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The Recognitions: An
Editorial Collaboration with
Robert Coover's "Party Talk"

Book! you lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts.—Stubb, speaking in "The Doubloon" chapter in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

In case the reader should not be sufficiently observant of the duplicity, it is the business of the author to make as evident as possible the fact that it is there. That is to say, the duplicity, the ambiguity, is a conscious one, something the author knows more about than anybody else; it is the essential dialectical distinction of the whole authorship, and has therefore a deeper reason.—Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*

"Nothing is ever wholly concealed"—Robert Coover, "Party Talk: Unheard Conversations at Gerald's Party"

Since Harold Jaffe and I became the co-editors of *Fiction International* 1983, we have adopted a policy of not providing editorial introductions or explications for even the most puzzling, wholly "unsituated" texts appearing in our journal. We are well aware that any work of literature can be cut-up, paraphrased, plagiarized or otherwise subjected to postmodernist interventions; but our sense is that surely a text should be allowed at least one brief moment of unaltered purity before its inevitable fate of readerly and scholarly

dismemberment. In the case of Robert Coover's "Party Talk," however, I have chosen to break with this policy, for reasons that I am most anxious to share with our readers.. .

From the time that artists first began to create their cunning illusion that they were "reproducing" the text-of-life by means of words, sounds, pigments, and bodily movements, the production of The Great Artistic Hoax has been a natural, though rarely perfected (and even more rarely appreciated) mode of aesthetic endeavor¹. Examples of the fraudulent art work—the work which successfully passes itself off as something other than it actually is, either by plagiarism, by purporting to be the work of someone else, or (most commonly) by creating the appearance of being one type of work (a scholarly essay, for example) while really being something quite different (a fiction in the *form* of such an essay)—can be found throughout the history of all art forms. Since realistic fiction is so firmly rooted in the principle of convincing its readers of the "reality" of a textual illusion, authors since the rise of the novel have been particularly inventive in developing a rich and elaborate variety of literary hoaxes. Thus from the time of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, through Poe's ingenious parodies of gothic melodrama, and continuing right up through Judith Krantz's hilarious, yet subtly rendered send-ups of television docudrama narratives (see her recent *Till We Meet Again*), the fiction-as-masquerade or hoax has been employed by many of our most original writers. Postmodernism's emphasis on intertextuality, the impossibility of originality (Borges), the "imagination-as-playgiarism" (the phrase is Raymond Federman's), the conflicting meanings of identical texts (Nabokov, Lem, "Pierre Menard"), and the deferred, provisional nature *of* all textual meaning (Barthes, Derrida) has made it particularly receptive to texts that represent themselves as one thing but which, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be something else (or several different other things). In this regard, one thinks *of* the mock essays by Borges and Lem, Nabokov's

¹ The subject of artistic forgery has been explored in two massive experimental novels, William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (New York: Viking, 1955) and Robertson Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone* (New York: Viking, 1985). For a discussion of the connections between postmodernism and the twin concepts of

larger pastiches of empiricist forms, or Ken Gangemi's "travel guide" to Mexico, *The Volcanoes from Puebla*. One of the boldest recent efforts in this regard ("bold" because its author took such great personal risks) was Clifford Irving's *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, whose extremist approach to conceptual purity was not appreciated by a public (and a legal system) unfortunately as yet unable to apply poststructuralist theory to actual literary practices.

As conceptually daring as Irving's efforts were in writing *Howard Hughes*, in the end he failed to create a successful hoax because his imitation proved to be imperfect enough so that it was eventually detected. This suggests the perpetual dilemma facing all truly ambitious fraudulent artists: the perfectly "successful" fraudulent text can necessarily never be appreciated as such in that such a text in effect *erases* its creator (or, to put it another way, the hoax-artist always constructs two texts, one of which is invisible). Since it is the absent (or invisible) text that is, after all, the more substantial work, it is quite natural for its invisible, erased author to want to devise a means whereby his perfect success can somehow be acknowledged without thereby turning his creation into a now-detectable failure. A paradox? Perhaps. Here we need to distinguish between what are really two different types of hoaxes whose ontological natures are quite different. In the one case, you have the hoax designed to remain undiscovered (the forged painting, the counterfeited coin or bank note, the plagiarized doctoral thesis, "Shakespeare's" *Measure for Measure*); the other is the hoax designed by its creator in advance to be recognized as such. In the latter case, the recognition factor is typically built into the work itself via the introduction of self-irony, exaggeration and other such formal means by which its status as a text-as-forgery is openly displayed (examples would include Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the various musical texts created by Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi as "The Blues Brothers," the re-made movie versions of *King Kong* and *Flash Gordon*, and so on).

"forgery" and "originality," see my review of Davies' novel, "Painter, Forger, Miser, Spy," in the *New York Times Book Review*, 15 December 1985, pp. 3-4.

But in fact there is a more rarely attempted third type of forgery which permits the artist to escape from self-negation—namely, the creation of the text that is an *exact* forgery, indistinguishable from the "real thing," but whose forged nature is also built into the project (i.e., the creator expands the game, creates a perfect imitation and its revelation, with the differing textual levels ultimately comprising a single, unified aesthetic object). This more ambitious type of forgery usually involves an artist willing to construct a "context" around the imitation whose function is to imply the "proper" perspective from which its fraudulence is to be inferred. Andy Kaufman's brilliant Tony Clifton performance pieces—in which Kaufman (AKA "Tony Clifton") did a series of lengthy nightclub engagements which differed in no observable respect from a bad lounge-lizard act—provide a perfect example of the way context (Kaufman presented his Tony Clifton routines within the setting of a stand-up comedian) can alter the "meaning" of a work of art. Perhaps the most formally daring approach of all involves the artist who creates texts within broader contexts that are designed to be deliberately confusing, ambiguous, "unreadable" by their audiences. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* could be seen as such a text, and so, too, could Andy Kaufman's celebrated "wrestling accident" (in which Kaufman either was seriously injured when he made the mistake of actually attempting to wrestle a professional male wrestler or contrived the entire incident, including the arrival of the ambulance, the subsequent wearing of the neck brace, etc.). The best recent example of this method, however, is probably Allan Bloom's "essay" on rock music (contained in his *The Closing of the American Mind*). Contained as it is within an otherwise "straight" analysis of the decline of public education in the U.S. and the "vulgarization" of the intellectual community, Bloom's "chapter" on rock illustrates the kind of complex resonances that a skillful artist can produce by manipulating contextual meanings. Seemingly presented as a reasoned and historically accurate summary of rock's contribution to the emptiness of values, moral decay, and loss of interest in the "great tradition of philosophy and literature" that characterizes today's youth culture, Bloom's text upon closer examination reveals itself to be a skillfully wrought reflection of

precisely the sort of absence of self-knowledge and lack of learning that Bloom so effectively analyzes in the rest of his study; thus his absurd mis-readings of recent artistic trends, his ridiculously ill-informed commentary about individual rock musicians and texts, and his over-blown, rhetorical nay-saying become a richly comic display of the nihilism, despair, relativism and adolescent thinking that he explores in the traditional academic fashion elsewhere in his study².

Clearly these sorts of elaborate and self-conscious manipulations of texts and (con)texts are very much in the spirit of postmodern art's central concern with examining the ways in which "meaning" and "interpretation" are generated in the realms of art, politics and the wider cultural sphere of information exchange; and the specific issues raised in all Great Artistic Hoaxes—the concepts of "reality" versus "simulation," "originality" versus "reproduction," meaning versus image, aesthetic irony and detachment versus romantic involvement and the desperate thrust at authenticity—can be shown to be central to virtually every major artistic and intellectual movement in the past twenty years (punk, poststructuralism, Marxist critical theory, cyberpunk, metafiction, feminist theory, etc.).

These considerations lead us (finally!) to a brief consideration of Robert Coover's "Party Talk: Unheard Conversations at *Gerald's Party*," the remarkable experimental fiction which follows. At the risk of sounding somewhat coy, let me announce here in advance that in the interest of preserving the playful spirit of the marvelous and elaborate textual labyrinth that

² Interestingly enough, Bloom's textual forgery has thus far apparently escaped detection from reviewers and readers, many of whom have even applauded Bloom's "analysis" (there is the possibility that certain reviewers and commentators have entered into the playful spirit of Bloom's "chapter" and themselves created forged "reviewer-responses," but this seems unlikely). But that Bloom intends that his "chapter" should be read as a carefully conceived hoax (or as *both* a hoax and an "analysis") is obvious. When one examines his specific references to individual musicians (say, his association of Prince, Michael Jackson and Boy George!) or any number of his general conclusions about rock music it becomes quite clear what Bloom is up to. Consider his remarks that summarize what rock music represents: "A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy" (p. 75). Are we really supposed to assume that Bloom—who is obviously familiar with the works of Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits, Joni Mitchell, Brian Eno, Talking Heads, and Bob Dylan—is doing anything other than adopting the persona of a tight-assed, middle-aged academic who can't stand the idea that life has passed him by? I think not.

Coover invites us to enter (as will be made clear in a moment, I am already inside!), I will make no effort to provide a summary of the possible "meanings" contained in (and around) Coover's innovative masterpiece. Part of what is involved in appreciating the formal beauty and intricacy of any Great Hoax (or sequence of interrelated hoaxes that comprise a Greater Hoax) is allowing the dialogue between artist and audience to unfold naturally. Certain fascinating cryptograms and hidden messages—deciphering the palindromic nature of "spam on no maps," for instance, or suddenly recognizing what a seemingly random series of letters (say, "X A O H") spells when held up to a mirror—are best enjoyed when they are unraveled gradually, as the author intended, rather than explained beforehand by an overeager critic or editor.

If this editorial preface—and, indeed, these very words you are presently reading—appear to undermine the spirit of authorial integrity that I have just now alluded to, let me reiterate my point that sometimes even the "natural unfolding" of a textual process could involve an inter-contextual imposition of possible interpretations . . . such as this editorial "preface." In fact, the possibility that Coover wishes us to recognize that his creation is a compositional *process* comprised of different kinds of texts is clearly pointed to by the title he has appended to his "story": "Party Talk: Unheard Conversations at Gerald's Party."³ The reference here to Coover's previous novel, *Gerald's Party* (New York: Linden Press, 1985), of course, has the effect of opening up the discourse of the new fiction by establishing an implied dialogue with another text. Thus readers who begin to read through "Party Talk"—at first glance, a discontinuous sequence of "unheard conversations," arranged alphabetically, that presumably occurred "at" Gerald's Party (which is a novel and not a "party" at all, the conversations being "unheard" because they were not included in Coover's original novel)—are directed to consider the way these sentences operate independently (as a self-contained textual unity) and as they contradict, reinforce and

³ As numerous critics have pointed out, the titles of Coover's major works nearly always contain a wealth of hidden puns, references, and allusions (Pricksongs and Descants, The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop., etc.).

otherwise interact with the prior text, *Gerald's Party*. The necessity of reading "Party Talk" from this interactive perspective is perfectly obvious; what may not be initially apparent, however, is the role that this editorial preface has in this process. But perhaps my readers have already begun to suspect what I myself only recently fully understood: that I, Larry McCaffery, was unwittingly chosen several years ago by Robert Coover to be a collaborator in the creation of a massive, enormously ambitious textual construction ("game," "performance piece," "interactive text," "textual happening"—if my reading of what Coover has done here is correct, criticism is going to need a new term to describe this sort of work).

The initial aspect of my participation in this project was straightforward (though the circumstances that led Coover to select me instead of any other editor/critic are, of course, complex⁴): it involved my examining "Party Talk" after Bob had sent it to me, recognizing its potential significance (though I'm embarrassed to admit that I completely failed to detect the "invisible" text at first), and accepting it for publication in *Fiction International* (with the enthusiastic approval of my co-editor— and collaborator—Harold Jaffe). As to the more substantial part of my collaboration, let me refer my readers to my earlier point about the need for certain types of hoax-artists (or magicians) to create a context which can somehow imply the "real meaning" of what would otherwise be "misread" by an unsuspecting audience. It should now be clear that I have gradually come to recognize that *I am* that context, that I am part of Coover's larger experimental text. This editorial preface should properly be seen, then, as merely one segment (though a crucial segment) of one of the most complex textual experiments ever conceived. In saying this, I don't mean that this preface is another of those fake scholarly commentaries that have by now—since Borges, Nabokov, et. al—become so familiar to postmodernist readers. I am no ventriloquist's dummy, propped

⁴ Readers familiar with the scholarship that has appeared dealing with Coover's work are probably aware that I wrote the first Ph. D. thesis on Coover's work (*The Reliance of Man on Fiction Making*, University of Illinois 1975) and that I have written numerous essays and reviews dealing with his work. As to why Coover might have decided to publish "Party Talk" in *Fiction International*, his decision probably has to do

up here in some stale limp sheets, spewing forth words provided for me by Coover. No, that sort of obvious authorial manipulation would have been a modernist device—and finally inappropriate for an artist such as Coover, who has been stretching postmodernist aesthetic boundaries to new limits in recent works such as *The Public Burning* and *A Night at the Movies*.

Finally, then, Coover's aim in including me⁵ as part of his project needs to be understood in terms of the postmodernist aesthetic context that has produced Happenings and Op Art, John Cage's music and Merce Cunningham's choreography, the performance art of Laurie Anderson and Joanna Went, William Burrough's cut-up fictions and John Zorn's collaborative jazz works. That is, Coover took the gamble of abandoning the modernist impulse to retain control over all the elements in the aim of producing a perfect aesthetic unity in favor of a truly *performative* approach: he included me in (as well as dozens, even hundreds of others) as collaborators in his work but allowed us complete freedom to interact with those portions of the text he had already written; to insure that our contributions would be "free," he took the precaution of not ever informing us that we were his collaborators, knowing full well that our "interactions" might not be congruent with his own intentions (for example, I might have rejected "Party Talk," have written a misleading or otherwise useless preface, or—just as damaging, in the long run—have simply faded into the usual editorial background and remained silent). It was providing each of his many collaborators real freedom to merge with and transform those verbal objects and accessories he had placed before us on his textual stage that we witness Coover—ever the riverboat gambler when it comes to his own work⁶—display the same postmodernist verve

with his aim at disguising the true nature of his piece—hence the appropriateness of having it appear in a non-mainstream literary journal.

⁵ Coover's artistic integrity has repeatedly created difficulties for him in terms of having his works appear in the exact form he has conceived for them. For a particularly striking example of these difficulties, readers are referred to our discussion of the background concerning *The Public Burning* in Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery, eds., *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 74-77.

⁶ My references to "collaborators" may be unclear. One of the most interesting features of Coover's textual performance-piece is the way it has the effect of actually generating other texts and discourses; for instance,

as John Cage allowing the environment to dictate the specific sound sources in his 4'33" composition, or the Velvet Underground walking off the stage and allowing the feedback from their guitars to complete the songs. The gamble Coover took, of course, was the greatest gamble an artist could take—but one I have already outlined as a gamble facing all Hoax Artists: the gamble that his creation would be misrepresented (the invisible work remaining undetected, the counterfeit accepted as reality), ignored, or—the ultimate disaster—never published (or "performed") at all!

Luckily for us all, this was not the fate destined for Coover's magnificent project, for his collaborators have all made contributions that have resulted in the eventual appearance of the final textual components of Coover's *magnus opus* on the pages of this issue of *Fiction International*! In this respect, we must applaud Coover's choice of individuals who could work with him, play off the elements he had introduced to produce new improvisational structures.

By this point, the pattern of branches I have woven throughout this preface with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment should have allowed the astute reader to long ago guess the true nature of the vast yet subtle masterpiece Robert Coover has produced. But for those few who have not yet fully "solved the mystery" (to enter into a discourse central to Coover's work), let me play the role of the detective-in-the-drawing-room who finally summarizes what has occurred and explains "whodunnit." At its most basic level, Robert Coover's Great Hoax required the construction of two separate forgeries whose elaborate parallels, oppositions, and mirror-like sets of interactions would generate the central tensions that would eventually result in the production of collaborative texts (in the forms of reviews, critical discussions—and this preface). The original hoax, while designed to appear to be a bold and important work in its own right,

the "reviews" and "essays" that were produced in response to the fraudulent "masterpiece," *Gerald's Party*, could all be seen as being fictive texts in that they were analyzing what is, in effect, an illusion. Part of Coover's strategy here (as elsewhere in his work) is to examine the different ways textual "meaning" comes into being and to suggest the need for new ways of perceiving texts whose "misreadings" have acquired a specious authority.

was actually only a brilliantly conceived red-herring: it was, of course, the "novel," *Gerald's Party*, a work which is actually a kind of pre-text, a simulacrum of a great novel⁶ whose illusionistic effects could be used for various purposes when contrasted with the real "masterpiece," — "Party Talk." The writing of *Gerald's Party*, while admittedly laborious and time-consuming, was undoubtedly a relatively simple task for Coover, who had already written at least three acknowledged "masterpieces" in the past and who thus was working on ground so familiar as to probably seem boring.⁷ Much more difficult to achieve, even at this early point in his grand scheme, were the sorts of complex and subtle orchestrations of elements drawn from the "real world"—the New York publishing industry (neither Coover's editor nor anyone at the Linden Press division of Simon & Schuster could, of course, be allowed to know what he was up to), his family and close friends, and the wider, diverse world of reviewers, critics, and readers—all of which were used as props (perhaps by now readers are beginning to sense the ambition and scope of this project). At any rate, if we were all being employed merely as textual accessories, surely in this case the means can be seen to fully justify the ends!

In regard to the second major part of his text, Coover set for himself a considerably more daunting task: the creation of a hoax whose fraudulence was of an exactly opposite sort as that found in *Gerald's Party*—namely, the invention of a genuine masterpiece masquerading in the form of a random assemblage of discarded, useless fragments of text that had been edited out of an original novel (*Gerald's Party*). Coover, of course, has always taken as his central subject the process of transformation—the metamorphosis of all things (including textual meanings and those "mythic residues" that both shape our perceptions and imprison us within their shapely patterns). Carefully scrutinized, "Party Talk" can be

⁷ Once again, a performance piece by Andy Kaufman provides a useful analogy. When Kaufman, disguised as professional golfer Seve Ballesteros, played the back nine of the 1985 British Open, he succeeded in creating one of the most difficult and elaborate hoaxes ever presented. Kaufman's performance was especially demanding not simply because his role required him to actually develop professional golfing skills to be credible (Kaufman's infamous impersonations as a woman-hating wrestler indicated that his athletic skills were considerable), but because he needed to develop the golfing skills and mannerisms of a specific golfer.

seen as the formal and thematic culmination of Coover's obsessive exploration of excess (and its opposite), magic, rigid order versus chaos, the role of language (and the alphabet!) in giving structure to an otherwise entropic (and dull) existence, the masking of the serious in the guise of the playful, the obscene, the irrelevant. Before our very eyes, then, Coover the alchemist/ magician performs his greatest literary trick by turning verbal shit into literary gold.

In order for this remarkable transformation to occur, however, Coover needed to make certain that his masterpiece really *was* a piece of shit, as it were—or rather, that its shape, texture, and other features were truly indistinguishable from the real McCoy. Hence the necessity to turn the aesthetic screws even further by refusing to supply the discarded bits of conversational garbage that comprise "Party Talk" with any seeming narrative continuity at all;⁸ eliminating even the rudimentary narrative "glue" that holds together the unsituated, question-response fictions of Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett and Harold Jaffe. Coover therefore casts his sentences completely adrift from their usual contextual moorings, and allows them to collide into startling new arrangements. The results frequently produce the peculiar shock of recognition—the yoking together, with violence, of two previously unconnected ideas and images that one finds in the work of William Burroughs and certain metaphysical poets, as in the following sequence:

"Beautiful from front, wormeaten behind."

"Besides, who knows, maybe the little tads have all gone back to the
promptuary."

"Big Brains here prefers to abuse the living." "Birth and death, the two great
ego trips."

When placed in this context, "Ballesteros's" closing round of 67—which included a number of miraculous recovery shots from the rough—must be regarded in an entirely different light.

⁸ Coover has experimented with less radical forms of discontinuity previously in short fictions such as "The Babysitter," "The Elevator," and *Spanking the Maid*. For a more complete discussion of these methods, see

"Blah! Somebody's sprayed it with deodorant or something!" "Bordel de merde. . . !"

"Bullshit! That's not my point!"

"But if everything we call reality is also a kind of mask, then . . . then. . . "

"But maybe not. Maybe they'd simply preferred to keep quiet about it and try to forget."

"But that's what I've been trying to explain."

This is an enormously complex passage of great poetic beauty and depth, a passage no critical gloss can ever do justice to. But even a casual glance at the "content" of this sequence reveals a rich variety of motifs, metaphors, and thematic issues that Coover returns to again and again in "Party Talk": the fraudulent nature of beauty (and all appearances), the emphasis on excrement, the interaction of life and death, masks and role-playing, memory and its embodiment in language and art, the difficulty of making sense of reality and of conveying this sense to others. In fact, once we begin to recognize the masterful control and subtle recurrence of certain themes and methods, we begin to realize that perhaps Coover is only playing with appearances and randomness, concealing the true nature of his poker hand (a royal flush!). We begin to question the "trite nature" of allegedly "random juxtapositions" such as: "Don't be cruel, C Geoffrey" / "Don't do that, Fats!" How likely is it, we wonder, that two sentences that have been jerked out of their original context and then rejoined through the accident of alphabetization should refer consecutively to the two major rock stars (Elvis Presley and Fats Domino) who just happened to be the two major white and black pop cultural figures of the very year (1957) that Robert Coover himself first began writing seriously? In addition to the private "meaning" (or incoherence) of these two sentences, other, less personalized references and motifs emerge that are developed at greater length elsewhere in "Party Talk": the insistence on death and the ungovernability of

my discussion of *Pricksongs* in *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Coover, Gass and Barthelme* (Univ

the body, the pattern of female victimization by cruelly aggressive, ego-tripping males (literalized most notably in the story by the implied murder of the lovely Ros), the human need to deny the reality of evil, the forces of entropy which rock music's emphasis on transcendence is meant to counter.

Meanwhile, of course, another level of transformation begins to be noticed, as the discontinuous, random sentences begin to produce a narrative that gradually and defiantly begins to emerge in a wholly novel manner.⁹ Even readers completely unfamiliar with the "novel" from whence these alleged bits of dialogue have been taken will eventually be able to piece together a fairly clear "story" involving a mysterious murder, a large party with a huge number of randy, middle-aged guests (over 40 individual characters, nearly the entire "cast" of *Gerald's Party*—are introduced here), an interrogation, and considerable speculation about art, metaphysics, and the role of reason and myth in guiding our understanding of the ambiguities of existence. Slowly but insistently, the dense poetic and lyrical fragments (reminiscent of Beckett's best elliptical prose) of "Party Talk" begin to inscribe a larger text around its absences a text which ultimately succeeds in displacing its "source" (that ornate but ultimately ponderous metaphysical detective yarn, *Gerald's Party*) and renders it superfluous.

Future scholars will undoubtedly explore the intricacies and specific nuances of Coover's sequence of interactive texts in considerably more exhaustive (or should I say "superfluous"?) detail than I wish to here. Certainly my own postmodernist inclinations, not to mention the nature of my own collaborative role in the project, should dissuade anyone from accepting my interpretation of this performance-text as being privileged. True, my discussion does have the advantage of being based on "inside information" that, some readers may object, is not directly "contained within" the visible texts (i.e., the twin hoaxes, *Gerald's Party* and "Party Talk"). With this in mind, I would like to conclude my remarks

of Pittsburgh Press, 1982).

⁹ The closest analogies to what Coover does here are probably certain experimental texts by William S. Burroughs, Walter Abish, Richard Kostelanetz and Samuel Beckett.

by providing the background concerning how I came to realize the astounding nature of what he was up to with this project—and the key role I had to play if its grandiose ambitions were to be realized.

It was Coover himself who provided me with these insights, though as one might expect from Bob, his manner of delivery was metaphorical. The occasion was a warm May evening in Rome several years ago; a full moon dripped its yellow warmth into the orangish glow of the Pantheon piazza where Bob and I, together with our wives and several other mutual friends, were enjoying a marvelous sea-food dinner and some heated yet friendly exchanges about topics such as Bruce Springsteen, poststructuralist criticism, and (a shared passion) the aesthetics of sports. My moment of illumination occurred while we were discussing a soccer match that we had witnessed earlier that evening. Bob, a fanatical soccer fan who loves to explain the intricacies of the game, was in the midst of diagramming on his napkin a set play that his beloved Kent soccer club had used to set up its winning goal—something about massing a number of attackers in one area of the field to lull the defenders into assuming a goal attempt would be coming from *a* particular area, and then having a single player—unnoticed by the defenders but in fact the real offensive threat—receive the pass for a relatively uncontested strike. Completing his diagram, Bob ordered another bottle of wine for our table and then turned and said with seeming casualness (I recall his words quite distinctly): "When this play works, it's quite beautiful; it's the aesthetic appeal of the fraud, masking one's intentions, using one's intelligence to take advantage of the whole field of play." Then he winked at me and said, "Hey, where's the W.C. around here anyway?" I pointed and, as Bob got up and began to walk off, he looked back at me, laughed, and said in one of those jokester tones of voice he loves to project for his characters, "Well, you know what they say—"suchness conceals itself from the peeing intellect," right?" Then he was gone.

In his absence I sat there absolutely stunned as his parting remark suddenly had the effect of a powerful magnet drawing the disparate bits of metal before it into an inseparably

tight new formation. His playful reference, of course, had been to a line from "Party Talk" ("Suchness conceals itself from the peeping intellect"), which Bob had sent me several months earlier and which I had been puzzling over ever since. Perhaps, it was the conspiratorial wink (so pregnant with possible meaning) that finally nudged me in the right direction, or perhaps it was the wine or other medication I had been taking to ease an allergic reaction, but Bob's coy reference—following as it did our earlier discussions of *Gerald's Party*, "Party Talk" and the nature of textual discourses, which had led to our "dialogue" (as I should now like to refer to it) concerning soccer, hoaxes, and aesthetics—was all the prompting I needed to put the innumerable pieces of Coover's textual jigsaw puzzle into their proper places.

It also became clear what my role in the creation of this text would be. In concluding this prefatory "Introduction," I have now had my brief moment on center stage of Coover's vast theatrical production. I hope I have discharged my duties without botching any of my lines. So now, without further adieu, let me invite readers to enter into the labyrinth that follows in the same spirit of collaboration and free play with which it was created. I hope you will derive as much enjoyment from *your* collaboration as I have from mine.

PARTY TALK: Unheard Conversations at *Gerald's Party*

"(Like this?)"

" . . . And it's a knockout!"

" . . . And the lusty impression they have exercised on the popular imagination, but.. .

" . . . And then there's her rather unusual childhood. .. "

" . . . At the synapse . . . !"

" . . . But of course it was Orpheus who looked back, wasn't it, not. . . "

" . . . Frozen into senseless self-contradictory patterns."

" . . . It is the effect that seeks always the cause."

" . . . Once you—heh heh—get the hang of it. . . "

" . . . That got such a rise. . . "

" . . . The unbreathable silence. . . "

" . . . To shut things down. . . "

" . . . Was the hush just before. . . "

"—But the way that it whistled when ris!"

"—Got our first piece a tail together!"

"Ass my boy!"

"Ass our Janny!"

"Ass Big Glad's baby brother." "

'N Hoo-Sin. 'N so on. . . "

A bit tight. . . "

"A busman's holiday. . . "

"A little—?"

"A long time ago, long ago . . . ?"

"A star is born and all that!"

"A unique adventure!"

"A what—?"

"Above all else, they should be trained to the point of self-confidence and have a professional pride and interest in work."

"After what he said to me?"

"Ah. Is that so. . . ?"

"Ah! That young man! Well, it wasn't its size, you know. . . "

"Ah! Well! Well!"

"Ah . . . ?"

"Ali, baysay my feces, Hugly!"

"Ah, the plot grows a complication."

"Ah, when will we ever learn?"

"Ah, you dumb twat! Pick 'em up yourself!"

"Ah, Fats, when you gonna get some learnin'?"

"Alas, a soft file cannot clean off ingrained rust."

"All style and no substance."

"All that running around in the streets—I just couldn't keep up!"

"All I mean to say, is that Ros was about the only person in the world who didn't treat me like a dummy!"

"All I want is for you to find true happiness, with all my heart I do!" "Always—?"

"An hour! We had to wait longer than that for the goddamn fur.. to show up!"

"An . . . an accident, my mother—she broke her legs, her collarbone, her jaw, front teeth, one wrist. . . "

"And then she'd get confused and say it was for darts and all you had to throw were beanbags!"

"And they're filming it all on some kind of portable TV!"

"And yet. . . "

"And I'm not sure I haven't done it again!"

"Any that shit left?"

"Apparently, while they were going over a bridge at fifty miles an hour, Ros just opened the door and stepped out."

"Are you feeling better, Miss?"

"As I thought, a complete mystery."

"Assume the worst and . . . and . . ."

"At least there's no mystery about that one."

"Aw, hell, Ger, I'm on a, you know, a cunt hunt for some class ass!"

"Bande de cons, grand meme! Tout le monde s'en fout . . ."

"Beautiful from front, wormeaten behind."

"Besides, who knows, maybe the little tads have all gone back to the promptuary."

"Big brains here prefers to abuse the living."

"Birth and death, the two great ego trips. . . "

"Blah! Somebody's sprayed it with deodorant or something!"

"Bordel de merde . . .!"

"Bullshit! That's not the point!"

"But if everything we call reality is also a kind of mask, then. . . then. . . "

"But maybe not. Maybe they'd simply preferred to keep quiet about it and try to forget."

"But that's what I've been trying to explain."

"But we both grew up in such happy families."

"But we—we can't take this, Mr. Trainer."

"But who's this punctured scumbag you dragged in with you, Beni?"

"But you'll never guess who's Zack's newest discovery!"

"But I got a pump!"

"But I'm not kidding myself. I know how you look at her and how you look at me."

"But, listen, get your tonsils tuned, sweetheart, the kid's writing you some new songs!"

"Button, button, Jacko!"

"By golly, y'know I haven't had guacamole since we were in Mexico, Iris and me."

"By the way, there's this young guy I want Tania to—pop!—meet, one of my clients' sons, a painter, very sweet. . . "

"By the way, who's that heavy lady over there scowling at us?"

"By the way, Ger, you got any more of them party favors?"

"Ca fait mal. . . !"

"C'mere, you kinky fartbrained yodeler—gimme a hug!"

"C'mon, Vadge, cut the goddamn muggin' and give us a hand with Zack."

"Certainly my mother never walked just right afterwards, but always had to twist her hip a little as she moved."

"Christ, he even sounds like one!"

"Close your eyes, everybody! I got nothing on but a smile!"

"Cyril said to tell you . . ."

"Cyri l?" "Damn right!"

"Dead body?"

"Defloratation's not a light undertaking, I thought you knew that."

"Dickie said that—?"

"Dickie . . .?!"

"Dickie? He took Naomi up to the bathroom."

"Dickie? Well, he's got a cute ass for one thing, tight and narrow, but not too hard, with soft blond hair all over it."

"Did you see Malcolm's crazy seance?"

"Did I mention his high moral character?"

"Didn't she come with the Scar and Prissy Loo?"

"Didn't you notice how quiet it was back here? He fixed the upstairs toilet, too."

"Didn't you see?"

"Do you chew it or suck it?"

"Do you remember the time Louise jumped all over him in that restaurant for the way he sucked up his spaghetti?"

"Do you think it was really Ros's ghost?"

"Don't ask me. Ask Mee."

"Don't be cruel, Geoffrey."

"Don't do that, Fats!"

"Don't pay him any mind, sir, he's just a bit excitable—it's so difficult, don't you see. . .

"

"Don't pretend, Geoffrey! I love you too much for that!" "Don't try to explain, just do it again. . . "

"Don't what—?!"

"Don't worry about Louise. She means well. But she's not very happy."

"Down to, more like! Ho—boy—hot as a junked-up canary!"

"Everybody lives by one lie or another. . . "

"Except the walls both reflect and let you see through at the same time, don't ask me how."

"Excuse me, but what do you feel about the breakdown of law and order in our society?"

"Feels good."

"Ffoo! To piss 'n to fart, it's good for the heart—ain't that so, Doc?"

"First one tonight."

"First one?"

"First, she'd complain that you invited her down to play pool, but your cuestick was bent or broken or something. . . "

"For that guy, love's just a passing fanny."

"Form is emptiness and emptiness is form."

"Forwards and backwards!"

"Fred always was one for acting things out."

"Frock? Frock?"

"Fuck that."

"Funny?"

"Ger, are you there?"

"Get down!"

"Ghosts don't salivate."

"Give love a chance!"

"Go up and see for yourself, it don't cost nothing."

"God's had his little joke on us, Gladys, I don't see why we can't have a few on him! I mean, 'ass fair, isn' it?"

"Goodness sake, you bachelors!"

"Grandma used to slip us bits of food, but she was simple and Mother always found out, so that just made it worse."

"Ha ha! Haven't seen one of those things in years!" "Hair lacquer."

"Half past a . . . pig's ass, friend, and . . . losing ground. . ."

"Hang in there!"

"Hang on to it!"

"Haven't I seen that girl somewhere before. . . ?"

"He and Peg were in the kitchen awhile ago."

"He came in the door and fell down the well, that's it, all she wrote."

"He came rearing down through here like a wild bull with a banderillo up its ass."

"He did an imitation of the Captain at our Christmas party that had the whole force busting their britches!"

"He did it, Gerry! It was Dickie!"

"He did. But you can make it well, Gerald."

"He doesn't have enough character to hold his fucking face together."

"He just married the wrong girl. . . "

"He knows something."

"He looks a mite like that feller got caught in the milkin' machine."

"He possesses the dangerous combination of too much physical vigor and too little mental inhibitory power."

"He used to punch tickets all day on the railroad."

"He was so . . . so crazy . . . !"

"He was such a polite, elegant, intelligent man!"

"He! Ho! Vous m'écoutez ou quoi, merde!"

"He's got a full set."

"He's got a mean fist."

"He's plowing the deep, got a bone-on like a fencepost, and the most beatific goddamn grin on his map you ever saw!"

"Hey! That clock! It's moving again!"

"Hey—hah!—'dj'ever heara one about the young bride'na baloney skin—?"

"Hey, bring that pearl-diver in here, lady, I got some rotten pipes need reaming out!"

"Hey, heard any good jokes lately?"

"Hey, if it ain't Beni the blimp!"

"Hey, if you're gonna start making fucking rules, I'll get my own."

"Hey, it's okay, Vic, the boat don't sail till midnight!" "Hey, kid, we got a book yet?"

"Hey, look at these old-fashioned sugar cookies!" "Hey, look who's here!"

"Hey, wait a sec, Pop! Where you going?"

"Hey, what is this stuff, Una?"

"Hey, Charley, ya like them bazooms?"

"Hey, Doc, I wunner if you could gimme a helpin' gland."

"Hey, I want you two kids t'fine alla happiness inna world, I mean it, juss like me'n whatserfaoe here!"

"Hoary but true!"

"Hold on to it!"

"Honest, I wish I was your heart's desire, Geoffrey. It would make me the happiest girl in the whole world."

"How about the Dropper?"

"How little is actually known of the subtle ways in which one's conduct is determined!"

"How this young fella'n me—this prince 'n me—a long time ago—long ago—"

"Hugue's done his number, Zack."

"Hugues?"

"Hugues's kaput. Fee-nee."

"Hung up?"

"I admit, it has its drawbacks."

"I can't get in it, but I could wear it like a hat!" "I caught his eye."

"I didn't think of that. . ."

"I don't have a lot of fun at these parties, but I think I have more fun than I'd have in a revolution."

"I don't know what I would have done without him during my last divorce—I was such a wreck!"

"I don't know what Jim has her on, but it sure gives her a hell of an imagination."

"I don't know, it seems to me he's just explained why he can't stop clutching bottoms as though he were trying to milk them!"

"I don't like religious jokes. . ."

"I doubt it. Anyway, I'll—say, where did this bottle of scotch come from?" "I dunno, but I could eat a whole one right now! Startin' from either end!"

"I dunno, I got a one-track mind—I can't concentrate on two things at once."

"I dunno, I think some old lady made a hole in the fucking bathwater up there or something."

"I forgot to look."

"I hadn't realized your wife had had a caesarian with Mark."

"I haven't seen one of these things in years!"

"I heard him say he was going to do it!"

"I heard though he mighta hung it up."

"I hope I still have some capers."

"I knew they'd get back together. . ."

"I know of course there is a strange contradiction between the discomfort with which such creatures are commonly regarded. . . "

"I know you're the world's most faithful husband, but, hey, if your wife ever gets tired of you, lover. . . "

"I look like Christmas all by myself."

"I loved those kitchen shots, ma'am!"

"I mean, maybe what they were upset about was just the poor treatment or something. . . "

"I once tried to paint that, love's sigh. . . "

"I reckon what always moved me most, eh, since you ask. . . "

"I said, hah!"

"I see. Well, I'm in travel myself."

"I should be grateful, I suppose, that he didn't bray or oink."

"I should be so lucky, Axel!"

"I think he was trying to tear a piece of it off for a souvenir!"

"I think we're almost there. . . "

"I think I just saw that on the screen!"

"I thought he was meant to represent the overturning and misuse of reason . . . "

"I told her I knew where they were, I'd seen them just last week, and she only laughed at me—"

"I want to see the nude man anyway."

"I want to, but I can't!"

"I wasn't talkin' to you."

"I wondered why Talbot kept going back down for a second look!"

"I . . . I was still thinking about Dolph and Louise."

"I—I forget. . . "

"I'll bring you one, Daffie, if you'll promise to stop using your pudendum for an ashtray."

"I'll get it this time, I need one myself."

"I'm going into this with my eye open."

"I'm going to explain it one more time.. ."

"I'm not finished yet!"

"I'm not so dumb I don't see what people think of me, and sometimes it hurts."

"I'm not surprised, that runt was pushing his luck all night."

"I'm ready now."

"I'm sorry about that, Dolph, but if I didn't wear one, I couldn't get into this dress."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, buddy. . ."

"I'm sufferin' from frontline bottle fatigue! Nothin' works good anymore but my right elbow!"

"I'm truly sorry."

"I'm working on it, Mr. Quagg!"

"I've always loved you, I thought you knew. . ."

"I've never saved anything . . . all my—kaff! foo!—life, I'm not going . . . to start now. . ."

"If he doesn't want to get in it, then stick it at the back there, it'll add to the illusion."

"If you wanta see something funny, you should go check Knud out."

"If I had three wishes—or only one—"

"If Vic's brat's around, tell her 'very funny.'"

"Im—kaff! 'foo!—possible!"

"In fact there's something almost beautiful about her life. As with many unhappy lives. . ."

"In the front parlor, Beni. It's a fucking tragedy, man!"

"In the old days they forced the priests to do it as a kind of penance, though later, of course, the practice got misunderstood."

"In the sphere of perfect harmony. . . "

"In Venice. . . "

"Intimate as soap, man. . . "

"Is he here?"

"Is it some kind of joke?"

"Is that fair?"

"Is that what you want, a collection of memories like dead butterflies?"

"Is that where the tall guy drags the dwarf over and swings him between his legs like a croquet mallet?"

"Isn' it?"

"It can't—hack!—be done!"

"It could have been worse."

"It happens to the best of them, you know!"

"It just goes to show. . . "

"It might be catching!"

"It should be easier than this."

"It was strange, but for a moment in there I felt somehow . . . anchored outside time. . . "

"

"It's a convention. Conventions — whoof! — change."

"It's a strange painting, so beautiful in an unearthly kind of way—yet. . . "

"It's all . . . kaff! . . . happening. .."

"It's dark and dangerous out there."

"It's hangin' in the balance!"

"It's like hugging a teddybear, all the girls love it."

"It's like something's . . . taking over inside, some fucking conspiracy. . . "

"It's not easy for her, I suppose, being married to a theologian. . . "

"It's party time, baby, give us a hug!"

"It's still hanging fire."

"It's the second law of thermodynamics, you can't make heat flow from a cooler body to a warmer one without a fucking pump!"

"It's the worst kind of hangover!"

"It's . . . it's going numb on me, Jim."

"J'ai la patte, cassee, bon dieu!"

"Jonathan, you old scoundrel! What have you been up to?"

"Just a strange premonition. . . "

"Just don't turn the other cheek, dear, you'll lose it, too!"

"Just garbage, Zack. . . "

"Just like grammaw used to make! Here, take this one: eat your heart out!"

"Just relax for a moment before you try to get up. . . "

"Keep your eye skinned, Noble."

"Lather, rather."

"Let us see how observant you are. . . "

"Let's get to the bottom of this!" "Like a hairy Valentine!"

"Like a pucker to a pothole, Gerry!" "Like smoked oysters?"

"Like something in a supermarket! Unreal!"

"Like the mandala in that icon of the tortured saint in there."

"Like Dolph, I'll stick with the beer."

"Like Howard's finger, Gerry, I guess I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Lissen! the bride's at a—whaddayacallit?—goddamn partya night before, seen she—"

"Liz's act of course was substantially different. . . "

"Love. Death. Time. Truth and beauty."

"Ma jambe, c'est pas un boulevard, nom de dieu!"

"Mais ils vont m'ecraser ces cons-la!"

"Mais qu'est-ce que je suis venu foutre ici, d'abord?"

"Mavis? She's into those wonky tales of hers again."

"Maybe this'll make up for that scarlet flush we hit on the last one."

"Me neither!"

"Memory may be expunged. . . "

"Menopause. Woody still looks so young." "Merde alors-!"

"Mmm. Right after the teddybear."

"Moo-ooo!"

"My god, can't she even do that by herself anymore?" "My mind's a blank."

"My, how observant you are, Gerald!"

"N'whuzza madder w'your shoulder? Somebody take a bite?"

"Naw! Haw!"

"Naw—hee! hoff!—it's funny, lissen—!"

"Neither. . . "

"New one—?"

"Next it was pingpong and she tried to claim that there were no balls to play with. . . "

"Next thing td it!"

"Next time he does that to you, Wilma, just pinch his pecker—I read about it somewhere, and it works every time!"

"No kidding! Fat Fred? An actor?"

"No kidding, in their tails or in their heads?"

"No kidding, what does she do for an encore?" ,

"No matter what happens, it's always easier if you can share it."

"No noose is good noose!"

"No one ever marries the wrong girl."

"No. Pay attention, Gerald."

"No, a knight."

"No, but—"

"No, it's this guy's partner! The stubby one!"

"No, she left!"

"No, Gerald, that's from some other party—I saw Archie in that group. . . "

"No, I hope it didn't."

"No, I said. . . "

"No? What's wrong with it?"

"Noble knows how to turn a blind eye to trouble."

"Noble's got an eye to the main chance."

"Nom de dieu de nom de dieu de bon dieu de merde de puce. . . "

"Not likely—it's pure aged malt. Must have been Cyril and Peg."

"Not now, Charley. Please."

"Not to mention those valuable pearly white gates, if you don't fall right."

"Not to Dickie."

"Not tonight, son. I'm retired, hadn't you heard?"

"Not yet, thanks. Catch me later."

"Nothing is ever wholly concealed."

"Nothing to worry about. We'll work it out later."

"Nothing wrong with your pipes, baby."

"Now you see it, now, you cunt!"

"Now, don't jump around like that, Howard, or I won't be able to tuck it in!"

"Now, if you don't mind, ladies and gentlemen, your watches. . . "

"Now, where's Hugues?"

"Now, who'll play the heavy?"

"Nude?"

"Of course."

"Oh no! Don't tell me! I bet it's her vaginal muscles!"

"Oh putain! Pouvez pas garer vos pieds ailleurs, non?!"

"Oh! Was that Susanna? I thought. . . " "Oh!"

"Oh. . . ,,

"Oh, is that what he was supposed to be . . . ?"

"Oh, that one—he didn't try, he succeeded."

"Oh, I know, I am a dummy, she was just flattering me, but I needed her, she helped me through some had times. . . "

"Oh, I see, they're like different card suits. . . "

"Once she stuck a long rubbery thing down my throat that quivered and made me throw it all up!"

"Only very careful probing uncovers the subtler influences to be found in suggestion, hatreds, fatigues, innuendos. . . !"

"Oops, sorry!"

"Or anyway you couldn't seem to find them, something like that."

"Or maybe I'd read about it happening to someone else and just borrowed the story. . . "

“

"Or, who knows, an argument with the doctor or the wrong drugs or even just the bill. . . "

"Pardon!" "Pardon?"

"Patient! What's there for an old scumbag like me to be patient for?"

"People marry the wrong people all the time—I should know, I've made one stupid mistake after another."

"Plastic sandwich bags or something. Her hands and feet and even her head—it's spooky, man!"

"Poor Yvonne."

"Pop? Yeah, last I seen he was in the next room there executin' a slide show." "Put this between your legs."

"Quagg's goonsquad, Mee and Hoo—Sin, Prissy Loo, Regina, and the rest of that freaky lot."

"Quel est le con qui me marche dessus?!"

"Really it's all about Roger the singer, Beni, and that's where you come in."

"Really!"

"Reminds me of that young man from Cadiz!"

"Reminds me of the old barrel-shirt punishment for drunks. . . "

"Right in the chest like that, he said!" "Right. . . "

"Roger handled everything, he was a real jewel!"

"Saloperie d'escalier! Je me suis casse le cul . . .!"

"Save your breath!"

"Say, huh! if birds that bring babies re called storks, what're the birds that don't bring 'em?"

"See what, Daddy?"

"She must have a whole jar of hand lotion packed in here, it's thick as transmission grease."

"She must mean that one whose pecker was big in showbizz . . ."

"She only wanted company."

"She powders, and I puff."

"She seemed so lifeless. . . "

"She was badly Bruised and hurt inside, too."

"She was in too bad a mood to think straight, I guess."

"She was the model for Susanna—that painting in the next room."

"She'd not seen the script."

"She'll know what I mean."

"She's all right. Even lucky in a way."

"She's been like that all night."

"She's filled out some since then, of course."

"She's upstairs, I think, Vic."

"Shouldn't that be Keith from Cadiz?"

"Sit down! Sit down!"

"Slide it on there for me."

"So delicate is the balance in one's makeup that what seems but a very slight occurrence may determine the event in conduct!"

"So that was what. . . "

"So this—yuff! huff!—young bull's mountin' one of them heifers after another, see. . . "

"

"So who we headlining now that Vaych is gone?"

"So I tell ya what I want you to do. . . "

"Society's first line of defense is the police."

"Some day! Just you wait and see!"

"Somebody brought it, Fats and Brenda maybe."

"Something that happened. Or maybe didn't happen."

"Sometimes, Gerald, I think beauty is the most frightening thing in the world. . . "

"Sorry if I jumped at you, Vadge, you know how I get when there's a show to put on. . . "

."

"Sounds more to me like Tight Tillie from Brussels!"

"Speakin' a milkin' machines, Earl—haw! —'dja hear 'bout the farmer witha two ole bulls . . . ?"

"Speaking of the, ah, corpus delicti. . . ?"

"Suchness conceals itself from the peeping intellect."

"Swallow it."

"Ta—DAAA—AA—Aaa-aaa . . . !"

"Tell me, Daffie, what's the secret of his success?"

"Teresa?"

"Thanks for . . . helping out—do I owe you any—?"

"That and money, power, status, connections, big cars, a smashing pad, and access to the best dope in the Western World."

"That clock's been stopped for nearly three weeks now, where have you been?"

"That day, I told Ros she should simply sleep it off, and I sent her home with some theater friends."

"That mutht have been pretty!"

"That poor woman. Her face looks scratched away like that painting on your landing."

"That was when Louise got all red in the face and left, and to tell the truth, I was getting a little tired of it myself."

"That's a cute paintjob, funkybuns—but you better watch out someone don't run you up the flagpole!"

"That's because of what Jim did."

"That's better!"

"That's enough now!"

"That's fair, isn't it?"

"That's funny! The clock—!"

"That's me, a very heavy thinker."

"That's no good, Zack."

"That's not a heart, it's a spade."

"That's the kind of story you'd remember. Watch out for the good guys and all that"

"That's true. I think I heard someone else say. . . ." "That's what friends are for, sunshine!"

"The end of patience is the goddamn boneyard, Jim!"

"The essential truth is as untouched by distinctions of the mind, as space is by light and darkness."

"The old Barbarossa syndrome! Aha! The red-folk neurosis!"

"The point of masks is that they are masks."

"The prince of piece."

"The promptuary?"

"The rest is just mechanics, really. . .

"The what—?!"

"The Doc's tole me to stop all drinks 'n so I haven' let a one get pass me all night!"

"Then something happened in the hospital afterwards which no one would talk about. .
."

"Then there are the sick ones like flannelmouth here who try to pretend they don't."

"Then, I didn't tell it."

"There was a man with a harelip once who—"

"There's two sides of the Nile, don't you know, and we took in both of 'em, Iris and me,
but it was, eh, the west side I most—"

"They try to hide it, but they all got a hump hid away somewhere."

"They used to roll 'em down a hill, y'know, until the staves busted—"

"They're carting her corpse around in there like it was Our Lady of the Bleeding
Goddamn Heart."

"They're insured."

"They've turned the interrogation scene into this weird rubber-and-leather number, see.
.."

"This one's about some city all made of ice—like one of those funhouse mirror mazes,
you know. . . "

"Those who kill tend to be about three years younger than those who are killed."

"Too bad."

"Tragic?"

"Tres tres chic!"

"True love is like a light that can never be hidden!"

"Try it and see!"

"Uncle Charley gave it to me."

"Vair's de boose?"

"Very domestic, if you know what I mean!"

"Wait a minute, sweetie, let 'me have a suck on that pretty thing before you take it away."

"Wanna hear me really chop out and cut the buck, Zack, or just noddle around, romantic-like? Hey, Zack?"

"Watch out for the fat lady, she'll wreck your marriage if you give her half a chance."

"Watch out, that's probably what he tells all the girls."

"Watches?"

"We gotta get t'gether 'n play some squash, ole Get."

"We need you for the cracker!"

"We tried to stand on the very spot, but the traffic nearly ran us down."

"We'll use Hugues, give him a new image."

"We're merely the flesh of time, after all, so who knows, cutting through, what we might discover?"

"Well. . . "

"Well, actually, I shouldn't complain, I suppose. . . "

"Well, if it was dead, it ain't no longer! Hot spit!"

"Well, it was the plot of a play. . . "

"Well, it wasn't Tania who—"

"Well, maybe she don't know that."

"Well, what the fuck you lying down here for, man?"

"Well, your balance for starters."

"Well, I—"

"Were you there?"

"Whaddaya talkin' about?"

"What a cute green suit, Patrick! We look like Christmas together!"

"What have I got to lose?"

"What party favors?"

"What time is it, do you know?"

"What you call Dolph's deep-seated analyzing."

"What you need is a good backrub. . ."

"What young man?"

"What I need is a quick kick! And not where I got the last one neither!"

"What . . . time is it?"

"What—?!" "What—?!" "What—?!" "What—?!"

"What? Oh, not with Mark actually—the first one. . ."

"What's ever enough?"

"What's it say? Turn around, lemme see—TIGHT SPLIT END! Ha ha, that's cute!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What's that, Tania, another one of your riddles?"

"What's up with Jim's wife?"

"Whatsat? What's his act? I can do it, gimme a chance!"

"When Hugues ducked, he—ha ha!—ducked his silly French cool all the way down the goddamn stairs!"

"When I heard this one, it was about a young girl named Liz. . ."

"When I leave, I'm always afraid we may never see each other again."

"Where was Fats when Ros's body was found?" "Which saint is that?"

"Who? Brenda and—?"

"Who's tragic?"

"Who's Noble making eyes at now—or eye, rather?" "W hoo . . .!"

"Why did you tear up Mark's picture?"

"Why don't you learn the goddamn language, you ass-eared lump of frog shit?"

"Wonderment. At the awesome workings of man's verse and loveless. . . "

"Yeah, and all packaged up."

"Yeah, he's a natural hooper! Outasight!"

"Yeah, something between a spigot and a gizmo."

"Yeah, sperm—they bear the principle of the soul, some Greek with a beard said so—"

"Yeah, spigoting of the witch, I think that Latin plank-spanker musta forgot me."

"Yeah, that got such a rise . . .!"

"Yeah, that's why modern man is such a fucking disaster—always trying to sublimate!"

"Yeah, there is, they're fulla some asshole's shit." "Yeah, well, he's had a good run."

"Yeah, well, not my cup of tea, as they say."

"Yes! How did you know? In the Navy—"

"Yes. . . "

"Yes, it's the same with my wife."

"Yes, like a wart, like a fever blister."

"Yes, thank you."

"Yes, that plumber fixed it. The new one."

"Yes, that's so."

"Yes, the famous triple tree of Tyburn—nothing there but a busy intersection now. . . "

"Yes, well, you've probably had too many dry martinis. . . "

"Yes, with my'folks. . . "

"Yes, yes, I see . . . and the pose itself. . . ?"

"Yes, I've —heh heh!—had a lot of hang-ups in my day. . . "

"Yet, with that little scratched-out area, an assault on beauty at the same time. . . "

"You almost have to envy her dramatic peaks and troughs—it's as though she has more of a life to live than most of us. . . "

"You already told that one, Charley."

"You asking us or telling us, Soapie?"

"You can always recognize a rationalist. They're all drunks."

"You can have it."

"You don't have to get sarcastic. . . "

"You hangin' out here?"

"You know Hugues?"

"You know, that's funny, I was thinking something like that myself, only about my own childhood."

"You mean, for me? A real part?"

"You mean, like twins and harelips?"

"You mean, something you wished might have happened."

"You remain silent and it speaks, you speak and it is silent. . . "

"You saw that. . . "

"You seen tall, pale, and ruthless lately?"

"You still haven't answered my question, lady. Who or what did that to you?" "You think that's it. . . ?"

"You, too, Daffie."

"You're a fucking ritualist."

"You're all the same—!"

"You're coming around in your old age."

"You're sure we can't help you wash up a few dishes. . . ?"

"You've a wonderful little woman."

"You've been there?"

"You've worked up a very fancy aesthetic, chum, but it's as primitive as a cannibal's!"

"Your one and only!"

"Yuh huh huh!"

"Yuh—'n 'ass what I was gonna tell ya. . . ."

"Yvonne?"