Chapter 3

Experimental Modes of Short Fiction: Temporal ‘Becoming’ in

Robert Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants*

*Every effort to speak of the world involves a kind of fiction-making process. There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations. So if some stories start throwing their weight around, I like to undermine their authority a bit, work variations, call attention to their fictional natures.* (Coover, qtd. in Maltby 103)

The choice of Robert Coover’s collection of short fiction *PD* for the study makes things easy, as the many experimental stories give in to discussions on structural and metafictional demonstrations of postmodern time. Many of its stories approximate to the characteristics of Roland Barthes’ ‘plural text’:

[. . .] the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable [. . .] the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural
text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (S/Z 5-6)

This definition of an indefinite text along with Borges’ conception of a multiple narrative with “forking paths” will serve the analysis of what may be called a new ‘genre’ of stories ‘hard to tell’ and hardly told in any of the conventional modes.


“The Babysitter,” “The Elevator,” “The Magic Poker,” and “Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl” make conventional reading impossible with alternative stories within the same narrative. Instead of the usual uninterrupted flow the reader is forced to indulge in narrative games with the many strands that flip back and forth in their non-linear typography. The stories are structured as small paragraphs numbered or marked by partitions. Some of the sections are repetitions of identical scenes with almost the same descriptions but slightly varying, effecting contradictory versions (Heise 56).

The ontological issue taken up here might be the possibility of a space that can accommodate “incommensurable and mutually
exclusive worlds" (McHale, PF 44). McHale adopts Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’ for such a space where “fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry” (qtd. in McHale, PF 44). The discontinuous properties of such a space destroys all (con)sequential thinking, as Foucault further reflects in The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences:

[. . .] they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite to one another) to “hold together.” (qtd. in McHale, PF 44)

For the postmodernist writer this space is “the zone,” “the Zone” in Pynchon’s GR becoming paradigmatic for the postmodernist ‘heterotopia.’ What happens in all such space is a violation of “the law of the excluded middle,” which according to Umberto Eco is that every proposition has to be either true or false for a particular world; it cannot be both true and false (McHale, PF 33).

Postmodernist narratives in their reaching out for the “excluded middle” seek a mode of being between existence and non-existence, true and false. In such worlds events both do and do not happen;
the same event manifests in irreconcilably varying possibilities (McHale, *PF* 106). Borges’ story “The Garden of Forking Paths” serves as the reference point for such narrative experiments where there is a juxtaposition of contraries. Borges’ notion of the narrative “labyrinth” is a proliferation of “mutually-exclusive possibilities”(McHale, *PF* 106), as with the Chinese novel described in the story:

[. . .] in all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of the others. In the almost unfathomable Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He thus creates various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times. This is the cause of the contradictions in the novel. (98)

Borges also puts forth “A New Refutation of Time” challenging the conception of time as linear, unidirectional and causally continuous (Tambling 81). Borges’ playful argument is that there is no ground for claiming the existence of time “beyond each individual instant of perception,” thus attacking continuity and coherence in narrative time (Heise 31-32). Geoffrey Green finds in Borges a precursor to the revolutions and innovations in American fiction: “a sense of the image of Borges in our postmodern fiction” (203). Stories in Coover’s *PD* are taken into account as literary embodiments of
Borges' narrative principle of "forking paths." "The Magic Poker" gives a sense of the creator or inventor of the story getting confounded by the story's many unfoldings that get 'out of hand' (PD 30). "The Elevator" is noted for its characteristic documentation of "a variety of experiential variables that may and do occur as a man enters an elevator" (Green 208), which gives the effect of alternative and simultaneous possibilities. "The Babysitter" is said to achieve an "extraordinary velocity of interchangeable narrative events" so that "we are in time and in all times—rather than saying either this or that may occur, all things occur, and none of them, since literature contrives the illusion of reality and is ultimately a text of words, itself a forking off from life" (Green 208; emphasis added).

Coover's PD holds critical attention primarily for its appropriation of Borges' "forking paths" in several of its stories. They develop narrative strands "that exclude and invalidate each other, leaving the reader with a spectrum of possible developments rather than a single plot line" (Heise 55). The narrative strategy used in such instances of 'spatial form' can be called 'juxtaposition,' 'simultaneity' or 'repetition.'

Heise points at "the insistent reiteration of identical scenes" in postmodern texts (56). With slight variations of wording or narrated elements is effected "quite disparate and even contradictory versions" of the same scene or incident (Heise 56). Postmodernist repetitions
are not motivated by the perspectival differences of narrators as in modernist texts, and therefore do not present any possible coherent evolution of the actions or any "criterion for evaluating the reality of any version" (Heise 56). The series of elevator rides in Coover's "The Elevator," of Martin going up or down, at various times, alone or with company, silent, conversing or engaged in sex, present a jumble of scenes some of which might lead to successive moments in time, but others are contradictory accounts of the same elevator ride—what in Heise's terms might be the leftovers of "narratorial games with language" or "diegetic experiments" (57).

Textual contradiction as a metafictional strategy implies 'simultaneity,' says Patricia Waugh (137) as in the concept of spatial form. In the stories under study no resolution is possible by a simultaneous reading of elements, by associational juxtapositions, as in modernist texts. The alternative versions can only be substitutions of each other and cannot be simultaneous logical entities. Any explanation based on causal sequence is ruled out, also any possible consecutive reading (Waugh 137). These "self-erasing narratives" (McHale, PF 108) violate linear sequentiality and thus linear temporality.

McHale considers "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl" "a more perfect approximation of Borges' paradigm" than the more complex postmodern narratives (PF 107). There can be many possible
happenings between these four entities Swede, Carl, Ola and Quenby in an island, and the story explores some of them, all at the same time. There can be illicit sex and vengeful murder, or not, as the case maybe. The story popping out in some thirty-eight fragments, which the reader can cross-match and perhaps tie into narrative knots however does not give a single cogent story line. The section, which if numbered will be the thirty-first, proclaims this loose, "forking" nature of the narrative:

Swede, Carl, Ola, Quenby [...]. One or more may soon be dead. Swede or Carl, for example, in revenge or lust or self-defense. And if one or both of them do return to the island, what will they find there? Or perhaps Swede is long since dead, and Carl only imagines his presence. A man can imagine a lot of things, alone on a strange lake in a dark night. (163)

Carl, the man from the city on a holiday in the island stays in the rustic lodge of Swede and Quenby and engages in fishing and hunting, with Swede as a guide of sorts. The story fragments suggest Carl possibly sleeping with one of Swede’s women—his wife Quenby and daughter Ola—or not. The possible branchings emerge like this: if Carl sleeps with either of the women, Swede either finds out about it or he does not; if he finds out about it, Swede attempts to kill Carl or he does not; if there is an attempt to kill, Carl is either killed or
saved or kills Swede in self-defense (McHale, PF 108). All of these possibilities exist simultaneously in Coover's story.

The repeated scene of Swede and Carl alone on a static boat in a cloudy night possibly serves as a space for all the “forking paths” to converge (McHale, PF 108). All the possible evolutions of the story of Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl can lead to such a meeting point for Swede and Carl, where either nothing happens or there is a murderous encounter. The story breaks off at such a point that there is only a sort of tension built up between the two men; neither possibility of Swede killing Carl or not killing is realized in the telling. The whole narrative is therefore rendered amorphous by being inconclusively stranded at such a branching with two men on a stranded boat. From this stasis is generated the “self-erasing” narrative strands in a Borgesian “tree-like proliferation” (McHale, PF 106). We can agree with McHale on the homogeneity of the bifurcations in the story “Quenby and Ola,” which in its limited field of possibilities is thus a more perfect realization of the forking-paths principle than the others of its kind in the collection (108).

The coexisting contraries determine the nature of time which can be attributed to the story. The multiple ontological levels in which the incidents narrated can be located point to multiple times with no sequential but simultaneous existence. The fragmented narrative with non-sequential elements, which presents possibilities of relating the
disordered segments back and forth, also constructs a nonlinear time. For instance, there is Ola telling a story that is randomly placed across the narrative in fragments 8, 18, 19, 26, 32, 35, and 38. The fragments when rearranged do not align well into a smooth flow but involve 'repetitions' of the descriptions as if wanting a more traditional hand to construe it into a usual story. The metafictional characteristic is thus structurally invoked in the story, which experiments with its own structure and the reading experience.

"The Magic Poker" also leaves the reader full of ideas not about a story that he can interpret but the various cues for the possible stories he can construct. The story involves contradictory sections designed to substantiate its characteristically metafictional proclamations. There is a pervasive intrusive 'maker' in the story who proclaims, "this arrangement is my own invention. [. . .] I have brought two sisters to this invented island, I say [. . .]. It is indeed I who burdens them with curiosity and history, appetite and rhetoric"(33).

The story made up into 54 sections mirrors its own status as a narrative construct, with constant intrusions by the authorial voice saying "I make," "I invent," "I spin webs," and "I impose." What it leaves behind is quite contradictory and inconclusive: "anything can happen [. . .] [in this] small and secretive bay" (20). Many possible interpretations emerge—psychoanalytic, metaphorical, allegorical,
structural—complementing the level of denotation. But the telling, by its fragmentary and contradictory nature, itself forestalls any uniform ‘line’ of interpretation.

The island with its dense green trees, scattered ruins of a mansion, guest cabins, boat houses and docks, the secretive bay and the placid lake impresses one with a sense of ‘history,’ the ‘past’ left unravished like the rusted iron poker “bedded deep in the grass.” The naked, primitive caretaker’s son seems to be the only human remnant in that deserted island. Life from a somewhat ‘present’ time is to shake the almost timeless stupor when two girls in a boat land there. The authorial voice does not however allow the luxury of such a single, uniform plotline, and the rich paraphernalia of images does not give in to easy metaphors of existence. The island, the characters, their “curiosity and appetite,” everything depends on the particular ingenious ways they are cast by the author who foregrounds his ontological superiority over the fictional world (McHale, PF 210). Laying bare his role as ‘puppet-master’ or as ‘assertively godlike,’ this metafictional device dramatizes the author’s ontological superiority (211). The creation of the fictional world happens as a “performance” before the reader, by which “the ontological instability and tentativeness of the fictional world is demonstrated” (McHale, PF 211).
"The Magic Poker" as a structure is not an assortment of homogenizing episodes, but the author’s experiments with motifs, with sequence, and thus with time and causality. The author has ‘put’ a rusted iron poker on the way of the girl character with golden pants and devises many kinds of response from her, scattered among sections 13, 14, 16, 19, 29 and 32, if one is to give them numbers. We find the same incident described with slight variations or contradictory versions of the girl’s encounter with the poker. The reader is left nonplussed and clueless as to the viability of the simultaneous existence of these realities, for instance:

She bends low, her golden haunches gleaming over the grass: how beautiful it is! On a strange impulse, she kisses it—POOF! Before her stands a tall slender man [. . .].(24)

She crouches to examine it, her haunches curving golden above the blue green grass [. . .] ‘Oh!’ she says softly. ‘How strange! How beautiful!’ Squeamishly, she touches it, grips it, picks it up, turns it over [. . .] bugs! millions of them. She drops the thing shudders, stands, wipes her hand several times on her pants [. . .]. (25)

The answer to the problem is the very story, “the words of the story flaunted as the words of the story” (Waugh 139) not the representation of any ‘given’ reality. The reader can experience another
instance of different ontological levels or 'embedding' on the page when the fictional grandmother in “The Magic Poker” is about to tell the story of ‘The Magic Poker.’ There are many versions and different generic renderings of the poker theme—ranging from a legendary tale of suspense to a parodic fairy-tale, all beginning with the all-time grandma-story phrase, “once upon a time.”

The reader is to poke into the story of a poker, which can be magical, archetypal, phallic, legendary, or just a piece of rusty iron. The ‘ever-becoming’ poker, “like the story and the imagination of its inventor, exists through its power to transform, but exists only as its own transformations” (Waugh 139). The poker holds a man under a spell, released by a kiss from the girl in gold pants; it is rusty and holds a million bugs, she drops it; she kisses the handle, rusted shaft and tip which creates no magic, only a rotten taste in her mouth; elsewhere, in the words of the author the poker is a blend of eros and wisdom, sex and sensibility, music and myth; one finds Karen sticking a poker between her teeth, puffing on the poker, using it as a walking stick, a rifle on her shoulder, and later using it as a phallic symbol to suggest her still unravished virgin existence; poker is also an instrument of torture and might, with which Karen strikes the caretaker’s son, almost like a colonial instrument. The poker thus becomes parallel to the story’s sense of narrative time, which neither
progresses, nor regresses but reveals as discrete moments of simultaneous existence in the text.

The last section of the story seems almost a cyclical return to the conditions at the beginning—the silent bay, the placid lake, the island of memories. But no such cyclic time can be posited for a story that defies the assumptions of narrative progression, with a 'middle' that is a formless mess of narratives.

Peter Brooker in his introduction to the anthology *Modernism/ Postmodernism* recounts Jerome Klinkowitz's definition of an indefinite "post-contemporary" fiction of a pluralistic, relativistic world, where it is sometimes hard to tell what has 'really' happened (19). So this fiction tells untellable stories, stories combining what 'really' happened and all that might possibly happen, suggesting "how language can exist purely as itself, with no reference at all to content" (Brooker 20).

The problem addressed in Borges' theory of a narrative dimension where many possibilities of time coexist, is deftly experimented in Coover's "The Babysitter." The hundred and eight units of the narrative offer may different possible plot lines for a conventional reading. But the simultaneity of the contradictory sections renders any linear or sequential patterning impossible. None of the narrative units of "The Babysitter" says Waugh, "read consecutively (i.e., with the causal logic of realism) or even spatially
(i.e. with the associative logic of modernism)— combines to form a unified non-contradictory story” (138). Coover, with such an amorphous narrative deeply impresses one with the limited and artificial nature of fiction based on linear, causal relations.

The story depicting the middle-class American family of Mr. Tucker, his wife, children, and a babysitter who works with them, branches out into many possible narrative developments. A new babysitter is attending the children as the Tuckers leave for a party, the man throwing lustful glances at the girl. The babysitter’s boyfriend Jack is in the vicinity instigated by Mark to attempt a seduction when nobody is at home. The fragments variously suggest a failed American marriage, adolescent sexuality, or savage lust, the story ending with news of the children murdered and a corpse in the bath of the Tuckers, along which lines plots proliferate. Waugh dwells on the proliferation:

The story chooses all of them. Nor can the reader naturalize the contradictory alternatives through a modernist reading in terms of shifts of consciousness or epistemological shifts, say, from ‘reality’ to dream. The story makes no indication of a difference in ‘reality’ status of the various sections; it can only be the ‘reality’ of itself. (138)
The segmented narrative is a dizzying mixture of plots, which cannot be realized simultaneously by an ordinary temporal and narrative imagination. The narrative is considered particularly complex for its "branching and converging pathways" (McHale, *PF* 108), and the significant intrusion of television narratives, which augment the ontological uncertainty. All these narratives intersect into a "kaleidoscopic display" (Waugh 139), or a ‘collage’ of realities or times as in a film with disparate scenes running rapidly without transitions. Postmodern narrative can be considered “a temporal instance of collage, or rather collage in motion” (Ermarth, *Sequel* 8). The art of collage disconnects material objects from their usual connections of time and space and thus “neutralize the principle of non-contradiction” (Ermarth, *Sequel* 8).

The babysitter is engaged in all things usual—feeding the children, forcing them for a bath and to bed from the obsessed viewing of the television. The nasty and uncontrollable children, the baby waking up and crying for milk or for diaper-change and the intermittent ringing of the phone, when all she wants is some time of relaxation in the bathtub or watching the television, is ‘hard times’ for the girl. In this messy state of affairs narrative time goes out of joint: in different episodes Jack and his friend are let in or denied over the phone; they wait at the bushes for a chance to force themselves into the bathroom, or just peep in through the window;
Jack and Mark are with her watching the television, fondling her under the blanket, or Mark is holding her down instigating Jack to force himself into her, or Jack is holding her for Mark; she chases them out, or Mr. Tucker catches them unawares, or all the people spring in with the police, or Mark is given a blow by Jack pitying her bruised body. Mr. Tucker gets into the bathroom when she in the tub, as if by accident, or is behind the bushes to see her naked with her towel pulled away, or blackmails her into an intercourse to keep the secret of her liaison with Jack, with Mrs. Tucker and others breaking in through the front door. The spurting out of Mr. Tucker's lustful fantasies in the drunken party mood makes it difficult to sort out illusion from an actual sexual encounter. There are many more permutations and combinations in this 'labyrinthine' narrative, and one cannot, exclude the parts played by the children, the baby, the telephone, the television, and some signs of impending danger like a siren, or some presence outside.

The last section of the story is in fact a 'multiple world' of incongruous endings, a very non-totalizing denouement at that: "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bath-tub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV, the news is over, they're selling aspirin. 'Hell, I don't know,' she says. 'Let's see what's on the late late movie?" (239). The possibility of all these deaths happening simultaneously is completely
set aside by the narrative, which is unreliable as to fix the identity of
the corpse in the bath-tub, whether it be the babysitter getting her
skull cracked slipping down from Mr. Tucker's savage embrace, or is
it Mr. Tucker getting himself hurt by the sink on his way down;
whether it be Jack and Mark who leave the babysitter dead in the
tub after a rape attempt; or the baby getting drowned in the tub
where she absently leaves him to attend the phone, or dead in her
attempt to muffle its scream. In this stage the story only gives a
confused/confusing alarm: "Police sirens wail, lights flash. 'I heard
the scream!' somebody shouts. 'There were two boys!' 'I saw a man!'
'She was running with the baby!' 'My God!' somebody screams, 'they're
all dead!' Crowds come running in. Spotlights probe the bushes" (237).
Jack and Mark might have got rid of the children witnessing their
deadly assault on the babysitter, or it might be someone else on a
killing spree, as suggested by "the cold white face staring in" (235). It
is also possibly some other babysitter in the TV news, as our
protagonist is dozing off, putting children to bed, all the dishes done.

The television narrative acting as fiction-within-fiction in "The
Babysitter," becomes a significant narrative trope. McHale terms it
"the plural ontology of television-dominated everyday life" (PF 128),
which he attributes to postmodernist writing. He writes,

[... ] the movies and television appear in postmodernist
writing as an ontological level: a world-within-the world,
often one in competition with the primary diegetic world of the text, or a plane interposed between the level of verbal representation and the level of the ‘real.’ Postmodernist fiction at its most mimetic holds the mirror up to everyday life in advanced industrial societies, where reality is pervaded by the ‘miniature escape fantasies’ of television and the movies. (128)

McHale, in his *Constructing Postmodernism* makes an insightful entry into the ontology of television and the significant intrusions of TV in postmodern culture. TV displaces cinema as ‘cultural dominant,’ as postmodern culture’s privileged metaphor for itself, or the most fitting model for its plural ontology (*CP* 125). “The Babysitter” involves TV as an “ontological pluralizer” with a “flow” of worlds (*CP* 128) in which the evening TV programmes seep in, sometimes in the background and sometimes manifestly foregrounded, complementing and replicating the complex narrative of “forking paths.” The narrative presents a discontinuous plurality of programmes, and the characteristic “zapping” or “channel-hopping,” unfolding in a whole range: dance numbers, Westerns, spy-thriller, ball game, murder mystery, melodrama, and the news followed by an aspirin commercial and the late night movie. The “ontologically plural, centrifugal structure” of the TV therefore “reflects in miniature” the ontological
structure of the narrative of “The Babysitter”; TV is a “mise-en-abyme, or reduced scale-model,” of the ontologically plural narrative (CP 130).

Glenn Hendler in the search for the postmodern on television remarks on the parallel pluralities involved in channel surfing and the construction of a postmodern text: “Channel surfing, zapping, grazing: flicking from station to station, program to program, constructing my own plural text, intended by nobody. What could be more postmodern?” (173). The experimental stories of the kind of “The Babysitter” work out the possibilities of postmodern narrative with the added entanglement of a television motif, which models its fragmentary nature.

The random flicking of the television channels provides an experience of narrative time almost similar to the arbitrary flashing of narrative possibilities in the story. In the conventional narrative the ‘embedding’ of another level of reality like the television film is not meant to cause a disruption in the linear temporality and unified whole of the narrative. But indiscriminate narrative intrusions of film sequences resonating with the situations of murder or mystery in “The Babysitter,” and the structural parallels we find between the two worlds or levels of reality, might effect a breaking of the frames of the two genres (modes) of narrative. We can draw theoretical connections with Heise’s analysis of postmodern frame narratives: “A similar blurring of the time sense sets in when different levels of
the nested structure resemble each other closely enough that at least a temporary confusion becomes possible [. . .]. And linear temporality may collapse [. . .]” (60).

In fact something happening with a babysitter somewhere might be just news on television, nullifying the narrative’s tremors of rape and murder. The suppositions and the foregrounding of their fictional indeterminacy reaches a climactic point when the whole mayhem ends with “Let’s see what’s on the late late movie” (239). The movie is probably, concludes Waugh, “a tale of a babysitter installed with the children, the parents departed [. . .]” (139).

What we have been doing is a paradoxical system-making to limit narratives that can be anything but predictable systems. One might thus fix the story “The Elevator” also into the category of stories with “alternative worlds” (Waugh 100) to serve the purpose of our analysis. The story itself seems to attach some significance to numbering: “The Elevator” is one of its kind in this collection with numbered segments.

The segments are all about Martin taking the elevator in his office building: “Every morning without exception and without so much as reflecting upon it, Martin takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works” (125). Another contradictory possibility of the elevator having a young girl as operator—not a self-service elevator—is also presented in intermittent sections. There are
also instances of unmotivated repetitions with slight variations, introducing a jarring note to one's expectations for a smooth reading experience. Heise's analysis of the distinctions such repetition effects between modernist and postmodernist narratives might find place here:

[. . .] in modernism, repetition and variation of the same events are motivated by differing perspectives of the narrators or focal characters whose views they reflect [. . .] the comparison of different narrator's accounts in a modernist novel usually allows one to form a fairly consistent picture of the events that lie behind them. No such motivation however is normally given for postmodernist repetitions. As a consequence, it is also impossible for the reader to infer a coherent image of the actions that underlie the repetitions, since there is no criterion for evaluating the reality of any version the text happens to present. (56)

The episodes in the story have Martin as a common factor in the elevator, alone or variously in company with men and women, in a reflexive mood at times, sometimes with happy interchanges between him and the lady operator, some other times submissive to a crude and coarse interplay of nasty language, and in some turn of events even going to the extremes of joy and terror in his encounters with
love, sex and death. Temporal succession and causal connections can be attributed to some of these moments, but the overall effect is of “mutually exclusive versions” (Heise 56) of life in an elevator—the girl and the possibilities of a sexual union in a crashing elevator, defying death, for instance, is overruled if Martin in ‘reality’ takes a self-service elevator.

“The Elevator” in fifteen numbered sections, nevertheless offers descriptions suggesting continuity and routine activity as of the elevator going up or down with men, at stipulated times of the day, with fixed floors each one is designated to—all victims of ‘the clock.’ This is how Vonnegut muses on human life locked up in clock-time: “There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (SF 15). Martin’s muse also stirs in the elevator, though he is “without so much as reflecting upon it” (PD 125; 129; 133) bound by the ‘Earthling’ categories of time and space: “The systematizing, that’s what’s wrong, he concludes, that’s what cracks them up” (133).

Martin is bound to make the customary elevator ride every time. It is only a possibility towards the end that he “reflecting upon it for once and out of a strange premonition” (137) probably decides to walk the flight of steps. The elevator becomes an agent of ‘time,’ of mortal life, for that matter. Martin is one among the many riders of the elevator “tyrannized by their own arbitrary regimentation of time”
they glance nervously at their watches with a hurried sharing of customary civilities, their bleak, blank faces growing impatient with the elevator which does not move in ‘time.’ In another instance of Martin working late in the office, his watch having stopped at twelve thirty in the midnight, and the elevator not working, he is totally perturbed and trembling in the realization of having gone out of the bounds of a measurable time, of something looming large like death, elevating him in the reverse direction (where there is no fifteenth floor) to some kind of a ‘timeless void.’ The process of the elevator struggling upwards is described as the “accretion of tragedy,” “a torture self-imposed yet in all probability inescapable”(133). This up and down goes on like a river of time, to some end unfathomable to the human mind—‘e-deformed browbeaten mind-animals,’ “suffering and insufferable” (134). Alone at the fourteenth floor, Martin stares back at the ‘end’ of human time, the “spent emptiness” of the elevator, and concludes: “There, only there is peace”(134).

Martin is mostly projected as a ‘mind-animal’ seeking pattern to give shape and significance to experience. Maltby traces this view to “the Kantian model of the mind as an essentially structuring agency, imposing its categories on the raw flux of experience,” or for a closer appropriation, to “the linguistic model of cognition as a process of ‘textualization,’ of knowing the world in the form of ‘narratives’ or ‘stories’” (89). We can find Martin overtly musing on the categories
in the section numbered '5.' He observes, “this elevator contains them all: space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class” (129). His delving into the relative motion of the passengers, apparently motionless on the elevator floor, yet moving, leads to thoughts on motion and the medium, energy and mass, force and matter, and so on to the infinitesimal minuteness of atomic reorganization. Martin is pregnant with something, “the image grips him purely”: “the totality of the universe is suffused: each man contains all of it, loss is inconceivable” (PD 129).

The story negotiates the possibility of transgressing the limits of categorization, of time and loss. One might recall the Tralfamadorian alternative of a time without beginning and end, causes and effects—“many marvelous moments seen all at one time” (SF 64). Nadeau refers to Einstein’s theory of matter as simply a point in the space-time continuum where the gravitational field is extremely intense (123). All matter as energy always has been and “always will be,” “since energy is never lost but merely transferred, the universe is perpetually full and can never be anything but itself” (Nadeau 123). In Pynchon’s GR, again one finds in the face of colossal catastrophe a sense of the perpetuation of nature’s process: of a universe which is “fluid,” the totality of which is “suffused” as in our story of the elevator. There is no loss in this process even with death. “There is a continuity in all natural process which includes us even if a particular
configuration of molecular activity (self) ceases to be,” Nadeau explains (138).

This realization of a “never-finished becoming” (Nadeau 196) is juxtaposed with the story segments that are stranded in time and death. Martin is perhaps going to meet Death casually in his way down the elevator to the drugstore or for lunch. Or the cable would snap and in the elevator’s “breathless plunge” (130) he would be there with the lift operator, searching her reaches for a possible defiance of death as “they plunge, their damp bodies fused, pounding furiously, in terror, in joy [. . .]” (136). There is a part of the story in italics where Martin proclaims his omnipotence almost ironically: Martin of his own “freewill” is imposing doom on the elevator created by him, moved by him. There is a shift later to a frantic prayer: “But – ah! The doomed, old man, the DOOMED! What are they to us, to ME? ALL! We, I love! Let their flesh sag and dewlaps tremble, let their odors offend, let their cruelty mutilate, their stupidity enchain— but let them laugh, father! FOREVER! let them cry!” (134)

In the last section of the story numbered ‘15...’ where the ellipsis seems to point to something which goes on, there is again a shift back to potency: “I, Martin, proclaim against all dooms the indestructible seed” (137). What immediately follows is a description of Martin switching over to an escape from the elevator (death/time) by choosing to walk the steps. The endnote is one of contradiction and
undecidability, a space for the story's structural and thematic concerns to transact.

The outcome of such a transaction is the play with language and narrative structure. The story gives a specimen of subversion and play in section 14 where someone's excited monologue in slang carries on in a 'carnivalesque' breaking of rules of propriety, of syntax, spelling or punctuation. 'Mert' or 'Mort' is presented as a Priapic or phallic creature ("a goddamn jackoff god or somethin" (135)), and some of the mythical rituals and beliefs associated with fertility and regeneration are parodied: “they pull him off out there in the fields and spray the crops [. . .] and they bring him all the old aunts and grannies and he splits them open a kinda stupendous euthanasia for the old ladies and he blesses all their friggin procreations with a swat of his doodang [. . .]” (135).

The interpolation of a different use of language produces the effect of a plurality at the level of discourse: the commonplace description of elevator rides coincides with metaphysical situations of reflections on being and time, and the conflicting 'register' of a nasty slang which breaks the rules of propriety and grammar. It might be a pointer to the kind of 'polyphony' or 'heteroglossia' that Bakhtin attributes to novels in The Dialogic Imagination. This effect of different voices, discourses, or worlds in collision becomes a central characteristic of postmodernist fiction, says McHale, "heteroglossia"
used here as "a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse" (PF 167). In "The Elevator" the use of the negative deviant language or "antilanguage" becomes an ever more radical strategy: the non-standard language is in a 'dialogic' relationship with its more standard variant, creating in effect an "anti-world-view," "a counter reality of its own that is dialectically related to "straight" or "official reality" (McHale, PF 168). This effect of conflicting realities at the level of discourse replicates the discontinuous and multiple temporal structure of the narrative. Parody is again an assortment of heterogeneous worlds/times—Martin's world, and that of Priapus, a Greek and Roman God of gardens and male generative power. Coover has attempted postmodern parody in some other stories in this collection alluding to fairy tales and Biblical motifs, the theoretical ramifications of which would be a challenging area for the study to enter.

Four stories have been sorted out from the collection for their episodic structures, which break conventional notions of narrative sequence and coherence. All of them have repetitions of descriptions, with slight variations or contradictory meanings, creating a multiple, heterotopic world. Heise does a microanalysis of such "diegetic experiments":

[...] the text explores the temporal micro-texture of crucial scenes in such detail that the reader is alerted to the
most minute element of change [. . .]. Due to this focus on the microstructure of time, what we learn is not so much how one event leads to another; in fact, the reader can never be certain whether one thing leads to another at all. Instead, the focus is on the constitution of the moment itself. Time "passes," [. . .] it does not set up any irreversible directionality but reconfigures the elements of the individual moment just enough for change to be perceptible. Instead of bridging the gap from one instant to the next, it introduces difference into the instant itself, splitting it into multiple bifurcations and virtualities. (57-58)

In such a 'contingent' narrative none of the alternate versions can claim an upper hand. Time is divided and disseminated; the present, divorced from past and future, is "trapped in its own mutations" (Heise 58). The stories of Coover thus undertake the revolutionary structuring of a narrative, which in its dispersed state overrules the limiting ideologies of cause and effect, closure and the unflinching linearity of an Absolute time.

If the stories like "The Babysitter" are nonconformist in their metafictional contrivance of a divergent narrative structure, one might form another 'category' of stories in PD that create space for dominant and deviant cultures to coexist. This kind of 'polyphony' marks the
emergence of a postmodern dissent with the established ‘meanings’
and conventions of what is considered to be bourgeois-rationalist
culture. Maltby in his *Dissident Postmodernists*, selectively discusses
“Panel game,” “The Wayfarer” and “Morris in Chains.” In the section
titled “Policing the Bounds of Discourse” (82), Maltby is after the
‘little narratives,’ which do not fit into the larger societal frameworks.
More light is shed on the socio-political aspects of postmodernist
narrative subversion than on its structure and metaphysics.

The stories are informed by a realization of the “unwritten
narratives” of Western culture which base themselves on what
Ermarth calls “historical time”:

[. . .] the belief in a temporal medium that is neutral and
homogeneous and that, consequently, makes possible
those mutually informative measurements between one
historical moment and another that support most forms
of knowledge current in the West and that we customarily
call “science” [. . .] for example, what is said or implied by
the United States Constitution, Darwinian biology, and
Marxist philosophy [. . .] everything it implies about
individual subjectivity, collective endeavor, proper uses
of language, the nature of power or thought, and [. . .] the
nature and uses of knowledge. (20)
The non-participating ‘subject,’ the ‘antilanguage,’ or the counter-cultural aspects in Coover’s stories therefore can be read as critiques of History or linear time, thus pointing to a multivalent temporality. The ‘Unwilling Participant’ in the “Panel game,” ignorant of the rules of the game; the queer silence and the subversive “eruption of obtuse language” (123) from the wayfarer; the ‘unsocialized’ existence of Morris in chains, all are possible pointers to a living outside the ‘system.’

The systems in the stories have their ways of exclusion and coercion. The “Panel Game” formed as a TV quiz show has its panel to judge the participant—Aged Clown, Lovely Lady, and Mr. America—and the Moderator upholding the rules of the game. There is the traffic cop in “The Wayfarer” who tries to ensure his authority and cultural identity, face to face with a man who seems to have wandered into this world, with no sense of the officer’s role in the power structure. There is the whole State machinery under Dr. Peloris to make a highly methodical study and capture of Morris, whose simple pastoral vision is a threat to their “science” (47).

Maltby in his analysis of the “Panel game” recognizes in the format of the game “the analogue for the process of enigma, suspense, and disclosure which governs much conventional fiction,” which rests on the understanding that “a chain of enigmatic signifiers will, ultimately, relay the reader to a conclusive signified or interpretation”
The cultural significance of such narratives with an investigative purpose, as in a detective story, lies primarily in their aim of 'rationalizing experience' so that "the mystery is explained, the behavior classified, and the criminal brought to justice" (Ermarth, *Sequel* 19). It is a confirmation of a discourse which thus values "empirical procedure, reasoned discovery, problem solution, linear causality and temporal unfolding," almost a ritual "re-inscription of a whole set of practices and beliefs" (Ermarth, *Sequel* 19).

Coover's "Unwilling Participant" or the "Bad Sport" in the game cannot reason out the clues given to him by the Moderator. Amidst the conditioned applauses from the audience, the Bad sport wants to make know that he is not "well apprized of the precepts and procedures" (*PD* 82) of the game. The clue-words merely lead him to a 'chain of signifiers,' almost analogous to a Derridian 'deferral.' In the participant's frantic efforts to construct an answer he is interminably switching from code to code, mostly depending on homophony or synonymity as sources of signification (Maltby 82). He takes off from the Clown's clue of the "three-spined stickleback":

beriberi. Also bearberry, the dog rose, dogberry. Dogberry: the constable [ . . . ]. PD (80)

The play with words does not come to ‘the desired end’ or a definite meaning. Coover in fact implicates the reader also in such a condition of ineptitude: “And the Bad Sport, you ask, who is he? Fool! Thou art!” (PD 80). The reader is as much incognizant of the rules of the game as the ‘unwilling participant.’ Maltby explicates how the language game, by defying ‘closure’ subverts the expectations of a conventional reading experience:

The reader expects that the clue-words will eliminate the possibilities of meaning in the passage to the disclosure of a final meaning. Instead, those possibilities proliferate as Coover conspicuously manipulates the rules of language. [. . .] Coover’s purpose is not simply to induce a questioning of the literary process of signification. Rather, he subverts literary-narrative conventions within the framework of a story so as to induce a questioning of signification as a sociopolitical process. (83)

The ideological significance of the characteristic ‘subject’-positions in the power structure is evident: the Moderator behind the ‘rostrum’ with gestures of superiority over an audience susceptible to manipulation; the members of the panel who represent stereotypical television images; the audience the story itself refers to as “the same
as ever, docile, responsive, good-natured, terrifying,” who “cued to Thunderous Response, responds thunderingly” (PD 80); and an unwilling representative of the audience who fails to prove himself fit for a place in the system or community. Maltby grabs the politics of the “Panel Game” as a discourse or language-game, where language becomes the touchstone to test whether the “Unwilling Participant,” or anyone for that matter, is within or outside the community, or the “rules of cultural intercourse” (83-84). The participant’s ‘muteness’ after a failed entry into “the lex of the game” therefore becomes ‘mutinous’ (PD 84). The Moderator, in contrast to the Bad Sport’s ineffectual never-ending language fragments, is “riding on waves of grand hosannas” (PD 84) to language, with his eloquence:

Muteness is mutinous and the mutable inscrutable! (84)
Inflexibly same and the lex of the game! (84)
THE SAGA OF SAGACITY IS THE PURSE OF PERSPICACITY! (85)
REASON IS THE RESIN, THE COLLEGE OF KNOWLEDGE! (85)

He tries to prompt the failed participant: “You must have contrived some concrete conjunctions from the incontrovertible commentary qua commentary so conspicuously constituted!” [. . .]
Dig in! Tie it up! The truth is [. . .]” (85). Finally the Moderator pronounces the penalty for straying away from “the truth”: the
participant is to be hanged by the panel for failing to "disentangle this entanglement" (85), for snapping the threads of "cultural affiliation" (Maltby 84).

The way the truth is to be sought, by a suggested tying up using 'concrete conjunctions' and 'incontrovertible commentary' points to a system based on linear connection, definite ends and unflinching cultural-linguistic beliefs. A moral of sorts clinches the argument:

Don't twiddle or piddle
Or diddle your middle
While riding a riddle, old Sport —
[
[........................
— For the frame is the same
In fame or in shame
And the name of the game—
[
[........................

--is La Mort! (PD 87)

The broken syntax of the unwilling participant becomes an instance of 'antilanguage' (he 'twiddles, riddles, diddles') against the official rule-bound language, and thus works out a deconstruction of the conventions of language and narrative.

In "The Wayfarer" also there is the outbreak of a 'non-language.' The wayfarer, with a bullet shot to his chest suddenly wakes up from silence to speech. The policeman's records say:
He spoke rapidly, desperately, with neither punctuation nor sentence structure. Just a ceaseless eruption of obtuse language. He spoke of constellations, bone structures, mythologies, and love [. . .] of beliefs and lymph nodes, of excavations, categories, and prophecies [. . .]. Harmonics! Foliations! Etymology! Impulses! Suffering! [. . .]. Immateriality patricide ideations heat-stroke virtue predication—I grew annoyed and shot him in the head. (124)

Here again as in “Panel Game” the utterance that transgresses the limits of language or “the bounds of discourse” (Maltby 82) is put to an end.

The story is in the form of the officer’s report of an encounter with the man who seems otherworldly and fails to register the officer’s presence and the exercise of his authority. The power he wields, which seems to sustain his identity, is dangling between the man’s threatening silence and his own flickering sense of superiority. His narration goes on with timely justification of his efforts to keep his authority unambiguous: there are ‘useful premises’ and ‘safe suppositions’ on the vagrant’s disobedient silence. The officer tries to make sense of what is happening by fixing it in his memo-book, which he alarmingly finds ‘blank.’ The officer interposes his face in the path of the man’s vacant “mindless” stare, but there is “nothing that could
be graphed” (PD 120) from the eyes. He hopes his badge would stake a claim, but to no avail, and is beset with doubts, whether the man is afraid, or angry, or even contemptuous, or else has something wrong with his vocal mechanism. The man’s silence proves ‘mutinous’; the officer fails to put it in words: he writes “aphonia” and then rules it off.

It is with a certain self-assurance and a sense of duty that the officer pokes his barrel under the man’s nose, to force him into speaking out ‘his name,’ ‘the President’s name,’ ‘the officer’s name,’ ‘what day it was,’ ‘what place it was’ (PD 121)—all, interestingly, the ‘fixities’ and ‘definites’ of man’s limited existence. The officer reaches almost the limit of his patience and courage when he is shouting out orders for the man to stand, to lie down, to look, and not even a finger moves in response. The irony of the moment is that the response, or the refusal to respond cannot be attributed to the impregnable stasis of the man: “I say refused, although it may not have been a question of volition” (PD 122). The irony bounds when the officer is frantically gathering his draining confidence by breaking the man’s nose, asking him to stare vacantly, and ordering blood to flow from his nose. The compliance is all the more frustrating: “He obeyed. Or, rather: he remained exactly as he was before” (PD 122). The only choice left for the cop is to carry out his “orders” and “execute him on the spot” (PD 122).
A shot in the chest, some time for the blood to ooze out, and then comes the sudden 'eruption of speech' and movement. The policeman, taken aback by the untoward utterance wants to bring it to an end. With a shot in the head his job is done, and he now wants to forget the episode that goes out of his bounds: "As I had feared, he was a mess" (PD 124). There is again an attempt to bring it to book: to jot down the vital data, to make a full report and to note down the "exact time." Restless and absorbed in the unyielding experience, it is in the gracefully flowing traffic that he seeks recuperation and rectitude:

Uniformly it flowed, quietly, possessed of its own unbroken grace and precision. There was a variety in detail, but the stream itself was one. One. [. . .] It flowed away and away and the unpleasant images that had troubled my mind flowed away with it. At last, I sat up, started the motor, and entered the flow itself. [. . .] A participant. I enjoy my work. (PD 124)

"The Wayfarer" projects, as in "Panel Game," the image of an "ultra-cohesive social order," which sanctions the death of those standing outside its "established system of discourse" (Maltby 85-86). The officer, participant and watchdog of the "order," subject to its "catechism" (PD 121) of 'duty,' 'proper sense,' 'precision,' and 'exact time' is unsettled by the intrusion of another indeterminate culture.
His narrative marked by “a functionalist logic” and “punctilious style” (Maltby 85) acts as a foil to the unruly speech of the wayfarer lacking punctuation and syntax. In the cop’s almost unreflective absorption in the ‘flow’ of the traffic, we find the kind of unconditional acceptance of a linear time and the ‘reality’ it constructs. We can identify this “hyper conformity” (Maltby 85) or integration in the responses of the “passersby” in “The Wayfarer,” as with the Audience in the “Panel Game.” Time goes berserk in the language of the old man, switching rapidly and illogically from subject to subject, losing eventually the pauses showing distinctions: “Immateriality patricide ideations heat-stroke virtue predication” (PD 124). Such “footloose narrative ramblings” (Maltby 85) starkly contrast with the ‘traffic-system’ of our conventional narratives.

“Morris in Chains” also presents an alternative to the established order—an intrusive ‘Other’ world of pastoralism—and the “intransigent effort in the common behalf” (PD 46) to save the nation from its counter cultural projects. The best minds in the State under “Doris Peloris, M.D., Ph.D., U.D.” (PD 47) are engaged in the hunt for Morris. No one in the State machinery is doubtful of the outcome: “it was merest Morris versus the infallibility of our computers, after all” (PD 48).

Morris is conceived as a ‘priapic faun’ illicitly herding sheep in the city’s parks, who pipes his way into some “unsocialized part of the self” (Maltby 86): “Morris trod old paths, forced a suffering of the
inveterate green visions, a merciless hacking through the damp growths of our historic hebephrenia” (PD 46-47). Despite their affirmation that his ‘simple song’ cannot prevail against their ‘science,’ the earlier chases get deactivated, may be due to some methodological loose ends. A foolproof strategy is evolved by Dr. Peloris’ team to track him down, and if possible reintegrate him into their world.

“Morris in Chains” can be read as Dr. Peloris’ report on the momentous capture, interspersed with Morris’ monologues, thus leaving the narrative space open for the conflicting discourses to enact their polemics. One cannot however simply reduce the conflict to the “critique of a technocratic culture” or “a retrospective idealization of rustic life” (Maltby 86). Morris and his flock cannot be situated in any idyllic pastoral setting; the mythical reworking can only find place as postmodern parody which effects a ‘deglamorization’ and reinterrogation of the Arcadian themes of “bucolic tranquility” (Maltby 86). There is a debunking of the idyllic fantasies in Coover’s reworking, where the head ram, old Rameses is castrated by Morris and the sheep conspire to kill him. The description of Morris’s lovemaking with a goose girl subverts the conventions of a pastoral romance: the soft and perfumed breasts of the lady love of lore is deformed into the foul-tasting, bloodied and scarred ‘pap’ of the goose girl “with some mucusy gop like to made me retch right there in her poor silly face it did!” (PD 51). The reworking of traditional motifs and genres, which
is characteristic of postmodern fiction, involves significant implications of a text that operates simultaneously in multiple modes, and effects a superimposition of patterns (Ermarth, *Sequel* 166).

Morris’s language is markedly unsophisticated and roguish, deviating from the essentials of grammar like punctuation, syntax, and tense, causing a wreckage of the whole concept of coherent narration. Here is a specimen of the Morris narrative, which is printed parenthetically in brackets:

(as if I ain’t havin troubles enough old Rameses stages him an insurrection the sonuvabitch! had it in for his old buddy Morris ever since I cropped his marbles and hell I didn’t wanna do it but the stock was multiplicatin past all reason and I had to halt it somewheres they was draggin me down to a near standstill [. . .]). (*PD* 53)

Morris’s language and versification are considered subversive “mad poetries,” and a possible cause for panic, for they, despite all resistance, seem to strike a chord somewhere in some mythic precipitate of the psyche. “We shall put an end to idylatry,” affirms Dr.Peloris (*PD* 48). But Morris in captivity is almost desperately clinging on to his language, “striving to sustain an alternative consciousness, and an anxious assertion of personal autonomy” (Maltby 88). As Dr.Peloris is suggesting a reintegration of Morris, his language disintegrates even more into ‘chronoschisms’: “(Doris Peloris
the chorus and Morris sonorous canorous Horace scores Boris—should be able to make *somethin* outa that by juniper then there’s bore us and whore us and up the old torus [. . . ]” *(PD 60).*

The interweaving of the two types of language or a ‘heteroglossia’ of standard and deviant languages leads to a text that is ‘polyphonic,’ comprising “a plurality of worlds” (McHale, *PF* 166). One cannot miss the “striking analogy between this ‘injection’ of alien discourse into a closed homogeneous world of discourse, and the fantastic motif of ‘another world’s intrusion into this one’” (McHale, *PF* 167). In the story the uncanny and fragmented language of Morris breaks into the world of impeccable methods devised by Dr. Peloris to create order out of chaos. The “antilanguage” of Morris and the “anti-world-view” he projects creates “a counter reality [. . .] to ‘straight’ or ‘official’ reality” (McHale, *PF* 168).

Dr. Peloris explains to her aide “the power of pattern over mere mind-activity.” An ‘order emerges out of Morris’ disorder’ *(PD 55)* as shown by the processed data and charts of the team, which makes it certain that he is going to camp there in the valley. The process by which they have reached this conclusion is highly methodical and infallible—a seeking of patterns. Dr. Peloris’ strategy is true to the prevailing empirical positivistic worldview and the cybernetized, hyperurbanized culture (Maltby 86). The contrast between the highly poetic and organic language of Morris and the cybernetic systematized
language of Dr. Peloris’ crew—which includes trained urbanologists, system analysts and statisticians—is evident. They “pore over the dossiers of previous forays,” make “octal and symbolic corrections to the operational program,” break down old software systems and reassemble the data to come up with “a new standard programming package for the project, now known as Project Sheep Shape” (PD 49). They map out Morris’ movements on “three-dimensional transverse Mercator’s projections of the entire park-system” (49).

There is also a charting out of data gathered on Morris’s known personal habits, his likings and needs, the needs of his sheep, and their manifest psychosexual behaviour into “realtime-based mathematical formulizations” (49). The phrase “realtime-based” serves as an arresting pointer to the way life and experience get represented in narratives, whether literary or non-literary, as exhibiting a ‘reality’ which is ‘time-based’: the ‘real time’ here is the mathematical and mechanized time with which we tie our experiences into measurable quantities. But here, in the case of Morris’ disordered life, the computations are not conclusive.

The chase as recorded in the official report gains epic proportions: the best minds in the state against an adversary of “perverse vitality” (PD 48). The alternative corrupting vision is termed as “undeniable disorder,” “random series of spontaneous incursions,” or “patternless irresponsible life.” All these phrases in fact would
describe postmodern narrative experiments in time. The earlier attempts to check the flock get sabotaged by Morris's "grit and cunning," Morris with his flute baiting the "pursuants into one blind valley after another" (PD 48), reminiscent of a reader who, in seeking his way out of a labyrinthine narrative, travels many inconclusive paths. Yet a labyrinthine mystery is always alluring to the human psyche. Dr. Peloris in an emergency session of the strategic force speaks frankly of "old temptations":

[. . .] we are already, let us admit, to a degree corrupted [. . .] by Morris. We can nearly admit notes of savagery in our parks, have not yet stifled the wild optimistic call. We might yet be thrilled by the glimmer of disembodied eyes burning hot in the dark forest, by the vision of bathing naiads' bared mammarys or of nut brown torsos with furry thighs, by the one-note calls of hemlock pipes. (PD 49)

The corrupting influence is set aside as something of the past, dark, exotic, somewhat 'oriental,' "the contaminated seed of our unfortunate origins" (PD 49), which emphatically should not intrude into the lives of future generations: "There must be no confusions for them between the old legends and conceivable realities" (PD 49).

The story does not admit any such homogeneous conceivable 'reality,' but only a polyphony of the two worlds of relative order and
chaos. Dr. Peloris, however, is confident that "even nonpattern eventually betrays a secret system" (49). In the case of Morris, after the "fact-finding mission," they "force" "predictable patterns" out of the facts, to chase him wherever he might go so that he wearily, unwarily falls into the trap. Rarely does Morris escape from the network of observers, recording even the 'least event,' reporting "his noises, odors, motions, choices, acquisitions, excretions, emissions, irritations, dreams" (PD 55). The data processed and charted exposes the "order" of his disordered life, claims Dr. Peloris, an 'order' that will force him into the valley they are waiting with the trap, whatever be the operations of his mind which will cause him to decide on the destination. She affirms how much potent the "power of pattern" is to prevail over "mere mind activity" (PD 55), so that even a dangerous foreknowledge might not cause a retreat. The spot fixed for the capture is safely monitored: the water-surface of the canal, its velocity, the sky, clouds, temperature and humidity are ascertained to be congenial. The target area is equipped with faint natural fragrances and "mechanical crickets," to be turned on one by one, exactly at 6.00 a.m.

Morris is surrounded from all directions by the full-fledged team. In their custody he is subjected to a series of tests like a zoological specimen or an otherworldly creature, culminating in a humiliating extraction of a semen sample. After the microscopic examination of
the smear, Morris is proclaimed “healthy enough to warrant an attempted rehabilitation” (59). Morris, “limp in the arms of two men” seems to give them a sense of victory, of having robbed the threatening other world of its potency (Maltby 86). They have already “methodically exterminated” his flock with hypodermic injections. There is an ironic, almost anticlimactic finish to the whole ‘epic’ when Morris is offered a job at one of their mutton factories, may be part of the technocratic culture’s methodical acculturation of Morris.

With a slow, but deliberate shaking of his head, Morris refuses to unlearn his “green vision,” and though in chains persists with his characteristic word play. Maltby identifies the “lexical games” in “dissident postmodernist fiction” as “an enclave of linguistic vitality in the midst of society’s reified language forms” (88). Added to its subversive potential is the kind of comic relief it generates for those weary of their policed lives. Morris’s language not only offers freedom from the narrative conventions of time, of causes preceding effects, it is also “a hacking through the damp growths of our historic hebephrenia” (PD 47). ‘Hebephrenia’ is explained as “a disorganized form of schizophrenia characterized esp. by incoherence, delusions which if present lack an underlying theme, and affect that is flat, inappropriate, or silly” (Webster’s 560). Overlooking the qualifying terms like ‘silly’ or ‘inappropriate,’ the term would illuminate those areas of our analysis of postmodern temporality characterizing it as
schizophrenic. The introductory section and the analysis of SF have dealt with the concept of ‘schizophrenia’ as a ‘linguistic disorder’ manifesting in “the inability to sustain the linearity of things” (Currie 103). This “breakdown in the temporal chain of signification” upsets narrative linearity and the sense of sequence (Currie 103). The “historic hebephrenia,” which the story’s city-dwellers would better keep buried underneath their “realtime-based” lives, may be those mythical residues or scraps of discontinuous history they would safely exclude, or an alternative vision of time that would upset their complacent living ‘within’ Time.

The story holds an oxymoronic old song of Morris:

Her hairs was black as silver snails
Her teeth was white as gold
[.................................]
Her ears they twinkled merrily
Her eyes hearked all I said
How lovely life, sang I, would be
If only we was dead [. . .] . (PD 57)

The striking contraries are juxtaposed into what might be called “a logical impossibility” (McHale, PF 33). Eco considers such “self-contradictory constructs” not as ‘self-sustaining’ or ‘possible’ worlds but “subversive critiques of worlds and world-building” (McHale, PF 33). The song which violates Eco’s “law of the excluded middle”—a
middle between existence and non-existence, true and false—poses the ‘third possibility’ of a space where the opposites can exist simultaneously, perhaps “in defiance of an orthodoxy in poetics that outlaws such ‘in-between’ modes of being [. . .]” (McHale, PF 106). McHale contends that Eco fails to capture the “full ontological peculiarity” of such a world where irreconcilables can coexist (McHale, PF 106). McHale’s poetics of postmodern fiction is eloquent on such a plural space “capable of accommodating so many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds” (PF 44), drawing connections with Michel Foucault’s “heterotopia” and Thomas Pynchon’s “Zone.”

The stories in the collection have been grouped for the purpose of analysis based on the theoretical issues they evoke. Elements of parodic reworking have been already identified in the stories discussed. Parody would be the cue to another category of stories in PD, which redraw Biblical, fairy tale or mythical narratives, undoing their existing configurations: “The Door,” “The Gingerbread House,” “Morris in Chains,” “The Magic Poker,” “The Brother” and “J’s marriage.”

In the section of PD set out as “Seven Exemplary Fictions,” there is a “Dedicatory Prologue to Cervantes,” almost halfway through the book where Coover admits, “prologues seem inappropriate” (76). He wants to appropriate himself into the tradition of Cervantes, recognizing his narratives to be “exemplary,” as working out different
writing ideas and bodying forth every invention. Coover dwells on “the dual nature of all good narrative art”:

[. . .] they struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life and sought to synthesize the unsynthesizable, sallied forth against adolescent thought-modes and exhausted art forms, and returned home with new complexities. [. . .] the great narratives remain meaningful as a mythic reinforcement of our tenuous grip on reality. The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader to the real [. . .]. (77-79)

What Coover intends is a reinvigoration of exhausted narrative forms to make them relevant to the present. In the postmodern context of ‘historiographic metafiction,’ which topples the “received versions of history” by self-reflexively unveiling the status of any narrative as linguistic/ideological construct, Coover’s reworking of past motifs might be considered as opening the tradition up to the present (Hutcheon, Poetics 110).

Corresponding with the postmodern subversion of the distinction between fiction and reality is the blurring of the qualitative difference posited between the ‘original’ ‘authentic’ text and the ‘inauthentic’ or ‘inferior’ copy (Ermarth, Sequel 164). Ermarth puts it in place in her radical rethinking of language and time: “The only
‘reality’ in a postmodern novel is a multiform and metamorphosing reality of language; nothing exceeds its practices or its play, nothing escapes its limitations, nothing acts as a cosmic or natural ‘ground’ and justification” (Sequel 140). There cannot be supposed a ‘pure’ version and study the instances of postmodern parody as playful digression from the ‘original.’ Although the postmodern subversion generates laughter and mockery it cannot be ‘the end’ of parody. In fact Jameson substitutes parody with the term ‘pastiche’—“a random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (18).

Jameson’s concept is comparable to Baudrillard’s claim that parody operates in the “realm of simulation,” that it “lacks historical specificity and increasingly loses difference, generalization and equivalence” (Ermarth, Sequel 166). Hutcheon opposes the concept of simulation by bringing parody to the realm of representation, simultaneously establishing and subverting the parodied tradition. All the diverse views converge, says Ermarth, in the argument that parody renders subjectivity, narrativity and knowledge sites to be reinterrogated (Sequel 166). The multiple modes existing simultaneously in parody and the superimposition of different levels of time has to be the theoretical fulcrum of our concern with Coover’s parodic reworking.
“The Door” has fairy tale motifs like that of the opening of a ‘door’ to mystery, of child becoming the giant, and of the beauty and the beast. “The Gingerbread House” experiments with possible reworkings of the Hansel and Gretel story, the witch luring them to the candied gingerbread house deep in the forest. One of the grandmastrogy versions of the fragmented narrative of “The Magic Poker” parodies the fairy tale plot of ‘princess in distress’ and ‘knight under a spell.’ “Morris in Chains” parodies pastoral settings and motifs; “The Elevator” has a priapic creature and a reworked fertility myth. “The Brother” and “J’s Marriage” revoice Biblical motifs of the Noah’s ark and ‘J’s’ marriage to the virgin mother.

These transformed repetitions of past narratives create an ‘intertextual’ space. “Intertextuality,” as defined by Laurent Jenny in French Literary Theory Today, marks the presence in a text of those “elements exhibiting a structure created previous to the text, above the level of the lexeme, of course, but independently of the level of that structure” (qtd. in Matthews 38). The relations among texts, or between specific texts and the larger categories of writing like genre, school or period can constitute an intertextual space (McHale, PF 57).

In fact every text is ‘intertextual,’ in the sense that contemporary theory attempts to redefine the concept of the ‘text’ as a dynamic, ongoing process, involving “the continual play of referentiality between
and within texts" (O'Donnell and Davis ix). The text, made up of "the traces" of other texts, in this view, is simultaneously being woven and unwoven, "always in process" (O'Donnell and Davis x). This definition taken to an extreme will project an "ever-becoming" of all texts, further divisible into other texts, and those in turn into yet other texts or signifiers, without end.

Hutcheon in her 'theory of parody' discusses its intertextual space as involving both the decoder and the text, and emphasizes the context of encoding where "the sharing of codes between producer and receiver are central" (Parody 37). The reception of Coover's parodic reworking therefore depends on the reader's sharing of the cultural-literary codes which he can/cannot identify in the encoded narrative. This relativity might warrant the exclusion or glossing over on the part of the reader who is differently or specially-abled to decipher the text.

As a genre's way of self-reflection or self-critique (McHale, PF 145), there is a duality posited to parody, in the subversive carnivalesque potential and its paradoxical reinforcement of the tradition (Hutcheon, Parody 39). It is again in another sense "a way of seeing double: seeing both the formulation [. . .] and at the same time seeing beyond it," or "the ironic mode of intertextuality, the shadowed form being constantly undermined by the activity of the other one" (Ermarth, Sequel 165). What is foregrounded here is the
'arbitrary and constructed' nature of every narrative, which definitely upsets the conventions of 'time.'

The ontological tension McHale attributes to the allegorical works of postmodern fiction can be applied to parody: allegory projects a world and erases it at the same time by sliding back and forth between the literal and metaphorical, thereby "inducing a flicker between presence and absence of this world" (PF 46). Parody also generates a foregrounding of the ontological gaps between the two worlds projected, thereby creating a "between-worlds" space—what McHale calls an "intertextual zone" (PF 58).

In this dual world of 'parody' as a postmodern form, where the text undermines itself there is also the upsetting of the conventional categories of space and time, as Ermarth says,

Paratactic, parodic, paralogical writing operates simultaneously in more than one mode, and once such multiplication has taken place, we depart from the Euclidean universe of unity, identity, center, and enter the non-Euclidean universe of pattern, superimposition, and differential function. Instead of continuity we have leaps in space, instead of linear time we have time warps that ‘superimpose one part of the pattern upon another.’

(Sequel 166; emphasis added)
'Parataxis,'—"the placing of clauses or phrases one after another without coordinating or subordinating connectives" (Webster's 855)—'parody,' and 'paralogism' or "fallacious argument" are parallel concepts, which when applied to narratives produce a 'heterotopia,' where multiple levels of ontology get superimposed one upon another. The emphasis in postmodern narratives gets shifted from the linear and syntactic aspects of language to a new linguistic focus on "the digressive, aleatory, paratactic, and semiotic disposition of language" (Ermarth, Sequel 139). The study obtains instances of these aspects in the stories of PD. The 'digressiveness' or 'play' with the authorized forms is evident in the structural experiments and the parodic reworking in the collection. Instead of a coherent plot we have 'little moments' which intersect in the "forking paths" narratives; there are digressions and parenthetical monologues which lack all syntax; there is a 'polyphonic' world as in the Morris story with the standardized and anti-languages/cultures sounding at once.

The paratactic arrangement in the stories like "Panel Game" and "Morris in Chains" realizes "multilevel employments of language" (Ermarth, Sequel 143) and time. A sustained example of "conspicuous construction or polymorphous play" (Ermarth, Sequel 144) can be drawn from the "Panel Game," where there is a play with homophones and synonyms:
Scut is tail and pad is paw: an animal! Yes! But crimson:
why not just red? Because crimson comes from kermes:
insect—but more! dried female insect bodies! Shimmy:
chemise, or a shimmer of light. But pad is stuff: female
bellies dried and stuffed? Dryden-stuffed. (PD 81)

All the monologues—of the granny in "The Door," of Morris, of
"The Brother," and "The Elevator"—lack the usual syntax, pauses
and conjunctions, and are almost like 'streams of consciousness.'
The frequent uses of the discourses of poetry and the nonsense effects
of language, as in Morris's versification, the TV language game, and
in the wayfarer's "ceaseless eruption of obtuse language" (PD 123),
take them to the realm of the "semiotic," in the sense that Julia
Kristeva uses the term to distinguish it from the "symbolic" disposition
of language which is syntactical (Ermarth, Sequel 146). They might
also be considered as attempts in 'spatial form,' the concept
enunciated as characteristic of modernist fiction, taken to an extreme
in postmodern narrative experiments of the kind of Coover. There is
a random switching of subjects to effect a "temporal collage":
"Immateriality patricide ideations heat-stroke [. . .]") (PD 124).

Coover in an interview with Larry McCaffery tries to give word
to his continuing metafictional concerns and what it means to be in
conversation with Borges, the precursor:
Borges said we go on writing the same story all our lives. The trouble is, it’s usually a story that can never be told—there’s always this distance between the sign and the signified, it’s the oldest truth in philosophy—and that’s why we tend to get so obsessive about it. The important thing is to accept this unbridgeable distance, and carry on with the crazy bridge-building just the same. (qtd. in Green 207)

In the new forms of narrative, which experiment with alternative possibilities and coexisting contraries, there has to be the inevitable limitation of language being sequential. The simultaneity, which is attempted in the telling and the reading of narrative, therefore impresses one with the sense of what Coover terms the “unbridgeable distance” and the “conceptual dilemma” (Green 208) severally addressed by the postmodern storytellers.

In his “Dedicatory Prologue to Cervantes” Coover terms his narrative attempts “apprentice fictions,” further suggesting writing as “a process of discovery,” as adventurous experiments by “picaros” who “sally forth in fiction [. . .] to discover, again and again, their manhood” (PD 78). If we divest this image of writing as an ‘ever-becoming’ process, of its imaginative and romantic colouring, it can be used for postmodern ends, towards the idea of narrative as “construct” or “artifice,” or the writer’s experiment with the never-
ending chain of signifiers. Coover’s stories are experiments in narrativizing, and therefore negotiate with time and other categories of language. In one of its metafictional moments in his “exemplary fiction,” “Klee Dead,” the narrative voice addresses the reader:

As for Wilbur Klee, I’ve not much more to say about him [. . .] just this: that he jumped from a high place and is now dead. I think you can take my word for it. [. . .] Your questions, friend, are foolish, disease of the western mind. On the other hand, if you wish to assume a cause-and-effect relationship—that he is dead because he jumped from a high place—well, you are free to do so, I confess it has occurred to me more than once and has colored my whole narration. Certainly there is some relationship [. . .]. (106)

Somewhere in this space of the narrative’s closing in on theory, can be the nodal point for all our insights and passing references to meet and converse, and may be look beyond.