

REFLEXIVITY AND THE QUESTION OF REALISM IN ROBERT COOVER'S *THE ORIGIN OF THE BRUNISTS*

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I

With his first lengthy work of fiction, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), Robert Coover, who had hitherto practiced his literary craft in the writing of short stories and a few poems, began his career as a novelist.¹ Winner of the 1966 William Faulkner Award, the story of the Brunists marks the beginning of Coover's reflexive examination of some of the basic existential needs of human beings. It also comprises many of the representative features of both the realist novel and reflexive fiction, which makes it a suitable example to illustrate the mimetic qualities of fictional reflexivity. Among other elements, the novel merges narrative linearity and the multiple perspectives provided by the sudden movements of Coover's gaze, constantly shifting from one situation and character to another; the firm monologism of the Brunists' cult, their straightforward conviction and faith, and the varied dialogism provided by the background of the coal-mining town and its people; the almost plain representation and concern with psychological potentiality of the modern realists and the distinctively, although not exclusively, postmodern reflexive examination of pattern-making processes. The result of such combinations is a peculiarly «realist» novel concerned with the need for purpose and the sense of causality without giving up a basically mimetic quality. In this case, the uniqueness of Coover's novel is provided by the kind of realism it displays, which relies on an exploration into the search for a sense of «reality» out of the arbitrary

1. Robert Coover, *The Origin of the Brunists* (New York: Putnam's, 1966). All parenthetical references are to this edition.

occurrence of events—in other words, what Erich Auerbach identified as one of the main features of modern fiction in his classic study of mimesis.²

The novel explores the rise and significance of an esoteric religious cult in the small coal-mining town of West Condon after a terrible mine accident in which nearly one hundred coal-miners are killed. Interpreting the disaster as a sign of an approaching apocalypse and a new world for humankind, a group of local religious fanatics, led by the illuminated seer Eleanor Norton and following the erratic visions of their «Chosen One,» Giovanni Bruno—the only survivor of one group of six coalminers, his brain damaged by prolonged lack of oxygen and carbon monoxide poisoning—found the Brunist cult to deal with the new situation. For Coover, this religious context functions throughout as an appropriate analogue to examine not only the religious but also the more general need to create a sense of «purpose» and causality when apprehending and trying to understand the randomness of reality, in this case, symbolized by the compelling need to somehow justify the unexpected catastrophe. Against the view of some Coover critics, the history of this peculiar religious sect—whose origin is just one of the novel's thematic concerns—not only provides the environment but also metaphorically comprises some of the meaning-making processes that sustain the exploratory core of Coover's penetrating excursion.³ His fundamental concern is not so much with any particular religious creed as with the pattern-making mechanisms involved and their impact on the individual's conception of reality. Thus, beginning from this specific framework, Coover metonymically amplifies his inquiry to embrace other crucial concerns—obviously much more substantial than the question of devoutness and more closely related to our understanding of the real. To put it in Malcolm Bradbury's words, the postmodern reflexive quality of Coover's novel is associated not so much with the analysis of specific historical facts as with «the ways of knowing of a time.»⁴

As Coover himself has already explained, the conception and design of his first novel was dominated by his interest in mimetic-realist creation, partly because the story was based on an actual mining disaster he witnessed in his youth when living in Southern

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 535ff.

3. In *Novels and Arguments: Inventing Rhetorical Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Zahava Karl McKeon contributes a comprehensive rhetorical reading of *The Origin of the Brunists* and concludes that some stylistic features, such as the absence of reliable commentary in some scenes, turn Coover's novel into «an account of the inception and growth of a religion . . . not an argument for truth or falsity» (170). McKeon derives this conclusion from the absence of truth-claims in the novel and sees its reflexive quality in terms of the relation of mutual narrative implication between the beginning and end of the novel (137); but, in my opinion, she ultimately fails to acknowledge the broader reflexive quality implied by the exploration of the pattern-making processes subsumed under the narrative of the religious cult.

4. See Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 13ff.

Illinois.⁵ For some time before writing the Brunist story—paradoxically, when composing many of the short stories collected in *Pricksongs and Descants*, which are anything but realist fictions—the compulsion to begin his career as a novelist coping with a more traditional form (at least before delving into other more experimental designs) inspired and stimulated the potential creative energies of what was to become his first novel. The beginning of the reflexive examinations Coover develops in his later works was marked, then, by an excursion into the domain of realism. This was the prelude to his becoming immersed in the techniques and designs of postmodern writing. As he puts it in an interview,

I thought of it [the Brunist story], 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 into the mine was my submerging of myself into the novel experience and then coming out again with my own revelations.⁶

The Origin of the Brunists is Coover's most «realistic» novel. And this is probably one of the reasons why it has enjoyed less critical attention than his overtly metafictional novels, such as *The Universal Baseball Association* or *The Public Burning*. Although the reflexive component of *The Origin of the Brunists* is certainly perceptible throughout, it is not so overt, neither structurally nor self-consciously, as to foster fabulationist criticism. The specific sense in which Coover's first novel can be identified as a realist work requires some explanation, mostly because my use of the term «realist» in these pages does not directly imply any of the constitutive principles of the 19th-century subgenre we recognize as the «realist novel»—even though the stylistic properties that articulate realism in literature are employed throughout the story of the Brunist cult. However, although I consciously turn aside from any «stylistic» approach to this subgenre, the use I will be making of the realist model will be intrinsically connected with it insofar as I intend to apply one of its leading epistemological features (the search for a sense of purpose and causality).

The reflexive «realism» of Coover's first novel does not actually reside only in such characteristics as faithfulness of description, abundance of detail, use of idiolect and sociolect, historical awareness, detailed characterization, social portrayal, etc., though these devices are also profusely displayed from the very beginning. The use of these

5. «Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions,» interview with Larry McCaffery, *Novel vs. Fiction: The Contemporary Reformation*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Geoffrey Green (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1981), 49.

6. «Robert Coover: Interview,» *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing*, ed. Frank Gado (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1973), 148.

artifices help, nonetheless, to make the novel fit in with the more normative conceptions of fictional realism as the representation of a specific, circumstantial view of life, deeply marked by the constraints of historical contingency.⁷ However, Coover does not limit himself to the restrictions of a specific era; on the contrary, the breadth of his inquiry—initially confined to the small, local area of a circle of religious zealots—gradually expands in order to encompass more extensive issues. (The stylistic conception is also brought into question by the introduction of certain anti-realist elements in the novel, such as the description of the mining tragedy itself, or Tiger Miller's death and resurrection.) Although the Brunists' narrative no doubt displays a large variety of features that invite us to view it in terms of Watt's «situational» view, to surrender the novel to the realist paradigm would entail overlooking the novel's reflexive components. In his first novel, Coover undoubtedly goes beyond this view. He keeps himself within the boundaries of the realist genre but suffuses it with new possibilities.⁸

The realist traits—or, rather, the «disposition toward realism»—we encounter in *The Origin of the Brunists* rest not so much on formal or stylistic features as on the examination of the existential sense of purpose and continuity human beings are forced to forge out of the randomness of reality. (Here the term «realism» is as much thematic as it is formal or technical.) And this essentially reflexive quality can also be thought of as an underlying realist device so long as «[p]urpose... stands in the same relation to realism in life as does meaning to realism in literature.»⁹ And Coover's novel is realistic not so much because it depicts reality as because it comprises and symbolizes a means through which a sense of reality can be created. And the invention of «purpose» is one of the basic thematic motives of the realist novel. Taking, then, the notion of «realism» not only in terms of verisimilitude, but also as an investigation into the nature and configuration of extraliterary reality, the story of the Brunists moves away from Watt's «circumstantial» conception toward a Lukácsian view of realism as representing human complexity and, more important, with a deep commitment against the view of this complexity as split into public and private spheres.¹⁰ *The Origin of the Brunists* meets these two necessities by examining the need for purpose and pattern-making not only as the characters' personal quests for order and coherence, but also as a collective need, that of bringing the members of the community together and conferring a meaning on

7. For a classic example of this view, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 34–35.

8. On this idea, see Richard Andersen, *Robert Coover* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 41–42, and Leo J. Hertz, «What's Wrong with the Christians,» *Critique* 11 (1969): 16.

9. J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 81. That the realist novel implies an investigation into the individual and social articulation of a sense of purpose in human life seems more a condition of the subgenre than a stylistic feature.

10. See Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Merlin, 1972).

their existence. Despite the obvious contextual differences, this is a strategy Coover has frequently used (for instance, though with larger ideological implications, in *The Public Burning*.)

This disposition toward realism can also be associated to Coover's own vision of the origin and evolution of the creative process. Each one of his novels, he has argued, stems from the expansion and penetrating exploration of a primary metaphor, usually one involved in some meaning-making process and, thus, essential to our understanding of reality. Such is the initial source of the imaginative workings leading up to the novel's form (which, in turn, becomes an allegorical projection of the metaphor). As he puts it in his interview with Larry McCaffery,

[Metaphors] are the germ, the thought, the image, the idea, out of which all the rest grows. They're always a bit elusive, involving thoughts, feelings, abstractions, visual material, all at once... Novels typically begin for me as very tiny stories or little one-act play ideas which I think at the time aren't going to fill three pages. Then slowly the hidden complexities reveal themselves.¹¹

In Coover's first novel, this metaphor might well be thought of as motivated by his personal experience in Southern Illinois. And it is clear that this experience originates and contributes to the metaphor's materialization into narrative form; but its scope broadens as the Brunist story unfolds, its implications becoming much wider than the fictionalization of a mining accident. The town's need to survive after the mining catastrophe (partly symbolizing the epilogue of an old reality and the genesis of a new order) presupposes a reflection on the almost unbridgeable split that momentary chaos effects on a peaceful existence. The response to this chaos that both the individuals and the community can give (its «rationalization» as well as the defense against it) constitutes the novel's fundamental field of inquiry. Given the nature and breadth of the context Coover chooses to plunge into, the meaning-making strategies examined are as comprehensive as is the human being's quest for order and purpose in life and the creation of a new—or, simply, renewed—order after the collapse of the preexisting one.¹²

Although we know very little about life in West Condon before the accident (and what we come to know is always in contrast to the new situation), what matters is not how reality was perceived before, but rather how it is to be reconstructed after the bankruptcy of order. This is why Coover's exploration of purpose and causality in human life needs to begin precisely with the unexpected devastation of the community's dreary

11. «Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions,» 48-49.

12. See Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982).

existence brought about by the mining accident. In Reverend Edwards' words, «each man, to find salvation, must, in a sense, pass first through a kind of terror» (224). The uniformity and dullness of the town's life, then, are torn asunder by the tragedy, as order is unsettled by confusion. As Coover's characters seem to be used to think almost entirely in terms of cause and effect, the accident gives rise to a sudden state of unfamiliarity and hopelessness that shakes the innermost foundations and beliefs of the community's actual existence. As Eleanor Norton claims, «we have come here, found a pattern, and in one split second it has all been destroyed and we did not receive a *hint* of it!» (65).

So compelling is the need to come to grips with the unforeseen circumstances that the first «solution» is to find the purpose of the accident. And it is in this sense that pattern-making and the search for meaning play a crucial role in the novel. A few inconsequential facts not directly related to the accident, which was caused by one miner's smoking in a dangerous area, are magnified to the category of signs of a divine revelation. Ely Collins' admonitory deathnote, the day the tragedy takes place, and the survival of Giovanni Bruno, among others, appear as riddles concealing a message from God. Such is the only answer that a few characters, who later become the founders of the cult, can give in order to face the havoc played by this «thunderclap of doom» (167).

The most significant of these details is no doubt Giovanni Bruno's survival, who becomes the center of the sect despite his state of complete alienation from reality. Regardless of what could have actually happened, or the reason why he has survived, a group of West Condon neighbors view him as the incarnation of a divine spirit. His discernment seriously damaged by the accident, he is only capable of babbling a few words (something about visions of the coming of light, a white bird, and a Sunday week) that inevitably become the «evident» symptoms of some sacred design. The locals turn him into their Chosen One as he seems to be «invaded by a superior being» (132). For Ben Wosznick, whose brother has also died in the accident, if Bruno survived whereas the others did not there «[h]as to be a reason. There always is» (218). Looking for the meaning of, and the answer to chaos, they project their anxieties and fears onto Bruno's stuttering «prophecies.» However, the state of their leader (his nearly total speechlessness) forces the community to look for this meaning by themselves, trying to unveil whatever secret meaning hides behind his incoherent utterances. Their inability to think in more pragmatic terms drives them to an odd search for any recognizable pattern, and the only interpretation that their religious faith allows them to come up with is the foreshadowing of an apocalypse. Although Bruno is widely regarded as «something of a town hero, a symbol of the community's own struggle to survive» (144), he increasingly becomes a fixed symbol, a kind of human fetish whose words are revered and whose essential value is that of a source of cryptic messages.

The role of Giovanni Bruno in Coover's novel is, therefore, somewhat paradoxical. Basically, he constitutes the core and spiritual guide of the cult. The interpretation of his rescue inspires the origin of the sect—or, at least, precipitates its birth—and the few

scattered words he is able to pronounce throughout the novel materialize as sacred missives. Indeed, he is the center, «little matter that he is so enigmatic a figure» (230). However unaware he is of having become a symbol, he brings together the needs of the community after the disaster as well as providing them with the messages they need once the cult has been established. However, he is neither physically nor psychologically relevant to the unfolding action. Bruno remains a grotesquely motionless element throughout the novel, a straw man who does not seem to know where he is or what he is saying. He is a major source of the cult but he ultimately plays only a lateral part within it. His visions are probably caused by some brain disturbance, but what really matters to his followers is not so much the immediate circumstances surrounding the message as the interpretive process they give rise to. Gathered around him in his hospital bed, his devotees pray for the One to Come, «[k]nowing not the form of the event, they sought only a readiness and a unity of spirit» (169). Ironically enough, it is at the very end of the novel—when the prophecy of the apocalypse has not been fulfilled, the Brunist doctrine is spreading worldwide, and Bruno seems to have recovered notably from his mental disability—that he is pronounced «psychologically disturbed» and confined in a mental institution far away from those who believe in him.

Bruno's paradoxical ending as a madman after having been taken for a messiah is the result of the religious cult's increasing interpretive self-consciousness. As the intuitions of Clara Collins, Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh (the representatives of the sect) gradually converge into the myth of the forthcoming End of the World and consolidate as a self-imposed vision, Bruno's relevance in this structure diminishes. He is an emblem, but one that only serves the purposes of the believers. His fragmentary messages are replaced by the «solid» interpretations his followers forge. Each additional message only authenticates the Brunists' already-established interpretations. Their creed, actually conducted by a few satellite interpreters, grows more vigorous, as does the certainty that these visionary metaphors contain, via Bruno, God's true word.

Hence, both the communicative vehicle and the communicated message recede as the visionaries' interpretive skills develop. Although adopting its name from the sect's idol, the origin of the Brunists lies neither in the mining accident itself nor in Giovanni Bruno's communiqués. The cult arises out of a series of interpretations, the patterned translation of certain random signs. In her speech at the Mount of Redemption, where the End of the World is supposed to take place, Eleanor Norton messianically refers to the role and purpose of the cult as follows:

Although the transformation we envision is unrelated to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the dense earth, ... it is wholly appropriate at these times to receive the call for certain symbolic actions, not as a part of a divine dialogue, but as a means of providing a comprehensive metaphor for the rest of the world, so as better to prepare the way ... and, for us, as a way to exercise our spiritual discipline. (19)

This passage clearly defines the boundaries the Brunists have set between themselves and the rest of the world. Conceiving of their activity as a metaphysical quest, the Brunists' symbolic actions involve an expansion of the comprehensiveness of their metaphors. And these same symbolic actions—unfailing devoutness, new prayers, seclusion, evangelization—which are supposed to hold the community together, withdraw them from any «divine dialogue,» turning them away from any contact with reality unless mediated by the self-consciousness of their own symbols. Already self-authenticated as a group, the Brunists appear almost exclusively concerned with their «mastery,» as it were, over the randomness of events. Their clinging to their own personal interpretations allows the Brunists to «triumph» over the contingency of the actual moment and reach a sort of communion with Destiny that—*only through their own readings* of the events—provides them with some solution to the existential impasse brought about by the disaster. Taking the religious context as an appropriate analogue, Coover's exploration broadens to the extent that pattern-making appears, on the one hand, as a universal need to overcome the eventuality of the historical moment and, on the other, as an attempt to create a collective sense of «transcendental reality» that gives the individual the illusion of subduing reality to his/her self-imposed designs.¹³

On the whole, the sense of reality the Brunists create is filtered through a mode of interpretation that begins as a completely arbitrary construction but ends up as a dogma of absolute value. In Marcella Bruno's words, «true knowledge is the discerning of pattern, and wisdom is its right interpretation» (254). And although each character retains his/her own voice throughout—Coover's novel is, in this sense, an admirable dialogical construction—the convergence of their respective interpretive processes is the only concern they seem to share. As their general interpretations are validated and their metaphors become fixed «signifiers,» individual perception recedes into the background of collective unanimity.

II

Besides Bruno's «miraculous» survival following the mining disaster, there are other signs pointing to the supposed apocalypse. Bruno, as I have explained, plays a major part in the rise of the cult, but a minor one in its development. (Actually, no

13. Following Durkheim, Coover puts this idea in the following terms: «we get our idea of religion, of a something larger than ourselves, by way of communal meetings. We live isolated lives, but when we come together in a group... we get a sense of being part of something beyond our individual existence. In part, this is repressive—in that individual freedom diminishes markedly; in part, there is an exhilaration in feeling the new power of the group.» See «Robert Coover: Interview,» 156.

character is truly relevant *per se* unless he/she represents a pattern-making process.) The evolution of the cult is fostered by other «evidence,» much of which contributes to the Brunist «sense of reality» that Coover dissects. We have, for instance, the deathnote found in Ely Collins' hand by the rescue team, according to which humankind «will stand Together befor Our Lord the 8th of ———» (96). Incomplete though this warning is, the message is taken as the first symbol of a heavenly revelation. Before anything is known about this deathnote, «the violence of his [Ely's] death ...made these people—especially the recently widowed—wonder if something disastrous, perhaps worldwide in scope, might not be in the air» (141). The significance of number eight now becomes a major key to the meaning of the haunting message, at least for his credulous widow Clara Collins. The mining accident, for instance, has taken place on the eighth day of the month. This is the beginning of a series of disclosures centered on the number eight. Shortly after learning about Ely's note, miner Willie Hall confesses he had already «had a hunch» about the accident «on the eighth of the month,» and also recalls how «one of his cousins had been hurt by a fall on the eighth of July some years back, and his bird dog had died the eighth of last December, just a month ago» (100). These incidental facts, which have nothing to do with the accident, are turned into meaningful events.

Numerology plays a significant role in the patterned meanings Coover wants to explore throughout *The Origin of the Brunists*. In fact, the sense of urgency of this supposed apocalypse is reinforced by an interpretation of certain patterned numerical repetitions, all of which constitute an almost obsessive imitative search for the regularity and precision of mathematical calculation. Actually, the novel's subplots, those converging on the Brunist cult, rely on the characters' fascination with the interpretation of numerical sequences. Eleanor Norton, for instance, who senses that «[c]osmic purposes of enormous significance are to be revealed... soon» (129), also interprets certain scattered incidents of the mine tragedy as a recurrent, patterned co-occurrence of the number seven—the number that «leads to the numberlessness and to the One» (123). (The accident, for instance, caught Giovanni Bruno working in the mine with six other workmen. But it was only he, the seventh, who survived.) Obsessed with order, she is able to find some integration and pattern even in her own pace when walking on her way to West Condon:

Each gray-booted foot appeared before her like a birth, and died just as quickly as the other materialized to replace it, a ceaseless recurrence, and yet each step was different, unique, fell on different soil,... Though each step, each appearance and disappearance, was singularly unique, the spirit lodged in them was of an unalterable whole, inseparable from past steps, a part of future one—it was not the mere passage of finite existences themselves with which one had to reckon, but with passage itself; motion, not the moving thing. And though opposites her feet... were a single essence, there their duality disappeared. (124-25)

Eleanor is not, however, the only one to yearn for order and purpose in life. Fascinated by crime, war, terror and other cruelties, the lawyer Ralph Himebaugh keeps records of all the disasters he learns about. Trying to connect them all in order to find some regularity or periodicity in calamities such as the West Condon mining disaster, the search for any sort of predictability haunts him:

Everything about it absorbed him: the scope, the periodicity, the routes of passage, certain correlativities, duration and instantaneity, origin and distant derivative effects, expenditure of energy, parallelisms and counteractions, and, above all, its wake of mathematical clues. Oh, he was *wise* to have done so! For although at the outset the incredible complexities had pitched him into a hell of confusion and despair, by disciplining himself, by literally chaining himself to the task and pummeling himself to greater wakefulness, he had at least mastered the necessary technology. (184)

This is, for Ralph Himebaugh, much more than just a distraction or a hobby. It is an entire metaphysical quest, the construction of a perfect organization whose total magnitude, however, he has not been able to comprehend yet. (Besides, his contrivance is also often threatened by a made-up oppositional figure he calls the Destroyer, who attempts to tear down his designs.) Unaware of the limitless range of his enterprise, Himebaugh relates his failure to predict the evil in the world to the lack of comprehensiveness of his interpretive system. But, in fact, it is only a matter of time, because «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).

Eleanor Norton and Ralph Himebaugh represent, each in his/her own way, two methods of «clarifying» the events involved in the mining disaster: the intuitive and the empirical. Eleanor draws on her intuitions, whereas Ralph remains within a more rationalistic scheme—his designs and aims being, however, not so reasonable. So different as they are, and both equally far from concrete reality to be relied on, their ways merge, «their respective systems... drawing their timid souls together in holy intercourse» (259). The basic role they play in the Brunist myth is that of «masters»—that is, interpreters as «authors» or «makers»—of reality. At the core of the transformation of interpretation into authoritative narrative, we have Coover's view of the human construction of reality, in which being what I have called «master of reality» means being basically a mythmaker or fictionmaker, the creator of a possible world. The artistic impulse consists, for Coover, in arranging chaos in such a way as to provide a pattern to live by, one in which human beings can acquire and develop a sense of «familiarity» that functions as the phenomenological ground of their understanding.¹⁴

14. «Robert Coover: Interview,» 152.

Pattern-making conveys, for Coover, a similar process of imposition of order on randomness. Both activities imply an assemblage of facts and events and the subsequent construction of «constellations that permit an illusion of order and enable us to get from here to there.»¹⁵ Whether at the level of private vision or collective belief, pattern-making emerges as an existential imperative. To give an idea of the importance that the Brunists attach to their interpretations of these heavenly signs, to the increasing multiplicity of visions related to the Coming of Light and Judgement Day, and the meaning standing behind these presentiments, let me quote at some length the passage in which Coover describes the new tunics the Brunists have sewn and wear in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of the West Condon people:

[Ralph Himebaugh's] new tunics, which the women made and which they all wore at their gatherings now, 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)

The description goes on for another page, where the hidden symbolism of these numbers is thoroughly explained. Following the metaphorical meanings they have attached to numbers, they must subdue their symbols to them. In so doing, the patterns the Brunists have set up are projected onto a «communal» sphere, although still remaining essentially personal, and transcend their private significance to become the public signs of their identity as a group. But, underlying these signs, there is always the search for regularity and method. Once the cult is settled and organized and Ralph Himebaugh has become the spiritual guide Saint Rahim, his meditations still focus on the attainment of harmony, order and pattern as a positive means to overcome the irreducible duality, contingency, and suffering of life:

Sainthood, ultimately, is a rising above—not only God—but the Destroyer as well. Saint Rahim, rigid, hungry, but supremely at one with the All, stares meditatively in front of him at springs and the red and blue stripes of a cotton mattress. Illusion at moments of remarkable distance. A great calm. Through discipline to pattern. Distantly, a toilet lid clunks carelessly against the enameled tank. Like a bell in the mind. Shattering of peace, but still the perception of pattern. (357-58)

15. «Robert Coover: Interview,» 152.

Some of the implications of this passage are significant to Coover's exploration of pattern-making. Besides giving up his old name and becoming Saint Rahim, Ralph seems to have given up his empirical method and now devotes himself to a more intuitive, ascetic contemplation. Significantly, this conversion happens before the apocalypse proves to be an error, and therefore has nothing to do with the failure that the Brunists' prophecy turns out to be. However, it implies an interesting insight into the construction of the new order that Coover explores. After the cult has created its own axioms—once its interpretive strategies, however groundless, have become «canonical»—a shift in one of its mentor's methodological perspectives, here from empiricist to intuitive, seems to be actually irrelevant to its concerns. The self-conscious, self-sufficient structure into which the sect has turned can function with almost any kind of interpretation (although it could even perfectly do without any at all) so long as the interpretations lead to the «perception of pattern» and to the «rising above» (the latter as an effacement of oppositional difference). Its growing self-containment—which, in its attempt to create a new order, only estranges it from the real world—increasingly works as the empowering, self-authorizing device that an ideological structure needs in order to legitimate itself.

III

In addition to the Brunists, there is also Justin «Tiger» Miller, by and large the most prominent character in the novel. As the editor of the West Condon newspaper, *The Chronicle*, he becomes the unofficial reporter of the Brunists' activities (also, in a way, their historian and publicizer), although he always maintains a skeptical, if not sneering, attitude toward their weird beliefs and practices. He is by no means fond of the cult and its rituals, but uses it as a good chance to invent and develop a fictional narrative of his own. The history of the cult—or, rather, its historical representation—serves him only as a fictional system he creates and controls. Games, we are told, are Miller's entertainment:

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 actions 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, adjustment was easier. (142)

This passage clearly illustrates Miller's role in the novel. Unlike the Brunists, who embody an unflinching, monological confidence in a creed exclusively based on the profundity and «reliability» of a particular metaphorical symbolization, Miller represents the ironical underside of causality and representation, since he has to account for a

metaphysical transcendence which, he firmly believes, does not exist at all. His personal view of order and meaning is not the kind of self-interested interpretation that Bruno's devotees carry out, but rather a playful version aside from the cult's interests. Form (and not meaning or significance) is what he gives to the history of the sect. In articulating the story of the Brunist cult, Miller self-consciously moves within the boundaries of a fictional system he creates and controls.¹⁶ His reports are «essentially objective—meaning, he left it up to the reader to decide if the end might really be coming or not» (300). Like in Coover's circus-like presentation of the Rosenberg case in *The Public Burning*, «form is what it always comes down to,»¹⁷ pattern and meaning being provided by repetition and an appropriate rhetoric. In a conversation with Reverend Edwards, Miller describes the rise of religion, explicitly equating it with the Brunist cult, as follows: «Somebody with a little imagination, a new interpretation, a bit of eloquence, and—zap!—they're off for another hundred or thousand years» (264). The product of an enthusiast of games, Miller's narrative of the Brunist cult largely hinges on some of the features of game-playing—fictionality, formal representation of mythical symbols and meanings—as does the *Chronicle's* account of everyday life in West Condon, whose reports constitute the «set of conventionally accepted signs [that] became... what most folks in town thought of as life, or history» (150).

With his newspaper Miller creates the complete history of the Brunist cult. His account functions as the purely written embodiment of «true» events. In fact, his narrativization presupposes, for him as well as for the Brunists, the possibility of giving not only a recognizable shape but also a purpose to the life of the community precisely at the moment when history has become, as Vince Bonali puts it, «a big goddamn sea» in which individuals are «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). (Such is Bonali's view, but Bonali is not a Brunist. Overwhelmed though he is by the mining disaster, he does not look for consolation in the cult's prophetic vision of a new world.) For the Brunists—who, except for Marcella, do not trust Miller because of his belonging to the world outside the cult—narrativized representation, whether the *Chronicle's* or any other, is another expression (and a suitable demonstration) of the legitimacy of the escape-route the cult provides out of hopelessness and into an ordered structure.

For Miller, the Brunists and their revelations and rituals begin as an inconsequential matter, subjected to his own story-telling abilities. Soon, however, as the cult grows more self-conscious, he realizes that what began as only a circle of religious zealots who claimed that the Judgment Day was at hand has turned into a self-consistent and self-generating structure that manages to absorb even its wildest

16. Andersen, *Robert Coover*, 53.

17. Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (New York: Viking, 1977), 91.

adversarial forces, such as the attacks from Father Abner Baxter. Desperately in love with Marcella, in his attempt to rescue her from their hands, Miller can only try to convince her of the meaninglessness of the Brunist creed—finally to no avail, since she will not give up her convictions. Although she has been able to make both her Brunist beliefs and her love for the «outsider» Tiger Miller cohere somehow, the abandonment of the cult would leave her defenseless, her private world so dependent on it that her fragile perception and knowledge of reality, if there were any, would disintegrate.¹⁸ When she dies in a luckless car accident the night the apocalypse is supposed to take place, Miller decides to visit the Mount of Redemption (the place where it is supposed to happen) and is beaten to death by an angry Brunist crowd. In the last chapter of the novel, however, Coover resurrects him, although transformed into a more responsible man, seriously committed to his newspaper and to his former fiancée, Happy Bottom, and determined to take on marriage and bringing up children.

IV

After this account of some of the basic concerns of Coover's first novel, an analysis of the interchange between realism and reflexivity is necessary. Mimetic representation and reflexive exploration intersect at numerous points in *The Origin of the Brunists*. On the one hand, both the realistic elements and metafictional concerns of the Brunist story converge in an examination of how the sense of reality and the construction of purpose that maintains it go along with each other. The novel is also an inquiry into order, pattern and purpose, three of the main features of mimetic representation in its Platonic formulation. The interpretive strategies that Coover ascribes to the cult very much resemble the Platonic search for clues of a higher sphere reflected in earthly phenomena. However, despite the similarities between the construction of a «sense of reality» in Coover's Brunist story and Plato's view of metaphysics, here the assumption that there exists an ideal image beyond the object and the word that guided Plato's conception of mimesis is replaced by what can be called a more «textualist» quest, one that basically focuses on signifiers and interpretation. Instead of mistrusting words and writing on the basis of their mediating role, the Brunists do exactly the opposite: although they look for a transcendental meaning and the higher purpose of life, they do not rely on the contemplation of the beautiful. They are forced to hold on to words, since these constitute the only available source of meaning and the basic horizon of intelligibility on which the cult is to be founded. They do not despise words, but rather use them as a vehicle to achieve a sort of transcendence that, significantly, rests on the interpretation of words.

As I have already pointed out, Coover's first novel also integrates individual

18. McKeon, *Novels and Arguments*, 159.

meaning into collective myth. It represents not only the origin and organization of a religious community, but also the search for wholeness, unity, and coherence characteristic of mimetic representation. This strategy—also used, although in a rather different way, in *The Public Burning*—allows the novel to transcend the mere situational inquiry in order to reach the examination of more general human necessities and their effect on the understanding and knowledge of reality. Coover's implicit critique of Platonic mimesis focuses on two main points: the epistemological conflict between pattern-making processes and some of the ways in which it represents and validates itself, on the one hand, and the circularity that pattern-making tends to establish in order to attain a certain «closure of meaning,» on the other.

The first limitation of this mimetic search for transcendence is the confrontation between abstract meaning-making and historical representation. In the novel, this contrast is provided by the conflict between the Brunists' and Miller's views of the «special» reality generated by the cult—between the solemnly mythical and the ironically playful undersides of representation. This struggle serves a reflexive inquiry into the (inner) formation and the (outer) explanation/validation of mimesis. Tiger Miller's part is to narrativize the clues and signs that the Brunists disclose in such details as numerical patterns, Bruno's survival, his scattered words, and so on. Apart from the obvious differences between the epistemological activities that each of them carries out (the Brunists looking for meaning, Miller narrativizing it) they fundamentally differ in their attitude to pattern and its relevance to life. Although they «cooperate» (though only until Miller's newspaper divulges the cult's most sordid practices), their respective visions of the role of pattern-making makes them diverge from the very outset.

Bruno's followers conceive of pattern as essential to understanding reality. It is the recurrence, whether literal or allegorical, of already-fixed signifiers that articulates any world-view. Seeking the stability and confidence that the catastrophe has devastated, their desperate endeavor aims at rearranging their sense of reality by constructing a new version of their existence. This renewed sense of reality clearly goes beyond the town's hitherto dreary life. In the process of fabricating an order for their new reality, the Brunists seek not so much to become prophets or priests, but rather to decipher the regularity of events, to sort out each and every fact and occurrence, so that nothing can challenge their view. In short, the question is how to translate the essentially unpredictable nature of reality into some predictable formula according to which any incident, whether expected or not, can be integrated by means of an adjustment of their all-embracing interpretive system.

Tiger Miller, on the contrary, represents the typically postmodern skepticism and suspicion of the stability and immutability of meaning and the reliance on meaning-production. In his role as historian he performs this task more in the way of some poststructuralist theorist than in a traditional, systematic manner. He seems to be much more interested in the cult's (and his own) interpretive processes than in the outcome of his reports and the effect they may have on the West Condon community—his attention

being especially focused on what can be called «the epistemological groundwork of a world-view.» Always aware of his newspaper's role in this narrative, he puts the difference between himself and the Brunists in these terms:

[The Brunists] set up something that looked hard and real, something to aim at, but they always concealed then the thick tangle of endless ambiguities that were the one true thing of this world. (385)

Miller's part as a historian is, in this regard, more concerned with the riddles and indeterminacies of representation than with accuracy, verisimilitude, or objectivity. By confronting the Brunists' and Miller's views, Coover implies that there exists an irreducible conflict, not only in any religious cult but at the core of any pattern-making process, between the abstract search for the regularity of pattern, on the one hand, and its representation, regulation and legitimation, on the other. What *The Origin of the Brunists* is intended to examine is the relationship (in terms of *antagonism*) between the establishment of a designed order and the processes through which this order can be authorized and validated. The conflict between the believers' sober faith in their visionary imagination and Miller's playful point of view can be seen as a fictional symbol of the process of devaluation of Platonic mimesis and the interest in textualist (signifier-oriented) approaches to reality. Broadly speaking, the struggle between the two standpoints is stressed by the apparent divergence between Miller's and the Brunists' self-conscious perspectives of pattern-making as the foundation of a new order. Although both its creators and its writer-agent are aware of their function in the overall process, the former rely on the certainty provided by their monological discourse, whereas the latter works to expose its weakness. When Miller resuscitates after having been ruthlessly killed by an enraged Brunist mob, Coover has turned him into a responsible man who prefers to devote his time to his future marriage rather than following the cult's enterprise. *The Origin of the Brunists*, in this way, discloses the alliance between an ideological system and the ways through which it represents itself to others. (In this case, although the religious context might seem too narrow to serve as an example, Coover manages to arrange it in terms of a profoundly human endeavor to resist chaos.) And it also exemplifies how this alliance can be broken and, as I have pointed out, how the self-generating quality of this ideological structure can, once it has settled down, ignore, or even exclude, these modes and their agents.¹⁹

Coover's use of irony, his detachment from the very concepts he examines in his

19. Again, like in *The Public Burning*, this struggle appears as an opposition between forces, not individuals. In their conflict with the West Condon neighbors, Eleanor Norton understands that «the specific agents utilized by the dark powers are less significant than a recognition of the existence and activity of the powers themselves» (216).

novel, enlarges the scope of his exploration by emphasizing the difference between our received view of the cultural paradigms he handles and the very special use he makes of them. However, this is not to say that «Tiger» Miller is voicing Coover's own view of the construction of reality, but rather that the intrinsically human need to mediate in the randomness of reality and to cling to the mythical meaning of our own constructions is all too readily thought of as «natural.» This «naturalness,» this layer of epistemological objectivity, is usually validated on the basis of our necessity to apprehend reality according to a sense of purpose or cause—whether intangible and metaphysical or down-to-earth and utilitarian—that both allows us to conceive of life and its occurrences organically and justifies the unpredictable. This impulse is, for Coover, basically an aesthetic one, since both artistic creation and the construction of a sense of reality rest on the pursuit of the narrative organization, for example, of fictional works.²⁰

As an inquiry into mimesis, *The Origin of the Brunists* embraces meaning-making processes broader than those belonging to religious beliefs or the writing of fiction itself. Coover's first novel is concerned with the underlying status of pattern-making in culture, its status as a precondition of knowledge, as well as with the conflict between order and its historical representation and validation. What in later fictions will emerge as a marked interest in the exploration of novelistic categories (notably in *Pricksongs and Descants*) here engages our perception of reality and the existential sense of purpose (or, in other words, the cause-effect correlation) we assign to events.

However, the examination of pattern and meaning in *The Origin of the Brunists* is, in many senses, also an inquiry into the circularity conveyed by patterned constructions. In Coover's view, our vision of the world is essentially circuitous. The realm of ideas being far beyond our grasp, human beings are virtually forced to hold on to experiences and signs of all kinds: intuitions, feelings, words, texts, etc. These are the vehicles through which reality can be apprehended. The circularity of meaning-structures is provided, then, by the repetition—literal, metaphorical, allegorical—of meaning and the insistence on the immutability of the referential links between words and things. Repetition reinforces both the alleged truth-value of words and the truth-claims of texts by validating meaning as an unchanging attribute of things rather than as an ever-shifting, though *not necessarily undecidable*, connection between signs and things. In Plato's view of mimesis and in the Brunists' cult, words only point to high ideas (or prototypes) of things, their meaning being reduced to their purely referential power. Consequently, it is the conjunction of the already-established referential nature

20. «Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions,» 50. This is one of the reasons why the realist novel proved most suitable for Coover's reflexive concerns in *The Origin of the Brunists*. This pattern-making process, whose fictionality is often overlooked, is one of the subjects of inquiry not only in Coover's first novel, but also in other works such as *The Universal Baseball Association*. I have discussed this issue in my essay «Mimesis and Self-Consciousness in Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*,» forthcoming in *Critique*...

of all «significant» words that articulates an ideological structure. This structure is necessarily circular insofar as the meaning of words, their referential relation to things, is given beforehand, so that any deviation lies outside its more or less solid self-consistency and is thus deemed «abnormal» or «unnatural.» The system's infinite circuitousness often constitutes its purpose.

In the story of the Brunists, this particularization of meaning can be observed in the readings of Bruno's words and the role they play in the narrative. Once the cult has been established, the elements that served as pattern (especially numbers) are only used to corroborate what has been already authenticated. At the end of the novel, for instance, when the Brunists see that the supposed apocalypse is not taking place, they do not give up the pattern of their vision. Now that the creed is spreading worldwide and their doctrinal books are selling well, they announce that the disaster will probably occur seven or fourteen years thenceforth. (The number of years is, of course, relevant, since seven and fourteen are two of the numbers which the Brunists cling to in their prophecies.) This last-minute explanation again emphasizes the importance of their chosen signs; but, at the same time, it also suggests that there is, after all, an emptiness in the Brunists' use of their own foundational signs that makes the cult's self-consciousness increase while its more pragmatic vision inevitably vanishes. This increasing self-consciousness implies, for Coover, a reinforcement of the circular quality of the structure by means of which the preservation of its condition and order (*only its own*) becomes the aim of any struggle against chaos.

There are, however, other ways in which *The Origin of the Brunists* can be regarded as an exploration into circularity. Coover's own characterization of the town of West Condon at dawn suggests a sort of never-ending routine that rules the lives of its inhabitants; but, most important, it also implies that the shift from the mining disaster toward the Brunists' new order takes place in the same manner as the day follows the night:

West Condon, as though unable to gaze any longer upon the deep black reach of night, rolls over on its back to receive the Monday sun, now rising, as men say, in the eastern sky. (345)

Here Coover seems to imply that the passing from catastrophe to order is more a cyclical—and, thus, circular—evolution than some sort of magical revelation. The existential breach brought about by an unexpected catastrophe, the ensuing need for a new order, and the actual creation of a new sense of reality emerge, in the light of this passage, as a process human beings cannot escape from. It condenses the essence of knowledge and constitutes the way in which human beings make sense of the world we inhabit. The organization and categorization of reality seems to be a never-ending project, one beyond the time-bound confines of human life. When chaos brings «obscurity» to a community's view of reality, its members turn away from it and construct a new one.

As the light of day follows the dark of night, in Coover's own metaphor, the demise of any world-view inevitably demands that it be replaced by another—one, of course, perfected against the causes that motivated the bankruptcy of the preceding one. In the Brunist narrative, this defense against disaster is achieved by the cult's increasing self-consciousness. The Brunist circle provides a most appropriate defense against the contingency of the historical moment: it adopts the feigned certainty and stability of self-referential meaning by relying on a transcendental system totally removed from reality. In so doing, the cult stresses the belief that human mediation and agency is meaningful inasmuch as it confers an order on the world. In Coover's first novel, as well as in other later works, the necessarily illusory nature of this order is unveiled, and its underlying processes of pattern-making prove arbitrary and even pointless.

All of these features make Coover's novel seem, among other things, like an inquiry into the logic of mimesis whose main interest is uncovering the artificiality of pattern. *The Origin of the Brunists* examines the need for order, regularity and predictability not only as preconditions of knowledge but also as the mainstay of human life. In so doing, it also reveals how any attempt to synthesize the randomness of the real into some coherent organization tends to overlook the artificial nature of its own design and, in time, grows so self-conscious and circular that the world-view it is supposed to set forth vanishes in the «textualist» cultivation of its own symbols and metaphors.