

A "DIAMOND" IN THE ROUGH:
BALANCING FICTION AND METAFICTION IN AMERICAN BASEBALL NOVELS

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On my Honor, I have received no unacknowledged aid
on this Thesis.

Randall Scott Devere

I would like to thank Professor George Ray, whose advice and expertise were invaluable throughout this project.

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To Mom, without whom I would not even be able to string two sentences together, much less write an honors thesis.

To Dad, for playing catch with me.

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INTRODUCTION

Baseball has one saving grace that distinguishes it...from every other sport. Because of its pace, and thus the perfectly observed balance, both physical and psychological, between opposing forces, its clean lines can be restored in retrospect. This inner game--baseball in the mind--has no season....¹

This passage from an essay by *New Yorker* writer Roger Angell serves as an epigraph for the themes that I explore in this thesis. First, the retrospection involved in the "baseball of the mind" evokes the process by which writers translate baseball into fictional form. Secondly, Angell's notions of "perfectly observed balance" parallel my own observations concerning a balance both between works of baseball fiction, and between the sport and the writing process. Finally, the idea that baseball transcends the seasons is reflected in the open-ended nature of the evolving baseball fiction canon.

The marriage of baseball and literature has a rich tradition stretching from the 19th-century inception of the game to the present. Characterized in its early days by children's stories such as Zane Grey's *The Short-Stop* (1909) and *The Redheaded Outfield* (1920), and Charles Emmett Van Loan's *The Big League* (1911), baseball fiction has evolved to the point where today it is a fully-developed subgenre of American literature that is worthy of increasing critical attention. As many writers and critics have pointed out, baseball lends itself to literary

representation as few institutions are able, and inspires some of our most vivid national memories. As Virginia Woolf points out when discussing the baseball reporter and novelist Ring Lardner--author of *You Know Me Al*, the seminal baseball novel included in my study--in her essay, "American Fiction," the sport of baseball provides the American novelist with the closest thing we have to a national heritage:

Mr. Lardner's interest in games has solved one of the most difficult problems of the American writer; it has given him a clue, a centre, a meeting place for the divers activities of people whom a vast continent isolates, whom no tradition controls. Games give him what society gives his English brother.²

Throughout baseball fiction's history, the game's century-and-a-half of tradition has provided both its writers and readers with a rich array of associations: equality as signified by the fairness of the rules, the pastoral myth of America symbolized by the field of play, the innocence and immutability of the game itself. W.P. Kinsella--author of the last book in my study, *Shoeless Joe*--contends that because of these associations "there is a body of quality literature about baseball."³, yet these connections also present a challenge to the baseball novelist. Because such historical "baggage" is inherent within the process of writing baseball fiction, the test for the writer is to be original even as the sport he depicts is so steeped in the past.

Few events are as ubiquitous and evocative within the American consciousness as the triumphs--and calamities--of baseball. The "Curse of the Bambino" haunting New England since Babe Ruth's sale to the Yankees, the tragedy of the Black Sox

Scandal, N.Y. Giant Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round The World," the mourning of Brooklyn when its beloved "Bums" were taken from them, the lovably hapless 1962 Mets, Carlton Fisk's game-winning "Body English Home Run," Bill Buckner's fatal flubbing of a ground ball--these real-life events are as compelling as any fictional creations. In their emotional impact and metaphorical significance, they have ascended to the level of American legend.

Philip Roth, author of another of the books in my study, *The Great American Novel*, discusses the literary sensibility inherent in the game of baseball:

Not until I got to college and was introduced to literature did I find anything with a comparable emotional atmosphere and as strong an aesthetic appeal....Baseball, with its lore and legends, its cultural power, its seasonal associations, its native authenticity, its simple rules and transparent strategies, its longueurs and thrills, its spaciousness, its suspensefulness, its peculiarly hypnotic tedium, its heroics, its nuances, and its mythic sense of itself, was the literature of my boyhood.⁴

Baseball fiction, according to Roth's assertion, simply constitutes an extension of baseball itself. The baseball novelist, then, need not stray too far from his subject in order to achieve thematic and symbolic resonance.

For the novelists in this survey, however, baseball is not the only topic they explore. Traversing a vast time-frame, the six novels that I study in chronological order are linked by a common focus on the craft of *writing* about baseball as much as by baseball itself. Lardner's *You Know Me Al* (1914), Mark Harris's

The Southpaw (1953) and *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1956), Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1972), and W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982) all contain distinct metafictional elements within their respective stories--a narrative motif which grows as baseball fiction matures. By "metafiction," I mean the category of self-referential fiction which contemplates the actual process of writing fiction. In describing metafiction, critic Robert Scholes defines the essential characteristic of the "fabulator," or metafictional writer: "Delight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer..."⁵ Metafiction is self-reflexive literature that strives to "assault or transcend the laws of fiction...from within the fictional form."⁶

Amid this self-scrutiny, the authors within this canon set their eponymous narrators in fictive worlds where they pursue Angell's ideal of balance--both literary and personal. No more fitting symbol for the concept of balance exists than the baseball diamond itself, the canvas upon which baseball--and baseball fiction--is drawn. The four bases of the diamond, each lying ninety feet from the next, circumscribe a rhombus with four equal sides. On this diamond backdrop of geometrical perfection, the central characters in our study--"diamonds in the rough"--strive with varying degrees of success for an analogous fictional balance.

In Chapter One I show how Lardner establishes baseball

metafiction in his seminal comic novel. *You Know Me Al's* narrator--hotshot rookie left-hander Jack Keefe--suffers from an emotional imbalance that is manifested in his pitching and his personal life. Because of his fundamental lack of introspection, Keefe never achieves balance in his life, and he remains in every respect "The Busher" he is when he enters the American League. From his rookie campaign in *The Southpaw* to his athletic prime in *Bang the Drum Slowly*, pitcher Henry Wiggen achieves the balance that Keefe cannot find: he matures as a man throughout his career. As a result, I explore in Chapter Two how Harris parallels Henry's personal stability with his development as both a ballplayer and a writer.

The metafictional component of our canon grows more pronounced in Chapter Three, as I examine a shift in the genre from player-narrators to observer-narrators of the game. In *The Universal Baseball Association* Coover explores in greater detail the act of writing fiction, as Henry Waugh's dice-controlled baseball "game" signifies the fiction-creation process. Within this game, Waugh-as-artist discovers a balance between history and imagination that results in dynamic fiction, even as his personality borders on the insane. In Chapter Four, we see that *The Great American Novel's* narrator, sportswriter Word Smith, also attempts to reconcile imagination with reality as a formula for fiction. Unlike Waugh, however, "Smitty" never finds balance--either emotional or authorial--and his narration suffers for the failure. Finally, in Chapter Five I describe the journey of

Shoeless Joe's narrator Ray Kinsella and his companion J.D. Salinger to break through the latter's chronic "writer's block." In the process, they discover the elusive balance between imagination and reality amid the fantastic events of their story. Ultimately, the two characters' literary travels return them to the place where all of our stories begin: the baseball diamond.

As these stories demonstrate, the dialogue on baseball fiction is ongoing and ever-changing. Each of these novels is connected--often consciously--to the others: either through explicit allusion, or by symbolic and thematic similarities. As a result, the canon of baseball fiction can be viewed as a vast work-in-progress, stretching between writers and across decades. Just as Kinsella and Salinger come back to their "Field of Dreams," so we recognize the baseball diamond as a paradigm of balance amid a game of infinite possibility for action--and interpretation. The search for narrative balance is the search for that diamond: what Donald Hall calls "a green island in a sea of change."⁷

NOTES

¹Roger Angell, "The Interior Stadium," *Baseball Diamonds: Tales, Traces, Visions & Voodoo from a Native American Rite*, ed. Kevin Kerrane and Richard Grossinger (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1980) 56-57.

²Virginia Woolf, "American Fiction," *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948) 123.

³Brooke K. Horvath and William J. Palmer, "Three On: An Interview with David Carkeet, Mark Harris, and W.P. Kinsella," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1987): 188-189.

⁴Philip Roth, "My Baseball Years," *The New York Times* (Apr. 2, 1973) 35.

⁵Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 3.

⁶Scholes 114.

⁷Donald Hall, *Fathers Playing Catch With Sons* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985) 62.

CHAPTER ONE

Any discussion of baseball literature in general--much less its metafictional components--must begin with an examination of Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*. Writing the first "adult" novel about the sport, sportswriter Lardner chronicles the rise and subsequent professional and emotional stasis of "The Busher," Jack Keefe. Amid this picaresque epistolary tale, Lardner lays the groundwork for baseball fiction's collective metafictional narrative. While still in its embryonic stage, this particular narrative form is nonetheless a thread that runs through all of Jack's letters to his friend Al. The metafictional undercurrent to the story reveals Jack's absence of editorial control over his own work, his lack of technical control in his writing, and his failure to channel his often explosive emotions into equally powerful prose. These literary shortcomings reflect Jack's overarching imbalance in his life and vocation. His failure to harness his talent with savvy on the field is mirrored by his failure to balance his artistic imagination with perception. Because Jack lacks introspective faculties, he cannot mature as a ballplayer and person. Concurrently, his lack of self-examination precludes his development as a writer. Thus, the first character in a line of literary self-explorers ultimately remains in a state of arrested development.

Jack's inarticulate letters--which make up the entire text

of the novel--chronicle the pitcher's rookie season with the Chicago White Sox. Written to hometown buddy Al, the letters present a biased, egotistical view of the tumult surrounding Jack's professional and personal life. Within this one-sided narrative, however, we can observe subtle signs that Jack is not in complete control of himself. In particular, the structure of the letters themselves reflects a lack of *authorial* control, as the opening lines from three of his letters indicate:

I got a hole lot to write but I ain't got much time because we are going over to Cleveland on the boat at ten P.M. (59)

I have not wrote for a long time have I Al but I have been very busy. (91)

I only got just time to write you this short note because Florrie and Maire is giving a big party to-night and I and Allen have got to beat it out of the house... (100)

Jack admits that he only writes to Al when circumstances allow or when events prod him into a response. He never takes a "proactive" stance in his writing; he is always reactive. The act of writing for Jack is almost exclusively a function of external machinations. Jack gives little attention to the content or style of his letters. Thus, Lardner presents Jack's narrative as dictated by the constraints of time and place.

The conclusions of Jack's letters further elucidate this point. They demonstrate that external circumstances not only serve as his writing stimulus, but they also provide him with his respective closures. Just as he often blames his teammates for his own mistakes, so he also ascribes his flawed literary

technique to others. As a result, Jack escapes culpability for the incomplete form that many of his letters take:

Well Al I must close and catch the boat.(62)

Well Al I must close and go in and get some lunch.(69)

I must close because I promised Allen...that I would come over to his flat and play cards...(78)

Well Al Florrie says it is time for me to keep my promise and take her to the moving pictures....So I must close for this time...(85)

In each of these cases, Jack's art imitates his life. Describing one particular loss, Jack writes: "My arm wasn't feeling good Al and my fastball didn't hop like it had ought to. But it was the rotten support I got that beat me." (74) This avoidance of accountability follows an established pattern: an external agent rather than his own judgement deprives him of a proper conclusion to his letters just as it prevents him from obtaining the victory he perpetually believes should be his. In each instance, Jack avoids taking responsibility for his own actions. He chooses to pass the blame along rather than admit that he has failed.

Lardner matches Jack's utter lack of editorial control with an equally pronounced absence of technical control in the pitcher's writing. Without question, Jack's failure to master the rudiments of the language constitutes the most distinctive feature of *You Know Me Al*. As Carl Van Doren points out, his skewering of English is remarkably thorough: "Malapropisms, misspellings and mispronunciations, paradigms simplified and distorted by ignorance, incredible triumphs over syntax--these appear in such numbers that a treatise could be based upon

them."¹

In particular, the following passage serves as a classic example of Jack's lack of narrative clarity:

Hill hollers to me and says I guess this is where I shoot one of them bean balls. I says go ahead and shoot and if you hit me in the head and I ever find it out I will write and tell your wife what happened to you. You see what I was getting at Al. I was insinuating that if he beaned me with his fast one I would not never know nothing about it if somebody did not tell me because his fast one is not fast enough to hurt nobody even if it should hit them in the head. So I says to him Go ahead and shoot and if you hit me in the head and I ever find it out I will write and tell your wife what happened to you. See, Al?(147)

This convoluted anecdote illustrates not only Jack's technical deficiencies but just as significantly his emotional immaturity. His mixed emotions toward Violet--his ex-fiancee who marries the pitcher Joe Hill--are manifested in his labored narrative. Jack tries too hard to inject humor into a situation so clearly painful to him that he botches the story and bewilders the reader.

Gilbert Seldes points out that Lardner intentionally uses such tangled syntax to reveal Jack's inner confusion. The "true" Jack and the Jack that the narrator wishes the reader to see are two vastly different people. The language that Lardner employs for the letters symbolizes this conflict:

...the way people spoke was to him a complete revelation of what they were; he used conversation as a dramatist uses it, to let you into the secrets of the heart...You never say, "People don't talk that way" when you read Lardner; people do talk that way because people are that way.²

The events surrounding Jack are not nearly as compelling as the

ongoing dialogue between the two sides of his personality. Jack tries to create a public persona that is confident, talented, and handsome, whereas the real Jack that intermittently bubbles to the narrative surface is naive, insecure, and lazy. His convoluted prose, then, symbolizes a constant wrestling match between the heroic Jack of the writer's imagination, and "The Busher" that Lardner intends the rest of the world to see.

Jack's lack of emotional control continually exacerbates his technical difficulties--a condition that undermines both his athletic and literary endeavors. While every fractured sentence testifies to his inner confusion, Lardner provides us with several instances in the narrative where Jack exhibits an inability to harness his emotions. Just as Jack uses external circumstances and other people as excuses for his many shortcomings, so he also uses his emotions as a crutch.

Events on the field often aggravate this character flaw to disastrous consequence. In one game, Jack faces Joe Hill for the first time since he has learned of his opponent's marriage to Violet. After Hill taunts him--"I don't want nothing more of yourn. I allready got your girl and your goat." (142-143)--Jack loses all control of his temper and his pitches:

Honest Al I was so mad I could not see the plate or nothing. I don't even know who it was come up to bat 1st but whoever it was I hit him in the arm and he walks to first base. The next guy bunts and Chase tries to pull off 1 of them plays of hisn instead of playing safe and he don't get nobody. Well I kept getting madder and madder and I walks Stanage who if I had of been myself would not foul me....But when I seen this Hill up there I forgot all about the ball game and I cut loose at his bean.

Well Al my control was all O.K. this time and I caught him square on the fourhead...But pretty soon he gets up and gives me the laugh and runs to first base. I did not know the game was over till Weaver come up and pulled me off the field. (143-144)

Here we see Jack's propensity to blame both others and his own fragile emotional state for his failures. In particular, his emotions provide an "easy out" for Jack, in that he can blame anger for his failure to strike out Stanage, while at the same time dismiss the insinuation that he simply *can't* strike him out. Jack displays no analytical side to his game; he does not learn from his mistakes and grow as a ballplayer. Instead, he misguidedly channels his energy into deceiving the reader--and himself.

Jack's inability to direct his on-field emotions in a positive direction is mirrored by his writing. Just as he uses his passion as a crutch for his pitching problems, so Jack also avoids taking full responsibility for his prose by "giving in" to his emotions. Lardner illustrates this literary malady through the closures of two letters:

I am so worried Al that I can't write no more. (103)

Well Al I am to happy to do no more writeing to-night... (151)

In both of these examples, Jack allows his emotions--worry and happiness, respectively--to overwhelm his writing to the point where he can no longer continue. Once again, Jack the author does not determine the structure of his letters; external circumstances do. Whereas Jack concludes other letters because of people or events to which he must react, in this case the

external entity is Jack's own emotion. He proves time and again that is incapable of balancing his emotions and his work. As a result, Jack the writer remains just as static as Jack the ballplayer and Jack the person. By not confronting himself as he truly is, warts and all, Jack withdraws from reality. By extension, his writing represents an imbalanced, artificial construct that he creates as a means of isolating himself from a society he cannot understand.

Jack's unchanging status in Lardner's eyes mirrors the static persona that the author has formulated for his narrator. In the titles of each of the story's six chapters, Lardner patronizingly refers to Jack as a "Busher": "A Busher's Letters Home" (21), "The Busher Comes Back" (51), "The Busher's Honeymoon" (83), "A New Busher Breaks In" (117), "The Busher's Kid" (153), "The Busher Beats It Hence" (187). The connotations involved with the term "Busher" all apply to Jack: immaturity, inexperience, ignorance, arrogance. The difference between a typical rookie--who is almost by definition a busher--and Jack is that the rookie gradually learns and grows from his mistakes, whereas Jack supplies no evidence of any such development as a professional. The chapter titles reveal Lardner's--and, by extension, society's--critical view of Jack's stagnant nature.

During Jack's ascent to the majors, it is clear that the pitcher has prodigious talent. No less an authority than the great hurler Christy Mathewson admires his pitching arm, yet the veteran in the same breath also defines the root of all of Jack's

problems: his immaturity. After Jack blames a poor outing on a sore arm, he is quickly rebuked by the Hall of Famer: "I wisht I had a sore arm like yourn and a little sence with it and was your age and I would not never loose a game..." (196-197) Jack's reaction is typical of his both his ignorance and his self-focused nature: "so you see Al he has heard a bout me and is jellus because he has not got my stuff but they cant every body expect to have the stuff that I got..." (197)

For Jack to gloss over--or not even recognize--Mathewson's criticism illustrates his one-dimensionality. While Mathewson balances talent and intelligence on the mound, Jack relies solely on his talent--which he often overestimates. Unlike the consummate professional Mathewson, Jack remains a thrower rather than a pitcher: he relies on his talent while declining to analyse the game--a process essential in honing his natural ability. Earlier in the story, when assistant manager Kid Gleason asks Jack for his impressions of the legendary Walter Johnson, the pitcher glibly replies: "I don't think so much of him....He ain't got nothing but a fastball." (57) Gleason's response strikes at the heart of all Jack's problems: "I guess you ain't learned nothing..." (57) As the Mathewson incident indicates, Gleason's indictment of Jack's stubborn superficiality is as applicable at the end of the novel as in the beginning.

Likewise, as a writer Jack is just as one-sided. He relies solely on his "stuff"--inadequate and insular as his authorial ability may be--and fails to cultivate the powers of observation

that a good writer must possess. Jack's prose is concentrated almost exclusively within his own imaginative universe; it has little basis in reality. He does not perceive the "real" world any more than he does his real self. As a result, he is nothing more than a "thrower" when he writes; he still must learn to pitch.

Jack's failure to achieve pitching and literary balance is a theme that recurs throughout the canon of baseball fiction. The next two novels in our survey--Mark Harris's *The Southpaw* and *Bang the Drum Slowly*--follow Lardner's lead in focusing on a young pitcher's immaturity as both a baseball player and a writer. The difference between Harris's hero, Henry Wiggen, and *You Know Me Al*'s Jack Keefe, however, is pronounced. While Jack remains a "busher" in every respect, we will see that Henry Wiggen makes the pivotal transition from rookie to veteran--and from scribe to true author. Jack's tragic flaw as a writer--and ballplayer--is that, while he continually asserts that "You know me Al," he never really knows himself.

NOTES

¹Carl Van Doren, "Beyond Grammar: Ring W. Lardner: Philologist among the Low-brows," *The Century* (July 1923) 473.

²Gilbert Seldes, "Introduction," *The Portable Ring Lardner* (New York: The Viking Press, 1946) 13.

For the narrator, Henry Wiggen. In the novels--the first two of three stories that constitute Harris' "Henry Wiggen Trilogy"--Henry's account continues baseball fiction's dialogue on what his neighbor Aaron calls "balance" (73). Unlike Keefe, however, Henry does indeed grow from a "punk" (137) rookie to a savvy veteran. Amid this maturation process, the concept of balance has multiple connotations: balance between confidence and arrogance, between baseball and personal life, between selfishness and selflessness. For the purpose of our discussion, however, the primary balancing act that Henry performs regards his development as both a writer and a man. As Henry grows into a mature adult and writer, he displays a keen self-awareness of his life and art that distinguishes him from Keefe. Within the canon of baseball fiction, such self-examination applies not only to specific characters, but to the burgeoning genre as a whole.

In the first of the Wiggen stories, *The Southpaw*, Harris quickly establishes his work as part of the picaresque tradition. Told in Henry's distinct voice, the novel chronicles the pitcher's journey from boyhood in upstate New York through his

CHAPTER TWO

Just as the fractured narrative of *You Know Me Al* mirrors Jack Keefe's stunted development as a ballplayer and writer, so Mark Harris structures *The Southpaw* and *Bang the Drum Slowly* to represent the various stages of life for the narrator, Henry Wiggen. In the novels--the first two of three stories that constitute Harris' "Henry Wiggen Trilogy"¹--Henry's account continues baseball fiction's dialogue on what his neighbor Aaron calls "balance" (73). Unlike Keefe, however, Henry does indeed grow from a "punk" (137) rookie to a savvy veteran. Amid this maturation process, the concept of balance has multiple connotations: balance between confidence and arrogance, between baseball and personal life, between selfishness and selflessness. For the purpose of our discussion, however, the primary balancing act that Henry performs regards his development as both a writer and a man. As Henry grows into a mature adult and writer, he displays a keen self-awareness of his life and art that distinguishes him from Keefe. Within the canon of baseball fiction, such self-examination applies not only to specific characters, but to the burgeoning genre as a whole.

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rookie season with the New York Mammoths baseball club. This growth incorporates three primary elements: his baseball career, his personal life, and his writing. Of these, Henry's athletic talent is the least compelling. No one ever questions his ability: he is a prodigy from the time he first picks up a baseball. From high school to semi-pro to Triple-A Queen City to New York City, Henry knows little but success. While capable of extraordinary feats on the mound, the thought processes behind his actions--and his method of describing them--possess far greater resonance.

Harris illustrates the crucial importance of Henry's character development early in the story. After successfully relieving his father in a hometown semi-pro game--his first outing with the team--Henry leaves a great impression on a veteran opponent whom he strikes out and taunts. Addressing Henry's father, the grizzled player comments on both Henry's fastball--and his attitude:

"Good boy you have got there," said Bobo, but he did not look at me. "He has got good variety."

"He will go places," said Pop.

"But green," said Bobo.

"He will get over it," said Pop.

"He better." (61-62)

In this conversation, Bobo disregards Henry's talent almost as much as Henry's presence itself. The discussion clearly centers on Henry's character. His "greenness"--his immaturity--seems to be all that stands in the way of success. This flaw, however, is no minor one, as Bobo's ominous conclusion points out. The proverbial "Million-Dollar Arm/Two-Cent Head Syndrome" has

derailed the career of many a phenom--look at Jack Keefe's mercurial performance--and such a fate threatens Henry as well.

Just as important to note in Bobo's words is the connection we can make to Henry's writing. His talent as a writer is evident--"He has got good variety," as Bobo says--but he exhibits a literary greenness that mirrors his personal immaturity.

Henry's hometown sweetheart Holly's analysis of his initial writing samples echoes Bobo's appraisal of his pitching. After he composes several poems for Holly, her reaction is critical yet encouraging: "[She] said they were minor league but showed promise. She said if I stuck at it I might amount to something some day. She says any lunkhead can play baseball but he has got to be something special to write a poem." (63) As Henry's wandering verb tenses alone indicate, his art is far from fully realized. We will see this symbiotic relationship between Henry's literary and personal evolution grow throughout *The Southpaw* and *Bang the Drum*.

The "work-in-progress" nature of *The Southpaw* is readily apparent when we examine the novel's structure. From the very beginning of the story--in the introductory segment, SPECIAL WARNING TO ALL READERS!!!--Henry demonstrates his artistic inexperience. In the case of the "Warning," Henry defers to the literary judgement of others, relinquishing a measure of artistic control in the process. After his father argues for censoring, or "blanking in," some of the rawer language in the book, Henry finally gives in to the pressure:

"I am sick and tired of the wrangling, and the book must go in the mail," [I said]. I will blank the word in and put an end to the whole rhubarb."
I suppose the women and children will fill it in to suit themselves, though. That's up to them. I blanked it in, for Pop's sake, and whoever blanks it out again learned the word from somebody else, not me.

Henry's soliciting of aid from others will become an important theme in the novel. In one sense, Henry deflects responsibility for his actions through his authorial passivity. As we shall see, however, the advice he receives is generally constructive, and accelerates his improvement as a writer. His literary receptivity further distances him Keefe, who continually rejects the advice of potential mentors in *You Know Me Al*.

As Norman Lavers points out in his critical biography, *Mark Harris*, Henry needs help in organizing his life into novelistic form. Lavers discusses the constant "input" that Henry receives from his friends, and from his Harvard-educated teammate Red Traphagen: "His life is only the material of the book. With Holly's and Aaron's and Red's advice, and his growing tact, he begins to shape these materials."² Thus, the other characters in the novel provide the perspective that Henry--as the primary subject of the story--cannot possess. As a result, we see the first example of "balance"--in this case, between the raw material that Henry generates, and the objectivity that Henry's friends contribute to produce an ordered narrative.

In particular, Henry's friends help him focus his writing. His tendency both to digress and attempt to cover everything is neutralized by his friends' input. At the end of the first

chapter of *The Southpaw*, we see Holly's influence on its structure, as Henry concludes: "That's it. Those are the folks and also the end of the chapter. Holly says try and write up 1 thing only in every chapter and don't be wandering all over the lot, and then, when the subject is covered, break it off and begin another." (18) Echoing Keefe's breaks in his letters--in which he implicates others for his literary shortcomings--Henry's statement is nevertheless different in tone. Rather than "blame" Holly for terminating his chapter, Henry realizes that she is simply trying to help him improve as a writer. Unlike Keefe, Henry possesses the ability to accept other people's criticism.

While Henry does indeed have this innate talent for recognizing constructive criticism, he is still "green." In Chapter 12 of *The Southpaw*--an extended discussion of the chapter itself--Henry attempts to describe his two seasons in the minors at Queen City. What dominates the chapter, however, is an argument that ensues after Henry reads the section aloud to Pop, Aaron, and Holly. All three of the listeners agree that the chapter is too long, while Henry vehemently defends the length:

"I think that number 12 is too long," [Aaron said.]

"Have you ever wrote a book?" I said to him.

"No," said he.

"Well, then," said I, "why are you so quick to run down what another writer did?"

"That is not the proper attitude on your part, Henry," he said, "for we are gathered here for the purpose of being helpful. I agree with Holly that number 12 is too long. But we must take it apart and see why it is too long and how we might cut it down and aim it to the point." (106)

Henry's defensiveness clearly echoes Keefe's persecution complex

from *You Know Me Al*. His response recalls Keefe's rejection of Christy Mathewson's criticism: Henry overlooks the benevolent motivation of his friend's/mentor's advice. However, Aaron remains resolute in his goal of focusing Henry's story:

"What was the very biggest thing about the two summers at Q.C.?"

"I guess," said I, "The big thing is that I shook off my greenness and got myself ready for the big-time."

"Ah," said Aaron, "now we are getting somewheres." (110)

Thus, Henry says in two sentences what had taken him 73 pages to cover. Such succinct prose is the goal of the editing process. While Henry protests the changes by calling Chapter 12 "Chapter 11-A," he nevertheless does incorporate the edits into his work. Clearly, Henry shows the dedication necessary for getting himself "ready for the big-time" as a writer.

This growing process requires a measure of introspection. Throughout the novel, Henry displays an acute self-awareness as a writer--a characteristic which even further distinguishes him from Jack Keefe. We see this rumination during Henry's first training camp at Aqua Clara. After giving up a home run of historic distance to Mammoth slugger Sid Goldman, Henry receives the ball from a "fan," along with a note:

Dear Mr. Wigen,

This is the baseball that Mr. Goldman hit 591 feet off you this afternoon. Will you please put your signature on it if you know how to write, or your mark if you do not.

Faithful Fan

I took the ball and made an X on it... (98)

Henry assumes that Sid himself sent the ball as a gag, and his comical response is in keeping with the spirit of the joke.

However, we cannot fail to note the relevance of his action to his literary development. By printing an "X" on the ball, Henry acknowledges that he does not yet "know how to write." Like his pitching, his writing still requires seasoning. By "marking" his position along the path of literary progress, he is better able to measure how far he still has to travel.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that Henry's often erratic literary development reflects his halting personal growth. The two qualities are inexorably intertwined, though Henry does not always see the connection. As he talks with a young Henry early in *The Southpaw*, Aaron defines the ideal that the narrator pursues through much of the story: "Balance," said [Aaron]. "I do hope you keep your balance in the time ahead." (73) In a literary context, this balance refers to the need for Henry to combine his natural talent with experience. From a personal perspective, the concept of balance relates to Henry's preservation of individual honor in the face of often compromising professional demands.

Echoing her father Aaron, Holly warns Henry early on about the treacherous "voyage" he must undertake: "'You are Henry the Navigator," she said. "The world is a big sea.'" (45) The first of several parallels drawn between Henry and literary and historical figures, Holly's pronouncement points out that Henry must navigate between a Scylla and Charybdis of personal integrity and professional success. Henry eventually realizes that the "win at all costs" mentality pervading the Mammoths' organization

engenders remarkable on-field success, but it is not conducive to individual development.

The temptation of victory-for-victory's-sake is exemplified during a pivotal game in the Mammoths' drive for the pennant. Pitching into the late innings, with his back aching, Henry caves in to the pressure of the moment by resorting to an illegal spitball, which results in a bittersweet strikeout:

I was all a-tremble, knowing that I done wrong according to the rules and could of been suspended and might of killed Tubs Blodgett besides. The crowd give me a hand when I come to the bench for the way I fanned Tubs on 3 pitches...yet I hardly heard it I was so scared and shaking. (298)

Henry realizes that he has sold out, sacrificing his dignity for the sake of a strikeout. His violent physical reaction to his decision reflects his personal discomfort--his lack of balance. As Henry learns through experience, one need not cheat in order to get ahead. Within the order of the game, there is plenty of room for creativity. For both the baseball player and the writer, there are no short-cuts in the process of development.

Despite his pangs of guilt, Henry is not completely honest either with Holly or with himself following the game. He rationalizes his act by blaming external circumstances, echoing Jack Keefe in the process: "Things are tight....Terrible tight. Every pitch is cash....This is for keeps. This ain't playground baseball." (306) Yet Holly serves as the true voice of Henry's conscience, as she cuts through his spurious rhetoric:

"[Baseball] is a grand game. I love to see it, and I love to hear you talk about it. It is a beautiful game, clean and graceful and honest. But I will be damned if

I will sit back and watch you turn into some sort of low life halfway between a sour creature like [veteran pitcher] Sad Sam Yale and a shark like [Manager] Dutch Schnell.

You are a lefthander, Henry. You always was. And the world needs all the lefthanders it can get, for it is a righthanded world. You are a southpaw in a starboarded atmosphere." (307)

Through his "spokeswoman" Holly, Harris once again stresses the necessity of balance. This time, Holly alludes not only to the personal balance that Henry seeks, but to a more general notion of balance. Henry personifies a weight--the "southpaw weight"--on a scale weighed down on the other side by the more conventional righthanders. Henry diverges from his teammates because he still retains a conscience, a fundamental introspection, which he cannot easily erase. He contributes diversity to a game that desperately needs it. Without the honesty that Henry represents, the game of baseball--in its lack of balance--becomes tarnished.

In two episodes near the end of *The Southpaw*, Henry sheds the yoke of professional pressure and affirms his own personal equilibrium. Throughout his inaugural campaign, Henry suffers from a mysterious back ailment that grows more painful as the season progresses. Despite his All-Star performance, Henry's injury--like his shaking fit after throwing the spitter--appears to be a psychosomatic manifestation of internal discomfort: "it is all in your mind," (261) says teammate "Piss" Sterling. This inner turmoil finally bubbles to the surface during a team meeting before the potential pennant-clinching game, in which Henry addresses rumors that Dutch is to pitch him on just one day's rest should the Mammoths lose the game. Dutch responds by

dressing down Henry, prompting an epiphany for the rookie:

[Sam] looked at me like he was saying, "Remember, Henry, what I told you on the train. *Nobody really gives a f---what happens to anybody else*"...
"Okay," I said. "Okay. I am glad to know the score. Sam told me it would take me 15 years to find it out, but I have found it out in 1. I am 15 times as smart as Sam. Piss on you, Sam...Piss on the whole lot of you. Pitch me tomorrow. Pitch me *today* for all of that."
Something snapped in my back. I did not give it a thought at the time, but I remembered it afterwards. (327-328)

Henry's assertion of his individuality restores a significant measure of balance, as the alleviation of his back pain clearly symbolizes. He realizes that his worrying, which causes the pain, centers on an organization that cares for him only as much as his record merits. He is merely a cog in the Mammoth machine, and he finally rebels against such subjugation.

Henry's second--and final--protest against his exploitation occurs when he confronts shady sportswriter Krazy Kress. Kress pesters Henry for months to join an off-season exhibition tour for U.S. troops in Japan and Korea, while Henry hesitates due to his abhorrence of any kind of violence--particularly war. Finally, Henry explodes at Kress, the culmination of a season's worth of frustration and learning:

After this I will be Old Take It Easy Wigger. I bust my ass for no man after this....I have really learned a lot this year, and it never really added up until this afternoon....I know only that from here on in I play baseball for the kicks and the cash only, for I got to eat like you do, but as for the rest--Japan and Korea and society bastards like [Mammoth owners] the Moorses, writers and fans...fancy celebrations and the wars and the politics of it--all this I leave to them that glories in it. I bust my ass for no man. (337)

This monologue signals Henry's affirmation of self; he has

discovered a balance between his baseball and his conscience. He can still enjoy "the kicks" on the field because he can look himself in the mirror off it. "Henry the Navigator" has successfully navigated through a perilous personal and professional journey.

The "port" that Henry returns to at novel's end is Holly, as she validates his maturation when she reflects on the season:

"...you grew to manhood over the summer. You will throw no more spitballs for the sake of something so stupid as a ball game. You will worship the feet of no more gods name of Sad Sam Yale nor ever will be a true follower of Dutch Schnell. You will never be an island in the empire of Moors, Henry, and that is the great victory that hardly anybody wins any more."

"I believe it is at that," said I. (348)

Holly then prompts Henry to ask for her hand in marriage for the fourth time: "Perhaps you will have better luck this time, [she tells Henry]. "You have sharpened your eye since February and April and September." (349) This time, she accepts. When Henry writes two pages later that "the book is done," it is because he, in effect, has completed his journey of self-discovery. Once again, Henry's literary development mirrors his personal development--this time, in the novel's structure. As Holly tells him with regard to his story's chapters, "write up 1 thing...and then, when the subject is covered, break it off and begin another." Henry's growth to self-affirmation is indeed "covered." He has gone from boy to man, and it is time to begin the next chapter.

The next "chapter" of Henry's story, *Bang the Drum Slowly*,

begins three years later: Henry has been dubbed "Author" Wigen(20) by his teammates--due to the publication of his first novel, *The Southpaw*--and the young phenom has now grown into an established major leaguer. The most prominent difference between the two novels is the shift from Henry's development of self in *The Southpaw* to a burgeoning sense of selflessness in *Bang the Drum Slowly*. After learning that his friend and batterymate Bruce Pearson is dying of Hodgkin's Disease, Henry the Navigator embarks on yet another journey of discovery--both personal and literary. Once again, Henry's prose reflects his personal development, and in the second novel we see his artistic control expand to coincide with his broader view of his relation to others. No longer concentrating solely on his personal growth, Henry likewise extends his art to examine not just *how* to write, but what to write *about*. As befitting the professional he has become, "Author" Wigen is no longer simply learning his craft: he is perfecting it.

Henry's newfound authorial professionalism is evident in his response to the criticism he receives from his friends. Just as in the first novel, Holly (now Henry's wife) and Red continue to criticize Henry's work. However, their advice no longer concerns simple questions of structure, but centers on broader issues of theme and style. Henry asserts that "when you write a book you must remember that everybody don't know what you might know. Holly says the same," (88) and in so doing he examines a stylistic question that he would have been unable in his greenness to

comprehend in the first novel. In *The Southpaw*, Henry is concerned primarily with ordering his narrative and making it readable. Now, Henry tries to make his prose *understandable*.

Red provides Henry with a thematic perspective to match Holly's stylistic influence. As Henry works on the storyline, Red insists the focus should be on Bruce Pearson's plight:

"Stick to Pearson!" he said...."You must write about dying, saying "Keep death in your mind."

"Who would wish to read such a gloomy book?" I said.

"Everybody knows they are dying."

"They do not act like they know it," he said. "Stick to death and Pearson."

"I will try," I said, and I done so. I wrote Chapter 3 and then again 4 mostly about Bruce, like Red said to... (207-208)

Henry's initial response here--like his self-revulsion after throwing the spitter--is again the correct one. Writing solely about death *would* make for an overly-depressing story. By rejecting Red's one-dimensional interpretation of events, Henry displays yet another sign of his growing literary maturity. Henry, in effect, appeases Red by concentrating Chapters 3 and 4 on Bruce's condition. He then resumes his more ambitious narrative, examining the complex dynamics between Bruce, his teammates, and himself.

The effect of Bruce's terminal illness on the Mammoths is indeed profound. Immature, fragmented, and underachieving for much of the season, the team slowly bonds together as, one by one, the players learn of Bruce's illness. Initially the butt of team jokes--"How tall are you Pearson?" "5'11,'" "We never seen a pile of shit so high before..." (121)--Bruce becomes the focal

point around which the team rallies. During an alcohol-soaked evening in Henry's apartment, in which a group of players celebrate the imminent conclusion of the regular season, Henry ponders the phenomenon that his friend has wrought:

I could hear them even while sleeping, and I kept saying to myself in my sleep, "It is all a dream. I am only dreaming. I will wake up in the morning and they will be slinging horseshit at each other on schedule," and I kept waking myself up every hour or so and looking around, and it was not a dream. It was real. They were sitting there, and Bruce amongst them, and it was a club....(223-224)

Clearly, the team has achieved a collective balance--with Bruce as the fulcrum. In their compassion for their teammate's tragic plight, the players quell their selfish impulses for the good of the team. Just as Henry's writing improves when he develops emotionally, so the Mammoths become a better team--morally, as well as technically--when the players mature as individuals.

While the Mammoths grow as ballplayers, Henry continues to develop as a writer. Like any professional athlete who experiences slumps and works his way out of them, Henry experiences a literary slump in the form of writer's block. His struggle prefigures that of J.D. Salinger in *Shoeless Joe*: "Every time I put something down it looks like somebody else wrote it."(168) Not until page 169 does Henry finally begin writing the book that we are reading, as he describes his inspiration in a somewhat dizzying bit of time-displacement:

I went to bed but I could not sleep. I started writing in my head, the first time I done any since "The Southpaw"...and I...got up and fished out the paper and started writing from the beginning, where the telephone call come, "Me and Holly were laying around in bed

around 10 A.M. on a Blank morning," not remembering what morning...and then I wrote some more, and the more I wrote the better I felt, and I stopped and thought, "But if he does not die there is no book in it, and all my work is for nothing," and then I thought, "That will be good," and then I thought again, "Still, if he dies or not it might still be a book at that," and I went on writing until I simply could not keep my eyes open.... (169)

We see in this passage that Henry starts to identify himself not merely as a ballplayer who writes, but as an "Author" in the truest sense of the word. His writing becomes an essential element of his life, no longer undertaken merely as a response to critics (as Henry asserts in the beginning of *The Southpaw*), but as a means of self-fulfillment. There is indeed "still a book" whether Bruce dies or not, because Henry's literary development represents an equally intriguing storyline.

However, the primary plot involving Bruce takes precedence later in the novel, when the catcher finally succumbs to his illness at the end of the Mammoths' championship season. Henry sorrowfully recalls a promise he made to Bruce before going out to pitch the World Series-clinching game:

"Arthur," [Bruce] said, "send me the scorecard from Detroit," and I said I would. But then I never sent it. We wrapped the Series up on Sunday, my win again, and I took the scorecard home with me and tossed it on the shelf and left it lay. Goddam it anyhow, I am just like the rest. Wouldn't it been simple instead of writing a page on my book to shoved it in the mail? How long would it of took? (242)

In this episode we see one final example of balance, revolving around self-absorption and selflessness. In keeping with the nature of metafiction, much of Henry's writing is focused inward, as his maturation as a writer is an adjunct of his development as

a person. However, Henry realizes upon Bruce's death that he--as both a writer and an adult--must maintain a sense of perspective. He cannot concentrate only on himself at the expense of ignoring people and circumstances surrounding him. He learns that the process of writing requires a balance between introspection and perception.

While Henry searches for self-identity as a writer of baseball fiction, the next novel in our study examines the actual process by which this fiction is created. Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* expands upon a facet of the balance principle that Harris only touches upon--that is, the balance between imagination and history in baseball fiction. In so doing, Coover supports the idea that the genre is continually re-defining and re-inventing itself--like the game of baseball itself.

ocean..." (320), and when he stands on the steps of the dugout before a gale, he simply says the famous words: "There she blows." (190)

NOTES

¹In the third novel in the Trilogy, *A Ticket for a Seamstitch* (1956), Harris no longer focuses on Wigger's development of a writer. As a result, I did not include the story in my study.

²Norman Lavers, *Mark Harris* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 51.

³Henry's journey of self-discovery has many antecedents within American literature. In particular, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* both establish the tradition which Mark Harris follows. Indeed, there are several explicit evocations of Melville and Twain within the Wigger novels--Henry mentions reading both in *The Southpaw*--and there are many parallels between "Henry the Navigator" and both Huck and Ahab. Several critics have explored the connection to Twain: Norman Lavers in the aforementioned *Mark Harris* discusses the similar use of dialect in both the Wigger stories and *Huck Finn*, while Michael Oriard points out the analogy between Huck's voyage down the Mississippi and Henry's own "raft trip" of self-discovery (*Dreaming of Heroes*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982). The correlation to *Moby Dick*--while not supported by substantial critical background--is nonetheless readily evident in the wealth of maritime imagery in the two Wigger stories: Henry at one time describes the noise of the crowd as "rolling like waves in an

ocean..."(320), and when he stands on the steps of the dugout before a game, he simply says the famous words: "There she blows."(190)

CHAPTER THREE

The transition from the Wigger novels to Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* is an immense one--the largest stylistic and thematic jump we have to make among the novels in this study. A truly ground-breaking novel that blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, *UBA* takes baseball fiction in a new direction by examining the fiction-making process itself. While the other novels we have looked at probe this issue, none does so with such depth and complexity. In *J. Henry Waugh*, Coover creates a central character more at home in the world of his imaginative baseball board game than in the "real" world of career and social relationships. Because Henry's game is the more compelling of the two spheres, through his obsessive interaction with its players and events Henry produces a self-enclosed fictional world. Within the world of his Association, Henry is not only the game's overseer; he comes to identify with the players he has created. Thus, the metafiction in *UBA* stems from Henry's quest for a creative equilibrium between his Association's history and his own imagination. In the process, the novel examines a pivotal question: can an author create innovative fiction within a fundamentally conservative and ordered form? In *UBA*, this question is mirrored in the machinations of the Association itself. Only when Henry breaks the rigid rules that he has

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established for the UBA does he regain editorial control over the novel's fictional structure. Henry discovers that, like the game of baseball, the novel is a form that can be continually re-invented even as it retains its fundamental design.

The novel begins with Henry playing his game at his kitchen table. Employing players that he has created and monitored through statistical records, Henry uses dice to determine the action of the respective baseball games. Different rolls produce a variety of pre-determined hitting, pitching, and fielding outcomes, so there exists a wide range of possibility within an ordered system. This definite structure inspires Henry to use baseball as the focus of his boardgame, which is the latest incarnation of his obsession with game-theory:

American baseball, by luck, trial, and error...had struck on an almost perfect balance between offense and defense, and it was that balance, in fact, that and the accountability--the beauty of the records system which found a place to keep forever each least action--that had led Henry to baseball as his final great project. (19)

As in the Wigger stories, the concept of balance plays a key role in the novel. In this case, baseball's balance parallels Henry's quest to find a substitute balance within his game that he cannot discover in his "real" life, as well as the balance between design and chance that produces the events of the Association--and produces fiction.

It is fitting that *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* begins with Henry playing his role as God-like "proprietor"--or Yahweh, as his full name suggests--of his

league, for his existence revolves primarily around the UBA. Indeed, the "skimpiness of the plot outside the game," according to critic Neil David Berman, reflects the fact that the UBA is "so fertile in metaphorical significance that there is virtually no activity in Henry's life upon which the game does not impinge. There is nothing the game cannot include."¹ Because Henry's everyday existence as an accountant is insufferably boring compared with the UBA, it is little wonder that the game subsumes his real life in both the plot, and in the importance that the story's overseer--Coover--confers upon it. When the narrator states that "It was the Association that kept [Henry] young" (6), he points out that the rest of Henry's life lacks any semblance of vitality.

Coover shows us the tediousness of Henry's daily life at "Dunkelmann, Zauber & Zifferblatt, Licensed Tax & General Accountants," (35) and it is clear that his game takes precedence over his work. After arriving at the office, hung-over, at noon, Henry loses his battle to make it to closing time:

What was he doing here? He had to get out, get home! He looked at the clock: 4:21. Couldn't even wait nine minutes?...He couldn't. He glanced toward Zifferblatt's office: bent over the books. Well, it would be a hard pill for the old man to swallow, but that was tough. Henry closed the books, put them away, stepped over to the hat-tree for his gray felt, raincoat, and black umbrella, and left the office. Come on, boys, let's take the field. Lot of pepper now. As he passed Ziff's office, he caught a glimpse of the old man's gray head jerking up to glare at his early exit. Well, too bad, but how could anyone take seriously, after all, a man named Horace Zifferblatt? Once in the elevator, going down, he was able to forget about work altogether. (43-44)

The only area of Henry's life where he can express himself is within his Association. Thus, Henry eliminates the possibility of balancing work as an accountant and play. His only hope to find an equilibrium lies within the game itself.

Just as the UBA becomes more than just a game to Henry, so the Association assumes an importance beyond a simple plot device. The UBA embodies more than simply the process of game-playing. It exists to illuminate the process of creating fiction, as Roy C. Caldwell points out:

Instead of a game, Waugh has actually devised a machine for the production of narrative. This machine operates by an action just the contrary of real baseball. The sport exists by a series of physical actions occurring in real space and time; the statistics to which the game is reduced are *derivative*; the numbers are an imitation of the real game. Waugh's game, by contrast, produces not actions but numbers. From the abstract schema of box scores, Waugh works "backward" to his fuller narratives. The sequence of figures produced by the roll of the dice and the machinery of the charts are only the skeleton of Waugh's creation; he gives the Association [life] as he sees the stadium, the sun, and the field, as he invents the playing styles, characters, and physical appearances of the players.²

The UBA serves as a catalyst for Henry's artistic imagination, establishing the framework within which Henry creates. This formula represents yet another example of balance, as the game provides the concrete "facts," while Henry supplies the vision--each of which are essential elements for the continued health of both the UBA, and, concurrently, the fiction. Only when these two factors are symmetrical does the relationship work. If one side of the equation becomes more prominent than the other, the resulting disharmony mars the entire story.

The first part of *UBA* holds little promise that Henry can perform this balancing act. Because "what attracted [Henry] to baseball were its formal qualities," Caldwell contends that he is too caught up in the game's history to be experimental the way a good writer must.⁴ Though he possesses imagination, it is an "essentially historical imagination," according to Berman.⁵ "Because of its long tradition as the national pastime, and because of the accessibility of its records and statistics, baseball is a fine metaphor for history, process, and order. It is history and continuity which most fascinate Henry...."⁶ Coover uses the *UBA* as a metaphor for the conservative force of history—the "facts" side of the equation that produces fiction. Henry's strict adherence to his game's historical foundation calls into question whether he can become a literary innovator.

Coover represents Henry's attraction to history as the basis for his "narrative production machine" in the person of pitching prodigy Damon Rutherford. As the novel begins, Henry is overseeing a contest in which the rookie is on his way to pitching a perfect game. Immediately, we see Henry intricately involved in the game: "Henry's heart was racing, he was sweating with relief and tension all at once, unable to sit, unable to think...." (1)

Even more pronounced, however, is the overwhelming happiness that Damon's victory arouses in Henry, as well as Henry's identification with the pitcher. This relationship between creator and creation is so intimate that Henry even assumes

Damon's identity when he "hooks up" with a B-girl later that evening: "'Who are you now?' [Hettie asked] 'The greatest pitcher in baseball,'" he whispered. "Call me...Damon.'" (29) As they "round the bases" during their night together, Coover's comic references recall the image of the diamond: "they ran the bases, pounded into first, slid into second heels high, somersaulted over third, shot home standing up, then into the box once more..." (29) Thus, Henry finds a temporary measure of balance through his identification with Damon.

We see in the events of this opening chapter that the joy Damon brings to Henry mirrors the comfort that the past provides the 56-year-old. To Henry, the rookie pitcher represents the UBA in all its traditional glory: "[Damon was] involved, every inch of him a participant, maybe that was all it was: total involvement, his oneness with the UBA." (9) Thus, Damon, like the UBA, serves as a metaphor for the conservative influence of history--Henry's principal tie to the Association. We observe Henry's fixation with history in his response to the perfect game, a reaction which focuses on the game within the context of league history. As son of the great Brock Rutherford--the UBA's first superstar--Damon is part of a family that Henry calls "the Association's first real aristocrats." (12) In addition, Henry refers to the perfect game as "More than just another ballgame now: *history!*" (1), as if the ultimate compliment involves a historical context. Henry also describes Damon's newfound status as "Maybe: immortality" (2), thus designating Damon as a

historical figure though his career has just begun.

Even as Henry revels in the triumph of his new alter-ego Damon, however, he also acknowledges the danger intrinsic in such an intimate relationship. He perceives that his role as imaginative locus of the fiction process is jeopardized by an over-reliance on the past: "One thing was troubling him, and he realized he had to face up to it: Damon Rutherford meant more to him than any player should. It had happened before, and it had always caused problems." (38) Henry's obsession with Damon, therefore, represents a harmful dependence on the past, "harmful" in the sense that fiction stagnates when an author falls back on endlessly repeating patterns and forms.

Henry himself admits his loss of authorial vigor while looking over one of his old log books from the 56-year-old Association's early years: "One thing that struck Henry was the optimism of his own style back then. Even a kind of jauntiness. He'd changed. He couldn't write like that now." (59) At the beginning of the UBA, the newness of the league inspired Henry to a corresponding literary "jauntiness." His writing was fresh and confident as he reveled in the freshness of the UBA. Those days are gone though, and Henry's infatuation with Damon represents a longing for a return to a personal and literary fulfillment that is impossible to attain. Like Jack Keefe, Henry's writing is stagnant. By looking only to the past, Henry fails to further develop his talent. Damon represents a self-deluding comfort for Henry that diverts attention from his stultifying skills.

The temporary happiness that Damon brings Henry is shattered when the dice turn malevolent. For Damon's next start, Henry concocts a "Brock Rutherford Day" to coincide with the younger Rutherford's outing. With the stands packed with legendary Pioneers from the past, Damon extends his scoreless streak to fifteen innings. Just as Henry's delight reaches a fever pitch, he rolls two consecutive triple ones on the dice, bringing into play the "Extraordinary Occurrences Chart." With Damon the batter, Henry rolls yet another triple one, signifying that the batter has been fatally struck by a bean ball.

Damon's death sends Henry into a frenzy of shock and anger, a reaction that is reproduced in the imaginative sequence that follows. Damon's teammates, stunned by the chain of events, emerge from their stupor and focus their rage on the pitcher of the bean ball: Jock Casey. With the crowd's encouragement, the players attack Casey, only to be halted by Brock Rutherford:

"No!"

The voice stopped them....Brock stood over his son's body and his quiet mournful gaze shamed them all. "No," he said again.

No. The Proprietor of the Universal Baseball Association, utterly brought down, brought utterly to grief, buried his face in the heap of papers on his kitchen table and cried for a long bad time. (76)

Despite his outrage, Henry cannot bring himself to condone the destruction of order. By attacking Casey, Damon's teammates threaten this order, prompting Henry to intercede through the character of Brock. Henry, at this point, would rather live with a miserable outcome than defy the dice's ruling.

Damon's death causes Henry to spiral into depression, though

he continues--albeit half-heartedly--to conduct league affairs: "it would resume, and he would simply have to play out his part. But he dreaded that..."(117) Despite his despair, Henry feels compelled to continue the UBA, even as he admits to being subjugated by his own creation: "what mattered was...well...the Association, this whole thing, bigger than all of them, that they were caught up in."(108) Even as he feels "possessed by impotence"(152) at his failure to curb the relentless success of "Killer" Casey (84) through conventional means, Henry nonetheless continues to submit himself to these conventions.

Though Henry remains fixed in his allegiance to the UBA as a game, he begins to question the efficacy of the Association as a mechanism for producing fiction. While Henry discusses the game in mock economic terms, beneath his flippancy lie serious doubts about the literary value of the UBA:

No flexibility...But what was Henry's solution? There must be a way, he thought--but then he remembered that absurd ballgame back on the table that the bad guys were winning, 18-1. What did he mean, "bad guys"? Because, damn it, they killed the kid. And it was the kid who'd brought new interest, new value, a sense of profit, to the game. You mean, things were sort of running down before...? Yes, that was probably true: he'd already been slowly buckling under to a kind of long-run market vulnerability, the kind that had killed off complex games of his in the past. What had happened the last five league years? Not much.(135-136)

Henry admits that Damon is merely a temporary stay against the trend toward stagnation. The entity with "no flexibility" is not the UBA itself, but Henry's traditional interpretation of the UBA. It is important to note that "complex games of his in the past," in addition to the Association, have deteriorated under

Henry's direction. In this manner, Coover implies that the UBA itself is not flawed. Henry's handling--or authorial control--of the operation is to blame.

As Henry searches for a sense of purpose, his Association spins out of control: "the action in the UBA was confusing and bewildering..." (145) Henry no longer keeps records, he hurriedly runs through the games, and his only satisfaction comes when Casey's Knickerbockers lose--which is seldom. As his "impotence" weighs on him, Henry examines his options for intervention, and displays his customary tendency toward conservatism:

Impotent? not really. But sometimes total power was worse...without law, power lost its shape....Supposing he just shipped Casey to the minors and to hell with the rules? He could at that. If he wanted to. Could explain it in the Book. It wasn't impotence. Still, it might cause trouble. What trouble? The players...What players? *Some* kind of limit there, all right, now that he thought about it. He might smash their resistance, but he couldn't help *feeling* their reluctance all the same. Their? mine; it was all the same. (158)

Henry reaches a turning point in his consciousness as an author here. As he recognizes that he is projecting his fears onto the players, he begins to accept responsibility for the events of the league. He initially tries--through references to their "resistance"--to blame the players for the league's stubbornly fixed structure, but he ultimately realizes that the problem emanates from his own aversion to change.

Just as the players charge the mound after the fatal pitch is thrown, so Henry's strongest impulse is to make "a sacrifice"⁷ of Casey. By sanctioning such an act, Henry has the opportunity to restore balance in several respects: the balance of justice,

the balance between good and evil, and, of course, the balance between the forces of history and imagination--the disorienting of the latter having wrested control of the UBA from him.

Henry finally resolves his dilemma by interfering with the dice, thus killing Jock Casey with a line drive to the head: "holding the dice in his left palm, he set them down carefully with the right. One by one. Six. Six. Six." (202) Henry's reaction to his decision is immediate and violent: "A sudden spasm convulsed him with the impact of a smashing line drive and he sprayed a red-and-golden rainbow arc of half-curd pizza over his Association..." (202) In this act, Henry is literally and figuratively exorcising the ghost of UBA past. With its religious overtones, Henry's violation of the UBA's established order echoes The Fall from Eden. Coover's Biblical allusion here reconciles the negative and positive connotations of such a deed. Henry's intrusion irreparably destroys the Association's purity, and signals the end of the UBA as we know it. Yet it is affirmative in a literary sense: Henry has seized command of his league, and has reaffirmed his authorial control by balancing the history-imagination equation. Like the true Fall, the end of the "ideal" UBA marks the end of innocence, yet it also provides a wealth of new possibilities for artistic interpretation.

After Henry kills off Casey, both the UBA and the novel enter a new stage. Now, Henry's enthusiasm for the league can barely be contained: "*Here they come!*" (218) Concurrently, Henry's fervor for his fiction matches the fresh incarnation of the UBA.

His next project symbolizes his newfound creative inspiration: a book that re-examines the history of the UBA through the eyes of Pioneers' manager Barney Bancroft:

It was all there in the volumes of the Book and in the records, but now it needed a new ordering, perspective, personal vision, the disclosure of a pattern, because he'd discovered--who had discovered? Barney maybe--yes, Barney Bancroft had discovered that perfection wasn't a thing, a closed moment, a static fact, but *process*, yes, and the process was transformation, and so Casey had participated in the perfection, too, maybe more than anybody, for even Henry had been affected, and Barney was going to write it...*The UBA in the Balance*. (211-212)

Instead of assuming the role of direct participant--Damon--Henry now identifies with the chronicler of the game, Barney. It is an important transition for Henry in his literary growth, and one which accords with the new development of the league itself. As the proposed title of "Barney's" book suggests, the "balance" between history and imagination has been re-asserted, as Henry's plan for the book includes both a historical foundation and a new perspective. Neither the league nor Henry is stagnant any longer. They are both vibrant, a crucial characteristic of good fiction as well.

While Henry makes clear his intention to produce fiction with a "new ordering," nothing prepares us for the radical departure represented by the novel's final chapter. Indeed, Chapter 8 is dizzyingly complex and confusing; it both clarifies and muddles all that precedes it in the novel. As befitting author Henry's shift away from history as the sole fictional locus, Coover writes the chapter in the present tense. Coover

also matches this change in Henry's perspective on the league with a switch to an exclusive "player's-eye view" of the action. The players are the only characters who act and speak in this chapter; Coover removes Henry the spectator from the affairs of the UBA, although hints abound that he may still be quite literally overseeing the game. While looking up at the "sun", the players are actually fixed in the glare of the lightbulb above Henry's kitchen table, upon which Henry plays his games:

Look up, good man, cast your eye on the Ineffable Name," intones Cuss, "and give praise!"

"Do you see it?"

"Yeah!"

"What does it say?"

"100 Watt." (231-232)

Henry's vanishing act corresponds to the reinterpretation of history that has taken place--an event which Henry has promised would occur. As players on the two teams re-enact the "Parable of the Duel"--a ritual that "simulates" the respective deaths of Damon and Casey--even the fundamental roles of Casey and Damon have been mixed up and intermingled. As Henry himself re-evaluates the respective effects of Damon and Casey on the UBA, we also see that the strict association between Damon/Good and Casey/Evil no longer holds. As McCaffery points out, "Damon has all along seemed to be the redemptive Christ figure. Now we must reorient our thinking to see Damon's killer, Jock Casey (whose initials perhaps should have tipped us off), as being the "real" Christ."¹⁰ Clearly, we can see the Christ-Casey parallel in the fact that Casey's death brings a renewed life to the UBA. Even the players seem to appreciate his influence, as one "Caseyite,"

Squire Flynn, cries out: "Casey died to prove his freedom! And ours!" (236) It is Casey's death, not Damon's, that marks the end of league--and fictional--torpidity.

The final chapter has prompted a wide variety of critical responses, ranging from the view that Henry has gone insane¹¹, to an existential reading of the players' condition¹², to the opinion that Henry has completely destroyed his fiction-making machine and developed "a whole new order"¹³. In particular, I take issue with the last thesis, advanced by Ann Gonzalez, who contends that the final chapter represents Coover's--i.e. Henry's--metafictional circumvention of the rules of the novel as a form, which is undertaken in his quest for a new kind of fiction:

He finally realizes that the "something remedial" (128) to save the UBA/fiction is to break down, not break, the rules that traditionally govern composition. Breaking the rules implies that they still exist to be broken. But to destroy them implies a whole new order, or disorder, and balance, consequently, must be redefined.¹⁴

I hold that Henry does not transcend--or "annihilate" (142)--his system as he contemplates following Damon's death, but has actually realized the fictional possibilities that exist within such a set system. Once again, Henry simply cannot abandon one side of the balance equation--this time, the history side--during the process of creating fiction. As experimental as the final chapter is, it is still played out within the context of the UBA, and its history remains a vital part of the action, as well as of the fiction. While the players have changed, the tradition of

baseball remains intact as a unifying principle.

If anything, history/tradition assumes an even more prominent role in the UBA, given the new context, because all of the players display an acute awareness of the Association's past: "Now, as for Casey, the first thing we know is that he was still pitching long after Damonsday the First." "Everybody knows that," is Squire [Flynn]'s reponse. "They've just squeezed the two deaths into one ceremony..." (235) In addition to pointing out our propensity for reinterpreting history to suit our mythic needs, Coover uses this passage to exemplify the UBA's continued grounding in the past, which is the necessary counterpoint to innovation.

The fact is that fiction need not be broken down completely in order to reinvigorate it. Henry himself seems to realize that there is a great deal of potential for imagination within a "fixed" system such as his: "the circuit wasn't closed, his or any other: there were patterns, but they were shifting and ambiguous and you had a lot of room inside them." (143) The parallel to baseball itself in this passage is evident: baseball is perhaps the most rigidly mathematical of all sports in its rules and regulations, yet it contains within such a strictly defined structure seemingly endless possibilities for action. *Shoeless Joe* author W.P. Kinsella describes the essentially limitless nature of baseball and the fiction that chronicles it:

There is no time limit on a baseball game. On the true baseball field the foul lines diverge forever, the field eventually encompassing a goodly portion of the world, and there is theoretically no distance that a

great hitter couldn't hit the ball or a great fielder couldn't run to retrieve it. In *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* I have a fielder run from Iowa to New Mexico after a fly ball. This openness makes for larger than life characters, for mythology.¹⁵

Kinsella--like Henry--appreciates the opportunities for fiction that the baseball context affords. When properly functioning, Henry's UBA can churn out compelling fiction. There is no need to forego such a system.

Coover poignantly conveys the potential amid baseball's--and fiction's--structure in the final image of the novel. While the players struggle to define their place in the world, "Damon" finally reassures them, and in turn supports the role of fiction as we know it within that world: "'It's not a trial....It's not even a lesson. It's just what it is.'" Damon holds the baseball up between them. It is hard and white and alive in the sun." (242) Just like history, the baseball is inanimate and rigidly defined. But, within such structure lies immeasurable room for interpretation. The baseball, then, symbolizes the ever-renewing relevance of fiction, the "source of all Waugh's stories," as Caldwell points out. Baseball fiction, like the game of baseball, is given life through reinterpretation--not circumvention.

This re-examination of fiction is continually evolving, as Coover suggests in the final chapter. While the players talk among themselves, one recalls that "[Galen Flynn] has turned...to the folklore of game theory, and plays himself some device with dice." (234) We see evidence here of other writers following in Henry's footsteps, pushing the boundaries of fiction even as they

maintain an allegiance to a similar form of fiction-production. *The Universal Baseball Association* itself represents this pushing of the boundaries within the canon of baseball fiction, even as author Coover acknowledges the need for such boundaries to exist. Philip Roth further examines the question of whether to "break down or break" the rules of baseball fiction in the next novel in our study, *The Great American Novel*. Because it both aspires to and undermines the American literary heritage, *The Great American Novel* is additional proof that a baseball novel can still be groundbreaking even as it treads on the same diamond turf as its fictional forebears.

"Berman 30.

"Berman 30.

"Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William S. Gass* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982) 51.

"McCaffery 51-52.

"McCaffery 49.

"McCaffery 52.

"R.H.W. Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast: The Fictions of Robert Coover," *Hollins Critic* (April 1970) 1-11.

"Richard Alan Schwartz, "Postmodernist Baseball," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1987) 147-148.

"Ann Gonzalez, "Robert Coover's *The UBA: Baseball As Metafiction*," *International Fiction Review* (1984) 108.

"Gonzalez 108.

NOTES

¹Neil David Berman, *Playful Fictions and Fictional Players* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1981) 88.

²Roy C. Caldwell, "Of Hobby-Horses, Baseball, and Narrative: Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1987) 164.

³Brooke K. Horvath and William J. Palmer, "Three On: An Interview with David Carkeet, Mark Harris, and W.P. Kinsella," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1987) 188-189.

⁴Caldwell 164.

⁵Berman 90.

⁶Berman 90.

⁷Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982) 51.

⁸McCaffery 51-52.

⁹McCaffery 49.

¹⁰McCaffery 52.

¹¹R.H.W. Dillard, "The Wisdom of the Beast: The Fictions of Robert Coover," *Hollins Critic* (April 1970) 1-11.

¹²Richard Alan Schwartz, "Postmodernist Baseball," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1987) 147-148.

¹³Ann Gonzalez, "Robert Coover's *The UBA*: Baseball As Metafiction," *International Fiction Review* (1984) 108.

¹⁴Gonzalez 108.