

# Anarratology: Dennis Cooper's Transgressions

By Danny Kennedy

Dennis Cooper's texts are vivid with sluts and weaklings. His sluts reach their apotheosis in *The Sluts*, devoted to their anal carnival. The preposterousness of godhood is itself contested in *God Jr.*, the former text's more restrained twin. A vigil for the weaklings, these must include its faux-disabled narrator, the dead, and deadened.

This year Cooper, newly signed to Harper Perennial, continues to collaborate on a series of critically acclaimed theatre pieces with director Giselle Viéne; has a volume of poetry *The Weaklings* released; and sees the publication of an original collection of essays on his work forthcoming.

It is eight years since Cooper completed his signature novel series the George Miles Cycle, where sluts and weaklings co-mingle. Since then Cooper's themes and preoccupations seem to have fragmented, shards lodging in each of his subsequent books. *God Jr.* is suffused with the tender atmospherics, and ear for grief, often overlooked by Cooper's critics. *The Sluts*, in stark contrast, evacuates any recognizable ethical register in a riotous exchange of violent sexual imaginings. In these texts Cooper's interests seem apparently at their most polarized and isolated. But both sluts and weaklings walk through each text in turn, and both are required for Cooper's transgressive art to perform its disappearances.

## Weaklings: The [a]narratologist's Imaginary ("The Remedial Logician")

The George Miles Cycle constitutes the core expression of Cooper's aesthetics; a sequence of five novels – *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide* and *Period* — exploring the dynamics of sexualized violence and pursuing knowledge of the eponymous teenager's personality and dispersed subjectivity. Miles is the disturbed object of fascination driving the cycle's investigations. Both his eroticised body, and the vacant mannerisms that gesture from it, serve as a crucial standard of comprehension in the texts, allowing characters their inter-personal transactions and activities.

George was a real figure in the writer's life. The cycle began as an attempt to communicate with this absent friend and the sense of loss that had accreted to his memory. Cooper later discovered prior to commencing work on the final volume of the cycle that Miles had shot himself before the first book had even been completed. Many years afterwards in the poem "November 17, 1997" he writes:

So I forgot who you were,/and you wanted me to know. You're the/one who fired a gun at his head, so high/on whatever, and so depressed by my lack of whatever that you were afraid you might have otherwise not hit the target,/wherever I was at the time (2008: 40).

In these lines the trajectory of Miles' bullet is

ultimately, secretly directed at Cooper himself for his perceived neglect of the troubled youth. Miles and Cooper had been close friends in preparatory school, with the latter's narcotic experience enabling him to coach the former in coping with the more difficult outcomes of psychotropic adventure. The two developed a bond, re-uniting in their twenties as lovers for a brief period, only to be again separated; and followed by the confirmation of Miles' death in the mid to late 90s. Earl Jackson Jr. points out that "George Miles' names not the boy Cooper wanted to reach but the failure of these texts to communicate to him, to bring him back into Cooper's life" (2006: 89). The bullet's projection, in Cooper's framing of this terminal event in Miles' life, becomes an image of the space between them as individuals, a signifier of both directional distance and the vicissitudes of temporality. Miles' own tormented life, as well as Cooper's ambivalence, becomes the target of violence once death intrudes into the frame of experience. Since Miles is the primary integer of Cooper's multiplicitous desire, as enacted throughout the cycle's paeans to variations on his gaunt, pale, scraggly physicality, this poem's terrible site of meditation is in many ways the retroactive originary moment of Cooper's art. Like the death Miles is precluded from experiencing, this lonely self-execution cannot be recuperated by the writer; it is instead an impossible instant, his work arising from its deferred acknowledgement. The cycle's anguished insistence on representing both subtle and obscene substitutes for Miles somehow begins its repetitions here, in a moment the author is literally ignorant of, almost until the conclusion of the said cycle.

If the cycle is a monument to George Miles, then this unbearable death is concealed and finally unveiled by its construction. Cooper admits, "when you were here,/I never thought about you, but fell in love/with anyone who resembled you, I was/so haunted" (2008: 40). A ghostly series of resemblances piles up in the cycle, numerous secondary characters acting as a "parallel self" for George who is perpetually withdrawn and inaccessible (1989: 36). Miles is figured as "a badly tuned hologram", "a prop", his face redolent of "a Halloween mask" (4, 5, 15). In these details he emerges as the vacant and indeterminate passive boy, the cycle's chief icon. He is imprinted with the spectral incoherence of the physically degraded, emotionally exhausted teen, spooked by his own inarticulateness; he and his avatar's "dusty and spent as ghosts" (9).

Deprived of intentionality through a combination of drugs, dreaminess and the shibboleth of his own uncanny personality, George is forever acted upon and is rarely capable of any action himself, barely able to rouse himself sufficiently to escape the assault that almost kills him at the climax to *Closer*. He is lusted after, abused, distorted, maimed and *represented* relentlessly by the text and its protagonists. Marvin Taylor argues that *Closer* is a novel that is foremost about the

crisis of representation, a demonstration "that the extremes of representation to which Cooper brings us question the very possibility of creating literature in a world where representations are irreconcilable with their referents" (2006: 176). He highlights the dismembering fragmentation that de-structures the cycle's first novel. Although *Closer* is undoubtedly a novel fixated on the limits of representation, from John's dysfunctional efforts at Miles' portraiture, to Cliff and Alex's incorporation of him into a pornographic tableau, and Philippe's appropriation of George to enact his perversions, the text's representational argument is still only one aspect of Cooper's characteristic interest in the process of narrative and its specific imaginary.

So a particular space is opened up by the measure of Miles' missile: it is the space of relation and representation. In the cycle this relation is charted by arranging a narrative field in order to narrate firstly the imagined and recollected experience of Miles—so as to gain knowledge and understanding of his enigma; and secondly to experiment with and test this data through Cooper's concomitant obsession with dramatic violence. Basically, the cycle erects itself as a narrative architecture built to "represent the world" in "a form they can understand" (1989: 31). Cooper appears to align his work to an overtly conservative narrative mandate in order to achieve the perspicacity demanded by the burden of Miles' unrecoverable loss: a sympathetic representational definition capable of conveying a sense of their relationship in the text. He would seem to appeal to representation and to idealize form; artistic moves supposedly anathema to postmodern temperaments. Yet his approach to representation is neither a reactionary restoration of realism's tenets, nor a restaging of mimetic strategies in a weakened mode, as simply the "simulation of imitative form" (Gibson 1996: 71). Instead Cooper inaugurates a transgressive representational model that violates the imaginary space of narratology.

Cooper constructs his 'fictional' worlds according to a strict logic of representation and its limitations. He invigorates his transgressive texts by binding them tighter and tighter with representational prohibitions. In this way the work attains a fascination equivalent to that of George Miles in the text by aggravating its narrative structure, intent on measuring, studying, acquiring knowledge and information of the body's mysterious signification, with an anti-interpretive and morally appalling fantastical semiosis located in the sickening eruptions of anal violence which punctuate the cycle. It is this operation at the limits of a robust representation that recalls Elizabeth Young's intimation of an escape from compositional deadlocks in a writing aware of the "increasing sense that all the theories of postmodernity have been played out... and that fiction will be able to move on from here", remarks included at the tail-end of her seminal essay on Cooper's early novels (2006:

65). Discussing the structure of the cycle in pseudo-narratological terms Cooper himself says (Sunday, March 05, 2006):

When I was developing the cycle, I realized that what I wanted to do wouldn't work if I wrote in a straightforward narrative style. I realized I would have to figure out and design a particular kind of container suitable for the content and subjects I wanted to explore – a container that would organize, display, house comfortably, and allow a productive interaction between subjects that would otherwise either deflect or destroy one another.

Elsewhere Cooper argues that “contrariness and confusion” in his work stems from a perhaps typically ‘postmodern’ scepticism toward systematic thought, including the narrative form. “I just don’t believe in the idea that there is a system already in place that is capable of locating truth”, he confides to Robert Glück during their interview (2006: 252). Yet narrative as a perpetually risked container of heterogeneous objects and experiences is retained in Cooper’s texts. Glück, as the impresario of the so-called New Narrative literary inclination, shares a similar methodology to Cooper in claiming narrative as an epistemological and imaginative device, while at the same time transgressing its structure and delineations. This indicates a textual affect which inherits the prejudices against narrative heightened by postmodern aesthetics, but shifts this position so that it yields a new narrative structuring capable of expenditure, side-stepping the rote assumptions of ‘experimental’, atrophied writing.

Criticism has tended to place Cooper’s work alongside practitioners of so called Blank Fiction, often conflated with the Downtown New York writing scene, its origins in punk action, reading it as a thesis on the apathetic life-style bred by late capitalism and the numb aggression permeating our shared hyper-reality, an exhibition of consumerist environments, or a disputation with the transcendence of identity politics in queer writing. Sustaining an examination of Cooper’s inquiry into the (im)possibilities of narrative it is more instructive to read his texts in conjunction with certain practices closer in style to Glück’s version of so called New Narrative. In his “Long Note on New Narrative” Glück contends that New Narrative is a literature of the present, that its practitioners “did not want to break the back of representation or to ‘punish’ it for lying, but to elaborate narration on as many different planes as we could, which seemed consistent with the lives we led” (2004: 28). This vision of a state of representation consistent with lived experience coincides in part with a kind of autobiography: “by autobiography we meant daydreams, night-dreams, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture, the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies and distortions” (29). Cooper too is embarked on the representation of night-dreamt autobiography. New Narrative volunteers, just as Cooper does, a narrative form, a representational system that it determines in order to transgress it. “We

realize the mistake in the system, which is that the system is a system”, writes Glück (1987: 42). However, instead of adhering to a stultifying postmodern anxiety at narrative systems, New Narrative co-opts the system and its law so that they can transgress its boundary and divisions. As Georges Bataille famously puts it, “the transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” (1986 [1957]: 63). The system of narrative is transgressed by the content it attempts to contain and efficiently constrain by its logic; a logic that allows representation and approach. The transgression is an uncertain moment of rupture, like the imagining of Miles at the point of death. Such acts invite a representation that disrupt narrative and eventually must fail. Consequently, according to New Narrative, transgression in narrative form entails a complex negotiation of narratological prohibitions regarding the causality and sense-making of story, the relation between sequential events and the space of representation, comprising “the double necessity and impossibility of narration” (1987: 41).

For Glück, “Cooper is so close he’s abstract” (1984: 117). Representation in Cooper crushes its gaze into the human form with such intensity the eye collapses in vertigo. At the same time Cooper’s cycle is a narrative form that is architected, yet at the same time punished by the extremity of the material it assembles and organizes (‘DC on the cycle’):

I’d developed a game plan or overall structure for the cycle. It would take the form of a novel being gradually dismembered to nothing. The first novel would be the cycle’s body, and the succeeding novels could only consist of its material. Each succeeding novel’s form would reflect the damage caused by the violence, drug use, and emotional turmoil of the previous novel...I hoped that this strict structure combined with the more instinctive, chaotic dismemberment structure, would give the cycle the dual qualities of excessive form and improvisational looseness.

Representation is not revealed as an empty simulacrum of the real or glibly denuded in its constructedness, but instead performs its function as an analogue to the distant spaces traversed by the text’s subjects.

New Narrative writers, as well as being story-tellers, are simultaneously theorists of narrative, narratologists creating new narratologies as well as narrating new experiences. Andrew Gibson contends that the supposed science of narrative, like all purported objective applications of thought, corresponds to a particular imaginative element ineluctable from its elaboration. In this case the “narratological imaginary” is above all the identification with geometrics and the formal grid. According to Gibson’s analysis, narratology has primarily involved itself in two types of space, “the space of representation – [t]his is understood as the space of the real, the homogeneous space of the world” as well as “the space of the model or describable form” (1996: 3). In Gibson’s estimation “the narratological imaginary has been haunted by something like the reverse of poetic intuition, by dreams

of the geometric” and this has led to the idea that “for narratology, geometry is a kind of universal law” (5). Gibson sees this calcification of the narratological imaginary as an inhibitor for prospective readings of narrative, and advocates a distinctly postmodern narratology based on de-centred notions of force and energetics, in preference to the strict architecture of systematic narratology with its rigid concepts of form and representation.

The geometric laws of narratology rely on Necessity to uphold their fixed and logical system. Lev Shestov, Bataille’s philosophical tutor, views Necessity as the extraordinary limit that both orders the chaos of experience and disciplines the imagination within a rigorous series of categorization whose sum is confinement. Necessity converts all philosophy and art into the regularity of science through its subjugating claims. While Necessity allows knowledge to accumulate, it restricts the possible and diagrams the provocations of man into a relatable finitude, guaranteeing representation despite its inherent creative poverty. Shestov insists that “knowledge is so intimately bound to necessity” and that individuals endure “pain and bitterness at ineluctable Necessity” (1966: 49, 37). Necessity ensures the reproduction of structures of systematic thought that Bataille will associate with the designs of architecture, since “there is consequently no way to describe a system without resorting to the vocabulary of architecture” (1992 [1974], 33). If one does not submit to Necessity there is only the confusion of the heterogeneous that exceeds subjecthood and the space of representation: “Without architecture the world would remain illegible...the cosmos itself is architected” (35).

This heterogeneous reality enclosed by the space of representation and architected inside the delimitations of narrative in fact enables the transgressive mechanism of Cooper’s text. Glück notes (2004: 31):

transgressive writing is not necessarily about sex or the body – or about anything one can predict. There’s no manual; transgressive writing shocks by articulating the present, the one thing impossible to put into words, because a language does not yet exist to describe the present.

In this formulation the present indicates the object of representation; that which is brought into the restricted economy of the narrative field at the cost of its heterogeneity. The ‘new narrative’ is in fact a narrative transgressed by the excess of “the present”, the violence of the referent. Miles in his bedroom before his own death must be made to submit to the narrative grid and conform to representation so that some relation can be made between the eroticism of his existence and the position of Cooper’s text. But the horror and formless intensity of Miles debases and unsettles narrative, undoing the certainty and consolation of its representations. The sought after knowledge and information of the body is not discretely forthcoming but becomes ever more spiralling, even as it is obscured. If the traditional structure of narrative thrives on representation and the model of form then Cooper’s text is brought to a transgressive and precise failure at each of these points, a collapse that is an

opening to the impossibility of the referent it wishes to understand and contain. But it achieves this fall into the heterogeneous through a paradoxical project of narration. Representation and form are harangued and worked through so as to attain the limit of that irresolvable scene of violence and loss that is the cycle's core. Cooper's work founds itself in the narratological imaginary critiqued by Gibson, because of the very pathos of its obsession with space, limits, finitude, and restriction. It gives a calculated clarity to his "pain and bitterness". The narratological grid is appropriated as prohibition, and limit, to invigorate his textual transgression. This is attempted not as a sterile, retrospective, or ironic intellectual game, but as a practice offered to represent, with all its intractable compromises intact, the anguish and distances of experience. Narrative form (in the cycle's "gradual dismemberment") and human form, especially as evinced in the duplicated forms of Miles' models (in the abjection and violation of bodies in the text), are repeatedly transgressed and wounded at all stages of the cycle's unfolding.

As both narrator and narratologist, Cooper performs the function of what a part-title of *God Jr.* calls "the remedial logician". The geometrics of narrative, rather than being overcome in a writerly ethos of postmodern writing, are instead self-consciously accentuated, acquiring a counter-valent suggestiveness and austere poeticism, as they reinforce the uniformity and self-abnegating futility of narrative to house and represent the excessive present of the lived experience they aim to scaffold. The intended referent rejects its taxonomy and undoes the mathematics of the narrative's inquiry. Yet this is arrived at via the operations and work of the narrative, though it is narrated to a point of dissolution, confusion and breakdown. In this way Cooper's remedial logic, using narrative as a curative for the agonies of experience develops into a narratology without narratology, or the conceptual disturbance of an anarratology.

### Sluts: The Excremental Fantasist ("The Childish Scrawl")

One of the more original ways Cooper attends to this in his text is the emergence of fantasy to upset and bring low the narratological imaginary in which his concerns are framed and distributed. Denis Hollier notes that "Bataille opposes to the levelling phraseology of philosophico-scientific discourse...something that he calls the virulence of "fantasies" (1992: 93). Referring to another part-title lifted from *God Jr.*, I would like to situate the play of fantasy in Cooper with what he calls "the childish scrawl". This fantastical "scrawl" appears in the text as a figuration for the transgression of narratology's remedial logic. While this opposition would seem to evoke Todorov's dialectic between the fantastic and the naturalistic, or properly representational, this binary is something different again. For one it is transgressive. Second of all, it not only turns on representation, but on the remote signification of a particular narrative logic, freighted with the anguish of its limitations. This virulent fantasy can only arise within this imaginary, and it gains power from its offensive challenge to this logic, a logic that enables it and finally transcends it.

In part the fantasy is the violent expression of the failure of the narrative to measure, block out, classify or arrange experience. It shatters the homogeneous world of representation, only for the narrative to have its boundaries restored once again, continuing upon its inherently failed project, a failure that reaches completion through the continuance of the narrative. As a momentary transgression of the arcane scientific discourse imprinted in Cooper's text (the desire to *know*, measure, interrogate, situate, disclose, understand, control the other...), the fantasy throws the poignancy of this structure into terrible relief. The fantasy works against its realization in the structure of the narrative. As Maurice Blanchot says of Henri Michaux, Cooper's is "an imagination that works endlessly against itself" (2001 [1943]: 225). It resists the "presiding idea" of narratological invention that "can give it a structure and impose a form on it" (225).

*God Jr.* is narrated by Jim, the distraught bereaved father of Tommy – his teenage son – killed in a car accident in which Jim happened to survive. The novel jettisons the familiar attention to wrenching sexual violence so prevalent in Cooper. What remains is the fantastic, frequently expressed in the excremental visions of the earlier cycle. Here, the fantasy of Jim entering the imaginary environment of Tommy's favourite video-game dominates the later half of the text. Jim melds with the platformer's bear hoping to somehow mimic and encounter a trace of his deceased son's experience. While his son remained aloof and mysterious to him in life, and absolutely unreachable in the silence of death, the computer game's structure affords Jim the impression of accessing the phenomenological texture and sensibility that perhaps animated his late son. This "remedial logic", this potentially curative course of action, results in the game narrative substituting for the narratological imaginary mapped by the cycle. Miles is here replaced by Tommy, another of Cooper's youths who is transfixed by his own sublime vacuity. Just as Cooper had written the cycle in remembrance to Miles, while also testing his visceral epistemology, in *God Jr.* Jim builds a folly in his yard *in memoriam* to Tommy; a monument designed to match a drawing his stoned son had made of a defunct piece of level design inside the same Nintendo game. The harsh, and by Shestov, and perhaps Gibson's account, inhuman geometric imaginary of the narratological system is made painfully transparent in *God Jr.*'s videogame scenes, mapping out and structuring Jim's emotional state. It illustrates in its rawest iteration the sensitivity and necessity of utilizing this grid, showing how Cooper embeds a formation within his text analogous to the distance and discontinuities felt by his characters, while also highlighting how this grid would seem to offer the possibility of interrogating and encountering, even abstractly, the beloved object of loss.

If *Period*, the final entry in the cycle, reduces the narrative form to a ruined skeleton and a grave for Miles, then in *God Jr.* even the flagrant bodily traumas of that work are absent. As much as the imagery of physical brutality in the cycle acts as the most extreme manifestation of fantasy in Cooper, its terror often encourages a reading that misses its significance as an outbreak which undoes the grid from within its own space,

defining and regulating its limit. In *God Jr.* the fantasy of blurring, through pot and grief, with the ludicrous "little costume" (2005: 81) of the bear game-sprite discloses a less obscene, but no less bizarre fantasy. It is a complex movement of virtual embodiment that both enables Jim's negotiation of the fabricated video-game world's actual geometric graphic narrative imaginary, and facilitates the ludicrous technicalities of this world to interact with him. Instead of a simulated exchange with his son, Jim/bear perambulates inside a delimited spatial model occupied by infantile, tokenistic fantasies – "gargantuan tropical plant[s]", "cacti", "cute...scorpions", "kindly sunflower[s]", and the "snowman" (2005: 91, 111, 110, 114, 148). His quest for what previous Cooper protagonists might conceptualize as "forms of information about what or who I am physically" generally passed on through sex, murder and the varieties of extreme experience, is a way to know the other in a profound and complete intimacy, a form of relation at the pinnacle (1991: 50). But as Bataille reminds us, at the pinnacle is collapse and "the fall 'is occasioned by a short circuit of knowledge and sexual bliss'" (1992: 103). This is the rupturing activated by fantasy.

*God Jr.* is a text littered with references to drawing: a motif originating in the very first chapter of *Closer* devoted to teen artist John's efforts at drawing Miles. A recurrent emblem of the act of representation in Cooper's writing, it surfaces in the novel as "blueprint", "JPEG", "fucked-up pixels", "doodling" (2005: 58, 67, 62, 58); a shifting array of visual signifiers holding out the possibility of optical, verifiable knowledge. These elements of the text are therefore linked to the remedial logic of narratological pursuit. But this is transgressed in *God Jr.* by a formless inveiglement upon this visual frame – what Cooper gestures toward in the expression "the childish scrawl". Ultimately the doodling of reality will devolve into opacity, as "the doodle's nothing more than a growing black dot...digging a hole" (58). "A messy little drawing" (representation) can collapse into an anal singularity, a grave of meaning (however appropriate or evocative), or deform into a scrawl, a nascent and troubling fantasy (71). Jim, "a real estate agent" (14) and consequently employed to "pencil in...render...delete" (87), is a subject trained to intervene in visual arenas arrayed with structures, constructs, architectures. Yet the monument he builds for his son is a translated fantasy, its blueprint a childish scrawl, a nonsense; rather than an orthographic plan it matches "some stupid puzzle" or "a stupid maze" (34). Tommy "has almost been erased. Soon his death will lack illustrations or even much of a story" (15). In its place will stand this eccentric empty backyard mausoleum. "But you want to talk about a puzzle? Try making up a world where having killed someone you love isn't important" laments Jim (160). This made-up world, this unconvincing structure, built to house bafflement and sorrow at death, and to rescue a sense of usurped intimacy between father and son, shatters before the intrusions of the fantastic. In this transgression the sad prison-house/refuge/echo-chamber of the narratological imaginary is damaged by the excess of these experiences. Jim's intoxicated 'bear-hood' is hailed as a god by the game's inhabitants when a convoluted theology

warps his progression. In this phantasm, God is the disabled, fraught and disenfranchised patriarch to a company of exaggerated, cartoonish creatures. As 'Dennis' remarks in *Frisk*: "Now I'm part of the fantasy that always fucks me over" (1991: 53).

It would seem that both Cooper and Bataille associate "fantasy with base matter, and indeed with scatology" (Biles 2005: 61). Jeremy Biles argues that fantasy is another function of the *informe*, the formless that ruins organization and structure. The idea in Cooper is narrative – "It imposes on the chaos of the world an order. The order of mere things: substantial reality" (60). For Biles, Bataille's view of fantasy contributes "to undo the structures and 'formality of systems' which are the product of the dominant tendency of thought – the tendency toward systemisation and ideality" (62). Fantasies also function by projecting the self, forging an ecstatic relationship with the other marked by "visions of laceration, woundedness" (64). Cooper's fantasies of "spectacular violence" (1991: 54), proffer yet another "ulterior life" (108), where he and Miles co-mingle in an impossible, excessive marriage, a life where death can obscenely manifest in an "incommunicable, obviously" (1991: 78) "dramatisation of fantasy" (Biles 2005: 63). Biles summarizes: "Fantasy, the base matter of thought, turns the *shape* of the body into the *base material* of flesh that no idea can comprehend" (66). This is the fantastical relationship between Cooper and his 'models'. Dennis Hollier relates fantasy to the "smudges and spots" of inkblot on the child's answer-book (1992: 121): the tiers of feint ruled knowledge smeared in "graffiti" (Hollier 1991: 121) (Cooper 2005: 87). Cooper fills his implacable studies and narratives with the haunted eros of distance and disconnection, this cramped space of representation where understanding might be possible: a space at times no bigger than the meanest anus. This project ensures its logic's sacrifice, curtailed and transfigured by the blinding scribble of an immature scrawl.

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