

All Tomorrow's Parties

Presented at the ELO_AI Conference at Brown University dedicated to Robert Coover on Friday, June 4, 2010.

(Velvet Underground song "All Tomorrow's Parties" is playing as people filter into the auditorium.)

SCOTT begins reading some serious sounding academic prose from the Robert Coover Criticism generator (<http://retts.net/coover/cooverscript.html>).

ROB: Testing, testing. Check, check, check. Excuse me Scott, just checking the levels. Is this thing on?

SCOTT: Rob, I'm getting started here, do you mind?

ROB: Ok Scot. You mind starting again?

SCOTT continues with a sentence or two. **ROB** interrupts to question a point of grammar. **SCOTT** starts again, irritated.

ROB: Hey Scott, I've been meaning to ask you, what's up with the title of your talk? Does it having something to with that William Gibson novel?

SCOTT: Which one?

ROB: *All Tomorrow's Parties.*

SCOTT: Ah, the truth is I haven't read it. It's more like the Velvet Underground song.

ROB: "All Tomorrow's Parties."

SCOTT: That's right.

ROB: But it's sort of a depressing song.

SCOTT: The truth is I just sort of liked the title. I thought it would be a good way to frame a talk about the early days of the ELO, and the, well, the gatherings, the parties, the live events, the festivals and cabarets from which the ELO itself was born.

ROB: So it has nothing to do with *Gerald's Party*, Robert Coover's 1986 novel?

SCOTT: To be honest I still haven't read that one.

ROB: Well you really should. Joseph McElroy describes it as a nightmare symposium of all of our awful parties, which only Coover could have recycled into a fiction that goes too far— a wonderfully uncompromising trip.

SCOTT: That sounds great, I'll really have to—

ROB: While Michael Malone says that it's something that Agatha Christie on hallucinogens might have dreamed as murder mystery comedy, and if Freud and the Marx Brothers brought it to the burlesque stage, with additional

dialogues by Beckett, sets by Dali, casting by Bergen and Pynchon and casting notes by Sartre—

SCOTT: Wow. That sounds awesome. I'll read that. That reminds me, though, the complicating factor in this talk is that John also asked me to be the seeded speaker for this session which is the sort of celebration of Coover, the bawdy, demonic, paradoxical, and finely polished vintage American novelist Coover, who has been many things to many people, in particular people in our field.

ROB: It just occurred to me that a lot of what we've been saying sounds like it came off the back of a dust jacket.

SCOTT: Rob, we're already a couple of minutes into the talk now, do you mind—?

ROB: By all means.

SCOTT: Well it is a great honor and pleasure to be here in Providence today at Brown University, or as I like to think of it, the house that Bob built.

ROB: I was under the impression that the University was actually built by the Brown family, or technically, by the slave laborers that the family owned and on which they built their fortune.

SCOTT: Ok, Rob, listen—

ROB: I'm just saying.

SCOTT: Nicholas Brown, the university's namesake, was in fact an abolitionist.

ROB: But the buildings were built by slaves. I'm just saying—

SCOTT: Ok. As I was saying— it's a pleasure to be here because the ELO was founded here, more or less by chance, in 1999. In his infinite wisdom and demonstrating his characteristic taste, humor, and foresight Robert Coover had just selected the hypertext novel *The Unknown* the cowinner of the 1999 trAce/AltX hypertext competition, and invited me along with William Gillespie and Dirk Stratton here to Brown for the "Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature Conference."

ROB: I almost won that award too, for the Marsha Project.

SCOTT: That's right.

ROB: I was here too.

SCOTT: You were, along with a bunch of other e-writers and critics — people like Stephanie Strickland, Michael Joyce, MD Coverley, Jay Bolter, Nick Montfort, Stuart Moulthrop, and Bobby Arellano. Of course, at the time, we in the Unknown didn't know much about the field at all, so we probably weren't as impressed as we should have been at the time. Coover's co-organizer of the conference and friend Jeff Ballowe was sort of a bigwig in the technology industry, and he had brought along a bunch of technology industry folks, ranging from Microsoft people to the Marc Canter, the guy who started Macromedia. The idea I guess was that the writers and the technology industry people would interface and something interesting might happen — new platforms for literature or something.

ROB: And how did that go?

SCOTT: Well, it was a complicated mix. Coover told us that some publishing industry people would be there too, so we spent all of the award money purchasing bottles of expensive liquor, top shelf stuff well beyond our means. We planned to throw a party for all the book people, ply them with expensive liquor, and talk them into publishing our book, *The Unknown Anthology*.

ROB: And how did that work out?

SCOTT: Well, Coover put us up in a nice suite at the Inn at Brown, and we got a bunch of publishing people good and drunk. Somebody rolled a few numbers and passed them around and everybody got kind of loud, talking about the future of American literature and what not.

ROB: Did you get any offers?

SCOTT: Oh no, nobody was interested in publishing the book. But it was a good party. Only trouble is Jay Bolter and his wife were in the room next door so the party ended rather badly with Mrs. Bolter at the door in her curlers. There were a lot of icy stares the next morning in the piano room while Bolter gave the plenary.

ROB: Uh-oh.

SCOTT: We were sort of the barbarians at the gate. But Coover didn't mind. That afternoon I was sitting at the final banquet with Coover and Ballowe and Jeff asked how I thought these two groups, the writers and technologists might work together to advance these new forms of literature. It seemed obvious to me —this was the height of the Internet boom and these guys were

basically printing money — I suggested that the technologists could use some of that money to support the efforts of the writers via a nonprofit organization, something like an Academy of American Poets for electronic literature. Surprisingly, Jeff thought this was a good idea. He said that if I'd write a business plan, with Coover's input and advice, he would try to raise money for it. So after the Unknown finished our east coast tour, I tried to work up a kind of plan. Deena Larsen had set up the Cybermountain symposium in Colorado and I brought a draft of the plan with me, and got some feedback and ideas from people like her, Margie, Stephanie, Rob Swigart on how such a nonprofit might fit in with the existing e-lit ecosystem.

ROB: An academy of American e-literates.

SCOTT: Mind you I was a grad student in fiction writing and contemporary American literature who should have been working on finishing my dissertation, but I cashed in some stock options I had from About.com to support myself for a few months. Coover lined up a number of forward-thinking writers to serve on a literary advisory board. We finished the plan and the next thing you knew it, I was doing teleconferences with captains of Internet industry. Ballowe talked Robert Ziff into donating seed money, Bill Wadsworth, the executive directory of the Academy of American Poets signed onto the board along with a number of e-writers, publishers and industry types, and within about six months I was the executive director of a newly minted nonprofit organization. We were working to get programs like awards, a directory, and outreach events off the ground at the same time as we were desperately trying to raise money to set up a basic organizational infrastructure.

ROB: Say Scott, I don't mean to interrupt but I notice that you didn't bring Jill with you here today.

SCOTT: She would have liked to have been here, Rob, but we couldn't find a babysitter.

ROB: Oh that's right, I nearly forgot what happened the last time you got a babysitter.

SCOTT: Yeah, things got a little complicated.

ROB: What was it that actually happened?

SCOTT: Well you never know what can happen with a babysitter. She might, you know go through your underwear drawer and pull things out, or invite a boyfriend over, or get into some kind of trouble while bathing the children, or she herself might take a bath in your tub and you might walk in on her, and with her boyfriend there, on your living room couch, watching television as they struggle to unhook and unzip or rehook and rezip things and the whole thing, I find, can just be terribly awkward and leave you with lost of explaining to do or lots of things that just forever remain unexplained. It can make for a real mess. And you can never be sure which version of the narrative is real and which is imaginary and there are some sordid subtexts there that we just don't want to explore.

ROB: Hey Scott, what is a "pricksong" anyway?

SCOTT: Hmm — It's a well, ah . . .

ROB: I didn't think those things could sing.

SCOTT: No Rob, a pricksong is music written, or noted, with dots or points.

ROB: I had a completely different picture in my head.

SCOTT: Let's not go there.

ROB: You were saying about the ELO?

SCOTT: Well we set up a little office in Ravenswood, Chicago in an old factory loft above a precision gear factory and went to work. We organized a series of events to serve as fund-and-awareness raisers. A lot of our work at that time was about raising public awareness of the fact that e-lit existed and that some of the work was interesting. We wanted to develop a platform for writers to interact with a larger cultural context. In Chicago, you'll remember, we were also trying to develop a local context. In those early days of the ELO, you'll remember, a lot of my friends and family thought I was insane to be wasting my time on this thing. In that first year or so, it looked like a real long shot, but I figured, I might as well step up to the plate and swing.

(BASEBALL BIT)

(Stadium noises. NOTE: DURING THIS BIT, **ROB** SHOULD JUST DO WHATEVER BASEBALL PATTERN HE IS MOVED TO DO.)

ROB: We'll we're here at Brown University Memorial Stadium in Providence Town and Scott Rettberg is really struggling to put together a presentation that both pays tribute to the great American novelist and electronic literature fairy godfather Robert Coover. That's right, Bob, Rettberg's had a tough time connecting with the ball this season, hasn't exactly been an MVP performance. Well you know the old slugger has had a lot on his plate, between the exhibition games he's been putting on out there in the Scandinavian leagues. That's right Bob he's been putting up some impressive numbers in European play but you can't be sure that will translate back into an impressive performance here in National league play. Casey's winding up for the first pitch . . .

SCOTT: Locally in Chicago, people like you and Rick Valicenti lent a lot of support, both moral and material, such as the development of the ELO logo, font and identity set.

ROB: He took a good cut at that one but tipped it off over the backstop. Casey's taking signals from Mcaffree, looks like it might be a slider.

SCOTT: We lined up a series of events. Our first big event, GiG 1.0, in December 1999, was actually the brainchild of Bob's son, Roderick, who I'd met up with in Chicago after Bob encouraged me to look him up. We got together Rod, Kurt Heintz of the e-poets network, Wittig, Joe Tabbi, and basically all our Chicago friends and put together an electronic literature extravaganza at DeadTech gallery, an old loft space in Logan Square. When we got to the space the day before event, we found a large, empty room. Rod took out a sketchpad and paper, took some measurements, and sent us off to buy the lumber. Over the next 24 hours we built a stage and a hanging stand for a projector, and some booths for video installations. We bought a case of wine and a keg of beer.

ROB: I think that entire keg of beer cost as much as one round of Hansa in Norway.

SCOTT: The event turned out great. There was a reading of *the Unknown*, Newspoetry readings, Bobby Arellano spinning us through *Sunshine 69*, e-poets beamed in over old-fashioned videophones from New York and Seattle, Rod Coover and Ben Chang showing their films and installations, folk music from Paul Kotheimer, poetry videos, and DJ Pancake's Brazilian rhythms. The night ended in the wee hours with Dirk Stratton reading of Samuel Beckett's *Rockabye*. We modeled the event on the sort of electronic cabarets Coover had famously been organizing each year here at Brown. That first GiG wasn't just a terrific launch for the ELO – it really created a sense of community in Chicago. People from a number of different arts communities in the city turned up, and by putting electronic literature in a context with other related art forms, including literary art, new media art and performance, we showed that this

thing wasn't existing in a vacuum. We had begun to create a cultural context and a community.

ROB: And you say Joe Tabbi was there among the hipsters.

SCOTT: Joseph Tabbi of *ebr*, yes.

ROB: As I recall, he was tight end on the Chicago Bears, back in the glory years.

SCOTT: He was first introduced to me as a scholar and writer just like the rest of us. I had no idea about his football past.

ROB: Gloomy Joe of the Chicago Bears.

SCOTT: Well now that you mention it, at the time he was quite skeptical about hypertext. He was afraid that we would lose something in the transition from print to screen.

ROB: A little mechanical, Gloomy Joe, he always played by the book. But if he had drilled it often enough, there was nobody better. I remember that game against the Patriots in '92. The same play over and over again, Statue of Liberty off the T-formation. It was a slaughter, touchdown after touchdown after touchdown. Always the same little dance in the end zone, three hops and a moonwalk. He was an all star until that sad day when they broke his pattern, disrupted his rhythm, threw him off his game.

SCOTT: Are you talking about postmodernism?

ROB: Somebody shouted "Offsides!" and that just broke his concentration. Broke the man.

SCOTT: He was a big fan of the fixity of the book, but I think we gradually brought him around.

ROB: Whatever happened to Gloomy Joe of the Chicago Bears? Last I heard he was killed in some labor unrest in Chicago.

SCOTT: No, Joe became the president?

ROB: Even worse. In this economy, who would want to be president? Not to mention that oil mess in the gulf.

SCOTT: of the ELO. As I was saying about the events in the early days — we also lined up a couple of events in the summer of 2000 in New York and Seattle. The idea of the two events was to raise money for the organization, while bringing together the "digerati" and the "literati." Gene DeRose, who at the time was the CEO of Jupiter, had made a generous donation to fund these fundraisers. We had some mixed results there. Seattle was sort of a bust. Richard Bangs, who was writing for Slate at the time, hosted a party with some ELO folks and a crowd of Microsoft millionaires. We had readings in his basement and made a pitch upstairs. The Microsoft millionaires had a great time at the party, but they weren't all that interested in e-lit. We didn't even cover the expenses for the party.

ROB: BASEBALL PATTTER.

SCOTT: The only two positive outcomes were a few good readings and a meeting between the Unknown and the Invisibles. Oh, and I did get invited back to give a presentation for the Microsoft e-book group.

ROB: How did that turn out?

SCOTT: That was a huge disaster Rob. I didn't have a car at the time, so I took the Blue Line on the El to O'Hare. Believe it or not, I missed my flight because somebody jumped on the tracks in front of the train. So I missed the meeting with Microsoft due to that weird twist of fate.

ROB: Some literary patriot committed suicide in order to prevent the ELO from joining in an evil alliance with Microsoft.

SCOTT: I suspect the man was simply depressed. Microsoft did like some of the ideas from the ELO proposal. They cribbed a paragraph or two for the announcement of their \$100,000 ebook prize, though they never gave a cent to the ELO. Ultimately this is probably a good thing. The ELO would not have been the same if all electronic literature were in Microsoft ebook format.

ROB: And how was the Big Apple? Crisp and fresh, or rotten to the core?

SCOTT: New York was phenomenal — there was a great alignment of the stars for that event. Bill Wadsworth, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe all dug deep into their Rolodexes to produce a night to remember on Bloomsday 2000. George Plimpton generously agreed to host the party at his apartment over the headquarters of the *Paris Review*. The place was packed with writers and editors and dot com millionaires. Stephanie and I both read some hypertext fiction and poetry. Coover played ringmaster after George made the introductions. Barney Rosset, the publisher of the *Evergreen Review* was in the front row. I remember thinking that night that we were really, suddenly, presenting electronic literature in the mainstream: A weird mainstream, of

course, given that half the people in the party were CEOs in their mid-twenties. The gossip rag, *The Observer*, even wrote it up, with an illustration of Plimpton in a space suit. The ELO was strangely, suddenly the talk of the town. Coover and I had dinner before the party. I remember Bob raising a glass for a toast, and saying that we should enjoy that night because it would not come again. And of course it really hasn't. Electronic literature has never since been so close to America's literary mainstream.

ROB: How did it turn out?

SCOTT: Well at the end of the night I recall Plimpton was serenading my date as she sat up on top of his piano. He was sort of a ladies' man.

ROB: No I mean—

SCOTT: And I'm not sure how, but you somehow ended up on Plimpton's team for the pool game. And Plimpton ran the table. William and I got crushed.

ROB: Did you raise money?

SCOTT: Oh— not much, right away. But it did turn out that John Santos was there from the Ford Foundation. He really hit it off with Coover, which ultimately led to the grant that kept the ELO going for the next two years.

ROB: BASEBALL PATTERN. Ending with something about batting clean up.

SCOTT: Well our house wasn't always in order, but we had thirty things going at once. We were running events from coast to coast, and electronic literature was getting a lot of play in the national media — in the space of a couple years,

e-lit was covered in the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, NPR, TechTV, all over the place.

ROB: Speaking of keeping your house in order. I would imagine you and Jill are struggling, with two little ones at home.

SCOTT: Well now that you mention it, Rob, it has gotten a little more difficult to keep our flat in Norway as tidy as we like. Toys and diapers everywhere and juggling schedules and so on. There just aren't enough hours in the day.

ROB: You know Scott, at this point in life, with all you and Jill have going on, you might consider hiring yourself a maid. You've earned it.

SCOTT: The temptation is always there. The trouble is finding good help.

ROB: How so?

SCOTT: Well you know, maids will sometimes leave a sheet a bit ruffled, or have the towels uneven, or may not have their uniform correctly done up, or even, sometimes, as I get out of the shower, I have even discovered a damp towel on the floor. And I have no idea how to properly manage discipline. Choosing the right corrective is such a subtle art.

ROB: It sounds like you need a manual.

SCOTT: There are no manuals for such things.

ROB: But there is! *Spanking the Maid!* This slim volume contains within its pages all the secrets to maintaining a fruitful and spiritually fulfilling relationship between yourself, your maker, and your domestic assistants. How hard? What implements? Under which circumstances and using which rituals of catechism. *Spanking the Maid!* Only \$10.95 from Grove Press and the nearer to thee your maid will be. How might you achieve a happier more orderly household? *Spanking the Maid!* The method you need to know!

SCOTT: Um, thanks, Rob. I'll take that under advisement. I want to mention a couple more events from the early days of the ELO before we go. As you can tell, we had set up a sort of rotating road trip. Nick Montfort thought it would be a good idea to set something up at the Boston Public Library, as part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival. We had nine different acts on the bill, and put on an evening of performances of work ranging from Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* to Marjorie Luesebrink's *Califia* to Adam Cadre's *Phototopia*. There were about 150 people there. I think that event was important for a few reasons. One was setting up the relationship with the Cyberarts Festival, which I hope will continue. The other was that after the show, the Boston Public Library accepted the works we had presented into their special collection. I'm not sure how well they were cataloged, or if they are still sitting in some box in the back of the special collections room, but I think that reaching out to public libraries is still an important an ongoing concern for the ELO today.

ROB: It sounds like this was a spectacular period for the ELO.

SCOTT: It was.

ROB: I mean that you were really concerned with spectacle.

SCOTT: Do you mean in a sort of Guy Debord sort of way?

ROB: I remember something about a Public Burning.

SCOTT: Do you mean the *Electronic Literature Collection*? We burned the CDs among other reasons so that could be indexed in library collections, yes.

ROB: No there was some sort of event in Times Square.

SCOTT: You mean the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards? The awards ceremony was actually at the New School in New York. I suppose we were after a sort of spectacle there yes. Jeff had worked on one of his old buddies who the CEO of NBCi, a dot com that has long since gone the way of the dinosaurs, and they provided a generous sponsorship that allowed us to offer two prizes for digital fiction and digital poetry. Our host this weekend John Cayley took the poetry prize and Caitlin Fisher went home with the fiction prize.

ROB: They got filthy rich and lived—

SCOTT: Happily ever after. No, not exactly.

ROB: And what did they win?

SCOTT: They won a bronze book — and \$10,000, but in the fullness of time what they really won was that bronze book, which will forever weight them towards their responsibility to electronic literature.

ROB: Can winning such an award make you responsible?

SCOTT: Not really, but just think about the gravitas, the serious heft of a bronze book. It's not the sort of thing you can easily abandon. It is like a child that you have somehow earned and now must carry around with you—

ROB: Heavy.

SCOTT: And of course after that great event in New York, my own perception of electronic literature changed. The works that were nominated were all over the map, from Caitlin's postmodern scrapbook bildungsroman to Talan's Deleuzian application to Paul Chan's narrative fonts. It was clear that hypertext could no longer be easily pegged into the easy and familiar genres we knew from print.

ROB: Desire. What is that?

SCOTT: And then the bottom more or less fell out.

ROB: The Internet boom went bust.

SCOTT: The backers who had committed money for the next stage of the ELO pulled out. I was in Key West, on the honeymoon of an ill-fated first marriage when I got the call on the cellphone from the ELO finance committee that I had to pull the plug, and fire all the employees, including myself.

ROB: Ouch. What did you do?

SCOTT: Well, I threw my cellphone into the pool. And we cut the honeymoon short. It seemed like a sad ending, but it kept me off cellphones for five years.

ROB: And you don't own a cellphone to this day.

SCOTT: I love my iPhone man. It's a great platform for electronic literature. And you can play scrabble on it.

ROB: Time is running out.

SCOTT: I'm still not sure that I've made my main point.

ROB: What was that?

SCOTT: Something about liveness, and chance, and fun, and community, and not forgetting about the public component of what we do, and the early ELO. That period was so intense, and so much happened. And it's not all about scholarship, and institutions, and students, and jobs. It's not really. It's about connecting writers with each other and with their audiences. It's about conceiving of a literary movement as a vaudeville act or a Rube Goldberg apparatus, a kind of chaotic performance engine of vast unknowable possibility. It's about creating stories in new ways and forging poetry with improbable materials and dropping Easter eggs here and there and opening jacks-in-the-box in the landscape of digital culture. It's about coming up with new forms of literature to spraypaint like graffiti on the underpass of the information superhighway.

ROB: That is so 90s. Say, is Pierre going to show anything at the screening tonight?

SCOTT: Is he part of the French contingent?

ROB: I love his work, though it is hard.

SCOTT: Lucky Pierre? Is his work difficult?

ROB: Hard, very hard. And long. And firm. It's got everything I like in a movie. Bouncing, pounding, slapping, whacking, caressing . . . interactivity. Not to mention metafiction and poststructuralism.

SCOTT: Are digital films electronic literature? Is virtual reality?

ROB: Does it matter what is and what isn't?

SCOTT: I suppose not, not really.

ROB: I just hope we end up surprised. Again. Constantly.

SCOTT: Anyway, by 2002 I was unemployed again. We had to shut things down and I set up a small operation as a private investigator.

ROB: A private eye. An e-lit dick.

SCOTT: I wasn't quite sure what my next assignment would be. Sure I knew there would be some mystery, and I knew I'd get beat up along the way. One night I was making my way home from Jean's, a few ryes into my sorrows, when I found this leggy blond, Kate Hayles, sitting in my office chair.

ROB: A dame with a mind that would not quit.

SCOTT: You said it Rob. She wanted to move the ELO to Los Angeles, and she was willing to cover expenses.

ROB: But there was a mystery.

SCOTT: There's always a mystery. Sure I said. That sounds like a decent proposition. And those legs stretched all the way from Chicago to Los Angeles to Washington DC and back again here to Providence.

ROB: Where we meet some shadowy figures from the mafia.

SCOTT: And ivy league types. And femmes fatale and performance artists. Computer programmers and contortionists. And where is the story in all of this, and how will it end? Who knows? I put on my crumpled fedora, and stumble off into the night in a pool of wet yellow light, wondering what will come next.