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For an American Nouveau Roman: Reading Coover's *Spanking the Maid*

Je suis en train de recopier, de corriger et raturer toute ma première partie de Bovary. Les yeux m'en piquent. Je voudrais d'un seul coup d'oeil lire les cent-cinquante-huit pages et les saisir avec tous leurs détails dans une seule pensée. (Flaubert)

Le texte a une forme humaine, c'est une figure, un anagramme du corps? Oui, mais de notre corps érotique. Le plaisir du texte serait irréductible à son fonctionnement grammairien (phéno-textuel), comme le plaisir du corps est irréductible au besoin physiologique. (Barthes)

Since the mid-fifties the discourse about fiction in France has been dominated by a group of experimental writers known as the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. Sarraute, Butor, Pinget, Ricardou, Simon, especially Robbe-Grillet — these men and women have continued to develop new narrative forms by analyzing, interrogating, and playing with the traditional axioms of story-telling. Despite their considerable impact on contemporary French letters, these writers remain outside academe, largely unappreciated or ignored in this country. Even American writers known for the experimental nature of their work exhibit this tendency to good old-fashioned American isolationism. During an interview in 1972 Robert Coover emphasized what he considered America's central role in contemporary literature with a casual dismissal of the old country's latest contributions, declaring that there was "not much life in the fiction of Europe today" (Gado 142). Another noted American experimentalist expressed a complementary idea in 1982. At a round-table discussion of the parallels between recent French and American fiction, John Barth "reassured" his colleagues that he had detected "no disturbing signs of an American New Novel" (Oppenheim 197).

Coover's remark, if applied to the *Nouveau Roman*, has a certain descriptive value, for the fictions of Robbe-Grillet and company contain little of the throbbing passion and deeply felt sense of life prized on the American scene. (On the other hand, I doubt that one could say the same

of other European fiction-makers — I think of Grass, Calvino, Kundera.) Barth's assessment, however, cannot be defended, for there are indeed "signs" (whether "disturbing" or not) of an American New Novel, signs that may be found, among other places, in the fictions of Barth's fellow panelist at the discussion, Robert Coover. If Barth finds no sign of the *Nouveau Roman* in Coover's fiction, then I can only conclude: 1) that Barth has not read Coover; or 2) Barth has not read Robbe-Grillet; or 3) — and this strikes me as the most probable case — that Barth's *reading* has not been affected by contemporary French fiction.¹ I, however, whose practice of reading has been heavily influenced by my experience of the *Nouveau Roman*, find striking parallels between some of Coover's texts and Robbe-Grillet's. Several fictions from the early collection, *Pricksongs and Descants*, employ the fragmented, plural narratives Robbe-Grillet had used in *La Jalousie*, *Dans le labyrinthe*, and other works. In "The Babysitter," for example, the tale of a banal suburban party explodes into a series of conflicting stories. Just as the babysitter switches TV channels, so the narrative shifts abruptly from plane to plane of the fiction. Each juncture of the evening seems to represent an intersection where the story stands faced with several possibilities of continuation; where most fiction-makers erase false-starts and dead ends — the paths the narrative did not pursue — Coover leaves them in his text. "The Babysitter" thus assumes the form of a field of stories, no one of which is privileged as the "real" one. This text invalidates the classic question of the conventional reader: but what *really* happened? Coover's experiment forces us to confront the paradox of fiction: none of it happened / it all happened; or, to put it differently, it's only a story / I swear it's true.

While "The Babysitter" and other fictions from *Pricksongs and Descants* possess certain experimental qualities, none of them goes so far in its disruption of traditional narrative as does Coover's recent novel *Spanking the Maid*.² This text not only exhibits several of the techniques and structures common in the *Nouveau Roman*, but it also embraces what seems to me the central principle of the French experimental program: to jolt the reader from his or her habitual practice of reading, to force him or her to adopt a radically different way of apprehending a text. Critics have not known quite what to make of this slim text, and some, ironically, have echoed Coover's

early evaluation of European fiction by claiming, in effect, that it "lacks life."³ Before I show what "disturbing" signs of the *Nouveau Roman* I find in *Spanking the Maid*, before I display a reading of it I avow to be conditioned by my reading of Robbe-Grillet and his colleagues, I would like to outline briefly the program of experimental writing developed during the past thirty years in France.

One explanation for the cool reception encountered by the *Nouveau Roman* in America may be found in an important difference between French and American literary traditions. While American fiction, generally speaking, has been dominated by pragmatic considerations and approaches, French literary history shows significant periods of formalism. The origins of the *Nouveau Roman* may be traced to one of the quintessential French writers, a novelist regarded simultaneously as the purest of stylists and the most trenchant of realists, Gustave Flaubert. Although he defended *Madame Bovary* by appealing to the veracity of the subject he represented — "Ma pauvre Bovary souffre et pleure sans doute dans vingt villages à la fois, à cette heure même" (*Correspondance* 3: 293) — he nonetheless dreamed of "un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style" (*Correspondance* 2: 345).⁴ Later, prototypes of the *Nouveau Roman*'s devices appeared in André Gide's many technical innovations; the central character of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, for example, is engaged in composing a novel itself to be called *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Play with narrative design would become the central strategy of Robbe-Grillet, *et al.*; Gide's book within an identical book, or *mise en abyme* ("interior duplication"), can be considered the emblem of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*.

3 See, for example, Cope 55-58, who emphasizes a different intertext than I: "The whole is a pastiche of nineteenth-century styles from the literature of pornography," he writes (55). This point of departure leads him to a rather negative valorization of the novel: "It is about the stunning simplicity with which one can, with the manual of generic prescription, with 'habit and method,' write oneself out of 'communication' with an audience, with one's own text, with one's own self" (57-58). The master and the maid do not re-enforce our desires; "they steal fantasies and sterilize them" (58). Surprisingly, Cope observes *Spanking the Maid* contains "nothing kinetic, only pornography simplified into its written essence as repetition" (55). I could not disagree more strongly. With Lois Gordon, I see in *Spanking the Maid* a highly kinetic text. Gordon compares the novel to a dance: "The whole story reads like a dance, with pattern, implied sexuality, and verbally choreographed thrusts that connect evocations of flesh, spirit, time, and space" (165). As Cope indicates, the tale of *Spanking the Maid* is static; its movement occurs entirely at the level of the telling. Indeed, this paper will be precisely a demonstration of the text's *kinetics*: its operations, its movements, its lines of force.

4 Flaubert's idea of "a book about nothing" is mentioned by Ricardou as one of the "generators" of his novel, *La Prise de Constantinople* ("Naissance" 380-81).

1 In *Le Plaisir du texte* 22-24, Barthes discusses the different kinds of reading required by "classical" and "modern" texts. "Lisez lentement, lisez tout, d'un roman de Zola, le livre vous tombera des mains; lisez vite, par bribes, un texte moderne, ce texte devient opaque, forclos à votre plaisir: vous voulez qu'il arrive quelque chose, et il n'arrive rien; car ce qui arrive au langage n'arrive pas au discours" (23).

2 An early version of *Spanking the Maid* was published as "A Working Day," *Iowa Review* 10 (Summer 1979): 1-27.

enterprise.⁵ Finally, in the years just after the second world war, existentialism and the theory of the absurd provided a metaphysical basis for the development of the *Nouveau Roman*: in an empty world, all human activities are equally (in)valid; as the characters of *En Attendant Godot* demonstrate, to live means to pass the time playing the games we have managed to invent.

The development of the *Nouveau Roman* has been characterized by a phenomenon which differs sharply with the situation of American fiction: the continuing dialogue between the theory and practice of writing fiction. Most *Nouveaux Romanciers* have published not only novels and stories, but also theoretical essays on their own practices or those of other writers. The first important text in this tradition was Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Ère du soupçon* (1956); Michel Butor has published five volumes of essays called *Répertoires* (1960-1982); Robbe-Grillet collected his early writings in what has become almost a manifesto, *Pour un Nouveau Roman* (1963), and, more recently, his pseudo-autobiography, *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), consists to a large degree of theoretical writings; Jean Ricardou's work on narrative theory (*Problèmes du Nouveau Roman* [1967], *Pour une théorie du Nouveau Roman* [1971], *Le Nouveau Roman* [1973]) eclipses his fiction, and makes of him the foremost theoretician of the *Nouveau Roman*. This dialogue between theory and fiction has resulted in a dynamic production. Sometimes the fictions have provided the impulse for experimentation, leaving to theory the task of articulating the effects of the experiment; just as often, however, the impetus for the discovery of new designs has come from theoretical writings.⁶ Whether *Nouveaux Romans* have assumed the form of game,

5 Gide is credited with coining the term, *mise en abyme*; in heraldry, it refers to a blazon which contains another blazon. For discussion of *mise en abyme*, see Ricardou, *Le Nouveau Roman* 47-74, and Dällenbach.

6 Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou have somewhat different notions of the proper relation of theory and practice in the *Nouveau Roman*. Early in his career Robbe-Grillet envisaged a constructive, creative role for theory. In "A quoi servent les théories," he wrote: "Après *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, après Joyce, après *La Nausée*, il semble que l'on s'achemine de plus en plus vers une époque de la fiction où les problèmes de l'écriture seront envisagés lucidement par le romancier, et où les soucis critiques, loin de stériliser la création, pourront au contraire lui servir de moteur" (*Pour un Nouveau Roman* 11). More recently, however, he has revised (contradicted) this position, claiming that theory has only a negative effect on his fiction. "Le critique qui a mis en lumière une signification, dans mes oeuvres, ne m'indique pas une voie à suivre mais une voie à abandonner" (*Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 2: 139). Ricardou continues to insist that the theory and practice of fiction-making go hand in hand. "Contre la séparation de la pratique et de la théorie que l'idéologie régnante encourage, voire institutionnalise, notre geste est une prise de parti: tout écrivain nous semble devoir se risquer à la théorie et y impliquer ses textes, tout théoricien nous semble devoir se risquer à la littérature et y confronter ses études" (*Nouveau Roman* 17). Theory and fiction are almost indistinguishable in his own

stream of consciousness, camera eye, jig-saw puzzle, or do-it-yourself kit, they have all shown an awareness of textual structures and an impulse to experiment with them. Like all experimental writing, the *Nouveau Roman* has investigated not thematic questions but invariably formal ones. The writers designated as *Nouveaux Romanciers* have all broken with the traditional novel and attempted to renew its forms. They share, according to Ricardou, a common goal and a common procedure: "la mise en cause du récit" (*Nouveau Roman* 137). This experimental project has proceeded in five principal directions: 1) the attack on traditional narrative structures; 2) the development of ludic narrative models; 3) the elaboration of specular narrative devices and self-reflexivity; 4) the liquidation of referentiality; 5) the transformation of the relation between reader and writer in creating a text's meaning(s).

1) *The attack on traditional narrative structures*. In their earliest as well as their most recent writings, the *Nouveaux Romanciers* systematically oppose the narrative convention established by the nineteenth-century novel, a convention based on chronology, linear fable, psychologically consistent characters, and an absolute confidence in a reality without gaps. The serial construction employed by the *Nouveau Roman* fragments the anecdote and abolishes chronology; instead of discrete, unique actions placed in an unequivocal temporal sequence, these texts repeat with variations the same scene again and again. For the "round," lifelike characters whose depths are disclosed by an omniscient narrator, *Nouveaux Romans* substitute flat and anonymous figures, "simple subjects of the verb's action," pure elements in a textual design.⁷ For the fixed reality of conventional narrative, they present contradictory, paradoxical spaces, where one fictional site first frames another site, and then is framed by it.⁸

2) *The development of ludic narrative models*. Robbe-Grillet argues that nineteenth-century social and narrative orders were founded on the "myth

writing. "Pour moi, théorie et pratique sont deux faces d'une même activité.... Lorsque je compose un roman, je n'écris pas d'essais théoriques, le travail théorique est fait uniquement à l'intérieur du roman" (*Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 2: 339). In his paper, "Terrorisme, théorie," at the colloquium on Robbe-Grillet in 1975, he spoke at length of this question.

7 "Un personnage, tout le monde sait ce que ce mot signifie. Ce n'est pas un il quelconque, anonyme et translucide, simple sujet de l'action exprimée par le verbe" (*Pour un Nouveau Roman* 27).

8 Bruce Morrisette discusses these "impossible topological structures" by comparing them to "Klein worms," figures where inside and outside, container and contained are confused by ingenious distortions. The best examples of these contradictory spatial arrangements may be found in Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, and in Claude Simon's *Triptyque*.

of naturality": "L'ordre bourgeois, la morale bourgeoise, les valeurs bourgeoises étaient censément naturels, c'est-à-dire inscrits dans l'ordre des choses, donc justes, innocents et définitifs"; "raconter semble pour Balzac un travail naturel et innocent" ("Sur le choix" 159, 160). The *Nouveau Roman*, however, belongs to a world where "il n'y a pas d'ordre naturel, ni moral ni politique ni narratif, il n'existe que des ordres humains créés par l'homme, avec tout ce que cela suppose de provisoire et d'arbitraire" ("Sur le choix" 160). Accordingly, the *Nouveau Roman* openly asserts its non-natural mode of production, proposing in place of traditional narrative structures grounded in allegedly transcendental values (Truth) completely arbitrary and gratuitous mechanisms to generate texts. In short, as Robbe-Grillet announces, *game-structures* are at present the only possibility of textual organization.⁹ In *Nouveaux Romans* characters become playing pieces manipulated by textual machinery and set wandering through the ritualized, symbolic (ludic) spaces of *damiers*, *échiquiers*, puzzles, labyrinths. Just as games unfold through a series of improvised responses to changing lines of play, these texts tell stories which are produced by the discourse on the spur of the moment, stories whose outcomes are not known in advance. The text becomes "the territory and stake of a combat"; it is configured by an internal agon of conflicting language games.¹⁰ The rules of this game of text-

9 "Après la faillite de l'ordre divin (de la société bourgeoise) et, à sa suite, de l'ordre rationaliste (du socialisme bureaucratique), seulement des organisations ludiques demeurent désormais possibles" (Prière d'insérer, *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, n. pag.). This brief essay contains some of Robbe-Grillet's most provocative observations about the intersection of play and literature. Robbe-Grillet is by no means the only one of these writers to employ images drawn from games in his novels, nor is he alone in employing ludic metaphors to describe his texts. References to games and play by the various *Nouveaux Romanciers* are too numerous to mention here, but I can cite Françoise van Rossum-Guyon's concluding statement from the colloquium on the *Nouveau Roman* at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1971. After assessing some of the confusions the term "*Nouveau Roman*" had accumulated, in her official capacity as organizer, she pronounced the death of the *Nouveau Roman*, and the birth of the "*Nouveau Nouveau Roman*" (!), a form she went on to define as "un jeu de construction" (*Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* I 404).

10 Robbe-Grillet describes the agon of the *Nouveau Roman* in this manner: "Que fait maintenant le roman moderne, celui que l'on a appelé ... *Nouveau Roman*? ... C'est la tentation désespérée d'un tissu de la solidité de bronze.... Oui, mais ce qui se passe dans ce tissu, le texte, c'est qu'il est à présent le territoire et l'enjeu d'un combat. Au lieu de s'avancer en juge aveugle, comme la loi divine, dans une volontaire ignorance de tous les anciens problèmes que l'ancien roman masque et nie (celui de l'instant, par exemple), il va au contraire se livrer sans cesse à une exposition délibérée au grand jour, et à une précise mise en scène, des multiples impossibilités où il se débat, et qui en même temps le constituent. À tel point que cette lutte interne va devenir bientôt (à partir des années 60) le sujet même du livre" (*Miroir* 29-30). For a discussion of the agonistic mechanism

production are furnished by the original formal arrangements from which the narratives are subsequently deduced.¹¹

3) *The elaboration of specular narrative devices and self-reflexivity.* As I have noted, the experimentation undertaken by *Nouveaux Romanciers* tends to be formal/theoretical rather than pragmatic/thematic; the subject of their inquiry is not phenomena in the world but the practice itself of writing. As certain examples of postmodern architecture flaunt rather than hide their pipes, ventilators, and superstructures, so the *Nouveau Roman* displays the techniques and structures that have produced it. From the origins of the *Nouveau Roman* this self-reflexivity has been remarked.¹² In one sense, these texts belong to the mimetic tradition of Western literature; they do not abandon mimeticism, but they redirect it from extra-textual realities back into the textual structure. Sometimes *Nouveaux Romans* inscribe novelists who reflect on the problems of novel-writing (Gide's Édouard of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* originates the line; Butor's Burton — near anagram of the author's name — in *L'Emploi du temps* would be one of the most distinguished descendants), or fictional novels which reduplicate their central configurations (e.g., the African novel of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*). In later texts, however, the fictions tend to be discontinuous, multiple, contradictory, and thus the comprehension of the text in a single reduced image is no longer possible; the later *Nouveau Roman* contains specular devices which are not *reproductive* but *productive*, not totalizing but fragmented and mobile (Dällenbach 175-208). The *Nouveau Roman* approaches the status of a perfectly self-enclosed system of mirrors infinitely reflecting its own constituent parts.

4) *The liquidation of reference.* According to traditional ideas of mimesis, a text should, as Hamlet tells the players, "hold a mirror up to nature." The *Nouveau Roman* systematically questions what Ricardou has called the "dogma of representation" by which the novel, especially the novel of the nineteenth century, has been supported (*Pour une théorie* 20-22). Ricardou goes further still in his attack on conventional notions of the text and

in Robbe-Grillet's texts, see Caldwell, "The Robbe-Grillet Game."

11 "Souignons-le: composer un roman de cette manière, ce n'est pas avoir l'idée d'une histoire, puis la disposer; c'est avoir l'idée d'un dispositif, puis en déduire une histoire" (*Nouveau Roman* 39). Many *Nouveaux Romans* thus begin not *in medias res*, but *ante res*; see, for example, the opening pages of Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*. For a discussion of a (ludic) *dispositif* generating fiction in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, see Caldwell, "Of Hobby-Horses, Baseball, and Narrative: Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*."

12 Jean-Paul Sartre observed already in 1948 "que nous vivons à une époque de réflexion et que le roman est en train de réfléchir sur lui-même" (9).

challenges the "ideology of expression": "Selon l'idéologie régnante, l'écrivain est le sujet propriétaire d'un sens que son texte a pour charge d'exprimer" (*Nouveau Roman* 15). The *Nouveau Romancier*, Ricardou argues, has no imagination, has nothing to say, but discovers his/her material as he/she writes — in effect, the *Nouveau Romancier* allows the text to produce itself.¹³ Abstract art freed painting from the task of referring to objects outside its own surface; a painting need no longer be a picture of something, but may be "merely" the play of color on a two-dimensional field. Kandinsky's compositions represent an effort to purify painting by reducing it to its basic painterly elements, space and light. In much the same way, the *Nouveau Roman* seeks to become an art of surfaces, abstract, a free-play of signifiers.

5) *The transformation of the relation between reader and writer in creating a text's meaning(s).* *Nouveaux Romanciers* claim that new kinds of texts require new kinds of readers. These *nouveaux lecteurs* are no longer called upon to disengage the message placed within the text by the author, but instead to participate in the enterprise of text-production by continuing the play of its elements. The *Nouveau Roman* thus aims at the collapse of the traditional barriers between reader and writer. Robert Pinget affirms that the reader must join the writer in a mutual project of text-production.

Il y a de ma part une revendication à l'égard du lecteur. Pourquoi bénéficierait-il d'une clarté d'exposé dont je ne bénéficie pas au cours de mon travail, pourquoi lui mâcherais-je la tâche alors que personne ne me la mâche à moi? Il doit prendre conscience, probablement à la seconde lecture, qu'il participe lui-même au travail d'élucidation, de décoration que je m'impose page après page, prendre conscience que le livre se fait sous ses yeux avec tous les doutes de l'auteur, ses hésitations, ses passions, ses reculs, ses élans. (317)

The new reader does not interpret the text by identifying its truth; instead she or he plays with the text's signs, rearranging them in new patterns, thereby constructing meanings which are not absolute, but local, provisional, idiosyncratic. Barthes goes so far as to say that the voice heard in the text belongs not to the author, but to the reader: "*dans le texte, seul parle le lecteur*" (S/Z 157). This, then, is the voice of the reader as I hear it in *Spanking the Maid*.

A reader familiar with the *Nouveau Roman* cannot fail to notice the structural and technical similarities of *Spanking the Maid* and certain texts of Robbe-Grillet, especially the novels *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959), *La Maison*

de rendez-vous (1965), *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970) and the film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1962). In his earliest novels Robbe-Grillet had begun to contest narrative unity by repeating certain scenes again and again: in *La Jalousie* (1957) the same centipede is crushed against the same wall in a dozen points of the text. In the later works, however, serial organization does not remain localized, but contaminates the entire fiction to such a degree that no narrative unity can be (re)constructed; the story has become irrecoverable, incorrigibly plural.¹⁴ Like the later texts of Robbe-Grillet, *Spanking the Maid* multiplies and fragments its central anecdote, substituting a serial for a linear organization. Nothing much happens in Coover's novel — all its scenes (in Ricardou's terminology, "cells" or "sequences")¹⁵ may be grouped in a limited number of schematic stages: the maid enters; the master awakes, begins to recount his dream, and then goes into the bathroom to shower; the maid cleans the room and finds a foreign object in the bed; the master discovers her fault and punishes her for it; the master returns to bed. The text's diversity arises not from its invention of new episodes, but from the variations it introduces in the fixed pattern of actions. Each of the anecdote's fundamental stages contains a series of different elements. When the maid enters, sometimes she forgets her bucket, sometimes she has it; sometimes she glances at the bed, sometimes she avoids doing so; she enters "once and for all" (21), only to reenter a few pages later. Each time the master awakens, he attempts to describe his dream with two sets of different but related words: utility, futility, humility, tumidity, cupidity, humidity, humanity / civil service, sybil service, civil severity, civil surface. In the bed the maid discovers a series of unexpected items: a bloody belt, a razor blade, a flower, the drawers she thought she was wearing. The punishments, too, are varied across the novel; the master chooses different weapons and positions for the administration of his corrections. This serial organization disturbs habitual ways of reading; instead of a single, consistent plot, the reader is confronted with a network of contradictory stories. Fictions normally obey metonymic (syntagmatic) rules: they proceed linearly from one point to the next of a single action.

¹⁴ My description of the difference in narrative strategies of Robbe-Grillet's early and later texts (which corresponds roughly to the difference between "*Nouveau Roman*" and "*Nouveau Roman*") follows Ricardou: the *Nouveau Roman*, he writes, "met en scène l'assemblage impossible d'un Pluriel diégétique et ouvre, de la sorte, une période subversive.... Du stade de l'Unité provoquée, on est passé au stade de l'Unité impossible" (*Nouveau Roman* 139).

¹⁵ Ricardou employs the term "cells" (*cellules*) in speaking of *La Jalousie* (*Problèmes* 80-88). He defines "sequences" (*séquences*) as "tout ensemble d'événements supposés sans hiatus" (*Nouveau Roman* 76).

¹³ Ricardou writes: "C'est dans et par le texte que se produit le texte" (*Nouveau Roman*: hier, aujourd'hui 199).

Spanking the Maid, however, incessantly disturbs the metonymy of its tale with a multitude of "metaphoric aggressions."¹⁶

The text's strategies for deploying its battery of variants further serves to assail and finally to cancel narrative linearity and unity. The different stages of the supposed action do not always occur in the order displayed above; there is a continual shuffling of scenes. In some sequences the maid enters, and then the master awakens, but in other sites of the text the master is already showering when she arrives. The reader's frustrated attempt to establish some sort of stable chronological order is inscribed in the text. After his shower, the master finds only damp towels, and asks himself: "Has she forgotten to change them yet again, he wonders furiously, standing there in a puddle with the cold wet towels clutched in his fists — or has she not even come yet?" (20-21). The maid also questions the chronology of events: "When, she wants to know as she opens wide the glass doors to let the sweet breath of morning in (there are birds, too, such a song, she doesn't hear it), did all this really begin? When she entered? Before that? Long ago? Not yet?" (22). Another of this text's disruptive tactics consists in its systematic failure to signal shifts from one sequence to another. *Spanking the Maid* contains thirty-nine (unnumbered) "blocks" of text; while sometimes new sequences begin at the opening of new blocks of text, other sequences break down without warning in the middle of blocks. In the first section of the novel the maid enters and begins to clean the room; then when she discovers she has forgotten her bucket, the story halts, and she immediately enters again: "but her mind is still locked on that image, at first pleasing, now troubling, of the light as it spilled into the room: as from a bucket.... She sighs. She enters. With a bucket" (10).¹⁷ Where does the narrative gap occur? I cannot be sure, for two possibilities exist: either at the ellipsis, before "She sighs," or before "She enters."¹⁸ At any rate, the action is

16 "Dans le Nouveau Roman, mille agressions métaphoriques perturbent incessamment la métonymie du récit" (Ricardou, *Nouveau Roman* 90).

17 Cf. the opening lines of *Dans le labyrinthe*, which likewise present diegetic false-starts: "Dehors il pleut ... Dehors il y a du soleil" (9). Several lines later the text "erases" these versions when it arrives at the meteorological condition which will prevail for the rest of the novel: "Dehors il neige" (11).

18 Cf. *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, where Robbe-Grillet regularly creates far more extensive zones of ambiguity than Coover does here. Robbe-Grillet's sequences often begin in one mode, continue for several pages, and then conclude in a different mode altogether. Early in the novel, for example, a third-person narrative account of a rape slows down little by little as the discourse's descriptive function clashes with, then dominates its narrative function. Finally the action stops altogether, and the scene has become a description of a poster seen on the wall of the subway. The text does not permit me to determine exactly where the action becomes a visual image; the zone of

interrupted, and the text instantly transports me to a different point in the story. This technique results in a figure analogous to cubist painting: different "views" are juxtaposed without regard to establishing a continuity between them.¹⁹ Nonetheless, conventional narrative order does not remain completely absent from the novel. Another series of elements effectively re-establishes a certain limited chronology. Many fictional cells contain motifs which indicate the time of day during which their particular action occurs. These indices form a clear pattern. In the first scenes the sun has just risen and the birds are singing; in the middle pages, the sun has climbed overhead and the birds are silent; in the final cells, evening has fallen and the birds have resumed their song. In effect, the novel's action happens within the framework of a single day.

Spanking the Maid's treatment of its characters likewise recalls the *Nouveau Roman's* program of experimental writing. The master and the maid remain abstract and nameless, human only in their broadest outlines. They are reduced to the functions they serve in the fiction: the master is merely the agent who punishes; the maid is merely the destination of his strokes and lectures. Synecdoche emphasizes the purely functional nature of each character: he is "the fearsome rod, that stout engine of duty" (45); she is her backside, "that broad part destined by Mother Nature for the arduous invention of souls" (84). To be sure, the reader sees at times what each character thinks and feels, but this occurs in a way which destroys rather than supports the illusion of the characters' individuation and uniqueness. The same thoughts and the same phrases circulate from master to maid: each wonders whether the other might not be testing him/her (37, 41, 65); each sighs and asks why it could not be easier than this (13, 15, 50); each questions when it all began (22, 30, 42). Both characters lack the power to control or alter what they undergo. The master must act according to the manuals which prescribe the specific punishment for the maid's offenses; the maid's efforts to establish a perfect order are repeatedly frustrated by a malevolent force which smudges the mirror, dampens the towels, and places ghastly objects in the bed.

It never ends. Making the bed, she scatters dust and feathers afresh or tips over the mop bucket. Cleaning up the floor, she somehow disturbs the bed. Or something does.

ambiguity extends, in effect, from beginning to end of the sequence.

19 McCaffery discusses certain texts from *Prickings and Descarts* — "The Babysitter," "The Magic Poker," "The Elevator," "Quenby and Olga, Swede and Carl," "The Gingerbread House" — as "cubist stories" (71-81). "Like cubist paintings," he writes, "they are consistently structured to force the viewer to consider competing realities as equally 'real' or true" (73).

It's almost as if it were alive. Blankets wrinkle, sheets peek perversely out from under the spread, pillows seem to sag or puff up all by themselves if she turns her back, and if she doesn't, then flyspecks break out on the mirror behind her like pimples, towels start to drip, stains appear on her apron. If she hasn't forgotten it. (82)

Two narrative operations are set into conflict. The maid's cleaning represents the text's propensity to establish a stable and static order, the limited perfection of classical art: "When she straightens a room, polishes a floor, bleaches a sheet or scrubs a tub, always doing the very best she can, she becomes, she knows, a part of what is good in the world, creating a kind of beauty, revealing a kind of truth" (28). The malevolent force of *Spanking the Maid* seems to be the narrative itself ("it's almost as if it were alive").²⁰ The two terms of the narrative paradigm are routine and disruption: the maid enters again and again and begins to clean, as she does day after day; the story is born precisely at the moment something unforeseen occurs to interrupt the everyday course of events. Here what happens in the story reproduces what happens to the story: as the text continually frustrates the characters' attempts to order the world in which they dwell, so it disrupts conventional narrative structure. The master and the maid display an awareness of their status as fictional characters. The limits of their world are the limits of the text in which they are inscribed:

Sometimes, as now, scratching himself idly and dragging himself still from the stupor of sleep, he wonders about his calling, how it came to be his, and when it all began: on his coming here? on her coming here? before that, in some ancient time beyond recall? And has he chosen it? or has he, like that woman in his dream, showing him something that for some reason enraged him, been "born with it, sir, for your very utility"? (30)

These characters have no life outside the ritual of punishment they are doomed endlessly to re-enact. They remain the victims of the text in which they figure.

The *Nouveau Roman* breaks with the tradition of recounting a story which exists before the effort of telling it; it shifts its focus from story to writing, from product to process. Instead of conventional fiction's past tense, it employs the present, for its invention occurs spontaneously, at the moment of writing. Similarly, *Spanking the Maid* presents not so much a

fiction as the production of a fiction. The text's opening lines reveal a discourse in search of a narrative:

She enters, deliberately, gravely, without affectation, circumspect in her motions (as she's been taught), not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her, but advancing sedately, discretely, glancing briefly at the empty rumpled bed, the cast-off nightclothes. She hesitates. No. Again. She enters. (9)

The maid's entrance and advance are stately, ceremonial, inscribed already in ritual. The narrative, on the other hand, advances in fits and starts, uncertain of the path it will take. Each of the negative clauses ("without affectation," "not stamping ... nor dragging her legs") displays a peculiar figure of fictional discourse: the text describes not what happens, but what does not happen — not what is present, but what is absent.²¹ Each of these represented non-actions has been considered and (almost) instantly rejected by the narrative. The parenthetical statement — "(as she's been taught)" — functions in a contrasting manner: it has been "grafted" on the narrative; or, to alter the metaphor, the narrative has accepted this foreign body, but has not yet assimilated it. With the words, "No. Again," the sequence comes suddenly to a stop. Like a film director who insists that a scene be repeated until it pleases him, the scriptor attempts to erase the action by substituting for it a new and presumably better version. While film directors leave discarded scenes on the cutting-room floor, *Spanking the Maid* includes them in its text. (Several later passages will be marked by the recurring phrase "once and for all," by which the discourse gives the illusion that it has finally settled on a definitive narrative. A narrative lure, an imposture: even the passages marked by this formula are eventually replaced.)

The opening passage continues with a new sequence, a variant of the initial one.

She enters. Deliberately and gravely, without affectation, not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her, not marching as if leading a dance, nor keeping time with her head and hands, nor staring or turning her head either one way or the other, but advancing sedately and discretely through the door, across the polished floor, past the empty rumpled bed and cast-off nightclothes (not glancing, that's better), to the tall curtains along the far wall. As she's been taught. (9)

20 The narrator of Coover's "The Magic Poker" has a similarly disruptive, even destructive function: "I arrange the guest cabin. I rot the porch and tatter the screen door and infest the walls. I tear out the light switches, gut the mattresses, smash the windows, and shit on the bathroom floor. I rust the pipes, kick in the papered walls, unhinge doors. Really, there's nothing to it. In fact, it's a pleasure" (*Pricksongs and Descans* 22).

21 Robbe-Grillet makes frequent use of this technique of "creation by negation." In "La Chambre secrète," a short text from the collection *Instantanés*, he clearly plays on what fictional discourse affirms and what it denies. The central element of the story, a dagger (or knife or sword or...), never appears in the discourse, although the reader knows it must be present. On the other hand, the discourse constantly presents objects which are not present: the male character reaches out for "l'appui absent" (103) as he climbs the staircase.

The proximity of this version of the maid's entrance foregrounds the work of alteration the narrative undergoes. Many elements from the original version are retained, although the rhythm and order of their positioning has been modified. New elements have accumulated: the series narrating what she does not do has been expanded, and the room gains another diegetic aspect (the polished floor). One significant gesture has been reversed, however. Now the maid does not glance at the bed, and thus the fiction changes character. Curiously, the parenthetical comment (an afterthought) contains two types of narrative discourse. "Not glancing" belongs to a discursive mode which presents the supposed actions of the characters: I call *narrative* any utterance which contributes to the telling of a story. "That's better" adds nothing to the story (the action) or to the presented world; it is neither narrative nor diegetic. Instead, it comments on how the narration of the story is proceeding; it is auto-reflexive, self-critical, *metanarrative*. The "No. Again" which arrested the first sequence likewise displays the metanarrative mode of the discourse. Here, as throughout *Spanking the Maid*, the scriptor momentarily functions as the reader of the text he/she produces (and which produces him/her); as if he/she reads the other and comments on the text. As a game may be represented as a series of discrete responses to an evolving context, so this novel produces its signs by responding to what it has already produced. Consequently, the scriptor takes the form neither of a spectator nor an auditor of the fiction (the supposed actions); he/she neither over-sees nor overhears what transpires.²² Instead, the text invents itself (plays itself out) during the moment of writing (reading).

What are the different functions of the discourse of *Spanking the Maid*? What are the different voices of the text? In addition to the three originating in the scriptor, mentioned above — the *narrative* (actions), the *diegetic* (qualities of place, time, and character), the *metanarrative* (qualities of the discourse) — one can isolate four others, all of which originate in the characters: 1) the master's speech reported by the discourse; 2) the maid's reported speech; 3) the master's thoughts; 4) the maid's thoughts. These four modes manifest the same lack of diversity one finds in the other modes: just as the master and maid repeat the same actions, so they endlessly rehearse the same lines and the same thoughts. Once again, the interest of this text

22 One could go even further and say that many narratives function as *voyeur*. The pleasure of certain texts arises from the reader's illusion that he or she spies on people unaware that they are observed. One could make this claim for Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* and for Coover's "The Babysitter." The latter story inscribes the male (not the female) reader in its several male characters — the father, the boyfriend, the son — who secretly watch the babysitter and fantasize about her.

arises not from its diversity of invention, but from the surprising ways it combines a limited amount of material, from the different figures or narrative games it manages to produce. In traditional fiction there exists a clear hierarchy between a text's voices; the functions originating in the narrator ("scriptor" in a modern text / "narrator" in a traditional text) embrace and dominate those originating in the characters. The lines of communication between narrator and character are open only in one direction: the narrator has access to the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters, but the characters are not permitted to overhear the narrator as he tells his tale. *Spanking the Maid*, however, allows a free exchange between its different modes of discourse. As I have previously mentioned, thoughts circulate from master to maid, from maid to master — an illicit operation in any system of realist story-telling. More outrageous still, the characters are aware of the text of which they are part; they regularly respond to elements which occur in another of the text's modes. As the discourse at times functions as its own reader, becoming metanarrative, these characters *read* the writing which presents and constitutes them.²³ When the maid throws open the curtains, sunlight streams in, "as though (she thinks) flung from a bucket" (9-10). "She thinks," occurring as it does after the phrase has begun, does not completely succeed in shifting the utterance from the narrative mode (owned by the scriptor) into the maid's thoughts. A few lines later, this metaphoric bucket has completed the circuit from the scriptor's pure discourse (figure of speech) to the maid's subjective zone, to the narrative: the bucket becomes "real"; the maid must leave to fetch a bucket she has forgotten. Later the maid again overhears the discourse's metaphor.

But on that road, on the floor of the bathroom, she finds a damp towel and some pajama bottoms, all puddled together like a cast-off mop-head. Mop-head? She turns and gazes in dismay at the empty bucket by the outer door. Why, she wants to know, tears springing to the corners of her eyes, can't it be easier than this? (13)

A mop, hitherto absent, makes its way into the maid's mind and thence into the narrative. The reader certainly expects maids to have mops, but nonetheless, this mop has not existed until this point in the text. The textual machinery has produced the item before our eyes.

Thus the discourse of *Spanking the Maid* gives birth to signs which subsequently migrate from zone to zone of the text. The master's bed frequently serves as the site of this spontaneous generation: the maid

23 Cf. in "The Magic Poker," where a character likewise overhears the text's narrative discourse: "Are we merely blind brutes loosed in a system of mindless energy, impotent, misdirected, and insolent? 'No,' he says aloud, 'we are not'" (28).

discovers there a series of bizarre objects; there the master awakens and attempts to describe his dreams. As in the *Nouveau Roman*, writing precedes fiction; no pre-established meanings restrict the free-play of signifiers. All combinations are possible. Objects found in the master's bed return and find a place in the narrative: the maid's drawers suddenly appear when she throws back the covers (28), and later the master punishes her for failing to wear them (48). In other instances, the maid's metaphors are actualized: the master's erection pokes up out of his fly "like (she thinks) some kind of luxuriant but dangerous dew-bejeweled blossom" (22), and later she finds a flower in his bed (45). The shifting images from the master's dreams are translated in a series of metaphors describing his uncovered penis: he watches his erection dip back inside his pajamas "like a sleeper pulling the blankets over his head" (30), "like a worm caught out in the sun, burrowing for shade" (56), "like a frog diving for cover" (94), "like an abandoned moral" (95). According to Barthes, "répéter à l'excès, c'est entrer dans la perte, dans le zéro du signifié" (*Plaisir* 67). The repetition of this text occurs on two levels: it repeats its narrative (e.g., the master awakening to watch his erection), and it repeats its linguistic signs (e.g., the mop, the flower). The continual regrouping and reformation of language in *Spanking the Maid* functions to liquidate reference, to annihilate the layer of the signified. Consider the "riddle of genesis" which surfaces at three points of the text:

a solution of sorts has occurred to her to that riddle of genesis that has been troubling her mind: to wit, that a condition *has* no beginning. Only *change* can begin or end. (23)

a solution of sorts to that problem of genesis that's been troubling her occurs to her: to wit, that change (she is thinking about change now, and conditions) is eternal, has no beginning — only conditions can begin or end. (88)

she ... realizes with a faint shudder (she cannot hold back the little explosions of wind) that change and condition are coeval and everlasting: a truth as hollow as the absence of birdsong (but they are singing!)... (97)

The terms of the original utterance are reversed in the second. The third and final statement, occupying a privileged position near the end of the text where readers are wont to look for truth, synthesizes the first two, and gives the illusion of transcending them. What does this configuration mean? Has some "truth" emerged during the course of the text? Is the final formulation a hollow truth or one as full as the presence of birdsong? In the reading of *Spanking the Maid* I practice here, I find not a metaphysical truth but a purely textual one: "change" and "condition" are empty of reference; the layer of the signified has been virtually abolished by repetition; this text is the

space in which writing works a transformation on language. In short, Coover's novel approaches the vanishing point of meaning.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the last section of the novel. Instead of closure, *Spanking the Maid* concludes with a grand *ouverture*, an explosion of language, a spectacular *feu/jeu d'artifice* of new combinations of the signs previously introduced in the text. For the first time, the narrative no longer remains at the threshold of the master's dreams, employing its discourse to transmit messages of the ineffable to the waking mind; here the language descends into dream and becomes itself oneiric. The boundaries between discursive modes disappear altogether as signifiers from all the text's zones freely commingle. A sample:

His arm is rising and falling through great elastic spaces as though striving for something fundamental like a forgotten dream or lost drawers. "I — I'm sorry, sir!" Is she testing him, perched there on his stout engine of duty like a cooked bird with the lingering bucket of night in her beak (see how it opens, closes, opens), or is it only a dimpled fever of the mind? (100-01)

Barthes claims that repetition itself engenders pleasure (*jouissance*), that we can experience a kind of *erotic* pleasure from the word itself — from the word repeated excessively, or from the unexpected or novel word.²⁴ Both conditions of pleasure are present here. I recognize the elements in the passage above from many other contexts in the novel — from the litany of the maid's lament ("I — I'm sorry, sir!"), from the recurring thoughts of one and the other characters ("is she testing him"), from the narrative (his rising and falling arm, the lost drawers, the forgotten dream), from the discourse and its metaphors (the cooked bird, the lingering bucket of night) — and am continually surprised at the new and comic figures they form. Furthermore, word-play — an operation which had been restricted to the series used by the master to describe his dream — is now unleashed and runs rampant through the entire field of the text: "higher end" is transformed to "hired end," "lecture" to "elixir" to "elastic," "hard part" to "heart part." Unlike the erotic titillation some readers may experience from a story like "The Babysitter," the pleasure derived from *Spanking the Maid* arises as one witnesses a performance of text-production. While "The Babysitter" provokes readers — male readers, at least, for the "pleasure" of this story may indeed be inaccessible to female readers, structured, as it is, on male fantasies — to imagine the events and objects depicted, *Spanking the Maid* manages to

24 "En somme, le mot peut être érotique à deux conditions opposées, toutes deux excessives: s'il est répété à l'outrance, ou si au contraire il est inattendu, succulent par sa Nouveauté" (*Plaisir* 68).

arouse no sort of emotive response whatsoever; I am neither erotically stimulated, nor moved to sympathize with the poor beaten maid. The conclusion of the novel represents a kind of *Walpurgisnacht*, where words dance wildly and couple freely. The novel closes with an orgy, but its orgy is entirely textual.

Nevertheless...

As Barthes admits, every text requires its "shadow" — a bit of ideology, of representation, of subject.²⁵ *Spanking the Maid*'s use of the terms "master" and "maid," and its staging of a continuing and varying sadistic punishment carry an undeniable ideological content. The microscopic reading I have practiced until this point cannot account for my entire experience of the text. Like most readers, I continue to look for "meaning" when I read. What then are the larger structures of *Spanking the Maid*? Where do its signs congregate? What are the general directions of flow and transformation in the text? What are its themes?

For the moment allow me to say that I find four principal thematic structures in *Spanking the Maid*. (I wish to reserve my discussion of a fifth theme, auto-reflexivity, until later.) All of them may be expressed in binary terms, and all four relate to the central problem of authority: 1) sexual: male/female; 2) class: master/servant; 3) didactic: teacher/student; 4) philosophical: service/freedom. The play of the first two themes remains limited and largely unproblematic. The master — male, member of a privileged class — dominates and punishes the maid — female, member of an inferior class. One could, I suppose, read the novel as belonging to the discourse which supports a dominant (patriarchal and aristocratic) ideology. It seems to me, however, that the presence of the other two thematic configurations renders such a reading problematic; the interplay between the terms in the didactic and philosophical structures confuses the issue of power which defines so clearly the sexual and social thematic structures. The theme of teaching and learning simultaneously *opposes* master and maid and involves them in a common enterprise.

He shows her how to make the correct diagonal creases at the corners, how to fold the top edge of the upper sheet back over the blankets, how to carry the spread under and then over the pillows. Oh, not for his benefit and advantage — he could sleep anywhere or for that matter (in extremity) could make his own bed — but for hers. How else would she ever be able to realize what is best in herself? (36-37)

25 "Le texte a besoin de son ombre: cette ombre, c'est un peu d'idéologie, un peu de représentation, un peu de sujet" (*Plaisir* 53).

By an operation which admittedly recalls the rationalizations of all master classes, the terms of the social thematic structure are reversed: the master works for the maid! Without him, she would be nothing — she owes him her very soul: "Her soul, in short, is his invention, and she is grateful to him for it" (34). The punishments he delivers are thus justified by their pedagogic function; frequently as he beats her, he forces her to repeat after him the "text" whose precepts she has violated. The master's dreams — where he becomes the student punished by a female teacher — present the activity of teaching and learning as a paradigm whose poles may be reversed; the master has been and could be again the student. The communication of a cultural tradition may be seen as a self-generating chain: masters teach students who in turn become masters to new students.

The theme of service and freedom undergoes a similar development and likewise exhibits an ambiguity which clouds simple ideological readings. While originally the text presents the maid as the figure bound to her routine, to her duty, and the master as the figure whose punishments display the freedom of a sadistic desire, gradually it undermines this alignment, transforming her service into freedom, his freedom into service: "what is wonderful is the quickening of her spirits as she enters, the light that seems to dawn on her face as she opens the room, the way she makes a maid's oppressive routine seem like a sudden invention of love" (24). While her housework has become a spontaneous invention, his punishments allow him no room for improvisation or creation, no possibility of desire.

Sometimes he uses a rod, sometimes his hand, his belt, sometimes a whip, a cane, a cat-o'-nine-tails, a bull's pizzle, a hickory switch, a martinet, ruler, slipper, a leather strap, a hairbrush. There are manuals for this. Different preparations and positions to be assumed, the number and severity of the strokes generally prescribed to fit the offense. (45-46)

During the chastisements she may respond as the spirit moves her, while he must perform his duty precisely as it is written in the manuals.

Her responses are assumed in the texts (the writhing, sobbing, convulsive quivering, blushing, moaning, etc.), but not specified, except insofar as they determine his own further reactions — to resistance, for example, or premature acquiescence, fainting, improper language, an unclean bottom, and the like. Thus, once again, her relative freedom: her striped buttocks tremble and dance spontaneously under the whip which his hand must bring whistling down on them according to canon. (61)

Again I can say it: *Spanking the Maid* is the site of a transformation conducted by writing. The antithetical terms, service and freedom, circulate so freely in the text that their difference vanishes: "True service, she knows (he has taught her!), is perfect freedom" (47).

Another textual development further compounds the clear thematic matrix established at the outset of the novel. In its largest pattern, *Spanking the Maid* tells the story of the changing relation between its two characters. Since the novel employs a serial narrative technique, this pattern is not narrated directly *within* a given narrative sequence, but must be detected by comparing narrative elements *across* a series of sequences. As certain recurring indices (sun and birdsong) permit me to read the novel's action as occurring during a single day, so I observe that as the narrative cells succeed one another, the master steadily loses power and the maid gains it. In the novel's first scenes the master punishes the maid vigorously and dominates her completely. As the text unfolds, however, he grows increasingly fatigued, and finds less and less meaning in his manuals, his duties, the punishments he administers. "And what has she done wrong today? he wonders, tracing the bloody welts with his fingertips. He has forgotten. It doesn't matter" (87). His pedagogic function dissolves, and even his language refuses to obey. His standard lecture on those "two fairies," "method and habit" (37, 59) disintegrates: "He can lecture her on those two fairies, confusion and disorder. Method and habit, rather..." (87-88). His system and his certainty have broken down. As the master sinks toward sleep, the maid begins to terrorize him, snatching his towel or speaking without being spoken to; she deliberately commits faults and then positions herself for the beatings. She has become the aggressive, dominant figure. For a time she successfully reminds the master of his duty, but finally he is too exhausted even for half-hearted spankings — by the end of the novel he has crawled back into bed and fallen asleep. If I read *Spanking the Maid* according to its social and sexual thematics, must I not admit that it deconstructs the ideological configuration implied by the terms, master and maid? In this view does the novel not stage the reversal of existing class/sexual structures?²⁶

Yes, perhaps... But the ideological value of a text, Barthes claims, is a value of representation, not of production: "la valeur idéologique d'un texte (morale, esthétique, politique, aléthique) est une valeur de représentation, non de production" (S/Z 10). I have attempted here to read *Spanking the Maid* systematically according to a program of reading developed in their demanded by *Nouveaux Romans*, texts whose value originates in their productive not their representative functions. What then are the thematics of *Spanking the Maid* when one views it in light of the *Nouveau Roman*? If

26 For a very lively demonstration of how Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York* fails to do this, see Suleiman's article. She writes: "Viewed in the light of the Sadic intertext, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* takes on a curiously non-subversive aspect. Far from deconstructing male fantasies of omnipotence and total control over passive female bodies, *Projet* repeats them with astonishing fidelity" (57).

the *Nouveau Roman* has consistently depicted not phenomena in the world but the problems and practice of writing, how does *Spanking the Maid* reinscribe its own techniques and structures? How does it thematize its own production?

Thus I arrive at the fifth theme, the theme held in reserve at the outset of this analysis — *Spanking the Maid*'s auto-reflexive theme, to which the *Nouveau Roman* has made me especially sensitive. Like the other four themes, this one problematizes authority: who is in charge of producing this text and who controls the play of its meanings? As I read *Spanking the Maid*, I notice a network of metaphors which work to transform the characters' bodies into the terms of text-production. Signs pertaining to writing, to text, to reading are disseminated throughout the novel. The master thinks of the maid's backside, target of his repeated corrections, as "a blank ledger on which to write" (54); elsewhere it confronts him "like blank paper" (81) or a "blank page" (86). If the maid's body represents the pretextual raw material, then the master's punishments are the act of writing which transforms paper into text. After he has spanked her, he watches "the weals emerge from the blank page of her soul's ingress like secret writing" (86), and "little drops of blood appear like punctuation" (62). What has he written there? For one thing he has "forged" her soul, by way of those "vivid lessons ... in holy scripture, hotly writ" (81): he has in a sense invented her. The instruments which he employs to inscribe the text complete the equation of body/text-production which the novel establishes: the rod, the bull's pizzle, the whip, the hand itself produce the writing on the maid's empty page.²⁷ Here the theme of text-production crosses the sexual theme, the poles male/female, for the tools of the master's trade are clearly phallic in nature. The overdetermined "bull's pizzle" could be seen as the text's emblem of inscription: the phallus of the mythic symbol of male potency / an instrument of torture: a term capable of engendering or destroying. The master is then both author and authority; he originates and controls the operation of text-production. *The maid has no say*.²⁸ She is permitted to speak only in

27 The theme of punishment as writing on the body of the victim recalls Kafka's "In the Penal Colony." The rationale of the godly or diabolical machine which occupies center stage in this story parallels the master's contention that he has invented the maid's soul. The officer who explains the function of the machine claims that its victims are able to transcend their bestial nature and to arrive at an understanding of their fundamental guilt as they learn to read the writing the machine inscribes on their bodies.

28 Cf. Barthes' *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, where he analyzes the lines of force in the Sadic couple: "Le maître est celui qui parle, qui dispose de son langage dans son entier, l'objet est celui qui se tait" (36). He concludes: "On comprend mieux sur quoi repose et à quoi tend toute la combinatoire érotique de Sade: son origine et sa sanction sont d'ordre rhétorique" (37).

response to his inquiries, or during her "scripture lessons" — when she must repeat correctly the text she has violated. Again and again her corrections are brought on by her locutionary transgressions: she answers back to a reproof; she speaks without being spoken to; she attempts to remind him that he has already punished her. *The maid has no say, but she talks back.* The auto-reflexive theme of *Spanking the Maid* would thus seem to lead to another level of ideology, the ideology of text-production. Is the male the father of the text, the mother merely the blank page to receive his creative efforts?²⁹ Is text-production an inherently male activity?³⁰ Must the stylus be phallus?

The novel's most important narrative development — the master's increasing fatigue, the process of aging he seems to undergo as the sequences succeed one another — assumes a new meaning in the context of the theme of text-production. The master's chastisements are never spontaneously invented but inevitably dictated by the manuals. His writing conforms to a code articulated in and transmitted by books whose authority he does not call into question. In effect, these books originate and develop a system of text-production whose fundamental law demands that the punishment suit the offense: a given transgression provokes a prescribed instrument and position, a prescribed duration and application. Within the narrow field left him by these authoritative texts, the master has only limited play: "if improvisation is denied him, interpretation is not" (66-67). In the bedroom and in the text he speaks from and for the manuals; his control over the maid — in theory absolute, in fact eroding — has its source in the unquestioned authority vested in him by the manuals. His spankings continue the manuals, rewrite them; he transcribes their abstract law into the maid's living flesh. The wounds produced by the master's rod should thus reveal a double sense: both the particular crime committed by the maid, and the corresponding passage in the manuals. As the master's exhaustion progresses across the text, however, he begins to doubt the "abstractions" behind the system: "The room is clean, the bed stripped and made, the maid whipped, why isn't that enough? Is there something missing in the manuals? No, more likely, he has failed somehow to read them rightly" (71). Perplexed

29 Curiously, this argument would reproduce in transcribed form the originary patriarchal law: Apollo argues at Orestes' trial that the mother is not kin to her child, for she has only carried it, while the father has solely created it.

30 Cf. Suleiman's article, which concludes with a critique which could be applied more broadly to the *Nouveau Roman*'s program of text-production: "The ultimate masculine fantasy, of which *Projet* is the enactment, is the fantasy of self-engenderment" (62). Like many other readers, Suleiman finds the *Nouveau Roman* an inherently misogynistic enterprise: "Woman, the irreducible Other, is eliminated to make room for the engenderment of the same by the same" (60).

by the "riddles and paradoxes of his calling ... he takes refuge in the purity of technique" (78). His punishments become an empty ritual, an activity undertaken for its own sake, as pointless as a game. The system of text-production based on the transmitted authority of a canon breaks down: he can read neither the manuals nor his own inscriptions/transcriptions in the maid's flesh: "And what has she done wrong today? he wonders, tracing the bloody welts with his fingertips. He has forgotten. It doesn't matter" (87). "A loss of syntax between stroke and weal" (65) has occurred. The writing on the backside signifies nothing.

Sometimes, especially late in the day like this, watching the weals emerge from the blank page of her soul's ingress like secret writing, he finds himself searching it for something, he doesn't know what exactly, a message of sorts, the revelation of a mystery in the spreading flush.... But no, the futility of his labors, that's all there is to read there. (86-87)

Mise en abyme: this "spreading flush" refusing to divulge any mysterious depths images *Spanking the Maid* itself. In this text authority has absconded, and the author no longer controls the operations of text-production. *Spanking the Maid* stages precisely the breakdown of the system of masculine authority and authorship. The spectacle presents not the death of the author but his impotence, a loss which makes for comedy not tragedy. Finally the master lacks the force to raise the bull's pizzle. It falls limp from his hand as he slips under the covers.³¹

As the master seeks some depth of meaning when he traces the lines of the maid's wound, readers expect to find some kind of truth within the texts they read. Reading has traditionally resembled *spelunking* (the reader ventures into the text to explore its hidden substructure) or *mining* (the reader exploits the text's secret lode of precious metal). Experimental texts, however, demand experimental readers. *Spanking the Maid* anticipates a different sort of reading, a reading which does not penetrate the text, but remains entirely at its surface. Like the *Nouveau Roman*, Coover's novel requires not a linear but a vertical reading, a continual reorganization of the text, a rearrangement of its elements into patterns of recurrence and transformation. This kind of reading, as Barthes points out, is neither parasitic nor passive but *work*. We can no longer simply consume a text "que nous parons de tous les prestiges de la création de l'antériorité" (Barthes, S/Z 17), but must join the writer in producing a text's meanings. Like the

31 I would ask Susan Suleiman and other feminist critics of the *Nouveau Roman* if the recombinant generative field (*matrixx*) of the postmodern text does not effectively replace the phallus with the womb as the image of text-production. The stylus has been retired; now the computer, matrilineal instrument of combination and relation, engenders the text.

game-texts of *Nouveaux Romans*, *Spanking the Maid* presents a mobile, sliding structure which may be arranged in countless ways by the renewable and variable performance of the reader. Its "scripture lessons" are also *lecture* (lexicological) lessons. It inscribes our role as readers in the figure of the maid. We break silence and talk back. We sigh and wonder why it could not be easier than this. We arrange the room, but it keeps coming undone.

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