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Coover**

R.H.W. Dillard

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Volume VII, No. 2

Hollins College, Virginia

April, 1970

The Wisdom of The Beast: The Fictions of Robert Coover



Robert Coover is a young American writer at the beginning of his career, the author of two novels (*The Origin of the Brunists* and *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*), a short novel ("The Cat in the Hat for President," an almost prophetic political nightmare which appeared in *New American Review* #4 in 1968), and most recently a collection of shorter pieces, *Pricksongs & Descants: Fictions*. His books have already given us more than a mere signal that Coover is a seriously gifted writer, for they are works of genuine artistic value, of an art which is alive to the day and able to live far beyond that day.

Coover's concerns are those of the major American literary tradition, that of Poe and Melville, Hawthorne and Faulkner, for he seeks in his fiction the truths of the human heart in the labyrinths of a fallen world and of the darkened human

The Hollins Critic

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Published five times a year, in the months of February, April, June, October, and December, by Hollins College, Virginia. Second class postage paid at Roanoke, Virginia. Copyright 1970 by Hollins College, Virginia 24020.

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The Hollins Critic is two dollars a year (\$3.00 in Canada and overseas).

mind. He is alert to the pains and promises of the present without becoming mired in a "realistic" understanding and without succumbing to the temptation to be a fashionable fantasist seeking the easy and dreamy way out of the mazed moment. His imagination rises always from the terrible ambiguities of experience, from Faulkner's "rubble-dross of fact and probability," and he finds in the forms of art a coming to terms with the powerfully creative and destructive force at the source of that experience.

On the dust jacket of *Pricksongs & Descants*, Coover dedicates the book to the Virgin of the Post, a dedication not repeated in the book's interior, lost to library readers and possibly even to the scholars of a future day, a salute to the value of the living and lost moment which is a proper introduction to Coover's fiction in which possibility is as real and as important as fact, in which dream is hopelessly ensnared in reality, in which each moment is capable of infinite foliation:

Once, some time ago and in a distant land, I met a young maiden, known to her tribe as the Virgin of the Post, and she gave to me, amid prurient and mysterious ceremonies, a golden ring. Perhaps it was a local custom, a greeting of sorts. Or perhaps a message, an invitation, a mission even. Some peculiar Moorish device of transport and return. Wand-scabbard. Open-sesame. Who can say? It bears on one edge an indecipherable legend, a single cleft rune, not unlike the maiden's own vanished birthmark, and I am inclined to believe that portentous inscrutability may in fact be the point of it all. Now, to that Virgin, I offer these apprentice calculations of my own, invented under the influence of her gifts, begging her to remember the Wisdom of the Beast: "If I carry the poison in my head, in my tail which I bite with rage lies the remedy."

The classic fairy tale is here made openly inscrutable with its sexuality showing, its "portentous inscrutability" revealed as "the point of it all." The lessons of Kafka, Nabokov and Borges have not been ignored; the symbol, so dear to Joyce and his generation of religious artificers (votaries, in fact, to the religion of art), is as unstable and inscrutable as the world of physical event and human perception which

it is intended to stabilize and explain. Just as Dylan Thomas consciously used the symbols of Freud to defang the Freudians, Coover uses the archetypes of the mythologists (catalogued so handily now by Joseph Campbell) to make his own myths, deeply involved in Christian belief but knowable only in terms of themselves, as portentously inscrutable as experience itself and as safe from catalogues. Like Kafka, Coover details imaginative events with naturalistic precision and a freedom (gained by his simultaneous use of contradictory archetypal patterns as well as simple facts) from the artificially imposed rationalism and easily translatable significances of the symbolic realism of Mann and Joyce. Like Nabokov, he never loses his sense of play, his delight in the game, even as he composes his elaborate textures with the authoritarian discipline of the artist. And like Borges, he is always aware of the limitations of the imagination, that we may mention or allude to any thing, but we may never express it. The Virgin of the Post is well served in the prurient and mysterious tales of *Pricksongs & Descants* and by the novels too, all of which are ever mindful of the Wisdom of the Beast, of the enraging and painful complexity of being, of the bond of flesh and spirit, mind and matter, good and evil, death and life.

I.

In his fictions, long and short, Coover has always been primarily concerned with the power of the imagination and its inextricable involvement with religious and sexual urgings, not in the argumentative chicken-egg primacy sense of Freud and Jung, but with an understanding of how they are all one, all manifestations of the principle of growth at the center of all being, the continual motion flowing from the universal's love of the particular. And he is as aware of the danger inherent in that power as of its creative and moral potential. In *The Origin of the Brunists*, he approaches the force of sex and the imagination in the birth of a religious sect; the blood and violence on the Mount of Redemption in a night of religious frenzy are as essential to the creative union of the lovers in the novel as the Beast's rage is to the curing of its poisonous head. In *The Universal Baseball Association*, he celebrates the reality of the living moment in all its inscrutability even as he admits the danger of the imagination to the dwellers in that moment. In both books, he cares truly for the creation with all its madness and disaster.

The Origin of the Brunists won the William Faulkner Foundation Prize as an outstanding American first novel in 1966, and it is a large and ambitious work, taking as its subject the terrible union of spirit and flesh. The novel is, in matter and manner, an elaborate texture of light and dark; it is at once tragic and comic, realistic and fantastic, genuinely religious and as genuinely bawdy, always meaningful and never sententious. In it good and evil, right and wrong, like flesh and spirit, are indissolubly one; villain and hero are one and the same, wise man and fool, good man and bad, saint and sinner. The nature and course of development of the new religion, the Brunist movement, is not shaped by any one man, but by an entire community, believers and non-believers, friends and enemies. The newspaperman, Justin "Tiger" Miller, who manipulates the movement for his own ends and who is in many ways both its tempting Satan and its Judas, has as much to do with the movement's growth as does its prophet, Giovanni Bruno, or any of his disciples. And, too, Miller is no emblem of evil; he does both right and wrong to the Brunists, and he finds his

own salvation in his disbelief even as the movement finds much of its energy and impetus in that same disbelief. The origin of the Brunists is a dark night of the soul in truth for everyone in West Condon, the small mining town where the events of the novel take place, and everyone must find his own way through the darkness to the light — the townspeople, the Brunists, and Tiger Miller alike.

The plot of the novel is too complex to summarize successfully, but two of its strands seem most important to its primary concerns and offer a way of discussing the book briefly. They are the interrelated stories of the Brunists themselves and of Tiger Miller. The Brunists are the most unusual product of a mine disaster in West Condon, a small mountain town as unfruitful up to this time as its name perhaps suggests. A mine collapses, killing ninety-seven miners, among them the Nazarene preacher, Ely Collins, who is found with a pencilled note clutched in his hand:

I dissobayed and know I must Die. Listen allways to the Holy
Spirit in your Harts Abide in Grace. We Will stand Together befor
Our Lord the 8th of

This enigmatic note (which probably refers to the Christian day of Resurrection and Last Judgment, for it was on the eighth day after Christ's entry into Jerusalem that he rose from the grave), coupled with Collins' having seen what everyone remembers as a white bird in the mine the day before the disaster and a general belief that something mysterious happened to the trapped miners before they died, leads to religious hysteria in the town and especially among the members of Collins' congregation. When Giovanni Bruno, a shy and poetic Italian who has always been an outsider among the miners and the townspeople, survives the accident, he becomes a rallying point for the religiously aroused. His ordeal in the mine has damaged him mentally as well as physically, and he admits to being a prophet and a supernatural being. The disciples who flock to him are: many of the Nazarenes who bring to the new religion a primitive and fundamentalist Christianity, Eleanor Norton who brings a Blavatskian mysticism and her supernatural correspondent Demiron, Ralph Himebaugh who brings astrology and the elaborate mathematical systems of numerology, and a scattering of other religiously disturbed people who bring only their superstitions and fears and a need for something in which to believe.

The central tenet of the Brunists is that Collins' note is apocalyptic and that the end of the world is fast approaching, due in fact on the eighth of the next month. They plan to meet on the Mount of Redemption, as they have renamed a local trysting place known as Cunt Hill to the cruder inhabitants of the town. On the night of their meeting, their religious intensity and the sexual tensions which have been heightened in the town by the shock of the disaster and the fear which followed it fuse in a violent and orgiastic riot in which the only Armageddon the Brunists find is that of the perverse explosion of repressed sexuality and the resulting pain and death. Among those killed is Marcella Bruno, Giovanni's sister, who dies a martyr to the folly and lust of the world she was trying to reject in a dream of purity (as she rejected the sexual advances of Miller earlier, a rejection paradoxically of both temptation and salvation). The Brunists gain a martyr, then, from their horrible meeting with the Lord on Cunt Hill. The "White Bird of Glory" led them only to her sacrifice to their imagined God, and they shift the focus of their tarnished belief away from the prom-

Two Sisters

In a shop with nothing to sell,
We patterned baroque lives.
There were chain letters,
Promising millions of dollars.
We awaited a furled success
From the valentine lottery.
We would prick our heads with antique hairpins,
And fall into magical naps.
We dusted the shop
And sprinkled rhinestones along the aisles.
Currants would rattle in the scones and crumpets,
We put in our teatime mouths.
We tried to deny the stuffed birds in bell jars,
And all the rusted horses behind the counters,
But our words were garbled with crumbs,
And out of our pregnant fantasies we drifted
Like the particles that settle
On the untidy floors of asylums and rest homes.

— SUSAN HANKLA

ise of the future to the ritualistic re-enactment of the past. Their belief miscarries into a formalized religion, complete with dogma and a hierarchy, one of dark ritual and dead faith.

If this were all, the novel would have considerable impact but little of the portentous inscrutability which is the point of it all. But it is not all; there is another martyr on the Mount of Redemption that night—Tiger Miller, the Satan and Judas of the Brunists, whose first name is that of the early Christian martyr Justin. Miller is beaten viciously in the mad riot on the dark hill, and as he falls for the last time, he sees a miscarriage in progress, "a woman giving birth: her enormous thighs were spread, drawn up in agony, and, staring up at them, he saw the blood burst out." After his fall and his moment of bloody vision, "Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward."

But Miller's reward is in the living world, not the world of the mad Brunists in the night. A rake and rascal, seducer of the innocent, Miller has fallen in love with his latest mistress, a nurse who is a remarkably sane and healthy sexual creature and whom Miller calls Happy Bottom. She has been writing him a series of comic "Last Judgments" which turn the religious intensity of the Brunists upside-down and give a proper perspective to both their madness and their serious yearning for belief. (These are, by the way, the best and funniest parables to come along since the amazing "Very Tales" in Charles Simmons' novel, *Powdered Eggs*.) And in their love making, Miller and his Happy Bottom have used the language of religion as the language of sexual love-play, for the act of sex bears the intensity of religious feeling and creates

the love that should be at the center of religion. She nurses Miller back to health and is pregnant by him; they plan to remain in West Condon until their child is born, bringing love and new life into that lost and fallen world. The Judas becomes the source of new life, risen from his nightmare of betrayal and death as surely as Christ himself. In bed, "nailed to the old tree of life and knowledge" one night, she murmurs one last "Last Judgment." In it the trial proceedings of the Last Judgment are slowed to a near standstill by "the absurd intricacies of human ambiguity," and God and the Angels withdraw from the whole process:

The only trouble was that by that time the enormity of the support organization and the goal hunger of the participants were such that the absented Divine Substances were never missed. The proceedings, indulging the everlasting lust for perpetuity and stage directions, dragged on happily through the centuries, the only consolation for those who might have guessed the true state of affairs being that which the risen Jesus centuries ago offered to his appalled disciples . . .

"Come and have breakfast."

The novel ends on that expression, comic and completely serious, of the spirit's place in the waking world. If we are all Noahs, as Tiger Miller suggests, living for the excitement of righteous destruction, then we are also Noahs who send out white doves and who land to repopulate the earth after its destruction. Jesus told the Sadducees clearly that "God is not God of the dead but of the living," and *The Origin of the Brunists* reasserts that truth; the novel's triumph is one of life, of the spirit incarnate in the flesh.

II.

The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop. is, as its title suggests, more openly parabolic, admittedly a game, albeit a significant one. Like Borges' character Herbert Quain, Coover could "lay claim in this novel . . . to the essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium." But, of course, the tedium is thoroughly dispelled by the brightness and vividness of Coover's language, by the sprightliness of his wit, and by the complexity of his game with the reader which opens in on itself like the wonders of a Chinese puzzle. The novel tells the story of an accountant, J. Henry Waugh, who yearns for a clarity and an order not available to him in his ordinary life. The precision of chess appeals to him, but he finally finds it to be a poor defense against the formless flow of time, mere "nameless motion." Baseball is more satisfying to him because of its order, its adherence to strict and complex rules, and its elaborate records in which no event is ever lost. But baseball is too slow because it depends upon actual physical action, so Waugh invents his own baseball league in which the games are played out on his kitchen table with the use of dice and an enormous set of probability tables. Waugh's game is at the center of Coover's games.

At first glance, the story is the familiar one of a small and lonely man's inability to cope with circumstance, of his slow surrender to his own loneliness and insignificance, to madness, to the lures of his own quirky imagination. The tale has been

Robert Coover

Robert Coover was educated at Indiana University and the University of Chicago, and he has since taught at Bard College and at the Iowa Writers Workshop. He has published poems and stories in such magazines as *Noble Savage*, *Evergreen Review*, *New American Review*, *Olympia* (Paris) and *Playboy*, and his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, won the 1966 William Faulkner Foundation Award as an outstanding first novel of that year. W. R. Robinson, the chairman of the Award Committee, wrote of the book: "This is a solid, masculine, bountiful art, a novel tough-minded in its vision and robust in its manner, a triumph of intelligence and a courageous heart, of a youthful spirit and a seasoned insight."

Mr. Coover is now living with his wife and two daughters in England, where he is working on his third novel.

told well by Gogol and Poe and Kafka, and less well by many others; its concerns are those of Nabokov's *The Defense* and Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." And it is that: J. Henry Waugh plays his game and lives his life alone. But he is drawn to others as all men must be. At first the game enables him to enliven his life sexually as he plays a bedded game of in and out with the local aging B-girl Hettie ("Oh, that's a game, Henry! *That's really a great old game!*"). But then the failure to share the game with his only friend, Lou Engel, and an incident in the game itself combine to shatter Waugh's grip on both the game and his life. One of his imaginary players, Damon Rutherford, the best young player in the game, perhaps the best ever, comes to be for Henry the spirit of the game and the center of his imaginative life. But the dice roll out a cruel end for young Damon; he is killed by a ball pitched by young Jock Casey. Waugh submits to the rules of his game, but the center falls out of his life. He stops following the rules correctly, and he stops keeping proper records, even as his outer life falls apart (he loses his friend, his job, even Hettie). He rigs games to punish Casey's team, and finally in his despair he kills Jock Casey with a revengeful turn of the dice in which chance has no hand.

In his darkness, he finds a new light by turning away from orderly events to the embalmed order of history; his alter-ego Barney Bancroft writes an imaginary history of the UBA and is elected chancellor of the league. But even that light proves illusory. In the closing chapter of the novel, the league has continued for a hundred more seasons; fact has become legend; knowledge has become myth; Henry Waugh has disappeared completely into his game, and only the game itself remains, a ritual without purpose, logic or coherence.

At this level of reading, Waugh has gone mad and lost himself in a game which has itself gone mad (the crowd even sounds "a little mad . . . Like a big blind beast"), but Coover has not finished playing his game with the reader. Two sets of initials in the novel supply the necessary invitations to further play, those of the Universal Baseball Association and of J. Henry Waugh himself.

The UBA may be seen as an allegorical representation of the USA, America of the early sixties. The events of the novel fall loosely into place: Damon Rutherford

as the slain John Kennedy, whose death certainly darkened the American consciousness; Swance Law, a southerner, a real pro, the best pitcher in the league after Rutherford, a crude man who for all his ability cannot supply the spirit needed by the UBA, as a caricature of Lyndon Johnson. Read this way, the novel presents a bleak view of an America which has lost direction and has declined into madness, into a crazed re-enactment of the loss of the leader over and over again. Assassination follows assassination; Barney Bancroft is killed, and revolutionary forces transform the league. A grotesque mysticism replaces Waugh's dream of order and reasoned progress, the American dream. But this dark vision, too, is not the end of Coover's game.

From the psychological and the political, the reader follows Coover into the religious levels of his thinking, and it is there that his celebration of the day occurs. J. Henry Waugh's initials are JHW; with the last letter of his name, they form the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew symbol or substitute for the ineffable name of God, JHWH, "I am," "I will be," the familiar Jehovah of the King James Bible. His best friend, Lou Engel, is as clearly Lucifer Angel. Henry invites Lou to play the game with him, and Lou, who does not understand the game or its meaning to Henry, tries to play but only confuses Henry's already upset world. Their game ends with Henry's curse ringing in the air ("*You clumsy goddamn idiot!*") and with Henry's decision to sacrifice Jock Casey to his own rage. Casey's initials indicate, of course, that he is the Christ of the game as well as the unwilling Judas who kills Damon. The murder makes Henry vomit, but it also gives him "a deep deep sleep."

This novel is, then, a *Paradise Lost* and possibly even a *Paradise Regained*. Once Henry told his friend Lou that "To be good, a chess player . . . had to convert his field to the entire universe, himself the ruler of that private enclosure — though from a pawn's-eye view, of course, it wasn't an enclosure at all, but, infinitely, all there was." In the last chapter of the novel, we take a pawn's-eye view of the UBA, all there is. The scene is Damonsday one hundred seasons after Damon Rutherford's death, a ritual re-enactment of the deaths of Damon and Jock Casey, an annual affair, a religious and sexual mass to be participated in by the assembled crowd. The imagined players act out an imagined pair of deaths which may in fact prove fatal to them. They don't even know if there is a score keeper, but they continue the game whether they believe they'd "have to play the game as if there were," or simply that you can't quit the game because the game and life are one. Whether they are Damonists who believe in the old covenant of order and reason or Caseyists who believe in the freedom of the new dispensation, they continue to play. And the answer they find in their play that gives value to their lives is the same as Christ's invitation to breakfast in Happy Bottom's "Last Judgment," a faith in life itself.

It does not matter whether Henry Waugh is mad or sane at the novel's end, or, for that matter, whether he is even alive. His imagined world is alive, and the young player who must enact the part of Damon realizes the truth: "It's not a trial . . . It's not even a lesson. It's just what it is." And the ball he holds "is hard and white and alive in the sun." The last chapter is told in the present tense, and the reality of that ball outweighs all of the madness and suffering which have preceded its appearance in the novel. The parable asserts its own reality, its own portentous

Books by Robert Coover

THE ORIGIN OF THE BRUNISTS

New York: Putnam, 1966. \$6.95.
 Don Mills, Ontario: Longmans, Green, 1966. \$7.95.
 London: Arthur Barker, 1967. 30/.
 New York: Ballantine, 1967. 95¢. (pa.)
 London: Panther Books, 1968. 7/6. (pa.)

THE UNIVERSAL BASEBALL ASSOCIATION, INC. J. HENRY WAUGH, PROP.

New York: Random House, 1968. \$4.95.
 New York: New American Library, 1969. 75¢ (pa.)

PRICKSONGS & DESCANTS: FICTIONS

New York: Dutton, 1969. \$5.95.

inscrutability, not Waugh's nor Coover's, nor even yours and mine. It moves within itself from the reality of the senses (Henry's world) to that of reason (the UBA-USA allegory) to the fullest reality of the imagination, the religious affirmation of the living fact, beyond the mere senses, beyond orthodox belief and even reason, the reality of that baseball "hard and white and alive in the sun."

III.

The epigraphs to Robert Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* reveal his usual delighted concern with the pairing of the strivings of flesh and mind: from John Cleland, "*He thrusts, she heaves,*" and from Paul Valéry, "*They therefore set me this problem of the equality of appearance and numbers.*" Pricksongs and descants, indeed, but which is which? Or are they one? Coover again writes of the mystery of unity, of the strained creative and destructive intercourse of imagination and reality.

One section of the book, "Seven Exemplary Fictions," is dedicated to Cervantes. In that dedication, Coover states what he believes to be the central value of Cervantes' art:

For your stories also exemplified the dual nature of all good narrative art: they struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life and sought to synthesize the unsynthesizable, sallied forth against adolescent thought-modes and exhausted art forms, and returned home with new complexities.

Coover notes further that today we are, like Cervantes, at the end of a literary era, that our literature has become exhausted. But where Cervantes rejected Romance, we must reject Realism, the exhausted and exhausting literature of the Sartres and Mailers, the literature of a begrimed and spiritless world. We must use "the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history. But these probes are above all . . . challenges to the assumptions of a dying age, exemplary adventures of the Poetic Imagination,

high-minded journeys toward the New World and never mind that the nag's a pile of bones."

Coover is, then, reasserting the Romantic's faith in the creative power of the imagination, but with an important difference. He has, as I said earlier, learned the lessons of his masters, one of which is the danger of the freed imagination, a lesson that Blake knew and that Poe and Melville, Kafka, Borges and Nabokov were to repeat for those who would hear. The murderous and idealistic narrator of "Ligeia," mad Ahab, caught K, Humbert Humbert and Kinbote dreaming of an immortality akin to that of Yeats' golden bird — these are the victims and villains of the freed imagination, destroyed by a perversion of the very force of life as brutal and as thorough as cancer. Coover knows that lesson well and the cure; in these fictions, he journeys toward the New World, but he is ever mindful both that the nag is a bag of bones and that the New World may prove to be a nightmare without the necessary love and craft which are essential to life and art.

The imagination is always eager to enter the world, to people it with its own creations which, like those of nature, proliferate with fantastic abandon. The artist, as the type of the imaginative man, must control the combinations tumbling in his mind, yearning for the life of the world. The imagination is continually getting out of hand in these stories — not Coover's, but his characters'. Where Poe's madmen imagine a coherent, if mad and deadly world, in Coover's stories many imaginers, mad and sane, imagine the same world, the incoherent world in which they live, reality itself. In it, places change underfoot, and events shift direction faster than any single eye or mind can follow; time stammers to keep up. Some of the stories are simpler and more conventional; "In a Train Station" is ritualistic and coherent because its imaginer is out of sight like Henry Waugh, closer to the imagining consciousness controlling Kafka's tales, and "Morris in Chains" is closer to the neo-allegorical imaginings of Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy*. But in "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," "The Magic Poker," "The Elevator," "The Babysitter," and the concluding "The Hat Act," more than one imagination stirs events and shapes meaning. In these stories Coover is moving into new ground, a relativistic fiction beyond Durrell's Alexandrian beginnings. The nightmare has always entered the world in fiction, and the daydreams of heart and will, but never have daydream and nightmare, desire and idle speculation, all entered so thoroughly and so at once.

An example: in the story "The Babysitter," a group of characters, a father, a mother, two children, a teenage babysitter, her boyfriend and his buddy, all unleash upon the world and themselves all of the cheap and idle imaginings of their minds, all of the stereotyped happenings to which babysitters are prey in magazines and movies. All of these happenings occur at once; they contradict each other, but somehow they are all accommodated. The babysitter is spied upon in her bath, tickled, fondled, kissed, raped, murdered, even while she manages accidentally to kill the children she is there to protect. The mother alone is not involved in the mayhem, but only because her sexuality and imagination are focussed on her tight girdle and the men at the party she is attending. She gets the last word in the story, after hearing on a television news show of the amazing disaster at her home:

Electricity Is Funny!

Would Edison get the blues if he blew a fuse?
No! So why cry if your light bulbs die?
Don't get bugged by a plug if it burns up your rug!
Laugh! It's a joke when the wires start to smoke!
No need to frown if the house burns down,
Just take it in stride with remarks that are snide.
For a joke that is rich, cop a look at a switch
Or just for a gag put a bulb in a bag.
Electricity's a riot!

The End
— JOHN CURRIER

"What can I say, Dolly?" the host says with a sigh, twisting the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers. "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV, the news is over, and they're selling aspirin. "Hell, I don't know," she says. "Let's see what's on the late late movie."

Hell, indeed, but what else? At least she has a solace Job never had — more freed imaginings on the late late show.

There are other complex and amazing stories, too many even to mention: the terrifying suddenness of "The Marker," "A Pedestrian Accident" in which the fear of getting run over by a truck is pressed to its ultimate and horrifyingly funny extremes, the beautiful "J's Marriage," the wildly comic and exemplary "The Hat Act." But there is a unity to them all. The cover of the book bears a bright circle of deadly sins by Hieronymus Bosch, an appropriate gathering of people damning themselves by distortions of desire and imagination. But in the center, with light flowing out from him, the wounded and risen Christ blesses the world and redeems it. The love for the world and its vain and foolish inhabitants which is at the vital center of Coover's art redeems the chaos in his fictive worlds, too. His is the controlling consciousness behind all these wild imaginings, giving them form, guiding them to the new world, "hard and white and alive in the sun." He knows the healing love at the bottom of each poisonous act, and by the harmonious communion of artist and reader imagining a world together, we, Coover and you and I, may share in the love that makes even the fall fortunate, that reveals the New World "beyond appearances . . . beyond mere history."

—R. H. W. DILLARD

The Idea of Conversation in Kalamazoo

For Dan Traister

We watch the pale flowers rising
out of books, their roots
deep in the river surrounding
all things, an ancient picture:
a lady-in-waiting rises, parts
the tapestry, turns and pulls
threads out of our eyes,
unraveling the room dark.
Outside, under the streetlights,
a truck, big with the country
on its back, tumbles through
midnight, moving to the sea.
Caught on long strings, we struggle
to continue talking, shuttling
in a tired loom, happy,
deep in the chairs of old kings.

—JAMES TIPTON

PAID SECOND CLASS POSTAGE at Roanoke, Virginia
