

ROBERT COOVER'S MYTHOPOEA: REVISITING THE BIBLICAL TEXT IN "THE BROTHER"

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Resumo: *No conto "The brother", Robert Coover relê e reescreve a narrativa em Genesis 6-9. Esta recriação ficcional questiona significados estabelecidos na narrativa bíblica. A mitopia de Coover leva o leitor a reconsiderar a versão oficial apresentada na Bíblia, abrindo novas possibilidades de interpretação para a mitologia cristã.*

A pervasive characteristic of postmodern fiction is the appropriation of prior literary forms that are reworked and re-presented to the reader in new, fresh variants. Such a characteristic is often present in Robert Coover's writing. The borrowing of myths, legends, and folktales can be identified in many of his novels, plays, and short stories. To Coover such a material represents an essential and necessary "means of navigating through life" (Gado 1973: 152); he sees in myth and mythopoeic thought a constant force to model human experiences. However, he thinks that when the meanings conferred to these systems become rigid, forcing the acceptance of a unique sense of truth, it is necessary to remove the frozen meaning of these forms to exhibit the multiple possibilities behind them. If myths are the agents of stability and the absolute, as Frank Kermode affirms (1966: 39), if "the very end of myths is to immobilize the world", as Roland Barthes claims (1972: 155), and if "myth possesses the dangerous potential for controlling us" (McCaffery 1982a: 28), Coover seems to be convinced that to struggle against myth on its own ground undermines its supposed rigidity of meaning (Gado 1973: 154), and opens up fissures in the official version.

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Coover achieves such a change of meaning through fiction, which stands in opposition to myth: “a myth lived as myth is incontrovertible; a myth lived as fiction provides insight into and leverage upon the structure of mythological thought” (Chénetier 1988: 88). According to McCaffery (1982a: 30), a central issue to contemporary fiction is how to escape from worn out conventions and stories and yet to recognize in them a fundamental pattern to artistic creation. To him, “the contemporary writer should feel free to invent whatever variations he chooses” (1982a: 31), since there cannot be certainty about the truths of the received versions of the past. What is valid is the author’s own “mythopoea”, in the sense J. A. Cuddon defines it: “in literature, [mythopoea is] the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of a ‘private’ mythology” (1992: 563). Such a mythopoeic activity has promoted, since the Greek poets, “a progressive remodeling of a myth or its variants in which an earlier story can be transformed or certain elements in it emphasized or repressed” (Burns 1991: 83). Coover’s mythopoea adapts biblical myths to a new perspective, rearticulating them and opening possibilities of new interpretations for those Christian myths. His deliberate emphasis, repression, and recreation of determined aspects of these myths seems to be essential to lay bare the subverting and revisional character of Coover’s writing.

The idea of subversion is here linked with the denial of a unique notion of truth. A Christian reading of the biblical stories enforces the establishment of a fixed truth and this pattern of truth becomes the dominant, a law that rules all Christian assumptions. Coover’s rewriting of these narratives conveys that there is no sense in talking about established truths – at least within fictional systems, and Coover considers the biblical texts from Jasper’s perspective, that is, as “mere stories”. As fiction, they are valued in a storytelling way; if they represent a truth, this truth is confined within the limits of the stories themselves, and it is neither immutable, nor stable. “The brother”, Coover’s short story, copes with the view that there is not a privileged position from which truth emerges: what one can have are interpretations of a truth, and none of them can claim to be the final one.

“The Brother” is included in the section entitled “Seven Exemplary Fictions” in *Pricksongs & Descants*. The prologue occupies a peculiar position in the book because of Coover’s “Dedicatória y Prólogo a don Miguel de Cervantes”, in which he discusses the issues concerning the innovation of fiction. Coover points Cervantes as a precur-

sor and a mentor of what he had in mind when he wrote the stories. Like Cervantes, whose works “were exemplars [sic] of a revolution in narrative fiction”¹ (Coover, 1970: 77), Coover claims that there is a need to renew the patterns in contemporary fiction. The great narratives that “remain meaningful through time as language-medium between generations” (PD, 78), such as mythic, historical, and literary discourses, may be now reworked and revisited. Together with the other six – “Panel Game”, “The Reunion”, “The Marker”, “In a Train Station”, “Klee Dead”, and “The Wayfarer” – “The Brother”, stands for Coover’s attempt to ascribe to his stories the same property he recognizes in Cervantes’s exemplary fictions: instances of imagination “exercised in good condition” to produce “a revolution in narrative fiction” (PD, 77).

“The Brother” is a story derived from Genesis 6-9. To recognize the similarity of themes demands the reader to be acquainted with Noah and the Flood story. In “The Brother”, the main character narrates a passage of his life: how he helped his elder brother to build a great boat. A short time after the construction is finished, a strong rain starts and floods everything, including the farm where the younger brother lived with his pregnant wife. The younger brother runs to ask for help from his elder and finds his family and him already aboard. He asks for a place for his wife and him, but the elder brother just waves and leaves, without answering. The younger brother swims back, climbs a hill, and waits for death, trying to understand how his brother knew about the Flood. The story ends abruptly, without a period, indicating that the waters covered the hill where the younger brother was and he was drowned him.

There are several possibilities of pointing out Coover’s divergence from the biblical narratives in “The Brother”: one is Coover’s use of language and narrative technique, which emphasizes a radical discrepancy between the two texts. The other is the premise that “The Brother” works as a “profanation” of the Bible, in the sense that it reinterprets or puts into the background the sacred character of the Scriptures, bringing into light the human aspects of the stories. This “secularization” not only conveys another subversive element, but also lays bare the textuality of the Bible, by removing the religious and doctrinaire contexts, leaving the text itself to be explored. A third aspect of the

¹ COOVER, Robert. *Pricksongs & Descants*. New York: New American Library, 1970. Further references will be abbreviated PD and included parenthetically within the text.

short story that contributes to stress subversion is the use of irony. Postmodernist texts have used it as a strategy to install “a division or contrast of meanings, and also a questioning, a judging” (Hutcheon 1985: 53). Central to the functioning of parody, as in the case of Coover’s stories, irony operates in the text to signal a critical distance between the Bible and Coover’s short story, and at the same time it questions and even dismantles the content of the biblical narratives.

Two aspects that do emphasize the subversive character of “the Brother” in relation to the biblical narratives are the narrative technique and the kind of language used in each text. The short story seems anything but scriptural when compared to the biblical text. The peculiar dialect the protagonist speaks stands opposite the solemn tone presented in the Bible in the following passages:

And the Lord said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them”. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord...

Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. (*Gen. 6: 7-9*)

The way the younger brother describes his elder as a clumsy, foolish man conveys the distance between the two kinds of discourse: “he was twenty when I was born and the first thing I remember was havin to lead him around so that he didn’t get kicked by a damn mule him who couldn’t never do nothin in a normal way just a huge oversize fuzzyface boy². According to Charles J. Callan (1944: ix), the Bible must not have the same language standard of newspapers and popular books because readers soon forget what they read in this kind of language. In the foreword of the Douay Bible, he explains that those editions that use the Challoner version were “produced by scholars (...) versed in the original languages of sacred writings and the masters of the English tongue in all its richness and complexity”. His statement shows that the language of the Bible must be of the highest standard to convey such elevated messages, reinforcing the use of an official pattern of language. In “The Brother”, it is clear that Noah’s brother way of speaking disagrees with grammar rules: concerning punctua-

² COOVER, Robert. “The brother”. In: *Pricksongs & Descants*. New York: New American Library, 1970, p. 91-94. Further references to “The Brother” will be abbreviated TB and included parenthetically within the text.

tion, only question marks are added, and sometimes there is no agreement. Some words are spelled differently and cuss names stresses the difference between the two texts. In Coover's story, the sacred character of the Scriptures is put aside; thus, there is not a commitment to a pattern of language that could be considered "suitable", as Callan claims.

The readers of "The Brother" are confronted with a text in which the facts are narrated in a single paragraph, with question marks as the only signs of punctuation. The initial sentence is not capitalized, and throughout the text the only words capitalized are "God" and "I". The protagonist's language is not standard English. It seems to be, in Jackson Cope's view, a "pseudo-southern Americanise, Snopsean discourse in dialect" (1986:) as conveyed in the passage:

and for weeks I'm tellin you we ain't doin nothin but cuttin down pine trees and haulin them out to his field which is really pretty high up a hill and my God *that's* work lemme tell you and my wife she sighs and says I am really crazy *r-e-a-l-l-y* crazy and her four months with a child and tryin to do my work and hers too. (TB 93)

Though the lack of punctuation emphasizes the protagonist's stream of consciousness, it is not so dispersed and vague that does not allow the reader to distinguish a certain kind of order in the narrative. It is a flash-back in which the protagonist, facing his imminent death, recalls the last happenings of his life: first, he helps his brother to build a boat, after the construction it starts raining, and the younger brother asks for a place for his wife and him in the boat. The elder brother denies his request, the younger brother swims back home, finds his wife drowned and goes up to a hill, from where he tells the story.

The use of stream of consciousness as narrative technique had its heyday during the modernist period, when it was employed to depict "the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" of the characters (Cuddon 1992: 919). Writers such as James Joyce in *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* exploited the technique to its extremes. There was a concern about exposing the multiple levels of reality the human mind can conceive, and the stream of consciousness was a way to convey, through the multiple possibilities of language, such a flow of inner experiences that expressed that reality. In "The Brother", the use of this technique doesn't seem to share with the modernists such a concern. Of course, it conveys the protagonist's actions, inner thoughts and feelings, but its effect is somehow different from the

one the modernist writers achieved in their fictions. It seems to reveal a more pragmatic aim than in modernist texts.

"The Brother" is in fact a story about a man who drowns. The moment he starts his narrative he is on a top of a hill and the waters are covering it. As in a film, he remembers the late months of his life, but he does not have much time to do it, since the waters are dangerously coming up. There is no time for punctuation, capital letters and so on. Grammar rules are put aside. The readers share with the protagonist his imminent "lack of air": they read the story at once, the lack of punctuation and paragraphs give no pause to breathe. In the end of the narrative, the protagonist drowns and the reader is breathless: it is somehow a similar fate. It is in this aspect that the narrative technique in "The Brother" goes beyond the modernist's use of it. It does more than express the character's mind, it transposes its effects to the reader. It represents Coover's own contribution to emulate the use of the technique that, since the blossom of modernist texts, has been commonplace in literature (Cuddon 1992: 920).

Another clear difference between Coover's and the biblical texts is the point of view. While in the Bible there is a third person omniscient narrator, in "The Brother" the protagonist is the narrator, in first person. The point of view change places a limitation on the protagonist that sets the tone of the story: unaware of the relationship between Noah and God, the younger brother is doomed with the rest of humankind to die in the Flood, while Noah, his family, and the animals are saved. There are pieces of evidence throughout the story conveying that. Since the very beginning, the younger brother and his wife keep asking what Noah's purpose in constructing a boat on dry land is:

right there, right there in the middle of the damn field he says he wants to put that thing together him and his buggy ideas and so me I says "how the hell you gonna get it down the water? (TB 93)
(...) what in the world he's doin buildin a damn boat in the country my God what next? (TB 93)

When Noah moves to the boat and puts the couples of animals as demanded by God, who tells him to bring into the ark "every living thing of all flesh" (Gen. 6:19) his younger brother's and his wife's amazement increases:

(...) and she says "what's he doing now he's got the boat done? and I says "funny thing they're all living in the damn thing all except the old lady. . . "so he's just living on that big thing all by hisself? and I says "no, he's got his boys on there and some young women who are maybe wives of the boys

or somethin I don't know I ain't never seen them before and all kindsa damn animals and birds and things I ain't never seen the likes" and my wife she says "animals? what animals?" (TB 95)

The ultimate sign of the younger brother's ignorance in relation to Noah's and God's affairs becomes explicit in the end of the story, when, waiting for death on the top of the hill, he tries to elucidate the enigma, realizing that what he thought to be his brother's madness turned out to be an entire mystery: "how *did* he know?" (TB 98) he asks himself, unable to find an answer. In the biblical account, the covenant between Noah and God explains Noah's posterior actions. In "The Brother", the protagonist and his wife (and the rest of humankind) do not take part in this process: they are left to confront their fate without choices.

In the biblical text all those actions, meaning, the construction of the boat, and the collection of the couples of animals are justified as God's commands to Noah, to prepare their salvation from the destruction of the earth. The only reference to the making of those things is summarized in the sentence: "[a]nd Noah did according unto all that the Lord commanded him" (Gen. 6: 22). There is no mentioning of the reaction of other people in face of those strange facts. The biblical narrator gives no space in the narrative to other voices but God's. Noah is a silent listener, ready to obey him and does not question God's decisions.

"The Brother" is, in Thomas Kennedy's words, "an ironic counterpoint to Genesis 6-9, a story surely lodged deep in the heart of many a Christian and Jew, about the shadow cast across humanity by God's decisions" (1992: 36). Noah's brother story imagined by Coover supplies the other voices the biblical narrator omits. The shift of the focus from Noah to his supposed younger brother allows the reader to realize how those who suffered God's wrath in the episode of the Flood faced it.

If in the Bible all humankind but Noah and his family were sinless, "The Brother" introduces another reading to the Scriptures. Throughout the text the readers are confronted with a Noah who is not as good and righteous as God thought of him, and that Noah's brother clearly does not fit into the description of a corrupted, wicked man. In the very beginning of the story this is emphasized, when the younger brother accepts to help Noah to build the boat, although Noah, in the brother's wife's words, "ain't never done nothin for [him]" (TB 92). The younger brother neglects his own farm to help his brother and though his wife

complains of that, she understands and accepts it to a certain degree. The sandwiches she packs for her brother-in-law are her way to show that she also cares about him and conveys a charitable attitude. Their behavior makes Noah's refusal to give them a place in the boat a very cruel decision. If according to God's criteria only the good ones would be saved, at least the younger brother, his wife – and their unborn child, clearly an innocent being – should live. As the biblical narrative tells, only Noah and his family were saved. In the Bible, there is no doubt that humankind deserves punishment. Coover's story questions God's decisions in relation to human beings: the very presence of question marks as the only sign of punctuation emphasizes it. The interrogations in "The Brother" culminate with Noah's brother final question: how did Noah know about the rain? What constitutes an enigma for Noah's brother becomes a starting point for readers to realize a deeper questioning the short story promotes. The point of view change in the story allows the raising of questions such as: was God fair by saving only Noah? What about the others, who, in Coover's view, seemed to convey more brotherly love than Noah himself? By considering the biblical narrative from that perspective, the readers may reconsider an official record received as truth for centuries.

The authority of the biblical texts rests upon its representation of God's words to humankind. As such, all those who take part in the narratives are special people: they have some kind of experience with God – *theophanies* – be it direct or not. God usually talks to them, as in the case of Noah, Abraham, and Moses or sends a messenger to tell them things, as for instance the angels who appear to Adam and Eve, Joseph and Mary. The biblical personages are embedded in a sacred aura, they are not common people living an everyday life. It is another aspect that differentiates the text in Genesis 6-9 from Coover's narrative: "The Brother" emphasizes the human aspects of the Flood story, whose protagonist is closer to an ordinary person than a sacred personage of a religious text: he works, talks about his feelings, has dinner with his wife, drinks wine, makes a cradle for his child.

There is, in the story, a kind of "profanation" of the sacred character of the biblical narrative: Noah does not seem to be a normal person at all; he is described more as a lunatic, his red-eyes even suggesting he is a drunkard. Noah's wife is equally depicted as a strange woman, who does not care about her husband and refuses to go aboard with their children, the animals and him. If Noah has told her something about the Flood, she does not seem to believe him

and thinks (like the others) that he is crazy. Their relationship is not peaceful and harmonious as it would fit sinless people who “walked with God”: “and my brother’s wife she’s there too but she’s madder than hell and carpin at him get outa that damn boat and come home and he says she’s got just one more day and then he’s gonna drug her on the boat” (TB 95). All those details invented by Coover are not relevant to the biblical myth, but are fundamental to his manipulation of it (McCaffery 1982b: 62). This manipulation results in a kind of “carnivalization” of the biblical story, which reinforces once more the subversive character of “The Brother” in relation to the Bible.

Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the concept of carnivalization in literature and its relation with the development of the novel. “Carnival is connected, for Bakhtin, with laughter, travesty, parody, comedy, improvisation and the breaking down of hierarchy” (Adams 1992: 838). In Bakhtin’s theory, the roots of literary carnival are the Socratic dialogues and the Menippean satire (Bakhtin 1972: 94)³. According to Cuddon, for Bakhtin “the element of carnival in literature is subversive, it disrupts authority and introduces alternatives” (1992: 121). Carnivalization implies an approximation of elements previously considered antagonistic, such as high and low, the great and the insignificant, the wise and the fool, the sacred and the profane (Bakhtin 1972: 106). Profanation is an intrinsic carnivalesque category: it is related to sacrilege, carnivalesque indecencies, mainly linked to the reproductive capacity of earth and of the body, and parodies of sacred texts and the Bible (Bakhtin 1972: 106). That seems to be the case with Coover’s “The Brother”: it parodies a passage of the Scriptures in such a way that the result is a story that subverts the meaning of the original text, by raising questions such as: why did God spare only Noah, if his brother was also a good, decent man? It exposes the hidden gaps under the established authority of the Bible – how did Noah get things done concerning the construction of the ark? What was the other people’s reaction to it? – and emphasizes the openness of texts previously considered to be closed.

To take for granted that the narrative in Genesis 6-9 (or the whole Bible) is closed to further interpretations is to have an uncritical or a fundamentalist vision of the biblical text. For a long time, the sacred

³ The translations from texts in Portuguese language are mine.

character of the Scriptures and the pressure of the church did not allow a departure from the crystallized meanings attributed to the biblical texts. A deep reverence for the narratives prevented a more serious questioning of its significance. Any attempt to go beyond the limits could mean problems to the person, who was accused of heresy. Though the Bible does preserve its value as a sacred, religious book, much of its content has been demystified, which allows more freedom to deal with its texts. This step is important to consider the possibilities of the biblical texts outside the religious context: its literary characteristics could be brought into light.

Bakhtin makes a distinction between the novel and the epic concerning open-endedness and closure of literary texts. For him the epic, nowadays a dead genre, is characterized by three main features: its world is a national epic past, its sources are based on national tradition and not on personal experience and free tradition, and there is an epic distance separating the contemporary from the epic world (Bakhtin 1992: 843). The epic past, in Bakhtin's conception, "is both monochromic and valorized (hierarchical), it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progression that might connect it with the present" (1992 :844). In sum, it is impermeable to the present, closed and complete in itself. National tradition enters as the only way the epic past can be preserved and revealed. Tradition isolates the epic world and does not allow any personal experience and evaluation of it. The strength of tradition relies on its sacred and sacrosanct features, "evaluated by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself" (1992: 844). Such an attitude of reverence makes evident the epic distance: the epic world is untouchable, because it is "beyond the realm of human activity" (1992: 845), in which things can be experienced, re-evaluated, and remodeled. The epic conclusiveness and closeness is immutable, complete and absolute.

The novel, on the other hand, stands in opposition to the epic: it introduces openendedness and indeterminacy (Bakhtin 1992: 842). Unlike the epic genre, the novel is flexible: it conveys "multi-language consciousness", or "polyglossia", as Bakhtin defines it, a multiplicity of discourses generated by new relations between language and its relation with the world. (1992: 842). Another distinctive feature of the novel is that its temporal structure is not closed, and therefore emphasizes a "zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality and all its openendedness)" (1992: 842).

By choosing as its subject contemporary reality, the novel abolishes the epic distance, even when myth or past are represented (1992: 847). If memory, meaning a sacred tradition of the past is the creative impulse of the epic, the novel shifts to knowledge, practice, and experience, pointing to the future instead of the past. While the epic rigidifies the past, the novel introduces new ways to conceptualize it. In the epic, the super-human hero fulfills all possibilities and needs; in the novel, such a surplus of humanness is not possible. The hero in the novel is the common man and, as such, does not convey the wholeness of the epic hero, but rather his inadequacy to his fate or situation: “[t]here always remains in him an unrealized potential and unrealized demands” (1992: 854). It is exactly because the novel operates within the realm of infinite possibilities – instead of trying to exhaust all of them, as in the epic – that its open-endedness becomes a remarkable characteristic, as Bakhtin emphasizes in his essay.

If the biblical texts partake characteristics of the epic genre – the absolute past, situated somewhere in *illo tempore*, in the beginning of the world; the sacred and sacrosanct character of its narratives, which claim for reverence and acceptance; a tradition, built upon the memory of the Hebrew nation – in Bakhtin’s terms they are complete, closed, and absolutely conclusive, leaving no space to be touched or approached from any other perspective. A fundamentalist view of the Scriptures corroborates this idea. Fundamentalists do not maintain that the biblical narratives are literally true, but that God inspires them. As such the Bible is “the unerring word” (Lane 1993: 39), and is accepted as an unquestionable truth, therefore there is nothing to add or to change in it. The fundamentalist reading emphasizes in the biblical text what Bakhtin defines as a constitutive characteristic of the epic genre:

the important thing is not the factual sources of the epic, not the content of its historical events, nor the declarations of its authors – the important thing is (...) [*the epic’s*] reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view – which excludes any possibility of another approach (1992: 845).

Considered as an epic that narrates the history of the Hebrews, there are no holes in the biblical narratives to penetrate: they are presented as finished and already over. They represent God’s words to humankind and are perfect and complete in themselves, leaving no space for further complementation.

“The Brother” emerges as Coover’s “novelization”⁴ of the biblical text: it removes from the epic its basic characteristics concerning temporality and tradition. The epic distance disappears: the younger brother’s language sounds rather contemporary to the reader. His way of life, thoughts, feelings, and actions make him belong to a time different from *illo tempore*. The humanness of the characters is highlighted, instead of the sacred and the sacrosanct. The references to God in “The Brother” do not convey any reverence, they are done as whenever any ordinary person mentions God, almost in an automatic way and in several contexts. The younger brother and his wife do it throughout the story:

“ I help him for God’s sake” ... (TB 92)

“ he ain’t never done nothin for you God knows ... (TB 92)

“his boys too they ain’t so bright neither but at least they come to help him out with his damn boat so it ain’t just the two of us thank God for *that*” (TB 93)

“finally we get the damn thing done all finished by God and we cover it” .(TB 94)

Coover’s novelistic hero, depicted as Noah’s younger brother, is inserted into the human sphere, thus his impossibility to have access to God’s plans and to know about the imminent end of the world. Confronted with the sacred, he shows his inadequacy to his fate: like the rest of humankind, he suffers God’s wrath without being prepared for that. Noah, on the contrary, was involved with God and as such is not comprehended within his brother’s realm: presented as strange, loony, crazy, his behavior conveys that he does not belong to this world; but he is the only one God saves. Noah is the epic hero, who partakes of the world of the gods and obtains privileges. The brother’s story, told from his human and limited point of view, is not able to encompass Noah’s epic dimension.

Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* proposes a different reading of the biblical narrative as an epic. In the first chapter, “Ulysses’ scar”, Auerbach discusses the differences between Homer’s style in *The Odyssey*, specifically the passage in Book XIX in which Ulysses’s old nurse

⁴ I chose to put this word between inverted commas because “The brother” is a short story, not a novel, therefore cannot be properly inserted within Bakhtin’s theory of novel. What I want to emphasize by using Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel is that Coover’s text performs a role similar to the novel when confronted with the biblical text.

Eurykleia recognizes him because of a scar on his thigh, and the biblical narrative in Genesis 22, which narrates Abraham's sacrifice of his son. In his analysis of *The Odyssey* Auerbach reaches the same conclusion of Bakhtin regarding the epic genre: that the epic is closed, finished, that all its angles are illuminated and exposed and there is nothing else to be added to it. According to Auerbach's analysis, Homer's narrative is developed entirely in one single plan, that is, every thing narrated is embedded, in every instant, in a pure and single present (Auerbach 1987: 9). It is intrinsic to Homer's style not to allow anything mentioned in the half-light or unfinished (1987: 3): if he introduces the scar, he must tell everything related to it. It is fundamental to Homer's style: to represent all the facts completely, considering all the angles and defining clearly the spatial and temporal relations. Such a representation occurs only in the first plane, always in a temporal-spatial present (Auerbach 1987: 4-5).

In contrast to the Homeric style, Auerbach presents a passage of Abraham's story in the Bible, whose authorship is attributed to the Eloist, who wrote about the early patriarchs and Moses (Lane 1993: 58-59). To Auerbach, the biblical narrative gives emphasis only to what is considered pertinent in relation to God and Abraham's relationship. Everything else is left in darkness. In the beginning of the story, when God calls for Abraham, Auerbach notices that there are no explanations about where the two interlocutors are: "Abraham", God calls and Abraham answers: "Behold, here I am". And then God orders him to take his son to be sacrificed in His honor. Since neither further explanations are given nor Abraham's reactions are reported, the readers are unable to know why God wants to tempt Abraham. He just obeys God unquestioningly. While the Homeric discourse intends to exhaust the phenomenon represented, illuminating all its sides, the biblical narrative is extremely economical in its intentions: only what interests the action is formally finished, the rest being relegated to the shadows (Auerbach 1987: 9). Everything that remains in between is inconsistent and demands interpretation. Time and space are not defined, only silence and fragmented discourses suggest thoughts and feelings. The biblical narrative, directed with great and uninterrupted tension to an end, though it presents more unity, remains enigmatic and loaded with second planes.

Despite the inclusion of the biblical texts in the epic genre, in face of Auerbach's analysis the biblical text does not present, in literary terms, the conclusiveness and absoluteness Bakhtin attributes to the

genre. However, within the religious context such a closure exists, since there is in the Bible an intention of truth that tries to eliminate anything else. Auerbach (1987: 12) comments that it is exactly the doctrinaire character of the Bible that makes it deep and obscure. The intention of the biblical narratives is to supplant humankind's reality, and insert it in its own historical-universal structure. For a long time it worked this way, but with the successive transformations of societies and the evolution of critical consciousness, the biblical stories, little by little, lose their initial power of penetrating people's reality: they become myths and legends, mere stories (Auerbach 1987:13).

This is a point with which Robert Coover agrees concerning the validity of the biblical narratives, a point from which he starts to create his stories.

Coover's explanation for a re-examination of those narratives that maintain themselves somehow meaningful throughout the ages such as fairy tales, fables, and the Scriptures, has to do with their loss of efficacy, or at least their decreasing of power to model human experience. Coover cites theologian Rudolf Bultman and philosopher Karl Jaspers as the mentors of his ideas about the relationship between literature and religion that he developed in his stories. According to Coover:

Bultman, a dogmatist, felt that the church was reeling under the attack of the Enlightenment. (...) He believed that Christianity should demythologize itself. Out should go the Noah story, Adam and Eve, the Virgin Birth, all those things that looked ridiculous to the modern eye – but not the Resurrection. The resurrection had to be saved because it was the moment in which God's finger touched history. (...) Jaspers got into an argument with him (...) For Jaspers, the argument was obvious: if you throw the rest out, you've got to throw the Resurrection out too. But why throw any of it out? Why not 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)

Following Jaspers' insight, Coover manages to remove from the biblical narratives any layer of the sacred power it contains. The method to achieve that, as he explains, was quite simple to him: "I merely took the story itself and, involving myself in it, considered various variations" (Gado 1973: 153).

"The Brother" comes out as one of them. It is brought from the depths of the Flood episode narrated in Genesis. Like Abraham's, the Flood account is obscure and full of second planes. Again, only the side considered essential to be conveyed is illuminated. The narrative

of the Flood is not attributed to the Eloist, but its supposed author, the Yahwist, seems to have a similar style. As in Abraham's story, God communicates Noah his intentions, but this dialogue is not described: we do not know if God called Noah, like he did with Abraham, and where Noah was when this happened. The narrator limits himself to telling what is pertinent: "And God said unto Noah, 'The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth'" (Gen. 6:13). There is no mention of Noah's reaction to this terrifying notice, he just listens to God's orders and obeys him. The reader is never told what happened between the moment that God gave Noah his orders and Noah's carrying them out. It is within this unspoken sphere, which confers a certain opacity to the Scriptures that Coover manages to create his own variation of the passage in Genesis 6-9. This openness of the biblical texts is the field explored by Coover in "The Brother" and other short stories, and is characteristic of many postmodern narratives that rework "those discourses whose weight has become tyrannical" (Hutcheon 1985: 72), in the sense that they impose a meaning that intends to be immutable, such as the Scriptures, fables, and fairy tales.

Irony is a fundamental element that many postmodern parodies present use to make the counterpoint with the previous text. Detractors of postmodernist writing identify in the use of parody a lack of newness and originality, such as Jameson, who argues that in postmodernism parody finds itself without vocation and is replaced by pastiche, a neutral or blank parody (Jameson 1994: 17). Linda Hutcheon (1988: 27) disagrees with such a view and points out that parody and irony in postmodernist texts do not signal to a necessary exclusion of seriousness and purpose, but rather emphasize a critical attitude. Hutcheon puts aside established definitions of parody "rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit" (1988: 26) that see it as ridiculing imitation. The parodic practice in postmodern texts "suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (1988: 26). In "The Brother", a parody of a biblical text, irony is a determinant factor of the subversive meaning of the story, a subversion that leads to the questioning of the narrative in Genesis 6-9. The emergence of new interpretations not only challenges those "centralized, totaled, hierarchized, closed systems" (Hutcheon 1988: 41) but also makes explicit that intertextuality in postmodernism opens the text up and excludes any notion of "closure and single, centralized meaning" (Hutcheon 1988: 127). In his

short story Coover uses irony as an instrument to question the Bible's frozen meanings concerning God and truth.

In "The Brother", irony is present in its very title, which is also pervaded by ambiguity: which brother does the title refer to? If it is Noah, by the end of the story the readers are able to realize in his behavior the denial of the notion of brotherhood, since Noah abandoned his younger brother and sister-in-law and let them die in the Flood. The title becomes ironical because it implies an attitude of brotherhood and brotherly love that does not find correspondence in Noah, a man presented as good and righteous in the biblical narrative. In Coover's story Noah uses the younger brother to achieve his aim – to have the boat ready – and then refuses him an opportunity to live. From this view, Noah may be seen as

the manipulator, not the charitable brother; Noah is the survivor to whom we owe our own survival; he is the one with the ability to curry favor with the authorities, to obtain inside information, to mobilize the work force to action, and to turn his back upon those who have helped him. (*Kennedy 1992: 37*).

In "The Brother", because of Noah's attitude, the title represents a subversion of the biblical meaning of the word brother: in God's name, Noah destroys one of the pillars of Judeo-Christian tradition, which is the existence of brotherly love among human beings, all considered children of God. It is, undoubtedly, a subversion marked by paradox and irony.

On the other hand, if the title refers to Noah's younger brother, his fate is permeated by irony because he values what Noah disregards. Brotherhood to him seems to be a meaningful concept to be followed. Thus, as a good brother he takes care of Noah and even helps him in what he considers a crazy project: the construction of an ark. Nevertheless, his deeds do not avoid his inclusion in sinful and corrupted humankind and his condemnation to death. The younger brother's belief in the strength of brotherhood is evaluated when he is confronted with Noah's refusal: "while I'm still talkin he turns around and he goes back in the boat and I can't hardly believe it me *his brother*" (TB 97, italics mine). He is deranged by Noah's cruelty toward his wife and him, they who were so kind to Noah. To the younger brother, brotherhood was a strong reason to help someone, but he sees that to Noah it does not count. To him, Noah is a clumsy fool, but the younger brother realizes in the end that Noah somehow knew more than he did. Because of

that, Noah would survive and he, his wife, and their child would die. The brother seems to be a better human being than Noah is, but God chooses to save Noah instead.

Irony in this case comes from the younger brother's unawareness of the misfortune that is going to happen to him. He and his wife laugh at Noah's strange idea of building a big boat on dry land, but he realizes very late that the boat meant survival from the Flood. The readers acquainted with the Flood account in the Bible are able to perceive the situational irony in which the younger brother is inserted because they know the course of the events, but in Coover's narrative, the divine dimension is kept out from the story, and the younger brother is unable to realize what is really going on.

The only capitalized words in the "The Brother", "God" and "I" emphasize the kind of relation the younger brother keeps with God. He uses the word "God" always out of a religious context and in a casual way. The words "God" and "I" in the story also reveal Coover's use of irony to convey the younger brother's humanness and his distance from the divine, sacred sphere that is present in the biblical narrative. When Noah refuses to help him and the younger brother feels that he is abandoned by his own brother, he cries in despair: "GODdamn YOU" (TB 97). Coover highlights the words, capitalizing all the letters of "God" and "you". Once more, the younger brother's lack of knowledge about the relationship between Noah and God makes his words sound ironic: he curses Noah, but he and the rest of humankind are the truly damned ones, whereas Noah is God blessed. The "God" – "You" relation symbolizes the covenant between God and Noah in Coover's story, a covenant that excludes the younger brother and the rest of humankind as well. It empties, destroys, and confers an ironic dimension to the relation "God" – "I", which emphasizes the human view of the younger brother. In the triangular "God – I – You" relation, the "I" is literally destroyed because of the combination "God – You".

From the moment God calls Noah and tells him he is going to destroy the earth, the fate of humanity is sealed. God's criterion is clear: to survive, the person must be good, righteous, and obedient to God. According to the Bible, Noah is God's chosen one. According to "The Brother", Noah's younger brother is also a good man, thus his death points out a serious mistake in God's choice. If Noah is aware that his younger brother may be saved, he does not interfere with God's decision to save only his family, the animals, and him. Noah's

decision goes against God's own law: to be good and fair with your brothers and sisters. He is a transgressor, but also God's accomplice. Like the younger brother, many others could be good people, but God failed in judging correctly. The results are catastrophic: all die but Noah. The covenant God made with Noah in the context of Coover's story conveys an opposite meaning in relation to the biblical text, again, in an ironic way: instead of the fair creator who saves his righteous son, God and Noah emerge as the murderers of all human beings.

Conclusion

The vision of God as a monster is one of the subversive interpretations the reading of "The Brother" may provide. In the Bible the acts of God are not questioned, only accepted. It is taken for granted that God is always fair, right and true. By shifting the focus from God and Noah to a supposed Noah's brother, Coover exposes a side that is not considered by the biblical addresser. The Yahwist chooses Noah's story to convey God's fairness; Coover chooses Noah's younger brother to convey the opposite. Noah's is the story of the survivor, the winner; "The Brother" is the story of the excluded, the one who did not have a choice or a voice in the official version.

The disagreement with an official record and its reinscription is an important feature of postmodern narratives. McHale identifies a revisional character in postmodern writing that seeks to contradict the official records by revising, reinterpreting, and demystifying its content, and by transforming its conventions and norms (1987: 90). Those re-writings may either supplement the official version, by bringing out what has been suppressed, or displace it entirely. In the case of "The Brother", it supplements the biblical version because it tells about those who were left to die in the Flood. Coover does not change the events, but adds what the biblical account disregards; however, that is done in such a way that it leads the readers to reconsider the notion of truth and the very validity of the biblical narratives themselves as conveyers of truth.

The role of the reader is fundamental to establish the connection between "The Brother" and the narrative in Genesis 6-9. Coover offers no hints in this sense, nor does he mention the Scriptures. The inter-textual relation is implicit and must be activated by the reader. Iden-

tifying the older brother of Coover's short story as Noah allows the reader to fill in several gaps in the story, and thus it points to the Bible as an intertext of "The Brother".

"An intertext", according to Michael Riffaterre (1933: 56), "is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance". In this sense the text of Genesis 6-9 is the intertext of "The Brother" as the biblical text, and provides answers to questions such as: why didn't the elder brother want to take his younger brother and his pregnant sister-in-law since the elder put aboard his own family and couples of almost all animals? Why not have two more persons who had been so helpful? Why not save the baby to be born? How did the elder know about the flood so he would construct the boat? As the story is told from the younger brother's point of view, the text itself does not provide the answers, so the readers need Gen. 6-9 as an intertext.

The younger brother's account is not charged with a sacred character nor does it claim the status of unquestionable truth. The Yahwist's, however, is not just the narration of the destruction of the world and Noah's redemption, but intends to transmit a meaning beyond its internal context, that is, Noah's story is not only true, but constructs a whole idea of truth. Such a context does not exist in "The Brother": as literature, it does not claim what it proposes to be true or false, but just proposes, and "its validity is verifiable only within the ontology of the text" (Jeha 1991: 70). Literature, as a rhematic sign, is one of possibilities; it is "a sign whose interpretant is not limited to what it can refer as object, that is, it is an open, undetermined sign" (Pinto 1995: 44). As texts, the same happens with the biblical narratives, even if the religious ground forces meaning into this or that direction. In "The brother, Coover transferred the myth from a religious sphere to a fictional one, which enables a broad range of interpretations. By considering the biblical narratives as only stories and not literal truth, Coover removes from them the burden of a final meaning. He even mentions that through fiction we can re-form our notions of things. From this point of view, "The Brother" shows how established truths can be shaken.

Coover's short story is inherently postmodern in its way to perform an inquire into the potentialities and consequences of a re-formulation of previous material. As a rewriting of a well-known biblical narrative, it questions how the meanings of this narrative conveys a notion of truth and reality to the readers. The valuing of margins and

edges instead of a supposed established center removes the voice of authority and brings into light the previously unvoiced. In the short story Coover privileges characters and points of view that are relegated to the periphery or are not considered at all in the biblical narratives. The denial of closure emphasizes open-endedness. The same way Coover considers the biblical narratives open enough to generate new stories, he consciously confers the same feature to his version. The unnamed characters that resist definite identifications point to open-endedness because since nothing can be asserted, the interpreters are free to establish the connections they wish.

The interpretations of "The Brother" considered here derive from its connection with the biblical story, and this works as a basis to identify it as a sign representing a biblical myth. Other perspectives, such as a Muslim, a Buddhist, or any other non-Christian or non-Jewish readings of "The Brother" would create different interpretations for this story. The openness of the literary text proclaimed by postmodernism can be seen as the recognition of literature as a sign of openness and indeterminacy. What postmodern writers are fully exploring in their fictions is the opacity of the sign, which allows, as in the case of Coover's story, to see the Bible from a new perspective, emphasizing that no meaning is ever static.

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