

# 1 Metafiction\*

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Robert Scholes is one of several writers who sought to give definition to William Gass's term 'metafiction' in the early 1970s. This article attempts to link that term to ideas which derive from John Barth's essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (see Part Three) to describe the attempts of experimental fictions of the 1960s to 'climb beyond Beckett and Borges' (the principal subjects of Barth's essay) towards 'things that no critic can discern'. These undiscernible things are best thought of as moments of critical vertigo in which the relations between real life and representation are no longer clear, either within or beyond the fiction.

In a volume dedicated to the idea that metafiction is a border-line territory between fiction and criticism, this essay has a special place. Its argument begins with the idea that there are four aspects of fiction (fiction of forms, ideas, existence and essence) which correspond to four critical perspectives on fiction (formal, structural, behavioural, and philosophical) in the sense that each critical perspective is the most appropriate response to the four aspects of fiction. The argument then moves on to claim that, because metafiction 'assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself', this scheme offers a model for the typology of metafictions, so that four distinct directions in metafiction can be understood to pertain to these four aspects of both fiction and criticism. Like most typologies, Scholes's relies on relational rather than absolute categories, and difficulties of determining the dominant aspect of any given metafiction can present real problems to the critic. The interest of the essay lies mainly in the idea that when a novel assimilates critical perspective it acquires the power not only to act as commentary on other fictions, but also to incorporate insights normally formulated externally in critical discourse. Scholes seems to conclude that the critic, and even the 'metacritic', is redundant with regard to such insights, but only, I think, because he is writing in the immediate prehistory to the golden age of the American metacritic, an age in which criticism sought to incorporate the same kind of aporetic insight into subject and object relations.

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Many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction.

(W.H. Gass)

And it is above all to the need for new modes of perception and fictional forms able to contain them that I, barber's basin on my head, address these stories.

(Robert Coover)

the sentence itself 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 stones

(Donald Barthelme)

We tend to think of experiments as cold exercises in technique. My feeling about technique in art is that it has about the same value as technique in lovemaking. That is to say, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill; but what you want is passionate virtuosity.

(John Barth)

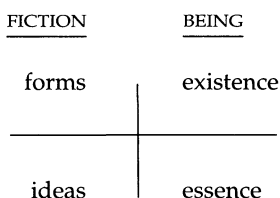
## I

To approach the nature of contemporary experimental fiction, to understand why it is experimental and how it is experimental, we must first adopt an appropriate view of the whole order of fiction and its relation to the conditions of being in which we find ourselves. Thus I must begin this consideration of specific works by the four writers quoted above with what may seem an over-elaborate discussion of fictional theory, and I ask the reader interested mainly in specifics to bear with me. In this discussion I will be trying not so much to present a new and startling view of fiction as to organize a group of assumptions which seem to inform much modern fiction and much of the fiction of the past as well. Once organized, these assumptions should make it possible to 'place' certain fictional and critical activities so as to understand better both their capabilities and limitations.

One assumption I must make is that both the conditions of being and the order of fiction partake of a duality which distinguishes existence from essence. My notion of fiction is incomplete without a concept of essential values, and so is my notion of life. Like many modern novelists, in fact like

most poets and artists in Western culture, ancient and modern, I am a Platonist. One other assumption necessary to the view I am going to present is that the order of fiction is in some way a reflection of the conditions of being which make man what he is. And if this be Aristotelianism, I intend to make the most of it. These conditions of being, both existential and essential, are reflected in all human activity, especially in the human use of language for esthetic ends, as in the making of fictions. Imagine, then, the conditions of being, divided into existence and essence, along with the order of fiction, similarly divided. This simple scheme can be displayed in a simple diagram. [see Fig. 1.1].

fig. 1.1



The forms of fiction and the behavioral patterns of human existence both exist in time, above the horizontal line in the diagram. All human actions take place in time, in existence, yet these actions are tied to the essential nature of man, which is unchanging or changing so slowly as to make no difference to men caught up in time. Forms of behavior change, man does not, without becoming more or less than man, angel or ape, superman or beast. Forms of fiction change too, but the ideas of fiction are an aspect of the essence of man, and will not change until the conditions of being a man change. The ideas of fiction are those essential qualities which define and characterize it. They are aspects of the essence of being human. To the extent that fiction fills a human need in all cultures, at all times, it is governed by these ideas. But the ideas themselves, like the causes of events in nature, always retreat beyond the range of our analytical instruments.

Both the forms of existence and the forms of fiction are most satisfying when they are in harmony with their essential qualities. But because these forms exist in time they cannot persist unchanged without losing their harmonious relationship to the essence of being and the ideas of fiction. In the world of existence we see how social and political modes of behavior lose their vitality in time as they persist to a point where instead of connecting man to the roots of his being they cut him off from this deep reality. All revolutionary crises, including the present one, can be seen as caused by the profound malaise that attacks men when the forms of human behavior lose touch with the essence of human nature. It is similar with fiction. Forms atrophy and lose touch with the vital ideas of fiction. Originality in fiction, rightly understood, is the successful attempt to find

new forms that are capable of tapping once again the sources of fictional vitality. Because, as John Barth has observed, both time and history ‘apparently’ are real, it is only by being original that we can establish a harmonious relationship with the origins of our being.

Now every individual work of fiction takes its place in the whole body of fictional forms designated by the upper left-hand quadrant in Fig. 1.1. Among all these works we can trace the various diachronic relationships of literary genres as they evolve in time, and the synchronic relations of literary modes as they exist across time. As a way of reducing all these relationships to manageable order, I propose that we see the various emphases that fiction allows as reflections of the two aspects of fiction and the two aspects of being already described. Diagrammatically this could be represented by subdividing the whole body of fictional forms (the upper left-hand quadrant of Fig. 1.1) into four subquadrants, in [the manner shown in Fig. 1.2].

fig. 1.2

fiction of forms (romance)	fiction of existence (novel)
fiction of ideas (myth)	fiction of essence (allegory)

Most significant works of fiction attend to all four of these dimensions of fictional form, though they may select an emphasis among them. But for convenience and clarity I will begin this discussion by speaking as if individual works existed to define each of these four fictional categories.

The fiction of ideas needs to be discussed first because the terminology is misleading on this point. By fiction of ideas in this system is meant not the ‘novel of ideas’ or some such thing, but that fiction which is most directly animated by the essential ideas of fiction. The fiction of ideas is mythic fiction as we find it in folk tales, where fiction springs most directly from human needs and desires. In mythic fiction the ideas of fiction are most obviously in control, are closest to the surface, where, among other things they can be studied by the analytical instruments of self-conscious ages that can no longer produce myths precisely because of the increase in consciousness that has come with time. Existing in time, the history of fiction shows a continual movement away from the pure expression of fictional ideas. Which brings us to the next dimension, the fiction of forms.

The fiction of forms is fiction that imitates other fiction. After the first myth, all fiction became imitative in this sense and remains so. The history

of the form he works in lies between every writer and the pure ideas of fiction. It is his legacy, his opportunity and his problem. The fiction of forms at one level simply accepts the legacy and repeats the forms bequeathed it, satisfying an audience that wants this familiarity. But the movement of time carries such derivative forms farther and farther from the ideas of fiction until they atrophy and decay. At another level the fiction of forms is aware of the problem of imitating the forms of the past and seeks to deal with it by elaboration, by developing and extending the implications of the form. This process in time follows an inexorable curve to the point where elaboration reaches its most efficient extension, where it reaches the limits of tolerable complexity. Sometimes a form like Euphuistic fiction or the Romances of the Scudery family may carry a particular audience beyond what later eras will find to be a tolerable complexity. Some of our most cherished modern works may share this fate. The fiction of forms is usually labelled 'romance' in English criticism, quite properly, for the distinguishing characteristic of romance is that it concentrates on the elaboration of previous fictions. There is also a dimension of the fiction of forms which is aware of the problem of literary legacy and chooses the opposite response to elaboration. This is the surgical response of parody. But parody exists in a parasitic relationship to romance. It feeds off the organism it attacks and precipitates their mutual destruction. From this decay new growth may spring. But all of the forms of fiction, existing in time, are bound to decay, leaving behind the noble ruins of certain great individual works to excite the admiration and envy of the future – to the extent that the future can climb backwards down the ladder of history and understand the past.

The fiction of existence seeks to imitate not the forms of fiction but the forms of human behavior. It is mimetic in the sense that Erich Auerbach has given to the term 'mimesis'. It seeks to 'represent reality'. But 'reality' for the fiction of existence is a behavioristically observable reality. This behavioral fiction is a report on manners, customs, institutions, habits. It differs from history only, as Henry Fielding (and Aristotle) insisted, in that its truth is general and typical rather than factual and unique. The most typical form of behavioral fiction is the realistic novel (and henceforth in this discussion the term 'novel' will imply a behavioristic realism). The novel is doubly involved in time: as fiction in the evolution of fictional forms, and as a report on changing patterns of behavior. In a sense, the continual development of its material offers it a solution to the problem of formal change. If it succeeds in capturing changes in behavior it will have succeeded in changing its form: discovery will have created its appropriate technique. But as Mark Schorer has persuasively argued, it may be rather that new techniques in fiction enable new discoveries about human behavior to be made. So the great formal problem remains, even for behavioristic fiction. A further problem for the novel lies in the non-

fictional adjuncts to its apprehension of behavior. How does the novelist perceive his reality? In general he perceives it with the aid of non-fictional systems of apprehension and evaluation. Notions like the control of personality by angels and devils, by humours in the body, by abstract 'ruling passions,' by phrenological or physiognomical characteristics, by hereditary gifts and failings, by environmental shapings and twistings, by psychological needs – all these have been indispensable to the novelist as ways of making human behavior manageable. Tracing the history of the novel, we trace the shift from religious perspectives on behavior through pseudo-scientific views toward a behavioral science which is perhaps close to achievement at last. If the study of human behavior should become truly scientific, it might limit the activities of novelists drastically. Currently, this danger seems to be driving writers of fiction away from behaviorism into other dimensions of narrative art, one of which is the fiction of essence.

The fiction of essence is concerned with the deep structure of being, just as the fiction of behavior is concerned with its surface structure. One route from behavior to essence is via depth psychology, and many novelists have taken that route, but there is some doubt whether it gets to the heart of the matter. The fiction of essence is characterized by an act of faith, by a leap beyond behavior toward ultimate values. This is a leap from behavioral realism to what Auerbach has called the 'figural realism' of Dante. In effect, it is the distinguishing characteristic of allegorical fiction. This is not to be confused with the petty allegory by which a character with a fictional name is used to point coyly at a historical personage with another. The fiction of essence is that allegory which probes and develops metaphysical questions and ideals. It is concerned most with ethical ideas and absolutes of value, where behavioral fiction emphasizes the relative values of action in practice. One of the great strengths of fiction has been its ability to be both allegorical and behavioral, to test ideals by giving them behavioristic embodiment, and to test conduct against the ideas of being. The problems of the allegorist lie partly in his management of the complex interrelations among the formal, behavioral, and essential dimensions of his art. They lie also, however, in his dependence on theological and philosophical systems of thought as approaches to the essence of being. These systems, of course, exist in time, and tend in time to lose whatever they may have captured of the essence of being.

The current retreat of philosophy into existential and behavioral postures presents special problems for the allegorist. Existentialism, for instance, in one of its aspects seeks to become purely active and situational. It is a theory which argues against theory. Thus the existential allegorist must often give us narratives of characters who make a discovery which cannot be communicated. They discover the truth, and in discovering it find that it is true-for-them-only. Thus the best of

contemporary allegorists (writers like Barth, Fowles, and Iris Murdoch) – work closely with existentialist ideas and often find themselves moving through the fiction of essence and back into the fiction of forms, producing, instead of romances which turn into allegories, allegories which turn into romances. The allegorist struggles with fictional form, trying to make it express ultimate truth, just as the realist tries to make it capture behavioral truth. John Barth has compared both of these struggles to the myth of Proteus:

The depressing thing about the myth is that he turns back into Proteus again. If the shifting of forms is thought of [in terms of] literary forms, what's particularly depressing is that he doesn't talk until he's turned back into old Proteus again, the thing that you seized in the first place, a dead end in a way.  
(From a symposium in *Novel*, Spring 1970)

It is the ideas of fiction which render Proteus mute except in his own fictional form. The myth of Proteus symbolizes the unchanging laws that govern that myth and all others, the ideas which exert their power whenever man seeks to create in fictional forms.

The four-fold perspective on fiction presented here is intended to clarify certain aspects of fictional creation. It should also serve to clarify the relationship between certain kinds of criticism and certain kinds of fiction. We can see the criticism of fiction as having four dimensions which correspond to the four dimensions of fiction in a way described by Fig. 1.3.

fig. 1.3

formal criticism	behavioral criticism
structural criticism	philosophical criticism

Both formal criticism and structural criticism are concerned with the way fiction works. But structural criticism is directed toward the essential ideas of fiction. It treats the individual works as instances of the ideas or principles that inform them. Both the French Structuralists of today and the Russian Formalists of yesterday may be called structural critics in this sense. (Which makes, alas, for an unfortunate terminological overlap.) Because of their structural orientation some of the most successful and influential work of the Russian Formalists has been based on myths and folk-tales, where the ideas of fiction exist in their purest form. Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* is typical of the achievement of structural criticism in general. Formal criticism is closely related to structural criticism. But it is more concerned with individual works than with the ideas that inform them. Formal criticism is also concerned with the formal

relationships among literary works as they exist in time. Where the structuralist looks for the ideas common to all fiction, as they relate to the human use of language and to other human activities, the formalist looks for the way fictional forms change in time to create generic patterns within which individual works take shape. The structuralist is mainly synchronic in his orientation; the formalist is diachronic. The ends of formal criticism are esthetic: what the artist has achieved in a particular work. The ends of structural criticism are scientific: the laws of fictional construction as they reveal themselves in many works. The self-conscious work which shows its awareness of fictional form by elaboration or parody is the particular delight of the formal critic: Fielding or Sterne, James or Joyce. This esthetically oriented criticism works best with esthetically oriented fiction – which is to say romance and anti-romance.

The formal and structural critics are concerned to explain how fiction works. The behavioral and philosophical critics are more interested in interpreting what fiction means. The behavioral critic in particular comes to fiction with strong convictions about the nature of existence. The rigid values of critics as different as Lukács and Leavis are characteristic of the social consciousness of behavioral criticism. The behavioral critic pronounced 'true' those works which agree with his ideological perspective and damns as 'false' those which see behavior differently or emphasize some dimension of fiction other than behavior. More than other literary critics, the behaviorists are in the world and aware of the world. The great behavioral critics have all been, in the broadest sense of the word, socialists. Marxist, Liberal, or Tory Radical, they have tended to see society as evolving in time towards a better life for all men, and have looked at literature in terms of its contribution to that evolution.

One would expect philosophical critics to be more detached and contemplative than the behaviorists, but it would be more correct to say that such philosophical criticism as we have had in recent years has been merely feeble and derivative. Too often our philosophical critics have been concerned with exegesis alone. W. H. Gass has made the case against this sort of criticism in an essay called 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction':

Still, the philosophical analysis of fiction has scarcely taken its first steps. Philosophers continue to interpret novels as if they were philosophies themselves, platforms to speak from, middens from which may be scratched important messages for mankind; they have predictably looked for content, not form; they have regarded fictions as ways of viewing reality and not as additions to it. There are many ways of refusing experience. This is one of them.

Yet the kind of truly philosophical criticism Gass calls for in this essay does in fact exist – in the work of the 'Geneva' critics, sometimes called



phenomenological critics or 'critics of consciousness'. Their work parallels that of the structuralists, but is quite distinct from it. As the structuralist looks for the ideas that inform fictional structure and the laws that preside over the order of fiction, the critic of consciousness looks for the essential values that inhere in the experience of fiction. Clearly these two activities are connected, and language is the bridge that connects them. But the structuralists work out of the perspective of linguistic science, and the Geneva school out of the perspective of linguistic philosophy: crudely put, it is a matter of Saussure versus Merleau-Ponty. Perhaps Chomsky's *Cartesian Linguistics* is a bridge that may connect the two more closely. At any rate, it is fair to say that in recent years the most vigorous and important work in the criticism of fiction, which used to be done by formal and behavioral critics, has passed into the hands of structural and philosophical critics. The fact that most of this work has been done in the French language is perhaps to the shame of British and American criticism. But at the same time it must be said that criticism seems to have stifled fiction in France, while in the chaos and confusion of American critical thought a vigorous new fiction has developed. It is this new fiction, a metafiction, that I wish to consider in the second part of this discussion.

## II

Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself. It may emphasize structural, formal, behavioral, or philosophical qualities, but most writers of metafiction are thoroughly aware of all these possibilities and are likely to have experimented with all of them. In the following pages I will be considering four works of metafiction by four young American writers: John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Donald Barthelme's *City Life*, Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*, and W. H. Gass's *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. All four of these books are collections of short pieces. This is not merely a matter of symmetry. When extended, metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives. The ideas that govern fiction assert themselves more powerfully in direct proportion to the length of a fictional work. Metafiction, then, tends toward brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction – an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form.

The four works chosen here are impressive in themselves: the products of active intelligence grappling with the problems of living and writing in the second half of the twentieth century. Any one of them might provide fruit for extended explication – and probably will. But that is not my

intention here. I will do justice to no author, no book, not even any single story. Rather, I will use these four books to illustrate the range and vigor of contemporary metafiction, and the depth of the problems confronted by it. Each of the four books, taken as a whole, emphasizes one aspect of metafiction which may be related to one of the aspects of fiction and criticism as I presented them in the first part of this essay. This emphasis is displayed diagrammatically in Fig. 1.4.

fig. 1.4

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE  (formal)	CITY LIFE  (behavioral)
PRICKSONGS AND DESCANTS  (structural)	IN THE HEART OF THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY  (philosophical)

These four books, of course, do not fit into the four categories described above like pigeons into pigeon-holes. Their metafictional resourcefulness alone would ensure that. But each one does take a distinct direction, which can be designated initially and tentatively by the above diagram. The special emphasis of each work can be seen even in its title and the selection and arrangement of the pieces included. *City Life*, for instance, *sounds* behavioral – a book about life in the city. And in a sense that is exactly what the book is, slices of life, but not cut in the old naturalistic way of behavioral fiction. Oh no. Still, the book is dominated by a Dadaist impulse to make funny art-objects out of found pieces of junk. The found pieces in this case are mainly bits of intellectual and psychological debris, worn and battered fragments of old insights and frustrations, ‘tastefully’ arranged like a toilet rim halo perched jauntily on a bust of Freud.

*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* sounds behavioral too, only directed toward midwestern farms and villages rather than the urban east. But there is one heart too many in that title, which gives us pause. Gass is interested in behavior but he is always trying to see through it, philosophically, to an essential order behind it: ‘the quantity in the action, the principle in the thing’ – the heart of the heart. He rightly says that Barthelme ‘has managed to place himself in the center of modern consciousness,’ and Barthelme has done so by adopting a relentlessly ironic vision which will tolerate no notion of essences, as he explains, ironically, in ‘Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel’. But there is a difference between the center of consciousness and the heart of the heart. The woman who narrates in ‘Order of Insects’ speaks with Gass’s voice:

I had always thought that love knew nothing of order and that life itself was turmoil and confusion. Let us leap, let us shout! I have

leaped, and to my shame I have wrestled. But this bug that I hold in my hand and know to be dead is beautiful, and there is a fierce joy in its composition that beggars every other, for its joy is the joy of stone, and it lives in its tomb like a lion.

I don't know which is more surprising: to find such order in a roach or such ideas in a woman.

(*'Order of Insects,' Heart*, p. 170)

The difference between the approaches of Gass and Barthelme to the phenomena of behavior show clearly when we see them both looking at the same object, like a basketball:

Why do they always applaud the man who makes the shot?

Why don't they applaud the ball?

It is the ball that actually goes into the net.

The man doesn't go into the net.

Never have I seen a man going into the net.

(*'The Policemen's Ball,' City*, p. 54).

Only the ball moves serenely through this dazzling din. Obedient to law it scarcely speaks but caroms quietly and lives at peace.

(*'In the heart ...,' Heart*, p. 206)

Barthelme's ironic voice, with its remorseless Dick-and-Jane rhythms and its equally remorseless pseudo-logic, moves toward the absurdity of existence by generating a ridiculous vision of a man going through the net – man as object. Gass, using pronounced alliteration in a sentence which divided into an assonant iambic couplet: –

Obedient to law it scarcely speaks

But caroms quietly and lives at peace –

works in the opposite direction, raising the object to the level of sentient, harmonious life. Gass reaches for the poetic order behind prose. Barthelme exposes the banality of prosaic statement. The two writers share a view of modern behavior, but Gass's vision is enabled by this metaphysical idea of order, while Barthelme includes any idea of a metaphysical order within the irony of his behavioral perspectives.

In 'Brain Damage' Barthelme's voice mentions the 'brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it'. And concludes with the parodic vision of brain damage falling like the snow that descends on the living and the dead in the last paragraph of another volume of stories of city life – Joyce's *Dubliners*:

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 covering everything like an unbreakable lease –

Skiing along on the soft surface of brain damage, never to sink, because we don't understand the danger –

(‘Brain Damage,’ *City*, p. 146)

This is not simply a parody of Joyce and the quasi-religious perspective of the end of ‘The Dead.’ It is also a measure of how far we have come since *Dubliners*. This snow-like fallout of brain damage is not just a reminder of the pollution of our physical atmosphere, it is the crust of phenomenal existence which has covered our mental landscape, cutting us off from the essence of our being, afflicting even the artists. For Barthelme man has become a phenomenon among phenomena. ‘WHAT RECOURSE?’ ask the bold-type headlines of ‘Brain Damage’. In ‘Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel’ Q and A discuss two possibilities, which are the two principal resources of metafiction: fantasy and irony:

Q: That’s a very common fantasy.

A: All my fantasies are extremely ordinary.

Q: Does it give you pleasure?

A: A poor ... A rather unsatisfactory ...

(p. 84)

A: But I love my irony.

Q: Does it give you pleasure?

A: A poor ... A rather unsatisfactory ...

(p. 92)

What recourse, indeed, for those gripped by phenomenological brain damage? They are beyond good and evil, beyond being, barely existing, snowed under.

For Gass, this phenomenological despair is a tempting refuge which he cannot quite accept:

I would rather it were the weather that was to blame for what I am and what my friends and neighbours are – we who live here in the heart of the country. Better the weather, the wind, the pale dying snow ... the snow – why not the snow?

(‘In the Heart ...’, *Heart*, p. 191)

But it is not the snow, the weather. Though the speaker tries to convince himself that ‘body equals being, and if your weight goes down you are the

less,' at the end of the title story (and of the volume) he is straining to hear 'through the boughs of falling snow' the 'twisted and metallic strains of a tune' that may or may not be 'Joy to the World'. Gass's world is full of snow, but there is always something active within it, like the mysterious killer in the black stocking cap who haunts the blizzard in 'The Pedersen Kid'. Gass's snow is not a crust that will support a man but a curtain that man must penetrate. It is not phenomenal but apocalyptic.

He was in the thick snow now. More was coming. More was blowing down. He was in it now and he could go on and he could come through it because he had before. Maybe he belonged in the snow. Maybe he lived there, like a fish does in a lake. Spring didn't have anything like him.

(*'The Pedersen Kid'*, *Heart*, p. 72)

After the purgation of this snowborne violence, there may be a new life, peace, even joy:

It was pleasant not to have to stamp the snow off my boots, and the fire was speaking pleasantly and the kettle was sounding softly. There was no need for me to grieve. I had been the brave one and now I was free. The snow would keep me. I would bury pa and the Pedersens and Hans and even ma if I wanted to bother. I hadn't wanted to come but now I didn't mind. The kid and me, we'd done brave things well worth remembering. The way that fellow had come so mysteriously through the snow and done us such a glorious turn – well it made me think how I was told to feel in church. The winter time had finally got them all, and I really did hope the kid was as warm as I was now, warm inside and out, burning up, inside and out, with joy.

(pp. 78–9)

In *Pricksongs and Descants* and *Lost in the Funhouse* Coover and Barth are less directly concerned with the conditions of being than Gass and Barthelme, and more immediately interested in the order of fiction itself. This difference of emphasis is proclaimed in the titles of the works and developed in each collection. Both descants and pricksongs are contrapuntal music. They run counter to the 'cantus firmus' of behavior. But to run counter is not to run free. These songs must speak to us finally about reality, however roundabout their approach. There are also some puns in Coover's title which can be looked at later. The title of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* is taken from a story about a boy who 'actually' gets lost in a 'real' funhouse. But the story is also about the difficulty of writing a story about that 'real' experience, as the book is about the difficulty of the writer whose position in existence is distorted by his desire to find

fictional equivalents for the conditions of being. For Barth, nature and Homer have a fearful symmetry – and they had it especially for Homer, he would add. ‘For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers.’ But not for artists and thinkers who alternate between making pricksongs and shouting, Stop the music. Trapped in life like a boy lost in a funhouse, this kind of man – intellectual man – seeks to maintain control over his being by *imagining* that he is lost in a funhouse, like Sartre’s waiter in *Being and Nothingness* who seeks to control the problem of being a waiter by pretending to be a waiter. Barth’s Ambrose is lost in a funhouse, so he ‘pretends that it is not so bad after all in the funhouse’. The boy Ambrose, figure of thinking man, treats the problem of being lost in a ‘real’ funhouse by constructing an imaginary one:

How long will it last? He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all, and he’s only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow’s way, complicate that’s, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was.

(‘Lost in the Funhouse,’ *Funhouse*, p.97)

Was what? Was what Ambrose can’t think of without remembering that the funhouse he’s in is not so well planned, so neatly equipped, is in fact ‘real’. But he does remember.

He wishes he had not entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he’s not. 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.

(p. 97)

Because life is a rather badly made funhouse the artist tries to imagine a better one. ‘God,’ Barth has quipped, ‘was not a bad novelist, only he was a realist’. The energizing power of Barth’s universe is the tension between the imagination of man and the conditions of being which actually prevail. After the ‘Frame-Tale’ (A Moebius strip which reads, endlessly, ‘ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN’), *Lost in the Funhouse* begins with ‘Night-Sea Journey,’ the tiny epic voyage of a spermatozoon caught in the inexorable motion of life, sex, and art. And it ends with the tale of an anonymous Greek writer (figure of Homer, father of fiction) who gets his inspiration by draining wine from nine amphorae

(named after the Muses) which he then fills with sperm and fiction written on goatskin in a mixture of wine, blood, and squid ink. He casts these creations upon the waters to float like spermatozoa on some night-sea journey of impregnation. *Lost in the Funhouse* is concerned with philosophical questions, but its metaphysics is inside its esthetics (life is bad art); just as Barthelme's concern for essential values is lost in the 'Brain Damage' and 'Bone Bubbles' of *City Life*. For Barthelme, language is inside of behavior and cannot get outside it to establish a perspective beyond the disordered wanderings of damaged brains. For Barth, behavior is inside of language. Life is tantalizingly fictitious, a rough draft of what might be perfected as a supreme fiction. For Gass, there is a deep reality behind behavior, beyond the walls of the funhouse. 'Against the mechanical flutter of appearance' he places 'the glacial movement of reality'. To approach this inner truth is difficult, because the path through human behavior leads into ultimate falsehood as well as ultimate truth. The fear of this falsehood haunts the truth-seeking narrator of 'Mrs. Mean':

Indeed I am not myself. This is not the world. I have gone too far. It is the way fairy tales begin – with a sudden slip over the rim of reality.  
(‘Mrs. Mean,’ *Heart*, p. 117)

For Robert Coover the way to truth leads precisely over the rim of reality and through the gingerbread house. He sees contemporary man as living in a contracting universe, forced to re-assume 'cosmic, eternal, supernatural (in its soberest sense) and pessimistic' perspectives. In such a world the writer must use

the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history. But these probes are above all – like [Don Quixote's] sallies – challenges to the assumptions of a dying age, exemplary adventures of the Poetic Imagination, high-minded journeys towards the New World and never mind that the nag's a pile of bones.  
(‘Dedicatoria,’ *Pricksongs*, p. 78).

Barth minds very much that the nag's a pile of bones. He feels that 'the narrator has narrated himself into a corner . . . and because his position is absurd he calls the world absurd' ('Title,' *Funhouse*, p. 112). He feels as imprisoned in the funhouse of fiction as Barthelme does in the brain damage of phenomena. But Coover, like Gass, senses an order beyond fiction and beyond phenomena, which may be discovered. But where Gass seeks to move through behavior to essence, Coover makes the parallel move through form to idea. This is why some of the most successful

things in *Pricksongs* are reworkings of fairy tales which probe into the human needs behind them. Gass thinks of a 'real' Hansel and Gretel

who went for a walk in a real forest but they walked too far in the forest and suddenly the forest was a forest of story with the loveliest little gingerbread house in it.

(*'Mrs. Mean,' Heart*, p. 117)

But Coover thinks of a fictional Hansel and Gretel who find in a gingerbread house the door to reality:

The children approach the gingerbread house through a garden of candied fruits and all-day suckers, hopping along on flagstones of variegated wafers. They sample the gingerbread weatherboarding with its caramel coating, lick at the meringue on the windowsills, kiss each other's sweetened lips. The boy climbs up on the chocolate roof to break off a peppermint-stick chimney, comes sliding down into a rainbarrel of vanilla pudding. The girl, reaching out to catch him in his fall, slips on a sugarplum and tumbles into a sticky garden of candied chestnuts. Laughing gaily they lick each other clean. And how grand is the red-and-white striped chimney the boy holds up for her! how bright! how sweet! But the door: here they pause and catch their breath. It is heart-shaped and blood-stone red, its burnished surface gleaming in the sunlight. Oh what a thing is that door! Shining like a ruby, like hard cherry candy, and pulsing softly, radiantly. Yes, marvelous! delicious! insuperable! but beyond: what is that sound of black rags flapping?

(*'The Gingerbread House,' Pricksongs*, p. 75)

This gingerbread house is a garden of sexuality, with its phallic chimney and cherry-red door. Sex itself is the door that connects fictional form and mythic idea: which is why these tales are called pricksongs and descants, or 'death-cunt-and-prick songs,' as Granny calls them in the opening story, 'The Door'. Apertures and orifices are as dominant in *Pricksongs* as mirrors and containers are in the *Funhouse*. Coover's technique is to take the motifs of folk literature and explode them into motivations and revelations, as the energy might be released from a packed atomic structure. 'The Door' itself is a critical mass obtained by the fusion of 'Jack the Giant-Killer,' 'Beauty and the Beast,' 'Little Red Ridinghood,' and other mythic fictions. In the heavy water of this mixture there is more truth than in many surface phenomena. Granny is aware of this as she ruminates on the younger generation's preoccupation with epidermal existence:

whose nose does she think she's twistin the little cow? bit of new fuzz on her pubes and juice in the little bobbies 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 I'll give her a mystery today I will if I'm not too late already and so what if I am? let her go tippytoin through the flux and tedium and trip on her dropped drawers a few times and see if she don't come running back to old Granny God preserve me whistlin a different tune! don't understand! hah! for ain't I the old Beauty who married the Beast?

(*'The Door,' Pricksongs*, p. 16)

Granny is witch and wolf, wife and mother; she is the old Beauty who married the beast – 'only my Beast never became a prince' – she is temptress and artist, a Scheherazade who has 'veils to lift and tales to tell'; she is initiatrix into the mysteries of her own degradation and transfiguration:

for I have mated with the monster my love and listened to him lap clean his lolly after ... I have been split with the pain and terrible haste of his thick quick cock and then still itchin and bleedin have gazed on as he leapt other bitches at random and I have watched my own beauty decline my love and still no Prince no Prince and yet you doubt that I understand? and loved him my child loved the damned Beast after all.

(*'The Door,' Pricksongs*, p. 17)

The 'flux and tedium' of phenomenal existence is not reality but the thing which hides it. For Coover reality is mythic, and the myths are the doors of perception. Like a mind-blown Lévi-Strauss he is concerned to open those doors.

Coover's mythic vision can be defined partly by its distance from Barthelme's perspective on myth. Usually a fabricator of assemblages of 'flux and tedium,' in *'The Glass Mountain'* Barthelme gives us a fairy tale of sorts. It seems there is this man climbing – 'grasping in each hand a sturdy plumber's friend' – a glass mountain 'at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue'. In one hundred numbered sentences and fragments he reaches the top with its 'beautiful enchanted symbols'.

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess.

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain ...

(*'The Glass Mountain,' City*, p. 65)

This is myth enmeshed in phenomena. The 'symbol' in the story symbolizes symbolism, reducing it to absurdity. It becomes an object with

a sign on it that says 'beautiful enchanted symbol'. The magical transformation of 'symbol' into 'princess' is simply a change of signs. Barthelme is like a comic magician who removes a sign labeled 'rabbit' from behind a sign labeled 'hat' in a parody of all magic. But when Coover gives us a magician putting a lady in a hat in the last story of *Pricksongs*, she is a real lady in a real hat:

Pockets handkerchief. Is becoming rather frantic. Grasps hat and thumps it vigorously, shakes it. Places it once more on table, brim up. Closes eyes as though in incantations, hands extended over hat. Snaps fingers several times, reaches in tenuously. Fumbles. Loud slap. Withdraws hand hastily in angry astonishment. Grasps hat. Gritting teeth, infuriated, hurls hat to floor, leaps on it with both feet. Something crunches. Hideous piercing shriek.

(*'The Hat Act,' Pricksongs*, p.255)

Magic is real. The fairy tales are true. Beast and princess are not phony symbols for Coover but fictional ideas of human essences. Barth and Barthelme are the chroniclers of our despair: despair over the exhausted forms of our thought and our existence. No wonder they laugh so much. Coover and Gass are reaching through form and behavior for some ultimate values, some true truth. No wonder they come on so strong. All four are working in that rarefied air of metafiction, trying to climb beyond Beckett and Borges, toward things that no critic – not even a metacritic, if there were such a thing – can discern.