

# NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

## Robert Coover's *The UBA*: Baseball As Metafiction

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The central ambiguity of Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* resides in the last chapter in which Henry, the protagonist and creator of an imaginary baseball series, abdicates his position as narrator. His disappearance for most of the critics implies his insanity, his loss of "balance" (an important word in the novel), and his inability to distinguish between the reality of this world and the fantasy world of his baseball game.<sup>1</sup> To speculate over Henry's sanity, however, reduces interpretations of the novel to the psychological analysis of the central figure and misses one of the key issues: Henry's and Coover's struggle (albeit in parody) over the nature of art. Both author and protagonist confront all the key artistic problems: point of view, authorial intrusion, language, purpose, verisimilitude, history, fictional rules, moral commitment, truth, and we watch as Henry becomes paradoxically more involved with, yet more detached from, the fiction he creates. The contention here is that his detachment, seen in the light of these fictional parallels, does not indicate Henry's personal insanity but rather his artistic decision, like Coover's, to separate himself from his creation.

From the first page of the novel certain of the "essential ideas of fiction"<sup>2</sup> appear: "History," "luck," and the being "all caught up in it." The subject of Henry's game (or fiction) is an "event of the first order" (p. 4), and he follows the traditional rules for writing fiction in creating his game: free will (or the imagination) balanced by what happens in "real" life determined by chance (or the dice). Both Henry's and Coover's initial goal is verisimilitude—the game is like baseball but faster; the novel is like life but shorter.

Henry, as novelist, feels his primary concern is for a written record of history, "to keep forever each least action" (p. 44). Furthermore, he struggles with his creation just as Coover must struggle with the novel, recognizing that "Even though he'd set his own rules . . . and though he could change them whenever he wished, nevertheless he and his players were committed to the turns of the mindless and unpredictable—one might even say, irresponsible—dice" (p. 40). The problem of creating character confronts him: "Who would Damon Rutherford really be then?" (p. 40) and he decides at first to adhere to the traditional realistic methods of character development in creating the figures who populate his game. Coover follows the same strategy: as readers we believe in Henry; we identify with his

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<sup>1</sup> See R. H. W. Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast: The Fictions of Robert Coover," *Hollins Critic*, 7 (April 1970), 1-11; Leo J. Hertz, "What's Wrong with the Christians," *Critique*, 11 (1969), 11-22; Frank W. Shelton, "Humor and Balance in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.*," *Critique*, 17 (1975), 78-89; and Mark Taylor, "Baseball as Myth," *Commonweal*, 96 (May 12, 1972), 237.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *Iowa Review*, 1 (Fall 1970), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, (New York: New American Library, 1968), pp. 1-2. All references are to this edition.

boredom and need for the game as an outlet; we agree with his sane position about balancing “work and play” (p. 141). In short, we like Henry just as Henry likes Damon.

In addition, Henry’s game, like the novel, has about it certain traditionally accepted rules, “certain assumptions or ground rules about what’s left in and what’s left out” (p. 49) to which both Henry and Coover initially adhere. But the original “jauntiness” (p. 59) in Henry’s style begins to disappear: “He’d changed. He couldn’t write like that now” (p. 59). Fiction becomes an increasingly serious and sobering project.

At the beginning of *The UBA* Henry is the traditional omniscient narrator. He even seems to sense beforehand how the dice will roll: “He knew even before he looked: 1-1-1” (p. 73). Henry is omniscient but not omnipotent: he cannot change the course of events once he, himself, instigates them. Omniscience, usually associated with third-person point of view, actually emerges here as a subtle first person. Henry is both creator (omniscient third person) and player (multiple first persons). Because he lives the roles of all his actors, he is far too close to his creation to remain objective. He has trouble separating himself from his game/art, and as a result, he suffers at the fictitious death of his fictitious hero, Damon. We as readers of Henry’s fiction suffer too because the distance between the reader and the fiction has been narrowed for us as well as for Henry. If we stand back as readers of Coover’s fiction, however, we laugh at the parody of real suffering over imaginary death.

Henry, as omniscient narrator, is concerned with his creation, and it is this concern which marks his moral position and ultimately determines his actions with regard to the UBA. At first, Henry tries to maintain an objective stance, even though he does not feel sufficiently detached. He makes no authorial intrusions, that is, no changes in the game. Although he cannot or will not intrude on his fiction, he clearly has a moral position with regard to what happens in his creation as well as a code of ethics about how to construct the fiction itself. Even after Damon’s death, Henry maintains control of the particulars of his story: “Later, he’d have it rain” (p. 77). But he will not interfere directly.

He becomes increasingly disenchanted, however, with merely recording what has happened: “Was. Murdered by the past tense” (p. 88), and he begins to take stock of the position of the game/novel: “Damon had been a wonderful league tonic” (p. 104)—like realism in the novel—but “the whole process had been slowing down . . . there’d been rising complaints about meaninglessness and lack of league purpose” (p. 104). These complaints sound suspiciously like the so-called “defects” of the modern novel. To entertain the bourgeois reading public, he feels, is no longer sufficient justification for the creation of the league/fiction/art: “Enjoyment. What in god’s name did enjoyment have to do with people and life and running a goddamn baseball league?” (p. 105).

The barroom/wake scene after Damon’s death is significant in Henry’s increasing awareness about art. The conversations are not merely Henry’s wide-angled view of the different reactions to death, but of the different reactions to art. As a result of these various opinions, Henry begins to “loosen up a little” (p. 108) and to revise his definition of art/the UBA even further. Fiction does more than mirror history, he concludes; it subsumes it—“the Association . . . bigger than all of them” (p. 108). At this point, however, he really skirts the central issue of what art is and tries to determine why he participates in it. He half admits that he must be crazy to persist: “What a drunken loony old goat you are” (p. 127). Prophetically Henry even anticipates the criticisms of Coover’s literary critics: “Some people would look on his game, Henry realized, as a kind of running away” (p. 140). The game/fiction,

however, is a product of Henry's ambiguous need for "balance" between what Coover's critics have called the real and the imaginary. But Henry phrases this need carefully. The choice is not simply between reality and illusion but rather between multiple realities—"there might be more alternatives than just two" (p. 142). Thus, Henry distinguishes not between fact and fiction but between his work with Zifferblatt and his "participation in the league" (p. 141), both equally real.

Both worlds have rules governing a person's participation in them. As long as these rules determine adequate behavior, Henry must maintain his balance between them. But he begins to feel limited by the traditional concept of verisimilitude and finds art has become mechanized and plastic—"the intrusion of all this machinery . . . didn't like it at all" (p. 149). Hence, he starts to review his notion of balance, that is, the traditional theories about fiction, and wonders if, after all "we have passed, without knowing it, from a situation of sequential compounding into one of basic and finite yes-or-no survival, causing a shift of what you might call the equilibrium point, such that the old strategies, like winning ball games, sensible and proper within the old stochastic or recursive sets, are, under the new circumstances, *insane!*" (p. 148).

He begins to meddle in the league, making minor changes in structure, but he cannot recapture the old attitude toward his creation. He searches again for some ultimate meaning in what he does, some motive, but can only conclude: "What I do, I do because I want to" (p. 155). He is unable to take significant action: "Supposing he just shipped Casey to the minors and to hell with the rules?" (p. 157). But the traditional rules of fiction still bind him: "Some kind of limit there" (p. 158). He despairs and thinks of leaving the UBA or destroying it—"better burn it" (p. 200). But Henry does neither.

He finally realizes that the "something remedial" (p. 128) to save the UBA/fiction is to break down, not break, the rules that traditionally govern composition. Breaking the rules implies that they still exist to be broken. But to destroy them implies a whole new order, or disorder, and balance, consequently, must be redefined. As Coover explains in an interview, "people are going back and breaking down all the old rules about having to tell a story that relates and is historically possible."<sup>4</sup> Henry, therefore, steps in, against all laws of probability and chance, contrary to all the conventional rules and ideas about verisimilitude, in disregard of his background assumptions about the game/novel and kills Jock Casey by manipulating the dice. Once this "remedial" step has been taken, there is no return to any of the past, accepted means of play. A new era has begun, both for the league and for the novel with a new set of premises and a different reason for being.

Henry's disenchantment with the novel as history, "past tense," is finally relieved in the last chapter which Henry/Coover is now able to write entirely in the present tense. More significant still is Henry's utter disappearance as the concerned omniscient narrator of his creation. His detachment from his art is total, and his unrelieved absence of moral judgment confuses traditional reader expectations. Because he refuses to intrude in the last chapter, critics call him insane and claim he has lost the balance so necessary for his life. But this view ignores the notion of multiple realities which Coover has so carefully set up as well as the UBA's fictional parallels. In the last chapter the discussions about the meaning, purpose and value of creation/art begin anew, this time in the guise of religious parody. Underlying the discussion, however, is the implication that fiction must be continually revitalized. At

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<sup>4</sup>"An Interview with Robert Coover: Leo J. Hertzell," *Critique*, 11 (1969), 25.

the end of the novel a new character, Shultz, like Henry before him, “plays himself some device with dice” (p. 234).

Henry’s withdrawal from the last chapter represents his artistic decision to detach himself from his creation. If he is wrong or insane, then it follows that so is Coover and God, Himself, the Ultimate Author. Clearly, neither Henry, Coover, nor God find it imperative or even desirable to reveal any presence or confirm any moral position. Instead, *The UBA* implies that fiction is one of a never-ending series of creations within creations moving forward from Coover to Henry to Schultz, ad infinitum, and backward from Henry to Coover to God in an infinite regress. Henry finally discovers that the key to fiction lies in the process of creating, “and the process was transformation” (p. 212). Thus, he has not lost his balance but redefined it, and Coover, certainly, has not killed the novel but attempted to transform it.

## Orpheus Returning: The Nature of Myth in Samuel Beckett’s “Still” Trilogy

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It would, of course, be quite absurd to argue that Beckett’s writing is “hidden behind a veil of Orphic esotericism.”<sup>1</sup> Nothing could, in fact, be further from the truth: the myth of Orpheus in Beckett must be regarded in terms of what he has called “the need that is the absolute predicament of particular human identity,”<sup>2</sup> namely, that of the artist figure who struggles to integrate his various selves. An appreciation of these more affirmative dimensions of Beckett’s writing has been hampered by, among other things, the fact that contemporary readings of the Orpheus myth have increasingly stressed the negations contingent upon a descent into the self and into language itself. Walter Strauss, whose *Descent and Return* exemplifies this approach, concludes that Beckett has “abandoned the Orphic ideal altogether,” that his “vision of a hopelessly fragmented and absurd universe would surely render the Orphic obsolete.”<sup>3</sup> But this essentially negative reading of the myth could only be convincingly applied to Beckett if we needlessly restricted ourselves to a consideration of what may now be called his “middle period,” particularly the “disintegration” he has so often spoken of with reference to *The Unnamable* (1958) and its “hell of stories.”

In Beckett’s later prose works there is a movement towards a regeneration of the Orpheus myth with an emphasis upon its first stage in which the archetypal artist once again directs his words towards the world. Myth now reappears in its original sense as a “true story” or exemplary model that creatively combines “facts” and “fantasy,” to use Vico’s definition which Beckett so very enthusiastically endorsed in

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<sup>1</sup> John Fletcher’s apt judgment in *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett’s important statement on the nature of the artistic enterprise in “Denis Devlin,” *Transition*, No. 27 (1938), p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 269.