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"I'm a I'm a Scholar at the Moment":
The Voice of the Literary Critic in the Works of
American Scholar-Metafictionists

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Abstract

In her seminal book on metafiction, Patricia Waugh describes this practice as an obliteration of the distinction between "creation" and "criticism." This article examines the interplay of the "creative" and the "critical" in five American metafictionists from the late 1960s, whose authors were both fictional writers and scholars: Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* and Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*. The article considers the ways in which the voice of the literary critic is incorporated into each work in the form of a self-reflexive commentary. Although the ostensible principle of metafiction is to merge fiction and criticism, most of the self-conscious texts under discussion are shown to adopt a predominantly negative attitude towards the critical voices they embody – by making them sound pompous, pretentious or banal. The article concludes with a claim that the five works do not advocate a rejection of academic criticism but rather insist on its reform. Their dissatisfaction with the prescriptivism of most contemporary literary criticism is compared to Susan Sontag's arguments in her essay "Against Interpretation."

Keywords: metafiction, American literature, academic fiction, postmodernism, experimental literature, scholars as fictionists, fiction vs literary criticism

In a chapter on metafiction in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), R.M. Berry lists as many as thirteen American novelists from the 1960s and 70s who contributed to the movement of self-conscious writing: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, William H. Gass, John Hawkes, Steve Katz, Harry Mathews, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Susan Sontag, Gilbert Sorrentino and Ronald Sukenick (Berry 128-40). Alongside the more immediate observation that those authors make up an almost exclusively male cast, one may notice that the vast majority of them (eleven out of thirteen) were scholars. What is more, many of them had very successful academic careers and went on to become distinguished professors in their fields – English (Barth and several others), French (Federman) and the Humanities (Gass). Interestingly, even the sole two non-academics – Harry Mathews and Thomas Pynchon – received degrees from Ivy League universities: Mathews in music from Harvard and Pynchon in English from Cornell. Therefore, it is safe to say that the practice of metafiction held a special appeal for the American scholar-fictionists of the time. In her seminal book on the subject, Patricia Waugh offers a possible explanation for that fact. Literary self-consciousness, she asserts, relies on a “fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion ... and the laying bare of that illusion” (6). By constructing a fiction and then commenting on it, metafictionists obliterate the distinction between “creation” and “criticism” (Waugh 6). It stands to reason that there is no one better suited to performing that task than a writer of fiction who is also a literary scholar.

This article is an attempt to examine that interplay of the “creative” and the “critical,” or, to be more precise, the role of the “critical” in the “creative.” With the spatial constraints in mind, I have decided to restrict my study to several canonical metafictionists: Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1967), Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Gass’s *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* (1968), Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) and Sukenick’s *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969). Following an overview of these authors’ academic activity, I consider the ways in which the voice of the critic is incorporated into their fictional works. I argue that although the ostensible principle of metafiction is to merge

fiction and criticism, most of the self-conscious texts under discussion adopt a predominantly negative attitude towards the critical voices they embody – by making them sound pompous, pretentious or banal. I insist, however, that they do not postulate a rejection of academic criticism but rather its reform.

The critical output of the five chosen authors ranges from minimal to highly prolific. Barthelme, who was an academic for most of his life and was affiliated to Boston, SUNY, City College of New York and the University of Houston (where he launched a creative writing programme), did not produce any academic studies of note. Coover, a professor in Literary Arts (now Emeritus) at Brown University since 1981, has also been a prolific fictionist but a rather sluggish scholar – with no significant critical publications to his name other than his numerous literary reviews for *The New York Times*. Although also far more committed to his fictional work, Barth produced three extensive anthologies – entitled *The Friday Book* (1984), *Further Fridays* (1995) and *Final Fridays* (2012) – which combine critical essays, lectures, commentaries on his fiction and tributes to deceased writers. He is also the author of two highly influential essays, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), read by some as a manifesto of postmodernist writing, and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980), meant as a “companion and corrective” to the former piece (*Friday Book* 193). Sukenick, also an author of an important manifesto, “The New Tradition in Fiction” (1975), produced five academic books, including two studies on Wallace Stevens (the subject of his doctoral thesis at Brandeis). He taught at various universities (including one in France) and then settled at the University of Colorado, where he was professor of English for twenty-five years. Finally, Gass, who has been a professor at Washington University of St. Louis since 1969 (first in philosophy, then in the humanities), is the only writer in the group whose volume of academic publications surpasses that of his fictional work and includes *Habitations of the Word* (1985), *Finding a Form* (1997) and *Tests of Time* (2003), each of which won him the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism.

It is interesting to note that even the more academically engaged of the scholar-metafictionists tended to play down the importance of their

university activity and its influence on their fiction. When asked in 1965 about the way in which teaching affected his creative work, Barth replied, "It delays its completion." He then added, "Professors don't work very hard ... They get a lot of money and an awful lot of time off" (Enck 9-10). Sukenick, in an interview conducted in 1982, responded to a very similar question in much the same way: "[Being a college professor] gives me a maximum amount of freedom in the way I want to spend either my mental energy or my time." As an afterthought he said, "It's a matter of incredible good fortune that writers in this country have that kind of sinecure or work available to them" (Meyer 144). An academic position, Barth and Sukenick suggested, was for such as themselves merely a day job that enabled a creative writer to pursue their more rewarding (in one sense) but less rewarding (in another) activity. Even when the critical work was evidently relevant to their fiction, the former was often spoken of as secondary. Federman, for instance, claimed that some of the most debated critical essays by the metafictionists – "The Literature of Exhaustion," Sukenick's *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (1985) and his own "Surfiction: Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction" (1975) – were written to "explain and even justify" their misunderstood fictional attempts (Federman, Interview with Abádi Nagy 159).

However, a careful reader of scholar-metafictionists' novels and short stories can discern that the trace of their engagement in academia is more distinct than they were willing to admit. That trace, I want to argue, is visible in the persistence of the voice of a literary critic in their fictions. That voice, alongside that of the "author," is the most common vehicle for commenting on the work's construction, technique and rationale. A characteristic example of an "author's" metacommentary is the following passage from Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971), whose narrator (referred to as the Second Person) muses on the narrative techniques he may use in the novel that he contemplates writing:

FIRST PERSON

or

THIRD PERSON

FIRST PERSON is more restrictive more subjective more personal harder

THIRD PERSON is more objective more impersonal more encompassing
easier

I could try both ways:

I was standing on the upper deck next to a girl called Mary . . . No Peggy

He was standing on the upper deck next to a girl called Mary . . . No Peggy
(comes out the same). (*Double* 99)

The voice of the “author” is also conspicuously present in Sukenick’s “The Death of the Novel,” where the narrator considers how to make his short story publishable: “Meanwhile my chief concern is whether I’m going to be able to sell this unprecedented example of formlessness.... Maybe I better put my editor into it, he’s a terrific editor, maybe that’ll do the trick.... Or how about a little sex, that’s the ticket. That’s what this needs.... OK, a little sex” (*The Death* 49). This resolution is followed by a description of the narrator’s tryst with a fifteen-year-old mistress (“Let’s call her Teddy”) who insists on calling him “Professor Sukenick, even in [their] most intimate moments” (50).

Although numerous other examples of the “author’s” metacommentary could be invoked, it is the instances of the critic’s voice that are more relevant to my argument. “Lost in the Funhouse,” a section of Barth’s book of the same title, is a model example of a metafiction featuring ongoing critical intrusions (particularly throughout the first six pages of the text) that disrupt the simultaneously developing narrative. The slowly advancing, and rather conventionally rendered, story of teenage Ambrose’s trip to an amusement park in Ocean City is interspersed with several-line-long comments on the specific literary tools employed in the fictional passages. And so when italics are used, a note about the use of italics in literary texts immediately follows. A reference to Ambrose’s companion Magda G___ is followed by an explanation of the purposes of substituting proper names with initials in nineteenth-century literature (“to enhance the illusion of reality” [*Lost* 69]). The early commentaries imitate the style of insipid literary criticism – either in the form of a lecture on the basics of narrative theory or of a primer on creative writing: “Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction” (70).

Such metacommentaries may strike the reader as somewhat unimaginative and self-evident but they do not sound parodic. However, as the text progresses, the critical intrusions veer towards subtle mockery. In a passage attempting a contrived parallel to the "snot-green" sea visible from Ocean City, James Joyce is referred to as an "Irish author" and *Ulysses* – as "his unusual novel" (Barth, *Lost* 71). Zack Bowen classifies this remark as a "naïve bit of freshman erudition" (55). In the next metafictional passage naivety gives way to pretension: phrases such as "first-order relevance," "second order of significance" and the "*milieu* of the action" – coupled with banal content – produce a satirical effect. At this point the frequency of metafictional comments drastically decreases and the story of Ambrose's artistic epiphany develops virtually unhampered. The occasional intrusions include a ridiculous reference to the metrical and stanzaic pattern of a popular song hummed by Ambrose's mother ("iambic trimeter couplet") and the irrelevant remark about the distribution of action in a typical dramatic narrative illustrated by two diagrams, including Freitag's Triangle (commonly referred to as Freytag's Pyramid) (*Lost* 73, 91). Although an assertion of the futility of academic discourse is hardly the focus of "Lost in the Funhouse," it is possible to interpret it as a mockery of – if not all, then at least bad – literary criticism, which emerges as bland, pompous or just dispensable.

Literary criticism's propensity for obviousness or pretension is also suggested in Barthelme's *Snow White*. Barthelme's postmodernist reinvention of the classic fairy tale features – in Larry McCaffery's words – "a hodgepodge of styles, modulating rapidly between specific literary parodies ... current slang, academic clichés, and advertising jargon" (149). Perhaps for parodic reasons, some of the "cliché, scholarly-sounding assessments of literature, history, or psychology" (McCaffery 140) are presented in block capitals:

THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS
INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST, BUT COMPLICATED
BY THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND POLITICAL
REPRESSION. ULTIMATELY THEY FOUND AN ANSWER NOT IN
SOCIETY BUT IN VARIOUS FORMS OF INDEPENDENCE FROM
SOCIETY: HEROISM, ART, SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE.
(Barthelme 24)

At the end of Part One, the reader of *Snow White* is confronted with a two-page questionnaire which poses questions whose scope ranges from their assessment of the book so far (on a scale from 1 to 10) to their specific reading preferences (“Do you stand up when you read? Lie down? Sit?”).¹ Among the fifteen questions there are at least three which could be interpreted as a mockery of the pretension of literary criticism. Question number seven – “Do you feel that the creation of the new modes of hysteria is a viable undertaking for the artist of today?” – is at once pompous, oblique and utterly irrelevant to the book in hand. “Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension?” (number nine) sounds banal and also slightly affected. Question eleven – “Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals?” – may, in turn, strike the reader as a rather tedious question, one associated with dry scholarly deliberations about literary form. The implied futility of the questions contained in the questionnaire is suggested by the parodic absurdity of the last one: “In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? Two sets of shoulders? Three?” (88-89).

In Sukenick’s “The Death of the Novel” (a long short story or a short novella from the collection *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*) the role of the critical voice is more nuanced than in Barthelme’s or Coover’s works. The text takes the form of a collage-like amalgam of a diary or journal of a young literature professor interspersed with his lecture notes (on the subject of the death of the novel), unrelated newspaper cuttings, jokes, records of phone conversations and embedded mini short stories. It begins with a two-paragraph critical discussion about the “contemporary post-realistic novel,” which confronts the certitudes of realism with the disillusionment of contemporary fiction (“Realism doesn’t exist, time doesn’t exist, personality doesn’t exist”) (41). In spite of making several grandiose claims, the opening passage does not read like a parody of literary criticism. Interestingly, Sukenick used the first twelve lines of this fragment as the epigraph for his critical essay “The New Tradition in Fiction,” which was released six years later. In “The Death of the Novel,” however, it does not function as a motto but, as Janusz Semrau notes, as “an integral part of the story’s content” –

probably the beginning of the seminar that the narrator-lecturer has been commissioned to teach (110). Every couple of pages consecutive fragments of the lecture appear, full of references to authors whom Sukenick greatly appreciated (among others, Wallace Stevens – the subject of his two critical books, Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet). The tone of the speech gravitates towards that of a manifesto: “we must all become like artists” (47), “What we need is not Great Works but playful ones in whose sense of creative joy everyone can join in” (56). Although such pronouncements may sound slightly pompous, they express what Sukenick believed in as an author and a critic. His preference for playfulness over seriousness or coherence, for instance, is manifest in the jumbled structure of “The Death of the Novel.”

In the second half of the text, three embedded stories illustrate the principles articulated by the critical voice in the opening passage. A story about Joshua Jericho waking up to a strange dream vision and then falling asleep to dream of reality can be interpreted as a fictional dramatisation of the statement that “reality doesn’t exist” and is merely a subjective experience. Another one – asserting the relativity of time – recounts the predicament of Junior Junior, Jr. (“known to his friends simply as Junior,” as the narrator helpfully explains), who finds himself one day stuck in tomorrow and wonders if he should do today’s work (“I’ll do it yesterday,” he concludes) (85). Finally, there comes an illustration of the instability of character in the form of a description of the narrator’s own personality crisis, as a result of which he is unable to remember his own name, distinguish between his two lovers Betty and Teddy or manage his different identities (“I’d suddenly start talking like a professor while drinking with my friends, or like a hippie while teaching my class”) (90). What these three stories enable Sukenick to achieve is a synthesis of “criticism” and “creation.” Nonetheless, in “The Death of the Novel” metacommentary precedes fiction, and it is fiction’s role to exemplify the critical argument.

In comparison with the previously discussed texts, Sukenick’s contains fewer attempts to satirise literary critics. The stereotypical scholarly detachment from reality is echoed in the exchange between the narrator and his girlfriend Lynn, who announces that she would prefer to

talk about *Daniel Deronda* rather than about other female characters in “Suknick’s” fiction. When asked by “Suknick” if she would really like to discuss Eliot’s novel, she answers, “I wouldn’t really but that’s what’s on my mind because I’m a I’m a scholar at the moment” (84). Scholarly pomposity, in turn, is mocked when an elevated assertion of the reign of all-encompassing chaos is followed by the narrator-lecturer’s admission, “I’m reading from my notes” (47). Finally, near the end of the class, the cliché of a lecturer-student affair is recycled in the following farcical scene: when the narrator is tackling “the problematic concept of personal identity” in Beckett’s novels, his pupil-lover Betty (not Teddy!) is rubbing her thigh against his knee and giving him “an enormous erection,” which makes the teacher speak faster and faster (90).

The last text to be considered, *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, shares with Suknick’s an ambivalence about literary criticism suggested by the coexistence of the mockery of its tone with an effort to engage with it and incorporate it in the fictional text. Gass’s novella, more radically experimental than any of the previously discussed texts, plays with the types and sizes of fonts, makes extensive use of photographs and other images (including a recurrent life-size coffee stain) and forces the reader to make decisions about the preferred order of reading. The narrator is at once the neglected eponymous wife and the book itself (or language), while the addressee consists of both her detached lover and the readers themselves.² Among the novella’s subtly parodic references to scholarly practices is the insertion of dispensable footnotes containing excessively detailed bibliographical information (e.g., “Locke. Concerning Human Understanding, Bk. II, Ch. XI, Sec. 9”).³ At one point, the bottom of the page is covered by a piece of text in a font reminiscent of the Gothic typeface (associated with Nazi Germany). Its content is the opening passage of Oliver Goldsmith’s critical analysis of Tobias Smollett’s *The Complete History of England* (1765). The text is gradually obliterated by a large triangle in the middle composed of two arrows pointing down and an inscription (in the same font) reading “Las Bas.” This act of violence performed on a critical text (using a font connoting totalitarian terror) may be read as a gesture of hostility towards criticism at large, but the

insistence that the passage is merely playful and devoid of any significance appears an equally valid interpretation.

Similarly to Sukenick, Gass accentuates the grandiosity of certain critical claims by juxtaposing them with trivial or even vulgar expressions. The claims "Timing is the essence of the comic" and "Contrast is the essence of the comic" (both anticipating the insufferable Alan Alda character's maxim that "comedy is tragedy plus time" in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*) are surrounded by "breadBUNsbuns" and the sentence "Olga precipitously cunted, but Ivan soft." Several pages later, the reader is confronted with a Christmas-tree image made of a quasi-critical commentary about the comic. This, probably the zaniest passage in the novella, which considers the at once tragic and comic implications of losing one's penis and then finding it in a breakfast roll or folded in one's wallet, contains a possible parody of the banality of much critical writing: "The lovely thing about [a basically comical situation] is that you can put anything into it you like, only laughter, simple and true, will ring out. That's in fact, what comedy is made of, if you want to know the whole and total honest of it."

Despite poking fun at bad criticism, *Willie Masters*, as Gass himself has admitted, aims to merge fiction and criticism. The author explained in an interview that the text is "a kind of odd manifesto ... part essay, part fiction, and part this and that" (Levasseur and Rabalais 59). In *Understanding William H. Gass*, H.L. Hix argues that the "essay-like character of his fiction" is never more prominent than in *Willie Masters*, which he places alongside Gass's *On Being Blue* (1976) – a novel-like essay (62). By refusing to provide a plotline (however hazy) or any sense of progression or character development and, at the same time, having the narrator articulate "a competition of views" suggestive of Platonic dialogues, Gass produces what Elizabeth Bruss calls "dramatized philosophy" (153-54). Not satisfied with the potential afforded by either fiction or criticism, Gass practices, by his own admission, fiction which is "malevolently anti-narrative" and criticism which is "maliciously anti-expository" (qtd. in Hix 71).

Whatever Barth's, Barthelme's, Coover's, Sukenick's or Gass's individual stance on the purposefulness of literary criticism may have

been, they were all to a larger or lesser extent involved (not to say implicated) in it – first as academics and second as metafictionists. Perhaps they would not have unanimously subscribed to Declan Kiberd's remark (made in reference to *Ulysses*) that "the best literature is an act of profound criticism, and the finest criticism is literature in the highest sense" (xxx), but they did all realise that critical writing had a certain role to play, greater than supplying them with the means to pay their utility bills. Although, as I have tried to illustrate, in all of the considered texts literary criticism is the object of (more or less gentle) mockery, it is the very presence of the critical voice that established their status as metafictionists and placed them at the forefront of the experimental literature of the time. Of the five authors Sukenick was the most outspoken apologist for the coexistence of fiction and criticism in literature. In an interview conducted in 1971, Sukenick emphasised the sincerity that a metafictional voice imparts to the fictional text: "I don't want to fool anybody, this is what I'm doing. I'm writing a story and here's the theory of the story" (qtd. in Semrau 21). In his 1975 essay "Twelve Digressions Towards a Study of Composition," he advocated that coexistence much more forcefully. In a passage that could serve as a manifesto of metafictional writing, Sukenick announces that "one of the tasks of modern fiction ... is to displace, energize, and re-embody its criticism – to literally reunite it with our experience of the text" (430).

The fact that metafiction postulates a rapprochement between fiction and criticism evidently does not mean that its practitioners thought highly of the quality of the critical writing of their time. The only writer whose straightforward assessment I have been able to find is, again, Sukenick, who made the following remarks in a 1982 interview:

Review criticism in [the US] is in one way or another connected with the publishing industry and is very weak, very commercialized. Independent criticism is almost nonexistent. Certainly academic criticism has its vices – I'm always the first to criticize it – but there's a good deal of virtue to even the small degree to which the academy does pay attention and try to evaluate contemporary writing. It's tending to do so more and the more the better. (Meyer 144)

Whereas Sukenick's commentary is sympathetic to scholarly criticism, the implicit assessment of it that could be gleaned from the previously discussed fictional texts points to several common drawbacks of critical writing but does not undermine the legitimacy of academic interpretation.

The gesture of a radical rejection of the belief in the value of criticism can be identified in Coover's short story "The Marker" from his first and most acclaimed collection *Pricksongs & Descants*. In this bizarre three-page vignette, set in a bedroom late in the evening, Jason, before putting aside a book he has just been reading, inserts a marker, and then begins to remove his clothes in order to join his beautiful young wife in bed. Jason switches off the light and heads for the bed while – as the narrator points out – letting his wife's image transform into an abstraction endowed only with some of her features. To his surprise, the bed is not there and, as he discovers a moment later, it is nowhere to be found, although several times he can hear her laughter. Convinced it must be a joke, Jason decides to turn on the light again but the switch does not work. Finally, he finds the bed to be in the original place and, greatly relieved and with rekindled desire, he climbs into it. While making love to her, Jason is struck with the apprehension that the object of his passion may not be his wife. When he leans over to kiss her, he detects "a strange and disagreeable odour" (Coover 71). At that moment a police officer and his four assistants burst in, turn on the lights and the truth is exposed – Jason has been copulating with the corpse of his wife (dead for three weeks). The police officer expresses his disgust and the assistants try to pull Jason away from the corpse, which sticks to his body like paper. Eventually, the policeman places Jason's genitals "flat on the tabletop and pounds them to a pulp with the butt of his gun" (72). Afterwards, he turns to him and delivers the following speech:

You understand, of course, ... that I am not, in the strictest sense, a traditionalist. I mean to say that I do not recognize tradition *qua* tradition as sanctified in its own sake. On the other hand, I do not join hands with those who find inherent in tradition some malignant evil, and who therefore deem it of terrible necessity that all custom be rooted out at all costs. I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their own turn by the innovations which

created them. I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them. In spite of that, however, *some things still make me puke!*' (72)

The policeman's accusation, while not unreasonable in content (an insistence on the need to find a middle road between literary tradition and radical experimentation), is made to sound ridiculous by the tone he adopts – pompous, overly formal and wordy. The use of pretentious words (“qua”) and turgid grammatical structures (“...who therefore deem it of terrible necessity that all custom be rooted out” and a relative clause introduced by “whereon”) are comically deflated at the end by the anticlimactic sentence containing the verb “puke.” Perhaps the fact that what the policeman-critic says is not unreasonable but how he says it is ludicrous could be interpreted as a commentary on literary criticism – that it may have interesting things to say, which are, however, frequently marred (and made inaccessible) by the obscurantism of their form. And yet casting the critic in the figure of a policeman who has the authority and the means to judge and punish the writer, whether culpable or not, must be interpreted as an expression of a deep-seated distrust of the institution of literary criticism.

Although the common reading of “The Marker” (offered in Brian Evenson's *Understanding Robert Coover*) is as an allegorical illustration of the dangers of slavishly holding onto outmoded literary models (compared to making love to a corpse), Louis Mackey favours a different interpretation, which investigates the validity of literary criticism. The critic locates Jason's mistake in the will to “convert reality ... into meaning” (Mackay 107) – in exchanging the image of his wife for an idealised abstraction:

The image of his wife, as he has just seen her, fades slowly (as when, lying on a beach, one looks at the reflection of the sun on the curving back of the sea, then shuts tight his eyes, letting the image of the reflected sun lose its brilliance, turn green, then evaporate slowly into the limbo of uncertain associations), gradually becoming transformed from that of her nude body crackling the freshness of the laundered sheets to that of Beauty, indistinct and untextured, as though still emerging from some profound ochre mist, but though without definition, an abstract Beauty that contains somehow his wife's ravaging smile and musical eyes. (Coover 71)

The above passage is, according to Mackay, a description of Jason's act of interpretation, in the course of which his real wife is killed. The macabre punishment that the husband suffers targets his genitals – "his organs of penetration and his means of interpretation" (Mackey 108). Although, as the narrator notes early on, "whatever meaning there might be in [the wife's] motion exists within the motion itself and not in her deliberations" (Coover 70), Jason seeks meaning not in the thing itself but through his deliberations. Since in the process he has "reduced her to a sheet of paper," his punishment involves having his interpretive organ (also signalled by the marker) "reduced to the stuff of paper" (i.e., the pulp) (Mackey 108). Therefore, in Mackey's reading, Coover's story emerges as a radical indictment of interpretation and, by extension, of (most if not all) literary criticism. "In all of Coover's fiction," the critic concludes, "the act and the art of interpretation are lethal" (108).

Even though all these texts share a degree of scepticism about the practice of criticism, Coover's notion of interpretation as a deadly weapon in confrontation with a fictional text questions the very *idea* of criticism. A reflection of Coover's more profound scepticism can be identified in one interview with Gass. When contrasting teaching philosophy with teaching literature, the author of *Willie Masters* (a lecturer in both) declared that the latter is not made "to be talked about" but rather "to be experienced" (Levasseur and Rabalais 57). Sukenick makes a similar point in "The New Tradition in Fiction," where he argues that "novels are experiences to respond to, not problems to figure out" (40). Crucially, however, he does not see that as a cancellation of the need for critical writing but rather as a signal that criticism should "begin to expand its stock of responses to the experience of fiction" (40). An eloquent articulation of Gass's and Sukenick's emphasis on literature as experience as well as of Coover's profound scepticism about the practice of assigning meanings to art can be found in a famous essay by another scholar-metafictionist, Susan Sontag. In "Against Interpretation," written in 1964 – several years before the heyday of American metafiction – Sontag postulates a rejection of criticism understood as "a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' of interpretation," a

practice of disregarding artistic form and divining the true meaning, or the latent content, of a given work. In place of the interpretation as “the revenge of the intellect upon art,” Sontag invites “acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art” and which would “show how it is what it is” rather than “show what it means.” She calls for a new critical vocabulary – descriptive rather than prescriptive, far removed from that of a critic-as-policeman or a critic-as-know-all. Sontag’s insistence on descriptivism and transparency, which she considers “the highest ... value in ... criticism today,” substantiates her claim that criticism should display a greater degree of humility and replace its tone of showy self-importance with that of self-effacing appreciation. It is a claim with which Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Gass and Sukenick, who all thought of themselves as artists first and scholars second (if not even further down the list), would have probably agreed.

Notes:

¹ A questionnaire designed for the reader can also be found in Raymond Federman’s *Take It or Leave It* (1976) and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979).

² The text invites a number of nuanced parallels between the experience of reading and the sexual act.

³ *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* is deliberately unpaginated, so the following quotations from the text will not be accompanied by any parenthetical references.

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