

## Violence, Death, Sex and Psychoanalysis in Dennis Cooper's *The Dream Police*

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This essay will explore the mirroring of erotic desire and violence that Dennis Cooper undertakes in his poetry anthology *The Dream Police (Selected Poems 1969-1993)*. Drawing mainly on Jacques Lacan and Georges Bataille, it will be argued that sexual violence is the vehicle which Cooper uses to liberate eroticism from what in psychoanalysis is known as the Symbolic —the order of the human mind ruled by sociocultural prescriptions. This liberation is productive of alternative knowledge about Cooperian subjects and their vicissitudes in desire, especially the *poietic* metaphorization of their sexual drives. On articulating this view, this piece of research departs from the critical line that conceives Cooper's violent *ars erotica* as either an elicitor of nihilism or the annihilation of otherness.

Keywords: *The Dream Police*; queer theory; sexual violence; perversion; Lacanian psychoanalysis; the Real

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## Violencia, muerte, sexo y psicoanálisis en *The Dream Police*, de Dennis Cooper

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar el espejo entre violencia y deseo sexual con el que Dennis Cooper inviste su antología poética *The Dream Police (Selected Poems 1969-1993)*. En torno a principios de Jacques Lacan y Georges Bataille, se argumentará que la violencia sexual es el vehículo que Cooper usa para liberar el erotismo de lo que en psicoanálisis se conoce como lo Simbólico —el orden de la mente humana gobernado por las prescripciones socioculturales. Dicha liberación produce operaciones de conocimiento alternativas sobre los sujetos cooperianos y sus vicisitudes en el deseo, especialmente la metaforización *poietica* de sus pulsiones sexuales. Al articular este punto de vista, este trabajo se desmarca de la línea crítica que ha considerado el violento *ars erotica* de Cooper como productor de nihilismo o la aniquilación de la otredad.

Palabras clave: *The Dream Police*; teoría *queer*; violencia sexual; perversión; psicoanálisis lacaniano; lo Real

### 1. SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN DENNIS COOPER'S LITERATURE: WHAT LIES BEHIND

The starting assumption of this article is a very simple one: sexual expression and violence in Dennis Cooper's poetics are inseparable. All the many influences he meshes into his poetic imaginary — the intensity of punk, the indolence of blank generation preppy styles, queercore dissatisfaction, pop iconography, and the philosophically-inflected avant-garde French literary tradition of perverse desire, from de Sade to Genet— are, in the end, imbued with a patina of severe sexual violence, which usually leads to the murder, the rape or the dismembering of the characters involved in the plot. It is not without reason, then, that Bret Easton Ellis has dubbed him the “last literary outlaw in mainstream American fiction” (2000). Examples illustrating the mirroring between desire and violence in Cooper's narrative abound. From the five novels comprising the George Miles cycle — *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997) and *Period* (2000)—to his 2011 novel *The Marbled Swarm*, the reader is faced with a chronicle of extremely intense murderous events. The teenage hero's involvement in scatological sex in *Closer*, the sadistic killing spree in Amsterdam occupying half of *Frisk*, parental sexual abuse in *Try*, the sex orgies which *Period* portrays, and the sexually-imbued obsession of an adult for a dead boy and his Emo brother in *The Marble Swarm*, orchestrate a symphony of prescriptive bodily rhetoric whose disturbing appeal defies denial. In fact, as Michele Aaron points out, the appeal is such that the victims themselves end up tuning in to the fascination of the erotic violence being perpetrated on them (2004: 116). Let us take, for example, the following excerpt from *Frisk* in which one of the heroes becomes sexually aroused on being certain he is going to be stabbed by his captor:

The knife stopped just short of Joe's right nipple. Joe gazed at the nipple. Then he gazed at the point of the knife. He raised his eyes to Gary's tight little smile. He lowered his eyes at the smudge of pre-come on the head of his own cock. When he shut his eyes a second later, the four things —pink nipple, knife point, crinkly smile, white smudge— were superimposed against the reddish darkness of his lids. It looked like a flower. “God Gary, you know what?” he said. “I—”

*Stab.* (1991: 64)

Cooper's poetry also exudes violence when it comes to conceptualising desire. Among the myriad of examples which could be proffered to illustrate this claim, let the following excerpt from a poem called ‘Some Whore’ suffice for now:

arm to the elbow  
inside a whatever  
year old, says he  
loves me to death,  
etc., but he loves  
death, not me.

i could kill him  
 sans knowing it,  
 punch through a  
 lung, turn my finger-  
 tip, render the  
 fucker retarded (1995: 128)

Cooperian erotic violence has been conceptualised around several critical paths which will be explored here in depth. Michiko Kakutani (1996), for instance, sees Cooper's violent ethos as sheer desire to shock the audience for the sake of it, since his literature does not deploy any radical conceptual work. Other critics, however, have conceptualised Cooper's scandalous plots as a way to explore the fringes of the human condition "right to the abyss where desire and lust topple into death" (Texier 1994). Drawing on Jameson's (1991), Baudrillard's (2001), and Bauman's (2010) insights on postmodernity, another path often followed by critics of Cooper maintains that the disquieting view of mankind which he is putting forward through erotic violence aims to reproduce the purposelessness and nihilism at the core of contemporary life. From this perspective, his literature highlights that the economic and technological conditions of the postmodern age have given rise to a decentralized, media-dominated society in which ideas are only cross-referential representations and copies of each other, with no original or objective meaning. Without a sound grip on reality, it is, therefore, easy to be prey to nothingness. Eroticism, as an integral aspect of human behavior, has not escaped this fate either. In this sense, Jackson has conceived Cooperian eroticism as an elaboration of Freud's death drive: "Cooper's work insistently exposes the relation between representation and death —the negation of the real in the image; the self-alienation within desire; the internal negation of the referent of the metaphor— all based on the resemblances of the corpse to the person who has died" (2008: 170). In contrast to traditional stances on sexuality in which the erotic drive is seen as one of the most important platforms for the production of human meaning, Jackson looks at Cooperian eroticism as a negative teleology from which it is impossible to extract firm knowledge, simply because satisfaction or love —if they ever come— serve as the intimation of death.

In a more optimistic vein, Damon Young (2008) and Paul Hegarty (2008), whose ideas will be thoroughly examined in the next section, do not interpret erotic violence as the symptom of the nihilistic relativism which Baudrillard and Bauman have preached upon in relation to the contemporary existential ethos. On the contrary, they consider Cooper's violent *ars erotica* as propitiatory for the dismantling of the monolithic socio-cultural certainties around which human beings build their sexuality.

My interpretation also stems from this assumption, but in more specific terms. I will argue that permeating eroticism with violence does not only seek to resist heteropatriarchal dominance; it is also, and mainly, a conscious attempt on Cooper's part to liberate erotic desire from the Lacanian Symbolic. At least, this proves to be so in *The Dream Police*, hence my decision to study violence as presented in this poetry collection. In so doing,

I seek to highlight a dimension of Cooper's literature to which very little attention has been paid in the existing critical commentary, which has almost exclusively centred on his narrative. But Cooper's poetry is not only worth exploring due to its peripheral presence in criticism. I will claim it also deserves attention because of the way Cooper's verse breathes erotic violence. In some of the poems in *The Dream Police* Cooper seems to be claiming back the power of the Lacanian Real in the understanding of eroticism. This is, for the American *poète maudit*, the only means, to borrow Lacan's words, "to permit the full spectrum of desire to allow us to approach, to test, this sort of forbidden jouissance [being sexually true] which is the only valuable meaning that is offered to our life" (1966). If Lacan's elaboration on the Real as a drive productive of bliss and metaphoricity proved to be operative in *The Dream Police* (other studies might explore this exegetic route in his narrative as well), the perception of Cooper's textual erotic violence might render another *poietic* conceptualisation.

## 2. COOPER'S "REAL" SEX: MOVING AWAY FROM THE SYMBOLIC

As is well known, the Real, together with the Symbolic and the Imaginary, shape Lacan's tripartite model of the psyche. The Real, in short, refers to the most unconscious and irrational dimension of the human being. In it, the self has not got structure; subjectivity has not happened yet. The Real is, therefore, ineffable and endlessly metaphorical and portrays human beings as organic non-mediated wholes in contrast to their Symbolic side. This latter terrain accounts for the subject's self-conscious existence: it is the place of representation and, therefore, culture and its prescriptions. The Imaginary, for its part, stands out as the hinge of the psyche: it triggers the constant changes from non-consciousness to consciousness, from objectivity to subjectivity, from the Real to the Symbolic, through which human beings constantly go (Lacan 1985, 1994, 1997). Although the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are associated to different sides of human beings, their spectrums do frequently overlap, bursting into each other and giving way to what Lacan calls a "Borromean Knot". In fact, it would be inadvisable to try to understand the Real as an external truth independent of the Symbolic dimension to the subject. Elaborating on Lacan's insights, scholars such as Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2000) or Renata Salecl (1998) have remarked on the function of the Real as both the trigger of the process of symbolisation, and a remaining nucleus which surpasses and resists that very process. The paradoxical nature of such a concept lies in the fact that, in Salecl's words, the kernel of the Real "is not simply something prior to symbolisation; it is also what remains: the leftover, or better, the failure of symbolisation" (1998: 177). In a similar fashion, for Žižek, "the Real is at the same time the product, remainder, leftover, scraps of this process of symbolisation, the remnants, the excess which escapes symbolisation and is as such produced by the symbolisation itself" (1989: 169). Rather than watertight compartments, then, the Real and the Symbolic are interrelated, frequently intruding on each other's domains. These intrusions tend to be from the irrationality inherent in the Real into the

grids of intelligibility that the Symbolic enforces, with the resulting destabilisation and estrangement of the reality socioculturally fixated and apprehended. This is how Lacan explains the illogical episodes that, at times, penetrate our daily lives and for which the Symbolic and its two mainstays, Cartesian reason and the Name-of-the-Father (the law), cannot provide an explanation.

It is my contention that in the understanding of the human mind that Cooper puts forward in *The Dream Police* he is indirectly alluding to Lacan's ideas. Cooper's collection of poems puts desire at the service of the Real through two main mechanisms: the carnalization and, especially, the brutalisation of desire. Cooper uses both of them in his quest to make eroticism unconscious, Real, far away from the prescriptions of the Symbolic, the only place in which sexuality, at least according to Lacan, cannot be lived: "signifiers do not suit sexual intercourse. Once human beings start to talk, the harmonious perfection inherent in copulation comes to an end" (2007: 23). For Lacan, erotic desire is tightly woven into the Real and he fiercely criticises any attempt to normalise and moralise it, that is, to take sexual expression into the Symbolic order, a tendency to be found even at the heart of psychoanalytical practice itself. As Lacan himself highlights:

It seems that from the moment of those first soundings, from the sudden flash of light that the Freudian experience cast on the paradoxical origins of desire, on the polymorphously perverse character of its infantile forms, a general tendency has led psychoanalysis to reduce the paradoxical origins in order to show their convergence in a harmonious conclusion. This movement has on the whole characterized the progress of analytical thought to the point where it is worth asking if this theoretical progress was not leading in the end to an even more all-embracing moralism than any that has previously existed. (1997: 4)

Lacan's comment highlights that human beings' erotic drives, which, by their very nature, tend to be paradoxical and, therefore, might articulate unpredictable contents, have been purged from their uneasy contents, not only by heteropatriarchy but also, and most surprisingly, by psychoanalytical practice itself. Lacan, in the end, is suggesting that the Real, always in favour of the Symbolic — "the purpose of harmony" in the above quotation — has been sent to oblivion even by the discipline, psychoanalysis, that gave rise to it.

As in Lacan, in Cooper's poetry there is also plenty of evidence of the Symbolic not being the right place to live eroticism. Let us take 'First Sex' as the starting point:

This isn't it.  
I thought it would be  
like having a boned pillow.

I saw myself turning  
over and over in lust  
like sheets in a dryer.

... Tomorrow when he has made breakfast  
and gone, I will sweep  
the mound of porno from my closet,  
put a match to its lies.

I will wait in my bed  
as I did before, a thought ajar,  
and sex will slip into my room  
like a white tiger. (1995: 20)

Who or what keeps erotic desire —that “This isn’t it” opening the poem— from being fulfilled? It is clearly the Symbolic: “the mound of porno from my closet” referring to all the social conventions ruling over the expression of sex, in this case, in the commercial format of pornography. Cooper distrusts anything coming from this order, to the extent he wants to “put a match to its lies”. Further evidence of Cooper’s stance that the Symbolic is not the appropriate dimension in which to live eroticism comes from poems like ‘Teen Idol’ where sex does not have anything to do with all the traditions structuring the idea of love, but something much more urgent, more basic, another thing:

... “Come over  
if and only if you’re  
incredibly cute, etc.,  
and if not, don’t  
bother”, not “Love  
is the answer”, not  
some philosophy. (1995: 125)

In ‘Drugged Man, Dying Boy’ something similar happens to the idea of standard Symbolic love. The poetic hero finds love lived within normativity extremely boring: “and me feeling zilch, only smarter / thereafter, and bored by love”. Love should be, as Cooper states earlier in the poem, “elsewhere”, “wherever”. Any place would be suitable for eroticism, but for the tradition that Cooper so much detests:

... I’ll just wend my way into  
wherever . . . the horror, etc.,  
of his removal from me, mine.  
Can’t sleep at the thought of it.  
Driven to understand why, how,  
to devaluate Thomas’s beauty,  
dump its contents elsewhere . . .

until nothing, whatever, a mess  
 where he used to stand posing.  
 And me feeling zilch, only smarter  
 thereafter, and bored by love. (1995:118)

In tune with Lacan, it is clear from the poems above that Cooper is disgusted at the idea of living eroticism at a conscious, Symbolic level. That stands out as a complete misplacement — “This isn’t it”. Rather than being an abstract concern of Cooper’s, the difficult relationship he has with the Symbolic is here pinpointed by a biographical episode. As documented by Richard Goldstein in an interview (2000), at the age of twelve Cooper heard about the “freeway killer” who had raped and murdered several teenage hitchhikers in the mountains near his home. He decided to visit the site where he thought the killings had taken place and there became so sexually aroused that he defines what he felt as “almost a religious experience”. His overall conclusion on this experience is clear: “I didn’t know what it was about, but I did notice it was incredibly exciting and that no one else shared this feeling”.

The episode which Cooper reports shows every trace of a nerve-racking encounter with the Real. The voluptuous delight with which he describes what he felt bears witness to a terrifying and impossible *jouissance*. What is highly relevant in this experience is the tense relationship between the unmediatedness of Cooper’s budding sexuality — the “religious experience” to which words cannot be put— and society’s expectations. Cooper makes reference to this mental struggle between the bliss of infinite possibilities for sexual expression inherent in the Real that innocently overtook him (“I did not know what it was about”) and the world of moral rules and prescription as inscribed in the Symbolic (“no one else shared this feeling”). Cooper’s sexual arousal on imagining the macabre episode both resists and exceeds any attempts at symbolisation. Situated between Eros and Thanatos —life and death— Cooper’s experience cannot be acknowledged without bringing about the collapse of the subject’s Symbolic universe.

Richard Goldstein (2000) claims that after being “caught between profound feelings of desire and powerful fantasies of destruction”, the burden of the Symbolic tradition fell upon Cooper dictating what he had felt was not acceptable, submerging him in a state of alienation that led him to a violent repression of his primal feelings which even made him consider committing suicide: “Murder was never an option, but suicide was. He [Cooper] used to imagine shooting himself in the woods ‘and having this contraption that would make the dirt cover me’ so that he [Cooper] simply disappeared”. This sense of wrong persisted and two years later he burned the novel he had written seeking to understand his feelings towards the “freeway killer” experience: “I wrote a thousand-page novel — *120 Days of Sodom* set in my high school— but I burned it because I was afraid my mother would discover it”.

Fortunately, as Goldstein points out, instead of ‘disappearing’, as he had originally contemplated, or continuing to burn his novels, Cooper used creative writing as a

cathartic way to understand what had happened to him. *The Dream Police*, then, might be seen as an attempt on Cooper's part to come to terms with the Real, as a way to alleviate all the suffocation and alienation that the Symbolic had inflicted on him because of his unmediated childhood experience.

But how does Cooper articulate his poetic liberation from living sex in the Symbolic? How does he claim back the Real? As suggested at the beginning of this section, this will happen mainly through the mirroring of eroticism and violence. Though however prominent, violence is not the only mechanism employed. The objectification of desire also occupies an important role in this respect and is worth analysis, since it is a necessary first step to the full understanding of the spectrum of violence in Cooper's *ars erotica*.

### 2.1 The Carnalization of Desire in *The Dream Police*

That Cooper's verse does not conceive of sexuality as a natural category is easy to infer. In line with queer theory scholars such as Michel Foucault (1998), Judith Butler (1999) or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Cooper's portrayal of eroticism in *The Dream Police* unveils the moral and political misuse sexuality has been prey to on the part of the Symbolic hierarchies of power. For these thinkers, the body is not naturally sexed, but becomes so through the cultural processes that use the production of sexuality to extend and sustain specific power relations. If to explore this idea Foucault relies on counter-discursive recoveries of subjugated knowledges, Butler on performativity, and Sedgwick on the synthetic nature of the discourse about heterosexuality, Cooper's strategy to challenge the Symbolic consists of objectifying desire, of presenting it as a mere display of flesh rather than one of the most traditional and prominent platforms for the production of onto-epistemological meaning. The poems in *The Dream Police* where desire is presented as false because it happens in its commercialized form should be understood in this fashion. 'Three', and the *ménage à trois* it depicts, provides a good example:

Up top is ted, thirteen, french  
 below is jeff who's fourteen and french  
 they are in a hotel in paris  
 they are being paid to do this, to be photographed

... they did this once before but were only jacked off and not  
 before a camera  
 when this particular act is over jeff will pretend to be fucking his  
 friend but it's easy to fake  
 no way, ted said, will he be buttfucked, not for a million francs

... if they want their money they have to give a little more  
 they have no choice so they say yes but they won't like it (1995: 32-3)



In the poem, sexuality is reduced to a “particular act”, based on pretence and which is “easy to fake”. But this disaffection is not only applicable to the hustlers. Clients also experience something similar. In ‘For My Birthday’, a man who knows he will be given a rent boy as a present fears the moment he opens the door and the automatic sexual intercourse starts.

He dislikes the ritual he would have to go through: “arms obligated”, “repaying each kiss”, “caressing by reflex”..., everything but a “real fuck”:

It will be my gift, paid up  
until morning, and I'll try  
to talk with him first, then  
just give up and rattle him  
orders that he'll understand  
or embellish, teaching me love  
the easy way: arms obligated  
to take me, repaying each kiss,  
caressing by reflex. I'll be  
nice to him, hoping he might  
contract my desire, knowing he'll  
ditch me when his watch strikes  
day, anxious for a real fuck (1995: 69)

Prostitution in these poems rarefies the ‘natural’ drive of eroticism by turning it into a mere performance. Unlike for people within the heteropatriarchal tradition, for Cooper, having sex is not a meaningful practice; there is no sacred truth to be revealed. Sex just implies the affectless use of a piece of meat, and having it is like a “joke”, an act of no consequence, as depicted in ‘Some Whore’:

jerk off, come,  
pay, and he's split-  
ting, says, “hey,  
thanks a whole fuck-  
ing lot,” like it's  
a joke, like he isn't.(1995: 129)

Outside prostitution, Cooper demystifies the Symbolic understanding of sexuality by shattering the alleged sublimity at which erotic desire should be lived. So he portrays sex as either not living up to expectations, as happens in ‘Idol Is Available’ (1995: 37) —all he remembers about his lover is “his skinny arm across my [his] chest / his bad breath on my [his] mind”, which leads to the conclusion that he “is nothing like a god”—or simply as casual, a routine activity for gratuitous entertainment:

'My Past':  
 . . . Take you, for example,  
 who I found throwing up in  
 the bathroom of some actor's  
 mansion and crowned my new  
 boyfriend. Your ass made me  
 nervous till I explored it.  
 Now I want to forget it. My  
 friends feel this way too.  
 I know them. We've been close  
 since before we were artists  
 working to leave haunted eyes  
 on our lovers. I've thrown  
 out hundreds like you (1995: 67-8)

In objectifying sexual desire, these poems seek to bypass the illusory grid of logicity around which the Symbolic order has transmitted and sanctioned some preferred forms of sexuality to the detriment of others. Cooper sows sexual disaffection in his poetry to short-circuit any appeal to naturalness in desire beyond the sheer materiality of the bodies involved in it. His poems show that, as he himself asserts in an interview, the erotic body is just sheer flesh that has nothing to do with knowledge operations: "a machine with all this stuff inside . . . . You just see what's in front of you. And what's in front of you is this body, right?" (Laurence 1995).

In sum, Cooper's acute preference for the glow of the flesh in his conceptualization of sexuality is to emphasize the Real discourse of the object rather than the Symbolic discourse about the object. A significant portion of *The Dream Police* pinpoints desire in a materiality that precedes socioculturally constructed signification. Cooper's message is clear: beyond its carnal immediacy, its Real dimension, sexuality is just a phantasmatic construction. If, according to queer theory this is true for everybody, for Cooper it was simply vital, a suitable tool to tackle his own troubling reactions after the "freeway killer" experience. Understanding that sexuality is a question of flesh helped him, as he himself recognizes, "not [to] rely on the standard moral, religious, and legal rights and wrongs, because I don't believe in the idea of a collective truth. I'm an anarchist by philosophy" (Nicolini 1993).

## 2.2 The Brutalisation of Desire in *The Dream Police*

The previous section ended with the assertion that Cooper's carnalization of erotic desire worked as a challenge to the Symbolic understanding of this human dimension. However, the *coup de grâce* to the alleged truths inherent in human sexuality will come from violence. That violence is going to be instrumental in this respect, was already obvious in the very objectification with which Cooper invests sexual intercourse in his texts. His view that sex is just about the flesh of a body is, at least, for him, accompanied by an irresistible urge to

check what is inside: “you are just like a kid, and kids try to take things like toys apart to see how they work” (Laurence 1995). But kids can get overexcited when playing and the toy can end up broken. Something similar seems to happen to Cooper’s toy boys.

In order to demonstrate that in *The Dream Police* violence is a way to anchor desire in the Real instead of in the Symbolic, we must summon Georges Bataille and his insights into eroticism. Bataille will reveal that what Cooper felt when he got sexually aroused after the “freeway killer” experience was far from being pathological or deplorable. On the contrary, it was simply the verification that Eros and Thanatos have always been interrelated, however difficult this is for our Symbolic laws to accept. But before exploring what Bataille’s ideas might contribute to the understanding of Cooper’s violent *ars erotica* as shown in his poetry, it should be noted that critical perception of this issue is not without its dissenters.

A number of critics are suspicious of the ultimate function of violence in Cooper’s writings on the grounds that his seemingly severe erotic ethos, in the end, proves to be at the service of tautology or nihilism —highly unproductive contents in onto-epistemological terms. The main proponent of the former trend is Michiko Kakutani who conceives of Cooper’s scandalous subjects as only a tool by which to attract media attention. She writes that, “unlike Dostoyevsky or Baudelaire, contemporary artists like Cooper and [Damien] Hirst are just interested in sensationalism for sensation’s sake. Their peek into the abyss isn’t philosophically interesting; it’s just an excuse for a self-congratulatory smirk” (1996).

Strongly imbued by Baudrillard’s (2001) and Bauman’s (2010) views on the postmodern condition, the nihilistic critical trend has seen Cooper’s violent *ars erotica* as a way to short-circuit the possibility of obtaining sound knowledge in contemporary life. The liquidity and the liking for simulacra, which these two philosophers, respectively, have seen in postmillennial onto-epistemological models is also to be found in Cooper’s literary breath. Leora Lev, for instance, situates the question of authenticity at the core of Cooperian ethos. For her, the American author’s novels thrive on “the paradoxes inherent in attempting to apprehend and aesthetically represent an existential and sexual extremity that are inexpressible, not only beyond language but beyond the understanding of the self that experiences them” (2006: 200). Neither Cooper’s language nor his view on sex are able to produce stable contents since every attempt at truth through language or sex proves to be a failure, “a powerful simulacrum that has the power to bind not only projective desires, but people” (Viegner 2008: 142).

In a similar vein, Barker (2008: 53) and Patoine (2008: 160) demonstrate that in the George Miles cycle Cooperian language functions to trick readers, since Cooper’s liking for unreliable narrators makes the reader doubt their very perception of the limits between fiction and reality within the piece of writing itself. As Aaron points out, another preferred mechanism which Cooper stages to trick the reader is the presence of gaps in the narrative. Normally in the form of ellipses or blank lines, they invite the readers to participate in the fiction, “to enter the scenarios and acknowledge/own his or her desires” (2004: 240).

Sex turns out to be equally futile in terms of producing truth —Paul Hegarty asserts— when he writes, “Knowledge, like sex, becomes a means to a greater (or more accurately,

lesser) end— the dissipation of knowledge through an almost exact copy of the search for knowledge”. In this view there is nothing truthful about sex. Whether directed at disarticulating true knowledge or true sex, in Cooper’s literature the copy usurps the place of the real eroticism which is left with no other choice but to reveal itself as ‘knowledge that is lost’: only that, if not less” (2008: 182).

Closely related to Hegarty’s approach but in specifically American cultural terms, other of Cooper’s commentators have interpreted his acutely nihilistic outlook on erotic desire as coming from his role as the main chronicler of the Blank Generation, late 20<sup>th</sup> century post-punk bourgeois preppy boys, trapped between consumerism and nihilism, with no morals or values other than aesthetic gestures (Young 1992: 1-20). They get away with it, with life, wading through drugs, extremely expensive commodities, and above-all wild sex. They are purposeless, defenceless human beings whose main goals, as Cooper himself portrays them in ‘The Blank Generation’, are “You see yourself dead. / You scream yourself hoarse” (1995: 78).

There are not in the Blank Generation any messages or political statements. Maybe, some denunciation: “These authors have found themselves right up against the dizzying excesses of consumer society . . . : inner city decay, extravagant commodity fetishism, sexual and narcotic extremes, information overloads, AIDS, and always ‘the pressure, the pressure’” (Young 2006: 64). Neither are there personal declarations nor artistic slogans. There is no insistence upon anything: “If Georges Bataille had been stranded in Disneyland, he might have written like Dennis Cooper” (Young 2000) or “Dennis Cooper is reciting Aeschylus with a mouthful of bubble-gum” (Edmund White, qtd. in Young 2000). The relationship that White and Young’s comments set between the pop quality inherent in bubblegum or Disneyland and the big themes of the human condition explored by Greek tragedy or Bataille puts forward an understanding of Cooperian violence as an aimless force. Pop’s blank affect reduces the macabre acts portrayed in Cooper’s literature to an aesthetic caprice, sheer nihilistic bubble-gum.

But not everything leads to nihilism in the critical perception of Cooperian erotic violence. Some critics have attached to it constructive meaning. For instance, Young asserts that Cooper’s runaway liking for violence attempts to implement an ethics of attention, that is, it works as an ironic device so as to prevent the reader from tuning in to his murderous plots (2008: 48-49). On presenting Cooper as some kind of anti-violence campaigner, Young seems to be contradicting a crucial aspect of Cooper’s ont-epistemological ethos: his non-denominationalism, that is, his lack of interest in moral causes. Cooper himself acknowledges this when, in an interview, he states that “I am not into collective identity at all. It just doesn’t interest me at all” (Nicolini 1993). In fact, his effort to insulate his fiction from any external concern or cause seems to serve to claim the right to sexual perversion which can just be obtained if one walks away from traditions and lobbies. As he himself asserts, “you need freedom from the political community to protect your individual and ever coveted perversions of mind and body” (Nicolini 1993).

Paul Hegarty puts forward another productive reading in which Cooperian sexual violence is understood as a mechanism to denounce the fossilisation of sexual practices to just those permitted in “the charmed circle of sexualities”, to borrow Gayle Rubin’s words (1994: 13): heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla. For Hegarty, in Cooperian eroticism “[i]t is the attempt at overcoming that counts, even if . . . your transgressing does not culminate in freedom from all established reactions and patterns of thinking” (2008: 183). From this viewpoint, Cooper’s portrayal of non-normative sexualities could be seen to aim to block the traditional, to interrupt the normalisation of only certain forms of sexualities —those sanctioned by the tradition— to the detriment of others.

Also understanding Cooper’s prescriptive sexual rhetorics as a vehicle to oppose social conventions about sexuality, but this time along psychoanalytical lines, Earl Jackson Jr. suggests that the corporeal immediacy brought about by Cooper’s violent view of the male body seeks to disarticulate phallogentric onto-epistemologies. For Jackson, however, the melancholy permeating Cooper’s work is the price to pay for his nerve: “exploration and resignation” (2006: 163).

The argument I put forward does also conceive of violence as propitiatory for liberation from social conventions. And it also does so by drawing on psychoanalysis. But there is a difference with regard to Jackson’s view: in my analysis the destination of the liberation which erotic violence enacts is not resignation, but rather the Real, understood as the realm of endless metaphoricity. To relate the Real with violence, as I suggested at the beginning of this section, we must return again to Georges Bataille.

For this thinker, any eroticism aims to destroy the isolation that, outside the copula, characterises human beings in their everyday life. That is, Bataille understands sex as an urgent desire to remember or maybe perpetuate, if the sex is aimed at reproduction, a state of wholeness that the participants in the sexual intercourse once fleetingly experienced in the perfect fusion of ovule-spermatozoon. By putting eroticism into practice, we as humans desperately try to overcome our condition as isolated beings, to overcome our discontinuous reality, no matter if it is just for a very limited time. But the change from discontinuity to continuity underlying eroticism cannot happen, as Bataille points out, without violence. Eroticism is violence, and death *per se* in the sense that, whenever human beings enact it, we want to abandon the constituted forms given to us by life: eroticism encodes an urgent desire to leave behind a life of incompleteness (the life we have) in search for the continuity and the plenitude of being:

In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation . . . . The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being . . . . Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux in this way, only violence and the nameless disquiet bound up with it. We cannot imagine the transition from

one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity. (2012: 16-17)

However direct and fierce these words might sound, the intimation of death, the recovery of continuity, to which eroticism adheres, Bataille contends, involves the death of social conventions rather than actual death. That is, he considers sexual desire to trigger “a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (2012: 18).

In light of these words, Bataille seems to draw the same conclusion as Lacan did when he stated that the Symbolic is not the right place to live eroticism. Furthermore, for both authors, death or violence is the appropriate tool to facilitate this flight. Does this prove to be true in Cooper’s poetics as well? I feel it is best to let his poems speak for themselves: In ‘No Future’ (1995: 121), for instance, the ‘I’ voice after killing his lover —“Then I stabbed / her. It’s like / cutting a pie”—, daringly continues by saying, “So kill me for / it. What did / I know. I was / trying to what”. It seems clear that, in the end, erotic violence in Cooper’s poetics leads to “what”, to complete unknowability. ‘Being Aware’ provides further evidence of this. In the poem a fifteen-year-old teenager is telling his father that he allows old men who resemble the paternal figure to sleep with him for money. Why? Partly to take revenge on his father, who pays very little attention to him, but mainly because sometimes he manages to lose consciousness falling into a very pleasant state of ineffability —“before everything”, as the poem puts it:

Or, nights when I’m angry,  
if in a man’s arms moving  
slowly to the quietest music—  
his hands on my arms, in my  
hands, in the small of my back  
take me back before everything. (1995: 57)

Something similar happens in ‘No God’ where, while involved in casual sex, the two participants have as their sole objective to “move further away” into a state of numbness whose communication cannot even be attempted:

He’ll go  
with me, do what I do.  
Nothing else interests him this side  
of death. Like me he’s just  
moving further away . . .  
We touch in a black  
car, on a back road, until numb. (1995: 81)

No doubt, it is in “?” that the expression of ineffability related to sexual violence reaches its peak. The poem tries to capture the primitive feeling of sexual arousal that overcomes the speaker on contemplating the corpse of a young boy he has just killed. The nature of the hold the image has on him is so powerful and so difficult to express that all he can do is to leave it in a question mark:

now, he's as still as  
the past in its reaches, and  
your body is flushed, prick  
broiling. The corpse is the  
match tip which lit it, the  
formerly dangerous object,  
something played out (1995: 76-7)

Unknowability, then, seems to be the final destination of the study of eroticism through violence that Dennis Cooper undertakes in his poetics. But how to interpret this violence-unknowability pairing? Rather than directed against the other or seen as the intimation of either nihilism (Hegarty 2008: 175-86; Taylor 2006: 196) or the unconscious helplessness and passivity of postmodern mediatised societies (Elizabeth Young 1992: 258), Cooper's sexual violence is exerted with the aim of taking eroticism to a *tabula rasa*, to a stage prior to non-mediation which is synonymous with the Lacanian Real or with the Bataillon state of the continuity of being. Therefore, in Cooperian eroticism, violence and death manifest themselves as mechanisms aimed at blocking traditional stances on sexuality. They are intended to annihilate the Symbolic in favour of the ineffability of the Real as the privileged space for eroticism to happen. The going “numb”, “wherever”, “nothing”, “elsewhere”, “trying to what”, permeating Cooper's poems analysed here, seek to recover the endless metaphoricity inherent in the Real.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In contrast to the majority of critical commentary on Cooper, which associates sexual violence with nihilism, *The Dream Police* seems to be putting forward a very different, rather productive message: eroticism is not a source of legitimate knowledge but an uncontrollable energy prone to be expressed in myriad ways. And to move from one state to the other, to move from the Symbolic into the Real, the intimation of violence and death understood as the collapse of our social self, is necessary. Failing to do so involves paying a very high price: the impossibility of desire. In Lacan's words, “If I am enjoying myself a little too much, I begin to feel pain and I moderate my pleasures. The organism seems made to avoid too much *jouissance*. Probably we would all be as quiet as oysters if it were not for this curious organization which forces us to disrupt the barrier of pleasure or perhaps only makes us dream of forcing and disrupting this barrier” (1966). But disrupting the

Symbolic barrier is an act of extreme courage. Is there anyone here who dares? Clearly some human beings are braver than others. And Dennis Cooper, without doubt, is one of them.

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