist hump in in the copse when the cops ain’t heedin” (51). Morris’ earthy, primitive humour and his ability to play with language not only distinguish him from the sober scientists, but they insure his survival. The doctors examine and humiliate Morris by clinically taking semen samples and insensitively offering him a job in a mutton factory after destroying his sheep, but they cannot completely destroy the shepherd’s spirit. While his body may be chained, his imagination remains active, and Morris is given the last word in this alternating narration: “Doris Peloris the chorus and Morris sonorous canorous Horace scores Boris--should be able to make something outter that by juniper... it’s the mother in insane are free!” (60) Although his sterile environment makes it more difficult to exercise, desire for the poetic cannot be stifled, so the poet must find new subjects for his songs.

The rustic shepherd is clearly an anachronism in this well-ordered society, yet Coover’s reader is sympathetic to Morris’ plight. The artificial order imposed on the natural world (plastic flowers and mechanical crickets replace the real things) extends to the world of human emotions, where simplex status quo. Yet the sympathy Coover generates by contrasting the pastoral with the urban is itself artificial, for both Morris and Doris peloris, the chief urbanologist, represent stereotypical extremes, and Morris’ pastoral poetry gains from its juxtaposition with the scientific language of the urbanologist. Similarly, the reader’s pleasure in Morris’ bawdy

language is enhanced not only by its anachronistic nature, but also by its inherent ironies. When, for example, Morris responds primitively--that is naturally--to the chirping of the mechanical crickets and to the piped-in spring like fragrance, which remind him of a simpler past and give him the courage to continue his flight, the reader knows the shepherd's instincts are contributing to his capture. Although Morris' simple songs may reflect primitive desires, they are inspired by complex artificial technology, just as the sophisticated reader may unconsciously respond to the more negative aspects of popular culture and thus contribute to his own spiritual bankruptcy.

In "Panel Game," Coover casts his narrative reader into a role which he then persuades the authorial reader to reject; his intent, it seems, is to suggest that the reader of contemporary literature is as firmly entrenched in the quagmire of popular culture as is the armchair quarterback this reader would disdain. The contestant for a television panel game is drawn from the general audience, which is typically "docile, responsive, good-natured, terrifying" (80), and is identified not only as a Bad Sport, but as the reader of the narrative. The participant/reader's job is to "endeavour to disentangle this entanglement" (85) to discover the meaning of the game, and he thus runs through a series of verbal associations: "wear and tear. Wary. Tarry. Salmonberry. Faster! Stickle stuff and Dryden's belly"(84). And his fellow panel member, all of whom seem more familiar with the rules than he is, are more inclined to confuse him than to help him: Lovely Lady intentionally distracts him with her sexuality; Mr. America, "fat as the continent and bald as an eagle" (79), tries to alert Bad Sport to clues, but later turns out to be Mr. Amentia; and Aged Clown might be well-loved by the audience, but as "a remnant from the Great Tradition" (83), he is more harmful than useful to the reader seeking the "lex of the game."

But it is the audience's response to the reader's panicky confusion that turns this story into something resembling a moral allegory. Drawn into this apparently innocent verbal game against his will, the reader/participant is greeted with hoots, catcalls, and wild applause whenever he errs or is humiliated by the Moderator, who likes some writers of contemporary literature, seems to hold the key to the game but refuses to let his reader use it. And the outcome of the game, like the outcome of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," is inevitable: the reader/participant must be hung while the audience laughs and applauds.

Richard Anderson cogently remarks that the audience is "no longer sensitive to the real values of life, "and thus looks to the other panel members as culture heroes "who embody mass ideals," But Anderson concludes that the meaning of the story lies in the fact that "Those who, like Unwilling Participant, do not wish to be a part of a fad, are labelled "Bad Sports 'and summarily executed.'"³ The Bad Sport, however, was originally a member of this audience and like the rest, he responds to the Lovely Lady's bawdiness and the Aged Clown's crude humour; like Tessie Hutchinson, who is stoned at the end of "The Lottery," the reader/participant is not exempt from the evil residing in the human soul, but is distinguished only by having lost the game. As the noose tightens around his neck, the reader comments that he "thought it was all for fun" (87), and comforts himself with the thought that the audience is at least happy--as he most likely would have been had he remained among them, as a spectator.

The narrative reader thus recognizes himself as a member of an audience insensitive to the real values of life. Coover's casting of the reader into the role of spectator-turned-participant has a discomfiting effect on his authorial audience, who is clearly included in this terrifying audience by having allowed itself to be entertained by the story. But at the same time, the authorial reader is encouraged to remain apart from his mass audience by condemning the false cultural ideals it embodies. In other words, while the narrative reader is himself satisfied with the fact that the spectators have been entertained, the authorial reader recognizes the horrifying nature of the "entertainment" in which he or she has participated.

Like "Panel Game," "A Pedestrian Accident," a story, in which Mrs. Grundy tells a bawdy tale to a delighted crowd gathered to watch a young man die beneath the wheels of a truck, indicts its reader for his insensitivity and for his easy laughter at another's expense. John Gardner suggests that for many of the practitioners of experimental literature, including Coover, "outrage is more appealing than are careful exploration and persuasion," and further claims that "A pedestrian Accident" owes its success to its appeal to "readers of a certain kind' who take pleasure in such outrageous attacks on Christendom."⁴ Both of these stories do indeed offer ironic crucifixions--the reader/participant of "panel Game" hangs to "save" the audience (that is to satisfy their perverse needs), and Paul, the Yung man left to die on the street, imagines the earth upended and "himself hung on the street, a target for the millions of rain darts somebody out in the night was throwing at him" (205).

Although it might appear that by writing these black comedies Coover is mindlessly pandering to his readers' desire for tales that are increasingly outrageous and ultimately immoral, he makes that audience an integral part of these fictions. His inclusion of the auditors' responses to the Moderator and Mrs. Grundy not only

suggests that the reader is in part responsible for the popularity of such fiction, but it also forces the reader to explore the reasons for his fascination with grotesque stories of sex and death. Paul, forced into the role of spectator by his accident, finds himself amused by Mrs. Grundy's fiction which casts him as his own fascination with it. He knew where it would lead, but it didn't matter. In fact, maybe that was what fascinated him"(192). Coover, it seems to me, does not replace careful exploration with mere outrage, but rather, like "The Lottery" and "Young Goodman brown," Coover's stories frequently employ the outrageous mob mentality to force his sophisticated and intellectual readers to explore the general inhumanity in their own lives.

Cover's parodies of fairy tales and biblical legends suggest on the one hand the appropriateness of these forms for exorcising our fears and confronting our humanity, and on the other hand, the necessity of constantly questioning the validity of the myths these forms perpetuate. Like the policeman disgusted by Jason's love-making with his dead wife, Coover seems to suggest that there are certain innate human laws that may be salvaged by revising old forms:

"You understand, of course, "he says [the policeman from "The Marker"], "that I am no, in the strictest sense, a traditionalist. I mean to say that I do not recognize tradition qua tradition as sanctified in its own sake. On the other hand, I do not join hands with those who find inherent in tradition some malignant evil, and who therefore deem it of terrible necessity that all custom be rooted out at all costs. I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their own turn but the innovations which created them. I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them, In spite of that, however, some things still make me puke!"(91).

Although one critic suggests that in the biblical parodies, "Coover creates skilful tricks of interpretation, but once the trick is grasped, all that remains is an irreligious jest,"⁵ Coover's parodies are not intended merely to mock Christian belief, but to present another view, to make readers question those beliefs that they may have blindly accepted or rejected.

In "J's Marriage" and "The Brother," the biblical parodies in Pricksongs and Descants, Coover creates two of the most memorable and human characters in the collection. While many of Coover's fictions elicit their effects by placing stereotypical, flat characters in bizarre situations, his modus operandi in the biblical parodies is to provide the miraculous events of the Bible with everyday significance and to provide human motivations and emotions to their essentially one-dimensional, silent heroes. Indeed, what makes these parodies effective is that Coover shows incredible restraint and gentleness in his treatment of these religious myths-the marriage of Joseph and Mary and the building of Noah's ark, and it is this restraint that makes it difficult to dismiss these fictions as "irreligious jests."

Coover, for instance, depicts J as a stoical man, devoted to his wife and disappointed, but not devastated, by their lack of a sexual life. A gentle, thoughtful man, J rationalizes their chaste relationship: "at this level sex could not be comprehended without love, but love could be distinguished without reference to sex; in short, that one was the whole, the other a mere part, contributing to the perfection of the whole to be sure, but not indispensable,"(113). Since the story is located in Joseph's consciousness, it never deviates from this gentle, rational tone to become a bawdy tale, and because the narrative provides no distance in time between the events of the tale and the time of the reading, the reader might well view J's plight as a contemporary one. As J's love for his wife, as well as his sexual frustrations, continue to increase, the reader increasingly sympathizes with J, so much so that when J finally walks in on his make wife and thinks that the time has come when he will consummate his marriage, the revelation that she is pregnant his marriage, the revelation that she is pregnant is as great a shock to the reader as great a shock to the reader as it is to J. the reader finally recognizes the tale as part of the Christian culture, and having gradually come to sympathize with Joseph, the reader must alter his or her conception of the original religious myth in order to accommodate that sympathy.

Coover, after all, does not parody the story in a way that allows us to reject it as a simple condemnation of Christianity. Even Mary's conception, which Joseph believes must be "an act of God" since nothing else in his experience can explain it, is, as the narrator suggests, "a common kind of story, and not a particularly entertaining one at that" (16). For the focus of this story is not the miraculous event of Mary's virgin birth, but their marriage--one Coover seems to suggest is sadly ordinary. Mary and Joseph "drifted quietly and impassively apart"

(118), and though they eventually consummate their marriage, their affection for each other slowly fades, and the marriage continues simply because "nothing was done to stop it" (118). Nothing, that is until Joseph's death over a cup of ale in a tavern (Coover's single extravagance in this fiction, though even this is tempered by the

narrator's admission that the manner of Joseph's death was inappropriate, "since not even in his advanced year was he much of a drinker"[119]). But before the old carpenter dies, he considers that his "life had turned out to be nothing more or less than he had expected after all," and though his life had not been particularly happy, "there was nothing tragic about it"(119).

By presenting the life of the holy family from the viewpoint of its least celebrated member, Coover does perform an act of reinterpretation, but as Anderson suggests, "Coover is as much interested in the suffering of everyday people as he is in performing literary acrobatics."⁶ Coover does not irreligiously change the "facts" of the myth by attributing Marry's conception to an act of adultery, for instance, nor does he alter dramatically the characters of Mary or Joseph as they appear in the Bible. Were Coover merely interested in mocking Christendom for certain types of readers, he would have created a burlesque along the lines of "A Pedestrian Accident"; the elements for an outrageous attack are clearly present within the original nativity narrative, as they are within the tale of Noah and the ark, which cover tells from the point of view of Noah's practical but good hearted brother, who helps build the ark out of compassion for his aging sibling but is denied refuge from the storm.

By attributing to Joseph and the brother very human emotions and by showing the unhappy and even cruel effects of God's mysterious intervention "in the tedious personal affairs of this or any other human animal" (117) on the less favoured of his creatures, Coover does not mock the Christian myth by questioning the "factuality" or "rationality" of the original tales. Instead, he engages the reader's sympathy⁷ for these men by gradually pulling us into the story, making these characters "ordinary" men who are, as protagonists of their own tales, compassionate and worthy of our compassion. Coover calls upon the reader to question the compassion of these sacred myths by creating sympathy for the characters before he reveals them as participants in the original myths. For in carrying out the will for their god, both Noah and Mary unwittingly cause those who love them to suffer. In other words, Coover does not ask his readers to abandon faith for reason, but to temper faith with human compassion, to review tradition rather than blindly accepting it, and to carefully explore their own motives and desires.

As the stories discussed so far suggest, Coover is essentially pessimistic about the nature of the human beast, but as he says in his prologue to the "Seven Exemplary fictions," a collection within the collection, narrative can serve "as a weapon against the fringe-areas of our consciousness, and as a mythic reinforcement of our tenuous grip on reality" (78-79). As his reconstruction of biblical and folk myths indicates, Coover believes that all narratives are fragments, partial stories that can be retold, but unlike Barth, who employs Menelaus as a means of escaping his own narrative drought, Coover alters narrative perspectives of already told tales in order to expose the cruelty and terror hidden in the recesses of our consciousness. While Rabinowitz suggests that readers "are often forced to call upon the 'best part' of ourselves when we join the authorial audience,"⁷ Coover, in revising popular folktales, seems to ask readers to recognize the "worst part" of themselves.

Nothing that "folktales are real," Calvino outlines their universal elements and explains their significance in his introduction to Italian Folktales:

...these folk stories are the catalogue of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed, i.e., youth, beginning with birth, which itself often foreshadows the future; then the departure from home, and, finally, through the trials of growing up, the attainment of maturity and the proof of one's humanity. This sketch, although summary, encompasses everything: the arbitrary division of humans, albeit in essence equal, into kings and poor people; the persecution of the innocent and their subsequent vindication, which are the terms inherent in every life; love unrecognized when first encountered and then no sooner experienced than lost; the common fate of subjection to spells, or having one's existence predetermined by complex and unknown forces...There must be fidelity to a goal and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph. There must also be beauty, a sign of grace that can be masked by the humble, ugly guise of a frog; and above all, there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things.⁸

Calvino's description of the value of fairy tales coincides with common wisdom: these tales help young people confront their fears of assuming a place in the terrifying and unjust adult world, and despite the unknown terrors lurking in the forest and the violence underlying many of these tales; they ultimately uphold positive human values and suggest a world of possibilities. In many ways, Coover's parodies similarly suggest the instructive value of these tales; as the father of an adolescent Red Riding Hood realizes in "The Door: a Prologue of Sorts," he has neglected one of his duties as a parent by failing to adequately prepare her for a role in the adult world:

And so he was afraid. For her. For himself. Because he'd
 Given her view of the world, in fragments of course, not
 Really thinking it all out, she listening, he telling, and because
 Of her gaiety and his love, his cowardly lonely love, he'd left
 Out the terror. He'd smelled the blood, all right, but he'd
 Called it essence. And when she encountered it, found herself
 Alone and besieged: what then? He'd be part of it, that's what, feared and hated. (14)

By pretending that there were no monsters, witches, or wolves in the world, the father attempts to keep his daughter innocent and safe from fear, hate and sexual passion, those fringe areas of our consciousness against which narrative serves as a weapon.

In Coover's revision, Red riding Hood's father is the grown up Jack of beanstalk fame, now also performing the role of lumberman, and Jack's mother is not only the Granny to whom Red must take goodies, but she is also the Beauty who marries the Beast. The effects of this amalgamation of tales are multiple. The reader confronts familiar characters in unfamiliar adult roles that indicate that the promises of Jack's and Beauty's youth have been unfulfilled; Jack, thinking the Giant has been conquered, discovers the ogre in himself, and Beauty ages and fades without her Beast ever becoming a Prince. On the one hand, this defamiliarization suggests that fairy tales falsely perpetuate the myth of the happily ever after, for Coover's continuation of these tales shows that life offers difficulties long after that first sally into the adult world, after the defeat of the giant, and after marriage to the man or woman of one's dreams.

As Granny's ruminations suggest, the "old times when virtue was its own so-called reward" were long gone already when she married her best, but she went around kissing toads and "stinky old creatures" because she believed "all the old legends"; she desires to see Red because she, like Coover, has "veils to lift and tales to tell" about the realities of life and death and sex and love. But on the other hand, Coover's casting of these romantic characters in unexpected relationship and in prosaic roles suggests that while the castles, princes, and wolves promised by the original tales failed to materialize, the very human concerns that replace them offer fears and rewards of their own. Jack, for instance, both resents and worries about his aging mother and tells his daughter half-truths because he loves her and "wanted her to love life" without fear or hate (14); and although Granny reminisces about the "old wild dreams" of princes and castles, she realizes that while her unfaithful, crude husband frequently caused her pain, she "loved him my child loved the damned Beast after all" (15). By transporting these romantic symbols from their mansions in the clouds to the complex reality of an everyday world that resists their fairy-tale dreams of the happily ever after, Coover suggests that traditional symbols no longer engage readers of contemporary literature or reinforce our "tenuous grip on reality." His de-romanticizing of these symbol, then forces his readers to confront their adult terrors directly, without the comforting illusion that the wolf is easily conquered.

Indeed, the only character who seems to be missing from Coover's composite tale is the hungry wolf, but his depiction is unnecessary because the monster resides within the hero himself:

He'd pretended to her that there were no monsters, no wolves
 or witches, but yes, goddamn it, there were, there were. And
 in fact one of them got a hold of him right now, made him grab
 up his axe, dig ceremonially at his crotch, and return to his
 labours, and with a weird perverse insistence, made him laugh. (15)

As father and lumberman, Jack is Red Riding Hood's protector, but "the ogre in him wouldn't drop away and leave her free" (13), so he is also her seducer and an emblem of threatening male sexuality. Similarly, Granny is not only the Beauty victimized by the Beast, but her admission that she misses his crude sexuality paints her as a seductress, who cackles like a witch anxious to rob red of her innocence:
 bit of new fuzz on her pubes and juice in the little bubbies and off she prances into that world of hers that ain't got forests nor prodigies a dippy smile on her face and her skirts up around her ears well well I'll give her a mystery today I will. (16)

Coover's merged characters parody the traditionally one dimensional fairy tale character and is thus not easily routed; no character is simply virtuous or evil, courageous Jack or bedridden Granny, aid their complexity makes them more compelling than the typically bland heroes of such tales (just as the monsters, witches, and evil stepmothers are inevitably more interesting than the fairy-godmothers and innocent children). Similarly, in contrast to the matter-of-fact tones and gentle cadences of most traditional folktales, Jack's philosophical

meditations on the “inexplicable emptiness” into which we are all born and Granny’s lusty stream-of –conscious musings individualize these characters and correspond to the complexity of their inner lives.

While Coover’s parodies are inventive and amusing, one must ask, as Schmitz does, if they are “more than adulterated versions of the TV cartoon, *Fractured Fairytales*”⁹ in other words, does Coover hope to achieve more than a comic effect through his transposition and rearrangement of elements of elements from fairytales? Schmitz criticizes Coover’s “pursuit of surprise” and suggests that it “mirrors the superficiality of this genre”;¹⁰ while the attempt to surprise and entertain his authorial audience is clearly one priority for Coover, he does not, it seems to me, pursue surprise merely for its own sake or to flaunt his own virtuosity, nor does he parody these tales in order to indicate the used-unless or invalidity of the form itself. While Coover, like Jack and Granny, clearly believes that the old legends perpetuate myths that are no longer viable, his parodying of folktales suggests the

Cathartic power of this narrative mode, in spite of the invalidity of the traditional ideology it frequently espouses.

Surprise, then, is not just an effect of Coover’s inventiveness, but it becomes an important rhetorical device to persuade readers to re evaluate not only the form, but the content of the tales as well. As Coover writes in his prologue, “The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader...to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation” (79). Yet writers of metafiction are frequently criticized for their formalist and structuralist concerns, as this comment by Schmitz illustrates: “Unless extended, expressive of a particular vision of experience...metafiction becomes nothing but mode: a series of acrobatic exercises in technique.”¹¹ While a true formalist or structuralist might bracket off the content of stories in order to concentrate on their form, Coover’s acrobatic transposing and combining of elements from different tales suggests that by changing a few elements in a tale, he alters the content of that tale in significant ways. Although Coover’s tale retains Granny, the lumberman, an evil wolf-like threat, and an innocent Red Riding Hood, for instance, and although in many ways the relationships between these Elements are similar to those of the original tale, his adding of new roles and combining of familiar characters resists any simple formal reduction and leads his readers through form to a re evaluation of the content. And instead of “‘decentering’ the individual subject, who is no longer to be regarded as the source or end of meaning,” an effect Eagleton attributes to structuralist poetics,¹² Coover’s parodies focus on the effects of the tales on the individual subjects and on their particular visions of experience. Although individuals may share a common mythic consciousness, Coover seems to suggest that readers need to evaluate (not merely analyze) those symbols that traditionally have embodied elements of that consciousness, and he uses surprising rearrangements to make us abandon traditional approaches to art and to view the familiar with new eyes. Through the source of new meanings. For in Coover’s composite fairy tale which acts as a prologue for his collection of fictions, Red is also the reader, about to embark on a journey that is familiar, yet “nevertheless possessed its own astonishments and conjuring, its towers and closets, and even more pathways, more gardens, and more doors” (19).

As Calvino indicates, the most important element of a folktale is the presence of “the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything,” and Coover employs the notion of infinite possibilities as a structural device for several devices for several of the stories in *Pricksongs and Descants*. Stories such as “The gingerbread House,” which is a revision of “Hansel and Gretel,” and “The Magic Poker,” in which a deserted island occupied by a Caliban-like character is visited by two sisters, are grounded in the fantasy of fairy tales, but they depart from the traditional form by failing to tell a single story with a conclusive meaning. “The Elevator” and “The Babysitter” take as their subjects modern, seemingly prosaic situations about which a contemporary folklore has developed.

Elevators, for instance, but they are also natural metaphors for claustrophobia and powerlessness. Similarly, babysitters are not only objects of parents’ and intruders’ fantasies, both as sexual conquests and as incompetent caretakers—perhaps even murderers—of the innocents entrusted to them, but as adolescents occupying adult roles, babysitters are subject to their own fears, real or imagined. Unlike his procedure with the more straightforward parodies of Bible and fairy tales, Coover does not simply relocate the centre of consciousness of these tales in order to offer a different perspective, but he offers multiple perspectives which often contradict each other and defy the reader’s attempt to analytically reconstruct the events of the narrative. In “The Door,” Coover’s combined characters indicate the possibility of contradictory elements existing together—beauty with terror, protection with seduction, fantasy with reality, but in this final type of story, he extends the use of combination and contradiction to the structure of the narrative itself. In “The babysitter,” for instance, Coover creates over one hundred individual narrative units that describe the events of one evening, from 7:40 when the

babysitter arrives and the Tuckers' depart for a party, until 10:30, when the news is over and the late movie is about to begin. Indeed, beyond this basic narrative situation, the only thing objective and definite in this tale is the passage of time, which is kept before the reader by the television as it shows musicals slipping into westerns slipping into spy shows slipping into news at half-hour intervals. Although told by a third person narrator who, as Anderson suggests, "frequently assumes the speech patterns of the characters it describes,"¹³ the narrative does not establish any criteria by which the reader may distinguish between what really happens and what is only imagined by its characters. For like the television's variety of offerings, Coover's tale offers multiple possibilities, but while the TV can be tuned to only one station at a time, Coover suggests that his narrative reader can entertain all of the possibilities at once, while his authorial audience searches for a reading strategy that will make sense of the tale.

"The Babysitter" thus begins matter-of-factly, and the reader is led to believe by the opening narrative units that he or she will be able to understand this story through a modernist reading; that is, Coover begins his narrative by apparently employing shifting consciousnesses à la Faulkner or Woolf, with each narrative unit clearly representing a particular character's perspective on real events. Mrs. Tucker, for instance, distrusts the sitter with her three children, particularly with the baby, while the young girl's sexuality reminds Mr. Tucker of his won lost youth and makes Jimmy, the little boy, anxious to tickle her. Jack, the sitter's boyfriend, contemplates his sexual timidity, while his friend, Mark, suggests that they go to the Tuckers' and rape the girl. Throughout it all, the narrator provides descriptions of what's happening on television, as though it too has a perspective to share.

But soon the characters begin to fantasize--to offer perspectives on imagined events, and Coover leads the reader to believe that the key to constructing this story is to distinguish between fact and fantasy, not merely between the perspectives of the characters. For several pages, this reading strategy seems rewarding, and it is possible to distinguish between Jack's fantasy of raping the sitter while protecting her from Mark, his more innocent Memory of necking under a blanket with her the last time she worked at the Tuckers, and the "fact" That heis still with Mark at the pinball arcade, about to call her to see if the two of them can visit. Simultaneously, Mr. necking on his couch with a boyfriend and fantasizes about sneaking home and seducing her himself; the sitter, meanwhile, seems to be roughhousing with the children and trying to bathe them as she imagines trying on Mr. Tucker's underpants and looks forward to relaxing in the Tuckers' big tub herself.

Yet this reading strategy also ultimately fails, for it becomes impossible to determine with certainty which sections are factual and which are fantasy. A section which seemed factual, like Jack's first phone call to the sitter which results in her inviting the boys over "for just a little while, if you'll both be good" (215), is contradicted three pages later by another seemingly factual description of the sitter absolutely refusing to let them visit her. The reader who attempts to resolve the contradiction by re-evaluating the first section and attributing the successful phone call to Jack's imagination--the hoped-for-result--may succeed in untangling this example, but he must also be prepared to alter his perspectives toward all that he has read and all he is about to read. For as the story progresses, Coover merges fact and fantasy in the same sections; an event which apparently is established as factual by an earlier... Unit—Jimmy claims he has to use the bathroom while the sitter is bathing--suddenly becomes part of the girl's fantasy when she asks him to wash her back. But the reader cannot be certain that the sitter actually takes a bath at the Tuckers' on this particular evening, although it is established early through both the girl's and Mr. Tucker's thoughts that on some previous evening she had used their tub.

The reader who attempts to distinguish between the real events occurring on this evening, real events that may have occurred previously, and imagined events is doomed to fail, because Coover intentionally confuses the chronology (only the television continues to present events linearly) and refuses to elevate any one set of narrative units to the status of "reality." As Waugh suggests, "The story makes no indication of a difference in 'reality' status of the various sections; it can only be the 'reality' of itself,"¹⁴ and though a rational reader might be tempted to dismiss as fantasy those more bizarre sections--like those depicting the chubby and self-conscious Mrs. Tucker exploding from her girdle while everyone at the party shoves and pushes her back into it--the narrative itself offers no support for such a reading.

Where does this intentional ambiguity leave the narrative and authorial audiences? Answering this question also allows me to address such negative evaluations as Anderson's, who has said that "The Babysitter" fails because 'its characters' lack of any but the most superficial of human thoughts and emotions...and the story's slight social message, which informs its readers in no subtle terms that lust, violence, boredom, and deceit play a significant part in the real and imagined events of contemporary man."¹⁵ although I agree with

Anderson's description would use it for the basis of a different evaluation and suggest that Cover intentionally uses flat characters with basic fears and concerns in order to establish the universality of those emotions so that he can write a fairy tale that is connected to a "contemporary mythic consciousness".

What Anderson and other critics frequently ignore is what it is like to read "The Babysitter." the reader is invited to enter multiple narrative audiences, to entertain the contradictory stories presented not only by the characters, but by the blaring television as well, which provides instant romance, intrigue, sex, and violence, as well as insight into the culture. The authorial audience, however, knows that all these stories simply cannot exist simultaneously, that they cannot all share the same reality status, but as characters begin to share the same fears and fantasize in similar ways. The reader must look to the ways in which the narrative units appeal to a collective consciousness. While the "fact" that the sitter has taken a bath in the Tuckers' tub may spawn fantasies of seduction in the water for both Mr. Tucker and the adolescent girl, other fantasies are similarly shared. The mother's worries about leaving her children with a "careless" girl create fears of disaster, while the sitter's concerns with caring for the baby (and her disgust with dirty diapers) lead her to imagine that the baby dies, either by choking on a diaper pin or by drowning in the tub. Similarly, Jimmy's childish curiosity about sex merges with the sitter's, so that innocent tickling, touching, and bathing become the source of not so innocent fantasies for both of them. While these examples depict psychologically valid responses to shared fears and concerns and suggest the power of stories--particularly those that seem fantastic--to help us cope as individuals and as a culture with the fringe areas of our consciousness, they nevertheless heighten the ambiguity of the status of each of Coover's narrative units, for the appearance of the same event in several characters' thoughts seems to make that event more possible for the authorial audience.

Cover also employs his not-judgmental third person narrator to heighten the ambiguity of some individual sections for the authorial audience. Consider, for instance, the effect on the reader of this unit which appears late in the tale:

"Stop it!" she screams. "Please stop!" She's on her hands and knees and Jack is holding her head down. "Now we're gonna teach you how to be a nice girl," Mark says and lifts her skirt. "Well, I'll be damned! " "What's the matter?" ask Jack, his heart pounding. "Look at this big pair of men's underpants she's got on!" "Those are my daddy's!" says Jimmy, watching them from the doorway. "I'm gonna tell!" (231)

This transaction between reader and text is much more complex than it appears. While it is clear which character speaks each of the lines, it is unclear to whom this particular fantasy belongs. It could belong to Jack, whose pounding heart indicates a fearfulness and remorse for the thought of raping his pleading girlfriend, but it could also belong to Mark, whose machismo would make the idea of resistance on the part of the victim attractive. But as Anderson suggests in his cogent analysis of this paragraph, Mr. Tucker's underpants belong in the fantasy of the babysitter,¹⁶ who was interrupted by Jimmy when she tried them on (or perhaps as she was only thinking about trying them on), so this fantasy of rape might belong to the sitter, who is worried that Jimmy will tell his parents about the incident. Does the girl's fantasy find its way into the boys', or do the boys' find their way into hers, or is she actually raped while Jimmy watches? Coover's intentional ambiguity implies not merely that these are all possible strategies for constructing the narrative, but that he has chosen all possibilities for his narrative. It is possible for the authorial reader to propose several different answer to the question of whose fantasy this is, just as it is possible for the reader to construct several different types of fictions from the narrative—Waugh, for instance, suggests the story is "a thriller, a detective story, a romance and a tale of middle-class domestic life"¹⁷ all rolled into one--but it is impossible to construct only one story, one meaning from the multiple possibilities.

Given these strategies for increasing the ambiguity of the events and for frustrating the reader's attempt to distinguish fact from fantasy, the reader must confront a more traditional horror tale, evil resides in the mind of one or two diabolical characters, but in this tale, evil resides in the collective fantasy, which each reader, regardless of his or her own domestic situation, is assumed in some way to share. By overwhelming his readers with contradictions, and multiple interpretations, Coover not only makes it possible for his narrative readers to recognize themselves as participants in the mass culture, but he also makes his authorial readers participate in the construction of the narrative. The reader thus becomes partly responsible for the act of imagination called "The Babysitter." Fredrick Karl has suggested that Coover is a "with-it" sermonizer,¹⁸ and indeed, he is different from many writers of metafiction in that he persuasively argues that the literary transaction is valuable as a means of exercising our fears and violent passions. In other words, Cover asks his audience to view reading as an emotional and ethical activity, as well as an intellectual one. In "The Babysitter," then, Coover disorients his audience by asking them to indulge in what begins as a harmless fantasy, but as that fantasy becomes

increasingly dark and dangerous, the authorial audience becomes increasingly unable to distinguish between the fantastic and the real and must confront as real that uncivilized side of ourselves which we frequently repress. Though the techniques are innovative and the symbols contemporary, Coover uses them to persuade his jaded audience of the value of the literary transaction as a means of keeping the individual reader--and his or her culture--healthy.

Coover thus creates a modern folklore with a poetics of multiplicity, which places much of the burden of constructing meaning on his readers. Yet it is impossible to doubt the sincerity of Coover's convictions or of his desire to not only entertain his readers, but to provide them with fresh ways of looking at the world in order to ensure its survival. For while Coover might agree with Barth's *Genie* that "the treasure of art...could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying, "he nevertheless believes that literature can provoke us into discovering truths about the real world. The concerns of Joseph and Noah's brother are real concerns, just as the fears of the babysitter are real fears. If at times those concerns are silly or superficial, Coover's elaborate rendering of them might provoke the reader into evaluating the superficial values of his culture, and if Coover is unable to provide us with meaning, perhaps his metafictional techniques equip us to be the source of our own meaning.

In the final story of the collection, "Hat Act," Coover depicts the relationship between the performer and his audience in a different manner than in the other stories of this type. The magician's audience is more humane than the audience of "Panel Game," which taunted and jeered at the panellist's errors and cheered at his death. Though this audience still laughs loudly at the assistant's bawdy behaviour, yawns when the magician performs the same tricks, and constantly insists upon new magic--new techniques --it knows the assistant who is stuck in the magician's hat is a real woman. When the magician's attempt to extract her from his hat fails, he "hurls hat to floor, leaps on it with both feet. Something crunches. Hideous piercing shriek"(255). Illusions have no bones to break or voices with which to scream, and when the magician's attempt to entertain this audience results in the woman's death, its members respond with weeping, retching, and moaning, horrified at the part they played in her death. The audience, unable to get a refund for the show, must accept responsibility of its role in the woman's crucifixion. Like the magician's hat trick, Coover's attempts to create new metaphors sometimes fall short of his intentions (as, for instance, in stories like "The Elevator"). But if he persuades his audience to look beyond the magic to the human essences it can reveal, beyond the trick to the crushed assistant or the sacrificed panel member, he has created an authorial audience sensitive to human values, an audience capable of viewing the barbarities of history and culture from different perspectives. Although they sometimes fail to provide us with new metaphors, perhaps Coover's fictions ultimately give us something more valuable: a belief in the power of literature to provide insight into the fears and hopes of real human beings who are connected to each other through a mythic consciousness.

III. The Consciousness of Form:

"Less and less people seem to believe in us, to say nothing of understanding our art."¹⁹ So laments the tight-rope-walking narrator of W.S. Merwin's "The Death-defying Tortoni." In language as precise and calm as Coover's is elaborate and hysterical, Merwin details the methodical, cautious approach the Tortoni take to their death-defying act, describing even the fine sand which coats the wire upon which they ride their cycles. Like the metafictionalist, the narrator reveals the tricks of his art and its carefully constructed terrors. Grandfather Tortoni scorns their cautiousness and theatricality: "He says we are no longer of interest because in fact we are not defying anything real at all. According to him we know too much, and it is all a game. Even if we were killed we would be killed in a game"(111). Grandfather Tortoni suggests that the performers are unwilling to combine risk with wit to look at their art freshly, and that until they return to the simple art of defying death as he did--be because it "got into him that he could"--they will be unable to ignite belief in their audiences. When Coover succeeds in moving his reader with his reconstructed fairytales, it is because he, like Grandfather Tortoni, believes in the reality of art and in its ability to help us defy death; but the risk, like the magician's assistant, must be real or it is all a game, all a construct. To understand the importance of this distinction, we must look at two other metafictionalists—Italo Calvino and Donald Barthelme--who use the fairy tale as formal possibility without defying anything "real" at all.

Barthelme's *Snow White* is a sixties update of the grim brothers' classic, and its heroine is a modern woman trapped in the original fairy tale. Snow white keeps house for and sleeps with the seven dwarfs, who are employed as window-washers and makers of Chinese baby food, and although she is bored by her role, she stays

with them and waits for her prince to come because, she says, “I have not been able to imagine anything better. “²⁰ In some ways, then, Barthelme’s parody suggests that fairy tales not only fail to help us imaginatively confront our fears, but that by perpetuating untenable cultural values, fairy tales actively inhibit the imagination and prevent us from seeing things as they are. Snow White, for example, is described immediately as a “tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots...The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow”(3). Though the narrator has literally drawn a picture of the heroine’s row of beauty marks, making it clear that her skin is not as white as snow, he mindlessly reverts to the expected phrase to end his description. Like Snow White, he is unable to imagine a better description because he is trapped in his culture’s linguistic constructions.

Barthelme is quite concerned in Snow White with the “odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall” (139) and with “Those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon” (97-8), but I will discuss the self-conscious language of metafiction in the next chapter and focus here on the use to which Barthelme puts the elements of the fairy tale. Barthelme typifies his characters so that they are even less distinct than these of the original tale; sleepy, Doc, Dopey and crew are at least distinguished by the trait which names them, but Barthelme’s seven male characters lack even that individuation. Except for Bill the leader, the dwarfs seem defined only by the fact that they are seven, for when Bill is executed at the end of the tale; the group finds it necessary to convert the repulsive Hogo to dwarfdom in order to keep their identity as the “seven” intact. Bill is distinguished only by his role as leader, a position given him because at one time he seemed to possess “possibility\.” But when he fails to live up to that undefined possibility—when he, in other words, fails in his role as leader by losing the group’s money and allowing the fire under the vats of baby food to die—Bill is found “guilty of vatricide and failure...and if you are guilty, then you must be hanged”(1980).

The “main” characters are similarly defined only by the roles they play. Paul (the hero-prince, forced into this role because of his blue blood) and Hogo (a character not in the original tale who says “vile things more or less at random, not only because it is expected of me but also because I enjoy it” [p.73]), are essentially different reflections of the same male-chauvinistic superficiality and act together as voyeurs outside Snow White’s window, Paul, unable to think of Snow White as a sexual woman because of his role as romantic hero, savours “the sweetness of human communication, through the window” (149), but because of his romantic insipidness and indecisiveness, he is unable to respond to her symbolic gesture of hanging her long hair out of her bedroom window. Hogo, on the other hand, believes women are only sexual objects and thus interchangeable; when he finds a woman more attractive than the one he has, he simply discards the old for the new. His rejection of June (the witch) for Snow White is prompted only by sexual desire, and though attracted to Hogo’s sexuality, Snow White rejects him because she knows he’s no prince.

Jane and the heroine are likewise inhibited by the roles tradition grants them. After being thrown-over by Hogo, whom she does not particularly care for, June whips up a poison for Snow White: “Now I must witch someone, for that is my role, and to flee one’s role, as Gimbal tells us, is in the final analysis bootless” (158). But apart from her role as witch, Jane is no different from Snow White; she longs for a man to complete her and for some connection with other humans, and thus she writes a letter to a stranger in order to inject her “universe of discourse” into his. And while Jane nourishes her malice, because it is her role, Snow White is essentially as bitter as the witch. Because of her role as maiden-in-distress, she simply waits for her prince to climb her hair: No one has come to climb up. That says it all. This time is the wrong time for me. I am in the wrong time. There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least try to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story. (131-132)

And this, of course, seems to be the moral of the story; no one can fill the roles demanded by the traditional literary and cultural structures, yet it is bootless to flee one’s role because the structures are innate.

Barthelme’s fairy tale characters are finally all of one type: uninteresting. The principle governing the seven men’s life is “equanimity,” and the reader must agree with the psychiatrist’s diagnosis of Snow White: “He said I was a screaming bore” (21). Because Barthelme’s characters are so intentionally superficial, because they lack even the tiniest bit of imagination, it is difficult to remain interested in them for 180 pages. Fairy tales, of course, are short, and their typified characters reflect some element of the mythic consciousness; because Barthelme’s characters all suffer from boredom and inertia, all the characters reflect the same dullness, and despite Barthelme’s interesting play with language, the reader feels, like Snow White, the dearth of possibilities in this world. Coover, of course, resorts to form in “The Babysitter” to suggest multiple possibilities and it is possible to interpret, as Gordon does, Barthelme’s final list as a similar attempt at an “open-ended finale” providing “totally contradictory interpretations”²¹:

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-HO
 (P. 181)

While this list, like snow white's lament that no one has the decency to supply the correct ending for the story, does remind the reader of the functionality of the text he or she has just read, Barthelme's ironic "heigh ho" suggests that none of these endings will happen; the dwarfs have installed Hogo as their seventh, Snow White will continue waiting. And nothing will change. The novel ends essentially as it begins, suggesting a circular, closed structure, which, because its inhabitants lack imagination, will enclose them forever.

Coover parodies fairy tales in order to reinterpret, revise, and reassert the value of the literary artifact as a means of conveying small truths about the real world, not to suggest that inherent in the traditional form is "some malignant evil." Barthelme's parody of "Snow White," however, is a denunciation not merely of the content of the original tale, but ultimately of the value of literary structures in general. Barthelme's parody suggests that his characters are imaginatively debilitated by the structures of their society (structures which traditional fictional genres harmfully perpetuate) and that no matter whom long Snow waits, the happy ending promised by the fairy tale will not materialize because art and reality have little to do with one another.

In other words, the "truths" art teaches about life are lies and literature can only teach us about itself--its structures, codes, and linguistic trips. This pessimistic view of literary constructions is emphasized by the questionnaire in the middle of Snow White. By asking his reader if she likes the story so far, if in "the further development of the story" story she would like more or less emotion, Barthelme seems to show a willingness to respond to the reader's desires, to offer her a degree of control over the novel; but, of course, the novel is already completed, printed, and purchased, and the reader's responses have nothing to do with Barthelme's final construct. Similarly, Barthelme asks his reader "would you like a war? Yes ()No()? ...In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? ()Two sets of shoulders? () Three? (" (82-83). Just as questions about the novel's construction imply and then deny the reader's power, these questions imply the author's power to alter reality with words only to deny that possibility.

Despite the light he sheds upon the nature of language and his sometimes brilliant linguistic performances, Barthelme's extended parody of the fairytale is finally unsatisfying, and not I need to emphasize, merely because of his pessimistic outlook. His use of fairy tale characters seems gimmicky and solipsistic rather than probing of the specific genre; and while he denounces the part structures of such tales and their happy endings, his own novel is for the most part neatly structured. Indeed, it is the choice of genre that ultimately undermines Snow White is a "thematic exploitation of language and the forms it takes."²² Despite Barthelme's basic assumption that literature is a retreat from reality rather than a commentary upon it, critics have ascribed vastly different meanings to Snow White: the novel has been called a "parody of the communes of the 1960s,"²³ a Freudian commentary on the tendency of males to fashion mythical women "with the dregs of their (and society's) unfulfilled dreams,"²⁴ a "parody of higher learning" and other social institutions, and Snow White "a latter-day Madame Bovary...a typical victim of mass culture."²⁵ These interpretations suggest the traditional importance of the genre as a means of transmitting social and cultural values, convention readers expect and one which his linguistic play fails to completely alter. The genre, it seems, is indeed best suited to portraying characters in action (or in the case of Snow White, in in-action). Barthelme's novel is an excellent example of the difficulty of maintaining the reader's interest in literary language and the forms it takes in an extended work and of the difficulty for both writer and reader of overcoming conventional genre expectations.

If Barthelme disdains structure, Calvino is obsessed by it in The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales, the Castle is a collection of tales told by a group of travellers gathered in a castle (part I) and in a tavern (Part II), but Calvino's work is distinguished from his predecessors' in that the travellers have all lost the power of speech while crossing the forest and must tell their tales with decks of tarot cards. The stories are first told, then, in pictures, and Calvino's narrator interprets the patterns of the cards with his text. This strategy creates an interesting and complex metafictional structure. Although the relationship between teller and told seems to be that of the oral tale, neither the unvoiced storytellers nor their "auditors" can be certain that the tarots are being interpreted correctly, so like the writer who must rely not only upon his own ability to create interpretable

patterns but also upon the reader's knowledge of language and literary conventions, storytellers must trust to their interpreter's knowledge of the conventions of tarot cards.

For like language and literature, the tarots suggest a system in which each tarot/sign has several ascribed meanings which must be interpreted in relation to the tarots that surround it. And as each teller fashions his individual discourse, he or she contributes to the general structure, in which stories intersect and comment upon each other according to general mythic forms implied by the symbols pictured on the tarots. And as Calvino's work progresses, his narrator relies increasingly upon his knowledge of literary prototypes in order to interpret the patterns before him; the tarots thus reveal the stories of Roland, Astolpho, Faust, Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear. The final story in the collection, "Three Tales of madness and Destruction," is an inventive pastiche of the three Shakespeare plays in which each teller interprets the same cards in light of their own stories; the "Hermit" tarot, for instance, represents a mistakenly murdered Polonius in Hamlet's tale, while Lady Macbeth sees in this card "another ghostly apparition, the hooded shade of the butchered Banquo," and Lear recognizes himself in the Hermit, "outcast and mad, roaming in search of the angelic Cordelia."²⁶ Just as the narrator uses his understanding of the literary tradition to interpret these tales, Calvino depends upon his reader's knowledge of the same system for the success of his pastiche.

Calvino's interest in the tarots as a "portrayal of the collective unconscious mind" (128) suggests a belief in the power of literary symbols that is similar to Coover's. indeed, in the tale of the writer, "I Also Try to Tell My Tale," the narrator suggests that the "raw material" of writing is "all a rising to the surface of hairy claws, curl-like scratching, goat's goring, repressed violence that grope into the darkness" (101); further, he indicates that the observers' response to artistic portrayals of saint George's slaying of the dragon is such that we hold our breath, "on the point of understanding that the dragon is not only the enemy, the outsider, the other, but is us, a part of ourselves that we must judge" (110). But this expressed faith in the significant role that legends and fairy tales play in the lives of readers and writers is lost in Calvino's almost obsessive structuring of the tarots and his strict adherence to the notion of tarots as system. We are never moved to hold our breath while reading Calvino's Castle, for like the author, we are always outside of the tales, our attention drawn not to the individual narrators or the elements of the unconscious mind they depict with the tarots, but instead to Calvino's structuring of the tarots and to the literary system they reflect.

IV. Conclusion:

The Castle of Crossed Destinies is thus a formal experiment that soon plays itself out, and the tales are for the most part as flat as the tarots used to tell them. Even in the most successful tales--those pastiches playing upon the mythic nature of classic literature—readers are distanced from the experiences reflected by the tarots by the many layered narrative; these tales are fictions about fictions told first in a symbolic system (tarots) and interpreted in another (words). And as Calvino's Shakespearean tale shows, the effect of retelling the plays through tarots is a flattening of these classic characters and their stories, and even the original playwright seems little more than a competent shuffler of literary symbols. In other words, Calvino's interest in structure and system in this collection overrides any concern with distinguishing between those literary works that are great and those that are not, since all stories are similarly part of a single system.

While Calvino's work is inventive, his obsession with pattern and system makes the literary transaction seem little more than a game that flaunts the role of the performer and keeps the reader at a distance--much like the Tortoni's tight-rope performance might inspire the audience's appreciation for the acrobats' skills but nevertheless fails to inspire belief. Indeed, Calvino's narrator seems to recognize this failure of his carefully constructed text: "Perhaps the moment has come to admit that only tarot number one honestly depicts what I have succeeded in being: a juggler, or conjurer, who arranges on a stand at a fair a certain number of objects and, shifting them, connecting them, interchanging them, achieves a certain number of effects" (105). Like the Tortoni, Calvino seems not to defy anything real at all, for by distancing his readers with a methodically structured text, he might earn our respect for his craftsmanship, his acrobatic ability, but he fails to allow us to enter the narrative world to discover what we do in Coover's fictions—that the "repressed violence's that grope in the darkness" are not only real, but within us.

Notes:

1. Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: Plume Books, 1970), p. 111. All further references to this work will be cited in the next.
 2. Italo Calvino, *Introduction to Italian Folktales*, trans. By George Martin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956, 1980), p. xvi.
 3. Richard Anderson, *Robert Coover* (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1981), p. 24
 4. John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), p. 73&75.
 5. Neil Schmitz, "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," *Novel 17* (1973-74), p. 213. Anderson, p. 21.
 6. Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry 4* (1977), p. 126
 7. Calvino, *Introduction to Italian Folktales*, p. xviii-xix.
 8. Schmitz, p. 214.
 9. Schmitz, p. 214
 10. Schmitz, p. 213.
 11. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 104.
 12. Anderson, p. 103.
 13. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious fiction* (London: Methuen Books, 1984), p. 138.
 14. Anderson, p. 105,
 15. Anderson, p.104.
 16. Waugh, p. 138.
 17. Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1983), p. 367.
 18. W.S. Merwin, "The Death-Defying Tortois" in *The Miner's Pale Children* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1970), p. 111. Further references to this story are cited in the text.
 9. Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1972), p. 59. All further reference to this work are cited in the text.
 20. Lois Gordon, *Donald Barthelme* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 83.
 21. Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 66.
 22. Charles Molesworth, *Donald Barthelme's Fiction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), p. 61.
 23. Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand, *Donald Barthelme* (London: Methuen Press, 1982), p. 68.
 24. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), pp. 262-3.
- Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. By William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Barce Jovanovich, 1969, 1973), p. 117. All further references to this work are cited in the text.