

{ BRIEF INTERVIEWS
WITH Hideous Men }

OCTET

POP QUIZ 4

Two late-stage terminal drug addicts sat up against an alley's wall with nothing to inject and no means and nowhere to go or be. Only one had a coat. It was cold, and one of the terminal drug addicts' teeth chattered and he sweated and shook with fever. He seemed gravely ill. He smelled very bad. He sat up against the wall with his head on his knees. This took place in Cambridge MA in an alley behind the Commonwealth Aluminum Can Redemption Center on Massachusetts Avenue in the early hours of 12 January 1993.

The terminal drug addict with the coat took off the coat and scooted over up close to the gravely ill terminal drug addict and took and spread the coat as far as it would go over the both of them and then scooted over some more and got himself pressed right up against him and put his arm around him and let him be sick on his arm, and they stayed like that up against the wall together all through the night.

Q: Which one lived.

POP QUIZ 6

Two men, X and Y, are close friends, but then Y does something to hurt, alienate, and/or infuriate X. They had been very close. In

fact X's family had almost sort of adopted Y when Y arrived in town alone and had no family or friends yet and got a position in the same department of the same firm X worked for, and X and Y work side by side and become close *compañeros*, and before long Y is usually over at X's house hanging out with the X family just about every night after work, and this goes on for quite some time. But then Y does X some kind of injury, like maybe writing an accurate but negative Peer Evaluation of X at their firm, or refusing to cover for X when X makes a serious error in judgment and gets himself in trouble and needs Y to lie to cover for him somehow. The point is that Y's done some honorable/upright thing that X sees as a disloyal and/or hurtful thing, and X is now totally furious at Y, and now when Y comes over to X's family's house every night to hang out as usual X is extremely frosty to him, or witheringly snide, or sometimes even yells at Y in front of the X family's wife and kids. In response to all which, however, Y simply continues to come over to X's family's house and to hang around and take all the abuse X dishes out, nodding sort of studiously in response but not saying anything or in any other way responding to X's hostility. On one particular occasion X actually screams at Y to 'get the hell out of his family's house and kind of half-hits-half-slaps Y, right in front of one of the family's kids, hard enough to make Y's glasses fall off, and all Y does by way of response is hold his cheek and nod sort of studiously at the floor while he picks his glasses up and repairs a bent arm-hinge as best he can by hand, and even after this he still continues to come around and hang out at X's house like an adopted member of the family, and to just stand there and take whatever X dishes out in retaliation for whatever it is Y apparently did to him.

Just why Y does this (i.e., continues to come around and to hang out at the Xes') is unclear. Maybe Y is basically spineless and pathetic and has nowhere else to go and nobody else to hang out with. Or maybe Y's one of those quietly iron-spined people who are in-

ternally strong enough not to let any kind of abuse or humiliation get to them, and can see (Y can) through X's present pique to the generous and trusted friend he'd always been to Y before, and has decided (Y has, maybe) that he's just going to hang in there and stick it out and keep coming around and stoically allow X to vent whatever spleen he needs to vent, and that eventually X will probably get over being pissed off so long as Y doesn't respond or retaliate or do anything to aggravate the situation further. In other words, it's not clear whether Y is pathetic and spineless or incredibly strong and compassionate and wise. On only one specific further occasion, when X actually jumps up on an end table in front of the whole X family and screams at Y to 'take [his] ass and hat and get the fuck out of [his, i.e., X's] family's house and stay out,' does Y actually leave because of anything X says, but even after this further episode Y's still right back over there hanging out at the Xes' the very next night after work. Maybe Y just really likes X's wife and kids a lot, and that's what makes it worth it to him to keep coming around and enduring X's vitriole. Maybe Y is somehow both pathetic *and* strong . . . though it's hard to reconcile Y's being pathetic or weak with the obvious backbone it must have required to write a negatively truthful Peer Evaluation or to refuse to lie or whatever it was that X hasn't forgiven him for doing. Plus it's unclear how the whole thing plays out — i.e., whether Y's passive persistence pays off in the form of X finally getting over being furious and 'forgiving' Y and being his *compadre* again, or whether Y finally can't take the hostility anymore and eventually stops hanging around X's house . . . or whether the whole incredibly tense and unclear situation simply continues indefinitely. What made it a half-slap is that X had had a partly open hand when he hit Y that one time. There's also the factor of how X's overt unfriendliness to Y and Y's passive reaction to it affect certain intramural dynamics within the X family, like whether X's wife and kids are horrified by

X's treatment of Y or whether they agree with X that Y dicked him over somehow and so are basically sympathetic to X. This would affect how they feel about Y continuing to come around and hang out at their house every night even though X is making it crystal clear he's no longer welcome, like whether they admire Y's stoic fortitude or find it creepy and pathetic and wish he'd finally just get the message and quit acting like he's still an honorary part of the family, or what. In fact the whole *mise en scène* here seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out.

Pop Quiz 7

A lady marries a man from a very wealthy family and they have a baby together and they both love the baby a lot, although as time goes by they become less and less keen on each other, until eventually the lady files divorce papers on the man. The lady and the man both want primary custody of the baby, but the lady assures she'll ultimately be the one to get primary custody because that's how things usually shake out in divorce law. But the man really wants primary custody a lot. Whether this is because he has a strong paternal urge and really wants to raise the baby or whether he just feels vindictive about getting served with divorce papers and wants to stick it to the lady by denying her primary custody is unclear. But that's not important, because what is clear is that the man's whole wealthy and powerful family all line up behind the man w/r/t this issue and think he should get primary custody (probably because they believe that since he's a scion of their family the man should get whatever he wants — it's that kind of family). But so the man's family comes around and tells the lady that if she fights their scion for primary custody of the baby they'll retaliate by taking away the lavish Trust Fund they'd established for the baby at birth, a Trust Fund sufficient to render the baby financially secure

for life. No Primary Custody, No Trust Fund they say. So the lady (who'd signed a pre-nup, by the way, and has absolutely nothing in the way of remuneration or spousal support coming from the divorce settlement regardless of how the custody issue is resolved) walks away from the custody fight and lets the man and his hardass family have custody of the baby so that the baby will still have the Trust Fund.

Q: (A) Is she a good mother.¹

Pop Quiz 6(a)

Try it again. Same guy X as in PQ6. X's wife's elderly father is diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer. X's wife's whole huge family is really close and intermeshed, and they all live right there in the same town as X and his wife and the father-in-law and his own wife, and since the diagnosis came down there's been a veritable Wagner opera of alarm and distress and grief going on in the family; and, closer to home as it were, X's wife and children are also terribly distraught over the old man's inoperable brain cancer because X's wife has always been so close to her father and X's children love their Grampappy to distraction and are shamelessly spoiled and their affection purchased by him in return; and now X's wife's father is progressively enfeebled and suffering and dying of brain cancer, and X's whole family and family-in-law seem like they're getting a head start on grieving the old man's actual death and are all incredibly shattered and hysterical and sad all the time. X himself is in a ticklish position w/r/t the whole father-in-law-

w/ih-inoperable-brain-cancer situation. He and his wife's father have never had a very close or friendly relationship, and in fact the old man had once actually urged X's wife to divorce X during a rocky period some years prior when things in the marriage were rocky and X had made some regrettable errors in judgment and had committed some indiscretions which one of X's wife's pathologically nosy and garrulous sisters had told the father about and which the old man had been typically judgmental and holier-than-thou about and had loudly communicated to just about everyone in the family that he considered X's behavior disgusting and wholly *infatigable* and had urged X's wife to leave him (i.e., X) over, none of which X has forgotten over the years, not by a long shot, because ever since that rocky period and the old man's h/t/t condemnations X has felt somehow provisional and tangential and *non-grata* with respect to his wife's whole teeming intermeshed close-knit family, which family by this time includes his wife's six siblings' own spouses and kids and various sororine great-aunts and -uncles and ordinarily disparate cousins, such that a local Conference Center has to be rented every summer for his in-laws' family's traditional Family Get-Together (caps theirs), at which annual events X is always somehow made to feel provisional and under continuing suspicion and judgment and pretty much like your classic outsider looking in.

X's sense of alienation from his wife's family has now intensified, too, because the whole enormous roiling pack of them seem now to be unable to think or talk about anything except the iron-eyed old patriarch's brain cancer and grim treatment options and steady decline and apparently slim chances for lasting more than a few more months at the very outside, and they seem to talk endlessly but only with one another about all this, such that whenever X is there alongside his wife during any of these lugubrious family councils he always feels peripheral and otiose and subtly excluded, as if his

¹ (B)(optional) Explain whether and how receipt of the information that the lady had herself grown up in an environment of unbelievably desperate poverty would affect your response to (A).

wife's close-knit family has woven in even tighter around itself in this time of crisis, forcing X even further out onto the periphery, he feels. And X's encounters with his father-in-law himself, whenever X now accompanies his wife on her ceaseless visits to the old man's sickroom in his (i.e., the old man's) and his wife's opulent neoromanesque home across town (and in what feels like a whole different economic galaxy) from the Xes' own rather modest house, are especially excruciating, for all the above reasons plus the fact that X's wife's father — who, even though by this time he's confined to a special top-of-the-line adjustable hospital bed the family has had brought in, and every time X is there he's lying stricken in this special high-tech bed being attended to by a Puerto Rican hospice technician, is nevertheless always still immaculately shaved and groomed and attired, with his club tie double-Windsored and his steel trifocals polished, as if ready at any moment to spring up and make the Puerto Rican fetch his Signor Pucci suit and judicial robes and return to 7th District Tax Court to hand down some more mercilessly well-reasoned decisions, a dress and demeanor which the distraught family all seem to regard as one more sign of the tough old bird's heartbreaking dignity and *dum spero joie de vivre* and strength of will — that the father-in-law always seems conspicuously chilly and aloof in his manner toward X during these dutiful visits, whereas X in turn, standing there awkwardly behind his wife as she is drawn tearfully in to incline over the sickbed like some spoon or metal rod drawn in and bent forward by the hideous force of a mentalist's will, usually feels overcome with first alienation and then distaste and resentment and then actual malevolence toward the iron-eyed old man who, if the truth be told, X has always secretly felt was a prick of the first rank, and now finds that even just the glint of the father-in-law's trifocals afflicts him, and can't help feeling that he hates him; and the father-in-law, in turn, seems to

pick up on X's hidden involuntary hatred and gives back the clear impression of not feeling at all gladdened or bucked up or supported by X's presence and of wishing X weren't even there in the sickroom with Mrs. X and the glossy hospice technician, a wish X finds himself concurring bitterly with inside even as he exerts an even wider and more supportive and compassionate smile out into the space of the room, so that X always feels confused and disgusted and enraged in the old man's sickroom with his wife and always ends up wondering what he's even doing there in the first place.

X, however, of course, also always feels rather ashamed about feeling such dislike and resentment in the presence of a fellow human being and legal relative who's steadily and inoperably declining, and after each visit to the old man's luculent bedside, as he drives his distraught wife home in silence, X secretly castigates himself and wonders where his basic decency and compassion are. He locates an even deeper source of shame in the fact that ever since the father-in-law's terminal diagnosis came down, he (i.e., X) has spent so much time and energy thinking only of himself and of his own feelings of resentful exclusion from his wife's clannish family's *Drang* when, after all, his wife's father is suffering and dying right before their eyes and X's loving wife is nearly prostrate with agony and grief and the Xes' sensitive innocent children are also grieving terribly. X secretly worries that the obvious selfishness of his inner feelings during this time of family crisis when his wife and children so clearly deserve his compassion and support might constitute evidence of some horrific defect in his human makeup, some kind of hideous central ice where his heart's nodes of empathy and basic other-directedness ought to be, and is increasingly tormented by shame and self-doubt, and then is doubly ashamed and worried about the fact that the shame and self-doubt are themselves self-involving and thus further compromise his ability to be truly con-

cerned and supportive toward his wife and kids; and he keeps all his secret feelings of alienation and distaste and resentment and of shame and self-urtication even about the shame itself completely to himself, and doesn't feel like he can possibly go to his distraught wife and burden/horrorify her even further with his own self-involved *pons asinorum*, and in fact is so disgusted and ashamed about what he fears he might have discovered about his heart's makeup that he is unusually subdued and reserved and unforthcoming with everyone in his life for the first several months of his father-in-law's illness and says nothing to anyone of the storms raging centripetally inside him.

The father-in-law's agonizing inoperable degenerative neoplastic lingering goes on and on for so long, however — either because it's an unusually slow form of brain cancer or because the father-in-law is the sort of tough old nasty bird who clings grimly to life for just as long as possible, one of those cases X privately believes euthanasia was probably originally designed with in mind, viz. one where the patient keeps lingering and degenerating and suffering horribly but refuses to submit to the inevitable and give up the freaking ghost already and doesn't seem to give any thought to the coincident suffering that his ghastly degenerative lingering inflicts on those who, for whatever inscrutable reasons, love him, or both — and X's secret conflict and corrosive shame finally wear him down so utterly and make him so miserable at work and catatonic at home that he finally swallows all pride and goes hat in hand to his trusted friend and colleague Y and lays the whole situation *ab initio ad mala* out before him, confiding to Y the icy selfishness of his (X's) very deepest feelings during his family's crisis and detailing his indwelling shame over the antipathy he feels as he stands behind his wife's chair at the \$6500 fully adjustable steel-alloy bedside of his now grotesquely wasted and incontinent father-in-law and the old man's tongue lolls and face contorts in gruesome clonic spasms and

A yellowish froth collects steadily at the corners of his (the father-in-law's) writhing mouth in an attempt to speak and his¹ now obscenely oversized and asymmetrically bulging head rotates on the 300-thread-count Italian pillowcase and the old man's clouded but still cruelly ferrous eyes behind the steel trifocals travel up past the anguished face of Mrs. X and fall on the tight hearty expression of sympathy and support X always struggles in the car to form and wear for these excruciating visits and roll instantly away in opposite directions — the father-in-law's eyes do — accompanied always by a ragged exhalation of disgust, as if reading the mendacious hypocrisy of X's expression and discerning the antipathy and self-shame beneath it and questioning all over again his daughter's judgment in remaining bound to this marginal and reprobative CPA, and X confesses to Y the fact that he has begun, on these visits to the incontinent old h/t prick's sickbed, rooting silently for the tumor itself, mentally roasting its health and wishing it continued metastatic growth, and has begun secretly regarding these visits as rituals of sympathy and support for the malignancy in the old man's pons, X has, while allowing his poor wife to believe that X is there by her side out of shared commiserative concern for the old man himself . . . X now vomiting up every last dram of the prior months' internal conflict and alienation and self-castigation, and beseeching Y to please understand the difficulty for X of telling any living soul of his secret shame and to feel both honored and bound by X's confidence in him and to find in his heart the compassion to (forgo any h/t judgments of X and to for God's sweet sake tell no one of the cryovelate and malignantly selfish heart X fears his innermost secret feelings during the whole hellish ordeal have maybe revealed.

Whether this cathartic interchange takes place before Y did

¹ (i.e., the father-in-law's)

whatever he did to make X so furious with him,² or whether the interchange took place afterward and thus signifies that Y's stoic passivity in bearing up under X's vituperations paid off and their friendship was restored — or whether even maybe this present interchange itself is what somehow engendered X's rage at Y's supposed "betrayal," i.e. whether X later got the idea that Y had maybe spilled some of the beans to Mrs. X w/r/t her husband's secret self-absorption during what was probably the single most emotionally cataclysmic period of her life so far — none of this is clear, but that is all right this time because it is not centrally important because what is centrally important is that X, out of a combination of pain and sheer fatigue, finally humbles himself and bares his necrotic heart to Y and asks Y what Y thinks he (X) ought maybe to do to resolve the inner conflict and extinguish the secret shame and sincerely be able to forgive his dying father-in-law for being such a titanic prick in life and to just put history aside and somehow ignore the smug old prick's self-righteous judgments and obvious dislike and X's own feelings of peripheral *non-gratuation* and just somehow hang in there and try to support the old man and feel empathy for the entire teeming hysterical mass of his wife's family and to truly be there and support and stand by Mrs. X and the little Xes in their time of crisis and truly think of *them* for a change instead of remaining all bent in on his own secret feelings of exclusion and resentment and *viva canorum* and self-loathing and -urrication and burning shame.

As was probably made clear in abortive PQ6, Y's nature is to be laconic and self-effacing to the point where you nearly have to get him in a half-nelson to get him to do anything as presumptuous as actually giving advice. But X, by finally resorting to having Y conduct a thought-experiment in which Y pretends to be X and rumin-

nates aloud on what he (meaning Y, as X) might do if faced with this malignant and horripilative *pons asinorum*, gets Y finally to aver that the best he (i.e., Y as X, and thus by extension X himself) can probably do in the situation is simply to passively hang in there, i.e. just Show Up, continue to Be There — as in just physically, if nothing else — on the margins of the family councils and at Mrs. X's side in her father's sickroom. In other words, Y says, to make it his secret penance and gift to the old man to just hang in there and silently to suffer the feelings of loathing and hypocrisy and selfishness and disownment, but not to stop accompanying his wife or going to visit the old man or lurking tangentially at the family councils, in other words for X simply to reduce himself to bare physical actions and processes, to get off his heart's back and stop worrying about his makeup and simply Show Up³ . . . which, when X rejoins that for Christ's sweet sake this is what he's already been doing all along, Y tentatively pats his (i.e., X's) shoulder and ventures to say that X has always struck him (=Y) as a good deal stronger and wiser and more compassionate than he, X, is willing to give himself credit for.

All of which makes X feel somewhat better — either because Y's counsel is profound and uplifting or else just because X got some relief from finally vomiting up the malignant secrets he feels have been corroding him — and things continue pretty much as before with the odious father-in-law's slow decline and X's wife's grief and her family's endless histrionics and councils, and with X still, behind his tight hearty smile, feeling hateful and confused and self-urticative but now struggling to try to regard this whole septic emotional maelstrom as a heartfelt gift to his dear wife and —

³ (The way Y says things like 'Show Up' and 'Be There' makes X somehow conceive the clichés as capitalized, not unlike the way he hears his wife's family talk about the insufferable annual 'Get-Togethers' at the Ramada C.C.)

wince — father-in-law, and with the only other significant developments over the next six months being that X's hollow-eyed wife and one of her sisters go on the antidepressant Paxil and that two of X's nephews-in-law are detained for the alleged molestation of a developmentally disabled girl in their junior high school's Special Education wing.

And things proceed this way — with X now periodically coming hat in hand to Y for a sympathetic ear and the occasional thought-experiment, and being such a passive but overwhelmingly constant presence at the patriarchal bedside and the involved family councils that the most waggonish of X's wife's family's great-uncles begins making quips about having to dust him — until, finally, early one morning nearly a year after the initial diagnosis, the inoperably ravaged and agonized and illucid old father-in-law gives up the ghost at last, expiring with the mighty shudder of a clubbed tarpon,⁴ and is embalmed and rouged and dressed (as per codicil) in his juridical robes and memorialized at a service throughout which a stilted bier holds the casket high above all those assembled, and at which ser vice X's poor wife's eyes resemble two enormous raw cigar-burns in an acrylic blanket, and at which by her side X — to the first surprised but eventually touched surprise of his massed and black-clad in-laws — weeps longer and louder than anyone there, his distress so extreme and sincere that, on the way out of the Episcopal vestry, it's the weedy mother-in-law herself who presses her own handkerchief into X's hand and consoles him with brief pressure on his left forearm as she's helped to her limo, and X is then later that afternoon invited by personal telephone call from the father-in-law's oldest and most iron-eyed son to attend, along with Mrs. X, a

very private and exclusive inner-circle-of-the-bereaved-family post-internment Get-Together in the library of the deceased judge's opulent home, an inclusive gesture which moves Mrs. X to her first tears of joy since long before going on Paxil.

The exclusive Get-Together itself — which turns out, by X's on-site calculation, to include less than 38% of his in-laws' total family, and features pre-warmed snifters of Remy Martin and unabashedly virid Cuban cigars for the males — involves the arrangement of leather divans and antique ottomans and wing chairs and stout little Willis & Geiger three-step library stepladders into a large circle, around which circle X's in-laws' family's innermost and apparently now most intimate 37.5% are to sit and take turns claiming briefly on their memories and feelings about the dead father-in-law and their own special and unique individual relationships with him during his long and extraordinarily distinguished life. And X — who is seated awkwardly on a small oaken stepladder next to his wife's wing chair, and from his position in the circle is to be the fourth-from-last to speak, and who is on his fifth sniffer, and whose cigar for some mysterious reason keeps going out, and who is suffering moderate-to-severe prostatic twinges from the flitched texture of the ladder's top step — finds, as heartfelt and sometimes quite moving anecdotes and encomia circumscribe the inner circle, that he has less and less idea what he ought to say.

Q: (A) Self-evident.

(B) Throughout the year of her father's terminal illness, Mrs. X has given no indication that she knows anything of X's internal conflict and self-septic horror. X has thus succeeded in keeping his interior state a secret, which is what he has professed to want all year. X has, be apprised, kept secrets from Mrs. X on several prior occasions.

⁴ (This was according to one of X's brothers-in-law, a Big Six junior associate who hadn't cherished the old man any more than X had, and was right there beside with his serotonin-flooded wife when it occurred.)

kicks — has been that, for the first time in their marriage, X's wife's not knowing something about X that X did not wish her to know has made X feel not relieved or secure or good but rather on the contrary sad and alienated and lonely and aggrieved. The crux: X now finds himself, behind his commiserative expression and solicitous gestures, secretly angry at his wife over an ignorance he has made every effort to cultivate in her, and sustain. Evaluate.

Pop Quiz 2

You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not *contes philosophiques* and not vignettes or scenarios or allegories or fables, exactly, though neither are they really qualifiable as 'short stories' (not even as those upscale microbrewed Flash Fictions that have become so popular in recent years — even though these belletristic pieces are really short, they just don't work like Flash Fictions are supposed to). How exactly the cycle's short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of '*interrogation*' of the person reading them, somehow — i.e. palpations, feelers into the interspaces of her sense of something, etc. . . . though what that 'something' is remains maddeningly hard to pin down, even just for yourself as you're working on the pieces (pieces that are taking a truly grotesque amount of time, by the way, far more time than they ought to vis à vis their length and aesthetic 'weight,' etc. — after all, you're like everybody else and have only so much time at your disposal and have to allocate it judiciously, especially when it comes to career stuff (yes: things have come to such a pass that even belletristic fiction writers consider themselves to have 'careers')). You know for sure, though, that the narrative pieces really are just 'pieces' and nothing more, i.e. that it is the way they fit together into the larger

cycle that comprises them that is crucial to whatever 'something' you want to 'interrogate' a human 'sense of,' and so on.

So you do an eight-part cycle of these little mortise-and-tenon pieces.¹ And it ends up a total fiasco. Five of the eight pieces don't work at all — meaning they don't interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three — and you have to toss them out. The 6th piece works only after it's totally redone in a way that's forbiddingly long and digression-fraught and, you fear, maybe so dense and inbent that nobody'll even get to the interrogatory parts at the end; plus then in the dreaded Final Revision Phase you realize that the rewrite of the 6th piece depends so heavily on 6's first version that you have to stick that first version back into the octocycle too, even though it (i.e., the first version of the 6th piece) totally falls apart 75% of the way through. You decide to try to salvage the aesthetic disaster of having to stick in the first version of the 6th piece by having that first version be utterly up front about the fact that it falls apart and doesn't work as a 'Pop Quiz' and by having the rewrite of the 6th piece start out with some terse unapologetic acknowledgment that it's another 'try' at whatever you were trying to palpate into interrogability in the first version. These intranarrative acknowledgments have the additional advantage of slightly diluting the pretentiousness of structuring the little pieces as so-called 'Quizzes,' but it also has the disadvantage of flirting with metafictional self-reference — viz. the having 'This Pop Quiz isn't working' and 'Here's another stab at #6' within the text itself — which in the late 1990s, when even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference, might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to

(Right from the start you'd imagined the series as an octet or octocycle, though best of British luck explaining to anyone why.)

interrogate in whoever's reading them. This is an urgency that you, the fiction writer, feel very . . . well, urgently, and want the reader to feel too — which is to say that by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext.²

² (Though it all gets a little complicated, because part of what you want these little Pop Quizzes to do is to break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or 'interrogate') the reader directly, which desire is somehow related to the old 'meta'-device desire to puncture some sort of fourth wall of realist pretense, although it seems like the latter is less a puncturing of any sort of real wall and more a puncturing of the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer himself, i.e. with the now-tired S.O.P. 'meta'-stuff it's more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings, an 'honesty' which personally you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., of the 'meta'-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you're enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you're in the middle of is artificial (like you didn't know that already); like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn't see what was right in front of you), which more than anything seems to resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and unmanipulative he's being all the time, a type who's even more irritating than the sort of person who tries to manipulate you by just flat-out lying to you, since at least the latter isn't constantly congratulating himself for not doing precisely what the self-congratulation itself ends up doing, viz. not interrogating you or have any sort of interchange or even really talking to you but rather just *performing** in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way.

None of that was very clearly put and might well ought to get cut. It may be that none of this real-narrative-honesty-v-sham-narrative-honesty stuff can even be talked about up front.)

*[Kundera here would say '*drawing*', and actually he's a perfect example of a leftist whose intermural honesty is both formally unimpeachable and wholly self-serving: a classic postmodern rhetorician.]

Which all sets up a serious (and seriously time-consuming) conundrum. Not only have you ended up with only half of the workable octet you'd originally conceived — and an admittedly makeshift and imperfect half at that³ — but there's also the matter of the urgent and necessary way you'd envisioned the original eight

³ Note — in the spirit of 100% candor — that it's not like it's any kind of Olympianly high aesthetic standards that have caused you to toss out 63% of the original octet. The five unworkable pieces just plain didn't work. One, e.g., had to do with this brilliant psychopharmacologist who'd patented an incredibly effective post-Prozac and -Zoloft-type of antidepressant so efficacious that it completely wiped out every last trace of dysphoria/anhedonia/agoraphobia/OCD/existential despair in patients and replaced their affective maladjustments with an enormous sense of personal confidence and *joie de vivre*, a limitless capacity for vibrant interpersonal relations, and an almost mystical conviction of their elemental synecdochic union with the universe and everything therein, as well as an overwhelming and ebullient gratitude for all the above feelings; plus the new antidepressant had absolutely no side effects or contraindications or dangerous interactions with any other pharmaceuticals and practically flew through FDA approval hearings; plus the stuff was easy and inexpensive enough to synthesize and manufacture that the psychopharmacologist could make it himself in his little home laboratory in his basement and sell it at cost via direct mail to licensed psychiatric professionals, bypassing the rapacious markups of the large pharmaceutical companies; and the antidepressant meant a literal new lease on life for untold thousands of cyclothymic Americans, many of whom had been the most endogenous and obstructively miserable patients their psychiatrists had had, and now were positively bubbling over with *joie de vivre* and productive energy and a warm humble sense of their great good fortune for same, and had found out the brilliant psychopharmacologist's home address (i.e., some of the patients had, which turned out to be pretty easy, given that the psychopharmacologist direct-mailed the anti-depressant and all anybody had to do was look at the return address on the cheap padded mailers he used to ship the stuff), and they began showing up at his house, first one at a time, then in small groups, and then after a while converging in greater and greater numbers on the psychopharmacologist's modest private home, wanting just to look the great man meaningfully in the eye and to shake his hand and to thank him from the bottom of their spiritually jump-started hearts; and the crowds of grateful patients outside the psychopharmacologist's home get steadily

belletristic pieces connecting to form a unified octuplicate whole, one that ended up subtly interrogating the reader w/r/t the protein but still unified single issue that all the overt, admittedly unsubtle 'Q's at the end of each Pop Quiz would — if these queries were themselves fit together in the organic context of the larger whole —

bigger and bigger, and some of the more determinedly grateful people in the crowd have set up tents and mobile homes whose sewage hoses have to be fed down into the curb's storm drain, and the psychopharmacologist's doorbell and phone ring constantly, and his neighbor's yards get trampled and parked on, and untold dozens of municipal health ordinances are broken; and the psychopharmacologist inside the house eventually has to phone-order and instal special extra-opaque shades across his front windows and to keep them drawn at all times because whenever the crowd outside catches any glance of any part of him moving around inside the house an enormous ebullient cheer of gratitude and praise rises from the massed thousands and there's an almost menacing-looking mass charge for the modest little house's porch and doorbell as the newly whole patients *en masse* are overwhelmed with a sincere desire just to shake the psychopharmacologist's hand with both of theirs and to tell him what a great and brilliant and self-less living saint he is and to say that if there's anything at all they can do to in any way even partly start to repay him for what he's done for them and their families and humanity as a whole, why, to just say the word, anything at all; so that of course the psychopharmacologist basically ends up a prisoner in his own home, with his special shades drawn and phone off the hook and doorbell unplugged and multiple expanding-foam earplugs crammed in his ears all the time to drown out the crowd-noise, unable to leave the house and already down to the last of the very most unappetizing canned food from the very back of his pantry and getting closer and closer to either slitting his radial arteries or else shimmying up the inside of the chimney to his roof with a megaphone and telling the maddeningly ebullient and grateful crowd of newly whole citizens to go fuck themselves and leave him the fuck alone for the love of fucking Christ he can't *take* it anymore . . . and then true to the cycle's Pop Quiz format there are some fairly predictable queries about whether and why the psychopharmacologist might deserve what's happened to him and whether it's true that any marked shift in the total joy/misery ratio in the world must always be compensated for by some equally radical shift on the other side of the relevant equation, etc. . . . and the whole thing just goes on too long and is at once too obvious and too obscure (e.g., the second part of the 'Q' part of

the Quiz spends five lines constructing a possible analogy between the world's joy/misery ratio and the seminal double-entry 'A = L + E' equation of modern accountancy, as if more than one person out of a thousand could possibly give a shit), plus the whole *mise en scène* is too cartoonish, such that it looks as if it's trying to be just grotesquely funny instead of both grotesquely funny and grotesquely serious at the same time, such that any real human urgency in the Quiz's scenario and palpitations is obscured by what appears to be just more of the cynical, amusing-ourselves-to-death-type commercial comedy that's already sucked so much felt urgency out of contemporary life in the first place, a defect that in an ironic way is almost the opposite of what compels the deletion of another of the original eight little pieces, this one a PQ about a group of early-20th-century immigrants from an exotic part of E. Europe who land and get processed through Ellis Island and after passing their TB exam have the misfortune to draw this one certain Ellis Island Intake Processing Official who's psychotically jingoistic and sadistic and on their Intake documents transforms each immigrant's exotic native surname into whatever sort of disgusting ridiculous undignified English-language term it in any remote way resembles — Pavel Shitlick, Milorad Fucksalot, Djerdap Snort, doubtless you get the idea — which of course the immigrants' ignorance of their new country's tongue keeps them from objecting to or even noticing, but which of course soon becomes and remains over the balance of their U.S. lives a hellish source of ridicule and shame and discrimination and the source of a gnawing E.-European-*vendetta*-type resentment that lasts all the way into the nursing home in Brooklyn NY where a fair number of the nomologically afflicted immigrants end up in their old age; and then one day a ravaged but eerily familiar old face suddenly appears at the nursing home as the face's owner is processed and admitted and wheeled with his portable oxygen tank into the old immigrants' midst in the TV room, and first sharp-eyed old Ephrosin Mydickisiritle and then gradually all the rest of them suddenly recognize the new guy as the tenfeebled senescent husk of the malignant Ellis Island I.R.O., who's now paralyzed and mute and emphysematic and totally helpless; and the group of a dozen or so of the victimized immigrants who've totally ridicule and indignity and resentment almost every day for the last five

ture. You were betting that the queer emergent urgency of the organically unified whole of the octet's two-times-two-times-two pieces (which you'd envisioned as a Manichean duality raised to the triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis w/r/t issues which both characters and readers were required to 'decide') would attenuate the initial appearance of postclever metaformal hooey and end up (you hoped) actually interrogating the reader's initial inclination to dismiss the pieces as 'shallow formal exercises' simply on the basis of their shared formal features, forcing the reader to see that such a dismissal would be based on precisely the same sorts of shallow for-

decades have to decide whether they're going to exploit this now perfect chance at exacting their revenge, and thereupon there's a long debate about whether cutting the paralyzed old guy's O₂-cord or something is justified and whether it could be any accident that a just and merciful E.-European God caused this particular nursing home to be the one that the sadistic old former I.P.O. was wheeled into versus whether avenging their ridiculous names by torturing/killing an incapacitated old person would transform the immigrants into living embodiments of the very indignity and disgust their English names connoted, i.e. whether in avenging the insult of their names they would come, finally, to deserve those names . . . all of which is actually (in your opinion) kind of cool, and the scenario and debate do have traces of the odd sort of grotesque/redemptive urgency you'd wanted the octet to convey; but the problem is that the same spiritual/moral/human issues this piece's 'Quiz-questions' ((A), (B), and so on and so forth) would interrogate the reader on an already hashed out at enormous but narratively necessary length in the piece's climactic twelve-angry-immigrant-men-type debate, here rendering the post-scenario 'Q' little more than a Y/N referendum; plus it also turned out that this piece didn't fit with the octet's other, more 'workable' pieces to form the sort of plicated-yet-still-urgently-unified whole that'd make the cycle a real piece of belletristic art instead of just a trendy wink-nudge pseudo-avant-garde exercise; and so, as gravid with import and urgency as you find the story's issues of 'names' and of names 'fitting' instead of just denoting or connoting, you bite your lip and toss the piece out of the octet . . . which actually probably means that it turns out you *do* have standards, maybe not Olympian ones but standards and convictions just the same, which no matter how big a time-wasting fiasco the whole octet's become ought to be a source of at least some comfort.

malistic concerns she was (at least at first) inclined to accuse the octet of.

Except — and now here's the conundrum — even though you've tossed out and rewritten and reinserted the now-quartet's⁴ pieces almost entirely out of a concern for organic unity and the communicative urgency thereof, you're now not at all sure that anybody else is going to have the remotest idea how the four⁵ pieces the octet ended up with 'fit together' or 'have in common,' i.e. how they add up to a bona fide unified 'cycle' whose urgency transcends the sum-urgency of the discrete parts it comprises. Thus you're now in the unfortunate position of trying to read the semi-quartet 'objectively'

and of trying to figure out whether the weird ambient urgency you yourself feel in and between the surviving pieces is going to be feelable or even discernible to somebody else, viz. to some total stranger who's probably sitting down at the end of a long hard day to try to unwind by reading this belletristic 'Octet' thing.⁶ And you know that this is a very bad corner to have painted yourself into, as a fiction writer. There are right and fruitful ways to try to 'empathize' with the reader, but having to try to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them; in fact it's perilously close to the dreaded trap of trying to anticipate whether the reader will '*like*' something you're working on, and both you and the very few other fiction writers you're friends with know that there is no quicker way to tie yourself in knots and kill any human urgency in the thing you're

⁴ (or rather 'duo-plus-dual-attempts-at-the-third,' whatever the Latinate quantifier for this would be)

⁵ (or whatever)

⁶ You're still going to title the cycle 'Octet.' No matter if it makes any sense to anybody else or not. You're intransigent on this point. Whether this intransigence is a kind of integrity or just simply nuts is an issue you refuse to spend work-time stewing about. You've cast your lot with the title 'Octet,' and 'Octet' is what it's going to be.

working on than to try to calculate ahead of time whether that thing will be '*liked*'. It's just lethal. An analogy might be: Imagine you've gone to a party where you know very few of the people there, and then on your way home afterwards you suddenly realize that you just spent the whole party so concerned about whether the people there seemed to like you or not that you now have absolutely no idea whether you liked any of *them* or not. Anybody who's had that sort of experience knows what a totally lethal kind of attitude this is to bring to a party. (Plus of course it almost always turns out that the people at the party actually *didn't* like you, for the simple reason that you seemed so intent and self-conscious the whole time that they got the creepy subliminal feeling that you were using the party merely as some sort of stage to perform on and that you barely even noticed them and that you'd probably left without any idea whether you even liked them or not, which hurts their feelings and causes them to dislike you (they are, after all, only human, and they have the same insecurities about being liked as you do).)

But after the requisite amount of time-intensive worry and fear and procrastination and Kleenex-fretting and knuckle-biting, it all of a sudden strikes you that it's just possible that the semi-octet's interrogative/dialogic formal structure — the same structure that at first seemed urgent because it was a way to flirt with the potential appearance of metatextual hooey for reasons that would (you had hoped) emerge as profound and far more urgent than the tired old 'Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me' agenda of tired old S.O.P. metafiction, but that then got you into the conundrum by requiring you to toss out the Pop Quizzes that didn't work or were ultimately S.O.P. and coy instead of urgently honest and to rewrite PQ6 in a way that seemed dangerously meta-ish and left you with an ablated and nakedly jerryrigged half-octet whose original ambient but univocal urgency you were now no longer at all sure would come through to anybody else after all the cuts and re-

tries and general futzing around, painting you into the lethal belletristic corner of trying to anticipate the workings of a reader's mind and heart — that this same potentially disastrous-looking avart-gardy heuristic form just might itself give you a way out of the airless conundrum, a chance to salvage the potential fiasco of you feeling that the $2+(2(1))$ pieces add up to something urgent and human and the reader not feeling that way at all. Because now it occurs to you that you could simply ask her. The reader. That you could poke your nose out the mural hole that '6 isn't working as a Pop Quiz' and 'Here's another shot at it' etc. have already made and address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what you feel.

The trick to this solution is that you'd have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked — more like unarmed. Defenseless. 'This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?' — this sort of direct question is not for the squeamish. For one thing, it's perilously close to 'Do you like me? Please like me,' which you know quite well that 99% of all the interhuman manipulation and bullshit gamesmanship that goes on goes on precisely because the idea of saying this sort of thing straight out is regarded as somehow obscene. In fact one of the very last few interpersonal taboos we have is this kind of obscenely naked direct interrogation of somebody else. It looks pathetic and desperate. That's how it'll look to the reader. And it will have to. There's no way around it. If you step out and ask her what and whether she's feeling, there can't be anything coy or performative or sham-honest-so-she'll-like-you about it. That'd kill it outright. Do you see? Anything less than completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity and you're right back in the pernicious conundrum. You'll have to come to her 100% hat in hand. In other words what you could do is you could now construct an additional Pop Quiz — so the ninth overall, but in another sense

only the fifth or even fourth, and actually maybe none of these because this one'd be less a Quiz than (ulp) a kind of metaQuiz — in which you try your naked best to describe the conundrum and potential fiasco of the semi-octet and your own feeling that the surviving semiworkable pieces all seem to be trying to demonstrate⁷ some sort of weird ambient *namesess* in different kinds of human relationships,⁸ some nameless but inescapable '*price*' that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly to be with⁹ another person instead of just using that person somehow (like for example using the person as just an audience, or as an instrument of their own selfish ends, or as some piece of like moral

⁷ That might not be the right word — too pedantic; you might want to use the word *transmit* or *wake* or even *limm* (*palfat's* been overused already), and it's possible that the weird psychospiritual probing you mean it to connote by medical analogy won't come across at all to anybody, which is probably marginally OK, because individual words the reader can sort of skip over and not get too bothered about, but there's no sense in pressing your luck and hammering on *palfate* over and over again). If *limm* doesn't end up seeming just off-the-charts pretentious I'd probably go with *limm*.

⁸ Be warned that this has become a near-nauseous term in contemporary usage, *relationship*, treacлизed by the same sorts of people who use *parent* as a verb and say *share* to mean talk, and for a late-1990s reader it's going to ooze all sorts of cloying PC- and New Age-associations; but if you decide to use the pseudomeaQuiz tactic and the naked honesty it entails to try to salvage the fiasco you're probably going to have to come right out and use it, the dreaded 'R'-term, come what may. ⁹ *Ibid* on using the verb *to be* in this culturally envenomed way: too, as in 'I'll Be There For You,' which has become the sort of empty spun-sugar shibboleth that communicates nothing except a certain unreflective sappiness in the speaker. Let's not be naive about what this 100%-honest-naked-interrogation-of-reader tactic is going to cost you if you opt to try it. You're going to have to eat the big rat and go ahead and actually use terms like *be with* and *relationship*, and use them *sincerely* — i.e. without tone-quotes or ironic undercutting or any kind of winking or nudging — if you're going to be truly honest in the pseudomeaQuiz instead of just ironically yanking the poor reader around (and she'll be able to tell which one you're doing; even if she can't articulate it she'll know if you're just trying to save your own belletristic ass by manipulating her — trust me on this).

gymnastics equipment on which they can demonstrate their virtuous character (as in people who are generous to other people only because they want to be seen as generous, and so actually secretly like it when people around them go broke or get into trouble, because it means they can rush generously in and act all helpful — everybody's seen people like this), or as a narcissistically cathected projection of themselves, etc.),¹⁰ a weird and nameless but apparently unavoidable '*price*' that can actually sometimes equal death itself, or at least usually equals your giving up something (either a thing or a person or a precious long-held 'feeling'¹¹ or some certain idea of yourself and your own virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of death, and to say that the fact that there could be (you feel) such an overwhelming and elemental *same ness* to such totally different situations and *mise en scènes* and conundra — that is, that these apparently different and formally (admit it) kind of stilted and coy-looking 'Pop Quizzes' could all reduce finally to the same question (whatever exactly that question is) — seems to you urgent, truly urgent, something almost worth shimmying up chimneys and shouting from roofs about.¹²

¹⁰ You may or may not want to spend a line or two inviting the reader to consider whether it's strange that there are literally a billion times more ways to 'use' somebody than there are to honestly just 'be with' them. It depends how long and/or involved you want this PQ9 to be. My own inclination would be not to (probably more out of worry about appearing potentially pious or obvious or longwinded than out of any disinterested concerns about brevity and focus), but this'll be a matter for you to sort of play by ear.

¹¹ *Ibid* footnotes 8 and 9 on *feeling/feelings* too — look, nobody said this was going to be painless, or free. It's a desperate last-ditch salvage operation. It's not unrisky.

Having to use words like *relationship* and *feeling* might simply make things worse. There are no guarantees. All I can do is be honest and lay out some of the more ghastly prices and risks for you and urge you to consider them very carefully before you decide. I honestly don't see what else I can do.

¹² Yes, you are going to sound pious and melodramatic. Suck it up.

Which is all again to say that you — the unfortunate fiction writer — will have to puncture the fourth wall¹³ and come onstage naked (except for your hand's hat) and say all this stuff right to a person who doesn't know you or particularly give a shit about you one way or the other and who probably wanted simply to come home and put her feet up at the end of a long day and unwind in one of the very few safe and innocuous ways of unwinding left anymore.¹⁴ And then you'll have to ask the reader straight out whether she feels it, too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness. Meaning you'll have to ask whether she thinks the whole ragged jerryrigged heuristic semi-octet 'works' as an organically unified belletristic whole or not. Right there while she's reading it. Again: consider this carefully. You should *not* deploy this tactic until you've soberly considered what it might cost. What she might think of you. Because if you go ahead and do it (i.e., ask her straight out), this whole 'interrogation' thing won't be an innocuous formal belletristic device anymore. It'll be real. You'll be bothering her, the same way a solicitor who calls on the telephone just as you're sitting down to unwind over a good dinner is bothering you.¹⁵ And consider the actual sort of question you'll be bothering her with. Does this work, do you like this, etc. Consider what she might think of

¹³ (among other things you'll have to puncture)

¹⁴ Yes: things have come to such a pass that belletristic fiction is now considered *safe* and *innocuous* (the former predicate probably entailed or comprised by the latter predicate, if you think about it), but I'd opt to keep cultural politices out of it if I were you.

¹⁵ (. . . Only *worse*, actually, because in this case it'd be more like if you'd just bought a fancy expensive take-out dinner from a restaurant and brought it home and were just sitting down to try to enjoy it when the phone rings and it's the chef or restaurateur or whoever you just bought the food from now calling and bothering you in the middle of trying to eat the dinner to ask how the dinner is and whether you're enjoying it and whether or not it 'works' as a dinner. Imagine how you'd feel about a restaurateur who did this to you.)

you just for asking something like this. It might very well make you (i.e. the *mise en scène*'s fiction writer) come off like the sort of person who not only goes to a party all obsessed about whether he'll be liked or not but actually goes around at the party and goes up to strangers and *asks* them whether they like him or not. What they think of him, what effect he's having on them, whether their view of him coincides at all with the complex throb of his own self-idea, etc. Coming up to innocent human beings who wanted only to come to a party and unwind a little and maybe meet some new people in a totally low-key and unthreatening setting and stepping directly into their visual field and breaking all kinds of basic unspoken rules of party- and first-encounter-between-strangers-etiquette and explicitly interrogating them about the very thing you're feeling inherent and self-conscious about.¹⁶ Take a moment to

¹⁶ . . . And of course it's very probably also the issue *they're* feeling self-conscious about — w/r/t themselves and whether other people at the party are liking *them* — and this is why it's an unspoken axiom of party-etiquette that you don't ask this sort of question outright or act in any way to plunge a party-interaction into this kind of maelstrom of interpersonal anxiety: because once even just one party-conversation reached this kind of urgent unmasked speak-your-innermost-thoughts level it would spread almost metastatically, and pretty soon everybody at the party would be talking about nothing but their own hopes and fears about what the other people at the party were thinking of them, which means that all distinguishing features of different people's surface personalities would be obliterated and everybody at the party would emerge as more or less exactly the same, and the party would reach this sort of entropic homeostasis of nakedly self-obsessed sameness, and it'd get incredibly boring,* plus the paradoxical fact that the distinctive colorful surface differences between people upon which other people base their like or dislike of those people would have vanished, and so the question 'Do you like me' would cease to admit of any meaningful response, and the whole party could very well undergo some sort of weird logical or metaphysical implosion, and none of the people at the party would ever again be able to function meaningfully in the outside world. **

*(It's maybe interesting to note that this corresponds closely to most atheists' idea of Heaven, which in turn helps explain the relative popularity of atheism.**)

**(I'd probably leave all this implicit, though, if I were you.)

imagine the faces of the people at a party where you did this. Imagine the faces' expression fully, in 3D and vibrant color, and then imagine the expression directed at you. Because this will be the risk run, the honesty-tactic's possible price — and keep in mind that it may be for nothing: it is not at all clear, if the precedent quartet of little mortise-and-tenon *quart d'heure*s hasn't succeeded in 'interrogating' the reader or transmitting any felt 'sameness' or 'urgency,' that coming out *hat in hand* near the end and trying to interrogate her directly is going to induce any kind of revelation of urgent sameness that'll then somehow resonate back through the cycle's pieces and make her see them in a different light. It may well be that all it'll do is make you look like a self-consciously invent schmuck, or like just another manipulative pseudopomo bullshit artist who's trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a meta-dimension and commenting on the fiasco itself.¹⁷ Even under the most charitable interpretation, it's going to look desperate. Possibly pathetic. At any rate it's *not* going to make you look wise or secure or accomplished or any of the things readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what they're reading

is when they sit down to try to escape the insoluble flux of themselves and enter a world of prearranged meaning. Rather it's going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do . . . more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ.

So decide.

¹⁷ This tactic is sometimes, at belletristic-fiction conventions and whatnot, called 'Carsoning' or 'The Carson Maneuver' in honor of the fact that former *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson used to salvage a lame joke by assuming a self-consciously mortified expression that sort of metacommented on the joke's lameness and showed the audience he knew very well it was lame, a strategy which year after year and decade after decade often produced an even bigger and more delighted laugh from the audience than a good original joke would have . . . and the fact that Carson was deploying this Maneuver in LCD commercial entertainment as far back as the late 1960s shows that it's not exactly a breathhtakingly original device. You may want to consider including some of this information in PQ9 in order to show the reader that you're at least aware that metacommentary is now lame and old news and can't of itself salvage anything anymore — this may lend credibility to your claim that what you're trying to do is actually a good deal more urgent and real. Again, this will be for you to decide. Nobody's going to hold your hand.