Reception and the real in 20th and 21st Century American Short Fiction: Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" (2018) and Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" (2019).

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What the concept of the real is and whether it should or should not be equated to that of reality, particularly in relation to fiction, is at the root of a debate among both philosophers and critics. The multiplicity of interpretations of the concepts offers the reader the opportunity to constantly reevaluate their significance within the reading experience of contemporary experimental American fiction. Be it understood as a notion neighboring that of reality, or as referring to a widely different space than that of what is commonly called "real," the real as encountered in the three short stories under study sets off a specific reading experience that calls upon the reader to actively participate in the elaboration of their contents through a process of re-mediation that doubles the initial mediation they operate when reading the text.

Questioning the real and its representations has been a crucial component of literary reception since the birth of American fiction but has become even more of a key element in the past fifty years, with the emergence of texts using modes of experimenting with narratives that test the boundaries between fiction and reality. Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" (2018) and Brian Evenson's "Born

Stillborn" (2019) all belong to that category. They all integrate metafictional aspects[1] that produce forms of "uncertainty," a term used by Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction.* Indeed, Coover's "The Babysitter" is a hectic but controlled exploration of different storylines, most of which are mutually exclusive, following the arrival of a teenage babysitter at the Tuckers' house to take care of their three children. Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" features a young father completely baffled by his ten-year-old son's admission that he doesn't love his parents. The father tries to make sense of this seemingly ludicrous situation, offering the reader a piece of short fiction that questions the direction taken by an apparently unremarkable narrative when the characters are confronted with an unexpected burst of absurdity. Finally, Evenson's "Born Stillborn" presents a protagonist who has alternating conversations with his therapist and the latter's double, an elusive and mildly threatening figure that appears only at night, leaving the reader to wonder about the reliability of the narrative they are reading. The uncertainty that arises from these narratives both inscribes them in the American tradition of unsettling fiction that challenges the reader's perspective and in a movement of authors experimenting with what the real is and how its representations of reality may be questioned and renewed.

In many seminal texts from the still relatively young American literature – compared to European and non-English speaking corpuses – the reader has been regularly challenged in their conception and understanding of what *is* real. Reality may be distorted in fiction through the way it is (re)presented. Examples of this abound, dating as far as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and its protagonist Clara's confusion facing the so-called divine voices heard by her murderous brother – which turned out to be the creation of a ventriloquist trickster, Carwin. Often this questioning stemmed from literary devices that astute readers are now very aware of, such as unreliable narrators – whose very unreliability is sometimes unbeknownst to them – who may be found in long and short fiction from Edgar Allan Poe to Chuck Palahniuk. The proliferation of such narrators throughout centuries of American fiction however calls their effectiveness into question for modern readers.

[1] The term "metafiction" here is to be understood as "reflexive literature" according to Linda Hutcheon's definition in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980).

If such devices are still efficiently used today, including by the authors whose short stories are the focus of the present reflection, they are just one facet of the reader's complicated relationship with the real in 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction. Rather than prompting the reader to figure out what is and isn't real, the short stories under study invite them to question their relationship to reality both in the context of fiction and more generally in the concrete world. The concepts of fiction and reality and the dichotomy they seem to establish are central to the exploration of the reader's relationship with the text and to the definition of the real as it appears in literature. The real is a complex notion whose meaning has been the object of controversies among philosophers. Some even merge it with that of reality while others clearly separate the terms. The exploration of the real requires a strict analysis of the way "something invented by the imagination or feigned" is set to interact with "the true situation that exists"[2]. This is particularly true in Coover's, Marcus's and Evenson's short stories since these authors resolutely tend to play with the confrontation of the concepts of fiction and reality, both literally and metaphorically.

These authors and their contemporaries, owing to the followers of Lyotard's postmodernism and its evacuation of the grand narratives of the past which questioned the nature of fiction and the relevance of traditional forms, have had the opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of structure in the wake of modernist writers. They have also worked toward blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality as much as possible. According to Philippe Forest in his article "L'autofiction," a striking example of this type of literary practice is what he defines as "a fiction of strictly true events,"[3] that is to say autofiction, a genre invented by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977.

However, going a step further, "post-postmodernist" writers, to borrow the term used by Mary K. Holland in her book *Succeeding Postmodernism*,[4] resort to structural and narrative devices while acknowledging that their reader is aware of them. They play on this awareness, coupling it with a return to more classic forms of fiction which have been

[2] These respective definitions of the terms "fiction" and "reality" are taken from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.
[3] Philippe Forest, "L'autofiction et après", 2016. Since the works by Philippe Forest mentioned in this article have not been translated into English at the time of writing this article, the offered translations are mine.
[4] According to Mary K. Holland, "post-postmodernists" writers are still indebted to postmodernist practices like "multiplicity and indeterminacy" (14) but they also operate a return to "paying attention to things and thingness" (141) among other things. This leads to a "return to an understanding of reading that privileges one's embodied experience of the text and of the text in the material world" (141).

ceaselessly challenged by postmodernists, particularly in the short story form. Coover, Evenson and Marcus's fictions testify to their author's versatile work with different formats and metafictional practices, thus creating fiction that, at times, mimics traditional patterns and blueprints to better reinvent the reader's relationship to linearity. For example, Coover's "The Brother" from *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) is a one sentence story beginning and ending *in medias res*; Evenson's stories in *Altmann's Tongue* (1994) and *Contagion* (2000) tirelessly bend the limits of the English language; finally, Marcus challenges the post-apocalyptic narrative in his novel *The Flame Alphabet* (2012),a worthy descendant of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985). These stories all disquiet the reader, making them question their relationship to a (potentially future) disturbing reality. They use devices of derealization that shake the boundaries of genre, form and language, thus driving the reader to a stronger and deeper involvement in their reading experience. However, the primary concern of these stories is not strictly their relationship to reality,[5] and the suspension of disbelief is only momentarily achieved for the reader due to the somewhat extreme aspects donned by elements of these pieces of fiction, be they post-apocalyptic disasters or catastrophes of biblical proportions. On the contrary, they seem to focus, among other things, on the materiality of language that emerges from these extremely unusual situations.

The stories under study in this article are crafted so that the reader is purposefully put in a familiar though derealized territory pervaded by an unsettling and potentially terrifying sensation of disruption what is considered as real. This is obviously not a new practice, Freud's uncanny having accompanied the birth of American literature before the latter even carried that name. However, I will argue that the familiar space – in all of its significances – as it is used and described in these stories, acts as a catalyst of the reader's specific involvement in the reading process and of their experience of the real in fiction, the two being inextricably linked. Indeed, Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" and Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" are both set in nondescript American homes and involve the most common of all groups of characters: a family. The additions to that cast of regulars vary from one short story to the next as the unfamiliar creeps in. Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" features a lone protagonist seemingly imprisoned in a world

[5] There is room here for nuance on the concern of these short stories with reality and the real, of course. Yet such is not the center of my analysis here.

that seems bare insomuch as it is completely dematerialized because of the absence of description from the narrator. In all three stories, the initial lack of individualizing details about the character and the setting, by making them simultaneously recognizable and nondescript, creates a metaphorically blank canvas onto which the reader may project their interpretation of the story. The apparent "normality"[6] of the environment, this quasi-neutrality that is echoed in the writing and the detachment of the narrative voice, contribute to the conditions of emergence of the real in fiction, thus making the boundaries that had initially been set between the two vibrate. I would like to show that what takes place in these stories requires a form of intervention by the reader. Indeed, what they encounter in these pieces of fiction, both formally and thematically, is simultaneously stemming from the real and calling upon it. Thus, the first part of this analysis will highlight the conditions of the reader's encounter with reality in the three short stories under study, leading to the emergence of the sometimes elusive notion of "the real". The second part will refine the terminology, notably by elaborating on Clément Rosset's and Philippe Forest's diverging theories of the real and reality in regard to literature and philosophy. The third part will focus on the reader's active role when confronted with the real. Indeed, the reader seems to be called upon to handle the text in a process which is second to the reading experience, or an extension of it. I would like to argue that this process is an act of mediation, readers being invited to actively interpret the text and to elaborate on the (absence of) meaning with which they are faced.

Encounter

Making the emergence of the real possible in unconventional places has become the specialty of these authors. Experimental practices often include fictionalized versions of reality, as demonstrated by Brian Evenson both in his autofictional writings (*Reports*, 2018) and in his short stories using and transforming historical figures in fictional storylines: for instance *Altmann's Tongue* (1994) and *The Din of Celestial Birds* (1997) both feature fictionalized versions of Altmann, the name borrowed by the Nazi "Butcher of Lyon", Klaus Barbie. Despite subscribing to postmodernist aesthetics advocating for a

[6] The quotation marks are purposely used here to denote a fictionalized and very specific Western and hetero-centric form of what could be termed "normality".

shattering of thematic and formal conventions, some of Coover's, Evenson's and Marcus's work may be considered as inching toward "post-postmodernism," that Mary K. Holland describes in *Succeeding Postmodernism* as coming back to more traditional forms of fiction. According to her, "post-postmodernist" writers have been keen on exploring the fictional opportunities offered by the world they share with their readers through more conventional forms than their postmodern elders. This is accompanied by a "vehement demand to be read and understood differently" (Holland 1) and a shift "toward the real, the thing, and presence, and away from the sign, word, and absence upon which earlier postmodern fiction fixated" (7). In this regard, Coover, Evenson and Marcus may be considered as hybrid writers, navigating a large part of the formal spectrum[7] evoked by Holland. Indeed, if the post-structural approach is still fit to analyze their respective works, especially in terms of Holland's "absence,"[8] the short stories which are the focus of this article lend themselves to a study that takes into account their concern with "presence" and "the real". What is the babysitter if not omnipresent in Coover's eponymous story? And what about the father's obsession with his son's behavior in Marcus's "Cold Little Bird," easily brushed away by Rachel – the level-headed mother – but continually rehashed by Martin? What, then, of the "stillborn" twin from Evenson's story, that is, precisely, *still born*, born without cease, infinitely re-actualized in the daily and nightly therapy sessions the protagonist goes through? In all three stories the real peers through a breach opened by an absence, thus demonstrating the shift in focus operated by the authors and by the reader as well. Indeed, the reader is instrumental to their own encounter of the real; their reaction, be it affective[9] or intellectual, shapes the product of their reading experience in the sense that throughout these stories they are ceaselessly invited not just to understand or to interpret what they are reading, but to choose which story – or stories – they are reading. Is Coover's babysitter the protagonist or the antagonist? Is she even real? What about the string of male characters who come and go in the story, alternatively and

[7] The choice of the word "spectrum" denotes here the absence of opposition in Holland's theory between postmodernism and "post-postmodernism": one is the continuation of the other; "post-postmodernism" isn't a reaction to but rather a continuation of postmodernism, and the former is composed of different shades of the latter.

[8] This subject has been studied in my PhD dissertation; its first chapter is dedicated to the study of absence (Bougerol, Maud. *The Aesthetics of Reticence in Brian Evenson's work*. Defended at the Université de Rouen, November 22, 2018.)

[9] "Affective, as opposed to emotional," according to Brian Massumi's distinction in "The Authority of Affect" (102).

sometimes exclusively introduced as powerful and powerless, prompting the reader to reflect on the status of dominance through sexual violence in American society? Whose mind do their misdeeds and twisted fantasies populate: the father's? the boyfriend's? none of the above? Just like in Coover's rewritings of fairy tales,[10] this piece of fiction challenges the reader to determine, however fleetingly, how the story begins, unfolds and ends, since the narrator refuses to deliver those pieces of information to them. The real thus emerges every time the reader makes one of the tenfold choices presented to them by the narration.

The choice of these three specific short stories stems from both the formal, thematic and interpretative similarities they share and the different ways in which they lead the reader to an exploration of the relationship between reality and fiction by featuring micro- or macro-disruptions that encourage them to reflect on the confrontation of reality and fiction through the prism of their own reading experience. Even though Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" opens on a quite traditional scene in what seems to be a commonplace American home sparsely described by a third-person extradiegetic narrator, things go wrong quite fast, both in the plot and in the forms of the story. A babysitter arrives in the suburban house of the Tucker family to take care of their baby and two young children. From then on, several scenarios play out that the narrator presents "as if they were reality" even though "many are mutually exclusive" (91) as Brian Evenson points out in his monography *Understanding Robert Coover*. Evenson thus offers the following chronology for the events taking place in the story:

> In the first twenty minutes or so, the babysitter shows up and the Tuckers leave for the party, the babysitter feeds the children, her friends Mark and Jack awkwardly contemplate rape as they play pinball, and the children wrestle with the babysitter. In the next hour, the children make up reasons why they should not have to go to bed, Mr. Tucker imagines himself making love to the babysitter, Mrs. Tucker is not certain that she trusts the babysitter, the babysitter refuses to let Jack and Mark come over after telling them they can, Jack and Mark rape the babysitter, Jack saves the babysitter from being raped by Mark, Mr. Tucker fantasizes about seducing the babysitter, the babysitter fails to get Jimmy Tucker to take a bath but allows him to wash her back while she bathes, Jack and Mark call the babysitter on the phone and watch through a window as she gets in and out of a tub. Mr. Tucker catches Jack making love to the babysitter then rapes her himself, catches the boys raping the babysitter outside, sends Jack home without any clothing, sings "I dream of Jeannie

[10] For example, *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), which is a modernized retelling of the Italian tale that "becomes a complex and intriguing philosophical discussion of issues such as the nature of being, the relation of being to memory, and the relation of one's writing to one's self," to quote Brian Evenson in *Understanding Robert Coover* (8).

> with the light brown pubic hair." From nine to ten, most of what has happened before all happens again, with new variations, the chronology confusing itself and events seeming to occur out of place. The party the Tuckers are attending becomes an attempt to get Mrs. Dolly Tucker back into her girdle by greasing her with butter. The babysitter drowns and suffocates the baby. Jack and Mark drown the babysitter. The babysitter does the dishes and falls asleep. (92-93)

In this short story the babysitter goes from victim to perpetrator, the storylines being placed on top of each other and disrupting the reader's attempt at making sense of the story. As Evenson puts it, here Coover displays his interest in the "gap between the real events and how those events are interpreted" (10) by "present[ing] readers with what appears to be a relatively stable, solid reality and then a few sentences or a few pages later tak[ing] it apart, call[ing] it into question, modif[ying] it. What may seem to be a reality at one moment may be revealed later as something imagined or misinterpreted" (41).

This latter comment on Brian Evenson's part applies to many of his own short stories, particularly "Born Stillborn" published fifty years after Coover's "The Babysitter". Here, however, the reader's unsettlement is instantaneous, as in the very first sentence the third-person narrator states:

> Haupt's therapist had started coming to him at night as well, and even though Haupt knew, or at least suspected, that the man wasn't really there, wasn't really standing beside his bed, with pencil in hand, listening to him and writing notes on the wall about what he said, he seemed real (3).

With such an opening to the piece, the relationship of the reader to what is "real" within the story is successively upset and restored. They are made to understand that some aspects will seem unbelievable – namely Haupt having conversations with a nighttime version of his therapist who looks "identical" (4) to what he calls the daytime version –, but which are simultaneously explained away and left to the reader's interpretation – Haupt is mad, clairvoyant or has been temporarily deluded. By thus seemingly defusing the reader's questioning on this odd nightly apparition, Evenson offers them a way to reflect on the effect of misinterpretation and their own imagination within their reading experience. The end of this opening paragraph reinforces this interpretation: "Their nighttime sessions felt, when he was honest with himself, just as real as his daytime sessions felt. Maybe even more real." (3). Thus, what might have been interpreted as an initial rejection of reality for the duration of the story in the first sentence may be

analyzed as a way to encourage the reader to question what *seems* real rather than what doesn't. During one of their sessions, it is revealed that the day therapist had a twin who was, in his own words, "born stillborn" (4) a phrase which confuses and fascinates Haupt. The alternating day and night sessions portray the protagonist as a man prone to association of ideas and a worrying distrust of the world around him: "But what, wondered Haupt, was the whole world? What did that even mean? If you were to draw a circle that contained the world, what else would belong within that circle? And where would you even draw it?" (7). On the next page, Haupt's relationship to the world – and by extension to reality – appears even more tenuous: "*The world is a strange place*, thought Haupt, alone in the dark, *almost unbearably so. And yet, it is the only place I have. And I'm not even entirely sure I have it*." (8). In a game of mirrors and endless reflections that proves to be a multi-layered exploration of the workings of the psychoanalytic process, the reader's perception of reality as it is represented in the text is ceaselessly challenged alongside Haupt's. The violent climax of the short story, in which the protagonist attacks the night therapist who at once bleeds and seems unscathed, purposefully fails to solve the issue, even though some scattered clues suggest that the whole ordeal might have originated from Haupt's sick mind.[11]

The gruesome aspects of the two aforementioned stories which fuel the reader's questioning of their relationship to reality are not to be found in the third piece of the corpus, Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird", published the year after Evenson's story. However, it shares with them an attachment to the exploration of the (psychologically) violent irruption of the unbelievable, of the surreptitiously appalling within a traditional structure, in the present case what might be considered as a 21st century version of Coover's Tucker family:

> It started with bedtime. A coldness. A formality.
>
> Martin and Rachel tucked the boy in, as was their habit, then stooped to kiss him good night.
>
> "Please don't do that," he said, turning to face the wall. […]
>
> "We love you so much. You know?" Martin said. "So we like to show it. It feels good."
>
> "No, not to me. I don't feel that way."
>
> "What way? What do you mean?" […]
>
> "I don't love you," Jonah said. (3-4)

[11] Brian Evenson, "Born Stillborn", 9: "*Shouldn't I have been given a safe word?* another part of [Haupt] wondered. "A safe word?" said the therapist, though Haupt was certain he hadn't vocalized the thought."

The third-person narrator adopts the point of view of a distraught father, Martin, who ceaselessly looks for explanations and, hopefully, a remedy to the unnerving behavior of his ten-year-old child. What troubles Martin is Jonah's ability to express himself with devastating honesty on his lack of love for his parents, as well as his attempt to placate the puzzled adults by pretending that he lied before and that he actually loves them:

> "I know he can pretend." Martin says, "But this seems different. I mean, to have to pretend that he's happy to see us. First of all, what the fuck is he so upset about? And, second, it just seems so kind of… grown-up. In the worst possible way. A fake smile. It's a tool one uses with strangers." (5)

As the story progresses, Martin becomes more and more frustrated, trying to rationalize Jonah's behavior to no avail, to the point of adopting an irrational behavior himself, putting his already fragile marriage in jeopardy. He even starts to question, metaphysically rather than literally, the *reality* of his son when he starts hugging him without Jonah moving an inch:

> Jonah gave nothing back. He went limp, and the hug didn't work the way Martin had hoped. You couldn't do it alone. The person being hugged had to do something, to be something. The person being hugged had to fucking exist. And whoever this was, whoever he was holding, felt like nothing. (10)

However, Jonah's existence and realistic albeit extreme portrayal cannot but strike the reader. As the child puts it on the next page, he is merely asking for his parents to stop touching him, a request he feels entitled to make – something Martin reluctantly agrees to when Jonah threatens to report his parents to the school for "touching [him] when [he doesn't] want to" (12). Things go awry when Jonah is caught reading an antisemitic conspiracy book about 9/11 and prompts his father to reevaluate his own Jewishness. The ending doesn't solve anything, leaving Martin's life irreversibly altered by his son's mature, ironic and distant attitude. What is revealed to the reader throughout the story is Martin's ever-growing anger toward his child, a concrete reality that is meant to replace his constant wondering: "He's not sick, he's just an asshole" (23). In this short story, just like in Coover's and Evenson's, the reader is disconcerted by the distinct possibility that the outrageous already lives within reality, and that the latter might give birth to the former at any given moment without warning. The specificities of Martin's life, his friendlessness, his poorly veiled resentment toward his wife and his general dissatisfaction with his existence represent tears that were made long ago in the fabric

of his reality that is slowing wearing itself out. The sudden announcement of Jonah's indifference is just the last snip of the scissors that unravels it all. The experience offered to the reader in this short story is just as disturbing as in Coover's and Evenson's pieces in the sense that in each narrative the polished surface of reality is shaken to lead them to reassess their sense of the real in its relationship to fiction.

The real, fiction, reality

Philosophers Philippe Forest and Clément Rosset's sometimes diverging theories of the real in its relation to fiction, and of the distinction that exists between the real and reality allow us to better understand the realm and fictional implications of this central concept. Both give different meanings to these notions, with consequences on our understanding of them and the way we may be able to handle them. In an interview with Laurent Zimmerman, Philippe Forest explains the difference he makes between the real and reality: "In some way, every story – even lived – is invented as soon as it is told. What matters, is that it leads to this remote place where the author and the reader experience the impossible together."[12] Like Jacques Lacan before him, Philippe Forest thus associates the real to the concept of the "impossible", theorized by Georges Bataille in his writings as a negative space, a mirrored image of reality, the place where one experiences the existence of a remainder which escapes it (*Roman* 49). This definition of the real/impossible may lead to the assumption that the real emerges from rifts in the text that call on the reader to be filled, and that it constitutes an *over-presence* that might however not be readily recognizable. For Forest, fiction is substituted to reality – supposing such a thing, that he defines below as "an objective state of the world", exists – to give us access to the real, without us ever being able to reach it:

> If the novel forgets that the real is the impossible, it falls victim to the trap of mimesis, supposing an objective state of the world exists (a "reality") that it needs only to copy, to mimic, to reflect while the "real" is precisely what representation, language, fiction come close to only to discover it is the place of a fault, of an absence, of a tear which arouses them but that they cannot report. (54)

[12] This distinction may remind one of Jean-Marie Schaeffer's analysis of the conversational and mental narrativizations we produce and experience willingly or not (11).

Forest thus associates fictional creation,[13] and the reader's experience of it, with the real. The fictional story is not a representation of the real – such a representation is considered as impossible –, but instead creates this "negative space" in which the real may emerge (59). Setting reality aside as a form of simulacrum, already a fictional construction (34), Forest paves the way for the experimentations and experiences offered by 20th and 21st century experimental American literature. He describes the "novel" as the place of the only possible experience of the real (the impossible) (19). He sees this experience as a "confrontation" with the dimension of the real, both for the author and the reader, and thus the "novel", as Forest theorizes it, may exist only in the way that it "answers the astounding call of the real" (29). This last phrase echoes the reader's experience of the stories studied here: they are thrown off balance not by the breaches in the realism of the pieces, but by the irruption of the real and its spreading throughout the rifts in the text – whether they were created by the aforementioned breaches in realism or by faults emerging in the diegesis or in language.

Forms of experimental writing have long entertained a special relationship with the real and have also been known to challenge the reader's relationship to reality by effectively challenging them to navigate the aforementioned rifts in the text. Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" relies on the narrator following different, non-hierarchized storylines to give a scattered but nonetheless narratively sound retelling of that night gone awry. By using a wholesome American setting – a babysitter is hired to take care of Jimmy, Bitsy and baby Tucker, the young children of Dolly and Harry Tucker, a couple living in a two-story house in suburban America gone to a little gathering at a certain Mark's home – Coover challenges the reader's relationship to a reality that has already become fiction, the simulacrum of all simulacra, to refer to Forest's aforementioned understanding of reality. The metaphorically Rockwellian nature of the setting chosen by Coover is in itself, in all its literary quaintness, a first challenge offered to the reader on the nature of their relationship to reality. It is only because the reader recognizes the

[13] The fictional creation of what he calls the "novel" but which escapes the usual constraints traditionally associated with the term. As a result, I'll continue to use it with quotation marks in the context of Philippe Forest's theory of the real in literature. Here is what he says of the "novel" in *Le Roman, le réel*: "It is by questioning itself and the world that it asserts itself, only accepting a definition of what it is not to let itself completely confined inside of it." (26-27) For Forest, the "novel" is "what constructs the fiction of that fiction that is "reality"" (34), but also the product of "everything the social discourse […] drops beyond the limits of where everything the words cannot name reigns and creates this residual space one looks away from and which sets off the fictional urge."

environment and identifies it as a reflection or representation of a version of the wholesome American experience that the thematic and formal turn taken by the short story has a specific effect on them. This stereotypically frozen America is also signified by the description of the TV broadcasting of a western in the background of the night's events (211). The constant rewriting of the piece as well as the horrific events described – namely the rape of the protagonist, as well as a few horrific deaths – contribute to the reader's questioning how they understand the concept of reality. They lead them to recognize it as an artificial construct which emerges here as the poor parent of the real.

Contrary to Philippe Forest, philosopher Clément Rosset doesn't make such a distinction between the real and reality: he uses both terms indiscriminately. In *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*, he warns his reader against the pitfalls created by the use of the term "real":

> Therefore, the word "real" is confusing as long as one doesn't clearly distinguish between the words and phrases of pure representation and the same words or phrases which only refer to an external reality; between the real things, that is to say everything indifferently, and what is real in things […] There are real things which don't contain or signal a single reality. (143) [14]

Rosset thus encourages his reader to experience the real insofar as it "contain[s]" and "signal[s]" something outside of itself. According to Rosset, glimpsing the real is made possible by a lack of precision in description, making a sparse representation the key to its presence (151). In Evenson's "Born Stillborn", the description of the protagonist's environment is reduced to "a wall" (3, 4, 5) on which he writes, "[the therapist's] office" furnished with "chairs arranged as if for a staring contest" (5), his "bed" brought closer to a "window" through which a "streetlamp" glows (5), and finally a "door" (9). What transpires from these settings, as well as from the characters who inhabit them, is a form of indeterminacy. Thus, in all three stories, the women, men and children seem to be archetypes whose specificities remain blurry.

Accompanying Rosset's analysis of the concept of the real is that of "illusion" which he calls a "useless perception" (*Double* 11) that "shelters" consciousness from any "unwanted sight" (8). The "Illusioned" either can't perceive the real or perceives it incorrectly because they're solely focused on the fantasies of their imagination and their

[14] The translations into English of Clément Rosset's essays are mine.

desire (11). The real is present within the illusion but is somehow bypassed by the Illusioned. It would be easy to establish a nomenclature where the real corresponds to reality and the illusion to fiction, however, it does not seem to have been Rosset's intent. Indeed, the illusion corresponds to a refusal of acknowledging the reality of the real, not because the Illusioned refuses to experience the real – they do, whether they want to or not – but because they refuse to see it unfurling in front of their eyes.

The real thus unfolds in fiction as well as outside of it. However, as Rosset demonstrates in *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie* (67), some types of fiction, particularly experimental, may be considered as illustrations of the illusionism of meaning. This practice occurs when language is used in a way that heavily and often irremediably shifts the relationship between signified and signifiers. He gives the example of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928) whose "metonymical shifts" create a linguistic erotically charged relationship between the subject and the object of desire (Rosset, *Idiotie* 67-68).

Even though some pieces by Coover, Marcus and Evenson may illustrate this illusionist practice of language and experimentation on artificiality, the focus of this article is on elements of short fiction that demonstrate an even more tenuous relationship with the real than that the experimental illusionist practice allows. Indeed, the return to more traditional forms of narrative, experimented by all three authors, favors the reader's encounter with the real. Indeed, in *Succeeding Postmodernism*, Mary K. Holland links her theory of "post-postmodern" literature to a return to the real, seemingly associating it to the earlier-mentioned "thingness" (141):

> literature of the twenty-first century seeks to salvage much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning and investment in the real world and relationships between people, while holding on to postmodern and poststructural ideas about how language and representation function and characterize our human experiences of this world. (8)

This analysis is particularly true of short stories. Indeed, short fiction, while being a rather pliable form, allows writers to explore the intricacies of human relationships and psyches in a setting that is instantly recognizable by the reader. Thus, a suburban family home, a town hospital or a nondescript city office are the typical environments where these experimental authors' stories are set. These places function as the privileged environments where the author may experiment with storylines and situations that mirror

this superficial ordinariness, while giving the reader access to the added value of comment. This is the case, for example, when Marcus's narrator mentions typical parental behavior. It might almost be considered as a metatextual comment, as it resembles a reflection on the apparent mundaneness of the characters of the parent in a seemingly generalizing paragraph:

> This happened. Kids tested their attachments. They tried to push you away to see just how much it would take to really lose you. As a parent, you took the blow, even sharpened the knife yourself before handing it to the little fiends, who stepped right up and plunged (4).

Here, the generalization functions as an extension of the almost blankness of the setting. It leaves space for the reader to intervene by attributing meanings to the narrator's comments well beyond the situation described, thus generating multiple layers of meaning from just Jonah's initial refusal of a kiss from his father.

The fact that the places often escape description and are reduced to their bare specifics, leads to a difficult spatialization for the reader. This lack of detail is easily justified by the short form: the description might impede the efficiency of the text – in other words the strength of its effect on the reader – precisely because the accuracy of the setting is not the main focus of the story. However, this argument has already proven to be moot by quite striking examples of short fiction that have managed to convey the depth and specificities of their settings and characters in a limited number of words. The detachment in the prose and the lack of details given to the reader in experimental contemporary American short fiction might at first glance be considered as keeping them at a safe distance from the story and limiting their intervention. Notwithstanding, I would like to argue that, on the contrary, the indetermination to be found in the stories under study calls upon the reader to play an even more crucial part in the elaboration of the meaning of the text.

The increase of the reader's role in their reception of fiction is potentiated by a literary practice that doesn't just take the real into account but puts its ambiguity and its "impossibility"[15] at the center of the textual experience. The real, while being absorbed by the story, seeps through the rifts in the text only seemingly covered by an *over-*

[15] Here the term is borrowed from Philippe Forest's previously mentioned definition of the real as an echo to Bataille's literary and philosophical work.

presence that is not merely an omnipresence of matter, but an accumulation of it – be it textual, formal, significant; the tightly-woven fabric of the text does not create a barrier between the reader and the real: on the contrary, it encourages the emergence of the latter through an active enticement of the former in the form of an accumulation of words, details and storylines. Thus, the reader does not just encounter the real in a fictional context; they experience the real in all its complexity, both formally and thematically. They are not as much confronted to the real as they are invited to experience its protean wealth.

The short stories under analysis were chosen specifically because they could initially be construed as more traditional pieces than the formally experimental works of their authors, albeit in different ways. They all feature third-person extradiegetic narrators and use a classic blend of narration and dialogue separated in short sections of only a few paragraphs. They all present their initial setup as real or rather realistic, offering a portrayal of situations that will seem familiar to the reader of the contemporary American corpus in a detached, sometimes almost clinical manner, and thus bypass the pitfalls of the illusionist practice of language Rosset warns us against.

In *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*, Clément Rosset considers two possible encounters with the real in the form of a "contact":

> the rugged contact, which stumbles into things and doesn't get anything from them beyond the feeling of their quiet presence, and the smooth, polished, mirrored contact which replaces the presence of things by their apparition into images. The rugged contact is without a double; the smooth contact only exists with the addition of the double (51-52).

Coover's, Evenson's and Marcus's works testify to this dual potential access to the real: their ability to wield language, form and narratives that entertain an ambivalent – and sometimes ambiguous – relationship with postmodernism and "post-postmodernism" gives their reader multiple access points to an experience of the real. However, what is at the center of Rosset's analysis here is what he calls the "idiocy" of things as opposed to images: while the latter "perspire and radiate meaning", things don't do anything, they just are (52). This theory echoes the modified position of the reader in the reception process in (ultra-)contemporary American literature. The addition of the double to the reader's contact with the text, and ultimately with the real, by authorizing the emergence

of the added value of meaning, puts them in a particularly active position, thus making a processes of *re*-mediation possible.

(Re-)Mediation

20th and 21st century experimental American fiction calls on the reader to act as a mediator between the text and the world. As a result, the real that emerges from the text is mediated by the reader as well, seemingly closing the gap between fiction and the world. In his article entitled “La déliaison,” André Green argues that readers operate connections in the text in order to have access to a primary content, which had been covered by the author’s writing – considered as a form of secondary content. This process born from Green’s practice of psychoanalysis suggests the existence of several layers of content – not necessarily of meaning, though – in what would be a collection of eternally palimpsestic texts. This new connection is a form of *re-connection*, a term which underlines the doubling of the text inherent to the process.

The function of the double or of the image, introduced in the previous section is, according to Rosset, to “sideline” the real (*Idiotie* 55). Thus, the reader’s *experiment* on the text in reception should engage them in a process that would drive them away from the real, and so postpone their *experience* of it. In that sense, the reader’s experience of the real would be one of deferment close to Derrida’s concept of “differance”: the access to the real is postponed inasmuch as it may be grasped only through traces, remainders left here and there that are bound to be erased (Derrida 334). Effectively, Rosset uses Derrida’s concept to remind us that as long as something is mediated, the real is bound to be deferred. Consequently, the act of reading, the reader’s intervention *in* the text, that is to say its ultimate mediation, should inevitably and indefinitely put off their experience of the real.

I would like to argue, however, that the reader of 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction effectively bypasses this impossibility through a secondary or doubled mediation I chose to call re-mediation of the text. Rosset does theorize a possible passage from the presence of meaning in the tangible to its relegation to an elsewhere, to absence (*Idiotie* 70), yet it doesn’t seem to account for a potential accessibility of the real. Even so, the meaning attributed by the reader to the signs found in the text –

though considered by Rosset as a way of disguising the real (78-79) – is never definite in the context of contemporary American fiction whose experimental authors produce works which are often difficult to circumscribe and locate within the boundaries of a certain genre. The potential multidirectional readings embedded in the fabric of fiction itself constitute an essential aspect of the experience of the reader. It appears more clearly in Coover's "The Babysitter" but is just as important in the two other stories. For instance, in Evenson's "Born Stillborn", further confusion is added in the narrative as the reading progresses since the day therapist starts to contradict himself, first stating that he "had a twin. He was born stillborn" (4) and then reacting with surprise when Haupt mentions this supposed brother to him later: "What twin brother? I was an only child." (7). Further bewilderment ensues for the reader when the narrator describes Haupt's evaluation of the situation when confronted with his night therapist:

> *The therapist can't possibly be there at night*, Haupt thought near dawn, finding himself alone. *It doesn't make any sense. And besides, I didn't give him a key.* And yet the man looked exactly like his therapist. He spoke in a cadence exactly like his therapist's. If it wasn't his therapist, who else could he be? (6)

The reader isn't prompted to consider if the apparition is real or not, but just how wide the spectrum of what is presented to them as real is, and to what degree they can explore it.

Moreover, the apparent linguistic restraint exercised by these authors is the sign of a refusal of what Rosset calls "grandiloquent writing," a type of writing which tries to "talk the real" but eventually just ends up "missing it" (*Idiotie* 101). This "verbal excess" (101) that Rosset calls a "swelling" may also be found in the subject matter, that then compensates in grandiloquence for the simplicity of the writing itself (104). Here, as I have previously mentioned, our authors avoid this hazard, effectively putting the reader, then left to their own devices, in the position to build up on the surface of the text and language. They thus keep away from the risk of an indifference to the real Rosset warns us against and that is at the center of the mechanism of grandiloquence (121). The reader is encouraged to discard representation in aid of the real and to reassess their relationship to the text, language, and more generally to the world around them. Their act of re-mediation then reduces the gap between the real and representation required

by the act of fictional creation. Indeed, Rosset calls on us to seize the real through fiction, and this by going beyond the layer of "brilliance":

> The seizure of the real, in most cases, will be translated by a pure and simple removal of the brilliance one wished to fix, to which a setting and a false light are substituted: one has indeed seized something, but that something is not at all what one planned to seize (150).

The role of fiction is to make the real appear to the eyes of the reader. According to Rosset, any refusal to see or to acknowledge the real can lead to madness which is the only way for the self to be "sheltered" from the real (*Double* 9). Rosset also warns that any attempt of annihilating the real would be a form of suicide, an obliteration of reality leading always to the death of the self (8). The situation of the protagonist in Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" echoes Rosset's analysis. Haupt's madness, implied by his fictional elaboration of the unsettling nightly visits of his therapist, may protect him from a more direct and potentially harmful confrontation to the real that only the reader can determine.

Clément Rosset addresses our need to attribute meaning to the real and thus add value to it, as we do with all things surrounding us. Giving the real "added value through a projection of imaginary meaning" (*Idiotie* 40-41) is a process started both by Martin in Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" and by the protagonist of Evenson's "Born Stillborn". Marcus's narrator, internally focalized on Martin, echoes his worries which are the product of an added value he gives to his son's behavior in order to make sense of it: "When Martin or Rachel caught Jonah's eye, the boy forced a smile at them. But it was so obviously fake. Could a boy his age do that?" (5). The reader, in turn, by elaborating on the insight offered by the third-person narrators, produces their own added value to the short stories, which effectively "*changes*" them, as Mary K. Holland suggested in *Succeeding Postmodernism.*[16]

Conclusion and perspectives: reading and affect

The work of these experimental authors suggests that the reader's response to the text is vital to the durability, or to the fulfillment even of the piece of fiction, something that may seem self-evident, the act of reading being necessary for any written piece to

[16] "Any other approach that aims primarily at interpretation or excavation of meaning actually changes the text" (145).

endure. However, in the cases here discussed the particularly active reading experience seems inextricably linked to a certain conception of these author's work in their relationship to the real.

Approaching the real in 20th and 21st century short fiction requires the reader to experience the text, as Susan Sontag encouraged the latter as well as critics to do in her essay entitled "Against Interpretation": "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" (14). However, Clément Rosset tells us that to approach the real one must try to catch sight of it obliquely, askew and unintentionally because its perception is always fortuitous (*Idiotie* 152). Thus, the uncertain and unpredictable aspect of the reading experience is preserved. Similarly, Jean-Marie Schaffer analyzes the need for the reader to subjectively simulate identification by adopting a subjective perspective – often that of the protagonist – to understand a narrative (31). I would like to propose that this demand for a slightly oblique perspective on the real paired with a process of identification encourages an affective reading of the text.

Mary K. Holland indeed argues that "post-postmodern fiction" also operates "a shift in terms of a return to affect, created by an author for a reader" (8). The role of affect[17] in shaping the reader's relationship to the real – and by extension to their own world – cannot be denied, especially in this perspective offered by Holland which suggests that such a response is, to a certain extent, tailored by the authors for their reader. Since, according to Brian Massumi, language interferes with the effect of images, and thus of representations, it seems that the bareness of language practiced by the "post-postmodern" authors we have mentioned, as well as others, and which echoes Rosset's previously mentioned "grandiloquent writing," might contribute to a potential affective reading experience, in the sense that it does creates a gap to be filled by the reader seemingly without setting a specific direction for their response. Thus, as Massumi further states, affect has to do with what is encountered and not, like emotions, with

[17] In "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi defines affect and its primacy in terms of response as: "a gap between content and effect: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way" (84).

something that is purely internal to the human being (93). The elements of an affective reading of fiction are thus already embedded in the fabric of the text and are waiting for the reader's encounter of the latter. After all, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us, the mental processes involved in production and reception are roughly the same (25), thus further explaining the dual role of the reader in the reception of the text. Holland's reflection on embodied reading practices and the importance of "thingness" in "post-postmodernism" (141) goes even further by encouraging the reader and the critic to "approach the text as a material object, with all our senses […] experiencing it as a thing in the world that affects our embodied selves, quite apart from any interpretations we might press upon it" (145). If taking into account the theory of affect, the levels involved in the act of reading might be multiplied. Indeed, Massumi identifies the following "resonating levels" in addition to those of body and mind that emerge from the theory of affect:

> volition and cognition, at least two orders of language, expectation and suspense, body depth and epidermis, past and future, action and reaction, happiness and sadness, quiescence and arousal, passivity and activity... (94)

One might then say that 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction encourages an affective practice of reading by allowing the source of the affective process to pervade the texts produced by its authors. The detachment of the prose – in the quasi-mechanical account of the babysitter in Coover's story –, the distance established with the protagonist – in Marcus's narrator's uncompromising account of Martin's marital life and mental state – and the total lack of judgement – from Evenson's narrator of their obviously deranged main character – by letting the real seep through, would then leave more space to be filled by the reader's affective experience of the text. It might then be through the specific prism of affect that the constant reevaluation of the reader's relationship to the world through re-mediation takes place.

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