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ABSENT CENTERS IN ROBERT COOVER'S *THE ORIGIN OF THE BRUNISTS*

Ayşegül GÜNDOĞDU

Danışman
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ÖZET

Doktora Tezi

Robert Coover'ın *The Origin of the Brunists* Romanında Yok Merkezler

Aysegül Gündogdu

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi
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Robert Coover'ın *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) adlı romanı, yüzlerce ki inin ölümüne sebep olan bir maden oca ı patlamasının ardından, West Condon kasabasında, dini bir grubun ortaya çıkı ını tartı maktadır. Aynı zamanda bu patlama, kasaba halkının o güne kadar sahip oldu u güven ve düzen duygularını da tümüyle yerle bir etmi tir. Böylesine yıkıcı sonuçları olan bu korkunç olay ile kar ı kar ıya kalan kasaba halkından bir grup insan, çaresizlikleriyle ba a çıkabilmek için Brunistler adlı grubu olu tururlar. Bu patlamayı da yakla an bir kıyametin habercisi olan ilahi bir mesaj olarak yorumlarlar. Ancak, bu yorum, bu kurmaca inanı , kasaba halkının hayatını tanımlayan ve belirleyen bir "gerçekli e" dönü ür. Bu da Coover'ın hemen hemen tüm eserlerinde tartı tı ı asıl ironidir, yani, dünyayı anlamlandırmak ve anlamak için insan sürekli yorum ve müdahalede bulunur ve bu müdahalenin sonuçları insanın kendi yorumunun içinde hapsolması biçiminde ortaya çıkar.

Bu müdahaleyi incelemek için, bu tez iki teorik temel üzerine odaklanmaktadır; ilki postmodern anlatım ve tarih yazımları, ikincisi de, en önemli ça da felsefecilerden, Slavoj Zizek'in iki en temel ve önemli teması/kavramı olan Gerçek ve fantezi. Romanın bu teorik temel ı ı ında ele tirel bir okumasını yaparak, anlatıların travmatik olaylara ve korkulara kar ı nasıl bir güvenlik bölgesi i levi gördü ünü ve bu i levin, genellikle, nasıl insanların kendi kendilerine yarattıkları bir hapishaneye dönü tü ünü gösterdim.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Robert Coover, Slavoj Zizek, *The Origin of the Brunists*, hikâyeleme, anlatı, postmodern tarih yazımı, Gerçek, fantezi.

ABSTRACT

Doctoral Thesis

Absent Centers in Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*

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Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) analyzes the formation of a religious cult in a small mining town, West Condon, after a mine explosion kills nearly a hundred people, destroying all sense of order and security that previously existed. Confronted with a trauma of such devastating results, in order to compensate for their sense of insecurity and desperation, some of the townspeople come together, forming the group, the Brunists. They interpret this explosion as a divine message about an approaching apocalypse. However, this interpretation, this fictional belief, turns into "reality," becoming the defining and determining factor for the townspeople. This is the main irony Coover analyzes in his works about human lives, that is, how human intervention is imposed upon the world to make sense of and to symbolize it, and what the consequences of this intervention are.

In order to analyze this intervention, this dissertation focuses on two theoretical bases; firstly, the postmodern narration and history writing, and next one of the most significant contemporary philosophers, Slavoj Zizek's two significant themes or concepts, the Real and the fantasy. Through a reading and analyzing of the novel with these theoretical bases, I have shown how narrations function as buffer zones against traumas and fears, and how this function usually turns into self-made prisons for people.

Key Words: Robert Coover, Slavoj Zizek, *The Origin of the Brunists*, fiction making, narration, postmodern historiography, The Real, fantasy.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant names in contemporary American literature, Robert Coover is the writer of many novels and stories whose structures and styles range from seemingly realistic to more postmodern forms, as in the re-writings of old fairy tales. Considered as one of the leading figures of American literature along with the pioneering writers of the counter-culture atmosphere of 1960s and 1970s such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William Gass and Thomas Pynchon, Coover has been cited as a prominent postmodern writer and a metafictionist. He is also known as the founder of Brown University's hypertext program to help young writers in America. As his name is related with hypertext and is listed among the postmodern American writers, he often declares his admiration to Cervantes who, he believes, shows the "courage to turn away from his age's worn-out ideologies and overused literary conventions . . . and focus instead on new ways of telling good stories and telling them well" (Andersen, 1981:16). According to him, Cervantes succeeds in creating such stories and "the *maestro's* [Cervantes] fictional innovations [are] as a part of a discovery process that is vital if man expects to consistently create relevant ways of describing his condition" (Andersen, 1981:16).

Thus, Coover's admiration for the Spanish writer Cervantes has a huge impact on his literary stance. He wants his work to have the same effect he believes Cervantes' work had on readers: "they [Cervantes's works] 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" (1973: xlvii). For Coover believes that there is a strong connection between life and fiction, and in order to understand this connection, the fictions dominant in people's lives should be analyzed. It is then that newer fictions can be created to provide people with new ways of approaching and understanding the world around them. It is for this reason that in almost all his works from *The Origin of the Brunists* (1967), *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop* (1970) and *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) to *The*

Public Burning (1978) and *John's Wife* (1996) and many others, Coover questions and analyzes the role and function of fictions and the effort of telling stories in human life. In this sense, Coover's attitude as a writer and his themes can be categorized mainly in two directions; the first is his challenge to old myths and dogmas which, due to their being no longer useful and valid, prevent free imagination and free thinking. The second is his belief both in fictions which will provide new ways of seeing the world, and in fiction makers who are to show the useless and the invalid to the readers in their long-held beliefs so that refreshing fictions can be created. Thus, his is a struggle against long-held beliefs/residues in order to clear up those residues and, then, to bring new forms of expression to the readers' attention so that still newer patterns and modes of thought can be created. For according to him, it is the fiction writer who can struggle with exhausted modes to replace them with new ones with his/her fictions. Noticing this tendency of Coover, Frank Gado writes that, "[s]ubtending [Coover's] diversity . . . is a continuing attitude toward the role of the fiction maker in an age of depleted forms" (1973: xlvi).

In order to create new forms of expression, in his role as the fiction maker, Coover acts as a postmodern "game creator/player" in two senses. The phrase game player, firstly, describes Coover who plays games as a writer by creating various stories and sometimes re-writing old stories in new forms in order to shake the readers' usual reading habits and expectations to make them question the fiction they read. He is not against the creation of stories but he invites readers to play the game by not passively reading and waiting for the end to come, when everything will be solved smoothly. Instead, the reader is expected to understand and differentiate this playful narrative style Coover presents throughout the novel or story. Thus, it is almost a necessity that the readers should respond to this effort (of game playing/fiction making) and partake in the process of struggle and creation.

Secondly, the phrase game player is used to describe many of the characters in Coover's works who create belief systems for themselves and are, then, trapped in their own creations. These "player" characters create belief systems according to

their needs, expectations and beliefs as a shield towards life when it becomes too hard, too painful or too incomprehensible. Then, ironically, forgetting their own role in those creations, they lose the scope of their own making and start taking these artificial/fictional creations for real and for granted. When what is created as new and different begins to be taken as the only possibility available or as reality or truth, it turns into a dogma. It is not a free play anymore, and it no longer offers a vitalizing and innovative outlook. On the contrary, it becomes a cliché or a residue, and often the self-made prisons for people.

According to Coover, it is the free imagination and fictions created with those imaginations that will help deal with life by offering different and alternative ideas and approaches. Not surprisingly, the writer/novelist/fiction maker has a crucial responsibility here because it will be the fiction writer who is to create, first, those alternative thoughts. Then, s/he is to show to readers through her/his fictions that people create centers of artificial beliefs and meanings for themselves which may not be the sole "truth/reality/narration" and which have the potential of turning into fixed dogmas over time and through overuse. Hence, in displaying to readers their "false games," the fiction maker provides them with a new perspective through which they can clarify their perception and understanding of what they read and see. For Coover believes that even if the old forms of writing are becoming outdated, "fiction" in general is not and it still has a great role in changing the old and the outdated. In addition, the fiction maker analyzes and questions our fundamental values and systems through such fictions written in new or innovative forms. It is through her/his analysis that, firstly, people can be aware of their own involvement in the production of those fictions that turn into dogmas and, then, they can start discussing the dogmas to find new ways for understanding and perceiving the world.

In order to trace Coover's attitude and analyze his strategies in creating a fiction as a fiction maker, I have chosen his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966). For through a close reading and analysis of the text and certain imagery and symbols Coover uses, it can be seen that *The Origin of the Brunists* covers almost all of these themes peculiar to the author. Although it is his first novel, it displays both

in its subject-matter and narrative structure the mechanisms of fiction making and creating belief systems. Brian Evenson explains this feature of the novel writing that it "encapsulate[s] many of the issues . . . in regard to [his] other books," such as people's construction of a shared community and their subsequent entrapment in their own creations by taking their fictional accounts for real (2003: 23). In order to explore these themes in the novel, I start with a chapter on postmodernism, but since "postmodernism" is too broad and inclusive a term, I limit my chapter to one of the most important challenges of postmodernism. That is, the argument that the line between fact and fiction is not so easy to draw, but in fact, that line can easily be blurred. This problematic line between fact and fiction is also the major characteristic in Coover's idea of fiction-making processes. For, the idea in fiction making, both in postmodernism and in Coover's use of the term, is that when a *fact* starts to be told, it becomes a *narration* which may contain many factors that are not as factual and objective as the term *fact* connotes. For instance, in narrating an event, the speaker's thoughts, beliefs and even prejudices may affect what and, more importantly, how s/he tells. Thus, the final product is a man-made artifice produced after a fiction-making process.

In addition, the ideas of context and being contextual are important in the sense that both words call attention to the relative and contingent nature of (the act of) narration. When contexts become an influencing factor in the understanding and interpretation of events, the borders of fact and fiction begin to dissolve, affecting also our knowledge and understanding of fact and fiction. Then, the question of how we know of what we know (as true/real/right/false/wrong) becomes important. When we question how and what we (can) know, we also wonder how and what we can know about a time that has already past, that is, history. Following this, writing about the past is opened up for discussion. The idea that the writing of history (historiography) can also be compared to fictional creation and that it is also a narrative constructed like fiction begins to dominate. On this topic, literary critics who write specifically on historical and postmodern writings, like Keith Jenkins, Frank Ankersmit, Hans Kellner and Linda Hutcheon, draw attention to history writing's affinity to fiction-making and its resemblance to fictional works. Moreover,

a prominent historian of the 20th century, Hayden White underlines the idea of narration in history writing. He claims that the past events are presented by the historians in specific forms that fit into certain narrative patterns so that the events that are being written make sense and become understandable to the readers. Hence, the narrative style in historical writings affects greatly the formation and, thus, the reception and perception of the writings. White also emphasizes that because it is the historians who decide to use a certain story or an account to explain events, historical writings can bear the marks of both the contexts they were written in and of those who write them. That is to say, the narration of an event or a fact can reflect the struggle among groups who try to make their own version or narration the recorded, and thus, the valid one.

In bringing out these factors to the foreground in the act of narration, postmodern thinking emphasizes the narrative and contextual approach not only in the creation of any narration but also in historical narrations. Instead of judging ideas solely on the basis of some universal, human based values like true/false, right/wrong or good/bad, postmodern thinking shifts the attention to the possible time-space-context bound characteristics of those universal values, calling attention to the subjective and contextual influence in any discourse. In this way, postmodern thought challenges the idea that we can find a single, definitive approach and understanding not only to our reality and the world outside but also to the stories that are written about our reality.

Having given this postmodern theoretical part in the first section, in the second part, I focus on the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek and his two—and probably, most popular—themes or concepts, "(ideological) fantasy and the Real." For both concepts are related with or comes to the foreground in the creation of fictions that make the world meaningful and relatable. In addition to the concepts of "the Real" and "fantasy/illusion," I also focus on the concepts of "looking awry" and "traversing the fantasy" as the complementary concepts to the Real and fantasy. Yet, my focus is specifically on the Real because the concept of the Real, which Zizek borrows from Lacan and elaborates on, is not only a major theme but also a

somewhat common denominator in almost all of his works. In the simplest sense, the Real is a "primordial core," or, to put it more specifically, a primordial "trauma" that we try not to "encounter" or deal with, both in our lives and in ourselves. Yet, it turns out that we are connected to it in much more subtle and complex ways than we can imagine. Moreover, the most horrifying, if not the most complex, implication of the Real is that the void that the Real is may be us and it may be our very "real realities." Hence, it turns out that all the effort to understand what seems meaningless or threatening is in fact directed at preventing the void of the Real from engulfing our realities. The best means to serve this end becomes creating fictions which symbolize, give meaning and verbalize the undifferentiated void of the Real.

Related with this complex and subtle (non)existence is the concept of fantasy. In fact, the most striking feature of the Zizekian fantasy is that it is not just an imaginary surplus to life but it is the "surplus as such" that supports "the reality." In the Zizekian sense, our realities are supported by the fantasies which are somewhat like "buffers" to the hard kernel (or the Real), and it is through fantasy that we construct reality; it is not that we lose our connection to reality through "falling into" fantasies. Then, looking awry and traversing the fantasy are related with how we (can) deal with the Real and our "reality fantasy." Looking awry is to look from a certain angle which is not the angle we "normally" are accustomed to seeing the world. This strange angle provides us with a perspective that enables us to see the "unseen, unrecognized" by our "normal" angles. It, thus, makes us aware of how we, in fact, are in "awry" positions in our "normal, usual" places in life. Finally, to traverse the Real is to traverse the fantasy, to go through it so that we see that there is nothing behind our reality and that fantasy actually hides from us that void behind our realities.

In view of this theoretical basis, I analyze *The Origin of the Brunists* in the last part. This novel is about the formation of a religious cult after a mine explosion in a small mining town, West Condon. After the explosion which leaves only one survivor Bruno behind, many people in the town try to attribute a meaning to this unfortunate explosion because the disaster turns their life upside down. The

attributed meaning is a religious one because a religious belief implies a divine and superior being's control of all that happens and, thus, calms their panic and horror. Thus, people start believing in the idea that there must be a divine purpose behind this catastrophe. Their efforts to give a relatable meaning to this accident become their way of survival and of coping with something which they cannot make sense of in any way. Calling themselves the Brunists after the only survivor of the explosion, the group starts spreading this idea of the divine purpose, making many people believe in an approaching apocalypse.

Accordingly, an analysis of the formation process of the Brunists shows how this fiction-making tendency, at times, turns into hysteria and directs people and their perception of the world in a certain way—the Brunist way, leading them to believe in their own fabricated story of apocalypse. Moreover, the journalist Justin Miller's embellished and even exaggerated renderings of this story in the newspaper make what might otherwise be forgotten as a sad story of a mine explosion a public event and the Brunists a country-wide phenomenon. Many people believe in their apocalypse story and many from different parts of the country come to watch them as they walk towards the Mount of Redemption to see what will happen. Some people even take photographs to make the much-awaited apocalypse moment "unforgettable."

In the Zizekian sense, this mine explosion becomes the trauma for the West Condonites; it is the Real erupting all of a sudden in their lives, destroying all their structure and order. Therefore, all the following efforts to make sense of this explosion are directed at making sense of and dealing with this sudden explosion of the primordial core. In addition, not only the explosion but the only survivor of the explosion, Bruno is a manifestation of "the Real" in the novel. With his paralyzed and life-in-death situation due to overexposure to carbon monoxide, he is the Real in the form of the threatening, scary, weird figure. The spreading of the belief that apocalypse is very soon and that Bruno is the messenger of this news show the efforts of West Condonites to try to give a shape to life in its most (R)real.

Finally, Coover's presentation of (the creation process of) this story in this way challenges and subverts the readers' usual reading habits and expectations. By not giving a linear narrative and by parodying some of the basic religious symbols, he challenges familiar literary expectations and then, makes us question our perceptions of (the creation of) fictions, especially those that help us to make sense of our lives and also our realities.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF POSTMODERNISM AND ROBERT COOVER

1.1. Breaking The Myths, Tearing down The Fictions

What defines postmodernism, among its many other characteristics, is its highly challenging attitude towards any discipline, belief and tradition that exists unquestioned and demands unquestioned submission and respect. It mainly challenges the concepts of truth, reality, reason and rationality of eighteenth century Enlightenment which accepts that there is a rational world and order outside. In Enlightenment view, this world can be perceived and interpreted through reason and rationality, regarded as the highest forms of mental capabilities, to reach an understanding of the absolute truth of the universe. In addition, central to this view, is the idea of a rational and free "self" with mental and intellectual faculties needed to perceive this order. Thus, there is a tendency toward "progress," a "linear" movement to reach truth and meaning in the universe. Postmodern writing, on the other hand, rejects the idea that there is a single absolute truth to be perceived and appreciated. It challenges those old organizing frameworks or "Big Ideas, the meta-narratives of modernity," which act as universally binding structures:

> The 'Big Ideas' were truth, rationality and the self. The idea that these concepts picked out universal timeless notions that would shape all human knowledge is the key to the Enlightenment project. These central concepts constitute what have been called the 'meta-narratives' of modernity; they are central concepts that have shaped our modern world. It is the fragmentation of these 'Big Ideas' into a jigsaw of contextualized accounts of them that I take as the definitive claim of philosophical postmodernism. (Luntley, 1995: 8)

Instead of taking those metanaratives or their supposedly "universal values" for granted, postmodernism insists that what is thought to be given and natural, such as truth, reality, fact, fiction, history, politics, society and institutions, is neither given nor natural but mostly human made social and/or cultural artifacts. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*,

> it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (1989: 2)

What triggers this "de-naturalizing" process is, mostly, the new theories and discoveries in many disciplines like philosophy, psychology, and physics along with the experience of the Second World War, which led to the questioning of the most basic concepts such as good, bad, ethics and morality. Because those theories and the experience of war radically changed beliefs and perspectives about humans, human behavior and human nature, such changes affected approaches to reality, too, making it susceptible to skepticism. People began to think of reality in different ways, from different perspectives, and different approaches to reality, instead of one dominating perspective were readily welcomed. Similarly, postmodernism requires a questioning and/or reconsideration of many concepts and ideas, even the concepts of reality and fiction. Such questioning brings even a blurring of the differentiating border between what is real and what is fictional. Now, the writers have to respond to this new state where because the ways of presenting, knowing and understanding reality change ever so strongly the real is almost fused with what is thought to be its opposite, the fictional or the imaginary. Larry McCaffery explains how postmodern writers struggle with this new state:

> [U]nable to feel any longer that they could present novels which depicted the true status of affairs in the world, postmodernist fiction writers decided to turn inward, to focus not on reality but on the imagination's response to reality—a response which became recognized as the only aspect of reality which could ever be known. (1982: 13)

These postmodern writers point out "this new epistemological orientation quite directly" (McCaffery, 1982: 13). They openly address the difficulty of knowing, asking people to question what they claim to know. The postmodern idea that we can only know reality indirectly emphasizes that perception and understanding of reality and world is not free from subjective and relative interpretations. For people create stories to make sense of the world, and thus, their understanding and perception are

not only subjective and relative but also contextual; it can change from time to time and from place to place. We cannot expect a single, definitive approach and understanding to reality and the world outside. Accordingly, disbelief and doubt, instead of certainty, towards attempts at finding meaning in life dominate postmodern literature. For this reason, rather than just appreciating a literary work for what it is, postmodernism prefers to reveal how that literary work is constructed, what its structure is and how it says what it says. Postmodern fiction, in a way, incarnates this inquiring attitude, and, taking this inquiry one step further, it also suggests that even what is known as reality may not be as real and natural as it is assumed and known, but it can be a fiction, a created system for knowing and understanding the world.

Accordingly, because the idea of a stable reality is already challenged, the authority of language as a transparent medium to reflect that stable reality is also shaken, an attitude echoing in literature as well. Many writers now tend to be more skeptical not only of their power and ability of analyzing people and their actions but also of conveying those actions through language. Because people's perception and understanding of the world are not free from subjective and contextual discourses, it is very difficult to claim that a purely objective language exists to express those discourses. Hence the problem of knowing. If we cannot directly know reality but can only know it indirectly, like through linguistic means, it is all the more difficult to narrate it with language. When something happens it just happens, but narrating that same thing with language is not necessarily the objective and real experience and expression of what has happened. That is, the act of translating an event or happening into words involves a major leap; it can be a somewhat one-sided and/or limited process because it is inevitable that the narration carries the narrator's point of view or personal judgments. In addition, those personal judgments or subjective opinions may have a tendency to be influenced by specific contexts and situations.

For that reason, postmodernism challenges both the attribution of universal values to events and the interpretation of those events in universal terms. Moreover, it emphasizes the time-space-context bound characteristic of all values: "Postmodern

works . . . contest art's right to claim to inscribe timeless universal values, and they do so by thematizing and even formally enacting the context-depending nature of all values" (Hutcheon, 1988: 90). Similarly, Michael Luntley also notes the "contextual character of meaning, of language and of its understanding" (1995: 8). This is why postmodernism asserts that even reality and truth can be considered to be fictions or constructions since our experience of the world or reality is constructed through our linguistic means. It is this discursive and narrative side of "our reality" that helps us not only to make sense of but also to shape and order our lives in ways that suit us.

When the concepts of reality and fictionality are already brought under scrutiny, the attempts to find the sole meaning of reality or solve the mystery of life seem far from being "objective and sincere." Therefore, to demonstrate the artificiality and constructedness of reality becomes the preferred topic for postmodern writers. One of the important writers of postmodernism Raymond Federman, for example, calls this kind of fiction "surfiction" because "it exposes the fictionality of reality" rather than telling about how reality should and should not be (1975: 7). Similar to Federman's challenging position is Jerome Klinkowitz's. He criticizes the fiction writers who act as if the fictions they write reflect the "real" human condition and character whereas their writing just keeps producing "secondhand lie[s] about the world" (1975: 178). Characteristics of the fiction Klinkowitz criticizes are clearly defined characters and/or plots, compact structures with neatly drawn beginnings, middles, and ends. In contrast, what postmodern writing insists on is that those neatly drawn lines are actually human-made borders that help creation of certain categories of characters, actions and ideas. If their fictional nature is not pointed out, they may turn out to be clichés through repetition and overuse, even though the reality or "truth of [people's] lives" cannot be reduced to specific formulas or types (Klinkowitz 1975: 165).

Thus, there can always be many different and various, more open ended and plural possibilities—in contrast to fixed positions and points of view—to interpret people, their actions and events. In order to explore those possibilities, imagination becomes a necessary means. Through imagination, the limits and overlapping

elements of the real and the fictional can be discussed and analyzed. To this purpose, against formulas and clichés, Klinkowitz insists on the regenerative power of imagination; the writer should use his/her imagination so that “the product is no longer life, nor even a sham illusory representation. It is simply itself” (Klinkowitz 1975: 179). Revealing the fictionality of the so-called reality and using “imagination” as the regenerative power may help discover new approaches and points of view.

1.2. Realities, Fictions, Histories

The challenge to grand narratives such as truth, reason, reality and rationality includes a challenge to “History” or “historical reality,” which has also been the grand narrative of the past. Now, the idea that the writing of the past is “fictional,” that it is also constructed like fiction begins to dominate. Instead of considering historical writings as the objective representations of the past, historians, especially, Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, draw attention to historiography’s affinity to fictional works and history writing’s similarities to fiction making. In particular, one of the leading historians of the 20th century, Hayden White’s theory that the past events are presented in a specific shape through narrativization has much influence on the literary theorists and critics. In addition to historians, one of the prominent literary critics, especially of postmodern theory, Linda Hutcheon believes that both history and fiction take their force from verisimilitude, not from objective truth, and both are linguistic constructs to make sense of the past and the present. This attitude to history and fiction reduces the boundaries between the concepts of reality, fiction and history, and draws attention to their fictional nature. Hutcheon also offers historiographic metafiction as a literary form to discuss and analyze the fictional nature in history writing. To display the fictionality of both reality and history may be an opportunity to overview and question the “big ideas”

1.2.1. Living Histories/Writing Histories

The idea of the "fictionality of reality" has echoes not only in literature and literary studies but also in the study of the past, history. Traditionally, for many years, history and fiction/literature were differentiated and considered as two totally different fields. In most cases, fiction's importance and value were related with how realistically and truthfully it represented the reality and the world outside as well as the historical past. Also it was important for a literary piece to be as true to life as possible so that the readers could identify with the characters and events depicted. Fiction was about only imaginary stories whereas history was taken as the "true and verifiable story of human experience . . . the guarantor of reality, of the meaning of human society and values" in general (Kellner, 1997: 129). In addition, the material fiction and history use and the methods they employ to deal with their material were also believed to be totally different. However, because postmodernism challenges and rejects the idea of a reality that can be truly represented with language or a single truth perceived by the individual mind, it also rejects that an objective, neutral representation of the "past reality" is possible. Instead, postmodernism insists that just as reality is constructed, to a degree, by the people living it, history, in the same way, is also a kind of production, a narration about the past events produced by the historians. In this way, the separation and difference between history as the account of the "real" past events and fiction as the story of imagination begin to diminish, and the affinity between historiography and fiction begins to appear more clearly. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, writes that the separation between history and fiction is what

> is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and the recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (1988: 105)

Following this, postmodernists add that if history is a narration of the historian(s), then there may be different narrations by different historians about past events, and thus, different "*history* stories" emphasizing their time-space-bound characteristic, in contrast to "*History*" emphasizing that it "is the grand narrative" to which people refer. By emphasizing these points, postmodernist accounts of history highlight the fictional side and multiplicity of historical accounts.

One of the foremost reasons why "history" is considered a "fictional construct" is expressed by Keith Jenkins who relates this issue to the past's ontological difference from history. He states that history is not, and cannot, for that matter, be, the one and the same thing with the past because "'the past [is] for all that has gone on before everywhere" and history is "that which has been written/recorded about the past" (1991: 6). This ontological difference emphasizes that there is a gap between the past that has occurred and gone and the past that is conveyed to us in the present, the past's constructed version telling about that past. Moreover, as Jenkins elaborates, history is not only about the past but it includes both the past (i.e., past events) and the written/recorded material on that past, that is writing of history, historiography. Thus, "the past doesn't exist 'historically' outside of historians' textual, constructive appropriations," and what we know as the true account of past events are in fact the written/recorded versions of those events (Jenkins, 1999: 3).

The outcomes of this approach can be seen in the way "history" has been treated. Until these discussions, history had been the reliable reference point. Now, despite maintaining its importance as a discipline, history is not thought of as the "always-already-there grand narrative" or "a reliable reference point about the real past events" anymore. According to Hayden White "[t]he First World War did much to destroy what remained of history's prestige among both artists and social scientists," for "*History,* which was supposed to provide some sort of training for life . . . had done little to prepare men for the coming of the war," destroying the last pieces of the remaining prestige of *History* (White, 1985: 36 emphasis mine). Such changes have inevitably affected the way we think of history; in Hutcheon's words, "history is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought—as a human

construct" (1988: 16). Yet, arguing that history is now a discourse about the world "does not stupidly and 'gleefully' deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality" (Hutcheon, 1988: 16). This emphasis on the "constructedness" of historical documents both brings to the fore a doubt about the historian's claims of objectivity and truthfulness regarding his/her representation of the past in writing, and moves the focus to historiography's similarity with fiction as a construction. With postmodernism, as Hutcheon points out, it is not that history is "real, factual" and literary/literature is "imaginary, fictional" but that both literature and history are human constructs based upon an event/a situation in order to understand or make sense of it. To sum up, Hutcheon says, "what the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (1988: 89). As such, history now becomes "one of a series of discourses about the world. These discourses do not create the world (that physical stuff on which we apparently live) but they do appropriate it and give it all the meaning it has" (Jenkins, 1991: 5). Therefore, it is very probable that those discourses will reflect the point of view (i.e., judgments, prejudices, expectations) of the writer(s)/the historian(s) of those texts because although the past did actually occur once, it is now known through people who tell about it in the ways that suit their beliefs, expectations and thoughts. In doing this, people can charge certain events and situations with meanings that those events do not actually have and they can create a new story. The contribution to the creation of stories about their lives in this way gives people the chance to locate themselves in time and space and also helps them gain and keep a sense of who they were/ are and will/can be. "Put simply, we are the source of whatever the past means for us" (Jenkins, 1999: 14).

Therefore, if these discourses are the means through which people situate, appropriate and give meaning to themselves and their worlds, then, the importance of understanding the factors and processes creating and shaping these discourses become all the more important, for it is that specific discourse that shapes the way the past is understood and conveyed to the next generations. In short, those discourses "become" the lives of people or, at least, the main support of the structure

of their lives. It is for this reason that the gap between the past and present on the one hand and the effort to write about it on the other seems to be the primary concern for the historians. For it is the historians who write about the past, but their writing is not and cannot be the actual past; it is their discourses filling in that gap through the help of the material like documents, archives and previous writings which are also very probably influenced by their historians' choice of material. In Jenkins's words, "the historian's viewpoint and predilections still shape the choice of historical materials" and the account reflects, to a great degree, those assumptions and the viewpoint (1991: 12). Following this, it becomes clearer that there are certain factors and limits affecting and controlling the discourses of historians.

According to Jenkins, among the factors effective in the formation of historical discourses, one of the most important is the difference between past and history: "[b]ecause of the past-history difference, and because the object of enquiry that historians work on is, in most of its manifestations, actually absent in that only traces of the past remain, then clearly there are all kinds of limits controlling the knowledge claims that historians can make" (1991: 10). The first limit is epistemological because, according to Jenkins, there are limits on the knowledge a historian can have and this, in turn, affects the way how that historian will narrate a certain event. Hence, how we know about the past becomes the foremost important issue in terms of historical knowledge because we cannot know the past as it is. Even if we put aside postmodernism's reservations about the possibility of knowing even the present objectively, resulting from the contextual character of meaning and language, "knowledge is [not] impossible to get" but "the idea of the world's own story, the unified picture of reality, is an illusion" (Luntley, 1995: 12). If to know about the world and reality is already complicated, it becomes all the more difficult to make claims about the past that no longer exists. For, in order to (try to) know something, one should have access to it, but the subject of historical account no longer exists, so we cannot have direct access to it. Moreover, since time has passed, many records about past events can be lost or lacking or some events may not even have been recorded in the first place, resulting in gaps in the bulk of information the historian works on.

This makes questionable also the "evidences" that are presented in a historical account as facts. F. Ankersmit in "Historiography and Postmodernism," explains this by referring to the modernist/postmodernist debate. In modernism, he elaborates, evidence is taken to be the means to reach the historical reality hidden behind the sources. In postmodernism, on the other hand, evidence does not lead or point towards the hidden reality but it leads to "other *interpretations* of the past" (1997: 287). Evidence, rather than being a sure sign, is like a "tile" to step on to see other tiles. It "does not send us back to the past, but gives rise to the question what an historian here and now can or cannot do with it" (Ankersmit, 1997: 287). With postmodern thought, the idea and status of the "historical fact" thus becomes ambiguous. What is presented as historical fact may not necessarily *be* a factual "fact" but it is *made* a "fact." Or, likewise, it can be concluded that a historical event is *a historical event* because it is made so by the historian who takes it as a significant fact and confers upon it a meaning. "In other words," Hutcheon concludes, "the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts.' This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning making function of human constructs" (1988: 89).

This means that, in addition to the lack of enough knowledge about the past, there is always a mediator/the historian who, to a large degree, "determines" the historical knowledge to be conveyed to the present day. The narration of a historical account will probably reflect his/her choice of historical material, and the events that are presented as historical facts will reflect his/her perception and judgment. Therefore, it may not be an exaggeration to say that history is "a manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator'" (Jenkins, 1991: 12). Similarly, because the past is too vast a field to study at once, in a historical account only a part of the past, not the whole totality of the past, is included. In this case, there is, again, the preference of the historian in that what is included in a historical writing is the "portion" that is considered important and/or significant by its writer(s). As Jenkins points out, "[the past] only reaches us through fictional devices which invest it with a

range of highly selective and hierarchical readings" (1999; 3). As a result of all these influences and factors, what the historian offers as the historical reality is, to a great degree, a "text," a discourse conveyed to us through the historian's eyes, and created with the material the historian has studied, not necessarily the only objective and true account of the past. Hans Kellner, in "Language and Historical Representation," characterizes history as "at best . . . a reasoned report on the documented sources of the past, whatever form those sources may take" (1997; 129). Likewise, Hutcheon states "we cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*" (1988: 16).

In the writing of history, rhetoric, or the way of saying things, which affects the formation of those "texts of history," is an equally significant factor. For if there are already some limitations on the historians' knowledge, then it becomes very important how an event/the past is expressed in language. Initiated especially by the poststructuralist idea that all reality is constructed through language and that it is conveyed through language, the analysis of the way the past is narrated through language and, how and why it is recounted in that specific way becomes a primary concern. For it is through that specific way that people perceive and appropriate their lives and give meaning to their worlds. In order to make a meaningful "text" out of many past events Hayden White offers narrative form to express human experiences. In *The Content of The Form*, he writes that "lately, many historians have called for a return to narrative representation in historiography. . . . And indeed, a whole cultural movement in the arts, generally gathered under the name post-modernism, is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling presuppositions" (1987: xi). According to him, "narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (White, 1987: 1). He, then, offers narrative as "solution . . . to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assailable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific" (White, 1987: 1). Because the past events do not present themselves as "stories," they should be "narrated," given the form of narration so that they do not look like a set of events just ordered chronologically but

have the form of a complete meaningful story about life or the world. According to White, the past is best understood in a narrativist-linguistic manner because what the historians do is to make connections between events, put them in order and, then, present them in a certain structure, that is, narrativize them, so that the past can be understood as a meaningful, compact set of events. Through "narrativizing" the past events will have a coherence, a story line to follow and will reach a conclusion. For, in the end, all the effort to write about the past, the attempt to represent it in the present is an effort to have that sense of meaningful completeness or, in other words, to cover the possible gaps; because the past has already gone, because we cannot reach it except indirectly, because we cannot exactly translate what has happened into language and through language there always is an absence around which all this effort to make sense and conceptualize lies. Narrative form, in providing a beginning, a development and an ending, offers a sense of fullness against that absence.

In order to illustrate the difference and significance of narrative in a historical account, White analyzes different forms in historical writing, namely, annals, chronicle and the narrative. For him, both the annals and chronicle lack the potential to portray the human experiences. Annals form is not narrative because "it consists only of a list of events ordered in chronological sequence," and, similarly, the chronicle, though it "seems to wish to tell a story, [and] aspires to narrativity is marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure" (White, 1987: 5). Thus, for White, narrative is the best form for a historical account because

> [u]nlike that of the annals, the reality represented in the historical narrative, in "speaking itself," speaks to us, summons us from afar (this "afar" is the land of forms), and displays to us a formal coherency to which we ourselves aspire. The historical narrative, as against the chronicle, reveals to us a world that is putatively "finished," done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience. Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal. (1987: 21)

Through narrative, the historian gives the events form, meaning and integrity. In this way, the past events seem more reliable and comprehensible. Hence, narrative seems

to provide the vision of a complete and meaningful ideal world or reality. Narrative historical accounts with their closures are compensatory substitutes for the open-ended and unexplainable or ambiguous real-life situations. Thus, in order to underline this "narrativizing" tendency and its importance for the people White asks these questions:

> Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? And does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us as already narrativized, already "speaking itself" from beyond the horizon of our capacity to make scientific sense of it? (1987: 24-5)

White's emphasis on narrative and the people's need to narrate indicates that an ideal (sense of) reality and history are created by the historian through "historical emplotment," and it is important that people should be aware of this process. White explains emplotment, in *Tropics of Discourse*, as "simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures" (1985: 83). That is to say, historical events do not make up a meaningful story in themselves. The historian makes them into a story by highlighting some or deleting others. S/he tries to describe the events in the historical record in such a way as to make them familiar to the people by way of representing them in certain plot structures people are already familiar with in their lives: "The historical narrative thus mediates between events reported in it on the one side and pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings, on the other" (White, 1985: 88). Consequently, he further elaborates, it is not that the events are comic or farcical in themselves but that they "can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning" (White, 1987. 44). There are "those elements of figuration—tropes and figures of thought, as the rhetoricians call them—that make "the narrativization of real events" possible (White, 1987: 48). Through these tropes historical facts are given the form of a tragedy, farce or another form, and people not

only "see" and "understand" that event in that form but also they empathize and identify with the events since those events are familiarized for them. In this way, meaning is bestowed upon a historical event by a particular form which makes that event fit into a familiar pattern of perception. This is, White asserts, "essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making operation" (1985: 85). In "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," White writes,

> . . . narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story. Among these elements are those generic story patterns we recognize as providing the "plots." Thus, one narrative account may represent a set of events as having the form and meaning of an epic or tragic story, and another may represent the same set of events—with equal plausibility and without doing any violence to the factual record—as describing a farce. . . . Can it be said that sets of real events *are* intrinsically tragic, comic, or epic, such that the representation of those events as a tragic, comic, or epic story can be assessed as to its factual accuracy? Or does it all have to do with the perspective from which the events are viewed? (1997: 393)

In narrativizing the events, what the historian should also take into account is the concept of continuity. For the events need to be formed in continuity to provide that sense of fullness and completeness. However, the past sources may not be continuous or even the past events may not seem continuous. In order to provide the sense of continuity the historian, again, uses narration. Through narration, the story being told is not only meaningful and compact but also continuous. Kellner states, in "Language and Historical Representation," that neither the sources about the past nor the people's experience of time is continuous but

> [r]ather, the source of the assumption that the past is in some sense continuous is a literary one. What is continuous is not so much reality, or the form in which reality exists (as artifact) in its obvious discontinuity, but the form in which our culture represents reality. Continuity is embodied in the mythic path of narrative, which "explains" by its very sequential course, even when it merely reports. . . . It is hard to distinguish the boundaries between the intuited continuity of reality and the relentless powers of narrative to make things continuous. (1997: 129)

In narrativizing the events, the historian's rhetoric and perspective, which make up the certain way the events are narrated, bring the ideological question in the historical accounts to the fore. Hutcheon expresses how historiographic writings are affected by the ideological and cultural dynamics in a society:

> Thanks to the pioneering work of Marxists, feminists, gays, black and ethnic theorists, there is a new awareness in these fields that history cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis of the act of writing itself. It is no longer enough to be suspicious or playful as a writer about art or literature (or history, though there it never really was); the theorist and the critic are inevitably indicated in both ideologies and institutions. (1988: 90)

Hutcheon's words emphasize that a writer cannot easily dissociate her/himself from the ideological, cultural and social environment in which s/he lives. The writer's rhetoric is affected by the environment, and thus, the final product s/he creates—her/his writing—carries the mark of that influence. Likewise, Hans Kellner emphasizes the cultural and linguistic codes that are effective in the shaping of the historian's narrative. What is explained as a real historical event is expressed through those codes, so "the facts of history" are, in fact, not "givens" but "takens . . . 'taken' in large part from the language and cultural understanding within which they must be expressed" (Kellner, 1997: 137). Accordingly, it is not that the events happen in certain ways in history, and the historian tells their stories. Rather, the narrative forms the historian chooses to tell about the past events are rooted in cultural and linguistic codes which, in turn, influence the way an event is analyzed and explained:

> . . . I do not believe that there are "stories" out there in the archives or monuments of the past, waiting to be resurrected and told. Neither human activity not the existing records of such activity take the form of narrative, which is the product of complex cultural forms and deep-seated linguistic conventions deriving from choices that have traditionally been called rhetorical; there is no "straight" way to invent a history, regardless of the honesty and professionalism of the historian. Indeed, the standards of honesty and professionalism are to be found in precisely those conventions, both in what they permit or mandate and in what they exclude from consideration. All history, even the most long-term, quantified, synchronic description, is understood by competent readers as part of a story, an explicit or implicit narrative. (1997: 127)

Keith Jenkins addresses the relation between narrative and cultural, ideological and linguistic factors by giving an example. If, he writes, an undergraduate history syllabus is prepared by a Marxist, black and feminist point of view, that syllabus is rooted in and reflects the black, Marxist, feminist agenda. Ironically, it is because of this reason that such a syllabus may not be allowed because it can be claimed that that syllabus is like a "vehicle for the delivery of a specific position for persuasive purposes" (1991: 17). Yet, it is the fact that historical accounts are implicated in that kind of "persuasive purposes" or ideological roots that are emphasized by the historians and critics like Jenkins, White, and Hutcheon. This emphasis on culture and ideology points out to another important factor in the historical accounts. Knowledge, of both the past and present, and the ways of acquiring that knowledge are always shaped through power relations among different groups in societies, especially between the stronger groups and those that strive to be the next stronger ones. Ways of having knowledge through power relations affect how that knowledge will be formed as a discourse and presented to people. Because "knowledge is related to power and within social formations, those with the most power distribute and legitimate 'knowledge,'" the dominant group affects the perspectives in the shaping of narrations (Jenkins 1991: 25). Those groups in power try to have the versions of past that suit them best. Consequently, "the past as history always has been and always will be necessarily configured, troped, emplotted, read, mythologised and ideologised in ways to suit ourselves" (Jenkins, 1999: 3).

This does not, however, mean that the stronger ruling groups will reign all the time. They are in power relationship with various groups which also try to be at the dominant position. Therefore, history is "constantly being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships because the dominated as well the dominant also have their versions of the past to legitimate their practices, versions which have to be excluded as improper from any place on the agenda of the dominant discourse" (Jenkins, 1991: 17-8). Because of this constant movement and struggle in the power relationships, "[t]here is no definitive history outside these pressures," and "history is forged in such conflict and clearly these conflicting needs for history impinge upon the debates (struggle for ownership) as to what history is"

(Jenkins, 1991: 19-18). Over time and space, different groups caught in power relationships may emphasize different aspects of even the same events as their interpretations of these events differ. It becomes very difficult to have only one historical interpretation, for there are different historiographic writings about the past. As a result, each group may wish to determine "what history is" in terms of their versions and may claim to be expressing universal historical knowledge but what each group has and knows is rather specific and local expressions. Thus, what history is, and the "meanings given to histories of all descriptions are . . . not meanings intrinsic in the past . . . but meanings given to the past from outside(rs). History is never for itself; it is always for someone" (1991: 17).

Finally, in "Language and Historical Representation," Kellner offers that in the face of all these discussions around historiographic writings we should "get the story crooked" so that we will not forget and be aware of the fact that what we read as the "real and straight history" is actually a human construct (1997: 128). The supposedly "straight" story is in fact a "crooked" one: it can be told by different historians with different emphasis points and it can reflect different cultural-ideological positions related with power relations. That is to say, it is not the one and only real story. For that reason, according to Kellner, getting the story crooked is a way of reading which reveals the "problems and decisions that shape [the historical text's] strategies, however hidden or disguised they may be. It is a way of looking honestly at the *other* sources of history, found not in archives or computer databases, but in discourse and rhetoric" (Kellner, 1997: 128). In other words, since history writing is, to a great degree, formed by rhetoric and narration, it should also reflect that "fiction making process" in itself. As Kellner puts it, "to get the story crooked is to understand that the straightness of any story is a rhetorical invention and that the invention of stories is the most important part of human self-understanding and self-creation" (1997: 128). For this reason, acknowledging the "crookedness" of stories may seem threatening to people because such acknowledgment confirms that there is an absence which is filled in through "fictional" accounts in life, whereas the seemingly "straight" stories sustain the fake relief provided by those accounts.

Likewise, Hutcheon insists on "thinking critically and contextually" at these times when all these discussions about history abound (1988: 88). In order to elaborate on "thinking critically and contextually," she offers "historiographic metafiction" as the literary method which questions and problematizes "*how* can we know that past today" and also "*what* can we know of it"? (Hutcheon, 1988: 92) Metafiction, then, becomes the means through which we can think critically and contextually not only about past but also about its writing in the present.

Metafiction, in a general sense, means writing that is about the act of writing. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as

> a term given to fictional writing, which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (1988: 2)

If metafiction, as an act of writing, concentrates on the process of writing, historiographic metafiction pays attention to the writing process of the past. Paying attention to the "act of writing" in historical narratives, it shows how the past is emplotted through the narrative of the historian and points out to the constructed and imposed nature of both meaning and "the seeming necessity for us to make meaning" in historical narratives (Hutcheon, 1988: 112). For that reason, historiographic metafiction rejects the attempts to distinguish between fact and fiction, emphasizing instead the infusion of those two in narrative. Thus, it "self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present" (Hutcheon, 1988: 97). As a result, our historical knowledge or concepts of fact/history and fiction are destabilized. To achieve this destabilization, historiographic metafiction "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" like deliberately falsifying the known historical details so as to point out "the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (Hutcheon, 1988: 114). In

addition, historiographic metafiction uses but rarely assimilates historical data; "more often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded" (Hutcheon, 1988: 114). As such, it reveals the paradox of both the "past reality" and its "*textualized* accessibility to us today" (Hutcheon, 1988: 114). Eventually, because historiographic metafiction destabilizes both the historical knowledge and the historical details that lead to that knowledge, it questions the concept of "facts" and "events" too. Due to the epistemological problems regarding "historical facts," historiographic metafiction distinguishes between events and facts. Events are made into facts and given meanings according to the contextual frames even if they are just events with no specific meanings. They are formed according to the questions the historian asks about what he studies: "they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him" (White, 1985: 43). It is for this reason that the historiographic metafiction's emphasis is on the question of "*whose* truth gets told," not on the effort to tell the "real truth" (Hutcheon, 1988: 123).

Consequently, the writing of both histories and stories are fiction making processes influenced and shaped by linguistic, ideological and cultural factors and contexts. Through those stories (historical or just imaginary) people develop a sense of identity and belonging for themselves against the "absence" of the unexplainable, threatening or nonsensical events and/or situations in their lives. Hence, it is also a responsibility on the part of people to discuss and analyze the "reality and fictionality" of the stories they adopt for themselves.

As a novelist and short story writer, Robert Coover is one of the artists who analyze the fiction making tendency and its possible outcomes. He points out how, eventually, this tendency leads people to be imprisoned in their own constructions. Then, he offers the same creative imagination for the purpose of making various fictions all the time and without letting one or some of the stories be the only one for reference and guidance. In this sense, his offer is ironical since he proposes the very same mechanism which paves the way for self-imprisonment, yet this it is this irony which can trigger people to think critically.

1.3. Robert Coover, the Fiction Maker/Breaker

Known and cited as one of the leading postmodern American writers along with John Barth, Donald Barthelme and William Gass, Robert Coover is mainly interested in exploring the nature of reality and fiction, and the fiction making tendency in human beings as the formative element in their realities/lives. He analyzes the means people develop to deal with a reality that is oftentimes difficult to conceive, explain and, from time to time, threatening. Most of the time the characters in his novels are described as players or game players who, in trying to cope with the randomness and uncertainty of life, create and cling to mystical, religious or mythical explanations and understandings. The expression "game players" is itself the best expression to describe Coover's ironic attitude to those people since those players do not so much play freely than cling rigidly to their constructed realities against the threat of the unexplainable, the disorderly and the chaotic. In order to challenge the fake games of those players, Coover uses and experiments with the familiar forms like myths, fables, and fairy tales in "distorted" forms so as to pay attention to their constructed and artificial nature. Through challenging both the players and their "games" Coover shows that all the secure foundations are not just givens but actually human constructions, and he invites his readers to be aware of these makings so that they can question and clarify their own frames of mind and commitments. As Coover himself writes in his short-story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*, "[t]he novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader (*lector amantisimo*!) to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation" (Coover, 2000: 79).

Even though his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) is considered by many, even by himself, as his most "traditional" novel, it includes almost all the themes and concepts Coover will explore in later works, like fiction making, game playing and creating "centers" of meaning to make the meaningless more meaningful and familiar. In a sense, this novel is at a transition point from a rather traditional

structure to more experimental areas Coover will explore throughout his works. Thus, not only in this first novel but also in his other works the analysis of the creation of a sense of reality and Coover's response to that tendency as a fiction writer who believes in the rejuvenating powers of fiction pervades through Coover chronology.

1.3.1 Reality and Community Making

In examining the concepts such as the real/world and the fictional/stories, Robert Coover's main emphasis is on showing how people need and create a sense of an ideal and manageable vision of reality by making fictions. Larry McCaffery, in *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and William H. Gass*, writes that "Coover's real subject remains the relationship between man and his invented creations—the creations we have broadly termed 'fictions'" (1982: 29). For Coover believes that there are too many happenings past and present in life and people cannot easily deal with all of them at once. In the face of all that influx of life, they need order and pattern to make those happenings more meaningful and less threatening. Thus, their means of bringing order and security becomes fictions/stories. Coover explains this tendency in an interview with Larry McCaffery:

> [T]he human need for pattern, and language's propensity, willy-nilly, for supplying it—what happens, I think, is that every effort to form a view of the world, every effort to speak of the world, involves a kind of fiction-making process. . . . Men live by fictions. They have to. Life's too complicated, we just can't handle all the input, we have to isolate little bits and make reasonable stories out of them. (Kennedy, 1997: 101)

Moreover, in the interview with Frank Gado in *Conversations on Writers and Writing*, Coover again explains that people's basic struggle is "against metamorphosis, against giving in to the inevitability of the process" (1973: 152). In a sense, people need to feel secure in the face of change. The more the faith in the "Big Ideas" diminishes, the more insecure and threatened people feel and cling to their Big Ideas. Coover says: "[w]e are no longer convinced of the *nature* of things, of design as justification. Everything seems itself random" (Gado, 1973: 153).

Confronted with this randomness and arbitrariness people try to put things together, make a meaningful whole out of many parts. Coover not only shows in his fictions that in all these processes, fiction making becomes the means, almost, of survival but he also reveals that most of the systems or models providing the means of survival are constructed through fiction making. Thus, it is this relation between people and their constructions and the artificial and fictional nature of their constructions that Coover analyzes in his fiction. He explores "how these systems are created and how they animate or deaden our relationship to the world" (McCaffery, 1982: 9).

Coover explains that in trying to put things together and make sense of the world people's basic beliefs are, first of all, of a "mythic" nature, not so much of rational or scientific in nature:

> the force of myth and mythopoeic thought is with us for all time. The crucial beliefs of people are mythic in nature; whether at the level of the Cinderella story or of the Resurrection the language is mythopoeic rather than rational . . . [a]nd so we fabricate; we invent constellations that permit an illusion of order to enable us to get from here to there. And we devise short cuts—ways of thinking without thinking through: code words that are in themselves a form of mythopoeia. (Gado, 1973: 152)

In other words, people believe that things are the way they are because that is the way it should be. In this kind of "reasoning" there is not much need for analyzing and questioning the way things are. For in contrast to scientific thinking which prioritizes questions, experiments and discussions to explain and understand events, life and the world, myths or mythical thinking provide some ideas or explanations to adopt and to believe in. These ideas or explanations not only make people feel secure and comfortable in their lives but also make them believe that there is an acceptable reason for unexplainable events or disasters. Brian Evenson, in analyzing Coover's fiction in *Understanding Robert_Coover*, points out this feature of mythical thinking, saying that, in their search for meaning and order, "myths" provide the needed assistance to people: "*I*, an efficacious myth says about itself, *am something you can take as a given, something that is true. You don't need to examine me; you can trust me and organize the rest of the universe around me. Find comfort in me*" (Evenson, 2003: 12). He, then, further elaborates

> [M]uch of Coover's fiction maintains that the world cannot be objectively understood—there is just too much to sort through. In the face of an overwhelming amount of data people take another route: myth. A myth has the ring and feel of truth, but rational thought and objective analysis are not needed to put it into place and allow it to function. By accepting myths, people put themselves in a position where they feel they can go on with life, that they have a place of stability from which to operate. (Evenson, 2003: 12)

Hence, stories—mythical or religious—provide a structure to interpret an event in a way that will make it meaningful and acceptable. With this soothing assistance of myths, people believe that they can find "something to point toward a meaning or purpose in life" and they try to understand the world accordingly "so as to know where they stand in relation to it" (Evenson, 2003: 12). Depending on this illusion of order and structure, people create "reality/life stories"—religious, social, mythological, political—which help them frame what is happening in their lives in an order and as they want them to be. Through religious stories, people provide themselves with spiritual guidance and sense of safety in institutionalized religion. Similarly, through stories about their ancestors and past, they have a sense of identity and belonging, and through this sense of belonging, they form communities and societies as organic wholes. As a result, those reality/life stories function as a reference point and as protective shields against complexities people cannot explain. Those unexplainable parts are the dark voids or absences in people's lives. They may also refer to the cosmically inexplicable gaps which people cannot make sense of and which they try to control and handle. Through fictionalizing, people fill in and shape these absences in familiar forms so that they are no longer absent, threatening and meaningless. As a result, ironically, what people consider their fundamental givens turn out to be not ontological systems but fictional constructions built to cover and/or fill in the absence(s) of their very own lives. McCaffery points out that Coover emphasizes this irony in human life:

> Coover is directly expressing a viewpoint that lies at the center of his work . . . that, partially due to human nature and partially due to the nature of the universe, we can never objectively know the world; rather we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of

> metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world. These fictional systems are useful in that they generate meaning [and] stabilize our perceptions. (1982: 8)

Through their "metaphors" or "subjective systems" people can function in life more efficiently or feel that they can control what is around them. Moreover, to further elaborate on the fictionalizing of the world, Evenson indicates how important it is to know that, in making fictions, "people approach the world and its institutions with opinions and beliefs in place, and what they see is often determined by the models and constructs that they have been given" (2003: 11). Like a historian, people try to fit what they "see" or what they cannot make sense of into a "familiar" pattern, whether it be the form of a religious story or a mythical story, and then "make an event mean something by reading it in a specific way, ignoring other possible readings" so that it has a specific meaning and functions in a specific way (Evenson, 2003: 3).

In addition, even before reading an event in a specific way people "see the world through the lens of their language . . . [which] [is] always caught up in certain attitudes and politico-cultural assumptions" (Evenson, 2003: 11). Thus, they express what they see and cannot see through that language which is already "stained" by cultural, political, ideological assumptions and which is not "neutral" at all. This process is similar to Hayden White's explanations about how a historian perceives the "*possible* study form that such events may figure" and then "emplots his account as a story of a particular kind" (1985: 86). Just as a historian sorts through many data, selecting and disregarding some during the process, and puts them into a specific narrative according to his thesis, people "employ different narratives about why things are the way they are" (Evenson, 2003: 12). They, like historians, encode events in certain plot structures which are familiar and meaningful so that as a group they can make sense of not only their personal and public pasts but also their present existences (White, 1985: 85). Also, they write different stories for different occasions, emplot them in different plot types so as to find the best form or most appropriate meaning for them. If people write different fictions all the time in different forms, it follows that the encoding of certain events, even the choice of

certain events for specific encodings, reflect people's subjective judgments, their beliefs, needs and expectations. For that reason, people who share the same, or at least, similar beliefs and expectations may come together around the same set of "subjective systems" so that they may deal with the "absences" and make sense of life. Their common stories encapsulate not only their collective needs, expectations but also their insecurities, failures and fears. Thus, to keep their sense of wholeness and security intact, they may exclude what or who poses a challenge. For that challenge does not fit into the "familiar" pattern or cannot be encoded in their group's structure. Accordingly, they, whimsically, may leave outside, any time, any person, any event(s) or whatever it is that they consider a threat to their meaningful system. In other words, it is up to the people's collective judgment as a group to decide what to include in and exclude from their circle and collective stories in order to continue to function as a whole. Coover is interested in revealing these dynamics of the processes of inclusion and exclusion effective in the formation of both communities and the fictions of those communities.

In view of this, Evenson mentions Coover's emphasis on the formation of communities as the places of shared fictions, where people may feel more secure and less vulnerable. He writes that "[Coover] is concerned with communities and the way in which communities both come together and hold together through a series of shared stories and myths; yet he also sees something menacing about the way communities reinforce themselves through exclusion and scapegoating" (Evenson, 2003: 10). Hence, communities, on the one hand, are the places where people feel secure and comfortable through common beliefs, rituals and communal and collective life. On the other hand, this collective unity and security may be threatening not only to those who, not belonging to a particular community, function as the other/stranger but also to those who are the members of a collectivity but feel that their individual identities are weakened by the communal whole. Nonetheless, as Morace writes, people still need "community and ritual even in its most outrageous or ludicrous manifestations" mostly because of this feeling of belonging, security and comfort (1985: 193).

Hence, rather than despising and criticizing people's need and search for meaning and security, Coover instead reveals the significance of this need and search, and its possible outcomes. He says that "in a sense, we are all creating fictions all the time out of necessity. We constantly test them against the experience of life" (Gado, 1973: 152). He wants to show the underlying details of this constant creation with his "fictions" which are about people who write fictions.

1.3.2. Individual, The Fiction Maker/Game Player

In Coover's fictions, individuals as fiction makers have an important role because they are the ones who write the fictions that determine the way they live, they believe or even the way they resist to what or who challenges their way. Those characters sometimes try to create systems of their own, shaped according to their needs and beliefs, or sometimes they simply contribute to the survival or dissolution of already-existing structures. Coover's analysis delves into the levels of how the characters, having created their own stories, become trapped in those very stories and how those stories turn into entrapping and clichéd conventions from free, original stories.

In analyzing this fiction maker character, Lois Gordon, in *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process*, defines "the Coover man" as a character who looks for "significance in both concrete and metaphysical terms" in a world filled with competition, failure, and limitations (1983: 8). Defining the features of characters in the fiction of not only Coover but also Vladimir Nabakov, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, William Gass, Raymond Federman and Thomas Pynchon—roughly the writers and novels of the 1960s—Larry McCaffery writes that in all these writers' novels, there is a similar pattern consisting of a central character "who is lonely, alienated, disaffected, skeptical; these characters also feel themselves victimized by a repressive, cold social order to such an extent that their lives seem meaningless, drab, fragmented" (McCaffery, 1982: 4). This is to a degree related to the intellectual environment developing since the end of World War II and culminating in the 1960s and 1970s in a manner that defies "many of the accepted

premises regarding what we had come to expect from fiction" (McCaffery, 1982: 3). The intellectual environment of the post-war period generated a challenge to meta-narratives like fact, fiction and even religion and history. Accordingly, the characters in those novels represent people of those times, who do not know or do not want to know how to deal with that challenging wave in society. Thus, "[i]n response to this powerful sense of personal isolation and violation, these characters decide to create or invent a system of meaning which will help to supply their lives with hope, order, possibly even some measure of beauty" (McCaffery, 1982: 4). These characters begin writing their own stories, which gives them the sense of security and power against irrationality and chaos. McCaffery defines those characters in Coover's novels who make "systems to play with or to help them deal with their chaotic lives" as "man-as-fiction-maker" (1982: 26, 7). Both McCaffery and Evenson use the phrase "the concept of game" (McCaffery, 1982: 36) and "game-playing" to define those characters' efforts in Coover's novels:

> Coover has been more capable . . . in making his game-playing and self-reflexivity seem relevant to a larger understanding of the human condition. Game-playing for him is a singularly human activity. It reflects the basic strategies people use in order to apprehend the world as a whole, in all its complexity and difficulty. (Evenson, 2003: 22)

However, even if people seem to benefit from the fiction making process, these fictions, ironically, turn into clichéd, conventionalized, rigid forms restricting them all the more in their own creations/fictions/lives. McCaffery explains that in order not to lose the sense of security, permanence and order, people do not want to question the contingent status of their stories and forget theit fictional essence. As those stories and their functions become more rigid and closed, and "we tend to become trapped within our fictional systems, victims of our own decayed or obsessive creations" (McCaffery, 1982: 9). Lois Gordon, in a similar manner, states that

> unfortunately, as Coover goes on to portray, most people tend to retain credos or games that have outlived their usefulness, or they invent others that inhibit rather than release. At times, one even constructs myths with the same machinery as the reality against which he is fortifying himself. (1983: 9)

It is for this reason that Coover insistently focuses on "the need people have to organize their lives in arbitrarily created rituals which inevitably carry with them destructive value systems and role models" (Gordon, 1983: 7). What is important is to be aware that we create *arbitrary* fictional systems to order our lives. However, people "lose their freedom when they passively accept roles in mythic systems" (Morace, 1985: 192). As a result, ironically, the seemingly liberating stories become prisons to their creators. Because, it is "only when games and stories become stratified into enforced rules of behavior that individuals begin to lose sight of their tenuous relation to the world at large and substitute in fixed and awkward systems that keep them from seeing the full extent of their reality" (Evenson, 2003: 22). Accordingly, many of Coover's works depict characters as man-as-fiction-maker who devises his stories, his own versions of possible responses to life and then is trapped in his own myths that reflect his own frames of mind. This is the problem Coover's characters have to confront:

> [I]n most of Coover's fiction, there exists a tension between the process of man creating his fictions and his desire to assert that his systems have an independent existence of their own. For Coover, this tension typically results in man losing sight of the fictional basis of his systems and eventually becoming trapped within them. (McCaffery, 1982: 26)

In this process of creating fictions and then, becoming trapped in them, metaphors which "gradually instill themselves as ontological verities" and people's tendency to try to grasp life through metaphors turn out to be an important factor (McCaffery, 1982: 26). For, in this way, reality is mixed/fused with its sign and, as McCaffery writes, in Coover's novels "what all of [the] characters share is the tendency to rely on mythic notions of causality—notions which operate differently from the more recently developed views of science and logic" (1982: 32). In presenting these characters who take sign for the "real" thing, Coover invites readers to be aware of the metaphors, most of which are created by people themselves, so that they can "break up more freely those forms which have lost their usefulness and to replace them with fresher, more vital constructions" (McCaffery, writes 1982: 27).

Robert A. Morace, in "Robert Coover, the Imaginative Self, and the 'Tyrant Other'," notes that against the entrapment of mythical or metaphorical thinking "Coover posits the creative and liberating possibilities of the human imagination" (1985: 192). In making this comment, he, like Coover, underlines the irony in human imagination and creative tendencies. Human imagination and the ability to make stories provide the characters with a liberating potential to fight the "entrapment of mythical thinking." Yet, this is possible as long as the fiction makers do not forget that their liberating potential, as Coover puts it, to "navigate through life," can paradoxically be the starting point of their entrapment (Gado, 1973: 152). For that reason, Coover "continues to chip away at the myths, exposing them for what they are. By clearing a space for his readers he allows them to move into the freedom that they always have but which they sometimes are unable to perceive" (Evenson, 2003: 22). The readers should "acknowledge the fictiveness of [their] often tyrannical beliefs and accept the responsibilities inherent in the fiction-making process" and then should perceive that area of freedom they already have (Morace, 1985: 206).

1.3.3. Fiction Making, Fiction Breaking

Coover believes that in order for his efforts to be effective, there has to be a change in people's understanding and perception of what fiction is and should be. He also relates this need to many changes both in American society and in different disciplines like history, philosophy and literature. He says, "we have come to the end of a tradition. I don't mean that we have come to the end of the novel or of fictional forms, but that our ways of looking at the world and adjusting to it through fictions are changing" (Gado, 1973: 142). His is a common attitude, especially among many postmodern writers, explaining how old forms of fictions are losing their reliability and validity. According to Coover, it is not that fictions are useless but that the ways of creating and using these fictions are changing and have to change. In an interview with Frank Gado, Coover explains:

> The question is not limited to how one produces narrative art; our basic assumptions about the universe have been altered, and so change has occurred in the broad base of metaphor through which the universe is comprehended. Our old faith—one might better say our old sense of

> constructs derived from myths, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories, and other fictions which help to explain what happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have, why the world turns as it does—has lost its efficacy. Not necessarily is it false; it is just not as efficacious as it was. (Gado, 1973: 142)

Thus, behind Coover's experimentations with different fictional forms lies his desire to show that our basic systems and fundamental values through which we perceive the world need to be analyzed by writing a novel kind of fiction. He states that "the world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notion of things" (Gado, 1973: 149-150). For the more people come together around certain beliefs leaving others out, the more probable it is that those beliefs will turn into common but fixed and unquestionable dogmas in time. However, the fiction writer can show, *again* by fictions, both how those beliefs have turned into dogmas and the need to be aware of one's involvement in this process. It is this awareness that will help people generate new ways of seeing and interpreting the world and new ways of fiction making for their interpretations.

Therefore, there is a fine line between fictions that can contribute to changes and the fictions that turn into unquestioned/unquestionable myths and dogmas that can block the changes or the adjustments. Brian Evenson differentiates between these two types of fictions, calling the unquestioned dogmas "myths" and the regenerative forms "fictions." According to him, whereas fiction refers to stories that can question and challenge the status quo, myths keep that status quo: "While myths affirm and support an established order, fictions at their best can take that order apart, show the holes in it, and provide new ground upon which to build" (Evenson, 2003: 14). Because myths provide a place of stability, order and safety, people do not need and want to challenge them. In addition, through rituals and traditions, myths are woven into the structure of societies, and they provide the people with unseen rules to order their lives. They become the "official stories, sanctioned stories that are not to be questioned" (Evenson, 2003: 15). Thus, it becomes harder to question or analyze them because of their "holy status." However, for Evenson, fiction "has a great deal

of ambiguity and free play. It does not claim to definitively know the answers. But fiction can help people to see the questions freshly again, assist them in realizing that while they've been putting their faith in unexamined myths, the questions have perhaps changed" (2003: 15).

For Coover, the writer's responsibility is to know when it is time to break away from old and no-longer-useful stories. To that purpose "Coover hopes to deal with myth and fiction making on their own grounds (hence the metafictional character of all his works)," and he re-writes the familiar forms like fairy tales and old myths so that he can challenge those forms from within in order to trigger the process of breaking away from the old forms and creating the new ones (McCaffery, 1982: 27). Coover says that it

> is the role of the author, the fiction maker, the mythologizer, to be the creative spark in this process of renewal: he's the one who tears apart the old story, speaks the unspeakable, makes the ground shake, then shuffles the bits back together into a new story. Partly anarchical, in other words, partly creative—or re-creative. (qtd in Evenson, 2003: 13).

Coover is especially anxious that one story or any set of ideas will dominate others because he "feels that relying on any set of conventions . . . will lead inevitably to a dead-end—much as relying on any single perspective will produce only a false perspective" (McCaffery, 1982: 28). Privileging only one among the others is what triggers the process of their becoming fixed positions or unquestioned dogmas; instead, Coover suggests, it is better to keep in mind that

> [a]ll of them [stories], . . . are merely artifices—that is, they are always in some ways false, or at best incomplete. There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations. So if some stories start throwing their weight around, I like to undermine their authority a bit, work variations, call attention to their fictional natures. (Kennedy, 1997: 101-102)

In this sense, one of the stories Coover challenges is Christianity. He explains that Christianity as a system of belief has bothered him, and he can not find a way to explain it. Then, he imagines a character like Jesus, creates Jesus in his mind, and, rather than discussing historically whether he existed or not, whether Gospel texts are

true or not, he just takes the Jesus story itself and thinks about its different variations. He also believes that to argue over whether this or that story should be included in Christianity is not crucial. It is not necessary that one story, like the Resurrection, should be singled out, chosen over the other stories like the Noah's or Adam's and Eve's stories. Instead, he prefers to "accept it all as story; not as literal truth but simply as a story that tells us something, metaphorically, about ourselves and the world" (Gado, 1973: 154).

In addition, Coover considers that the domination of certain stories over others is not limited only to religion or religious stories. According to him, many concepts, themes and ideas that make up America become a sort of "America's Big Idea" or the "Myth of America." This Big Idea turns into a religion acting as a common denominator to Americans from their early ages on. In an interview with Larry McCaffery he names all those elements that make up America as parts of the "American civil religion" (2000: 116):

> The concept isn't original with me, but I found it [America's civil religion] a useful metaphor for containing and organizing all the disparate elements of American mythology. From the beginning, I've wanted to get inside all the stories by which we as a people are shaped and guided. 'Educated' is the word, I suppose, though I mean by that everything from Sunday School and Fourth of July jingoism to locker-room banter, comic books, and the movies. All part of the American civil religion. Of course, all genuine religions at their inception are civil ones. Only as they spread do they lose their attachment to the specific body politic and become, as it were, theology. It was a concept useful to me, not only in *The Public Burning*, I should say, but earlier in *The Origin of the Brunists*, *Pricksongs & Descants*, and *The Universal Baseball Association*" (McCaffery, 2000: 116).

For Coover, the fiction writer's role becomes important at this point. If a metaphor or a story starts affecting the way the events or individuals are perceived, if it provides the specific lenses through which to view events or individuals, such as through the lens of the American civil religion, it should be the fiction writer who will call attention to the possibility of some stories' turning into a kind of religion or mythology. The fiction writer, as he says, should realize and undermine the "weight" some stories try to throw around, calling attention to their fictional nature and to the

fact that they also are only stories among others (Kennedy, 1997: 102). In order to be able to do this with his fictions, as Coover indicates many times, fiction makers should write with awareness that they are writing fictions, and they should make this "awareness" as evident as possible in their fictions to their readers so that in reading them the readers will not only read a story but also *know* that they are reading a fictional construct. It is this awareness that will prevent those stories from becoming fixed dogmas and unquestioned myths. One of the ways to avoid this risk is to make sure that fiction can undermine itself, even at times mock itself and know itself as just a story among many other possible stories, without demanding a controlling position. In a way, fiction making is to be considered as a game playing to explore different possibilities, various approaches and attitudes to talk about the world or to talk about our lives and ourselves. Coover's fictions are thus like the embodiments of "his interest in providing his readers with the kinds of literary games that are necessary for a healthy imagination" (Andersen, 1981: 15).

Metafiction can be seen as a literary form which can provide readers with a structure that makes them feel the spirit of such "literary games. Metafiction, as Patricia Waugh asserts, self-consciously draws attention to its status as a fictional creation, a human construct and like a puzzle it asks reader to decipher itself (Waugh, 1984: 2). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, describes it as the "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" and adds that for that reason the definition of metafiction almost always includes words like "self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational" (1984: 1-2). Focusing on the process of its creation and production as a fictional artifact, metafiction constantly reminds the reader of its artificial nature and emphasizes "the shift in focus of narration from the product it represents to the process it is" (Hutcheon, 1984: 39). Because the idea of an "objective truth and reality," and the belief that fiction can mirror reality is no longer valid, metafictional writings "mock the realistic claims of artistic significance and truth . . . [and] insist that the reader accept the work as an invented, purely made-up entity" (McCaffery, 1982: 5). In addition, with its emphasis on the artificiality of fiction making,

metafiction can also be considered as a form indicating the artificial and constructed nature of our belief systems, our "civil religion" and our reality. As Evenson puts it, metafiction is "concern[ed with] all construction of reality—the way individuals and social groups put together a sense of the world" (2003: 15). Then, Patricia Waugh notes that if our experience of the world is mediated through language, we can learn about how we construct a "reality" by literary fictions which are "worlds constructed entirely of language" (Waugh, 1984: 3). Moreover, because language's authority to reflect a supposedly coherent and "objective" world is already shaken, metafiction has begun to serve almost as a code word to explore "the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers" (Waugh, 1984: 3). Metafiction, then, by self-consciously drawing upon its process of creation, underlines the fictional nature of all representation of reality and the arbitrariness of language. In showing the arbitrary nature of language it displays that language does not represent an objective outside world but generates its own meaning.

Therefore, as McCaffery puts it, metafiction examines not only the way the fictions are created but also "the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions" (1982: 5). He continues to explain that "the author [uses] the writer/text relationship as a paradigm for all of human creative activity. By exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated" (McCaffery, 1982: 7). In doing this the author may use traditional narrative forms to challenge those same forms or s/he uses irony, pastiche, multiple, or sometimes, contradictory points of view and inserts fantastical elements into the narration. These serve as the means through which the writer plays with his material.

Then again, since metafiction draws the readers' attention to the process of creation, this process may frustrate their expectations for identification with the characters in the novel or for a coherent plot order, linearity and a proper ending to the story. This is metafiction's game playing with the reader who is expected to be an active player in this process; as Hutcheon says, "the activity of the reader is not one

of being a consumer of stories, but one of learning and constructing a new sign-system, a new set of verbal relations" (Hutcheon, 1984: 14). She also adds that the reader must share with the writer "certain recognizable codes—social, literary, linguistic" so as to comprehend the language of fiction (1984: 29). Therefore, the reader's responsibility is much more than identifying with the characters and following the plot and waiting for the novel's ending. He should comprehend the world the writer presents with the words through "the act of reading" (Hutcheon, 1984: 29). Hutcheon continues:

> The reader must accept responsibility for the act of decoding, the act of reading. Disturbed, defied, forced out of his complacency, he must self-consciously establish new codes in order to come to terms with new literary phenomena. Since product mimesis alone does not suffice to account for the new functions of the reader as they are thematized in the texts themselves, a mimesis of *process* must perhaps be postulated. The novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It, now, demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he, too, is undertaking. (Hutcheon, 1984: 39)

Hence, now, what is expected from the reader is the awareness that the reading process includes not just "reading" but process itself; that is, as one reads, one needs to keep in mind that s/he is making a creation, is making sense of what s/he reads in her/his mind, and that this process of creation is a primary factor in understanding life as well. Patricia Waugh states that

> [i]t can be argued that metafictional novels simultaneously strengthen each reader's sense of an everyday real world while problematizing his or her sense of reality from a conceptual or philosophical point of view. As a consequence of their metafictional undermining of the conventional basis of existence, the reader may revise his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality. . . . [What many writers] are hoping is that each reader does this with a new awareness of how the meanings and values of that world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed. (1984: 33-34)

Therefore, metafiction as a form concentrating on the "fiction making process" itself offers the chance for being game players as long as the player does not forget that it is a game to "play" to discover new possibilities and attitudes. Likewise,

according to Larry McCaffery such "playfulness" is an important factor because it "becomes a deliberate strategy used to provoke readers to critically examine all cultural codes and established patterns of thought" rather than degrading the older forms (1982: 14). Playfulness provides a chance to use older or traditional literary forms with new techniques or in new formats. It also gives a sense of freedom because it undermines the writer's position as the creator or the desire to control and use language as a means to express an "objective reality." In explaining the "playfulness" in Coover's works, McCaffery writes that Coover uses

> the sort of familiar myths, fictions, cliché patterns, and stereotypes whose *content* he hopes to undermine. This undermining is achieved at times by overt parody or irony, and other times by allowing the elements to freely engage and contradict one another. But at all times Coover hopes to deal with myth and fiction making on their own grounds (hence the metafictional character of all his works), and to use the energy stored within these mythic residues to break up the hold which they have and to redirect their forces. (1982: 27)

According to Richard Andersen, Coover's attempt in "fictional game playing" is two-fold. Firstly, Coover reinterprets old stories which are accepted without questioning for years: "By providing these stories with alternative perspectives, Coover hopes to free his readers from some of the cultural clichés they have unconsciously assimilated" (Andersen, 1981: 17). Secondly, Coover's exemplary fictions are stories "that present fiction as a variety of narrative possibilities. These stories are designed to subvert their readers' accepted literary conventions and simplistic ideas about human nature and help them recognize and attain higher levels of artistic consciousness" (Andersen, 1981: 17-18). In this sense, Coover's short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) can be taken as an example of this kind of game playing and fiction making (Andersen, 1981: 15).

In this collection, Coover presents old stories like "Hansel and Gretel," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast" in a new form; the characters are changed, the stories are similar to the traditional tales but there are different, even strange details that do not match the traditional versions. He breaks the linearity and plot sequence altogether and makes a new story out of the old one. By playing with

an old form in this way, while he gives the sense that he is telling a familiar story, he, at the same time, presents something new. Speaking from a familiar field in a different form may alienate the reader, but it forces one to question not only one's way of reading fictions but also ways of looking at one's self and the world. Margaret Heckard, in "Robert Coover, Metafiction, and Freedom," underlines that Coover's use of older forms with new formats and multiple viewpoints as in *Pricksongs and Descants* helps him emphasize his view that what people take as ontological may turn out to be fictional meaning systems. For her, metafiction and playfulness provide "freedom—freedom from stifling literary conventions, from doctrines and sweeping assumptions about human nature, from anything that prevents the individual from becoming clearly conscious of his consciousness" (1976: 226). Finally, for Jaroslav Kusnir too, Coover's desire is "to overcome the traditional, old sensibility, represented by old narrative forms" and to establish "a new sensibility and new approach to reality and its representation" (2004: 47).

In conclusion, Coover's work, as a whole, is, firstly, an attempt to expose the general desire to impose an order and pattern on reality by structuring it in certain discourses like religion, history, myth and politics. Secondly, and more importantly, in exposing that desire, Coover reveals that those discourses or structures are themselves arbitrarily constructed fictional artifacts. The effort to order the world through/in those structures and to adopt them "blindly as archetypes for morally and politically correct behavior" is a dead-end, causing the absence of those structures and archetypes to grow deeper and more disturbing (Redies, 2004: 13). In shifting the focus to the process of "writing" and to the use of traditional narratives in "distorted" forms, Coover provides an outlet to draw attention to the fictional and unexamined nature of people's (ways of) perception. What the readers should be aware of is this "fictional process," both in literary products and in "real" life. For it is this awareness that will trigger the readers to pay more attention to who tells a story and how and whose story is being told. Answers to such questions help people realize both how they (are) position(ed) (themselves) in their lives and how and with whom they identify themselves. When people can see this "big frame," it can be the first step to strip it of its layers, even at the expense of not finding the comforting and

secure foundations. Yet, this stripping may start that new sensibility and approach to reality and its representation.

2. ZIZEKIAN REALITY FANTASY

2.1. Reality as the "Fantasy"/Illusion"

One of the most important philosophical figures of our century, Slavoj Zizek is known as the philosopher who constantly asks "*why* . . . is everything like *that*?" and whose main "amazement is a *ruse*" (Myers, 2003: 1). Glyn Daly, in *Conversations with Zizek*, likens Zizek to a "computer virus" whose purpose is "to infect us with a fundamental doubt about the very presuppositions of our social reality" and "disrupt the comfortable appearances" of our selves and lives (2004: 1). Zizek's basic premise is, first, to challenge the "givens," and, then, to question how and what we know (Myers, 2003: 2). According to Tony Myers, the basic Zizekian thesis is that "the truth of something is elsewhere, that the identity of something is outside of itself. There is, as it were, a hole in every thing, a little piece missing that can be found beyond itself, revealing the truth of that thing" (2003: 3, 6). It is for this reason that Zizek's basic concern is to question how we know what we (think we) know since there is this hole not only in the discourse of philosophy but also in the identity of anything. In this regard, in "infecting" our fundamentals and in searching the truth outside things, Zizek develops his arguments basically from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxism and Hegelian philosophy, or, more generally, German Idealism. [1]

In briefly explaining German Idealism, Myers writes that we are taught that in German Idealism the truth of something is to be found in itself. However, Myers continues, according to Zizek, we are taught to understand German Idealism in only one way whereas the real emphasis of German Idealism lies in the thesis that the truth of something can be found outside itself; it is not that, for example, we "look

[1] In terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the basic book is Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psyco-Analysis*. London: Harmondsworth:Penguin, 1960; and Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits*:*The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W.Norton&Company, 2007; also www.lacan.com an extensive site on Lacan, not only provides links, bibliographies and online articles for this site but also includes explanations of Lacan's seminars, and has, probably, the best

inside ourselves" and find who we really are or the truth of ourselves (Myers, 2003: 43). For "[t]he identity of something, its singularity or 'oneness,' is always split [,]. . . [t]here is always too much of something, an indivisible remainder, or a bit left over which means that it can not be self-identical" (Myers, 2003: 44). Likewise, Glyn Daly writes that "Zizek's central concern is with a certain failure/excess in the order of being," in both Lacanian psychoanalysis and German Idealism (2004: 2). This failure/excess/leftover prevents not only the completeness of the subject but also the compatibility and consistency of words with their meanings. For instance, the meaning of the word *cat* is not to be found in the word *cat* itself but in other words like small, domestic feline (Myers, 2003: 44). The meaning of *cat* is split; it is not self-identical and it is as if the word *cat* functions to fill in the void of this split. It is this void, this split at the core of our beings, our very existences that Zizek is most interested in. Similarly, according to Daly, in Zizek's references to German Idealism (mainly Kant, Hegel and Schelling), the dominant motif is the idea that "an unaccountable 'madness' is inherent to, and also constitutive of, *cogito* and subjectivity as such" (2004: 2). In *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Zizek's basis for this concept of "unaccountable madness" is, again, Hegel and Hegel's concept of the "night of the world." [2] According to Hegel,

> [t]he human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many presentations, images, of which none happens to occur to him—or which are not present. This night, the inner nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical presentations, is night all around it, here shoots a bloody head—there another white shape, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful. (Hegel qtd. in Zizek, 1992: 50)

Philosophically, this state is "when reality is eclipsed by this 'night of the world,' when the world itself is experienced only as a loss [and] as absolute negativity" (Myers, 2003: 37). Then, when the world is eclipsed by this night "it becomes

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bibliography on Zizek too. For more on Hegel, see G.W.F Hegel. Phenomenology *of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

[2] Zizek quotes both "night of the world" phrase and the following passage from Hegel, from Donald Phillip Verene. *Hegel's Recollection*. Albany: SUNY P,1985.

possible, and indeed necessary (if we are to escape from madness), to construct a symbolic universe or a universe of culture" (Myers, 2003: 37). Zizek explains that

> to put it in a different way, what interests me so much already in German idealism is the idea that with negativity (death drive) there is neither nature nor culture, but something in between. We cannot pass directly from nature to culture. Something goes terribly wrong in nature: nature produces an unnatural monstrosity and I claim that it is in order to cope with, to domesticate, this monstrosity that we symbolize. (2004: 65)

In the passage from nature to culture/order state the individual "withdraws into self" from this night of the world (Zizek, 1992: 50; Myers, 2003: 36). Myers writes that "[i]t is here, in the gesture of total withdrawal, that Zizek locates the hidden passage from nature to culture" (2003: 36). According to Zizek, this withdrawal into self is the process of Cartesian doubt as in the case of Descartes's cutting himself and all his links off from the world until all he is left with is *cogito* (Myers, 2003: 36). For Zizek, Descartes's withdrawal is the experience of such an absolute and fundamental negativity and the emptiness. Such an experience of withdrawal into self is that of the unaccountable madness. Therefore, paradoxically, it is through the passage of that "unaccountable madness," "void" or a "fundamental negativity" that our identities and realities are possible (Daly, 2004: 3). Therefore, this "hole" is not, just, "'nothing' but the opposite of everything . . . the empty space devoid of all content" (Myers, 2003: 37). Through this void, the passage from nature to culture is possible "[a]nd the symbolic order, the universe of the Word, emerges only against the background of the experience of this abyss" (Zizek, 1992: 50). Thus, in an ironic twist, this fundamental abyss functions both as what drives the subject away from achieving completeness and as what causes both the subject and the universe of culture to be formed in order to escape from this substantial void. In the end, even if negativity and void seem like contradictory notions in terms of the formation of subjective identities and cultures, for Zizek, the "truth is always to be found in contradiction" (Myers, 2003: 17), and "negativity" is the "fundamental (and ineradicable) background to all being" (Daly, 2004: 3).

It is for this reason that a "hole" at the center not only in discourse but also in identity is a main concern for Zizek because our identities, lives and realities were

shaped “around and against” this void. In theorizing his basic themes around this concept of void and negativity, Zizek’s main reference is to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who re-evaluated and re-presented many of Sigmund Freud’s terms, concepts and ideas. Lacan provides Zizek with the framework and basic terms for his analyses. Among those basic terms, Zizek is particularly interested in the concept of “The Real,” as well as with the concepts of symbolic and imaginary. In addition, Zizek’s framework is also greatly shaped by a re-evaluation of the Marxist notion of ideology. Although, in years, Zizek’s emphasis changes as he makes adjustments to his basic concepts (especially the concepts of The Real and ideology), his fascination with Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis continues in his theories and in his analyses of movies, books and operas. It is, probably, for this reason that “Zizek is sometimes referred to as the ‘philosopher of the Real.’ This reference is partly a play on the word ‘real’” since most of Zizek’s material comes both from “high” culture, like operas, and from popular and everyday culture like Kinder chocolate eggs, European toilet designs, Chinese eating habits or Arnold Schwarzenegger (Myers, 2003: 29). Also, the word “real” in the phrase “the philosopher of the Real” is a reference to Zizek’s engagement with the Lacanian concept “The Real,” because Zizek shifts the focus more and more towards the paradoxical concept “The Real” as the substantial level of our existences in the Lacanian “imaginary, symbolic, real” triangle. As Sarah Kay writes “what holds these various philosophical, political and cultural strands together in Zizek’s writing is his sustained interrogation of what Lacan calls the ‘real’” (Kay, 2003: 3).This Real seems like a hard kernel, almost impossible to encounter but it is also somewhat fragile, hard to decipher and is at the very core of our existences. Even if we are not willing to encounter The Real in our lives, it turns out that, “what we had taken for reality was all along an illusion masking the space of the real” to make our fresh realities (Kay, 2003: 5).

2.1.1. “The Real” as the Lurking Core

It may be better to start defining The Real, firstly, by referring to two other orders, the imaginary and the symbolic in the Lacanian frame because as Daly puts

it, “Lacan identifies the Real in relation to two other basic dimensions—the symbolic and the imaginary—and together these constitute the triadic (Borromean) structure of all being” (2004: 6). For Zizek, too, the Real is particularly important because, even if it is outside of signification, it emerges as the substantial dimension of existence.

Of these three dimensions, “[t]he imaginary designates the process by which the ego is conceived and born,” and this period the when ego is born is characterized by the “mirror stage” (Myers, 2003: 21). At a very early period in life when the infant does not have a full bodily coordination and control, s/he sees him/herself in the mirror as a coordinated and controlled being and identifies with that image. S/he thinks s/he is that image s/he sees because that image provides her/him with a sense of coherent, whole and unified body image. The child’s ego is formed with this (mis)identification and this discrepancy between the child’s image of her/himself and her/his real being drives the ego to reconcile its “other to its same” (Myers, 2003: 22). The symbolic, on the other hand, “constitutes a good part of what we usually call ‘reality.’ It is the impersonal framework of society, the arena in which we take our place as part of a community of fellow human beings” (Myers, 2003: 22). Thus, while the imaginary refers to the “pre-symbolic” period in the subject’s life, the symbolic refers to the “everyday reality” with all its institutions and orders. In addition, the symbolic is also the order of language because what holds together the symbolic is “the signifying chain or the law of the signifier” (Myers, 2003: 22).[3] In addition, this signifying chain is somewhat arbitrary because there is not necessarily a complementary relation between a word and what it refers to. A cat is not a cat because it is called “cat.” The word “cat” brings to mind many other words that define this small, furry pet instead of a dog or bear. Thus, the signifying chain of language is constituted by free associations; when we use one word, we automatically think of other words as well, and it seems that we are circled by this “signifying chain.” Moreover, if our symbolic order is the order of “language,” it means we will always be in this signifying chain, not having a direct access to what

[3] We can say that the signifier is one of the parts of the signs that make up language. Through language we name things, give meaning to them and order and classify them, which means that we always approach things, even our lives, through this medium, “the signifying chain.” According to Myers “[i]nstead of reflecting experience, words constitute it,” and we are born into this symbolic network (2003: 24).

we call reality. Then, the nature of our real/symbolic "reality" is also affected by this; like the arbitrary relationship between a word and its referent, "the character or type of Symbolic Order in which we live is neither permanent nor necessary" (Myers, 2003: 24).

The Real, as the third part in Lacanian frame, is in no way "what, through discourse, we represent to ourselves as 'reality'; it is, by definition, that which discourse cannot include" and it is "the world before it is carved up by language" (Kay, 2003: 4; Myers, 2003: 25). According to Daly, the Real, "does not belong to the (symbolic-imaginary) order of signification but is precisely . . . which cannot be incorporated within such an order" (Daly, 2004: 6, 7). Because it is outside the "symbolic life," the Real seems as the hard kernel, "the excess that remains behind and resists symbolization, appearing only as a failure or void in the Symbolic" (Myers, 2003: 27). Daly explains that "[t]he Real persists as an eternal dimension of lack and every symbolic-imaginary construction exists as a certain historical answer to that basic lack" (2004: 7).

However, even if the Real seems only a "negating and negative force," the "disgusting, hidden underside of reality," it is far more elusive and complicated than that; the disgusting, horrifying "void" is what is at the very core of our existences, and it is the primordial failure/excess/leftover in/of our lives (Kay, 2003: 4). To put it in a different way, "the real is what shapes our sense of reality, even though it is excluded from it" (Kay, 2003: 4). The reason is that "the Symbolic and the Real are intimately bound up with each other. The Symbolic works upon the Real; it introduces a cut into it . . . carving it up in a myriad different ways" (Myers, 2003: 25). Zizek also explains that

> to put it in a slightly simplistic terms: at its most elementary, symbolization exists as a kind of secondary stop-gap measure in the sense that it consists of an attempt to patch things up when something goes terribly wrong. And what interests me is this dimension at which something goes terribly wrong. There we are not yet in the dimension of truth. . . . [S]omething is primordially broken (the absence of mother and so on) and symbolization functions as a way of living with that kind of trauma. (Daly, 2004: 64)

It is for this reason that, for us, the Real emerges as what resists symbolization, what causes a trauma in our being because it *is* when something "terrible" happens to us that we cannot insert that terrible thing into our everyday lives and we cannot confront the fact that the terrible *did* actually *happen* to us. It puts us into a deadlock and we see its indifference and resistance to any form of symbolization. Thus, through the Symbolic we try to shape the Real in different ways, order our lives and, in a way, "bypass" it so that we can relate to it in our everyday and ordinary existences. Our realities are, in this sense, constructed "as an attempt to establish a basic consistency against the disintegrative effects of the Real" and the "reality is always reality-towards-the Real. Every form of (symbolic-imaginary) reality exists as an impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another: trauma, loss, anxiety and so on" (Daly, 2004: 7).

Then again, although we think we bypass the Real, in a paradoxical way, it already shapes our lives. As it resists signification and causes a leftover in the process of signification, it, at the same time, contributes to that very signification. Thus, we do not really bypass it; our very act of symbolization cuts through reality, or as Zizek puts it, "introduces a gap in reality. It is this gap which is the Real and every positive form of this gap is constituted through fantasy" (Daly, 2004: 78). Thus, the Real becomes more than "just a horrifying absence;"

> [t]he Real always functions in such a way that it imposes limits of negation on any signifying (discursive) order and yet—through the very imposition of such limits—it serves simultaneously to constitute such an order. The Real in this sense is strictly inherent to signification: it is both the unsurpassable horizon of negativity for any system of signification and its very condition of possibility. (Daly, 2004: 7)

It is because of this paradoxical nature, both against and inherent to our horizons of meaning that the Real cannot be defined easily and it is what discourse cannot include. For this reason, the words mostly associated with the Real are "horrifying, traumatic, deadlock, void and absence" and, most of the time in the movies, "it can nonetheless be alluded to in certain figurative embodiments of horror-excess" where the monster, alien or living dead "dissolves the fabric of reality" (Daly, 2004: 7).

Yet, this paradoxical nature of the Real is what Zizek is most interested in. Although in many of his early works the Real is presented as the negating force and the traumatic encounter, later on, Zizek makes adjustments to this notion of the Real. Now, the Real no longer, functions *only* as the frightening and traumatic core which people try to avoid through symbolization and signification. This shift in focus in the concept of the Real is explained by Zizek himself:

> The notion of the Real presupposed here is the Real-as-impossible in the sense of the big absence: you always miss it, it's a basic void and the illusion is that you can get it. The logic is that whenever we think we get the Real, it's an illusion, because the Real is actually too traumatic to encounter: directly confronting the Real would be an impossible, incestuous, self-destructive experience. I think that I am partially co-responsible for this serious revisionism. . . . I am co-responsible for the predominance of the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing . . . [as] this traumatic Other to which you cannot ever answer properly. But I am more and more convinced that this is not the true focus of the Lacanian Real. (Daly, 66-67)

Now, according to Zizek, the true focus of the Real should be in the concept of "the impossible possibility" in the Real. In this view, the Real functions as that which because of its very "impossibility" and resistance to representation "gives shape and texture to reality" (Daly, 2004:8). Thus, as Zizek clarifies, the Real is not simply impossibility "in the sense of a failed encounter" or of a horrifying experience so traumatic that we avoid it through the symbolic order, but it is the impossibility that becomes possible, that *does* happen to us (Daly, 2004:71). Accordingly, Zizek further explains that,

> . . . the Real is not impossible in the sense that it can never happen—a traumatic kernel which forever eludes our grasp. No, problem with the Real is that it happens and *that's* the trauma. *The point is not that the Real is impossible but rather that the impossible is Real.* A trauma, or an act, is simply the point when the Real happens, and this is difficult to accept. . . . The point is that you *can* encounter the Real, and that is what is so difficult to accept. (Daly, 2004: 69-70)

It is impossible to accept that we can encounter the Real because, if accepted, it means that what cannot be integrated into our existences can be included in it. In short, it is death and/or dissolution for us. Therefore, Zizek says that,

> [the Real] is a traumatic encounter that *does* happen but which we are unable to confront. And one of the strategies used to avoid confronting it is precisely that of positing it as this indefinite ideal which is eternally postponed. One aspect of the Real is that it's impossible, but the other aspect is that it happens but it is impossible to sustain, impossible to integrate. And this second aspect, I think, is more and more crucial. (Daly, 2004; 71)

Since we cannot confront that traumatic encounter, we sometimes try to present or perceive it as an indefinite and unattainable ideal. Zizek explains this "avoidance" by referring to the notions of desire and the unattainable object. As he explains, it is not that our desire is shaped around a primordial void and we try to fill that void through empirical objects which cannot take the place of that unattainable driving our desire. It is, he emphasizes, rather that any empirical object, can simultaneously, be that Thing, the essence that cannot be met and the empirical object that it actually is. For the objects are already split in themselves, and therefore, are the embodiments of impossibility in the first place. That is to say, we do not need to distance ourselves from the Real/impossible because we already encounter it by the objects that are already split. Although we think or believe that we do not encounter the impossible we, in fact, do. For example, a beloved is not somebody we put in the place of a lost essence; rather we know that s/he is our beloved, s/he is not "the Thing" but we cannot get enough of him/her. Thus, the impossible thing "*is* this particular object . . . this object is strangely split" (Daly, 2004: 67). Our lover is both himself and, at the same time, something else because "[t]he split is not between the empirical reality and the impossible Thing. No, it is rather that [that object] is both itself and, at the same time, something else" (Daly, 2004: 67). That is, we are already experiencing the impossible through that split, and the impossible *is inherent*; we are not safely away from the Thing. Thus, it is not that we confuse our beloved/the empirical object with the impossible Thing and it is not that the object's being impossible is just an illusion; "[t]he point is that the objects of drive are these privileged objects which are somehow a double in themselves. Lacan refers to this as

la doublure (doubling). There is a kind of a safe distance, but it's a safe distance within the object itself: it's not the distance between the object and *das Ding*" (Daly, 2004: 67). The object's being both itself and something else becomes a safe distance from the impossible to us but that distance is not the object's distance from the impossible; it is because of this very doubling that we feel this safe distance. For distance keeps us away from the "annoying contact" and we try to keep as proper and safe a distance as possible so as not to come too close to an "all too possible" Real in many of its forms (Daly, 2004; 73). In a way, the more distant we are, the safer we feel. However, our feeling of distance is already deceiving. For when we think we have a distance between the impossible and our empirical reality we are not actually, strictly away from the impossible Thing.

In addition, Zizek adds further dimensions to this impossible Real when he explains that there are at least three notions of the Real, all intersecting with each other. He says that he is "more and more convinced that there are at least three notions of the Real" and "the very triad of real, symbolic and imaginary is in a way mapped onto or projected into the Real itself" (Daly, 2004; 68). Among these three forms of the Real, the first one is "real Real" which is the horrible thing like monster, alien and zombie figures. The second one is the "symbolic Real" "which is simply meaningless scientific formulae [such as] quantum physics . . . in the sense that . . . [we] cannot translate it into our horizon of meaning; it consists of formulae that simply function" (Daly, 2004: 68). The last one is the "imaginary Real" designating "not the illusion of the Real, but the Real in the illusion itself" (Daly, 2004: 68). For instance, as Zizek explains, it is those certain features in some people which bother us but we cannot know exactly or define easily what it is, or, similarly, it is that something which shines through or transpires in a person that charms us but we cannot identify that charming feature (Daly, 2004; 69). These features are the imaginary Real. Thus, apart from being "scary" or "threatening," this imaginary Real can have this totally "fragile" dimension as in when we are attracted to a person and now and then, we realize a tragic, mysterious or mystical dimension in that person. It is this "elusive" and "fragile" thing that is the Real (Daly, 2004; 69). For that reason, according to Zizek, this imaginary Real has a crucial role in a total understanding of

the Real since its characteristics point out that the Real "is not necessarily or always the 'hard real'" but it can appear in a completely opposite form than its "dark and hard" side (Daly, 2004; 69). Its elusive and linguistically hard-to-express feature can confront us suddenly and in any part of our lives.

Because of all these paradoxical features, the Real becomes the "inescapable," the essence not only of our lives but also of our selves too. Therefore, if we take it as simply the "true reality as opposed to our symbolic fictions," we would be reducing it to a single simple explanation (Daly, 2004: 78). For the Real is not a "pre-symbolic reality" or a "raw nature which is then symbolized" (Daly, 2004: 78). As Zizek insists, "the Real should not be mistaken for symbolic fiction" because what is at stake is to recognize "the Real in what appears to be mere symbolic fiction" (Daly, 2004: 102). This is to say that in the symbolic fiction there can be more than "fiction"; that "more-than-," or, in Zizek's words, "this surplus dimension" is the Real (Daly, 2004: 102). For Zizek, then, it is not, anymore, a matter of recognizing and unmasking the fiction behind reality so that we can have "the real reality." Such an understanding of "reality" and "fiction" does not take into account that surplus in the symbolic fiction. As Zizek explains, we symbolize but in this very act of symbolization we "produce an excess or a lack symmetrically: and *that's* the Real" (Daly, 2004: 78). That lack or excess seems like an obstacle but it "is purely inherent: the impossibility is produced as the very condition of symbolic space. That is the ultimate paradox of the Real. You cannot have it all, not because there is something opposing you, but because of this purely formal, structurally inherent, self-blockade" (Daly, 2004: 79). It is for this reason that according to Zizek, the Real should not be taken simply as the traumatic, hard core because it "manifests itself in far subtler ways" (Daly, 2004: 102). As a result, the idea that there is a void, impossibility at the center and there are different elements embodying this central space is a "transcendental logic," reducing the notion of the Real to a limited scope (Daly, 2004: 74). Different notions and functioning of the Real allow for "different configurations of the Real. Of course, Real-as-impossibility *is* an a priori, but there are different constellations as to how you deal with the Real. . . . This transcendental constellation where the Real is the void of impossibility is just one constellation"

(Daly, 2004: 74-75). All in all, it seems that the Real emerges in our lives suddenly and unexpectedly in many different forms and thus, with all these paradoxical features, it plays a complex and definitive part in shaping our existences and realities.

2.1.2. "Ideological Fantasy"/Illusion

If the Real has an essential role in the formation of our existences and our realities, there are also two other concepts that have as essential a role as the Real, namely, the concepts of ideology (ideological construction) and fantasy. For Zizek, ideology is not as simple as that there is an ideology preventing us from "seeing" the real reality, that it blurs the real state of things with all its ideas and notions. What accompanies this concept of ideology is that if only we "decipher" this set of ideas and see what it hides from us, we learn both how it works and how its workings create that atmosphere which hides the reality from us. Zizek's argument is directly opposed to such an understanding. According to him, "ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an illusion which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel" (1989: 45). To explain his definition of ideology, Zizek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, bases his main arguments on Marx and he re-evaluates the Marxian formula "they do not know it, but they are doing it" (1989: 30).[4] Zizek revises this maxim into one that says, people *do* know it, but, acting *as if* they do not know, they still do it. As such, Zizek believes, there is an "ideological illusion" on the part of the people in their "doing" since "the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion" (Zizek, 1989:30, 32).

Zizek refers to German theorist Peter Sloterdijk and his concept of "cynicism" in order to clarify his position on this subject. In knowing but acting as if we do not know, we are performing what Sloterdijk calls "cynicism" which is

different from "kynicism" (Zizek, 1989: 29). A cynical subject's paradox is "a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it" (Zizek, 1989: 29). As in an example Zizek gives, while using money, people know that richness or wealth are not the inherent, natural properties of "money" (those pieces of paper) in its (their) materiality, but people act as if money "in itself, in its immediate material reality [*is*] the embodiment of wealth" (Zizek, 1989: 31). That is to say, people continue to act as they do *in spite of* their *knowledge,* and "the illusion or the distorted perception of reality is written into the situation itself" (Myers, 2003: 67). Thus, Zizek emphasizes that ideology does not hide from us the real reality outside but people act as if the real reality is hidden from them, and through that assumption they begin to create a reality fantasy. Zizek states that

> [w]hat [people] overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (1989: 33)

As Zizek explains in this passage, there is misrecognition on people's part. They miss the fact that an illusion is already at work in the formation of their reality; that is to say, they see reality as it is through that illusion in the face of a primordial core. However, people act as if some ideological mechanism, whether it be cultural or political, hides the reality from them. For it is to their advantage to act as if some outside force prevents them from reaching the real reality. Yet, this very attitude is what makes people miss the ideological fantasy at work. Ideology does not hide from us or does not distort the real state of things but there is "an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (Zizek, 1989: 33). That is to say, fantasy or illusion makes up their reality. Thus, the concept "ideological" illusion or fantasy is not limited to or does not necessarily refer to a strictly political state of things or a

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[4] In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek's main references to Marx are to, Karl Marx. *Capital I.* London: 1974; Karl Marx. *Les 'sentirs escarpés' de Karl Marx I.* Paris: 1977.

political point of view. Rather, it is the idea of a fundamental fantasy framing and/or supporting our "realities" that is crucial and of primary importance for Zizek.

In order to explore this idea of fantasy and how the reality is supported by fantasy, Zizek, referring to Lacan, writes that "there is a certain gap in reality itself, and fantasy is precisely what fills this gap in reality" and it "is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'" (Zizek, 2003: 95; 1989: 44). Zizek points out that, in the Lacanian thesis, we are somewhat distant from reality because there is a leftover which persists and remains as a primordial core in what we call our realities. Giving an example from Lacan, Zizek writes: When we wake up from a dream, we feel relieved of its anxiety and pressure, and say, "oh, good, that was just a dream," "blinding ourselves to the fact that in our everyday, wakening reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of this dream*. It was only in the dream that we approached the fantasy-framework which determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself" (Zizek, 1989: 47). Thus, the "reality" is already supported by the fantasy (the dream-work) which, in a way, acts as a buffer to that hard kernel. When we wake up, we think we are safely distant from that fantasy framework, but, in fact, we are already in it; in the dream, we just come too close to it and save ourselves by waking up.

An interesting interpretation, regarding also this dream process about the escape into reality from the Real, is from Lacan's reading of Freud's interpretation of the dream about the "burning child." A father watches his sick child for days and nights but eventually the child dies. After the child is dead, the father is asleep in the room next to the one where his dead child is laid out, but he already leaves the door of the child's room's open so that he can see his child. After some time, in his sleep, the father dreams that his child is next to him, grabbing him by the arm and saying, "don't you see father, I'm burning" (Zizek, 1989:45). When the father finally wakes up, he sees in the other room that one of the arms of his child actually is burned by a lighted candle. Zizek explains that in Lacan's interpretation the idea is that

> the reality of the child's reproach to his father, 'Can't you see I am burning?' implying the father's fundamental guilt is more terrifying than

> so-called external reality itself, and that is why he awakens: to escape the Real of his desire, which announces itself in the dream. He escapes into so-called reality to be able to continue to sleep, to maintain his blindness, to elude awakening into the real of his desire (Zizek, 1989:45). [5]

Therefore, paradoxically, in order to be as near as possible to our realities, we need to be as distant as possible from that core to which we come too close in the dream, like this father of the child who wakes up to escape the Real. Zizek explains that,

> As soon as we recognize that it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire, the whole accent shifts radically. Our commonest everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we play our usual roles as decent ordinary people, turns out to be an illusion resting on a specific 'repression': on ignorance of the real of our desire. The social reality then becomes nothing more than a fragile symbolic tissue which can be torn at any moment by the intrusion of the real (Zizek, 1999: 21).

This same mechanism of fantasy and the Real is at work in ideology too:

> It is the same with the ideological dream, with the determination of ideology as a dreamlike construction hindering us from seeing the real state of things, reality as such. In vain do we try to break out of the ideological dream by 'opening our eyes and trying to see reality as it is', by throwing away the ideological spectacles. . . . The only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream. (Zizek, 1989: 47-48)

Thus, when people believe in something, or believe their reality to be in a certain way, it is not that they do it without knowing but they *do know* and *do it* (as if they do not know). In acting this way, they create their lives out of "absent centers" because their very reality is a fantasy-construction serving as a support for the reality they live in.

[5] For more on Freud see, Sigmund Freud. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (Psychopathology of Everyday Life, The Interpretation of Dreams and Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. Trans. A.A. Brill. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

In addition, in the construction of "realities" through fantasies, the interrelation of one subject with the "others" is important.[6] It is this idea and function of "other" that drives the concept of fantasy. According to Zizek, in the creation of fantasy, subject's relation to the big Other plays an important part because "fantasy appears . . . as an answer to '*Che vuoi*', to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other" (Zizek, 1989: 118). According to Myers, fantasy is our answer to the question "*Che vuoi*?" (what do you want from me?) by the Big Other, or the Symbolic. He explains that our roles in the Symbolic order "are arbitrary in that they are not the direct consequence of our actual, real properties" (Myers, 2003: 93). A king is a king not because there is something inherently "kingly" about him but because when he is born into a royal family, the kingly qualities and the king position in the Symbolic are conferred upon him. Therefore, there is a distance between a person and his position or role, and because of this distance s/he feels that s/he cannot fully account for that role. Or, to put it in another way, s/he cannot totally understand why s/he is in the position s/he is. *Che vuoi* expresses this distance: "'*why am I what you say I am*'—the question we address to the big Other" (Myers, 2003: 93). Because the subject (as a king, a celebrity or a lawyer) cannot be sure of what the Big Other wants from him/her, in order to dissolve this anxiety, s/he creates a scenario which will provide an answer to the question *Che vuoi* and "[f]antasy functions as an attempt to fill out the void of the question of 'what do you want from me?' by providing us with a tangible answer. It spares us from the perplexity of not knowing what the Other really wants from us" (Myers, 2003: 94).

In order to discuss this theme in detail Zizek generally gives the example of "the Jew figure" and "anti-Semitism" because "in the anti-Semitic perspective, the Jew is precisely a person about whom it is never clear 'what he really wants'—that is, his actions are always suspected of being guided by some hidden motives (the Jewish conspiracy, world domination and the moral corruption of Gentiles, and so

[6] With regard to the concept of the "other," in Zizek's works there are two "others," roughly, other as who/what is not "me" and the "big Other," as the symbolic, the world or the system where the subject is located,. In differentiating these two others, Zizek refers to the Lacanian distinction where the "other" refers to the "imaginary other [which] designates an alterity within ourselves" and the "big Other" which "refers either to the Symbolic Order as it is experienced by individual subjects, or to another subject in so far as that subject represents the Symbolic" (Myers, 2003: 23).

on)" (Zizek, 1989: 114). For that reason, here, fantasy is the answer to the question "what does the Jew want?" The answers may vary: Jews are trying to corrupt the morality, they are manipulating events, they are trying to get all the money, and they have mysterious powers…etc. In this way, a scenario which provides people with an acceptable answer regarding the Jew figure and his desire is written. Accordingly, in this scenario, the Jew is manipulating a vicious plot against other people and destroying their social unity, so the best way is avoid contact with him by staying away from him. Through this scenario, the desire to get rid of the Jew is a "means of concealing the anxiety generated by the desire of the Jews" (Myers, 2003: 98). Even before the Jew figure, according to Zizek, the Jewish God "[is] the purest embodiment of this '*Che vuoi*?', of the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss, with the formal prohibition to 'make an image of God'—to fill out the gap of the Other's desire with a positive fantasy scenario" (Zizek, 1989: 115). After all, why does God order Abraham to slaughter his son? It is not clear what God wants, and in order to answer this unclear question/this "desire" of the Other (in this case, God) the Jewish believer responds with a fantasy. Therefore, fantasy is not, as it is usually thought of, a state of mind where our desires are satisfied or where we can "fantasize" about our desires but it "realizes the desire of the Other" (Myers, 2003: 98).

In view of this, even if the fantasy is specific to subjects, it is intersubjective in that it is "produced by the interaction between subjects" (Myers, 2003: 96). It is always produced in relation to intersubjective situations; we try to "frame" our desire or learn how/what to desire so that we can satisfy the desire of the Other. To explain this, Zizek refers to Freud's daughter's fantasy of eating a strawberry cake. Because she, previously, sees how her parents enjoy watching her eating the strawberry cake, she thinks that it is what "they want from her": that is, she is expected to eat strawberry cake. Thus, although she may, actually, want to eat some strawberry cake, still, her desire is based upon, again, her desire to fulfill the Other's (in this case, her parents') desire (Myers, 2003:96). Accordingly, it is fantasy which

> provides the co-ordinates of our desire—which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something. The usual definition of fantasy ('an imagined scenario representing the realization of desire') is therefore somewhat misleading, or at least ambiguous: in the fantasy-scene the desire

> is not fulfilled, 'satisfied', but constituted . . . [;] *through fantasy we learn 'how to desire'*. In this intermediate position lies the paradox of fantasy: it is the frame co-ordinating our desire, but at the same time a defence against '*Che vuo*i?', a screen concealing the gap, the abyss of the desire of the Other. (Zizek, 1989: 118)

In addition to this defining relationship between fantasy-desire-Other, there is another paradoxical and, yet, fundamental feature of fantasy: fantasy functions as that which provides the consistency of a "socio ideological edifice" (Zizek, 1992: 89). In a very concise part titled "Fantasy as a Mask of the Inconsistency in the Big Other," Myers explains that the Symbolic, or the Big Other, is structured around a gap because when, as subjects, we enter into the Symbolic, into the space of language, we lose our full bodily senses. After entering into the Symbolic, we are barred subjects; what is barred is

> the body as the materialization, or incarnation, of enjoyment. . . . In order for the subject to enter the Symbolic Order, then, the Real of enjoyment or *jouissance* has to be evacuated from it. . . . Although not all enjoyment is completely evacuated by the process of signification (some of it persists in what we call erogenous zones) most of it is not symbolized. What this means is that the Symbolic Order cannot fully account for enjoyment—it is what is missing from the big Other. The big Other is therefore inconsistent or structured around a lack, the lack of enjoyment. . . . What fantasy does is conceal this lack or incompletion. . . . It covers up the lack in the big Other, the missing *jouissance*. (Myers, 2003: 97) [7]

Zizek writes that "[f]antasy conceals the fact that the Other, the symbolic order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized—i.e. the real of *jouissance*: through fantasy *jouissance* is domesticated, 'gentrified' . . ." (1989: 123). Hence, fantasy conceals that the Symbolic, the system we live in, is already "split"—with an inherent lack—and fantasy "constitutes the

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[7] Sarah Kay presents a "Glossary of Zizekian Terms" where she provides explanations to basic Zizekian concepts. In this regard, she explains jouissance as "Zizek's translation of the Lacanian term *jouissance*. Although *jouissance* carries stronger and (because it can connote orgasm) more sexual associations than English 'enjoyment,' 'enjoyment' has the benefit of gesturing towards the signified ('enjoymeant') in a way similar to *jouissance.* . . . In Zizek's usage, enjoyment is usually identifiable with what Lacan calls 'surplus enjoyment' (*plus de jouissance/plus de jourir).* Given that the real as such is inaccessible, enjoyment comes in the form of a surplus, or remainder, that permeates all of our SYMBOLIC institutions as their obscene underside . . . At the same time as being unknown to us, it is compulsory." (Kay, 2003:162-163).

frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful" (Zizek, 1989: 123).

Accordingly, the fantasy figure who embodies the abysmal "*Che vuoi*?" serves to conceal this inherent absence. People attribute to this figure or thing the role of "an outsider, a foreigner" who does not belong and who poses a threat to integrity and, then, come together around this disintegrating element. Thus, in order to conceal a basic lack, fantasy creates an element that does not fit into the "seeming" pattern or texture of a society, but it is through that unfitting element that the pattern or texture is completed. As Zizek writes, "*fantasy* guarantees the consistency of a socio ideological edifice [by] designa[ting] an element which 'sticks out,' which cannot be integrated into the given symbolic structure, yet which, precisely as such, constitutes its identity" (1992: 89). For example, in a fantasy figure like the Jew figure—or who/whatever whose desire is not known—the Jew is attributed negative qualities and through perceiving the Jew with these qualities the basic lack is kept hidden, such as, if only this Jew has never existed (or this thing had never happened), everything was so good. As Zizek explains, this fantasy figure, while acting as a "destructive means," ironically, functions as a "positive condition" to a society or its homogeneity:

> what appears as the hindrance to society's full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto the Jew the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society qua consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible" (1992: 90). [8]

According to Zizek, this is because society is already inherently split by a contradictory or opposing dynamic, and fantasy functions to hide and/or give the impression that such a split has never existed and that the society and its parts are all in harmony:

[8] In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek explains that "it is the merit of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that they have, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) developed a theory of the social field founded on such a notion of antagonism—on an acknowledgement of an original 'trauma', an impossible kernel which resists symbolization, totalization, symbolic integration," and it is from Laclau and Mouffe's idea of antagonism that Zizek enriches and elaborates his theory. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: 1985.

> . . . society is always traversed by an antagonistic split which cannot be integrated into symbolic order. And the stake of social-ideological fantasy is to construct a vision of society which *does* exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary.
>
> The notion of social fantasy is therefore a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism: fantasy is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked. In other words, fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance. (Zizek, 1989:126)

Having made all this contribution to the concept of ideology, Zizek later revises his definition of ideology, as he does in his definitions of the concept of the Real. He accepts that he defined ideology in a certain way but, now, he provides a more refined definition for ideology:

> I am no longer satisfied with my old definition of ideology where the point was that ideology is the illusion which fills in the gap of impossibility and inherent impossibility is transposed into an external obstacle, and that therefore what needs to be done is to reassert the original impossibility. . . . I am almost tempted to say that the ultimate ideological operation is the opposite one: that is, the very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it.
>
> Again, I am almost tempted to turn the standard formula around. Yes, on the one hand, ideology involves translating impossibility into a particular historical blockage, thereby sustaining the dream of ultimate fulfillment—a consummate encounter with the Thing. On the other hand . . . ideology also functions as a way of regulating a certain distance with such an encounter. It sustains at the level of fantasy precisely what it seeks to avoid at the level of actuality: it endeavors to convince us that the Thing cannot ever be encountered, that the Real forever eludes our grasp. So ideology appears to involve both sustenance and avoidance in regard to encountering the Thing. (Daly, 2004: 70)

With these new explanations, Zizek shifts the emphasis in the concept of ideology. In former explanations, ideology attributes the impossibility/inherent lack onto a "foreign" body, implying that a fulfillment can be achieved when that foreign body is blocked. Now, ideology still attributes impossibility onto a foreign body, giving the sense that if that block is removed, the Thing can be achieved. Then, at the same time, it postpones any meeting with the Thing and postpones any ending, creating the

image that it is always eluding and it cannot be met. Daly adds that, with Zizek's revisions,

> crucial here is the status of the category of the impossible. For Zizek impossibility is not the kind of neutral category that we tend to find in Laclau and Mouffe . . . where it tends to connote a basic constitutive frontier of antagonism. Like the immanent markers of the Real, impossibility gets caught up in ideology and is configured in such a way that it both structures reality and determines the coordinates of what is actually possible. . . . Ideology is the impossible dream not simply in terms of overcoming impossibility but in terms of sustaining that impossibility in an acceptable way. That is to say, the idea of overcoming is sustained as a deferred moment of reconciliation without having to go through the pain of overcoming as such. (2004: 11)

Thus, like the Real, the concept of ideology functions in very paradoxical and far subtler ways than it might at first seem since both concepts are doubled or even multi-sided. Thus, in order to grasp the paradoxical natures of not only the Real and ideology but also our realities one needs to "look awry," as in the title of one of Zizek's books.

2.1.3. "Looking Awry"

According to Zizek, our understanding of reality is somewhat blurred because our access to reality is not direct but it goes astray as we try to "see" what is around us. For as Sarah Kay writes, "[a]ny perception of reality, Zizek argues, relies on its point of inherent failure. Unless there is a remainder of the real to spoil the picture, we cannot see it; if the lack of fit between reality and the real is eliminated, we lose all sense of reality" (2003: 72). This spot, or as Zizek calls it, the "stain" seems as what "stains" our view but it is what makes possible our "seeing" because we cannot "really" see reality (1992: 4). Therefore, paradoxically, that spot acts both as what prevents us from seeing and what provides our seeing. In order to illustrate this stain which both stains our reality and shows it to us, Zizek analyzes Charlie Chaplin's movie, *City Lights*, which is about a tramp who is in love with a blind girl selling flowers on the street. For Zizek, the tramp here functions as a stain. For, at the very first scene, the tramp is seen in his black suit, sleeping at the lap of a big statue when

the statue's cover is pulled off by the mayor in front of a crowded group of people. At the moment of the mayor's pulling the cover, he stands there as a black mark in front of the people, distracting and/or contaminating their gaze.[9] He is "thus an object of a gaze aimed at something or somebody else: he is mistaken for somebody else and accepted as such, or else—as soon as the audience becomes aware of the mistake—he turns into a disturbing stain one tries to get rid of as quickly as possible" (Zizek, 1992: 4). This situation, Zizek explains, is the perfect example where one finds him/herself occupying a position that does not belong to him/her. The tramp is "always interposed between a gaze and its 'proper' object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object—a stain which disturbs 'direct' communication between the gaze and its 'proper' object, leading the straight gaze astray, changing it into a kind of squint" (Zizek, 1992: 4).

Through the gaze that goes astray we are positioned in each other's fantasy frames which provide us with a certain view or perception of life. Here, Zizek emphasizes a different position regarding the so-called fantastic/real people distinction. For him, it is not, as is usually thought of, "fantasy figures are nothing but distorted, combined, or otherwise concocted figures of their 'real' models, of people of flesh and blood" (Zizek, 1992: 5). It is just the opposite; because each person is identified with a certain place in another's fantasy frame that that person is "such and such," and also "not such and such." In the "network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other's symbolic structure. . . . We can relate to . . . 'people of flesh and blood' only insofar as we are able to identify them with a certain place in our symbolic fantasy space" (Zizek, 1992: 4-5). For fantasy does not simply refer to a

[9] Apart from "look" and "see," "gaze" is also a psychoanalytical term from Lacan, carrying some threatening and horrifying connotations. Sarah Kay explains it as an "object attached to the scopic drive (elaborated by Lacan, Seminar XI). Like all Lacanian objects it is an imaginary construct, but it has an exceptionally strong attachment to the REAL. Zizek stresses that it is object and not subject: the gaze does not involve my looking but my being looked *at*" (Kay, 2003:164). Zizek writes that "in what I see, in what is open to my view, there is always a point where 'I see nothing,' a point which 'makes no sense,' i.e., which functions as the picture's stain—this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me" and "the part missing in the mirror-image of myself . . . is my own gaze, the object-gaze which sees me out there. . . . [T]here certainly is in the mirror image 'more than meets the eye,' yet this surplus that eludes the eye, the point in the image which eludes my eye's grasp is none other than *the gaze itself*: as Lacan put it, 'you can never see me at the point from which I gaze at you'"(1992: 15, 126-127).

dreamy state of mind which cannot see the things as they really are, or "fantasy is not simply on the side of imagination; fantasy is, rather, the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality—the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our 'sense of reality'" (Zizek, 1999: 122). In *City Lights*, the blind girl mistakes the tramp for the prince charming she has been waiting for. It does not matter that the rich prince charming does not exist at all; for the tramp fills in the place of the prince in the blind girl's fantasy space and exists in relation to this space. Thus, the tramp "finds himself occupying, filling out a certain empty place [the prince does not exist] in the structure" and his function "is thus literally that of an intercessor, middleman, purveyor: a kind of go-between, love messenger, intermediary between himself (i.e., his own ideal figure: the fantasy figure of the rich Prince Charming in the girl's imagination) and the girl" (Zizek, 1992: 5-6). In occupying a certain empty place and acting as a stain, the tramp's existence in the symbolic is maintained because his existence is related with the fact that he is *identified with a certain fantasy place* in the fantasy frame of the girl. In a way, because he *is* a "black spot," there is a certain version of reality where the poor blind girl loves a man who is (*a substitute of*) her prince charming: a poor girl who cannot see (*reality*) and a tramp who does not have anything (*in reality*) gain a sense of reality from their fantasy frames.

In addition, because his existence is supported by the blind girl's fantasy, the moment this support is broken his existence is broken too. As Zizek explains, when the tramp is reduced to his "bare existence" out of the "ideal support," he dissolves in the symbolic: "when the subject's presence is exposed outside the symbolic support, he 'dies' as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other (the symbolic order) . . ." (Zizek, 1992: 8). According to Zizek the movie's end is important in terms of the relation between this nothingness and the symbolic existence (supported by a fantasy frame). The movie ends when the girl's eyes are healed and she can see the tramp, and says: "Yes, I can see now." Her words are significant in two senses: first, now she can "literally" see since her eyes are healed. Second, and more important, she can now *see the tramp* for who he really is without fantasy support. The movie ends at this exact moment and there are no

hints whether the girl, now seeing the "real situation," will accept the tramp and they will live happily ever after, or whether the tramp will want her in this new state, i.e., she is not a helpless, pretty girl anymore. Therefore, when the fantasy frame's support is broken, that is, when the stain no longer exists to provide the possibility of a certain state of things, the (symbolic) structure that the fantasy frame maintains is dissolved too: "when our fundamental fantasy is shattered, we experience the loss of reality" (Zizek, 1999: 122). Paradoxically, it is the stain that keeps us both away from getting too close to the "bare existence" and next to our everyday "realities." Otherwise, all there is left is "the massive weight of . . . presence outside symbolic representation" and "what we are forced to grasp is . . . the fact that the real 'message' . . . is the stain itself" (Zizek, 1992: 7-8). Ironically, we "see" "because of" the stain but when we really *see the stain*, all we are left with is nothingness of the hole or the void in the symbolic. It is this nothingness/void that is at the core of the symbolic/reality that we are about to see and it is this same nothingness that we stay away from in our "everyday life within its closed horizon of meaning, safe in [our] distance with respect to the world of objects, assured of their meaning (or their insignificance)" (Zizek, 1992: 15). Therefore, as Kay writes, "the price of seeing everyday reality is that we don't see the blot, even though this is in fact what frames and gives definition to reality" and we maintain ourselves "however precariously in reality . . . at the cost of *not seeing* something, the objects of fundamental fantasy by which that reality is defined" (2003: 62).

What makes us aware of this "inherent failure" or the void in reality is a specific angle, the "anamorphosis," or which, as Zizek explains, is the "the element that, when viewed straightforwardly, remains a meaningless stain, but which, as soon as we look at the picture from a precisely determined lateral perspective, all of a sudden acquires well-known contours" (1991: 90).[10] Myers also defines anamorphosis as "an image distorted in such a way that it is only recognizable from a specific angle" (Myers, 2003: 99). Kay defines anamorphosis as "the backwards

[10] Many sites on the internet can be found on anamorphosis; some of the most interesting ones, which provide not only Holbein's original painting, but also its version of when looked awry are, www.math.nus.edu.sg/aslaksen/teaching/holbein.html; www.anamorphosis.com and www.nwe.ufl.edu/~tharpold/resources/holbein/ 14.01.2008.

glance that assigns meaning to what had previously seemed troublesome, inconsistent or resistant to analysis" (2003: 51). In *Looking Awry*, Zizek elaborates this idea of anamorphosis and the specific angle that is needed to be aware of such an angle with the example of German painter Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* painting. This painting shows two ambassadors standing, but at the bottom of the painting (i.e., the floor where the ambassadors stand) there is a white-like, formless shape "staining" the painting, or in Zizek's words "an amorphous, extended, 'erected' spot" (1991: 90).[11] This stain which looks like a shapeless extra figure in the painting seems as a distortion, sticking out of the painting, but when looked at not in-front but from a specific right angle, it is seen as a skull (Zizek, 1989: 99; Zizek, 1991: 90; Myers, 2003: 99). Making no sense in itself, this spot is what

> opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning—nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new 'hidden meanings': it is a driving force of endless compulsion. (Zizek, 1991: 91)

As Zizek states, this is the logic of anamorphosis at work: "a detail of a picture that 'gaz'd rightly,' i.e., straightforwardly, appears as a blurred spot, [but it] assumes clear, distinguished shapes once we look at it 'awry,' at an angle" (1991: 11). By creating such a change of perception, anamorphosis implies that when we see something we do not get a "direct or real" perception of what we see. What we see is already "stained" and is related with our "fantasy frames" which frame or support how we "see" reality. This fantasy frame is our "particular or subjective frame of reality," acting, in a way, as a buffer against the inherent Real "staining" the reality. Thus, anamorphosis is our point of view, our "surplus knowledge" contaminating our

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[11] Zizek reads this "erected" spot in the sense of the "Lacanian phallic signifier." In *Looking Awry*, he writes that "this is the way Lacan defines the phallic signifier, as a 'signifier without signified' which, as such, renders possible the effects of the signified: the 'phallic' element of a picture is a meaningless stain that 'denatures' it, rendering all its constituents 'suspicious'," and, in this way, it triggers the efforts for meaning (1991:91). Also, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek explains how this "phallic" signifier functions in the field of ideology: "The criticism of ideology must perform a somewhat homologous operation: if we look at the element which holds together the ideological edifice, at this 'phallic,' erected Guarantee of Meaning . . . we are able to recognize in it the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning" (1989: 99-100).

gaze in a certain frame (Myers, 2003: 99). The irony, as well as the important point, here is that our subjective frames, far from being limited and biased versions, look "directly" by looking "awry."

In order to discuss how we "see awry" through subjective frames, Zizek gives an example from Shakespeare's *Richard II*. He explains that at the beginning of Act II, Scene II, the king is away and there is a dialogue between the queen, who is full of grief and pain with no concrete reason at hand, and Bushy, the king's servant, who tries to comfort the queen by trying to explain to her that her grief and worries have no foundation. According to Zizek, at this point in the play, Bushy's words to the ueen can be interpreted in two ways. Bushy's first words, "for sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears/Divides one thing entire to many objects," (qtd. in Zizek, 1991: 10) firstly, refer to the "simple, commonsense opposition between a thing as it is 'in itself,' in reality, and its 'shadows,' reflections in our eyes, subjective impressions multiplied by our anxieties and sorrows" (Zizek, 1991: 11). For if we are worried about someone or something that issue appears far more serious, worse and problematic than it really is. Even if what we are worried about is a small problem, "[i]nstead of the tiny surface, we see its 'twenty shadows'" because of our stress and worry (Zizek, 1991: 11). In this sense, the queen's looking at the king's absence with her anxiety and worry distorts her view, that is, she cannot see and think "clearly" because her look is already blurred. She needs to "see" clearly" and understand that there is nothing to worry about the king.

However, there is another level in Bushy's words since he also says that: "like perspectives which rightly gaz'd upon show nothing but confusion; ey'd awry distinguish form," which Zizek identifies as Bushy's passing on to the perspective of anamorphosis from the perspective of comforting the queen (Zizek, 1991: 11). That is to say, because the queen is worried and anxious, she "looks" awry and "*precisely by 'looking awry,' i.e., at an angle, she sees the thing in its clear and distinct form*, in opposition to the 'straightforward' view that sees only an indistinct confusion" (1991: 11). This is the second meaning in Bushy's words. If we look at a thing straight-on we see a "formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features

only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e., with an 'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by *desire*" (Zizek, 1991: 12). Looking awry, in this sense, does not just give us a "distorted, blurred image" but, through that distorted or blurred image, it brings us closer to the nothingness, to the void that *is*/*becomes* something by looking awry: it "is the anamorphotic object, a pure semblance that we can perceive clearly only by 'looking awry'" in our *undistorted* realities (Zizek, 1991: 12). Thus, it is only when we look awry that we see the stain, and it is when we *see* the stain that our fantasy, our *undistorted* realities dissolve. In this regard, looking awry directs our look to the nothingness, to the

> object that can be perceived only by a gaze '*distorted*' by desire, an object that *does not exist* for an 'objective gaze' [because] outside this distortion, 'in itself,' *it does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion . . . introduced into so-called 'objective reality'" (Zizek, 1991: 12).

In other words, "[this] Object, therefore, is literally something that is created—whose place is encircled—through a network of detours, approximations and near-misses" (Zizek, 1999: 156).

For Zizek, we come closest to this "literally created" anamorphic object, the void in the director Alfred Hitchcock's famous tracking shot, especially in his groundbreaking movie *The Birds*. Zizek explains that in the Hitchcockian tracking shot "from an overall view of reality, we advance toward the blot that provides it with its frame. . . . [Like the Moebius strip] by moving away from the side of reality, we find ourselves suddenly alongside the real whose extraction constitutes reality" (1991: 95). For instance, in the movie *The Birds*, there is a scene where the hero's mother, entering a room that has been destroyed by the birds, sees a body whose eyes are torn out by the birds. In this scene, the camera first shows the entire body, then, instead of slowly focusing on the head and eyes, Hitchcock "*drastically* speeds up; with two abrupt cuts, each bringing us closer to the subject, he quickly shows us the corpse's head" (Zizek, 1991: 93). Zizek writes that through his tracking shot Hitchcock creates an effect of "radical discontinuity," not by linking the disconnected fragments but "by showing us the heterogeneous element that must

remain an inert, nonsensical 'blot' if the rest of the picture is to acquire the consistency of a symbolic reality" (1991: 95). Hitchcock does this by "isolating the stain, this remainder of the real that 'sticks out'" in that, instead of, as in usual tracking shot,

> endow[ing] the object-blot with a particular weight by slowing down the "normal" speed and by *deferring* the approach, [here in Hitchcock's shot] the object is "missed" precisely insofar as we approach it precipitously, too quickly. . . . We "miss" the object because of the speed, because this object is already empty in itself, hollow—it cannot be evoked other than "too slowly" or "too swiftly," because in its "proper time" it is nothing. (1991: 93, 94)

In Hitchcock's too swift, too quick and near-missing movements we find ourselves abruptly closer to the stain, to the void that must remain intact. This move reminds also the dream process where we wake up to escape to reality from the Real which we suddenly come too close to (as in the dream of the father of the burning, dead child). Thus, when we wake from a dream we feel relieved, and we try to see things in a "clear and objective manner" so as not to come too close to the point where we may come face to face with the distorted, nothingness point. In order to avoid such an encounter we make a detour to wake up and we "see clearly in daylight," instead of "looking awry in the dream."

2.1.4. "*Passage a l'act*" and "Traversing the Fantasy"

If looking awry brings us to the void which we try to escape there is a more radical attitude than looking awry in confronting that void. It is "the act" as different from what it usually connotes, the action or deed. Instead, the act, as Zizek uses it, is even one step further than coming closer to and bypassing the spot. Rather, it is "a suspension of constituted reality" (Zizek, 1992: 46). According to Zizek,

> the act differs from an active intervention (action) in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent): the act is not simply something I "accomplish"—after an act, I'm literally "not the same as before." In this sense, we could say that the subject "undergoes" the act ("passes through" it) rather than "accomplishes" it: in it, the subject is annihilated and

> subsequently reborn (or not) i.e., the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject. (Zizek, 1992: 44)

This "temporary eclipse" or "annihilation" reminds, again, of Hegel's "night of the world" concept. The night of the world refers to the state when the self withdraws from itself, from the world into the night of the world, that is, into experiencing the world and reality as complete negativity and loss. Such an experience is before and even beyond our symbolic realities, and Zizek explains that,

> [w]hat we forget, when we pursue our daily life, is that our human universe is nothing but an embodiment of the radically inhuman "abstract negativity," of the abyss we experience when we face the "night of the world." And what is the *act* if not the moment when the subject who is its bearer *suspends* the network of symbolic fictions which serve as a support to his daily life and confronts again the radical negativity upon which they are founded. (1992: 53)

Similarly, Myers also pays attention to the similarity between the act and the Hegelian night of the world:

> Just as the "night of the world" is the founding gesture of subjectivity, so the act is a return to that gesture, a repeat of the founding movement of the subject. As such, it is an act of madness in which one withdraws from the world, risking not only any possible return but more fundamentally what one will return to. (Myers, 2003: 60)

According to Zizek, this act of withdrawal or as Lacan calls it "passage a l'acte" or "'passage to the act' . . . entails an exit from the symbolic network, a dissolution of the social bond" (Zizek, 1999: 33). That is to say, the subject who *acts*, suspends his/her bonds to the symbolic, and thus, suspends his/her fantasy support to the symbolic, i.e., his daily life too. Thus, while the act is no longer in the domain of the symbolic "acting out is still a symbolic act, an act addressed to the great Other. The 'passage to the act,' by contrast, suspends the dimension of the Other: the act is here transposed into the domain of the Real" (Zizek, 1999: 33). In order to explain this act, Zizek discusses two Roberto Rosselini movies, *Germany, Year Zero* and *Stromboli*. In *Germany, Year Zero* Edmund's patricide and ensuing suicide—in a way that generates almost no feeling at all, no sense of empathy, pain or anger—are

"acts" because such an act "is an act of 'absolute freedom' which momentarily suspends the field of ideological meaning," and it is "precisely by being emptied of every 'positive' (ideological, psychological) content [that] Edmund's act is an act of freedom" (Zizek, 1992: 35). Edmund's act which cannot be placed in the symbolic takes him out of the symbolic too. Thus, Edmund is "excluded from the community, [and is] 'symbolically dead'" because he "assert[s] a distance to the Big Other itself, the symbolic order" (Zizek, 1992: 36). That is why, "such an act presents the only moment when we are effectively 'free'" (Zizek, 1992: 77). At that moment, the subject is not in the symbolic but s/he suspends it and withdraws him/herself completely out of it.

In addition to being almost an impossible experience of undergoing the zero point, the act may have unforeseen results, offering no alternative for its aftermath: "With an act *stricto sensu*, we can . . . never fully foresee its consequences, i.e., the way it will transform the existing symbolic space: the act is a rupture after which 'nothing remains the same'" (Zizek, 1992: 45). Rex Butler, in *Slavoj Zizek: Live Theory*, in explaining the characteristics of Zizekian act, writes that the act "do[es] not remain within the range of commonly accepted possibilities, but actively seek[s] to expand them. There is always an element of the unexpected and unpredictable associated with the act, of something not foreseeable within the current conceptual horizons" (2005: 66-67).[12] For Zizek, a case in point to such destructive break is Antigone's saying "no" to Creon, the state power. Because, firstly, "her act is literally suicidal, she excludes herself from the community," and then, her act of saying "no" does not even offer an alternative to what she resists; "she offers nothing new, no positive program—she just insists on her unconditional demand" (Zizek, 1992: 45). Antigone's case can be a good example of why the act is not simply an accomplishment but almost a suspension of the symbolic; she dares to defy the

[12] Rex Butler also lists some of the "acts" that Zizek gives as example: "Kevin Kline blurting out 'I'm gay' instead of 'yes!' during his wedding ceremony in *In and Out* [,]. . . Mel Gibson not cenceding to his son's kidnappers' demands . . . no matter what the consequences. . . in *Ransom* [and] Keyser Soeze [Kevin Spacey], upon finding his wife and daughter held hostage by a rival gang, shooting them so that they no longer have any hold over him in *The Usual Suspects*"(2005: 66).

symbolic and can confront exclusion and/or losing her place in the symbolic, but does not offer anything in return. [13]

Also, in Rossellini's *Stromboli*, Karin, while trying to escape from the dull existence of a volcanic island community, experiences the Real in the form of the smoke and fumes of a volcano ready to erupt: "In the face of the primordial power of the volcano, all social ties pale into insignificance, she is reduced to her bare 'being there'" (Zizek, 1992: 43). Here the important point is that there are two versions of this movie. The American version implies that Karin understands her need to return to the village and, in this regard, the movie implies a kind of resolution or reconciliation (with the primordial power). However, according to Zizek, the Italian version of the movie is more significant since it does not end with a proper solution to this experience, and we do not learn whether Karin leaves the village or return to it. According to Zizek, the Italian version's

> very irresolution . . . marks the proper dimension of the act: it ends at the precise point at which the *act* is already accomplished, although no *action* is yet performed. The act done (or, more appropriately: endured) by Karin is that of *symbolic suicide*: an act of 'losing all, of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,' from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel 'abstract negativity.' (Zizek, 1992: 43)

Even if, in the face of the volcano, Karin cries out, "I'm afraid, God," next morning, in all the stillness around her, she experiences a "supreme bliss" and she, again, says "Oh, God," this time implying an awareness on her part that "what, a moment ago, she was so afraid to lose, is totally null, i.e., is already in itself a kind of loss" (Zizek, 1992: 43). According to Zizek, this passage through zero point is the act itself when

[13] One of the most interesting and provocative explanations of Zizek concerns this "act of Antigone." According to Zizek, Antigones's act clearly shows the "feminine nature" of "the act." Lacan's "notorious" expression "woman does not exist" (Seminar XX) is elaborated by Zizek, in a chapter titled "Why Is *Woman* a Symptom of Man?" and here he explains that "the act as real is feminine. . . . The very masculine *activity* is already an escape from the abysmal dimension of the feminine *act*. The 'break with nature' is on the side of woman and man's compulsive activity is ultimately nothing but a desperate attempt to repair the traumatic incision of this rupture" (Zizek, 1992: 46). In this regard, Zizek considers Lacan's "dissolution of the *Ecole freudienne*" as a "feminine act," and Lacan's "gesture of founding the new *Ecole de la Cause*" as a masculine gesture (Zizek, 1992: 46).

we are totally free. For, now, we know that maybe we have nothing to lose, we can "renounce renunciation itself" (Zizek, 1992: 43).

Although, generally, Zizek interprets "the act" as the passage to the zero point, he revises the concept of act too, as he did the concepts of the Real and ideology. Sarah Kay, noticing this "pattern" in Zizek's entire oeuvre, that is, his constant revisions and adjustments to his concepts and themes, writes that Zizek, until the last few years, emphasizes the act as "the hysterical acting out," and a suspension of the symbolic (2003: 155). However, she adds, Zizek has modified some parts in some of his work, and "[m]ore recent writings have refocused his understanding of the act. . . . The act, he now says explicitly, is not the hysterical 'acting out' (of the imaginary), nor an act/edit (of the symbolic), nor yet again the psychotic *passage a l'acte* (of the real)" (Kay, 2003: 155). In *On Belief*, Zizek writes that, "[t]he act proper is the only one which restructures the very symbolic co-ordinates of the agent's situation. It is an intervention in the course of which the agent's identity itself is radically changed" (2001: 85). Thus, the act can be an opportunity to start fresh, to make a new beginning, but in the "real" Zizekian sense it seems impossible to realize. Still, as Myers writes, "[i]t is this aspect of the act, the negation which opens up the possibility of reinvention, which is most appealing to Zizek" (2003: 60).

In opening up the possibility of reinvention, what completes the act is, probably, "traversing the fantasy." It is in traversing the fantasy that we, in a way, do "act." However, this does not mean that with the act, fantasy as a support is annihilated, nor has this anything "to do with a sobering act of dispelling the fantasies that obfuscate our clear perception of the real state of things. . . . 'Traversing the fantasy,' on the contrary, involves our over-identification with the domain of imagination . . ." (Zizek, 1999: 122). Remembering Zizek's idea that society is already traversed by an antagonism, and the subject is already the embodiment of a void, traversing the fantasy requires us to realize this inherent split. Traversing the fantasy, Myers writes, "is that we have to acknowledge that fantasy merely functions to screen the abyss or inconsistency in the Other" (2003: 108). For

instance, one needs to understand that the characteristics attributed to the "Jew figure as a hindrance" are only the products of his/her system. It is not the Jew/doctor/lazy student figure, or whatever it is that emerges as the fantasy figure that is a hindrance to a society's, or, even, one's own, completion. We project our very desires, hatreds, anxieties or questions on to somebody and/or something else and, then, believe in our very own projections. In a sense, our fantasies mask this hypocrisy on our part. Thus, as Zizek writes, because

> fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void[;]. . . fantasy is not to be interpreted, only 'traversed': all we have to do is experience how there is nothing 'behind' it, and how fantasy masks precisely this 'nothing'. . .
>
> In 'going through fantasy'[,]. . . we must recognize in the properties attributed to 'Jew' the necessary product of our very social system: we must recognize in the 'excesses' attributed to 'Jews' the truth about ourselves. (1989: 126, 128)

In other words, by traversing the fantasy we can see that our failures *are* of ourselves, not the fantasy figures; the fantasy figures function to point out the reality of our failures to us. Ironically, it is through this revelation that we gather around our failures in a fake sense of completion.

To conclude, what completes Zizek's ideas is the concept of void at the center of being and reality. It seems that all our efforts are to fill in, or at least, to feel like filling in that void. As he says in his preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in his overall effort to "accomplish a kind of 'return to Hegel' . . . by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis," his main reference is to "a certain radical loss," to an absent center at the/as the core of the being (Zizek, 1989: 7). The Real is where this absent center lurks from time to time in different forms/guises. Whether it is the inherent antagonism in a group or a traumatic experience in a person's life, this inherent void, the Real is what people try to (postpone) encounter(ing) and deal(ing) with. This is most clear in people's perception of their identities and lives which, in the Zizekian sense, turns out to be versions of reality that are supported by fantasy frames. We can say that Zizek, on the one hand, tries to reveal such a frame and its workings through a combined analysis of popular culture

products with “high theory.” On the other hand, he offers a way out of this certain deadlock by traversing the Real and by the act. However, considering the various definitions and features attributed to “act” it seems highly challenging, if not impossible, to make that act.

3. THE BRUNIST COMMUNITY: THE FICTIONALIZED ABSENT CENTER

3.1. Brunism as Reality Fantasy

Lois Gordon states that Robert Coover' s first novel *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966) is his "apprenticeship to conventional form" before he moves on to "more ambitious, unusual approaches" in his "not-so-traditional" kind of fictions (1983: 19; McCaffery, 1982: 30) Coover himself explains in an interview that

> I thought of it, a bit, as paying dues. I didn't feel I had the right to move into more presumptuous fictions until I could prove I could handle the form as it now was in the world. In a sense, the trip down the mine was my submerging of myself into the novel experience and then coming out again with my own revelations. . . . The basic concerns that are in everything I write are also in that book—though they look a little different, they are still there. (Gado, 1973: 148)

Commenting on this novel, Larry McCaffery states that "more than any of Coover's other works, the strengths of this book are drawn from traditional fiction, especially the realistic novel. Thus *The Brunists* has more than twenty vividly drawn, realistic characters and provides most of the other elements of plot and setting familiar to conventional fiction" (1982: 30). Then, sharing McCaffery's views, Evenson adds that

> *The Origin of the Brunists,* then, is the most traditional of Coover's books. Its characterization is often conventional, and it has a plot that builds tension roughly linearly, developing to a point of climax. Yet even within this form, Coover begins to experiment; it is already clear that the confines of the realistic novel are too constricting for his artistic vision. *The Origin of the Brunists* should be seen less as Coover's attempt to write a traditional novel than as Coover's attempt to figure an escape route *out* of the traditional novel. (2003: 26)

It is clear that the novel's seeming conventionality includes a more complex and promising narrative. Then, Lois Gordon calls attention, especially, to the novel's, "in its last pages, unique blending of realistic, fantastic and mythic materials" and adds

that "[p]erhaps in the very writing of the *Origin* Coover exhausted the limits of traditional characterization and plot to his own satisfaction and then felt free to pursue his innovative fictions (1983: 19). Similarly, McCaffery, emphasizes how Coover's "payments" to the traditional form "seem to be made with ambivalent feelings" as "he constantly undercuts the realistic impulses of the book by borrowing elements from the surreal, the fantastic, and the absurd" (1982: 30). As Andersen claims, "[w]ithout [abandoning] the traditional novel for more experimental forms or . . . [classifying] the conventional novel as obsolete, Coover manages to depart from the traditional novel without adopting an antinovelist style" and in doing this, he "critique[s] established institutions, particularly religious and political institutions [by] draw[ing] elements from realism and naturalism but to combine them with absurd and surreal elements and with a metafictional style that sometimes calls attention to itself" (Andersen 1981: 41-42; Evenson, 2003: 23).

Thus, Coover's seemingly traditional form merging both realistic and fantastic/mythical elements in *The Origin of the Brunists* gives him the chance to disrupt the "supposed smooth flow" of the traditional form both on the structural and narrative level. This disruptive mode becomes Coover's means of showing how most of the forms whose smooth flow we take for granted are actually not so smooth but are structured upon "absences" which are filled in and turned into "centers" in time through rumors, stories . . . etc. The concept "centers" is paradoxical in two senses. On the one hand, these centers function as "centers" because they pull people towards them like magnets and cause people to gather around them for a purpose. On the other hand, they are "absent" and therefore dysfunctional centers because they are already created by those very people who gather around them for a purpose. Their artificial and constructed nature implies that anytime, they are subject to change, even to dissolution only to be replaced by new centers when needed. Thus, these centers are artificial forms/constructions functioning as people's realities, and Coover's novel displays this irony by both "creating" absent centers and "showing" the creation of such centers through the story of a mine explosion and the following religious frenzy in a small mining town. Thus, Coover is the artist/ "creator" who

creates both the individual stories of the Brunists (the characters of the novel) and the Brunist story as a novel.

Yet, even before its narrative level, the structure of the novel is suggestive of an "absence" since it challenges the usual linear storytelling pattern, refusing to settle within the usual limits of telling a story and thus complicating the narrative form. To begin with, the novel consists of four parts in addition to a prologue and an epilogue. The "Prologue" named "The Sacrifice" tells about the gathering of the Brunists at the Mount of Redemption where, as they believe it, the world will end and the apocalypse will occur. After this prologue come the four chapters of the novel (supposedly the rising action part) which narrate the mine explosion, the formation of the Brunist cult and the culmination of events towards the gathering scene narrated already in the prologue. Thus, even though the prologue (supposedly the introductory part even before the first chapter) is placed at the opening of the novel, in terms of the plot line it takes place in the middle of things, or in other words, it "takes place chronologically after the major events of the rest of the narrative" (Evenson, 2003: 27). In this way, the novel starts in the middle to "progress backwards." Lois Gordon likens this kind of beginning to the

> classical epic which begins *in medias res* (as Milton, for example, introduces the already fallen angels), [and] Coover begins, so to speak, in the middle of things—at the penultimate 'Gathering' scene two days before the anticipated apocalypse. . . . Most of what follows is Coover's speculation, *his* book of Genesis, regarding the birth of a religion. We are back to the beginning of things. (1983: 25)

As such, the epilogue's title "Return" gains importance because it does not just imply an end but, rather, implies a sense of beginning anew or a return to the point of start. For although in the chapter before "Return," Miller is mentioned as dead due to an assault on the Mount of Redemption, in "Return," he appears again, recovering from the accident, with his nurse and girl friend Happy Bottom beside him. This structure undermines the expectations for a traditional structure and challenges both temporal and narrative linearity, provoking a sense of

incompleteness and confusion, and thus triggering the readers' desire to think about and interpret the meaning of all these confusing events.

In addition, emphasizing the novel's structure which invites readers to participate as interpreters more, "Prologue" part is significant in other ways. For at the beginning of "Prologue" there is a quotation from the New Testament, Revelation to John 1:11, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the Seven Churches" (11). Evenson explains this quotation as Coover's implication of "the relation between writing and divine revelation. To begin this way gives the sense that *The Origin of the Brunists* will be concerned with the nature of 'revelation' and its interpretation and recording" (2003: 27). In this case, Coover is the writer who writes this story and sends his revelations, if not to the seven churches, to different readers around the world. Then, also, there are the "writer" characters of the novel, both the Brunists and anti-Brunists who create/write their stories and send it to many places so that many people come and join their group. Therefore, Coover indicates that the "origin" of the Brunists is based on telling and writing which are products of and subject to interpretation in their retellings and rewritings. Such an "origin" and its reality do not seem to be stable and reliable, but very likely to be affected by the variety of interpretations. As Evenson continues to explain,

> Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* is . . . interested in the diversity of interpretation to which supposed revelation is subject. The novel chronicles in detail the power struggles inherent in the formation of a religious community, showing the way in which revelation and its interpretation—myth-making—are integral parts of these power struggles. (2003: 27)

Thus, in writing and sending out what "is seen" and what "he sees," Coover emphasizes both the fact that it is the interpretations and the fictions which are at the root of many "origins" and that these origins carry the marks of those struggles as to whose version will be the true/real/accepted/dominant one. The novel displays and analyzes this tendency; while the formation process of the Brunists shows the competing attempts at making sense out of events, Coover's narration, the novel, is the version that presents and comments on all the individual versions and struggles.

Throughout the novel, Coover narrates this story mostly through an unknown third-person, reminiscent of the traditional narration, only to interrupt that narration with speeches, monologues of other characters, letters to the newspaper editor, sermons and spiritual messages or voices heard by some of the characters. In the Prologue, for example, the third-person narrator narrates what is happening on the Mount of Redemption by focusing on one of the Brunists, Hiram Clegg. As such, the role of the narrator is to show the readers the process of the Brunist formation, that is, the mythmaking process at work in the Brunist community. For instance, the narrator explains and comments on the other characters, on what is happening and also provides insight into other characters' state of mind. For example, having come to "witness the apocalypse," one of the Brunists, Hiram witnesses, instead, a car accident and the death of a young girl, and the narrator tells about Hiram's confusion. Moreover, the narrator also comments on how the news of that accident were spread among people and how the responses to the events were on that night of the supposed apocalypse in the later days. In narrating people's responses to events, the narrator specifically mentions that this event—the car accident—has become a "legend" and uses phrases such as "some seemed to remember," "others spoke in later years" and "there were those who recalled," not only indicating the variety of responses and interpretations of the events but also creating questions about the reliability of those responses (24-25). Thus, the narrator highlights the role of imagination and interpretation in the "writing and sending out" the events. In addition, in explaining Marcella's death, the narrator calls it

> the most persistent legend in years—and the only one which Hiram knew to be false—was that the girl, in the last throes of death, had pointed to the heavens, and then, miraculously, maintained this gesture forever after. This death in the ditch, the Sacrifice, became in the years that followed a popular theme for religious art, and the painters never failed to exploit this legend of heavenward gesture, never failed to omit the bubble of blood. Which was, of course, as it should be. (25).

In this passage, the narrator clearly expresses that the position of Marcella's body is interpreted and mythicized over the years by the townspeople, so much that her position becomes a subject for the painters. In addition, the phrase "which was, of course, as it should be" suggests that this event is interpreted in the way people

prefer to interpret it, that is in a religious context which construes the death of a girl in divine terms.

According to Richard Andersen, by giving both Hiram's thoughts and the narrator's comments that the events Hiram remembers has already become myths, Coover

> immediately establishes an ironic contrast between fiction and reality. . . . By establishing in the prologue the fact that the events described in the rest of the novel have already become legends, Coover offers his readers the opportunity to compare his narrator's more objective view of the founding of the Brunists religion with the myths that later developed. (1981: 43-44)

Similarly, Evenson also underlines this narrative style in the prologue and writes that "through the narrative style, the contrast between a certain objective strain and Hiram's combination of confusion and belief is passed along to the reader. Thus Coover is able both to suggest first what actually happened and second how the event has been reconstructed by the zealous after the fact" (2003: 27-28). The comment by the narrator that Hiram knows the falsity of the "most persistent legend" calls attention to this zealous reconstruction. By focusing on the "discrepancy that exists between what happened . . . and the myth that has been created from those events," Coover underlines both the distinction between an event and its interpretation and his basic theme that those interpretations are, in fact, the stories people create to deal with the chaos and arbitrariness of life (Andersen, 1981: 44). In providing both Hiram's thoughts and the narrator's comments on Hiram's thoughts Coover emphasizes that there is a chasm between the mine explosion and its interpretation by and revelation to the people. It is this split that the Brunists try to fill in through their interpretations/fictions. Therefore, in addition to its structure, the novel's subject matter contributes to the absence and the sense of incompleteness created by that gap between the event (explosion) and its "revelation."

In Evenson's words, the subject matter of the novel "explores the religious fervor, connected with the rise of a religious cult in a small coal-mining town, among people desperate to find meaning in their lives" (2003: 25). It is this desperate need

to find meaning that drives the characters to create centers based on the fictions of characters. The plot line develops in the aftermath of a mine-explosion in West Condon at which ninety-seven miners are dead except only one miner, Giovanni Bruno who survives but has serious after effects from the carbon monoxide poisoning. He is paralyzed and almost on the verge of death. Bruno's survival in such a condition, and as the only person to survive, is considered a miracle by the townspeople for whom the explosion is an unendurable disaster, a catastrophe. This explosion and Bruno become the two most significant driving forces for the West Condonites who begin to interpret this event as the sign of an approaching apocalypse. For religious thought provides them with a framework according to which they can read into and interpret the world. They can interpret Bruno as the messenger of God; Ely Collins's note, a hidden message, and a journalist investigating and writing about this explosion as the force of darkness. Thus, all their versions and interpretations function to create (a) center(s) around this event, with crippled Bruno as their "master-signifier."

This explosion causes a "hole" in the town in two senses. Literally, the explosion causes a real hole, a ditch in the mine area in West Condon, and metaphorically, the event disrupts the life in the town; there are dead miners, their families are in hard conditions, and people do not know how to handle all this chaos. Therefore, the Brunists not only provide an answer to all the questions and expectations of West Condonites but their group also functions to fill in or cover that black hole and settle the chaos. Thus, it can be said that although the Brunists are really formed as a group, their existence is closely linked with their fictionalizing of the events leading to their formation as the Brunists. For as Gordon puts it, the "explosion . . . radically disrupts the precarious balance of forces. It evokes throughout the population a combination of despairing helplessness and immense excitement" (1983: 23). Faced with a disaster they cannot make sense of, the townspeople create a community, the Brunist cult, to deal with the chaos that has intruded their lives. This is exactly what Coover means when he insists that life is too complicated to digest all at once and thus people create stories to deal with it (Kennedy, 1997: 101). In order to be able to cope with and cover up the hole, a group

of people in West Condon create meanings out of it, and their Brunist cult becomes "*the absent center*" covering up the hole not only of this explosion but also of this town too. For what is significant in the rise of the Brunists is the townspeople's frantic attempts to attribute meaning to every single detail regarding the explosion to have a reasonable understanding of it. According to Richard Andersen, these efforts of finding and making meaning from events are, in fact, efforts of finding answers to "the oldest question in man's experience, 'Why?'" (1981: 46). For as Gordon points out, "in a time of crisis everyone becomes acutely aware of the ambiguous and precarious nature of existence" (1983: 24). Having met the shaky and unreliable nature of their existence townspeople try to understand why this explosion happened and, more pressingly, why only one man survived. In a sense, they try to rationalize and predict the possible outcomes of this ambiguous event for themselves:

> It is this temptation to justify what has no purpose that leads to the founding of the Brunists, a cult of people whose sense of reality has been threatened by a catastrophe and who in desperation create a fiction to explain what has happened in terms that confirm their already-held viewpoints of life's meaning. (Andersen, 1981: 46)

Likewise, McCaffery writes that "[i]n times of crisis or chaotic disruption, religious and historical perspectives have always provided men with the attractive notion that events actually contain a recognizable order and meaning despite their apparent absurdity" (1982: 31). In the novel, after the explosion the narrator summarizes the panic-stricken mood of the town and the thoughts of people who are looking for answers regarding this event:

> The spirit is made manifest by signs. Else, how account for the uprooting of the widow Mrs. Wilson's hollyhocks, excrement on her front porch, a signature from the 'Black Hand'? Or the theft of the widow Mrs. Lawson's porch swing. . . . Or the excited non-sense of boys in high school locker rooms? . . . How else shed light on the anonymous phonecalls received at the home of the coalminer Mr. Bruno?
>
> Or who can say why else this town's fate darkens so? (214-215)

As the passage implies, because the mine explosion destroys any sense of order and security the townspeople might have before, all the seemingly strange

events or even the usual nonsense the children do everyday are now attributed to the explosion and the "supposed message" hidden behind them. In asking "why else this town's fate darkens so," the narrator clearly translates the feelings of the West Condonites who desperately need to justify and symbolize what happened in terms that confirm their expectation of what this explosion should mean. McCaffery points out this fictional nature of the Brunist belief emphasizing that

> [b]y focusing *The Brunists* on religion and religious history, Coover provide[s] himself with an obvious context in which to show the way that human intervention is imposed upon the world to give it meaning. . . . Coover makes it clear that the initial impetus for the Brunist development is the desire on the part of the survivors of the dead miners to attribute some purpose to the catastrophe, to justify it somehow. Faced with a destructive event of such major proportions, the townsfolk find in the Brunist religion a fictional system which endows the terrible events they have experienced with an illusion of order and purpose. (1982: 31)

Having given this fictional basis of the Brunist belief, Coover also calls attention to West Condon which, in fact, paves the way for and nourishes the need to create a (Brunist) story. After the "Prologue," in the first chapter, Coover starts by describing the general condition of West Condon emphasizing the monotonous and dull atmosphere: "Clouds have massed, doming in the small world of West Condon. . . . Only eight days since the new year began, but the vague hope its advent traditionally engenders has already gone stale. It is true, there are births, deaths, injuries . . . but a wearisome monotony seems to inform even the best and worst of them" (29). The adjectives Coover chooses here to describe West Condon like "dull, drag, vague hope, wearisome monotony" have mostly negative connotations. These words, while, on the one hand, prevent the understanding of West Condon's and West Condonites' routine as a calm and peaceful life-style, emphasize, on the other hand, the dominating sense of dreariness and boredom culminating towards a climax. Only within eight days after the new year, people almost lose their hopes and expectations from it.

In order to accentuate the effects of this culminating boredom Coover creates an inside/outside separation in West Condon and West Condonites' lives. What best

describes this inside/outside division is the situation of the preacher Ely Collins' daughter Elaine who is afraid to go alone outside where she feels insecure and isolated. While listening to a game played in high school auditorium on the radio, she thinks how she wants to be there but is afraid to go:

> There was a comforting fullness about the room. Elaine Collins, listening to the high school basketball game while she ironed, wished to be there, yet she knew she was always frightened outside this house, and once out would wish to be back. Out there, with the others, she would sit alone, persecuted by noises and events she did not understand, afraid of—she didn't know what. She knew Hell by her Pa's portrayals of it, but understood it by her own isolation and the fearful sense of disintegration she suffered out in public. Just as she understood God's peace by this house, by this room with its rich and harmonious variety of loved objects. (47)

Life in West Condon is so heavy a burden and is so small and engulfing that Elaine does not feel comfortable outside. Outside is chaos, disorder and insecurity to her. However, she feels safe in their home filled with objects, paintings and books related with Christianity. It is as if against the "noises and events she does not understand outside," their life shaped mostly around Christianity is the antidote and Christianity in particular and religion/religious thought in general provide them with the order, security and comfort they need.

After giving these impressions about the town, Coover continues telling about both the people of West Condon in general and the miners working at the Deepwater No.9 Coalmine, where the explosion will occur, but his descriptions of a usual day and "outside" in West Condon identify the town, surprisingly, with a monotony and routine that seem in exact opposition to the "outside" Elaine thinks about:

> Out at Deepwater No.9 Coalmine, the day shift rise up out of the workings by the cagefuls. . . . Some will go to homes, some to hunt or talk about it . . . In town, the night shift severally eat, dress, bitch, wisecrack, wait for cars or warm up their own.
>
> On Main Street . . . [b]usiness is in its usual post-Christmas slump. Inventories are underway. Taxes must be figured. Dull stuff. Time gets on, seems to run and drag at the same time. People put their minds on supper and the ball game, and talk, talk about anything, talk and listen to talk.

> Religion, sex, politics, toothpastes. . . . West Condoners, what's wrong with them, what dumb things they've done, what they've been talking about, what's wrong with the way they talk, who's putting out, jokes they've told, why they're not happy, what's wrong with their homelife. (30)

In these passages, Coover identifies the life in West Condon not only with monotony but also with dreariness overwhelming people like the clouds massing and doming in their town's small world. It seems that these people are bored even with themselves and their lives, and they are in need of something that can take them out of this tiresome routine. This narration of boredom continues focusing on the daily routines of several miners until the end of the first section of the first chapter. Then, this section closes with the sentence, "the mine is silent except for the distant scrape of machinery and voices, and what seems to be a sound nearby somewhat like that of bees" (40). The juxtaposition of the mine's silence and the sound of machinery and the bees in this sentence implies an ordinary and still day's routine, when different sounds are heard but go unnoticed. Yet, these descriptions of West Condon as overly monotonous and ordinary foreshadow something looming, something about to happen or "explode."

As expected, disorder and interruption is on the way both at the level of novel's narrative style and the townspeople's life. The very beginning of the second section of the first chapter expresses this disruption clearly in two senses. Firstly, this section starts not in prose but in a verse-like form and then continues in prose, disrupting the flow of the novel's narration suddenly:

> There was light and
> post drill leaped smashed the
> turned over whole goddamn car kicking
> felt it in his ears, grabbed his bucket, and turned from the face,
> but then the second
> "Hank! Hank Harlowe! I cain't see nothin'! Hank?" (40)

This is the moment of explosion told from the point of view of one or two of the miners, but it is not very clear to whom "his" in the "his ears" and "his bucket" refers, yet it is probable that those pronouns belong either to Rosselli or Clemens because, before telling about the silence of the mine at the end of the first section, the

narrator mentions how Rosselli accepts a cigarette from Clemens: "Rosselli hesitates, looks around, his headlamp slicing through the unfamiliar blackness. . . . He accepts a cigarette, fits it in his mouth" (40). Then, the second section starts with "there was light" as if indicating the light of the cigarette which can be a possible reason of the explosion, though it is not certain that the word "light" in the sentence refers exactly to the lighting of the cigarette. In addition, "there was light" is a clear allusion to the Bible but the context this allusion takes place does not have any religious meaning at all. Then, the narration continues to proceed in the verse-like form with the impression that there is little or no connection between the lines:

> Vince Bonali knew what it was and knew they had to get out.
> He told Duncan to keep the boys from jumping the gun and went for the phone in
> saw it coming and crouched but it
> "Wet a rag there! Git it on your face!"
> seemed like it bounced right off the
> Red Baxter's crew had hardly begun loading the first car when the power went off. Supposed the ventilator fan had stopped working, because the phone
> "Jesus! Jesus! Help me! Oh Dear God!"
> came to still holding the shovel but his
> looked like a locomotive coming (40)

In this part, the lines do not follow one another, so it is difficult to grasp exactly what is being told, except for the sense of atmosphere of panic and turmoil. In addition to the seeming irrelevance between the lines, the passages do not come in a meaningful pattern either. For instance, after the passages about the moment of explosion comes a passage about a game being played at the high school auditorium, a paragraph about Angela, Vince Bonali's daughter, and her boyfriend in the car, a passage about Elaine, as she thinks about her life at their home. In this way, Coover presents passages with completely different topics one after the other, disorienting the sense of order and connection among them. Also, the passage in verse about the explosion is followed by the prose passage telling about some of the miners in the mine trying to understand what has just happened. In fracturing the narration this way, Coover destabilizes the readers' thoughts by not giving in exact terms what happened and when and disrupts the narration, resisting easy answers to the questions from the readers.

In addition to this disruption at the narrative style, the explosion disrupts people's life because that overwhelming monotony is suddenly and radically broken. Through Mike's eyes, at the moment of explosion, "when the second one hit—hard [floor] seemed to heave, threw him off his feet, top crashed down, chunk batted off his helmet, face bit into the cinders. . . . [T]he roof was down aslant. It was hotter and smokier than the griddles of hell" (41). Such a terrible experience falls outside any meaning pattern and, hence, is the "unexplainable" for these people. In this sense, what West Condonites experience *is* "the Real" in the form of a mine explosion because the Zizekian Real is, also, what is left outside comprehension and meaningful patterns. The explosion is incomprehensible since it does not have any explanations or does not fit into a reasoning pattern. It is not positively clear that this explosion is related with a human intervention such as lighting of a cigarette or of matches. Suddenly and unexpectedly it happens, and this sudden eruption seems like the eruption of the Real to the fore.

Here, this eruption has the features of the Real in two important senses. Firstly, in an interview, Zizek characterizes the Real as what is between nature and culture or, rather, the gap, the fissure between the two: when "something goes terribly wrong in nature [and] we cannot pass directly from nature to culture" we symbolize in order to be able to "domesticate" that "terribly wrong" or "horrifying thing" (Daly, 2004: 64, 80). In the novel, the mine's explosion is an instance of something in nature going terribly wrong, and people's attempts to make this explosion comprehensible by attributing to it certain religious features (i.e., it is God's message to be deciphered) are their efforts of symbolizing the Real so that it has a meaning. Thus, what people do by symbolizing the explosion is to make this unknown natural disaster into an "understandable event." Referring to the panic of the Brunists when they see people coming to watch them on the Mount of Redemption, the narrator once says that "[t]hey knew not this enemy and what a man knows not, he fears unreasonably" (22). However, these words also express the Brunists' general condition in front of this "unknown enemy." Because they know not what it is that they have encountered, "they gasped, panicked, flew in a mad

scurry back toward their cars. . . . People cried without cause" (22). The antidote to this panicking, gasping and flying in a mad scurry, then, is to symbolize, "to domesticate," the unknown and pass on to the side of the cultural/social/understandable/manageable.

Then, as a second feature, Zizek insistently points out that, strikingly, it is not that the Real is what cannot be confronted, but, to the contrary, it *is* what is *encountered*. The paradox of The Real is here: it *does* occur and it is the "(im)possibility of the *acceptance* of its possibility of occurrence" that is unendurable: "the Real is impossible but it is not simply impossible in the sense of a failed encounter" but it is a traumatic encounter that does happen to us, and it is this acceptance of its possibility that is the real trauma (Daly: 2004: 69, 70, 71). In this regard then, what is the real trauma for the characters, even more than the explosion itself is the acceptance that they *did* experience the explosion. Thus, all their efforts to "fictionalize" this event are their attempts not only to decipher the explosion but, more importantly, to bypass "the real encounter" and meet it in disguise of the Brunist story. Coover's depiction of the town's situation after the news of the explosion is heard displays how the encounter with this traumatic happening disintegrates all the existing structure in the town's reality. In a rather long passage Coover explains this condition of the town:

> Like ravens fly the black messages. By radio, by telephone, by word of mouth. Over and through the night streets of the wooden town. Flitting, fluttering, faster than the flight. Crisp January night, but none notice. Out hatless into the streets to ask, to answer, to confirm each other's hearsay. Women shriek and neighbors vulture over them, press them back into shingled houses with solicitous quiverings. Three hundred are dead. They all escaped. God will save the good. All the good man died. Flapping. Flustering. Telephones choke up. Please get off the line! This is an emergency! Below the tangled branches of the gaunt winter elms, coatless they run, confirm each other's presence. No one remains alone. Lights burn multifoldly, doors gape and slap. Radios fill living rooms and kitchens, leak into charged streets, guide cars. The road to mine is jammed. A policeman tries to turn them back, but now they approach in a double column and there is no route back. Everything stops. All cars hear the beatless music, the urgent appeals, but nothing yet is known. Down roll windows and again the ravens lift. (52)

This paragraph clearly describes the upside-down West Condon after the explosion. The words and phrases "flitting, fluttering," or the sentences, "Three hundred are dead. They all escaped" express how great the level of the sense of agitation and panic is.

In addition to this agitated mood, the explosion brings about another significant change; the secure separation between inside and outside is broken and inside and outside merge. Describing the people's exit from the high school gymnasium, Coover writes that "[t]he crowd, protoplasmic, flooded through the double doors and inundated the parking lot. Lamps on poles and swerving car lights made the onrushing mass seem translucent, unbodied" (50). Then, he returns to Elaine who was afraid to go out alone. As she hears the news, she runs to inform her mother of what has happened and "[s]he [feels], as in dreams, to be running without gaining ground, willing acts she could not perform. . . . Ma! . . . It's the mine, Ma! . . . 'It's blowed up, Ma! I jist heard it on the radio!" (51). When panic-stricken she and her mother run the streets "toward the Deepwater road," Elaine sees that her mother is running without her shoes on (52). Actually, it is not only Elaine and her mother running shoeless but also almost the whole West Condon is alarmed. Families of the miners rush to the mine area, people try to learn what happened and the roads leading to the mine area are filled with people. For the boundaries of the soothing home and chaotic outside are merged with each other and, ironically, something from deep inside swallows up the outside which, simultaneously, engulfs that inside:

> They keep coming. Families, miners, officials, newsmen, police, civil defense, state corps, priests, Legion, Red Cross, television, psychiatric service. Fully equipped rescue teams now enter the mine methodically. Trucks arrive with oxygen tanks, stretchers and tents. A bank president moves from group to group, bringing hope. At the city hospital, beds are cleared and nurses alerted. The West Condon radio station asks for and receives permission to stay on the air twenty-four hours a day. The high school gymnasium, still, is brightly floodlit. . . . In a few hours, it will host a new activity: already the gym has been designated Temporary Morgue. The janitor, alone, spreads a tarpaulin on the floor. (60)

The wearisome and monotonous West Condon is, now, in a state of emergency as the suddenly exploding Real brings this town literally face to face with death. This real confrontation with death also acts paradoxically for the West Condonites. It is because of this confrontation with death, that is, the explosion, that people create this Brunist view to interpret and understand what is happening in their lives. This is the paradox: What actually brings them disaster also provides them with the means to interpret and deal with that very disaster. If they see the "real explosion" for what it really is, all their position, which has so far been built upon that certain view of this event, will dissolve. However, their point of view which underlines the idea of the apocalypse and thus God's involvement in this event prevents that possible dissolution and helps them go on with their lives with a newly constructed meaning and significance. Therefore, ironically, as Gordon explains, "[c]atastrophe gives life to both the individual and to all the groups that form in response to it . . . [since] [e]veryone has the need to be the protagonist in this drama" (1983: 23).

Embracing this need of being a protagonist provides these characters with a channel or place to transfer their fear of losing their sense of order and security. This place becomes that explosion. That explosion—the Real—suddenly erupts in front of them but it had already been culminating in the form of their too much orderly, secure and calm everyday routine. When this culmination eventually explodes it cracks that overly calm routine all open, bringing to the fore a fissure that was already building up deep down in West Condon. All that boredom, the silence where even the voice of the bees are heard, the hopelessness even eight days after the new year pile up in West Condon, and thus, the eventual explosion happens suddenly and unexpectedly but it was already there, lurking beneath their lives, "threatening to explode" in one way or another (Daly: 2004: 65). Thus, when it explodes eventually, it is a reverse Big Bang bringing not life and beginning but death and ending, pulling West Condon below its already "under the ground-level."

In addition, because they believe that this event is related to or indicative of a certain mysterious message, they start finding signs which, they believe, are pointing

to them what they are looking for. According to them, those signs are a manifestation of God's spirit which/who sends them those and this is already expressed in the novel with the words "the spirit is made manifest by signs" (214). Thus, to be able see those signs, they start taking into account even the tiniest details, making connections between them and then situating all those details and happenings in a certain apocalyptic context with the hope of achieving a whole and a conclusion. Acting this way, they not only *know* what they cannot understand but also, and more importantly, have power over it, rather than it having power over them. For as they attribute meanings to weird happenings or rumors, they feel secure and powerful before the unknown. No longer confused or lost, they feel that they can master and control the unknown. For instance, there is a rumor before the explosion that the preacher Ely Collins is "lately given to seeing white birds winging around down here [underground mine area]" (41). After the news of the preacher's death is heard this rumor is supposed to have become real and it is considered a "*fact*" now, a common belief among most of the people in the town. Thus, the rumor becomes reliable because of becoming a fact, a piece of information that the townspeople can count on, rather than being just hearsay. Eleanor Norton's saying "the site of White Bird visitation" in her speech and people's applauding these words with "amens" and prayers reveal how firmly they believe in this "fact."

Similarly, when a carbonized hand is found in front of Ely Collins's house, his widow Clara believes it to be her husband's hand and immediately makes a connection between the hand and its relation with their common cause, that is, the supposed apocalypse: "Widow Collins grabbed up that thing and held it high. '*Ely*' she screamed. . . . Widow Collins went completely off her bat, bleating out crazy stuff about the end of the world and the horrors of the last times" (282). Actually, the carbonized hand is a game played on the widow of Ely Collins by the two sons of Abner Baxter who is the next preacher after Ely Collins. Calling themselves "Black Hand" and "Black Peter," who are "million times better than Batman and Robin," these brothers "[steal] and put poop on porches and [torture] victims" (164-165). However, as Gordon writes, because "everything is symbolic" to the townspeople, "through the novel, black crucifixes, the theft of a window, snowstorms, and even

poor television reception are turned into omens of ‘positive eventualities.’ Anorexia caused by illness is distorted into an act of religious fasting [;] . . . a charred, scabby, black hand from a dead miner becomes sacred” (1983: 28). In addition, these “sacred things” or “events,” which would mean nothing in a totally different context, show both how hysterical the whole town gets about the explosion and how bigger and wider the extent of this hysteria gets every day at the community level. For example, the naughty behaviors of children who call themselves Black Hand and Black Peter in the town are taken for real and interpreted as signs showing how the community has gone wrong,

> “Black Hand” phonecalls tie up the circuits, and letters from same arrive daily at the newspaper office, city hall, private homes. When the newspaper releases the report of two other signatures, the “Black Peter” and “Black Piggy,” it sets off a rash of new calls and letters, etc., by everything from the “Blackhead” to the “Black Bottom.”
> Yes, the mayor admits with a rueful sigh . . . it is really a reflection of the town’s whole general deterioration, and is at the same time contributing to it. A community-wide moral problem. Monstrous. A cancer. Something has to be done, says one. The mayor agrees. A little common sense, says another. (216)

Thus, the town is completely caught in this mood of “good versus bad”; for them Black Hand and Black Peter are villains who want to bring destruction on their town. People act as if they are trying to catch a terrible criminal naming these children’s games as the “monstrous” problem or the “cancer” of society. As Larry McCaffery states “the Brunists, who are willing to assimilate anything which will fit into their pattern of beliefs, quickly interpret these pranks as otherworldly messages or warnings,” and “in the process of establishing their creed—a purely arbitrary, invented fiction—they provide an excellent example of why fiction making is so useful to men” (1982: 36). By naming these pranks as “community-wide moral problem,” these people fit these otherwise nonsensical children’s games into their frame of mind according to which “these bad happenings are the works of bad people or souls who try to destroy our order and lives.”

In addition to these “suspicious” happenings, there is a literal message for the Brunists, a letter or a note left by Ely Collins which he was unable to complete

before he died in the mine. The half-written note reads: "DEAR CLARA AND ALL: I dissobayed and I know I must Die. Listen always to the Holy Spirit in your Harts Abide in Grace. We will stand Together before Our Lord the 8th of" (96). It is important in two senses: Firstly, for the Brunists, it becomes a perfect document, hinting at them the vital information about the end of the world with a number and some words Ely managed to scratch on a piece of paper. Secondly, the note can be considered in the Zizekian sense as a letter/ "the piece of real" circulating among people (1992: 18). Although the note is ambiguous and is not clear what Ely really wanted to say, the words "Holy Spirit," and "I dissobayed," are enough proof for people like Clara to infer that the note has definitely a divine message. According to them, Ely was trying to tell them what they are now trying to decipher; on a specific date something will happen, and that happening is God's wish and it is their duty to act upon this call. Especially, the half sentence "We will stand Together before Our Lord the 8th of" triggers all their desire to find the meaning they look for. Since it is not clear what "the 8th of" refers to and where they "will stand Together before their Lord," Clara immediately makes the connection that the expression "8th of" means specifically the date of the apocalypse, and that on the 8th of- they will stand together before God to wait for the Apocalypse. It is for this reason that even if Abner Baxter, the preacher after Ely Collins, who does not believe that the message has a secret meaning, tries to explain that "the 8th" probably refers to the date of the explosion—because it happened on the eight of the month, Clara does not change her mind. According to her, both the white bird story and this note point to a particular meaning, that Ely has actually seen a white bird, he knew the end was coming, and before the explosion he was trying to send them this message. Even Abner Baxter's wife Sarah believes in Clara's account and in "the prophetic vision in Brother Ely's deathnote" (98). Moreover, she is "vexed by a sinister mystery" which is "why . . . the Lord [has] chosen to take Brother Ely just the second before he would have completed the terrible message" (98).

In addition to its perception by the townspeople as a "foreshadowing" message, Ely's note can be read as the stain or the letter that Zizek explains in his analysis of the movie *City Lights*. In analyzing *City Lights*, Zizek explains that the

tramp who loves the blind girl is the black spot that stains the girl's gaze, but it is his being the black spot that makes possible a certain version of reality where the girl loves a man who is (a substitute of) her prince and the tramp loves the girl who is blind. For, being a "stain," the tramp causes the girl's gaze to go astray, so the girl mistakes him for the prince charming. The tramp, here, occupies a place that is not his; he is filling in the absence of the prince charming. However, when the girl can see the tramp for who he is at the end of the movie, it is not clear whether they will fall in love and live happily ever after or separate because neither the blind girl nor the tramp fill in a place in each other's fantasy frames anymore. Thus, according to Zizek, the stain or "the letter arrives at its destination when we are no longer 'fillers' of the empty places in another's fantasy structure," and "this moment marks the intrusion of a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended" (1992: 7, 8). For the letter "embodies, gives material existence to the lack in the Other, to the constitutive inconsistency of the symbolic" (Zizek, 1992:18). In the novel, apart from its figurative connotations, Ely's note *is*, first of all, literally *the* letter. It marks the "intrusion of a radical openness in which the support of West Condonites' existences is suspended" and/or destroyed. Ely's note, here, embodies the lack and the inconsistency in their current situation as well as in their former West Condon life. It seems that, for the Brunists, the only way to integrate this "letter" into their system is to make Ely and his note occupy a certain place in their "fantasy frames." Thus, Clara attributes to the note a specific meaning that her husband was trying to give them a message and that this letter was meant to reveal that message. It is through this fantasy frame that she tries to keep the support of their lives intact. Therefore, for people like Clara the note functions, in Zizek's words, as "an object that circulates among the subjects and, by its very circulation, makes out of them a closed intersubjective community" (1992: 18). Yet, it is not only Ely's note which functions to keep West Condonites together and makes out of them a "real fictional" community. In fact, Bruno is the (R)real sign/message/letter for the West Condonites.

3.1.1. Bruno: The Absence Embodied

In addition to Ely's note and other relatively minor details, the only survivor of the explosion, Giovanni Bruno is the ultimate sign, the real message and letter circulating among West Condonites. What makes Bruno the symbol of this explosion and—though he is not aware of it—a leader of sorts for the Brunists is his survival, though paralyzed after the explosion. His survival makes the townspeople think that in an explosion where so many men die, if he is singled out it must be by a higher force for a mysterious reason. He must be somewhat different and special and, there must be something in him they do not know but need to pay attention to and investigate.

In fact, his co-workers at the mine probably feel that something unknown in him, and thus, try to "decipher" him. Coover's first descriptions of him show this clearly in the pages where he is depicted as an "*inter*-verted" [introverted] Italian Catholic who has lost his parents at an early age, lives with his sister Marcella, and when somebody says, for example, that it is a nice day "he'd jis stare back at you" (101). He "belong[s] to no clubs, [has] no friends. Not active at the church. . . . Standoffish and peculiar" (144). He is a very shy and quiet "tall bony miner" who has not much to say to or share with his co-miners at the mine (32). His silence, shyness and loneliness do not give his co-workers any clue about him, so they try to extricate meaning from him in rather brutal and bullying ways. They make him a target of their vulgar jokes, but most of the time they cannot get the response they need. For example, on their daily "teasing" session, when Vince Bonali "blister[s] the thin ass" of Bruno with the towel, "Bruno says nothing, barely flinches, simply turns pale and stares coldly at Bonali" (32). In all these occasions, "Bruno, encircled, is crying" but it is this overly timid and silent manner that attracts all the more attention (33). Bruno becomes a "target" to them, someone who is not like them or, rather, who they believe is different from them. Thus, they exercise all their bully-like violence on that foreign body, teasing and terrifying him since he is to be either assimilated in or excluded from their community. Ironically, and somewhat violently, all their humiliating jokes and acts are, in fact, their efforts to make sense of him and

fit him into a context they can relate to. This becomes clearer when the mine explodes and they cannot find Bruno. They try to find him and call his name, but they want to get out of there as soon as possible too so,

> “Bruno, we’re going!’ Mike call[s], but they were already on the move as he said it, Pontormo leading. . . . With his buddy Collins nailed to the earth and maybe dying, Bruno had cut out to save his own skin—if he got in a hole, he goddamn well deserved it. “Jerk must have gone on,” Strelchuk muttered, covering his vague sense of guilt. (51)

Because they want to (and also have to) get out of there as soon and quickly as possible, after several calls, they think that he probably has already run or hidden somewhere without telling them. In fact, they even forget about him until Ely Collins, who protects him against the other miners, asks where he is. In sum, their feelings towards him are a combination of dislike, guilt and the desire to hurt him. It is probably for that reason that most of the time they call him with negative words like “goddamn” and “jerk” or describe him as if he was not a “regular guy” like them but a weird person or a freak. One of the miners tells Miller that “he [is] a funny bird” (101). Similarly, at the moment of explosion when Mike sees Bruno “[h]is goddamn face was white as the Virgin’s behind with feathery black streaks on his cheek-bones, but his eyes were open and blinking—his mouth gaped, but nothing came out” (41). In this scene, he is described like a ghost or an alien body with open mouth but not speaking, with eyes open but showing no feeling whatsoever like horror, pain or panic. This image of open but silent mouth is significant because all the Brunist belief is structured upon this silence. People around him try to hear something from this silence; they wait for him to say something explanatory about the explosion or his survival, but, though his mouth is open, no words come. The closest they can get to words are his murmurs, so he is either silent or just murmuring and wheezing. The person whose silence and passivity they cannot make sense of before the explosion now becomes an even bigger mystery, triggering their desire not only to interpret him more but also, and more importantly, to attribute to him spiritual qualities that he does not really have, like being a prophet or God’s messenger sent to this world. Thus, Bruno becomes the incarnation of the “hole” or

the "absent center" that is the explosion has created in the town. All the Brunist belief is structured upon this silence and hole, that is, nothingness.

In addition to his being the incarnation of the nothingness of the Brunists, Bruno's loneliness, standoffishness and peculiarity make him the embodiment of the Real too: He is a "death-in life/life-in death" element because he is neither totally dead nor alive, but as if suspended between the two. This in-between condition calls to mind Zizek's comments on the difference between the real and symbolic deaths in Lacan's theory. Zizek explains that according to Lacan, there is the real/biological death and "its symbolization, the 'settling of accounts,' the accomplishment of symbolic destiny (deathbed confession in Catholicism, for example)" (1989: 135). For instance, when Antigone is excluded from her community before she is not biologically dead, this is her symbolic death. However, Hamlet's father is actually dead but his ghost follows Hamlet because his accounts are not settled; he is not dead symbolically. The point here is, there is a gap between these two deaths, which "can be filled in various ways; it can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters" (Zizek, 1989: 135). For instance, Antigone's symbolic death "imbues her character with sublime beauty, whereas the ghost of Hamlet's father represents the opposite case [and] he returns as a frightful apparition until his debt has been repaid" (Zizek, 1989: 135). However, as a gap, this place between the two deaths "is the site of *das Ding*, of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order" (Zizek, 1989: 135).

Taken in this context, Bruno does not die biologically, but he is not alive either, and it seems he is symbolically dead, that is, he loses his place in the symbolic network. Yet, even if he is dead symbolically, he is not alive like Antigone. Nor does he die leaving his soul behind like Hamlet's father; he still persists physically. For this reason, in his case, rather than real or actual death, the gap, the absent place between the two is more definitive of Bruno. For as Zizek says, the letter's arrival (the moment of explosion) is when the "presence is exposed outside the symbolic support [and then,] he [the subject] 'dies' as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole[,] . . . the void" (Zizek, 1992: 8). Bruno's is the

same condition; his body is there but his being cannot be defined by a place in the symbolic system. Furthermore, his uncanny condition is not that of sublime beauty but he is attributed sublime qualities. Thus, his uncanniness or frightening appearance combined with the sublime feature attributed to him by the people draws him nearer to the gap between the two deaths, the site of *das Ding*, of the (R)real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order. It is because of his peculiarity combined with the townspeople's interpretation of that peculiarity that he is made into a target and he becomes the embodiment of the absent "hole" of the town. Now, his situation as a kind of "living dead," which is noticeably evocative of the figurative embodiments of the Real in the form of monster, zombie and "living dead," points to his position, at the same time, as the Real-traumatic kernel which is the "malfunctioning element" of a given order (Daly, 2004:7, 5). Following this, with his physical features reminiscent of the monster, alien or strange creature figure who cannot be integrated into the system and who can dissolve people's sense of reality in most of the horror movies, he disturbs the "normal" structure and order of life in West Condon. In the hospital, Bruno's condition is narrated through his sister Marcella's eyes:

> Withdrawn he lies, absorbed into the bed, one with it, dark etching on the immaculate sheet. "Giovanni" she whispers. No sign is given her but the determined pulsing of a vein in his neck. His skin has shrunk taut over his high skull, exaggerating the recession of his hairline. His black hair is long on the neck, feathers dark and wild on the pillow. He is . . . somehow . . . changed: yes, a new brother must come of it. She fears for him. So white! The dried blood she'd seen on his face seems to have sunk beneath the surface, now mottles with rose the flesh's pallor. (98)

This description is the description of the foreign body threatening to dissolve the structure of life; the whiteness of his face, the blackness of his hair and the redness of blood combined with a pulsing vein create a sharp contrast, making him seem twice as odd and particular as before.

Actually, there is a scientific explanation for his situation. As one doctor mentions to Miller, because Bruno is exposed to too much carbon monoxide in the mine after the explosion, he has been poisoned. The doctor explains to Miller that

> “[o]ne thing, he was separated from the others, though no one knows why, and he may have received a much more gradual dosage.”
> “ . . . His chances of recovery diminish the longer he remains in it. Usually they come around within the first couple hours, once they’ve got fresh air or are fed oxygen, if they do at all. If he does come around, the delay increases the likelihood of pulmonary complications. He is still getting transfusions, respiratory stimulants.”
> “Carbon monoxide poisoning, Miller, amounts to oxygen lack. And oxygen is the one thing—it and glucose—that the brain cannot do without, even for short periods of time. So some damage is conceivable, and there have been cases of permanent mental illness, although almost always, I should say, in cases where there was a predisposition for it.” (89-90)

The doctor’s words make it clear that Bruno’s situation has nothing to do, as some people assume, with some supernatural power or the divine spirit whatsoever. He is just sick; he can neither speak properly nor make any moves consciously. It is not even clear whether he is really awake or not because he just lies in bed except just murmuring, nodding or moving a finger once in a while. However, it is exactly this strange condition and weird look of Bruno, which is actually due to his real medical condition but which contributes much to the sense of ambiguity and wonder around him. It is because of this same reason that Bruno is being mythicized. As a result, his strangeness attracts people’s attention all the more, causing them to attribute meaning to his survival. Thus, ironically, their leader is a kind of “living dead” and “[t]he Brunist movement commences, then, with a man overwhelmed. It begins as a movement in full retreat” (Dewey, 1990:95).

Then, as if to “justify” the Brunists’ belief in Bruno, one day the *West Condon Chronicle* announces that “not only had Giovanni Bruno recovered from his coma, *but he had announced a visitation by what he called the Holy Virgin during his entombment*! She had appeared to him, he said, in the form of a . . . a white bird!” (129). This news on the paper further strengthens people’s belief that Bruno is the “One,” God’s messenger because who else, apart from the devoted preacher Ely Collins, would receive *the Holy Virgin* in the form of a white bird? Now, with a faith that is strengthened more with such affirmations, people interpret his murmurs and voices as words and messages of God and his gestures as secret moves which

complete those murmurs. Once, he lies on the bed with Clara's Bible on his lap and his finger points towards a passage, the gospel according to John. People are so absorbed in deciphering his words and actions that although his finger very probably just happens to point to that passage, they try to extract meaning from this move by asking him questions and interpreting his head moves and facial expressions as answers to their questions. In addition to his already dubious moves and words, "weak but yet resonant" he speaks for the first time saying, "'The coming . . . of . . . light!' . . . 'Sunday'" confirming all their belief in the approaching apocalypse that, they think, will occur probably on the Sunday the 8th (174). They are so involved in their own belief in him that, in one occasion they perform a somewhat religious ceremony next to his bed to get more information:

> Eleanor Norton posed priestesslike at the foot of Bruno's bed. Bruno sat as he had sat before, staring out straight in front of him[,] . . . his dark scooped-out eyes, though now seemed blank and unseeing. Worn out probably. The others gathered around his bed. . . .
> Mrs. Norton now lifted her slender arms slowly before her, a kind of benediction as it were. . . . . "Hark ye to the White Bird!" she commanded, shattering the silence and causing some to start. Himebaugh caught his breath sharply. "Giovanni Bruno! The One to Come!" The widows and Mrs. Hall whispered mewing amens. "We look to the east! We look to the west! The feet tug downward, but the spirit soars!" (201)

As they begin their prayer, they are nervous and excited, waiting for what might happen in the next minutes. They are waiting for a nod or for some words from Bruno and the anxious atmosphere of the room rises to a climax:

> Betty Wilson had begun to whimper softly. Elaine and Carl Dean had joined the group at the bed. . . . . "So hark ye, hark ye to the White Bird of wisdom and grace!" At this familiar angelus all the Nazarenes, in Pavlovian response, amenned. "*From out of the abyss of darkness, lead us to light!*"
> . . . but just then Giovanni Bruno lifted one hand and brought a sudden hush down on all of them. They waited. *"The tomb . . ."* he said, and it was weird how the sound emerged as though forged in some inner and deeply resonant cavity, then heaved whole through his open but utterly passive mouth, *". . . is its message!"* Hand down. (206)

These passages, on the one hand, show how passionately they cling to Bruno for realizing their expectations. They are so involved in their own frames of mind that

they get completely carried away, into the moment and their voice gets higher gradually until Bruno's lifted hand suddenly stops them to give the answer they seek. The words "tomb" and "message" immediately remind them of Ely's note which had told about the day they will stand together before God and which Clara had interpreted as prophesizing the coming day of judgment when they would all die. Thus, "all eyes turned on Clara Collins. '*Oh God!*' she screamed, thrusting high her husband's note. '*The Day of the Lord is at hand!*'" (206).

On the other hand, in especially the last passage, there is a sense of irony and even mockery. Coover's use of "Pavlovian response" mocks their overly passionate ceremony; like the Pavlovian dogs they all respond to the expected sign, Bruno's hand. Then, when the hand is down it is the time they can start again their orgy-like ceremony. Also Coover's description of Bruno's effort to talk indicates the irony about the way the Brunists see Bruno. As Bruno breathes, "the sound emerge[s] as though forged in some inner and deeply resonant cavity, then heave[s] whole through his open but utterly passive mouth" (206) It is as if Bruno discharges something from his insides, from a big cavity, with great effort, and the voice that can finally emerge reflects that effort which is perhaps due to over-exposition to toxic gases. Then, the words "inner and deeply resonant cavity" is a perfect allusion to Bruno's state of absence; he is like a deep and inner cave through which the words resonate to the Brunists. Finally, he is *the* cavity resonating to the Brunists what they want to hear because it is the Brunists who hear what he says as meaningful expressions. However, Coover makes this known only to the careful readers through subtle expressions, and thus, tricks both the Brunists and the readers who do not realize this style and believe that "the story being written is for real."

Yet, despite his "absence," Bruno gradually, turns out to be the center or the "absent center" of this event, pulling people to himself like a magnet, as Ted Cavanaugh thinks, "not because of who Bruno was personally or what he'd done, but because of the way others see him" (144). The townspeople *want* to be pulled to him, to gather around this "center," and carrying his name as the Brunists, they do form a periphery around this "living absence." Accordingly, there are many ways these

people see him because he is “truly a life-in-death figure—mute and hollow-eyed—[and] is a virtual tabula rasa to be read as anyone wishes” (Gordon, 1983: 25). As Dewey writes, “Bruno, from the moment he is dragged from the mine, is essentially passive, a mere shell,” and thus he addresses to different expectations of different people and every person can interpret him in his own frame of mind (1990: 100). While Eleanor Norton believes that “Giovanni Bruno’s body had been invaded by a higher being” (132), for Ted Cavanaugh the banker, who wants to make Bruno’s homecoming from the hospital a public event, Bruno is “something of a town hero, a symbol of the community’s own struggle to survive” even though “he was a little short on style” to be a hero (144). For that reason, Ted Cavanaugh makes every effort to make Bruno’s coming home from the hospital into a kind of carnival where they can celebrate their struggle to survive and affirm their sense of unity and community with hope:

> Townsfolk had already massed up on the Bruno front lawn when Vince arrived. Bright sun, though the day was crisp, holiday air. Shops, school, everything closed [and] everybody was feeling good. Mort Whimple, the mayor arrived in a new black Chrysler, accompanied by father Baglione, some state politicians, and one of the Protestant ministers. TV guys dollied around on the sidewalk, shooting everybody. Jesus, the crowd was really big! Officials from the Red Cross, the UMV, the coal company, members of the city council, and representatives from other civic organizations pulled up behind the Chrysler.
> A sign on the mayor’s car said: GIOVANNI BRUNO—WEST CONDON SAYS—GET WELL SOON!!! (148-149)

Since the explosion day, both the explosion and Bruno, ironically, function as catalysts to bring people together as a community, and this show of Bruno’s homecoming energizes the town boosting everybody’s self-esteem and self-confidence. In other words, this homecoming becomes the climax of such feelings: “the speeches were full of praise for West Condon’s great community spirit and stamina” and, “after the ceremonies, everybody still mill[s] around, not wanting to go home and lose this thing” (150). As a result, when his pre-explosion characteristics are combined with his tabula rasa state, he becomes the perfect target to which people can project all their thoughts and interpretations about this event. As Gordon

writes, “[h]is patent emptiness makes him an ideal vessel for their needs” and as a vessel he becomes the perfect center for the people of West Condon (1983: 29).

Bruno’s being a center can also be explained by referring to another related Zizekian term, fantasy. Being a “vessel,” the “standoffish and odd” Bruno, who was like a “foreign element” in West Condon, now becomes the element which, in Zizek’s words, “sticks out” but which “precisely as such, constitutes” and keeps the West Condon’s identity together (1992: 89). Hence, ironically, Bruno is both the absent center and what conceals the fact that there is an absent center by creating the illusion of a center and of an orderly community. For townspeople confirm their expectations from the explosion through Bruno; he makes it seem possible that there is a divine plan and meaning in this terrible catastrophe. In this regard, townspeople’s interpreting the explosion and gathering around Bruno as the answer to their expectations can, in Zizekian terms, be considered a fantasy which guarantees the existence and integrity of their society. Accordingly, if fantasy is an answer to *Che Vuoi,* that is, the question “what do you want from me?” Bruno is the fantasy figure giving the townspeople answers to their *Che Vuoi.* Their interpretations and fictions about the event are a fantasy scenario not because they are unreal or unbelievable but because they function to conceal an “inherent gap” in their lives: Firstly, the overwhelming monotony, dreariness and hopelessness of West Condon, secondly, the sudden eruption of the mine and people’s efforts to integrate it into their lives. As Daly underlines, “reality itself is always constructed as an attempt to establish a basic consistency against the disintegrative effects of the Real,” so in a similar manner, through their Brunist fantasy, the townspeople attempt to “establish a consistency against the disintegrative effects” of the explosion/the Real, tryşng to integrate the “sticking” element(s) into their system (Daly, 2004:7). Thus, ironically, what they believe to be their reality is, in fact, their “fantasy reality” or the frame providing their sense of reality with Bruno as their fantasy figure who serves to hide this basic split.

In this sense, Bruno resembles the character Roger O. Thornhill in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (Zizek, 1992: 5). In the movie, Thornhill is

mistaken to be the mysterious agent George Kaplan "*who doesn't exist at all,*" and thus, Thornhill "accidentally finds himself occupying a certain place in the symbolic network" (Zizek, 1992: 5). Thus, Thornhill, in being mistaken for a non-existent George Kaplan, occupies the already existing "lack," or fills in "a certain empty place in the structure" (Zizek, 1992: 5). Similarly in the novel, Bruno "accidentally" survives the explosion and, then "accidentally" occupies the place of a divine figure. In their fantasy space, he is the one who brings news about the apocalypse and who leads them to God's message through his murmurs and gestures. This fantasy space makes the Brunists' existence possible because the Brunists "are able to identify [him] with a certain place in [their] symbolic fantasy space," which prevents them from falling into the absence (Zizek, 1992: 5). In this sense, Bruno is also like Ely's note, that is, the object which circulates among subjects and makes them a tight community. In return, the Brunists look at the stain (Ely's note and/or Bruno) and see it as a spot staining their view (i.e. unexplainable, weird happenings), but, just because of this stain, they can frame it in their Brunist context and make it meaningful and explainable for themselves so that they do not die "in their symbolic networks" and do not fall into the void.

3.1.2. Signs of Coover/ Signs of the Brunists

As the readers interpret the different apocalypse stories of the Brunists, in fact, it is Robert Coover the writer who narrates all this Brunist story (of the apocalypse). He constructs the story of a group of people who construct a story for themselves. Thus, it is no wonder that in this game, he is the one who manipulates both the Brunists and the readers. His maneuvers can especially be seen in the signs and details the Brunists try to interpret. On the one hand, these signs are essential for the Brunists because they believe that certain signs carry hidden meanings for them in which their existence is rooted. On the other hand, it is Coover who creates both those signs and the Brunists. In this sense, as the master player, Coover plays with the readers on purpose to make them *see his* signs so that they can realize that they are being manipulated into another "game playing" as they read the novel. For, in the novel, "[w]herever we turn, we encounter new numbers, new symbols, clues, paths,

which are designed to discredit and parody each other" (Lewicki, 1984: 66). According to Lewicki, this style or "the dominant feature of Coover's writings is the premeditated distance that he maintains between the traditional meaning of the ideas he deals with and his own treatment of them. The resulting effect of irony must be taken into account in all interpretations of his writings" (1984: 60). Therefore, it is not only that there are signs for the Brunists to decipher but also that the Brunists and their signs function as symbols for the readers to decipher since "Coover approaches [to symbols] as a consciously designed game—with himself, with the readers, with the whole concept of symbolic representation" (Lewicki, 1984:60). Gordon points out that "[i]f these people [the Brunists] see signs as wonders, Coover characterizes them with 'signs' from a variety of sources. Their symbolic identities, however, are as misleading as their false reading of events" (1983: 26).

In this sense, one of Coover's misleading signs is Ely and his note. It is believed that his note prophesizes the apocalypse and he is the messenger. However, "although his message, like his name, suggests his divine powers (Eli, Eli lama . . . : My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?), since the event does not materialize, he is, like his name, 'a lie'—in fact, both deliverer and betrayer" (Gordon, 1983: 27). The names of the other characters are also full of evocations from the Bible, for example the name Giovanni Bruno associates "Bruno as Christ, Job, John Brown, Giordano Bruno, Saint Stephen" (Gordon, 1983:22). Andersen, Dewey and Lewicki acknowledge, too, the association between Bruno's name and Giordano Bruno, "a sixteenth-century relativist" and "a renaissance Italian poet and playwright" whose defense of Copernican science caused him to be called a heretic at his time (Andersen, 1981: 48; Dewey: 1990: 101; Lewicki, 1984: 65). Lewicki adds also that "his first name translates into English as John, which suggests an analogy with St. John" (1984: 65). Yet, the nearest Bruno gets to being a poet is through his poems; he is in no way a scientist; in fact, his image as the embodiment of an "unseen, holy being" is in contrast with the empirical science. Nor can he spread the Word but he *is* believed to spread the Word and thus, if anything at all, he is at best a fake St. John.

Among these misleading names, perhaps the most significant name is Justin Tiger Miller, the journalist of the town. Tiger is his nickname and his name's associations include "Christ, Adonis, Osiris, Justinian, John of Patmos, the Christian apostle" (Gordon, 1983: 27). In chronicling the Brunists, he is like Saint John and, in "authoring the apocalypse," is like John of Patmos (Gordon, 1983:27). Lewicki mentions also other possible associations of Miller's name, emphasizing that his nickname "Tiger" is "one of Christ's emblems," an association supported by the "resurrection" of Miller in the novel (1984: 63). For on the Mount of Redemption, Miller is announced dead due to an assault by a fanatic and right before he "dies," "[a]mazingly, just at that moment, he saw, or thought he saw, a woman giving birth" (410). In this part, Coover narrates the whole event in such a way as to give the impression that Miller is died or "drown" in the "blood burst[ing] out" from the woman: " 'No!' he pleaded, but it sounded more like a gurgle. . . . And it was done, the act was over. . . . At which point, Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward" (410). In fact, it is Abner Baxter's wife giving birth on the mount at that night but Coover explains this later. Since the readers do not have this information yet, it seems that Miller is dead. Then, in the next part, "Return," Coover writes, "[t]he West Condon Tiger rose from the dead," but Miller's return is in no way a holy return (431). He is in the hospital with his girl friend, healing from his wounds and his so-called death and re-birth, "his resurrection" is only a parody of Jesus and the resurrection story.

Also, Lewicki emphasizes that "Justin Miller's Christian name suggests St. Justin, a second-century Christian martyr who was trusted with spreading the Word, and Miller is given credit for securing worldwide recognition for the Brunists" (1984: 63). Richard Andersen mentions the "ironic allusion" in Justin Miller's name "to the second-century Christian apologist, St. Justin" and calls him an "interesting mixture of Judas and Jesus, a tiger and a lamb" (1981: 55). Although Miller is aware of the dynamics creating the Brunists and is rather cynical towards them, he does spread the news about them, bringing them nation-wide, televised recognition. In this sense, Miller's "spreading the Word" is far from being in the traditional Christian context, and, in making this symbolic act into a fake one, Coover turns the act of

"spreading the Word" upside down, just as he does the Resurrection story with Miller's "death and re-birth."

In addition, Coover's fake religious references are not limited to names. To begin with, according to Joseph Dewey, the main subject of the novel, "the explosion in the mine shaft is a most effective rendering of the elements of the classic Christian apocalypse" (Dewey, 1990: 97). In addition, with the explosion, Coover establishes further associations between the Bible and his novel. As Dewey writes, "[i]n addition to his self-conscious use of Revelation, Coover clearly taps archetypal patterns borrowed from Genesis" (Dewey, 1990: 97, 91). As Genesis is "an account of God's methodical destruction of His creation—the fascinating myth of Noah and the ark," Coover's first chapter narrates the destruction brought upon West Condon (Dewey, 1990: 91). In addition to this structural similarity, there are some passages, and also Bruno's murmurs which, despite their religious tone or reception, do not necessarily function as religious texts. For instance, before telling about Vince's daughter, Angie having sex with her boy friend, Coover writes this passage

> She is spreadin' her wings for a journey,
> And is goin' to journey by and by,
> And when the trumpet sounds in the mornin',
> She will meet her dear Lord in the sky! (43)

Although "spreading her wings" brings to mind, again, the White Bird image and Jesus and the twelve apostles, what is narrated has nothing to do with the White Bird or the Jesus. This passage preceding the scene about the backseat sex of a young couple is, again, followed by a religious passage, making that passage dysfunctional and misleading if not completely nonsensical. Similarly, as Lewicki states, Bruno delivers "six cryptic 'prophesies': *Hark ye to the White Bird; I am the One to Come; Coming of Light; Sunday Week, The tomb is its message; A circle of evenings; Gather on the Mount of Redemption*; and *Baptize the Light*" (1984: 65). Yet, it is not clear how he says these or, even whether he really says these or not, because each of these "cryptic" expressions are falsified throughout the novel; gathering on the mount turns into a circus, the Brunists' evening meetings turn into hysterical meetings and power struggles between Clara Collins and Eleanor Norton. An equally

interesting word play with a religious context is made in the part where Eddie Wilson's death in the mine is narrated. Here, Coover begins narrating the moment of explosion by writing "There was light," another Biblical reference. He writes, "[h]is lamp arrowed a cloudy ray out into the darkness," as if there was a divine presence in the mine "arrowing" cloudy rays, or as if Eddie Wilson was a divine presence (42). Yet, Eddie Wilson is not a divine presence and his lamp does not "arrow cloudy rays." In fact, this is the last time he sees "light."

According to Dewey and Lewicki, Coover's reference to religious symbols is similar to the pattern of apocalyptic writing. However, Dewey adds that Coover "exploits, upsets, and in general resists traditional apocalyptic patterning. He plants suggestions of it—typical antithetical images such as dark and light, good and evil, lamb and beast . . . but he never lets such systems rest in place" (1990: 92). Lewicki, too, points out that as a postmodern writer Coover "play[s] with the conventional chiliastic imagery to the point of turning it against itself and in effect nullifying its traditional intimidating aspect" (1984: 60). Therefore, even if Coover uses apocalyptic patterning and seems to allude to Genesis with his subject matter and treatment of it, "Coover himself is no ark builder," and therefore, the novel's evocation of Genesis is slightly distorted (Dewey, 1990: 92). First of all, Coover starts the novel just in the middle, before the explosion in terms of novel's chronology and after the explosion in terms of the occurrence of events. Then, he does not follow a linear path in narration but, instead, continues narrating in a fractured manner. As Dewey writes, "[t]he passages in Genesis that deal with the Flood rather quickly pass over the destruction of the earth; indeed, more space is devoted to God's instructions for building the ark. *The Origin of the Brunists* refutes this Noah complex, this disconnection with the brutal blood-and-bone unpleasantness of the physical world" (1990: 92). In fact, *The Origin of the Brunists* abounds in the brutal blood-and-bone unpleasantness of life especially in the parts such as where Mike Strelchuk literally cuts Ely Collins's leg to save him from a pile of timber with his "hands . . . greasy with blood," (47) and where Miller sees or thinks he sees a woman giving birth with "her enormous thighs . . . spread [and] blood burst[ing] out" (410). Thus, in all these examples of Coover's use of familiar religious and/or

apocalyptic imagery, he “provides a clue to his ‘reverse’ treatment of chiliastic symbols: he uses them but at the same time disavows their basic pattern” (Lewicki, 1984: 61).

Finally, regarding the names and their possible implications, “West Condon,” the name Coover chooses for the town of the Brunists is also very interesting and ironic. “West” calls to mind the iconic “West/East” theme in American literature; Westward expansion, savagery, freedom, openness and its clash with American East, its culture, norms, and societal order. However, West Condon is not an open and free town; as it is introduced on the very first page of the novel, its air is cloudy and heavy. It already has lost its hopes about the future. In addition, the word “condon” sounds like “condom” which is actually related with the town’s name. Miller is told at one point in the novel about the geography of what the Brunists call the Mount of Redemption, that is, “the little rise next to Deepwater Number Nine” (249). That little rise is also known as “Cunt Hill” since

> it looks like one. The east, or belly, slope is gradual, there’s even a slight abdominal dip before the last pubic rise. . . . Then, on the west side . . . it drops off sharply into a grove of trees at the edge of the mine buildings. But it only really got its name . . . when the company for some goddamn reason cut a clearing in the middle of all that vegetation, went digging for something or other, and left an incredible gash right in the old alveolus of love. . . . This fissure is now the repository of used condums, thrown there, it is said, in the belief that such oblations prolong the potency of the communicant. (249)

In a complete irony, the Brunists go to this geographically “*higher (sexually loaded) place*,” to the “mount,” against the geographically lowest place “the Deepwater Number Nine mine ” to “be raised” before God. This aim to be “raised” also indicates a desire to ascend from the claustrophobic and closed atmosphere of their town, but their Mount of Redemption turns out to be “a local make-out spot near the mine entrance rechristened from its more popular sobriquet—Cunt Hill” (Dewey, 1990: 90). Thus, their aim to rise is in complete contrast with what the hill actually connotes for the townspeople. Thus, the meanings of the “high” mountain and “low, deep in the ground” mine area are reversed: “it is no accident that Coover names their town West Condon—the very name suggesting impotency—a town

closed off, drained not only of its men by the mining accident, but its youth who are steadily migrating north" (Dewey, 1990: 102). With the explosion, "the mine which was once their womb, their life support, become[s] their tomb," but their attempt to go upward from this tomb does not exactly lift them up as they expected (Gordon, 1983: 32). In a final sharp contrast to the Brunists' "high" aim, the initials of "W"est "C"ondon, "WC," directly denotes a place where all the waste, filth and excrement go.

As a result, although Coover uses symbols, names, terms or contexts that have many connotations, the names of the characters or places (Miller, Bruno, Ely, West Condon) do not necessarily correspond to what they connote, nor is the context in which they are used in accordance with the seeming reference. In fact those names or symbols are used in a rather mocking way. In using the signs or symbols in this "crooked" way, Coover destroys not only the traditional understanding of these names but also the (seemingly) religious context in which the novel seems to be placed (Kellner, 1997: 128). In the novel's end, the Brunists establish themselves as a religion, and their religious materials are also woven with traditional Christianity. They choose Clara their "evangelical leader," they have their "Creed" based on "the Seven Words of Giovanni Bruno and Saint Paul and the Revelation to John," and even the Nortons (Eleanor and Wylie) become the bishops to California (429, 423). Once again, "these parallels serve to parody the origins of Christianity" (McCaffery, 1982:40). As the game player and metafictionist, Coover, in giving all these details and symbols in distorted forms and in playing with traditional stories and their structures, warns the readers that the "skillful manipulation of signs and symbols can in fact produce the illusion of substance behind them, even if there is no 'real' message to convey" (Lewicki, 1984: 66). Just as the Brunists, who believe in and manipulate the details and signs according to their needs, are being deceived by those very signs, so are the readers who read the Brunist story without recognizing that Coover is playing with and manipulating deliberately not only the Brunist story but also the symbols and signs of the Brunists (story) to create the illusion of substance behind them. As Lewicki writes,

> [t]he community of West Condon (the rest of world being sometimes referred to as East Condon) has no present time: the explosion destroyed the last mine, and there is no other industry in the area. In despair, people turn to what they think has absolute value: numbers, messages sent by "other aspects," hidden meanings of Biblical texts. These, however, are not reliable either. They are frequently falsified, altered, and variously distorted. So, in a sense, is *The Origin of the Brunists* itself, with its misleading clues, possibilities of different and conflicting interpretations of seemingly obvious symbols, and a happy end which is so disappointing. (1984: 66).

Thus, Coover reminds us, the important thing is to be able to look at a story "awry" or "crookedly" since what seems to be a very "straight" story can be a "crooked," an illusionary one. Yet, as they cannot look at what they create awry and cannot play with it, through their stories of Bruno and Ely's note, the Brunists seem only to be able to create a "crooked" story and take this crooked construct for real. As such, their "man-made apocalypse" is a clear example of how people can lose sight of the thin line between fact and fiction, and each of the Brunists is the perfect example of a typical Coover character who gets lost in his/her own artificial construct. In all these examples Coover's emphasis is clear: that it is important be aware of the fact that what we read as the "real and straight story" is actually a human construct, thus prone to change, manipulation and to get outdated. Thus, "only if we are able to develop an awareness of our own participation in the creation of fictions can we reject dogmatic attitudes and begin to take advantage of the fiction-making process" (McCaffery, 1982: 41). As a human artifice, *The Origin of the Brunists* invites the readers to realize and then play this game since "[i]n the midst of [all] veiled allusions and obscure parallels it seems impossible to distinguish between human invention and fact" (McCaffery, 1982: 56).

3.2. Encounters with "The Real": Answers to "*Che Vuoi*"/The Writers of History

In order to show the "origin" and the formation of a reality fantasy, Coover presents a variety of interpretations of the explosion in West Condon by various characters. In this way, "individualized perspectives [of different characters] of a presumably common experience form the substance of the novel" (Gordon, 1983:

22). Through these different voices and individualized perspectives, Coover shows how vital it is for people the tendency to create stories and how different the interpretations of a single event can be. For it is through those stories that people make sense of and integrate the ambiguous, threatening or frightening into their lives. This tendency has two variations; firstly, in terms of the Zizekian Real, each interpretation in the novel is an attempt to encounter and integrate the Real into a meaningful context. In order to be able to deal with such confrontation, the characters attribute to it a divine or mystical meaning and adjust their lives according to that "meaning." Through those mystical meanings they confer upon the explosion, they can use this explosion as a means on to which to project their boredom, their fears, expectations and even their hopes. Encountering the Real this way, they turn this encounter into a catalyst to serve and fulfill their various needs. Gordon states this function of the explosion and claims that

> [t]he catastrophe arouses and serves a variety of needs. Those who require an explanation for their sudden despair also thrive on a new excitement brought into their otherwise drab and empty lives. Disaster also appeals to everyone's pride needs—to the yearning to feel important—and it prompts opportunism and untapped creative energy in the least likely corners. An aging faceboss of the recently closed mine (Bonali), for example, latches on to the dream of rebirth as a grassroots political figure. A repeatedly displaced and perverse schoolteacher (Eleanor Norton) seizes the moment to gain prominence as a mystic; a meanspirited evangelist (Abner Baxter) schemes his way to replace his revered predecessor (Ely Collins), a courageous and saintly leader who dies in the mines. (1983: 23)

The next variation in this tendency, to "fictionalize," is the desire to create not only an individual but also a collective story, a group's history; the created fictions tell about how a group of people comes together, deals with hardships and reaches the day they are now. In this novel, West Condonites start creating their own stories about this catastrophe and start, in a sense, recording their own histories as the Brunists. Thus, Coover emphasizes two points here, he, once again, "calls attention to the constructedness of 'knowledge' derived from ambiguous events" and questions the reliability of such "knowledge," just as he did with the signs and symbols of the Brunists (Evenson, 2003: 26). For those events become "important/significant/meaningful events," or else discarded as "unimportant and

insignificant" through the interpretations of people who "tend to recycle and rethink events to make them seem significant in terms of their own conscious (and sometimes unconscious) systems of belief" (Evenson, 2003: 28). Similarly, while the Brunists recycle and rethink the details and happenings that best fit their perception about the explosion and turn those details into significant events, they record their collective story as the Brunists. This is especially underlined by postmodern literary theoreticians and historians who argue that history writing is a similar process to fiction writing. Because of the lack of direct access to past evidences, it is up to the historian(s) to choose and decide which happening will be a historical, significant event and be recorded as historical and which will be discarded as secondary or insignificant Thus, as Linda Hutcheon emphasizes, the meaning of the explosion is not in the explosion itself but in the meaning the Brunist historian(s) confer on those events that will make their historical events (1988; 89).

In this regard, the main historians in the novel are the Brunists, and their responses to their "encounters with the Real" make up their history. Mainly, they interpret the explosion with a reference to apocalyptic beliefs. However, even if they have a common belief about an apocalypse and God's message to be deciphered in general, their ways of approaching this common belief and expectation are different. Among the Brunists, while Ely Collins's wife Clara approaches the event from a more traditional Christian point of view, Eleanor Norton's points of view are psychic, for she is somewhat like a medium in her "connections" with some so-called divine beings. Ralph Himebaugh, the lawyer who lives with many cats, uses mathematical formulas to explain and "decipher" the catastrophe.

In addition, even if the Brunists are in majority, there are also other characters like the members of the Common Sense Committee who want to stop the Brunists' efforts. Common Sense Committee is organized by a group of people including the mayor, a banker and some other influential people in the town who want to control and prevent any more expansion of the Brunists and to bring order back to town again. In addition to these two opposing attitudes, there is a third and somewhat "middle" point, the journalist Justin Tiger Miller who narrates this event

in his newspaper and who represents in the novel Coover's "game player" character. Because, for Miller, this event is just another "juicy story" to take advantage of, he literally tries to create the Brunist story for the newspaper.

Therefore, in an atmosphere where there are many interpretations (stories) and approaches regarding this explosion, it is unavoidable that there will be conflicts and disagreements over which story is the truer or more important. For instance, in the novel, there is a difference and conflict between Clara Collins's Christian interpretations and Eleanor Norton's psychic ways, or between Miller's sarcastic approach to the Brunists and Common Sense Committee's ironically frantic efforts to "clean" their town of the Brunist frenzy. Thus, it becomes all the more difficult to claim the "truth" or "reliability" of any of these narrations since every story struggles to be the master or real story to be recorded as historical fact. In this regard, the meaning of the epithet before the "Prologue" about writing and sending the message becomes clearer: that the credibility and reliability of any narration is questionable since a narration may have many "narrators" each of whom may focus on a different aspect and may have a totally different reading of the event.

Then, Coover's aim is two-sided in this Brunist story; he "uses the familiar, narrow Christian *contexts* but extends them so that the book becomes a metafictional commentary on the fictive process of history itself or, rather, on the ways in which human experience is conveniently translated and mythicized by chroniclers and historians" (McCaffery, 1982: 31). That is to say, by structuring the novel in a familiar context, he questions the creation of the contexts that we find familiar. Also, through constructing a familiar "story" of survival, he calls attention to the constructedness and contingency of knowledge.

3.2.1. Answers from the Community

The Origin of the Brunists abounds with enthusiastic chroniclers and historians. In fact, Coover clearly expresses what history is in West Condon: "Once a day, six days a week and sometimes seven, year in, year out, the affairs of West

Condon [are] compressed into a set of conventionally accepted signs and [become], in the shape of the West Condon *Chronicle*, what most folks in town thought of as life, or history" (150). In a place where history is born out of the ordinary affairs of the town, certain enthusiastic chroniclers in this town automatically become the recorders and writers of such "history." This enthusiastic group in West Condon includes a wide range of interesting and competing figures from the fanatic Brunists to the "story-digger" journalist Justin Miller. Among these characters, Evenson writes, the "most eccentric" ones are those who are somewhat different in one way or another, and "thus they feel compelled to sift through the detritus of life in search of a higher design or divine plan that will give their existence meaning" (2003:30). These people are also the leading Brunists, Clara Collins, Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh whose unique ways of reaching knowledge and truth make up almost all of "the Brunist reality fiction." Thus, even though their aim is common, neither they nor their ways are homogeneous, and a single mine explosion is interpreted through their different minds. Each of these minds presents both an attempt to integrate the unexplainable into one's reality and an attempt to create a unique (hi)story for oneself.

In presenting these different minds and attempts, Coover calls the readers' attention to how mythical thought—relying not on scientific research but on belief and stories—dominates people's reasoning and perception. As McCaffery asserts, "what all of these characters share is the tendency to rely on mythic notions of causality—notions which operate differently from the more recently developed views of science and logic" (1982:32). Because myths provide people with a sense of security and order, most of the time people refer to mythical stories—religious, political or historical—to explain what is happening in their lives so that it begins to make sense and fit into a meaningful pattern. Likewise, in the novel, religious myths of Clara Collins, psychic practices of Eleanor Norton and numerology of Ralph Himebaugh are the effective mythic thoughts driving the characters' interpretations and defining the frames for their line of thought to reach a message and "finale."

In *The Origin of the Brunists*, one of the most familiar and influential myths is the traditional Christian thought, represented by Clara Collins who later is selected as evangelical leader and organizer of the Brunist movement. When they are at the Mount of Redemption, Hiram Clegg describes her as a "strong and self-possessed" woman "as though possessed by the Holy Spirit Itself" (14-15). For Miller, she is "gangly . . . large-boned, stouter," her hair is like straw, she has freckles, "her skull [i]s larger [than her daughter Elaine's], her neck thicker, her body more massive, her hands tougher. . . . She ha[s] quick nervous eyes, wider set, more determined and aggressive than her daughter's. And she [speaks] with the absolute authority of a long-time matriarch" (87). Although she was in "the shadow" of her husband Ely when he was alive, now she believes that she is the one who will carry Ely's message (15). As Gordon writes of her, "Clara is the word of Ely now conferred upon Bruno, the necessary male vessel to continue the faith. She too shares the belief that apocalypse is at hand" (1983: 26). The reason why she too believes that apocalypse is at hand is, first of all, her husband's note. When Miller comes to her to talk about her husband's death, he also hands Ely's note to her. As she reads it, she just cannot believe that her husband is dead, leaving only a half-written note behind. However, she believes that Ely saw the white bird and "tears roll[ing] down her broad cheeks and her voice quaver[ing]," she says to Miller: "He knowed he was maybe jist seein' things, like you ofttimes do down there, but he was afeerd too as how God might be tryin' to tell him somethin" (88). In her despair and frenzy, Clara cannot deal with her husband's death and wants to believe that there is a purpose behind his death. For she and her family are already good, conventional Christians, their house having the atmosphere of a "sentimental religiosity [with] evangelist pamphlets, dimestore plaques, cheap Biblical prints" (86). Thus, she exclaims,

> [h]e was a good man, Mr. Miller! . . . He done no wrong! He didn't deserve to git killt like that! . . . Ifn he died like that, they must be a reason! The Good Lord would not take Ely away ifn they weren't no reason! Would he Mr. Miller? *Would he*? . . . Why did Ely die and his partner live? *What is God tryin' to tell me Mr. Miller*? (88).

Her key words pointing out to the workings of her mind are "Lord would not take Ely away ifn they weren't no reason" and "What is God tryin' to tell me?" In her

mind, this death should have a reason and meaning behind it, and thinking this way gives her solace and comforts her. The note thus becoming of primary importance for her, its message "the 8th of" gains an extraordinary significance as the message of her husband. However, unable to interpret the message by herself and needing an affirmation of her belief in the significance of the message, she takes it to Abner Baxter, the next preacher after Ely. Although he tries to explain that Ely's words may not have a secret and hidden meaning, Clara is very insistent to "find the reason why," interrupting Abner with "but why"s. In the meantime, Abner, getting nervous, frustrated and distracted because of both Clara's stubborn insistence and of his children's noise in the house, reads that God "is ready to judge the living and the dead" and "[f]or the end of all things is at hand" (96). The moment Clara hears the words "the end of all things is at hand," it is enough for her to be sure that her belief about Ely's note is true, that the "8th" in the note indicates the date of that coming end. Even if Abner tries to persuade her that the eighth in the note may refer to the date of the explosion which occurred on the eighth of the month and that Ely might just be trying to write it down, nothing can ever change Clara's mind anymore.

The important point here is that Coover specifically underlines the restless children and Abner's distracted mind due to them. Getting slowly angry and impatient with the children, Abner mutters these words, probably, by forgetting what he has been trying to explain to Clara. However, because "Clara has already internalized the original interpretation of the message and, in her mind, the true import of its contents," she clings to her belief all the more strongly because her belief makes sense to her (Andersen, 1981: 46). According to her, "that Ely never put a period at the end of his note . . . is proof that he was interested in more important matters than the date of his own demise," that he was chosen by God to serve Him. (Andersen, 1981: 46). Through such thinking, she places her husband's death in a religious context because "[r]eligious myths provide [her] with a scheme from which all events can be understood" (Andersen, 1981: 46). Her view of reality (or reality fiction) is framed by "God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ" in whom she "discover[s], through her enduring faith, . . . new inner rivers of resolve" (165). It is this same frame where she not only infers the answer to "What is God tryin' to tell

me?" but also finds her place in this divine frame (165). She believes that God wants her to bear and spread her husband's word and her place in the world is thus determined by her duty to spread Ely's (supposedly God's) word. As Evenson rightly puts it, "if Bruno is the cult's Christ, it is Clara who serves as Peter, spreading the word and solidifying the Church, establishing the doctrine and the day-to-day operations of the faith" (2003: 34).

Furthermore, in Zizekian sense, Clara "recognize[s] [herself] as [Ely's letter's] addressee," and she becomes an instance of how "the letter always arrives at its destination" (Zizek, 1982:18). When the letter (Ely's note) arrives, the town almost collapses, but through their fantasy frame (the Brunist mind), they (think they) avoid this fatal contact. However, it is, as Zizek states, because they think of themselves as the addressee of the note that they believe the note arrived at its place. This is an imaginary "(mis)recognition" through which they believe they get the answer to *Che Vuoi*? (what do you want from—"what is God tryin' to tell me"). Nevertheless, as Zizek says, "I don't recognize myself in it because I'm its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it" (1982: 18, 12). Thus, it is not that Clara (or any other person in the town) was the addressee of the note but that Clara "recognizes herself in it" that she becomes the addressee and decides to act accordingly. For, as Zizek states, " 'a letter always arrives at its destination' exposes the very mechanism which brings about the amazement of 'Why me? Why was I chosen?' and thus sets in motion the search for a hidden fate that regulates my [both Clara's and others'] path" (1982: 12).

Identifying herself with a (mis)recognized mechanism and defining a holy duty and place for herself, Clara makes every possible effort to succeed in it: "She already determine[s] what she believes to be the truth and no evidence to the contrary can destroy that determination. She [begins] the process of constructing a myth out of the materials experience offers" (Evenson, 2003: 31). To that purpose, she interprets every word or comment as she expects it to be. Moreover, even if she cannot get the answers she needs, she starts "finding/creating" her own answers. For example, because she believes that Ely's words have a deeper meaning and

significance, “she ignores Abner’s subsequent and more rational suggestion that the mine disaster occurred on the 8th of the month” and that that was what Ely might be trying to write down (Evenson, 2003: 31). Because there is no other way that she can peacefully live with the trauma of death, she creates a fiction for herself using every material she sees fit, and even making those which seem not so fitting fit into her chain of thought. Therefore, although what she believes in is, in fact, just a construction of her, based on her basic Christian religious thought, “[h]aving placed her husband’s death within a context she can understand, Clara’s view of reality is no longer threatened. She feels comforted” (Andersen, 1981: 46).

Because she feels comforted and safe in her own fiction she becomes absorbed into it. Nevertheless, when her fiction falls short of her expectations she is devastated again. When one night Abner Baxter accuses the Brunists of being “false prophets, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ,” all of the people who are with her until then in the Brunist cause leave the house where they meet regularly (170). It is at that night that she “struck down[,] . . . wept. . . . Everything just drooped out. Even faith failed her. . . . It was as though they had walked out taking her very spirit with them, and now the hollow shell of her could but sit, utterly powerless and forsaken[,] . . . sit whimpering like a lost child” (165-166). When her reality fantasy is thus shaken by Abner Baxter’s sermons, Clara, left without the support of her fantasy frame, feels the hollow shell which was there and real all along but which she was trying to bypass. Now, left alone with the hollow shell, “she no longer [feels] Ely’s presence. Throughout this month of terror and trial, he had stayed by her side, had seemed closer even than he had been while living, had guided her, inspirited her, given her strength and singleness of purpose . . . and now he was gone. Gone! Ely! How?” (166). Because she cannot identify with the “call” (of God to duty) now, she cannot feel Ely’s presence; that is, she comes face to face with the “Real,” the fact that “so many indications of the Spirit at work” were not so real but fake indications. It is only when Bruno moves somehow a finger and murmurs the famous words “the coming of light, Sunday” that she again finds the support for her frame of thought, and sitting next to Eleanor “she sat, in awe, but feeling Ely close at her side one more” (175).

If Clara's chain of thought is nourished by religious myths, another sort of myth, numerology, operates through lawyer Ralph Himebaugh's mind, which "relies on a mythic notion of causality" and which "assumes that some sort of causal relationship exists between two entities (in this case number and event) which do not have any logical scientific (i.e., empirical) connection" (McCaffery, 1982: 32). Ralph firmly believes that all events can be explained by mathematical formulas, that there is a mathematical connection to be solved between events and numbers. Hence, he tries to find this connection and solve the mystery by trying to create various and different combinations of numbers so that he can reach an overall (mathematical) rule/conclusion. Ralph is described as a "man removed . . . as though the world were remarking the continuing aggravation of his isolation, as though nature herself were persecuting him, the victim, the sacrifice, the outcast" (184). Although he sees himself as the outcast or the victim, according to McCaffery,

> [he] is, as well, a parody of the mathematically oriented post-Renaissance scientist. Himebaugh's metaphysical notions amusingly parallel what has been called the "mathematical metaphysics" which developed after Galileo. Like Descartes, Galileo, Newton, and other formulators of the metaphysical foundations of modern science, Himebaugh is confident that all events can be explained in terms of mathematically determined forces and formulas. (1982: 33)

Since Ralph sees himself as the one who can find the secret formula to prevent disasters and diseases, he somewhat looks down on other people who, he believes, cannot see what he can see: "Discord, famine, war, cruelty, deaths, rape—couldn't the fools see it? Every day, mounting, tragedy upon tragedy, horror succeeding horror, oh my God! It was too plain! Yet their blindness was a part of it, was it not?" (184). For seven years now, he has been taking notes on his "P.O.—Personal Observations—journal" (186) and he sees himself as the one who "had been the intended victim and had in some incredible manner escaped, and now he had one more chance, one more chance to find the way out, to discover the system that would allow him to predict and escape the next blow [another disaster]" as well as to reach a higher reality (188). Since the basis for his thought system is numbers, he explains the explosion with numerology:

> The number ninety-seven, the number of the dead, was itself unbelievably relevant. Not only did it take its place almost perfectly in the concatenation of disaster figures he had been recording, but it contained internal mysteries as well: nine, after all, was the number of the mine itself, and seven, pregnant integer out of all divination, was the number of trapped miners. The number between nine and seven, eight, was the date of the explosion, and the day of the rescue was eleven, two one's, or two, the difference between nine and seven. Nine and seven added to sixteen, whose parts, one and six, again added to . . . seven! (188)

Although he makes this explanation regarding the explosion, he is "lacking only a final calculation of the value or values of the single *x* unit. When he had *that*, he knew he would be invulnerable!" (188). Thus, he sorts through, mixes, juggles and mixes again the numbers but instead of solving the mystery, he reaches always new patterns and formulas. Yet, he is not discouraged by the fact that he lacks "the value or values of the single *x* unit" and that he keeps finding new patterns. On the contrary, he is confident that his "system was nevertheless for him a new science, and if he did not yet embrace the whole truth of the universe, it was only because he still lacked all the data, lacked some vital but surely existent connection—in short, had not yet perfected his system" (261). In order to find that "lacking" vital element, Ralph "fills his spare time collecting and graphing statistical information, attempting to discover within the numbers before him a pattern, a basis for predictability" (McCaffery, 1982: 33). However, it is this attempt to find the lacking vital element and this desire to find the basis of predictability that Coover is satirizing. It does not occur to Ralph as a possibility that the lacking element may never be found out and that predictability is impossible to achieve. As a result, never taking into account this possibility, he is caught up in his frantic attempts to find the vital element and "close the circle," as Evenson states, "in another sort of myth—the myth that an understanding of formulae can lead to a full and complete understanding of tangible human events" (2003: 32-33). For the connections between numbers are endless and every time a new combination can be reached. Thus, it is very probable that Ralph is chasing after a formula that can never be known, and he is just trying to construct a hollow structure which will act as a hollow shell to cover up his years-long illusion of "disciplining himself, by literally chaining himself to the task and pummeling himself to greater wakefulness" (184). Unfortunately, his effort is rather vain since

this is an endless process, a game. Yet, because he is far from being able to realize its "gameness," he is destined to be caught up in his own fictions, just like Clara and other Brunists.

Moreover, it is not only Ralph or Clara who try to find patterns or create connections but also the readers of this novel who as they try to follow Ralph's formulas or Clara's Christian beliefs, are manipulated into this trick by Coover, the master player himself. McCaffery points out that

> Just as in a Nabokovian puzzle, certain patterns do mysteriously appear if we follow these numerological hints. If we take the number seven, for example, we find that tiger Miller's high basketball number was seven; the number of miners trapped was ninety-eight, which is itself composed of fourteen sevens (with fourteen itself being another multiple of seven); ninety-eight, if taken in a series leads first to seven (the number of miners trapped with Bruno) and then to six (the number who died). . . . . After just a little of this sort of number-chasing, we sense that Coover is playing a joke on us—inducing us to establish fictional patterns. (1982: 34)

It is clear that Coover is again playing with the readers, this time with numbers to question the efforts of extracting and creating meaning: "[he] pokes a great deal of fun at . . . [not only] these [the characters'] methods" but also the readers' efforts to create their own methods to make sense of these numerological games (McCaffery, 1982: 34). For as he creates these games he, simultaneously, "subtly undercuts" his own creation "by establishing a 'real' numerological foundation in his own novel and thus indirectly creat[ing] an 'objective basis' for the position he mocks" (McCaffery, 1982: 34).Thus, on the one hand, Coover gives some numerological connections between the events/characters and numbers, making it seem as if the novel does support these numerological signs, such as Ralph's findings, the number eight was the date of the explosion, the day of the rescue was eleven, nine was the number of the mine itself, and seven, was the number of trapped miners. On the other hand, however, this is the game Coover plays on his readers. Lewicki underlines this "pseudo-objective-numerology" in *The Origin of the Brunists*. He claims that Coover's abundant use of numbers is related with his use of traditional symbols in a rather mocking way and his turning the traditional apocalyptical imagery upside-down. As he writes,

> Coover's method can be perhaps best exemplified by his treatment of dates and numbers. . . . Throughout *The Origin of the Brunists* Coover is also very much concerned with giving exact dates. He keeps a precise count of how many days, weeks or months pass between events, but in the process successfully conceals the crucial information: the year the End is to happen. Coover states repeatedly that Easter Sunday fell on April 11 that year, and the book obviously takes place after World War II, but the next time will not be before 1998. In effect, Coover not only places his book out of time, so to speak, but also provides a clue to his "reverse" treatment of chiliastic symbols: he uses them but at the same time disavows their basic pattern. (Lewicki, 1984:60-61)

As the reader loses him/herself in the numerological details and dedicates him/herself, along with Ralph, to reach a conclusion, s/he will never be able to reach a final formula to close the circle. In fact, the whole trick is that that circle is supposed to stay open, its inherent gap not closing altogether but always remaining open for another possibility. In order to emphasize this, Coover's "favorite procedure can be described as a three-tier construction. He presents some chiliastic belief, ridicules and apparently rejects it—and then goes on to include it in disguise somewhere else in the novel" (Lewicki, 1984: 61). For instance, regarding the Brunists' robes, it is written in the novel that the robes were

> white (the White Bird, the coming of Light) with brown (Bruno) ropes at the waist, and, embroidered in brown on the breast, a large circle (Evening Circle, a Circle of Evenings) enclosing a miner's pick, stylized to resemble a cross. The dimensions of this pick/cross were numerologically determined: seven units each for the arms and head, twelve units for the post or handle, totaling thirty-three, the life in years of Christ not to mention an entire history of secondary meanings derived from important ancient writings. (295)

Here, the emblem on the robes includes the number 33, reminding at first the age Christ died, but in different parts of the novel the reader meets number 33 again. For instance, there are some scars on Bruno's body, in the shape of a "kind of 'LOF'" and the connections between the letters L, O, and F, and numbers lead to number 33 again (300). If we look for the equivalent of L, O and F, we find 12, 15 and 6, totaling in 33 again, and then, "the dimensions of the cross . . . 7, 7, 7 and 12" on the Brunists' robes also reach 33" (Lewicki, 1984: 61). Finally, "what should we make

of the fact that out of four chapters of the book itself, three consist of seven parts each, and one of twelve?" (Lewicki, 1984: 61). Coover seems to be playing with the number 33, at first as an allusion to Christ, but which turns out to be a fake sign since in almost every part of the book there is a number 33, triggering the desire to find an explanation for a pattern in Coover's abundant use of it.

Then, the passage above on robes and number 33 concludes with "an entire history of secondary meanings derived from important ancient writings." The meanings found are always secondary because they are inferred from some acts or persons that are considered to be symbols. What the Brunists (and the readers as they follow the Brunists' imagery) do is to make their own secondary and subsequent meanings from the events that they see as primarily symbolic, as in the case of number 33. However, it is not easy to reach a conclusion from those secondary and attributed meanings. For to try to reach past knowledge through a combination of facts, evidences and numbers—as Ralph does—or reading and interpreting the evidences or symbols as divine message—as Clara does—may lead to ever-expanding results without a definite conclusion and may turn into a deadlock in itself.

A character as significant and lost in her own creations as both Clara and Ralph is Eleanor Norton. Eleanor's way of thinking is psychic as Clara's is religious and Ralph's is pseudo-numerological, but it is twice removed from "rational" thought. Eleanor is sure that she has extrasensory abilities and that she is in contact with Domiron, a supposedly higher spiritual being from which she claims to get special messages. She sees herself as a "practicing medium of some sort, an automatist and old-fashioned sibyl," and also as "a communicant with the higher forces" (141). When she is about to get messages from Domiron, she goes into a room to make the connection. After a few minutes, exhausted and sweaty, she comes back with the note from Domiron (141). It is for this reason that she considers herself as the only person in West Condon who carries the "entire burden of keeping the connection alive on her shoulders" with Domiron after the explosion, so that the messages keep coming to her about what the explosion means, what the future holds

for them, and how she can communicate with Bruno to perceive and understand all of this (132).

In fact, she is a schoolteacher and her "connection" with Domiron causes her a lot of trouble. She and her husband had to move from Carlyle because of Eleanor's "relationships" with certain male students with whom she claims to have had teaching sessions on Domiron and its messages. However, her behavior irritates the parents in the town and they are made to leave Carlyle. One night some of those disturbed parents, including the father of Larry with whom she has such sessions on Domiron, come to their door and say, " '[i]n plain talk, we want you two to get out of Carlyle" (74) and a "nicer and kinder" one continues:

> "We are only you might say interested citizens of this—interested citizens and *parents* of this community. We have, well, we have been requested by our, ah, our good neighbors to speak briefly. . . . Mrs. Norton, frankly, we—that is, *all* of us, have been frankly asking—have *repeatedly* asked you to terminate your, ah, your activities as regards all the—as regards the *youth* of Carlyle, and you nevertheless persisted."
> "We're asking you two to get out of town!" Mr. Loomis had snapped. (74)

Having had to move from town to town, they finally come to West Condon, hoping that this will finally be the place they will live. Eleanor's husband, Wylie "hope[s] only that, whatever happened, they would not have to move again. They had to change towns eight times now in the past fifteen years. . . . They had left Carlyle to come here to West Condon just a year ago, and they had only been in Carlyle fourteen months before that" (73). Still, despite their move from city to city in fifteen years because of her "activities," Eleanor continues firmly to believe in her "talent." She even believes that she and Wylie serve a cosmic purpose by going from city to city; their move is not simply a change of place but it is to reach and teach as many people as possible what she knows. She is so involved in what she believes that when she sees in Wickham—their next town after Carlyle—the druggist who talks to them "nicely and kindly" in Carlyle, she even thinks that "that was [not] the real person of the Carlyle druggist who appeared to [her] on the street in Wickham. . . . It was a sign, Wylie . . . *we're being sent*!" (77).

Brian Evenson provides an illuminating analysis of Eleanor and her way of thinking: "with Domiron's words obviously stemming out of her desires, fears, and needs, Eleanor's revelations are shot through with her own personality"; she "sees Giovanni Bruno as a figure she can use to make her spiritual 'gifts' increasingly manifest to others" (2003: 33). Yet, the irony is that those "gifts" she believes she has been bestowed upon are her own montages; she combines her "messages" from Domiron in her mind and by interpreting them she tries to reach a wholeness that unites all of these happenings. For instance, one message says "**. . . look to the east! look to the west! The feet tug downward, but the spirit soars!**" and she interprets this as follows "the east: the source of light, of course. The West . . . West Condon? And the tugging downward, was that the miners?" (120, Coover's bold). Actually, these may be random passages from a book she has read or is reading these days, or may even be her mind's creative workings. However, she is sure that these are privileged messages sent specially to her because she is the special person. For she tries to assist Wylie "in attaining a communication with the higher forces in the universe [but] he had almost no success. Domiron explained privately to her that **. . . if even the faithful are few, how rare then the master!**" (121, Coover's bold).

Hence, like Clara and Ralph, Eleanor, too, tries to write the "story" that best fits her fantasy frame and that makes her reach the conclusion that "Giovanni Bruno's body had been invaded by a higher being" (132). Because she sees Bruno in the hospital as "little more than a vegetable," using "her peculiar use of the deductive reasoning process, Eleanor suspects that the real Bruno died in the mine and that the body that was rescued is being inhabited by a being from another world" (Andersen, 1981: 48). According to her, Clara's husband Ely was also a means through which that higher being tried to communicate with them, and now it is Bruno that is being used for this purpose. She shares her idea even with Miller too: "[t]here is every reason to believe that the . . . the being, let us say, the being now struggling to establish communication with us through . . . through the body and person of Giovanni Bruno . . . might originally have intended to utilize Mrs. Collins' husband" (200). Hence, she deduces, she is the one to "establish that contact" and continue the communication to provide the required circumstances for the establishment of such

contact (132). Because she believes that "she [is] the only person alive who [realizes]" that Bruno is embodied by a higher being she makes "every effort" to unveil that plan step by step (132). Going to Bruno's home with this purpose in mind, she starts asking him questions and then starts interpreting his every motion or sound:

> "Am I to call you Giovanni?" she asked. He nodded. . . . "Giovanni" she whispered anxiously—she must hold on to it!—"*Giovanni*!" Again his eyes opened. "Giovanni, did you come a great distance?" He nodded. "From another aspect?" He hesitated, then nodded. He trusted her! . . . "Have you . . . have you any messages?" He did not reply, but continued to stare at her. So tenuous! She swallowed and felt them at her throat. "The white bird," she ventured, does it signal . . . a new life?" He nodded. "May I come often?" Again the nod. "There is time then!" she whispered, and at his nod a great relief washed over her. With time, she could do it. She felt the malignant bodies disperse and retreat. (134)

In the passage, sentences like "he nodded, he continued to stare at her," on the one hand, imply a sense of "objectivity and reliability" through the omnipotent third person narrator, giving the sense that as if Bruno did really give these responses to her. On the other hand, because we, as readers, already know the real medical condition of Bruno, and of Eleanor's obsession with her own thoughts, the sentences like "he trusted her, she felt the malignant bodies disperse and retreat" seem to be rather Eleanor's projection of her feelings and expectations about Bruno on to his "responses." As in Evenson's explanations, it is very probable that because she sees in him what she expects to see, she deduces that Bruno's motions are a sign of his communication with her, indicating that he will give the information she desperately needs. Thus, playing the role of the "messenger" between Bruno and the people becomes for her a means of proving her leadership to guide people in their path to apocalypse.

In this role, she attends every occasion to inform people about the Brunists and their aim. It seems, even if her interpretation of events differs from Clara, Miller and Ralph, she is ready to cooperate with them. On the Mount of Redemption, she makes a speech about their being the holy players of a great spiritual drama. Again, on the mountain, she makes explanations to the newsmen about their walk to the

mount for the apocalypse, and she gives them information on how they prepared for this event. Even though she does not like Clara, she even defends Clara against Abner's accusations that she is a false prophet: "'Who are you to judge another's gifts?' asked a gentle voice with a calm, a mildness, strange to this awesome hour. With unbelief, Clara saw that it was Mrs. Norton who had spoken" (171). In fact, there is already a clear conflict and disagreement between the two women about ways of interpreting this explosion and Bruno. Still, Eleanor defends Clara and decides to agree with her because "events of supreme importance were in the air, although the function and date hardly appealed to her, especially since they had never been mentioned by her own sources" (132).

Eleanor's dislike of both Clara and Miller is related with their different perspectives. She sees Miller as a "malign force . . . the intruder" but her dislike of Clara is partly related with the fact that she sees Clara as a rival (133). Before his death, people already respected and loved Ely. Now, they, in a sense, channel their love and respect for Ely to Clara; firstly because she believes that she is the carrier of Ely's spirit and secondly because what she says is based on basic Christian beliefs, they can relate to Clara's Christian interpretation of Ely's death. However, Eleanor finds in Clara's interpretations of the events a

> simple Christian admonition finally, which the Collins woman with equal simplicity equated to stale dreams of a Last Judgment. Eleanor could not help becoming impatient with the Christians and their adolescent clubbiness, their absurd dualities, concern with the physical body, their chosen people complex . . . even though the Bible itself, before Domiron, had been her chief guide. (131)

According to Eleanor, Clara and those who believe in her limit themselves and their vision to a basic Christian teaching by reducing everything to the Last Judgment. It is because of this narrow vision that, she believes they cannot see the big picture she sees. There is the event, the explosion, Bruno and also "messages" around to decipher and work on to understand what this is all about and where it will lead them. Hence, she somewhat scorns not only Clara and her Christian roots, finding Clara "ignorant" and her roots simple but also Ely, finding his imagery "lower-class Christian": "Now the woman believed that something—perhaps even

the second Coming—must happen on the eighth of February, finding this implication in her dead husband's note, and she was bullish and tense and she had power. She led a group called the 'Evening Circle'" (131). She even shares her feelings about Clara with Miller, telling him that it is because of Clara's being "slow to learn, overemotional and impulsive" and her being "too hemmed in [in] her own prejudices" that the higher being cannot communicate with Clara even if it tried to do it through Ely (200). She believes that Clara's "morbid expectations" of "another thing somewhat like the disaster" may be possible but "*there is* a *logic to everything[,] . . . even the irrational*" she, *ironically*, believes (my italics) (201). Because she has not gotten any message "to confirm such an extreme interpretation," she thinks that Clara's is an all-too-limited Christian view hindering her understanding about what is going on (201):

> Righteousness and salvation, the so-called Second Coming, the terribly overworked parable of the Cross, angels and devils and sin—*sin*! Good heavens! Finally, Mr. Miller, we are all of us emanations of the world soul, are we not? Ultimately we all partake, like it or not, in what is commonly called the divine, and the only conceivable sin in such a case is to be willfully ignorant of one's proper condition. Isn't that so? (200-201)

However, although Eleanor likes neither Clara nor Miller, and feels somewhat threatened by both, "[t]hrough Ralph, Eleanor finds a person whose empirically based constructions support her vision of reality" (Andersen, 1981: 48). For she is interested in numbers like Ralph too and some of her messages contain numbers which, she believes, are the numerological signs for the explanation she needs: "**The seven starred image of life's oscillation from abysses to cusps shadows forth in morning's east, but a firmness is forthcoming. Is nine a number? Is eight a number? Lead men to numberlessness!** . . . **For a time is to come, and the soul will swim in the vast and empty sea of enlightenment**" (120, Coover's bold). With this message, she concentrates on the numbers "nine" and "eight" and tries to find an explanation to the connection between "nine-eight," "numberlessness" and "leading men." Thinking of the dead people in the mine, she muses: "And there were the numbers to be considered, the number of miners who perished, of course, ninety-eight, but if thought of in a series, nine and then eight, then the next number would be seven . . . but what of that? For it is to

‘numberlessness’ he asked her to lead men” (122). Then, she learns that only one person survived the explosion, and she finds her connection:

> Of course! Domiron was trying to tell her to lead men away from . . . from a head-count of mortalities to his message! To the limitless and ununumbered truth of his word! “Does it matter these have died?” he was in effect asking. “Bring all to wisdom!” . . . “I knew it! I knew it! . . . Domiron told me!”
> “it started with the numbers. Nine and eight in a series. Next comes seven.
> “it is seven that leads to numberlessness and to the one!” (123)

As she makes use of numbers for her connections, and thus, feels closer to Ralph, “[s]he, in turn, provides Ralph with an end toward which he can direct his computations” (Andersen, 1981: 48). In the novel, the uniting of Eleanor and Ralph is expressed as “one of the more fascinating products of the cult” and an “odd” one because “under ordinary circumstances [these two] would probably never even have spoken to each other” (259). Yet, paradoxically, “a disaster had thrown them together, two innocents surprised in a fever, and now their logbooks, their respective systems, were drawing their timid souls together in holy intercourse. In fact, their two systems did fit together in the mating posture, one embracing from above, the other reaching up from below” (259). Miller describes them as complementary parts, each covering up the lack of the other:

> While Eleanor was, essentially, a gentle mystic who found peace of soul in the denial of all dualisms, particularly that of life and death, Ralph was terrorized by a haunting vision of the worst half of all dichotomies, obsessed by the horror of existence *qua* existence. In Eleanor’s messages from the higher aspects, [there was] an uncompromising rejection of constructive thinking: wisdom could only be intuited; contrarily, in [Himebaugh there was] a total commitment to the precision tools of logic, of science, of mathematics, the patient step-by-step addition of simple premises or single actions to arrive, hopefully, at complex totalities, the larger truths beyond phenomena.
> So, what was it united them?
> . . .
> They shared, that is, this hope for perfection, for final complete knowledge, their different approaches actually complemented each other, or at least seemed to. Eleanor’s practical difficulty, after all, was in relating her inexpressible vision of the One to the tangible particulars of in-the-world existence, and it was here where Himebaugh’s constructions and proofs, founded on the cold data of newspaper reports, seemed to be of value, providing her shortcuts, as it were, to the relevant material within the

> impossible superfluity of sense-data, and enriching her own vision with new and useful kinds of imagery. Similarly, Himebaugh's major frustration . . . was that his addictive process never seemed to end, it was apparently impossible ever to ascend to that last telling sum, and he had welcomed this final figure, so-called, toward which he could more accurately direct his computations(260, 261)

Ralph's and Eleanor's need for each other outstrips their differences and they come closer. However, in portraying this rather unusual closeness, Coover not only displays how obsessively each character clings to his/her vision of reality but also he emphasizes how limited and dogmatic the views the characters represent turn out to be. For it is to have more power and say and to make their fictions the "real narration" of the Brunists that they join forces together. As Evenson expresses, both Ralph and Eleanor

> attempt to dominate the cult developing around Bruno, trying to impose their own sets of myths on Clara Collins and others. . . . Coover is effective in showing the way in which Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh delicately balance their belief in their own systems with a very real play for control and a desire for power and glory . . . so that things come out with them both on top. (2003: 34)

In addition to the characters' own drives, "through the spiritual relationship that blossoms between Eleanor and Ralph, Coover provides his readers with a humorous parody of the deductive and inductive reasoning processes" as the efforts to reach the ultimate knowledge. (Andersen, 1981: 48). McCaffery writes that "Mrs. Norton's confident overview of events (from above by divine dispatches) and Ralph's slow assimilation of facts and numbers into a general framework seem to represent comic analogues of the two basic methods of achieving all knowledge—the rationalistic, deductive approach and the empirical, inductive method" (1982: 33). Thus, Coover's critique is directed at the two fundamental thinking styles, induction and deduction, accepted as the basic ways of reaching knowledge. Even if they may be the basic methods, one or the other can easily be manipulated by the ones like Ralph or Eleanor in their desperate needs to prove the rightness or validity of their beliefs. Such desperate situations turn into kind of a struggle for power, and, as Coover says, it is when one starts "to throw its weight around" or becomes too

dominant over the others that it turns into a dogmatic mythic essence that leaves no place for change. When this happens, the characters fall into a deadlock; they are either locked desperately in their own fictions/fantasy frames or use their fictions as a means of power over others, and sometimes even both. In the novel, Eleanor, Ralph and Clara, too, are in fact imprisoned in their own fictions but, without realizing it, they dedicate themselves to their own "fantasies" all the more and work hard to spread it in the town. It is such deadlock and irony that Coover tries to show to the readers through his parodying of not only the deductive and inductive processes but also the basic Christian teachings, the so-called more scientific mathematical way of thinking and the psychic ways to reach the knowledge of both past and present.

In fact, Coover shows this deadlock and the irony in two messages Eleanor gets from Domiron long before the mine explosion. One of those messages says: "Let thoughts pass through your mind . . . like fluffs of dandelion afloat on an errant breeze, like migrating birds, like purposeless foam appearing and disappearing, but let your mind dwell on none of them. The surface must be barren, the page white . . . the room of the mind empty" (75). This message can be interpreted as an advise for free thinking, for letting one's ideas float over different approaches and for letting oneself go with the flow of life. However, Eleanor is so obsessed with her own chain of thinking that she is no closer to interpreting those messages in any different way than her obsessed mind allows her. She is completely unable to let her thoughts—or herself for that matter—go with the flow freely since her mind is already framed with a certain point of view. The surface of her mind is not clear or free enough to fly like a breeze among many possible ideas. In this sense, this passage she quotes is a complete irony to how she acts. She cannot possibly be more distant from "[flying] with birds as a bird, swim[ing] in the sea as a fish, behave[ing] in the world as the world would have [her], for all is illusion but illusion itself, and only the wise can exist in it with tranquility" (76). Although to fly like a bird or to swim like a fish implies a sense of freedom, she is already imprisoned in her own vision, and she cannot grasp the *irony/illusion* in Domiron's message. The part that says, "for all is illusion but illusion itself and only the wise can exist in it with tranquility," seems

like warning her to be aware of the illusion so that she can live in tranquility, but she already lives in her illusion and cannot see the irony

In fact, none of them, Clara, Eleanor and Ralph, can go with the flow of life but, instead, create their own versions to make it meaningful and sensible. In their desperate and obsessive involvement in their beliefs, as Dewey writes, "[n]ot so much inhuman as unhuman, they are all pushed into preposterous poses of exaggerated performance: the too obviously comic (Eleanor Norton and her private, often frenzied communications with her spiritual mentor, Domiron); the too obviously tragic (the lawyer Himebaugh, who fasts himself to death) . . ." (1990: 94). In order to (de)balance these preposterous poses of obviously comic and/or tragic exaggerated performances, Coover presents a different group of characters consisting of Reverend Abner Baxter, the "Common Sense Committee," and Vince Bonali, also in the Common Sense Committee. Reverend Baxter is from the start against the Brunists. He does not believe in their apocalypse story or the significance of Bruno, and he says right to Clara's face that they are false prophets. It is again Baxter who says that the "8th" in Ely's message may not be more than the date of the explosion. Since he is the next preacher after Ely, he sees the Brunists as a threat to his congregation, yet, he ironically causes the Brunists to get closer. For when his children leave the burnt hand on Clara's house, this burnt hand becomes a "holy relic" for the Brunists. They incorporate such instances as significant signs to the myth they create and cling all the more passionately to what they already believe in. Thus, his opposition to the Brunists strengthens their sense of community and their belief in their myth: "Forced to seek each other's company for protection as well as spiritual support, the Brunists form a communal core that Coover believes is at the center of religious life" (Andersen, 1981: 49). It is this core that provides their continuity and their formation as a religious group. The same paradoxical mechanism also applies to Common Sense Committee in that as they try to prevent Brunists and their activities the Brunists stick to each other more tightly.

Common Sense Committee is organized by some of the "responsible and considerate" citizens of West Condon. Disturbed by the closing of the most

important financial support of the town, the mine, Ted Cavanaugh the banker initiates this idea of a group or a committee. On a rainy day, he contemplates how the town is about to lose any hope it might have from the future: "Rain. The banker stares out on it from his office window on the second floor. It reflects his own depression. He remembers how, after the war, there was so much hope here, so much promise. And now it's all going sour" (241). Thus, Ted believes that if the Brunists come together and stick with each other as a group, he has to do something for his town, or at least something has to be done for the town because "[t]his is his home and his home is sick. He believes it is really a matter of spirit Ted Cavanaugh has faith in the spirit, or, as he puts it, in will. A community of men of good will: his ideal" (241). Like the Brunists, Ted also wants to kindle a new spirit in the town but unlike them, he does not believe that the explosion has a deeper significance or that Bruno is the holy messenger. He just wants to revive the working environment of the town again because it is the financial situation which interests him. For that reason he even tries to keep the mine open but fails, "[s]o he look[s] for something to stimulate the community spirit again. Something they all could believe in . . . something . . . to provide the spark . . . to unite them" (241). Thus, he starts considering the Brunists as the uniting element but knowing them for the "crackpots that they are," he comes to consider them in a different way for his purpose (McCaffery, 1982: 35): "A committee. Communal exercising of a little common sense" but he knows that "he just can't fight anybody else's religion, no matter how absurd it is. They had to *do* something first, hopefully something offensive. And now . . . Baxter had done it for them. For him. Created that old vacuum, the filling of which is every American's first nature: the need for a third force" (241-242).

Because Abner Baxter is against the Brunists after the explosion, it seems there are two poles in the town, Baxter and the Brunists. Thus, Ted thinks, between these two extremities, he can start a formation which may fill in the void between those two by functioning as the third or the middle ground. Since there are also some people who are really disturbed by the whole Bruno and the apocalypse story initiated by this fanatical group (the Brunists), it seems the committee may also help these people get their voices heard. For example, the mayor Mort Whimple, trying to

express these feelings of unease to Miller, says that he is concerned about the letters some people send to him about the Bruno affair, and he tries to prevent Miller from writing on this subject anymore:

> "Anyhow, I don't give a good goddamn if Bruno thinks he's the Virgin Mary, but what I don't like is for the law and order in this town to get disturbed, see? People . . . [cannot], by God, turn a goddamn town upsidedown!
> "But, see, I'm the goddamn mayor of these humans, and some of the humans think certain other humans are stepping over their rights as citizens of this town, and it's going to get worse. *That's* the point! *That's* what I've been trying to tell you! They want me to arrest Bruno and have him examined by a state psychiatrist and get him locked in a nutbin somewhere. But I don't want to interfere with religion, see?" (302-303)

However, Miller calms him down with his distant and somewhat "not caring" attitude, saying that the apocalypse the Brunists are waiting for is eleven days ahead and when nothing happens that day it will all be over. Thus, between these extremes the idea of a middle ground seems perfect for West Condon and, with these ideas in mind, Ted says to Vince Bonali, "[g]et up a kind of committee or something, and . . . the more people the better. I think if these people saw how the whole community felt, they might start showing a little, you know, a little common . . ." and that's how he comes up with the name "A Common Sense Committee" (289-290). Yet, in his effort to make up the third position, he also creates a fiction of Bruno as the town's hero. He makes people forget that Bruno is a lonely Catholic with no family, no friends but "he push[es] the idea that in the eyes of the world, Giovanni Bruno represent[s] this generation's victory over hatred and prejudice, and that they could all stand taller today. . . . He [stands] for West Condon, and they all had to help lift West Condon high!" (144-145). In order to spread this idea, he writes some articles to explain it and publishes them in Miller's newspaper. Also, it is his idea to make Bruno's homecoming from the hospital a public event, almost a celebration, by which the idea of West Condon as a revitalized and energized town can be spread out to whole town.

Taken as a whole, in all these efforts, Ted also creates a fiction, a fiction of the town which is revived by the survival and heroism of Bruno. What provides the

realization of this fiction is their idea of “solidarity” the committee supports and “a program of community renovation, which, hopefully, would establish a base of Christian fellowship and prosperity here that would make ‘these other sentiments’ seem silly and inconsequential” (294). Thus, the committee’s aim emerges as bringing about communal unity and peace but in its actions it cannot quite live up to its promise. Even though the committee supports “solidarity,” some people “abstained, others were effectively barred”; for example, along with the “embarrassing fantasies of the coalminer Giovanni Bruno,” “neither the Chronicle editor nor any loyal Nazarene follower of Reverend Abner Baxter” were welcome (294). As a result, ironically, as they try to bring a little common sense to their town, the committee members also start acting as “sides,” though they claim to be on the side of “the common sense.”

3.2.2. Answers from a Journalist: Justin Miller as the Fiction Maker/ Game Player

These voices in West Condon, though they seem different from each other, either focus on Bruno and the Brunists or concentrate on the anti-Brunist sentiment and try to prevent the Brunists’ from having more power and from spreading their ideas to more people each day. In this sense, the town seems to be divided between the two ideas. However, there is another voice which really does seem to be the third or the middle position the Common Sense Committee aspired to be. This voice is Justin Miller, also known as Tiger, the journalist of *West Condon Chronicle*. Miller is situated in the middle ground since he is both from West Condon and is outside it. He is from West Condon, is the ex-basketball star of the town, and thus, seems like an insider. Yet, as a journalist he is outside the town, and also the Brunists; he now acts more as an outsider and/or an observer who publishes what is happening in the town with a journalist’s eye. On the other hand, as the newspaper editor, Miller is the one who spreads the news of the Brunists, and it is through his writings in the newspaper that other people who are not Brunists both in West Condon and in other towns hear and learn about the Brunists. Paradoxically, he becomes “the Brunists’ public relations man” (McCaffery, 1982: 36).

As a journalist, Miller also represents the role of the "pseudo-historian or fiction maker" (McCaffery, 1982: 37). For his worldview and approach to events call to mind Coover's idea of game playing and fiction making, and it is Miller's game playing tendency that makes the Brunists a public, almost a historical event:

> Games were what kept Miller going. Games, and the pacifying of mind and organs. Miller perceived existence as a loose concatenation of separate and ultimately inconsequential instants, each colored by the action that preceded it, but each possessed of a small wanton freedom of its own. Life, then, was a series of adjustments to these actions, and if one kept his sense of humor and produced as many of these actions himself as possible, adjustments were easier. (141-42)

In Miller's philosophy, life is a loose series of instants not necessarily leading to an ultimate conclusion. Each moment is affected by its predecessor but each also has its own freedom. As Andersen claims, "Miller's view, by his own definition, contradicts the historical perspective that relationships between events can be explained and an order imposed on them" (1981: 53). For Miller, life is, then, not a series of desperate efforts to make sense of its each and every instant or to make connections between them. His idea of separate and ultimately inconsequential instants having their own freedom contradicts also

> an *externally imposed* system of order. Once this view is accepted, the alternatives are evident: either man can adopt the despairing outlook that life is fundamentally and irrevocably absurd and chaotic; or he can consider the "freedom" of each moment as a sign that man can create his own system of order and meaning. . . . The meaning and order of games are fictitious and arbitrary in the sense that they are invented subjectively and then applied to the transformational possibilities within the system. But unlike the equally fictitious sense of order provided by history, politics or religion, games allow man to act with awareness of his position, without dogmatic claims to final truths and objectivity. (McCaffery, 1982: 37)

As a pseudo-historian and fiction maker, Miller chooses to create his own system from different moments without making a claim for the final truth. As an old basketball star, he is already familiar with the games and the rules, and thus, right from the start, he sees the Brunist event as a chance to play another game whose

rules he can create or at least manipulate as much as he can. It is for this reason that when Bruno's sister Marcella calls him to say that Bruno is conscious, "he listen[s] to her voice, dream[s] up questions to keep her talking. . . . But there [is] little more she [can] tell him. Except that Giovanni had been visited in the mine by the Virgin, a vision so to speak. Yes, he [can] publish that" (116). As he listens to Marcella, his first instinct is to think about what he can publish from her talk. He believes neither in the Brunists nor in their stories of the apocalypse. Ely's note is just "the damned thing" for him, which he will decide later whether to publish or not (88). Moreover, what he sees in Bruno is "the browbeaten child turned egocentered adult psychopath, now upstaging it with his sudden splash of glory—a waste of time" (140). Yet, he acts as if he really cares about them because this event is business for him; it is a very good story to publish and sell, "for Bruno himself was news, nationally as well as locally" and also "he [makes] good copy, and Miller sold some of it nationally" (140). Similarly, in preparing the news for the paper, he approaches the whole Brunist case distantly, like an operator or a businessman he is opportunistic and after his interests. Hence, he considers what will sell the paper and what will touch the townspeople, and as he and Jones prepare the front page of the newspaper they "[decide] to banner it with MIRACLE IN WEST CONDON just to wow the homefolks" (85). Although he attends Evening Circle meetings of the Brunists, most of the time he observes them and what is going on with a distant and sarcastic eye. He just acts as he is expected to, kindly and not seeming so eager in his desire to exploit them. He answers their questions about whether he believes in Bruno's survival, whether Domiron's messages are reliable mostly by "nodding firmly" and not saying too much since "it [can be] just too cornball [and] he might start grinning" (194).

He is able to have this kind of cold and detached stance accompanying his game playing and opportunistic attitude. His distance from the event and from the people is best expressed in his description after the explosion as he "ranges high above the chaos, unaffected by it" (Dewey, 1990: 102). As he takes photos of the crowd, he "shinnied halfway up the goddamn watertower shooting photographs of the jam" (55). He looks people down from above; godlike, he is not among them but

he just observes and takes photos from a secure distance. Being at a secure distance defines Miller's position because it is this secure distance which provides him with ways to deal with life. That is to say, his is also the desire to have control, order and security in his life. As Andersen points out, it "stems from the same needs that drive people to establish religion and record history" (1981: 53). As long as he keeps his distance and does not get involved in a single story, he can have different stories all the time. In this sense, the Brunist story becomes the field where he can use his faculties to create and exploit the material that offers him more than he expects:

> Their speculations amused Miller—who himself at age thirteen had read Revelations and never quite got over it—so he printed everything he thought might help them along, might seem relevant to them, amateur space theories, enigmatic Biblical texts. . . . Once the emotions had settled down and the widows themselves had established new affairs or found mind-busying work, their eccentric interests of the moment would be forgotten, of course. Which, in its way, was too bad. As games went, it was a game, and there was some promise in it. (141)

This same attitude can also be seen in his approach to the two women in his life. These two women, in a way, embody the basic characteristics of Miller's approach to and understanding of life. Representing two opposite sides of femininity, one of them is Bruno's sister Marcella, the other is Happy Bottom, a nurse and his girl friend. Marcella is the innocent, inexperienced "virgin" girl, and Happy is the sexually attractive, witty woman. Despite his distance from the Brunists, Miller is strangely attracted to Marcella. In fact, this attraction is mainly rooted in Miller's opportunism. He wants to be among the Brunists because "he [has] invested three hard weeks, and he [needs] at least that many more to have anything really exploitable. He stare[s] at the manila folders: yes there [is] a story there" (265). Hence, Marcella is, in a sense, his "means" to be with them. Yet, his paradox is that despite his opportunism, he both wants to save her from the Brunists, as if to feel like a savior and he feels a strong sexual desire for her.

He first sees her after the explosion near the mine, "darkly turned into herself, yet somehow radiant, some distance away from anyone else, a young girl, probably not much more than nineteen or twenty, under an olive-colored shawl—well, not a

shawl, of course: a blanket" (81). He is as if idealizing this darkly introverted girl who needs to be saved from the Brunists. Yet, although Marcella seems as the glowing, white-skinned, graceful young girl for him, his feelings of idealization are mixed with his sexual desire. For instance, once, when they are about to kiss, as if to show his idealization of her, he kneels in front of her like a knight. Yet, he combines her "virgin" image in his mind with the sexual desire he feels for her. As he kneels, he "lift[s] his eyes the full length of her young body, all those subtle curves of thigh and belly, and . . . he [rises]to—he thought coolly—enrich her experience," and he watches her walk "to enjoy a prolonged unobserved regard of the easy cadence of her hips" (203, 205). Then, he thinks how she "flattered the hell out of him, the way she looked at him. And there was a grace about everything she did, laughed, walked, turned. Bright, too. And she was beautiful. Coming or going, she caught a man's eye" (140).

It seems that Marcella is more than a pure maiden for him, in fact, he sees her quite like a woman, a desire object. As he watches her, it is a "feast in itself" and he feels "joy" in her "poise, her unfailing delicacy of movement, her radiance, open smiles" which "[breaks] the last bolts" and which make him feel like "blowing the goddamn roof off" (202, 203). When he goes to see Marcella he "[traces] the "expressive tapering of her right forearm, resting on her crossed knee, the bone-bent turn of her wrist" and he "feel[s], then, watching her eyes . . . a flicker of exaggerated tones and comforts from a distant innocence of his own" (257-258). His feelings, thus, turn out to be a strange combination of sexuality, attraction and affection. Feeling "weak," he faces her and "[realizes] that the decision [is] actually already made, had been made long before, and this was only a ritual: drawn to her sphere's center, he [has] long since agreed to stay. There now remained for him only to redescribe the sphere itself for her, make a few holes and let real air in" (258). Probably, because of all his confused feelings about Marcella, he tries to tell her to leave the Brunists and marry him when they are finally alone in the print room.

However, this is too strong for Marcella who is already "torn between her religious and sensual impulses," (Gordon, 1983: 27). For she is Bruno's sister and

carries the burden of her identity as such. Combined with their Catholic background, being Bruno's sister prevents her from enjoying life and her sensuality as freely as she may wish. Yet, she has had a crush on Miller ever since they were both teenagers, and she really wants him as a man. When she is waiting for him to talk about her brother, she sees him coming and in her eyes,

> *[h]e arrives, in crushed light, bringing with him the air of old story books, things wanted, things with a buried value in them. As a child, she watched him run, a man to her . . . with long legs and strong shoulders. . . . And now it is for her he comes smiling, a man to her still, long and strong, with something about him of forest greenness and church masonry and northern stars. . . . A man to be praised, yes a man to be loved*. (108 Coover's italics)

Marcella is ready to be with him and "[*n*]*ot for one moment does she fear, not even when, as though confused, he again asks her to wait,*" but Miller hesitates (309 Coover's italics). Although she is "*momentarily chilled by the pace of distance between them*" in the photocopy room, she manages to ignore his asking her to wait but she cannot tolerate when Miller asks her to dissociate herself from the Brunists (309 Coover's italics). Thus, although she is very attracted to Miller, she cannot leave the Brunists and cannot betray them with and for Miller (Gordon, 1983:27). In addition, thinking that Miller is among the Brunists because of his belief in them, she is completely shaken with what she hears from him: " '*It means I'm leaving the cult Marcella.' Again he embraces her, but now in terror, she shrinks from him. 'It has been a mistake. . . . And I want you to undo it with me. I want you to marry me, Marcella'. . . . 'But you promised!' she manages to cry*" (310 Coover's italics). What he says at such a moment of intimacy feels like a vulgar attack on her already split psychological state. She realizes that Miller is among them not because he believes in them but probably because of his personal interest for the newspaper. As a result, all these conflicts become too much for her and she "run[s] barefoot to the door" (310). As Dewey points out, "it is the realization that Miller's attentions have all been part of his private melodrama of rescuing the maiden and possessing her in marriage that destroys Marcella. It is a game that her frank, intense hunger for sexual consummation in the print shop cannot abide" (1990: 105).

It is after this traumatic encounter with her “man to love” that she gradually stops eating, becoming thinner and thinner as if to the point of dissolution. Even before this, she already starts having “this sensation of being pursued by something incorporeal. . . . Shapes in dark rooms. Shadows falling across her path. Disembodied sounds on stairways and under her bed at night. Sense always of a second presence, spectral and foreboding” (305). In this sense, Coover’s use of italics in writing about Marcella and her thoughts implies Marcella’s spectral condition. Just as something is written in italics for emphasis or for differentiating it from others, Marcella is differentiated from the Brunists, Happy Bottom and Miller’s plays. She can be neither like the Brunists nor like Miller totally; she is as if somewhere between the two. Also, like italics style, she implies an air of lightness and thinness in contrast to Eleanor’s Domiron’s bold messages. In contrast to Happy Bottom’s full figure, Marcella is like a silhouette disappearing gradually and acquiring a somewhat grotesque look as she loses weight. In a way, her physical appearance reflects her confused and disappointed psychology and state of mind and like her brother, she is gradually turning into a kind of “absence”: “Her hair hung down haglike past her ears, past her face, now a dull matte white. Those eyes that had so captivated [Miller] now stared vapidly out past the camera, too large for this face, all their bright glitter gone” (385). These descriptions imply that her absence is not only metaphorical, that Marcella does really lose her bodily “presence.” Such a loss calls to mind the act in Zizekian sense. In rejecting eating, she is gradually withdrawing from the world; in a sense, she is committing suicide. Then, combined with her already too-perplexed state of mind, this physical rejection of life causes her to lose all her ties to the “real” world. By not eating, by hearing voices or feeling spectral beings around her, she becomes lost in her distorted mind, suspending all her real connection to the reality. When she eventually runs towards a car, thinking of its lights as the holy light from God, she completely loses all her bonds to the world and, she literally dies. Thus, she not only turns into absence but also does the “act,” losing all her connection to the reality even to the degree of death.

With “plump and decidedly frisky” Happy, on the other hand, there are not such problems (Dewey, 1990: 105). According to Gordon, Happy is the “loving,

creative, sensual nurse who enjoys her body and who views the supernatural and the Brunists with affectionate mockery" (1983: 23). Thus, Miller's attraction to Happy is related with her playfulness and sensuality, which are in complete harmony with his sexual and playful nature. Like Miller, Happy thinks of the Brunist affair as a game and she sends Miller mysterious notes or makes strange phone calls to him making fun of the town's Brunist craze. With Happy, whose full name is never mentioned in the novel and whose "pseudonym suggests her own susceptibility to role playing" Miller can share his playfulness fully and as much as he wants (Dewey, 1990: 105). In this sense, "they are made for each other, pieces of the same game" (Dewey, 1990: 105).

However, even if they seem to be pieces of the same game, having both women is the real thrill for Miller:

> Where Happy Bottom pinched in at the waist, bulged tremulously at the buttocks, Marcella tapered finely, arched firmly. There was a conscious challenge, a proud taunting thrust to Happy Bottom's stagy shamble; Marcella swung loose-limbed and light of heart, stunning but chaste. Difference between a hurdy-gurdy and a pipe's soft capriccio. But he liked both. (205)

As a man who likes to have the both, the virgin and the temptress, Miller, finally, "settles" with Happy but his "settlement" is not in the usual sense of the word, such as marrying a nice girl, having children, and living in suburbia. His settlement involves the possibility of playfulness and excitement with a "frisky" girl. He and Happy "affirm life through sex . . . rather than falling into the rigors and restraints of religion" or any other institution for that matter because "Miller's own 'cult' is quite a bit different, involving only himself and Happy Bottom, The only role religion plays in their lives is as a kind of profane sexual banter" (Evenson: 2003, 30). That's why, although shaken somehow by his confused feelings for Marcella, it is the excitement, not the strict commitment to the Brunist cult, which drives Miller to settle into playfulness. Also, it is this same thrill at work that drives him as he works on the Brunist story. Gordon summarizes this position of Miller as a rather opportunistic and sexually-driven journalist:

> Appropriately nicknamed “Tiger,” Miller both fits into and is a loner among the Brunists. On the one hand, he is granted special privileges as the cult’s publicist because, among other things, he is associated with “grace,” with the magical number seven: he was the successful “14” on the West Condon high school teams, and he worked for the paper fourteen years. Now he not only chronicles the group’s activities (like Saint John?), but he also authors the apocalypse (John of Patmos?) On the other hand, Miller is the cult’s gravest opposition—cunning and manipulative, while forcefully attractive sexually and intellectually. (27).

His opportunism and manipulative behaviors enable him to create and develop the Brunist story in the newspaper since he is well aware that “the fact that historical perspectives result from human intervention and selection is usually ignored by an uncritical public hungry for order and truth” (McCaffery, 1981: 39). Hence, it is not only easy for him to manipulate this hungry-for-order public but also it is playful for him. For as “[the newspaper’s] publisher and editor, [he], sometimes thought of himself as in the entertainment business and viewed his product, based as it was on the technicality of the recordable fact, as a kind of benevolent hoax” (151). This “benevolent hoax,” that is to select, organize and present news, sums up how Miller thinks of reality, history, and the creation of historical knowledge. He is well aware that he is a game player, and in a conversation with Reverend Edwards who, for a long time, tries determinedly to convert him into a believer, he says that both journalists/fiction writers and theologians are doing the same thing, that is, they are creating and writing stories:

> “Well, Edwards, news is news.”
> . . .
> “ . . . If the news is news, how did it turn out you missed that fight the other night on Mr. Bruno’s front lawn?” Miller shrugged. . . . “Justin, it’s just that sort of thing, I’m afraid, that’s beginning to worry me.”
> . . .
> “It doesn’t matter! Somebody with a little imagination, a new interpretation, a bit of eloquence, and—zap!—they’re off for another hundred or thousand years.” Miller passed his hand over the heap of manila folders on his desk. “Anyway, it makes a good story.”
> Edwards gazed down at the folders. “But Justin, doesn’t it occur to you? These are human lives—one-time human lives—you’re toying with!”
> “Sure, what else?”
> “But to make a game out of –

> Miller laughed. “You know, Edwards, it’s the one thing you and I have got in common.” (264)

Miller’s point here summarizes what Coover emphasizes in almost all of his fictions that (for Miller) “the process of creating a religion and presenting a historical account of it is a game, an arbitrary fiction conjured up by an imaginative mind” (McCaffery, 1982: 38). For Miller, it is not that fiction is imaginary and unreal, and religion or history is factual and real, but both are equally imaginary and have a fictional nature as well. However, whereas Reverend Edwards seems concerned about Miller’s toying with real lives, as a journalist and story writer, for Miller what he does is not really different from what historians or theologians do. In essence, they all do the same thing, that is “fiction making,” and they create fictions—historical, religious or political—in order to both make sense of and survive in life. For instance, about a false report that a United Press representative prepares, he laughs saying “[s]uch are history’s documents!” (99). His words reflect his irony; if false reports can contribute to historical “facts,” then, he seems to be saying, how accurate and factual are those facts? He knows histories are made through false reports and selected/omitted writings, and it is this awareness that distances him from others and drives him towards sarcasm. Accordingly, unlike Ralph, Eleanor or Clara, he is not after big conclusions or significant results from his fictions but he manipulates the so-called “signs” because it is this play and games that keep him going. With his sarcasm and distance as “the supreme fiction maker” (Dewey, 1990: 103) he constructs what will be recorded in/as history:

> A beautiful spread! Goddamn he had too much good stuff! Eight-column banner: BRUNISTS PROPHESY END OF WORLD! Four-column photo of the group on Cunt Hill, lit by the car lights he’d arranged and shot from the shaggy crotch by Lou Jones. Two-column mugshot of the Prophet in his new tunic, which Marcella had let him get for “inspirational” purposes. And inspirational it was. Wonderful dark head afloat in pale white light; forehead, nose, cheeks—all looked as though chiseled from granite or marble. . . . Miller was working up ideas for a special Millennium’s Eve TV documentary, if he could just sell the notion to one of the networks. . . . Then, as if he wasn’t already overloaded, the school board had provided him an unexpected bonus story by firing Eleanor Norton last night. He dug up a somber shot of the board . . . ran it with cutlines that all but made grand inquisitors of them. Except for these cum-incensed types . . . Miller’s

> stories were essentially objective—meaning, he left it up to the reader to decide if the end might really be coming or not. (299-300)

In accordance with his opportunistic and manipulative attitude, Miller's arrangement and presentation of his headlines, photos and news in the Brunists case are far from being objective and factual. As the fiction maker, he "records history secondhand, through the medium of his newspaper and through the lens of his ever-present Speedgraphic camera" (Dewey, 1990: 102). For he is behind the camera and he can adjust the scene he will record. He is aware of people's needs and expectations for a story to believe in, and thus, he records the Brunist story in the best way that will not only touch the people but also sell the newspaper. Hence, the final product, the published story, reflects his "*essentially objective*" approach and his point of view because he can cut, combine and edit his recordings to create the story that he intends to create. Even the doctor's words informing Miller of Bruno's condition in the hospital clearly express that it is Miller's point of view which will make Bruno something or the other. In answering Miller's question about how Bruno managed to survive the explosion, the doctor says: "Frankly, I don't know. Maybe your headline makes a . . . valid diagnosis" (89). Miller's vital diagnosis is to contribute to the perception of Bruno as a miracle. Then, it is through his contribution that the Brunists' belief in themselves is stimulated and the Brunist myth is heard all over the country, giving the Brunists the publicity they need. Thanks to Miller, before "that night of Easter Sunday, April twelfth," all West Condon is waiting for that night because "[f]or four straight days, *The West Condon Chronicle* has headlined the bizarre story. For four straight days, the city editor has exploited the event in special articles and photo features released to the world" (330). With Miller's manipulation and shaping of the events, the Brunists' meeting on the Mount of Redemption becomes a(n) (inter)national public event:

> All the way from the Antipodes to the Balearics . . . [w]irephotos, news stories television and radio broadcasts . . . burst now over West Condon. . . . A month and a half ago, it was all about coalmines and violence and economics and death and there was an innocence about it. Today it is faith and prophecy and cataclysm and conflict, and it is outrageous. Why did it happen here? How will it be stopped? Where will it end? . . . [N]one can know. (330)

It seems that Miller extends the limits of playing his game even farther; he makes a far bigger game of the Brunists than a simple small town fanaticism. West Condon is transformed from a closed, small, and despairing mining town into a town full of TV and radio broadcast cars, of curious people around and of the Brunists getting ready for their climb to the mount. In presenting Miller character, Coover highlights how beliefs, myths and histories are manipulated by the fiction writers like Miller. Miller's love of games incites the masses hungry for mystical stories, religious myths and rumors, turning West Condon into a site for public interest and upheaval. In this sense, Andersen provides an answer to the "why" and "how" questions in the above passage. According to him, this manipulative inclination is related with people's need for order and meaning. Because most people feel insecure and restless, they look for meaning in every event which will soothe them, and it is people like Miller who always find a way to "soothe" them. Andersen states that

> though the central focus of *The Origin of the Brunists* is on religious myths [it] is also a commentary on history, which, like religion, fictionalizes and reveres human experience. Except perhaps for its imposition of a specific time, the events of history, says Coover, are not much different from myths. Both stem from man's desire to place his experiences within a context he can understand. (1981: 51)

Thus, what lies at the origin of the creation of such myths and such absent centers is mainly the fear of meeting life in its most "(R)real." In order to bypass such a meeting, people create those stories to believe in so that they can make sense of life and can place their experiences into a meaningful context they can relate to their life. One of the miners, who tries to gain himself a place in history by joining the Common Sense Committee, Vince Bonali, says that "history is like a big goddamn sea . . . and here we are, bobbing around on it, a buncha poor bastards who can't swim, seasick, lost, unable to see past the next goddamn wave, not knowing where the hell it's taking us if it takes us anywhere at all" (330). Vince's choosing the word "sea" to describe history is significant because sea, mostly, connotes fluidity; it is something that is not containable but usually contains what is in it and its boundaries are not clear-cut. Also, sea calls to mind the period before we acquire language; things have not meanings yet then, nor have they been named. Or, even if there are names or meanings, we do not know them until we acquire language. It is

when that the world is "named," it becomes more orderly and its borders are defined more clearly. Thus, through language, we are saved from falling into the void of formlessness and namelessness. In this sense, the Brunists and even Miller try to swim in the formless sea to give it shape and meaning. In fact, Miller has more means in creating ways to get out of the sea since he is the journalist/historian/story writer who helps people place their experience in a context they can relate to and make their experience "the historical and the real" experience. As Andersen puts it, "history, like myth, has no more meaning than men assign to it" and, in this case, the Brunists' history has the meaning the Brunists and Miller assign to it (1981: 51).

Finally, in all these activities, Miller's position as "St. Justin" who is to spread the Word is paradoxically realized. He spreads the Brunists' news not only in the town but also outside the town. In addition, it is because of his spreading the Word that he comes very close to death and to being "sacrificed" on the Mount of Redemption. Ironically, Miller is somewhat sacrificed in a story that owes its growth and scope to a great degree to himself, only to be reborn in the next chapter, as if nothing happened on the Mount of Redemption. This "as if" part is another trick Coover plays on the readers because this sacrifice scene is an allusion, again, to Christ and its rebirth, but, as usual, Coover's ending the novel makes fun of these allusions too.

Because Miller publishes a special report and sells his story to newspapers and TVs all over the country, many people come to see and witness the apocalypse with the Brunists on the Mount of Redemption. "As messenger with the Word," Miller also joins the crowd which is getting bigger and more crowded each minute (398). In addition, his joining the crowd is also described as the "lost lamb returning to the fold," again an allusion to Christ (398).Yet, as the lost lamb Miller is among the crowd, he has his speedgraphic on one hand, running from here to there in that rain and "stampede" where everybody crushes one another as they follow or watch the Brunists (408). Coover's description of "the lost lamb Miller with his speedgraphic," once again, turns the Christ image completely upside down. Also, as Miller runs among the Brunists and looks at the hills beyond, he is not looking at and

photographing them from an upper position as before but now is on the same ground with them. Now, Miller can see "the watertower with its DEEPWATER banner" and, interestingly a woman's image comes to his mind, "a photograph taking shape: photograph of a young brown-eyed girl in a shawl, the shawl slipping to her shoulders . . . and he [sees] then that he [is] one with the Brunists: that he, too, had been brought full circle to stand upon this place" (405). This brown-eyed girl is Marcella. When he first sees her, she sits with a blanket over her shoulders, which at first he mistakenly takes to be a shawl. It is as if he has made a full circle or finally "returned" to his "fold," as the title "Epilogue: Return" suggests, to where he first started.

For after the explosion the Brunists start their journey here, from this explosion place, and Marcella sits near the explosion area as the miners are brought from the ruins, waiting for his brother. Miller also starts at this same place after many years when he returns to West Condon for the newspaper and he first sees Marcella as she sits near the explosion area. As the Brunists come to the mountain which is the "origin," the birth place of their cult, he also comes with them to where he starts. It is as if both the Brunists and Miller make a full circle and complete their movement. However, at this point when it is thought that everything will be settled with this full circle and return, it is understood that Coover only makes us think so, that he plays another game, giving the sense that the full circle is completed. For in that stampede, one of the people screams "Killer," pointing to Miller, meaning Marcella's death by a car accident. With this screaming, "[a]ll the aimless fury of the moment before suddenly discover[s] its object" and people begin to attack him (409). Finally, he

> felt them shred the clothes off him, saw the ax, knew, though he couldn't feel it, that his legs had been splayed and hands had been laid on him. Amazingly, just at the moment, he saw, or thought he saw, a woman giving birth: her enormous thighs were spread, drawn up in agony, and, staring up them, he saw blood burst out. "No!" he pleaded, but it sounded more like a gurgle. "Please!" and a whip lashed his mouth. (410)

It seems that instead of a peaceful settlement, a new chain of events will begin. The above passage implies that Miller is probably killed either by the ax or by the stampede because he can only say "no, please" and "it was done, the act was over.

Through the web of pain, skies away, he recognized the tall broad-shouldered priestess with the gold medallion. Rain washed over him. He seemed to be moving. . . . At which point, Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward" (410). Then, in the "Epilogue: Return," however, it is written that "The West Condon Tiger rose from the dead, pain the only sign of his continuance, for he was otherwise blind, deaf to all but a distant shriek, and abidingly transfixed" (431).

"Rising from the dead" implies not settlement but action and vitality. It also implies that in the new set of events, not only Miller's full circle is interrupted to begin anew but also the novel's sense of full circle is challenged. Miller is not dead but hurt in that stampede and he is back to life in the hospital room. Happy Bottom asks him, "[a]nd, how feels today the man who redeemed the world?" as if all is at rest and "the act is completed" with Miller's fake sacrifice as the fake Christ (431). On the contrary, nothing is at rest and everything starts again. After Miller's so-called end, "[a]fter this wild carnival scene, despite the violence and chaos and the fact that nothing miraculous transpires, the religion spreads. Its leaders . . . go on to bigger and more successful ventures as bishops and national television figures" (Gordon, 1983: 31). Instead of ending, the Brunists' belief spreads in many places in America and they choose Clara, who has become a public figure, as their Evangelical leader. Then, Miller is ready for his new life with Happy, and he even muses about their future, again with his typical sarcasm:

> "You know, the appeal of Noah is not the Ark or the rescue."
> . . .
> ". . . They just added that stuff to make the story credible."
> "Aha."
> That was worse than sarcasm, that was outright mockery, but still he went on. "No, it's the righteous destruction, that's what it's all about. We're all Noahs."
> "Why"—as though astonished—"that's true!"
> "So, see, the excitement of the disaster is over unless new destruction is possible. If Noah has three sons, one and preferably two have to become corrupt, so that we can—" (389).

Here, in addition to his "outright mockery," Miller's reference to Noah and his sons is interesting. In religious history, Noah is the one who saves the living

species from the disaster, and the next generations are the descendants of his children. During the big flood, with a command from God, Noah makes an arc and with his arc all the living beings are saved from the flood and extinction. In this sense, Noah implies both an ending and a beginning. He comes into the scene at the time of a disaster and, then, he becomes the means through which a new life begins. Moreover, because he makes the arc with God's command, he acts as a kind of messenger of God in this world. Considered this way, Miller's words, "We're all Noahs," can be interpreted as that he sees himself—and people like him—as Noah who changes the flow of life and/or the world with what he does. Like Noah, Miller comes to the scene when a disaster destroys people and life, and then, he contributes greatly to start life again. Also his death on the mount and re-birth in the "Epilogue" suit that same destruction-re-start/re-birth cycle. Thus, it is clear that the cycle of destruction and—possible—re-formation is what is appealing to Miller.

Moreover, in the above quotation, Miller mentions Noah's sons too and the second significant part of Noah's story is his curse to his son Ham because Ham sees Noah naked. Miller's unfinished sentence about Noah—"If Noah has three sons, one and preferably two have to become corrupt, so that we can—" can be read in terms of this curse story in two senses. First, it is as if Miller sees himself and Happy among the corrupt, belonging to the cursed generation, that is, Canaan's generation. For after his pseudo-resurrection his "rise" is again overly sexual and the two affirm life not in any spiritual or religious terms but in sexual terms: "Abruptly, she backed off and cracked his ass mightily, a kingsize belt that made him drop his smoke. . . . And then she cracked the other cheek and said, 'And this is the sign of my covenant!'" (389) This is a complete and profane mockery of Christ's "turn the other cheek" advice because the cheek, here, is the cheek of Miller's buttocks. As Gordon expresses, Miller "affirms a pagan embrace of life—the second but true religion" (1983, 21). Then, secondly, Miller can also have "one or two corrupt" sons, and following Noah, he may put a curse and trigger a new story's beginning. For Happy Bottom hints at her pregnancy at the hospital, implying new "births." These new "births" are the births not just of babies but of new lives too. Again, even if there is

the possibility of curse and the following punishment in terms of Miller's "would-be-sons," there is also the promise for new beginnings.

This cycle of destruction and re-formation applies to Miller's present condition at the hospital as well. Because the articles and the photographs he publishes on the Brunists infuriate many people, causing him trouble, his love of games is cooled off, at least, for the moment. He feels, for the time being "discourage[d] . . . from any more games-playing in that direction" (438). Still, he "receive[s]—and accept[s] an offer to do a series of TV commentaries on the Brunists which, he [sees], might give him a wimble into the whole world's cranny. Moreover, he could move his arms again, plug in razors, use the telephone, pinch bottoms, and piss alone: in short, felt a man again" (438-439). It is clear that despite all his discouragement from game playing, his desire to "move his arms, pinch bottoms and feel a man again" shows he is quite "alive," and not as cooled off from the games as he thinks. As he and Happy talk about their "tigers[,] . . . sons of Noah" they "quickly sign a pact, exchange gifts, [break] a chamberpot, [buy] Ascension Day airline tickets for the Caribbean, and nailed to the old tree of life and knowledge that night, she murmur[s] in his ear one last *Last Judgmen*t" (440). All these possibilities with Happy and with his new series for TV are equally potential destructive forces which may bring about new troubles to Miller, but still this is exactly the thrill of the cycle of destruction and—possible—re-formation he wants.

Finally, the destruction and re-formation cycle is seen in the novel's ending. After Miller's "death" scene, the novel's supposed conclusion does not bring a real end or closure. In fact, in the seeming inconsistency between Miller's death and his return lies Coover's overall challenge to the readers' ordinary expectations for conclusion. As Gordon puts it, he "leaves it up to the reader to understand Miller's 'return.' Thus if one accepts the incarnation and resurrection myths, he might also accept Miller's rebirth. On the other hand, perhaps Miller has just been mistaken for dead, in which case his 'recovery' is miraculous in the colloquial sense of surviving the odds" (Gordon, 1983: 32). In both cases, Coover both challenges those

resurrection and incarnation myths and plays with the readers who take Miller's death, the myths or the novels at their face value.

3.3. Meeting/Traversing "the Real" at the Mount of Redemption

The Brunists' encountering "the Real" takes the form of a carnivalesque atmosphere. Due to Miller's "juicy" and curiosity-provoking headlines and photographs of the Brunists, on "Tuesday, not only the goddamn local paper and the city papers were headlining the Brunist story, but it was even featured on the six o'clock televised newscast" as the Brunists plan to climb the Mount of Redemption on Sunday night to "await the Coming of the Light" (365-366). The interest in the group becomes so wide that their gathering becomes a live event to be broadcast on national TV. Spearheaded by Miller, the media constructs this place as a center for the whole event, as if there will really be the apocalypse, or at least something as important as that. Coover constructs this circus atmosphere by giving details about TV and radio broadcasts on West Condon, about the Brunists' behavior on the night they go to the mountain and also about the people watching them. Actually, he begins constructing this atmosphere first in the "Prologue" where he begins his narrative of the Brunists preparing for their walk to the mount and then climaxes and closes the part by mentioning Marcella's death's as the "most persistent legend in later years . . . [since] the girl, in the last throes of death, had pointed to the heavens, and then, miraculously, maintained this gesture forever after" (25). Then, in the last chapter, "The Mount," before the "Epilogue: Return," he returns to that night when the Brunists go to their sacred mountain for the apocalypse and in the midst of all that chaos Marcella dies and Miller gets hurt.

In the "Prologue," this atmosphere is narrated through Hiram Clegg, one of the Brunists. They decide to go to their spot on the mountain the night before the apocalypse so that those who have joined the group recently can be familiarized with the event and the atmosphere. In order to make sure that they will be secure and will not be harassed by the strangers, they come by cars since "the cars they reasoned, would permit them a quick removal in the event the enemy—any enemy—should

appear” (21). Yet, they are not the only people who come to the mount; many others who heard about them and their apocalypse story rush to the mount to watch them. As the Brunists get ready before they head to the mount, there are “literally hundreds of people milling about [and] at least half of them . . . [are] newspaper, radio, and television people: many cameras, much light, an unbelievable excitement” (13, 14). In the midst of this excitement, while Eleanor Norton “discourse[s] to newsmen,” the others in the group explain in detail to newcomers the “meaning of the design on the tunic, the cross that turned out to be a sort of coalminer’s pick, the enclosing circle, the use of the color scheme of brown upon white, and . . . their expectations of the Coming of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of Light” and remind them their rule to wear “white garments under the tunics,” (16, 15). As if this was a tour in a museum, they show the newcomers Bruno’s house and the “altar, where, surrounded by such relics as white chicken feathers, the Black Hand of Persecution [i.e., the carbonized hand the Baxter children leave on the porch of Clara’s house], a Mother Mary with her heart exposed on her breast, and, in a gilt frame, the famous death message of the beloved Ely Collins” stand (16). All these “relics,” the tours to the house, the speeches are designed to make the Brunists feel that they are participating in the staging of this Brunist historical drama as important players. That’s why, Sister Clara Collins says “we go, we go to that Mount of Redemption . . . we go not to die *but to act*!” (20). As Dewey states, “West Condon, caught by surprise by the mining accident, is now restaging history, ending it on schedule” (1990: 96).

However, despite all their well-designed plans, the lookout suddenly cries “*lights on the mine road!*” starting the big “mad scurry” not only of the Brunists back to their cars but also of all people there including the TV and radio newspapermen and even Miller to all directions (22). Through Miller’s eyes, “crowds blocked the way. People milled in every street. Mostly strangers. Lot of cars with out-of-state licenses. He saw the crowds, though, just swelling out onto the mine road from the edge of town. Helicopter circling overhead, no doubt photographing his lone gallop crosscountry toward the Brunists” (398). First, the car lights and then, TV camera lights and helicopter lights turn this place into a big live TV studio or a show stage. Now, Coover’s mockery both of the light image and “the coming of light” belief

upon which the Brunists form a whole system of belief becomes clearer. Ironically, the lights *do* literally come to the Brunists, though not quite in the form as they expect but in the form of car and helicopter lights. The climax of this "bright light frenzy" comes with Marcella. In this chaos, Marcella, assuming that she is left behind the others, runs to catch them and thinks

> *she seems to see light, even to feel—yes! It is coming. . . . The light grows, gathers, enlarges. Ahead of her, always just ahead of her. . . . She sees her shadow as the light sweeps down on her from behind. She tries to enclose herself in its sweep. . . . Suddenly: lights spring up before her! out of nowhere! lights on all sides! Flooding the world! she in its center! . . .* God is here! *She laughs. And she spins whirls embraces light leaps heaving her bathing in light her washes and as she flows laughs His Presence* light! *Stars burst sky burns with absolute laugh* light! *and* (389-390 Coover's italics)

she is hit by the car Abner Baxter drives and is killed. In this passage, Marcella's effort to catch up with the others is described through her eyes which see nothing but a light growing before her and leading her. Coover builds our expectations rhythmically to a climax which Marcella waits for and runs to ("yes! It is coming. . . Ahead of her . . . God is here. . . His presence . . . light!") until he cuts the narration abruptly with an "and." This unfinished sentence implies the end of Marcella due to a car accident at that moment. As she runs seeing God's light ahead of her, actually, it is the lights of the approaching cars which she is unable to perceive. In this sense, she is the epitome of the whole Brunist mind which cannot differentiate between the real and the fictional or the imaginary. Just like Marcella runs towards the car lights for God's light, the Brunists run towards the mount for God's light but they also get only the car and camera lights.

Moreover, already trapped in their confused minds, the Brunists immediately attribute to Marcella's death a symbolic meaning. Her death becomes a "sacrifice" to them, and Clara Collins reads it according to her basic Christian beliefs. Taking advantage of this moment to invite everybody to their union, she cries, "[n]o, friends! We're all murderers! . . . We all killed her with our hate and with our fear!" and she succeeds in gaining the most fervent anti-Brunist, Abner Baxter (391). Partly due to

his guilt of killing Marcella, Abner Baxter transfers his negative feelings into a religious/sublime context and putting aside his anti-Brunist feelings towards the Brunists, he joins them in their "holy" aim. In a sense, he experiences a kind of emotional and spiritual "conversion":

> And with a great lightening of his heart, he perceived that, though a terrible thing was upon them and many would despair, he, Abner Baxter, would march in the vanguard and give them strength, and he foresaw the great and holy march upon the morrow, he like these, in a pure-white tunic, foresaw the massing on the Mount of the mighty army of the sons of light, foresaw the smiting of the wicked and the destruction of the temples, foresaw the glory. (392)

In addition to Abner's spiritual transformation, Marcella's death also acts as the catalyst to quicken the following process of chaos and disorder. From the moment of her death on, the Brunists are completely scattered, some run here and some there. They try to continue walking with Marcella's body "floating as though on a raft," and "there must have been at least three or four hundred tunicked followers in the procession. . . . Others joined in, some wrapped in sheets, some merely in streetclothes, all barefoot. Behind the caravan were cars and trucks as far as the eye could see" (401, 402). Singing hymns and songs about the coming of the light, the Brunists continue walking, "the crowds ahead dissolving into a shifting white mass, bordered by browns and grays" (402). It is in this chaos, confusion and crowd that one shouts "killer" pointing to Miller and he is (nearly) killed by an ax-attack.

As this craziness goes on, the ditch and the gathering scene of the Brunists on the mountain also become a market of sorts. With pop-corn and game machines, TV cameras, helicopters and all, it is like a festival area. In fact, even some of the people who prepare this place like a festival area use the exact word "carnival" to describe the event; that is to say, they are very well aware of what they do here, and they try to make the most of what can be done. One of them is the hotel keeper Fisher who, setting a "perfect" example to the "spirit of entrepreneurship," "rents" the hill where the Brunists meet, a place totally worthless a few days ago, and puts a real "ticket booth" (402) to charge one dollar to those who want to see the ditch: "Mr. Fisher had

rented the premises for the day for the purposes of promoting a small carnival, and that the admission charge of one dollar was entirely legitimate," and they "limit the free entrance only to those who have these here jumpers on," that is, the white tunics (402-403). Yet, this does not quite solve the problem either because Clara Collins and Ben Wosznick point out the members who are not in tunics, so, "bare feet become sufficient criteria" (403). What is more, people do actually pay money to see the ditch or watch the Brunists up close even though there are some protests against being charged. Even when Miller wants to pass through the booth by showing his press card, they do not let him and say, grinning mockingly, "[t]his is, in fact, hee hee, a press carnival!" (403).

In addition to Fisher's ticket booth, there are also other "facilities" around which contribute to the amusement park scene of the area:

> The carnival amounted to a handful of refreshment stands, a bingo game, and a numbers game. . . . Popcorn *flup-flup-flupped* in the lit-up popping cage. A woman laughed. On the hill, a dramatic prayer was commenced. . . . Everyone joined in, echoing parts, chorusing familiar responses, all of it a kind of contest of Biblical knowledge and appropriate responsive ritual" (404).

Throughout the place, on the one hand, numbers game scores are heard, the Brunists walk in groups singing, praying, and on the other hand, while some people take photographs, others literally partake in this circus, like the couple who gets undressed to "stand with the Brunists in their white underwear" (407).

All this amusement park fun, combined with live broadcasts, turns this supposed apocalypse or the coming of the light into a mockery. In mentioning all the details like Fisher's renting the hill, the ticket booth, the arguments over who should pass without paying one dollar and what should be the criteria to "recognize the Brunists," Coover calls attention to the carnivalesque and performative attitude in the awaited night of the Brunists, and he wants the readers, too, to be aware of this process, through which a "simple event" is turned into a public show. For it is this process of transformation that turns an event or a belief into something else, in this

case into a public show. After this process it becomes something different, affecting all the people who are involved.

Finally, this public frenzy comes at a climax with the start of the rain and thunders, "perhaps an analogue to the 'eclipse' at the Crucifixion," after which everything goes astray (Gordon, 1983: 30). People run, shout, scream and try to protect themselves from the rain by entering into the tents. The Brunists are completely agitated. Because of the rain their thin white tunics no longer function as clothes, causing their flesh be seen except their underclothes. Everywhere is mud,

> [s]ome people on the outer, wettest, fringe, frightened by the storm and lashed by the frantic press of the mass, lost their heads and ran hysterically up the hill to join the Brunists. . . . Women prayed and shrieked, and there were cries, some mocking, some terrifyingly real, that the end was coming. And it was a sight to see. Naked or near-naked, they leapt and groveled and embraced and rolled around in the mud. A large group danced wildly around Marcella, screaming at her, kissing her dead mouth, clearly expecting her to rise up off her litter. . . . Men tore branches off the little tree until it was stripped nearly bare, and whipped themselves and each other. (408)

This scene is like an orgy scene and it has nothing to do with the first apocalypse idea the Brunists create. Ironically, the great spiritual drama the Brunists play on their holy spot is washed by the "ever-present silvery wash of the television lights," not quite by the God's holy light as they hoped for (Dewey, 1990: 96). This "Bacchanalian and ritualistic scene" (Evenson, 2003: 29) or the "wild carnival scene . . . like a Roman spectacle" (Gordon, 1983: 31) is where myth and fiction making meets its "more sinister side" (Evenson, 2003: 29). This "more sinister side" is the time when people lose the sight and extent of their fictions. For it is then that fiction making is completely turned upside down and comes to the point where it starts to become not only dogmatic and useless but also dangerous and literally life-threatening. For, in addition to Marcella, a child is killed, Miller is (nearly) killed and many people are injured before and during that orgy. Moreover, in the Zizekian sense, this carnival finally suspends all of what is left from their connection to the world. For they were already too lost in their Brunist fantasy scenario. This carnival becomes the West Condonite way of traversing the fantasy, giving all the participants

of this spectacle an opportunity to “bypass” the Real in a completely absurd way. Through their march to the mount and through all that chaos, they forget all their “aim” and transform their “holy” march to the mount into something totally different and something totally absurd.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, the analysis of Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* shows that fiction making and/or narration are not just fiction making and narration as such but both characterize, in a more general sense, an act of narration as a means of making sense of and dealing with life. For at the very core of human selves and lives, there is a primal trauma and the fear caused by that trauma, haunting people throughout their lives and lurking from time to time in different disguises. All human effort to narrate is basically a struggle to bypass confronting any meeting with that trauma and to prevent it from engulfing our realities. Due to this struggle, the fictions created and embraced, be it religious, political or socio-cultural, reflect basic needs, expectations and desires. In the face of the unexplainable, horrifying, painful or meaningless, a "buffer zone" is created through narrations to be able to deal with such occurrences. It is for this reason that especially during times of crisis, extreme pain or desperation, people try to find reasons for that crisis and try to explain it in ways that make sense. Only by doing this can a sense of control over that trauma and power over it be felt. Yet, the main irony in this effort is that although those fabricated buffer zones seem like the means through which we believe to have power and then, try to carve up our lives accordingly, they turn out to be walls separating us from any real encounter not only with life but also with ourselves.

Theoretically, this primal trauma and the following survival mechanisms are brilliantly analyzed by Slavoj Zizek who emphasizes a primordial existential trauma as the basis for human (existence). This primordial core is so significant and defining that it has to be acknowledged before discussing the effects of any social, cultural or political system in the formation of a subject who is the origin of all this fiction making process. This traumatic core called The Real by Zizek is the unexplainable, frightening and meaningless happenings in life. Such occurrences cannot be integrated into the symbolic system because any attempt at confrontation, let alone integration, with them dissolves the fabric of life. Thus, the driving force of the basic human effort to understand existence is the struggle to keep the dissolving and

haunting Real from creeping into the daily existence of life. Ironically however, the Real is already there and does not disappear with such struggles which only function to bypass it by symbolizing it sometimes with fairy tales, sometimes with politics or religion. For, in the end, as soothing as they may be, they are all fabrications, not much different from each other, but the primal fear is so great that even those man-made constructions seem calming enough, and this is the real human drama.

As Zizek theoretically explores this human condition, Coover, as a writer of novels and stories, also emphasizes and explains in his literary works this human need and effort to understand the world. According to him, life is too complex to grasp all at once, so people need means to deal with this complexity. Verbalizing and symbolizing seem the best ways to that purpose because as people tell, name and explain, things are no longer unexplainable or unknown. They become materialized and tangible, giving people a "false" sense of security, control and order. All those stories, novels, fairy tales, and even art in general in many of its forms, thus, become a means of survival for people. It is because of this need to survive that they cling to the stories they create without ever letting go of their hold over us. This is the reason Coover keeps analyzing the basic narrations in people's lives; by analyzing this strategy, he can, firstly, display this tendency, and then, create and offer new ways to challenge those very narrations. Thus, whether it is religion (as in *The Origin of the Brunists* and *A Theological Position*) or politics, even the real political events in America, (as in *The Public Burning*) or fairy tales and myths (as in *Pricksongs and Descants*), Coover insistently questions the complex yet essential link between life and fictions. For all of those religious, political and mythical stories are fabricated narrations giving support and consistency to what is called reality and providing people with a point of view through which they can see the world. Interestingly, in this sense, the narrations resemble the Zizekian fantasy which is not just a day-dreaming in the usual sense of the word but are what gives a shape to reality. Through the narrations/fantasy scenarios, a way to perceive the world is produced and that construction serves as support to the "reality."

Moreover, people are so involved in these "supporting stories" that they cannot realize their turning into reality. For the more established and accepted by everyone the narrations are, the more dominant they become in defining and ordering life. This is when the means of survival turn into imprisoning systems. Coover's main challenge is against this transformation process. He does not call for a total destruction of the desire to create narrations. He challenges that process during when beliefs, needs and expectations turn into absolute dogmas, refusing any questioning or critique. In accordance with his idea, in *The Origin of the Brunists*, he narrates how the Brunists start with a simple idea of a coming apocalypse but, then, they hold onto to what they believe in so fanatically that they forget how this whole process has started in the first place.

In order to display this crucial connection between life and fiction and the narrative side of life, Coover narrates the creation of a "narration." In the novel, the Brunists' attempts to attribute meaning to the explosion are the efforts to shape and symbolize the primordial traumatic core or the Real. When suddenly and unexpectedly a devastating trauma is in front of West Condonites all they can do is to symbolize it in religious terms and thus, put it in a relatable context which will give them a sense of security. For, in fact, there is a giant gap, an indefinable absence materialized in the huge ditch in the mine area caused by the explosion, in their lives. Thus, the whole Brunist story is a fake security wall, a man-made-fabrication through which West Condonites try to attribute meaning to what happened to them The irony is that although it is an attribution, that although the explosion is not symbolic or meaningful in itself it is interpreted and narrated as such, people begin to take it for granted and for real. Hence, the man-made-fabrication becomes the meaning of life, even life itself. The apocalypse fantasy scenario becomes the only available possibility for the majority of the town because the absence that already exists and the sense of nothingness behind all these attributions threaten to engulf everything. Coover's and Zizek's main emphasis points are about this, that is, the absence is there and no matter what we try to do we cannot fill it up, it is all a futile effort. In this sense, no matter how developed, progressive and technological societies can be, it is often seen that in face of the unexpected or mysterious

occurrences and/or traumas, rumors, hear-says and tales dominate the air; many people claim to have experienced a similar happening once, some try to relate it to a religious passage according to the religion s/he believes in, or some try to give "scientific" explanations through numbers and formulas. Still, despite the variety of explanations, they all boil down to the same mechanism Coover and Zizek so insistently reveal about humans and their futile attempts to decipher the world: They are all stories—religious, mystical, mythical or political, all of them are part and result of the deciphering process.

In order to show the futility of this effort in *The Origin of the Brunists*, Coover narrates the novel both in structural and narrative levels in such a way that the reader's (futile) effort to put this novel in a clear-cut structure parallels that futile effort to contextualize the world in familiar and relatable terms. For instance, first of all, the novel's structure surprises the reader expecting to find a traditional form. It subverts the linear storytelling pattern rejecting the comfort of the usual limits of a story. Instead, it presents a fractured form, where even the Prologue and the Epilogue do not fit into the usual introductory and concluding parts. The Prologue, in terms of the plot line, narrates the events that will happen later chronologically. Similarly, Epilogue does not give a sense of completeness or closure because although Miller's death is implied in the previous part, in the Epilogue Miller is back, musing about his future with his girlfriend Happy. This structure, as disturbing and unexpected as it may seem, in fact, points out that the forms we take for granted and for real may not be as natural as they were assumed. On the contrary, they can be artificial, human-made and open for questioning and challenge.

Moreover, the novel is rich in—misleading—symbols and details that may go unobserved to the uncritical eye, but it is these symbols and details that make the novel's challenge stronger. The most significant symbol is the explosion which becomes the origin for the entire fictional basis of the Brunists. Evoking the big bang theories or the millenarian beliefs—that after a major transformation, society will be better and change especially in religious terms will be brought about by true or devout believers who will be rewarded, this explosion acts as a catalyst for those who

want to believe in and expect such a change. This is exactly Coover's point; raising the expectation for a familiar structure, he surprises, even disturbs the readers with such parodies so that they can realize what is accepted as unquestionable and unchallengeable is in fact quite questionable and challengeable. They only seem unquestionable because people prefer it this way; taking dogmas' seemingly substantial nature for granted keeps the sense of security and control intact, making people feel strong and capable.

In addition, not only the explosion but also the names of the characters are loaded with deceptive symbolic meanings. As the reader follows the connotations of the names like Justin "Tiger" Miller and Giovanni Bruno, s/he realizes that almost all of the connotations are parodied and distorted throughout the novel. Miller's nickname Tiger is a very specific reference to Christ but he is in no way a Christ-like figure except his pseudo-death and resurrection. Also, the name Justin's reference to the Christian martyr who is to spread the Word becomes a complete irony; Miller spreads the Word of the Brunists to the degree of making it a public show and a journalistic success for himself. In parodying and making fun of all these familiar symbols, Coover shows that it is people who attribute a specific meaning or value to a person, an event or an act. Following this is the idea that just as a value can be attributed to an event, that same value can be undermined too. Coover's point is to make the reader realize this "human intervention"; that what they have is all an act of fiction making and the final product is only man-made, not God-given, whose details and leading characters can be changed and manipulated according to both its writer and the reader. For instance, in Clara's view the leading actor is her husband Ely and the significance of the event lies in the interpretation of Ely's note; or similarly, for Eleanor the leading figure is herself after the disaster; likewise, Miller sees the event as an opportunity to use his ability to create a story and make profit from it.

Coover, in referring and parodying such familiar (religious) symbols and themes, misleads readers, on purpose, who expect a familiar story line to follow. With such detours, he shows that narrations can easily be manipulated by their narrators and even by the listeners as well. This, again, points out to the artificial

nature of seemingly unquestionable "Big Ideas" or the "grand narratives" but now another important point is added. It is of primary importance to know and realize who tells a certain story, when and how. For an awareness of this situation helps see that it is not natural and given that a particular story is told and trusted, but that a story is told and trusted because somehow it is made dominant over the others and presented as "the" story. Similarly, in the novel, such manipulations are shown through Clara's, Eleanor's, Ralph's and, most importantly, Miller's narrations, which manipulate even all three of those.

Coover calls for an awareness on the part both of writers and readers for all these fiction making possibilities. He wants fiction writers to create innovative fictions to clear up the long-held residues. In order to prevent dogmas and status quo becoming dominant and defining, he expects fiction writers to lead the path to show the readers this narrative side of life and the narrations in/of life by creating fictions which will both reveal this mechanism and offer newer possibilities to shake the minds. Yet, the writer alone is not enough; equally, even more, important are the readers who are to understand and respond to what is presented to them. For writers like Miller can manipulate fictions; any writer can do this. In fact, it has already been stated that the contextuality of any narration is a primary defining factor, challenging the reliability and certainty of any narration. In presenting Miller, the fiction maker character, Coover also shows this irony, that is, the extent the fiction maker can go in his creative and manipulative abilities. This irony is what Coover wants from the readers to be aware of, that is, to be critical of and not absorb what is presented without questioning. For it is only by developing such a serious and critical awareness of our basic paradoxical core and the following need and desire to symbolize that we can understand the true nature of our fictions. It seems then that those innovative or rejuvenating fictions Coover so enthusiastically emphasizes can have a chance to come out. Other than that, it seems all we are left with are our stories, narrations and our struggles to make this or that story more powerful than the others.

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