

# Sussex Research

## Queer cryptograms, anarchist cyphers: decoding Dennis Cooper's *The marbled swarm*: a novel

Diarmuid Hester

### Publication date

22-09-2012

### Licence

This work is made available under the **Copyright not evaluated** licence and should only be used in accordance with that licence. For more information on the specific terms, consult the repository record for this item.

### Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Hester, D. (2012). *Queer cryptograms, anarchist cyphers: decoding Dennis Cooper's The marbled swarm: a novel* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23416412.v1>

### Published in

Studies in the Literary Imagination

### Link to external publisher version

<https://doi.org/10.1353/sli.2012.0012>

### Copyright and reuse:

This work was downloaded from Sussex Research Open (SRO). This document is made available in line with publisher policy and may differ from the published version. Please cite the published version where possible. Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. For more information on this work, SRO or to report an issue, you can contact the repository administrators at [sro@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:sro@sussex.ac.uk). Discover more of the University's research at <https://sussex.figshare.com/>

## Queer cryptograms, anarchist cyphers: decoding Dennis Cooper's *The marbled swarm*: a novel

Article (Unspecified)

Hester, Diarmuid (2012) Queer cryptograms, anarchist cyphers: decoding Dennis Cooper's *The marbled swarm*: a novel. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 45 (2). pp. 95-112. ISSN 0039-3819

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/53986/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Diarmuid Hester**

**QUEER CRYPTOGRAMS, ANARCHIST CYPHERS: DECODING  
DENNIS COOPER'S *THE MARBLED SWARM*: A NOVEL**

The celebrated and controversial American novelist, poet, playwright and blogger Dennis Cooper is most often identified with other so-called transgressive fiction writers that came to the attention of the academy in the mid-late 1990s. According to its advocates and critics, the primary concern of such writing, which included the work of other Grove Press authors such as Kathy Acker and Gary Indiana,<sup>1</sup> as well as Bret Easton Ellis and Lynne Tillman, was to propel writing towards the limits of acceptable moral and ethical behavior. Their respective treatments of sexuality, violence, and drug use (and often conjunctions of all three), it was proposed, comprised a violent and shameless assault on social convention (see Gardner). In an article coining the phrase “transgressive writing” in 1993, Michael Silverblatt aligned the emerging genre with the subversive corporeality of de Sade’s transgressive fiction *avant la lettre*: “Exploring the sexual frontiers implicit in Mapplethorpe’s photographs or Karen Finley’s performances, transgressive writing has violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body. Really, it’s the Marquis de Sade who officiates at the American orgy.” Though so-called transgressive fiction was not without its detractors, to aficionados it exposed the artificiality and hypocrisy of socially defined norms, subverted sexual and gender stereotypes, and, by so doing, prized open spaces for the articulation of alternative, non-normative modes of sexual experience (see Gardner 56; see Neeper). A brief article written by Cooper in 1992 entitled “Queercore” appears to substantiate such a position, in its enthusiastic endorsement of “a new brand of queer defiance ... where ‘queer’ defines not a specific sexuality, but the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear then shoot it back into the stupid world more distorted and amazing than it was before” (295).

However, while the transgressive writings of de Sade and Georges Bataille are no doubt important influences, it seems to me nonetheless unhelpful to confine Cooper’s work within the proscribed limits of the genre of transgressive fiction. Such a designation hardly palpates a modicum of the variety and richness of Cooper’s prose or the fiendish

complexity of his relentless literary experimentation. Neither does it take into account, moreover, the fact that Cooper's mobilization of transgressive strategies in his writing and his persistent concern with the limits of personal freedom in contemporary society, are in fact symptomatic of a more profound identification with anarchism. Thus, while relatively dismissive of the transgressive fiction label, he is openly and avowedly anarchist, readily acknowledging that "anarchism is extremely defined in how I live my daily life. I believe in the old anarchist dictum that as soon as you gain power, you must disperse it. Anarchism is a utopian notion, but as a system by which to think about the world and myself, I think it flawless" (Cooper and Stosuy 20). From his controversial series of novels called the George Miles cycle (*Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*) to his post-cycle work, which includes the award-winning cyber-noir *The Sluts*, Cooper's fiction has persistently sought to fashion forms of literary expression most appropriate to his experience of the world as an anarchist artist. Taken together, I would suggest, his novels constitute one of the most remarkable examples of sustained artistic engagement with the subject of anarchism in American letters. Embedded within each text, concealed beneath the smooth, atonal veneer of Cooper's celebrated "blank" prose and the bright hum of his ostensibly sensational subject matter, lie numerous imbricated critiques and dramas of anarchy shot through with subcultural expressions of dissident desire and encounters with contemporary conceptual art and avant-garde writing (Aaron 115). In what follows, I will consider just one example of Cooper's efforts, *The Marbled Swarm: A Novel*, which represents his most recent and extravagant effort to capture a number of such concerns within the confines of a single text. Here I will show that, by creating a text whose structure is hewn from secrecy and cloaked in codes, Cooper appears to draw upon modes of dissident expression found in queer and anarchist subcultures and, in doing so, effectively aligns his work with both.

## 1. DECODING *THE MARBLED SWARM*

*The Marbled Swarm* is a perplexing text that offers its reader the testimony of an arrogant, rich, twenty-something French guy who haltingly recounts, in baroque prose, a circuitous journey through a labyrinthine chateau in the French countryside to his flat in the Marais area of Paris. Along the way, the unnamed narrator persuades us that he is part of a small group of affluent Parisian cannibals, with whose help he murders his brother, a depressive teenager and Manga fanatic, by fucking him

violently then repeatedly rolling a heavy barrel over him. Hidden passageways behind false walls of French chateaus and mansions abound, and voyeurism is a recurring theme. I would argue, however, that these incidents represent only the most superficial layer of Cooper's text, and to mistake them for the most significant aspect is to look at things rather back to front. The main focus of the text, and the aspect that concerns me here, is the eponymous marbled swarm: the narrator's manner of speaking, which he inherits from his stepfather. This comprises a number of interlocking systems of speech derived, at least in the father's authoritative version, from a variety of different European languages and registers, "spoken at a taxing pace in trains of sticky sentences that round up thoughts as broadly as a vacuum. Ideally," we are told, "its tedium is counteracted by linguistic decorations with which the speaker can design the spiel to his requirements. The result, according to this mode's inventor is that one's speech becomes an entity as open-ended as the air it fills and yet as dangerous to travel as a cluttered, unlit room in which someone has hidden, say, a billion euros" (49). This kind of obscurity adheres to the narrator's descriptions of the marbled swarm which, the reader is led to infer, may have supernatural effects: it is hinted, for example, that the father's vast accumulated wealth has been one consequence of the marbled swarm's deployment (49).

However, the son's version, and the one that we are reading, the narrator admits, is a flawed imitation, involving different systems, badly integrated, which fail to produce the same manipulative effect. This version, he laments, is a bad cover version of an original classic: "my marbled swarm is more of an atonal, fussy bleat—somewhat marbled yet far too frozen tight and thinned by my loquaciousness to do the swarming it implies" (49). Nonetheless, this version is sufficiently marbled to produce the disconcerting effect of the novel itself, which, though initially part murder-mystery, part Sadean nightmare, increasingly comes to draw the reader's focus away from the pursuit of such sensationalist currents toward the crosshatched surface of the text itself. The reader's interpretive energies subtly evolve into investigative ones, their attention conducted toward deciphering the multitude of narrative threads (or, what Cooper calls "tunnels") which litter the plane of the text and whose intermingling, we realize, constitutes the plane itself (Chaplinsky and Cooper). The supremacy of ostensible plot (that of a cannibal's murderous travelogue) is challenged, woven into and around the others to produce an undulating textual fabric. Cooper suggests this in a recent interview with *The Paris Review*, claiming:

I thought about each element of the novel, whether it was a narrative thread or character or reference point or an ongoing motif or tone or rhythm. The idea was that they would always be there, but they would be emphasized or de-emphasized at different points, mixed into the foreground, middle ground, or background, being moved around constantly so the reader's attention would be directed all over the place. My idea was that it would give the writing a three-dimensional quality, as the reader is carried along by the musical surface of the novel, but he or she would also be chasing different story lines and recurring ideas as they waver and scamper about and hide inside the prose. (Cooper and Silverberg 197)

A brief look at one of the more densely plotted sequences of *The Marbled Swarm* may provide an idea of how this strategy works. The fifth part of the novel opens with the revelation that, unbeknownst to all including his lawyer, the narrator's recently deceased stepfather was in possession of a chateau in northern France. Attempting to find out more about the property and ascertain its value, the lawyer tells the narrator that he has found scant reference to it despite his extensive searches. He was, however, informed by the mayor of a nearby village that in the chateau's gardens there exists a mysterious and peculiar-looking playhouse designed to resemble something from a comic book. The account quickly segues into a description of the narrator's final meal with his father, who reveals his discovery, years earlier, of a network of hidden rooms and passages in their previous home which, he was told, were installed by a contemporary of de Sade. He then confides that his attraction to magic, rather than voyeurism motivated the construction of secret rooms and passageways in their new home, an old shoe-factory in central Paris. The rest of the section continues in this way: shifting from one narrative track to another, splicing sequences together, taking up themes discarded in previous sections, fraying narratives replaced by others, storylines intersecting at unexpected moments and escaping in surprising directions. However, embedded within these prominent narrative threads (the spooky chateau, magic, the culinary arts, and so on), are the vague features of still more plotlines. Passages in this section open onto fairy-tales (we are told that "the playhouse would huff and puff"), Disney motifs (a child is said to be "goofy"), comic books (the narrator refers to himself as "a kind of Robin who wasn't wedded to uncley Batman but rather hypnotized into an unwitting shadow of the Dark Knight"), and acting or performance ("[the narrator's] father's head ... starred the long face he had generally fastened to the world" [129,

131, 132, 133]). Such a sequence may not impress the reader who wishes to be informed of the ultimate fate of a particular character; however, the reader who learns to decode *The Marbled Swarm*'s simultaneously functioning plots, themes, and rhythms, and who can chase down its tones or chase its tones down the fictional tunnels Cooper constructs, will experience it rather differently.

This use of encryption that by turns signals and buries narrative strands in the throng of the marbled swarm is an essential feature of *The Marbled Swarm* (and its marbled swarm) and one that is explicitly and repeatedly noted by the novel's narrator. Reflecting upon the narrative's construction, for example, the narrator confides that: "Everything you've read thus far was more mischievous than you imagined.... you're advised that what you see around you—walls, if you're hallucinating, or certain facts, if you're my readers—are potentially encrypted—with passageways if you're chateau guests, or subtexts if you're with me" (60). In interviews, Cooper is also unambiguous about the use of various codes in order to create the text's mystifying effect: "It is a puzzle and it can be solved." He seductively explains, "There's [sic] many, many, many clues—everything there is kind of a clue. You can believe the narrator when he says, I have an emotional problem and I've been lying to you—if you want. But it is solvable" (Chaplinsky and Cooper). In the following sections I will argue that a consideration of *The Marbled Swarm*'s secret strategies of encryption allows the reader to make out not only the myriad concealed and visible passages that underlie its apparent tale of Gallic cannibalism; it also allows readers to perceive that underneath the work itself lies yet another grid of interlacing passages which lead out of Cooper's text and away from the twenty-first century. The most significant of these pertain to the oblique systems of communication utilized by sexually dissident subcultures in the twentieth century and, deeper still, the deception and duplicity employed in anarchist propaganda since at least the end of the nineteenth century.

## 2. ENCODING QUEER DESIRE 1930–1970

As his above remarks on "queercore" indicate, Cooper has rarely identified (or been identified) with what might be considered the mainstream of contemporary gay culture. Though his early poetry collection, *Idols*, and his first novel, *Safe*, were initially published by Felice Picanò's progressive gay publishing company, Seahorse Press, Cooper's work expresses a pervasive skepticism of such identity-based endeavors: his work persistently eschews the reification of homosexual desire and the adoption of norma-

tive taxonomies of sexual identity (see Picano 108–11). Rather than present his readers with affirmative representations of gay relationality, therefore, he instead confronts and trespasses on the bounds of normative registers of sexuality (gay and straight), offering often unsettlingly objective accounts of marginal, illicit, and socially reprehensible forms of sexual desire. His early novel *Closer*, for instance, was repeatedly rejected by major publishing houses because his impressionistic portrait of queer male adolescence failed to conform to conventional gay stereotypes (Cooper, Letter). Even more unsettlingly, following the publication of *Frisk* in 1991, Cooper received a death threat from a gay direct action group for what was perceived as that novel's perpetuation of murderous homosexual stereotypes. Cooper's skeptical detachment from the normative nomenclature of sexual identity is sustained by the narrator of *The Marbled Swarm* as he nonchalantly defers responsibility for the designation of his sexual orientation to the reader in statements such as: "were I gay and not the creep to whom you'll turn the other cheek soon enough"; "were I even half as gay as you imagine"; "were I gay or, if you insist, entirely gay I would have . . . well you tell me. I'm not gay enough to know" (5, 7, 46, ellipsis in original). Nonetheless, despite this continued suspicion of identity politics, and his reputation as a "literary outlaw," I contend that Cooper does affirm, if subtly and provisionally, his participation in a tradition of sexually dissident expression: the techniques of encryption and encoding deployed in *The Marbled Swarm*, as I will show, evoke strategies of covert communication and oblique expression utilized by queer subcultures since at least the beginning of the twentieth century (Bret Easton Ellis qtd. in Young 52). The two forms I would like to consider here are Sapphic modernist *romans à clef*, occasionally employed by writers like H. D., Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes, and the secret language of polari, which circulated most widely within British queer communities in the forties and fifties.<sup>2</sup>

While the origin of the *roman à clef* (a novel in which biographical detail is—often barely—concealed beneath anodyne prose) dates from seventeenth-century France, its function as a satirical or parodic mode of address, which speaks uncomfortable truths to power from behind a fictional screen, has assured its continued usage to the present day (*Primary Colors*, Roberto Bolaño's 2666, and Robert Harris's *The Ghost*, for instance, are all popular works which utilize *roman à clef* techniques). For early-twentieth-century women novelists who wished to publish narratives featuring same-sex desire, however, the *roman à clef* also offered a unique opportunity to have their work buoyed up by the current of mainstream publishing. American (and some English) writers of so-called Sapphic



*romans à clef* used the form in order to express personal lusts and private trysts in ways that succeeded in circumventing the panoptic gaze of anti-obscenity legislation.<sup>3</sup> As Sashi Nair's recent study asserts,

In the period between the world wars, a number of female modernist authors mobilized a particular version of the *roman à clef* genre in order to represent a desire that was seemingly unspeakable, strategically deploying references to personal experience as a means to simultaneously reveal and encrypt same-sex emotional and physical attachments. (4)

One such practitioner of the Sapphic *roman à clef* between the wars was the American writer Barnes, whose work, as Thomas Heise points out, is consistently marked by a preoccupation with secrecy and writing's potential to secrete that which is most cherished. Her early journalism, he contends, demonstrates that "for Barnes, authentic queer life was contingent upon being submerged, unknowable and away from the prying eyes of New York.... Ultimately the [queer] underworld—hidden below the basements of a depraved neighborhood—remained concealed within her prose as a means of staving off the erosion of local detail in the community she seeks to shield" (100). Her novel *Nightwood* extends this project, conducting an interest in secrecy and concealment though the form of the *roman à clef*.

*Nightwood* is ostensibly an oneiric travelogue through the streets of pre-Haussmann Paris, stippled with a panoply of eccentric characters, most notably Doctor Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, melancholic Nora Flood and her promiscuous, alcoholic lover, Robin Vote. In his preface to the text, T. S. Eliot attempts to divert its readers' attention from a lurid fascination with the weirdoes who populate *Nightwood*'s passages toward an appreciation of its lyricism and the universality of its accomplishment: to mistake its representation of "the human misery and bondage which is universal" for a "horrid sideshow of freaks," he contends, is "to miss the point" (xxi). However, beneath these interpretive layers or functions (one anticipated and scorned by Eliot, and one he construes and endorses), there exists yet another, couched within the form of the *roman à clef*, the point of which is rather missed by Eliot (whether deliberately or accidentally is unclear): *Nightwood* also describes, in detail but at a safe remove, the sorrow and suffering attendant to Barnes's failed homosexual relationship with her lover Thelma Wood. When Nora dejectedly reflects upon her fraught relationship with Robin, therefore, Barnes's

prose broadcasts on at least two different frequencies, concealing within a fictional register an autobiographical account discernible only to herself, Wood, and the members of their circle:

Looking at every couple as they passed, into every carriage and car, up to the lighted windows of the houses, trying to discover not Robin any longer, but traces of Robin, influences in her life (and those which were yet to be betrayed), Nora watched every moving figure for some gesture that might turn up in the movements made by Robin. (55)

*Nightwood's* "layered, simultaneous address to public, counterpublic and coterie audiences," which scrambles the salient features of Barnes's relationship with Wood and renders them decipherable only to a small clique of queer subcultural writers, I would argue, telegraphs the later use of polari by gay subcultures after World War II (Nair 4).

Immortalized in British singer Morrissey's 1990 single "Piccadilly Palare,"<sup>4</sup> parlyaree, parlare, or polari, despite its heterogeneous origins in the murky depths of Britain's urban spaces, is now largely synonymous with the gay subcultures of post-WWII London and Manchester: "put simply, [it was] a secret language mainly used by gay men and lesbians in London and other UK cities with an established gay subculture, in the first 70 or so years of the twentieth century" (Baker 1). Akin to other types of mid-century slang in its use of metonymy ("handbag," for example, usually denotes money) and anagrams ("ecaf," often shortened to "eek," is a face), polari may be considered as less a discrete language than a composite lingo comprising a singular admixture of linguistic ingredients and registers. In terms reminiscent of those we have seen used by the narrator of *The Marbled Swarm* to describe his father's speech, Matt Houlbrook explains:

Derived from a mixture of lingua franca, Italian, Romany, and backslang originally associated with eighteenth-century theatrical troupes, by the twentieth-century polari was part of that amorphous "underworld" slang current amongst dockside laborers, seamen, prostitutes and tramps. By the 1920s it had clearly entered common usage within queer urban life. (152)

The most significant feature of polari, and one of the primary reasons for its emergence within certain urban gay communities in Britain, was

its facilitation of secrecy. Faced with the threat of arrest and prosecution until the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967, “anti-languages” and asignifying systems such as polari enabled the gay subcultures of cities like London to continue to circulate within, around, and beneath the prevailing language of society at large (Baker 15). Identifying gay men with other ostracized, often criminalized groups at the time, Leslie Cox and Richard Fay affirm the importance of this aspect of polari’s genesis and deployment, claiming that “just as some marginalised groups developed secret codes, such as criminals’ cant or tinkers’ shelta, so Gay men developed Polari. These codes developed from the need to express common identity, for self-protection, and for secrecy” (107). Houlebrook similarly asserts that, “if ... polari was a linguistic practice through which men enacted their difference, it was simultaneously a tactic of concealment, evasion and invisibility.... Whatever their degree of fluency, these ‘special words’ allowed men to hide their character and conversation from all but those in the know” (152). In the following passage, evocative of the vocabulary and cadence of the polari which was used in London, for example, discernible English terms and phrasing give way to code-encrusted arabesques designed to foil the intrusion of a mainstream audience and evade its penetrating glare, while remaining ajar for the initiated inhabitants of the queer underworld.

As feely homies [young men], when we launched ourselves on the gay scene, Polari was all the rage. We would zhoosh [fix] our riahs [hair], powder our eeks [faces], climb into our bona [nice] new drag [clothes], don our batts [shoes] and troll off [cruise] to some bona bijou [nice, small] bar. In the bar, we would stand around parlyaring [chatting] with our sisters [gay acquaintances], varda [look at] the bona cartes [nice genitals] on the butch homie [masculine male] ajax [nearby] who, if we fluttered our ogleriahs [eyelashes], might just troll over [wander over] to offer a light. (Burton 23)

The distribution of polari textures in the conversations of some gay men at this time, the surfacing of encoded terms (riah, ajax, bona drag) within their speech, evokes the alternately visible and invisible circulation of gay subcultures within the heteronormative terrain of British urban spaces in the 1940s and 1950s.

What I find in *The Marbled Swarm*, in its emphatic use of encryption and its fixation upon concealment, is perhaps a continued adherence by Cooper to the clandestine practices laid down by preceding forms of queer

subcultural communication. Like the polari-peppered speech of queer Londoners, the narrator's prose is littered with *key* words and phrases which signal the surfacing of a particular narrative strand which the reader may or may not recognize: the opening, "One day..." or the invocation of a "trail of breadcrumbs" indicates the proximity of a fairytale thread, while the appearance of a carousel or a roller coaster will denote the arching of the story towards Disney/Disneyland (84, 91, 124). The unexpected loops and folds of the narrator's language, furthermore, bend the temporal trajectory and envelop a *something* that remains undisclosed (at least until the final sections of the novel). Lines typically corkscrew through repeated future unreal conditional formulations without ever divulging their ultimate destinations:

If vampire movies hadn't been the franchise of that year, and were wastrel fashion models and feeble-looking bands not so incredibly in vogue, and if a wary-eyed pallor were not, as a consequence, the diamond in the rough of facial options, my sad state might have turned the single-minded nerds and fops moseying around me into Good Samaritans. (79)

Elsewhere, proleptical remarks that might designate a relatively clear locus are quickly clouded by another formulation like the one above. In the following passage, will the boy die at the hands of the narrator? Yes or no?

Sure enough, and let me add that this assessment stood beyond his death, there was literally nothing worth archiving in the boy's head.

It's true that until a year or two prior to that afternoon, I might have set myself the less ambitious goal of having some variety of sex with him, then, severely disappointed, as I've always been about sex, and worrying about the act's illegality, murdered him after a day or two or week of careful planning. (9)

In these examples Cooper furtively affirms a conditional affiliation with oppressed constituents of sexually dissident communities, which peopled the secret spaces of twentieth-century history, conversation and writing. However, beneath this affirmation there persists another, still more firmly embedded tradition to which Cooper's use of encryption in *The Marbled Swarm* may be seen to allude: a seditious strand of anarchist doublespeak that emerged in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

### 3. ANARCHIST ARTIFICE FROM 1901

The United States in the mid-to-late 1800s experienced a golden age of anarchist propaganda which saw the publication of numerous avowedly anarchist tracts, pamphlets and newspapers, the majority of which largely denounced anarchist terrorism and concerned themselves more with “propaganda of the word” than “propaganda of the deed.” These included reformer Josiah Warren’s *The Peaceful Revolutionist* (1833–48), Ezra Heywood’s anarchist and free love periodical *The Word* (1872–93), Lysander Spooner’s series of pamphlets targeting the United States legislature, *No Treason* (1867–70), and Benjamin Tucker’s individualist anarchist newspaper *Liberty* (1881–1908). In often incendiary terms, these publications outlined positions overtly critical of the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses, excoriating its domination of an impoverished underclass, its immunity from prosecution, its instantiation of coercive forms of social organization, and its intrusion into the moral lives of individuals. This profusion of nineteenth-century anarchist propaganda even survived the sensationalist, anti-anarchist attitude that prevailed in some quarters following the Haymarket bombing of 1886, which saw the murder of police officers by anarchist radicals and the subsequent execution of anarchist sympathizers in Chicago. Despite the consternation provoked by Chicago law enforcement in its aftermath,<sup>5</sup> Haymarket induced neither widespread fear of anarchist activity, nor consequent license to repress anarchism in all its forms:

During the 1890s the United States near immunity to anarchist violence seemed natural to most Americans, who believed ... that, given the freedom and liberty provided by American laws and institutions, anarchists, whether of native or foreign origin, had no reason to attack public officials ... because anarchists were “at least allowed the right of conducting a peaceful propaganda” in the United States, they hoped for the President’s “protection and preservation,” rather than his murder. (Jensen 17)

However, with the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, public opinion turned viciously upon anarchist groups, their supporters, and their presses. Prominent anarchists across the US were rounded up, abused, and interned as suspected collaborators; anarchist settlements in the textile factory town of Paterson, NJ, were raided and burned, and mobs attacked the offices of numerous anarchist

mouthpieces (Jensen 18; Goldstein 67). This initial convulsion was sustained by the legislature with the implementation of a plethora of state and federal laws between 1902 and 1903, aimed at exposing and punishing anarchist dissent, or what was adjudged to be criminal anarchy, which envisaged the overthrow of the state. Crucially, these laws also targeted the publication and dissemination of ideas considered to be supportive of criminal anarchy: the 1902 amendment to New York State's penal code, for instance, defines an advocate of anarchy as any person who "prints, publishes, edits, issues or knowingly circulates, sells, distributes or publicly displays any book, paper, document, or written or printed matter in any form, containing or advocating, advising or teaching the doctrine that organized government should be overthrown by violence, force or any unlawful means" (Chap. 371). President Theodore Roosevelt's public criticism of anarchist activities in 1908, in the hyperbole of its denunciation and its advocacy of repression by any means necessary, expressed a sentiment which had, by that stage, become characteristic of many Americans' feelings toward anarchism:

When compared with the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind, and this is a deeper degree of criminality than any other. No immigrant is allowed to come to our shores if he is an anarchist; and no paper published here or abroad should be permitted circulation in this country if it propagates anarchistic opinions. (13)

Such action and the agitation of Roosevelt, according to Robert Goldstein, "left behind a lasting and dangerous legacy in the passage of federal and state laws that for the first time since the Alien and Sedition laws [in 1798] penalized persons solely on the basis of opinions, affiliations and advocacy, rather than on the commission of what would normally be considered a crime" (67). Indeed, the prevailing anti-anarchist inclination at this time contributed to the formation of the State Department's Bureau of Investigation, precursor of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the first American intelligence network that could track and curb the seditious activities of anarchist groups in the US (Jensen 32).

As a result of such widespread control and surveillance and in order to evade it, anarchist groups and, in particular, anarchist literature in the US largely went to ground. For the latter this meant excising the word itself from anarchist propaganda, obliquely offering anarchist strategies for the

modification of the status quo and burying the terminology of its political ideas deep beneath a veneer of euphemistic language. As anarchist historian James J. Martin remarks, this concealment of anarchist sedition was so extensive that an accurate survey of American anarchism at this time is impeded by “the constant use of less highly-charged words [in] anarchist propaganda”; he writes that during this period, “anarchist literature and sentiments [are] disguised as something else” (1). Even the well-known, outspoken anarchist Emma Goldman from 1901 to 1906 took to expressing her anarchist convictions only under the pseudonym “E. G. Smith” (Ferguson 62 n. 93).

This shift from the explicit to the implicit, while permitting anarchism to persist undetected and unprosecuted also rendered its reality contiguous with the perception of anarchism in the contemporary public imagination as an ever-present but invisible threat. This perception was exacerbated by fictional depictions of anarchy which appeared at this time, most notably *The Secret Agent* and *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, Joseph Conrad and G. K. Chesterton’s respective forays into the dim-lit and sinister worlds of espionage and anarchist terrorism at the turn of the century. Conrad’s tale pursues his corpulent protagonist and agent provocateur Adolf Verloc (codename Δ) down London’s dank streets and shadowy back-alleys as he attends secret meetings with deranged anarchists and instigates a Greenwich bomb plot which will allow the authorities to arrest and prosecute such traitors to the Crown. Chesterton’s more metaphysical or surreal work, meanwhile, amplifies to an almost comical degree certain elements of Conrad’s text, bestowing codenames upon each central character (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so on) and implicating all of them in a conspiracy devised by anarchist seditionists, who are ultimately unveiled as police officers.

While these novels are antipathetic to the political ideology of anarchism and though their British locale differs from the American context I have been discussing, their clandestine worlds of passwords and codenames muttered in dingy alleyways that travel beneath the unsuspecting façade of contemporary society, are not entirely inaccurate representations of an American anarchist underground in the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Neither, to be sure, are they unfaithful depictions of the kind of fictional techniques which Dennis Cooper utilizes in *The Marbled Swarm*, written more than a century afterward. The passwords and passageways which distinguish the question of anarchism for Conrad and Chesterton become central features of fictional composition for Cooper: what they merely represent themati-

cally as characterization and plot, he etches into the fundamentals of the formal constitution of his text.

While Cooper is often thought of as a queer writer (in both his treatment of homosexual subjects and, perhaps, the invariable strangeness of this treatment), he is rarely considered an anarchist writer, despite his repeated affirmation of anarchism and anarchist principles in numerous discussions of his work.<sup>7</sup> In an early interview with fellow new narrativist Robert Glück, he declares, "I think my novels are entirely informed by anarchism on the levels of form, style, approach and philosophy" (qtd. in Glück 254). He reaffirms and elaborates upon this commitment in a recent interview, claiming that

My own politics, which I identify as anarchist, are fundamental to how I make work, and I don't think I could have written my novels without employing anarchism's structuring principles and philosophy on the level of aesthetics in a thorough way.... in general, approaching, say, the writing of a novel with an anarchist viewpoint makes the idea of creating a revolution within that form not just an ultimate narrative goal but an obligatory and organic first step. (Higgs and Cooper)

One of the reasons that Cooper's work is not readily identified as the product of an anarchist artist is, perhaps, the orientation of his thought rather more toward form than content. Unlike previous avowedly anarchist writers such as Tolstoy (or those who wrote about anarchists such as Conrad or Chesterton), who were satisfied to merely represent anarchist ideas thematically, without having anarchist ideology intrude upon the form of fictional construction, Cooper admits anarchist ideas into the style and structure of his writing. The George Miles cycle of novels, for instance, virulently critiques intrusive forms of domination and control through the manifest tension between the voices of his unruly adolescent protagonists, and the arbitrary, immobile structural laws to which they are bound and which they reluctantly enunciate. What might be called structural or formal anarchy, in this sense, constitutes the arrangement of Cooper's work: not an affirmation of the inchoate, or some kind of haphazard or chaotic organization directed against the constraints of form, but rather the mobilization of formal arrangements in order to express some kind of anarchist outlook. The puzzling structure of *The Marbled Swarm*, therefore, the encryption of its structure which harkens toward the deceptive ploys deployed by American anarchists in the late-nineteenth



and early-twentieth centuries, offers another instance of Cooper's formal engagement with the history of anarchism.

## CONCLUSION

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault famously charts the evolution of the disciplinary regime, outlining the principal features of a transition from a sovereign society, in which discipline was characterized by confinement and seclusion, to a contemporary disciplinary society, remarkable for the primacy of visibility and observation, "from a schema of exceptional discipline to one of a generalized surveillance" (207). A disciplinary society, according to Foucault, is one that is derived from the permanent visibility of the social subject and its observation, real or imagined; which requires that its persons be legible at all times to the panoptic gaze of the disciplinary apparatus. Under these conditions, the constant exposure of the subject to the possibility of surveillance results in an internalization and concomitant proliferation of the machinery of discipline: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202–03). Constant visibility effectively induces the subjects to forever unveil themselves and become the means of their own domination: "on the whole, therefore, one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social 'quarantine' to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism'" (216).

Foucault's provocative analysis of the disciplinary society, and in particular this latter emphasis on the principle of visibility, offers an especially useful prism by which to view certain features of life in the twenty-first century and, in turn, the radicality of Cooper's anarchist gesture in *The Marbled Swarm*. From a Foucauldian perspective, ours is a context determined by the absolute primacy of the visible: thus, individuals willingly unfold the most private pleats of consciousness before the databank of social media. Governments similarly demand absolute transparency of the self in order to evince one's innocence until proven otherwise. Even dissent, in order to be considered as such, must present itself in terms which are immediately legible to the status quo: recent responses to quasi-anarchist collectives such as Occupy Wall Street, for example, speak of the need for "positive objectives," "to be for something specific and not just against something" (Bill Clinton qtd. in Weinger). Within

this panoptic landscape, therefore, a subject's commitment to secrecy and concealment—effective renunciations of the *sine qua non* of such a social context—is imbued with a radical significance. Strategies of concealment such as those employed by anarchist seditionists at the end of the nineteenth century, or queer dissenters in their turn in the twentieth century, or those who the queer anarchist Cooper utilizes to structure the text of *The Marbled Swarm*, therefore, offer possible alternatives to the ceaseless exposure and consequent subjugation which characterizes modern disciplinary society and its regulation of resistance.

University of Sussex

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Grove was very much aware of the promotional potential of the transgressive tag having published and publicized "obscene literature" such as William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in the 1960s under the management of Barney Rosset (Rosset 6; see also O'Connor and Ortenberg's *Obscene*).

<sup>2</sup> The following study might have been bookended by a consideration of the use of green carnations, a nod to Oscar Wilde which identified its wearer as homosexual, and flagging or handkerchief codes, which circulated particularly within the gay BDSM subculture in the 1980s and denoted its bearer's preferred sexual practice (see Bartlett 52; see Gambetta 166–68).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to subversively sequestering their non-normative desires in a dominant conservative mode, some of these writers also used the *roman à clef* to critique clinical discourses such as Havelock Ellis's sexological studies and Freudian psychoanalysis, whose theories of sexual pathology aimed at making explicit and visible the features and origins of same-sex desire. Barnes's first *roman à clef*, *The Ladies Almanac*, for example, in its extensive enumeration of the "tells" or symptoms of same-sex desire, accentuates the expository impulse of sexology to humorous effect, "mak[ing] a mockery of sexological attempts to attribute desire to a congenital disorder or medical condition" (Nair 81).

<sup>4</sup> The refrain of Morrissey's "Piccadilly Palare":

The Piccadilly palare  
was just silly slang  
between me and the boys in my gang  
"so bona to vada, oh you  
your lovely eek and your lovely riah"  
.....  
exchanging palare  
you wouldn't understand  
good sons like you  
never do.

Morrissey, whom a High Court judge once pronounced "devious, truculent and unreliable," is himself no stranger to sexual double-speak ("Morrissey").

<sup>5</sup> Investigation of the bombing fell to Captain Michael J. Schaack who, with the assistance of the infamous Pinkerton Detective Agency, kept Chicago and its populace “writhed in fear” and brought any kind of anarchist activity in the city to its knees (Donner 8).

<sup>6</sup> Linnie Blake’s discussion of Emma Goldman’s activity in 1901 sees Goldman “retreating to the burrow, the lair, she went underground, becoming Miss E. G. Smith and setting to work on the tenements of the Lower East Side” (186).

<sup>7</sup> Yet Matthew Stadler, one of the very few critics to remark upon this feature of Cooper’s work, rightly pronounces, “Cooper is an anarchist. He is terminally suspicious of power. But he lives (and we live) in a world so deeply matrixed by tropes of struggle and hierarchy that even something as simple as a dinner conversation sinks down the toilet of power and struggle” (238).

## WORKS CITED

- Aaron, Michele. “(Fill-in-the) Blank Fiction: Dennis Cooper’s Cinematics and the Complicitous Reader.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 27. 3 (2004): 115–27. Print.
- Baker, Paul. *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. London: Faber & Faber, 2007. Print.
- Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988. Print.
- Blake, Linnie. “A Jew, a Red, a Whore, a Bomber: Becoming Emma Goldman, Rhizomatic Individual.” *Angelaki* 2.3 (1997): 179–90. Print.
- Burton, Peter. “The Gentle Art of Confounding Naffs: Some Notes on Polari.” *Gay News* 120 (1977): 23. Print.
- Chap. 371. *Laws of the State of New York*. Albany: J. B. Lyon, 1902. 958–60. Web. 18 June 2012.
- Chaplin, Joshua, and Dennis Cooper. “Solving The Puzzle of Sex and Violence With Dennis Cooper.” *Lit Reactor* 3 (Nov. 2011). Web. 23 June 2012.
- Chesterton, G. K. *The Man Who Was Thursday*. McLean, VA: IndyPublish, 2002. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. Champaign: Project Gutenberg, 1999. Web. 25 June 2012.
- Cooper, Dennis. *Closer*. New York: Grove, 1989. Print.
- . *Frisk*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991. Print.
- . *Guide*. New York: Grove, 1997. Print.
- . Letter to Between C&D. 30 Jan. 1987. MS. Between C & D Papers. MSS 85. Fales Lib. New York U Libs., New York.
- . *The Marbled Swarm: A Novel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011. Print.
- . *Period*. New York: Grove, 2000. Print.
- . “Queercore.” *The Material Queer: a LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Donald Morton. Boulder: Westview, 1996. 292–96. Print.
- . *Safe*. New York: Sea Horse, 1984. Print.
- . *Try*. New York: Grove, 1994. Print.
- Cooper, Dennis, and Ira Silverberg. “The Art of Fiction No. 213: Dennis Cooper.” *The Paris Review* 198 (Fall 2011): 172–98. Print.
- Cox, Leslie J., and Richard J. Fay. “Gayspeak, the Linguistic Fringe: Bona Polari, Camp, Queerspeak and Beyond.” *The Margins of the City*. Ed. S. Whittle. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994. 103–27. Web. 23 June 2012.
- Donner, Frank. “Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression.” *Radical History Review* 48 (1990): 5–31. Print.

## Queer Cryptograms, Anarchist Cyphers: Decoding Cooper's Marbled Swarm

- Eliot, T. S. "Preface to *Nightwood* (1936)." *Nightwood*. London: Faber & Faber, 2007. xvii–xxvii. Print.
- Ferguson, Kathy E. *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Gambetta, Diego. *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.
- Gardner, James. "Transgressive Fiction." *National Review* (17 June 1996): 54–56. Print.
- Glück, Robert. "Dennis Cooper (interview)." *Enter at Your Own Risk: The Dangerous Art of Dennis Cooper*. Ed. Leora Lev. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006. 241–59. Print.
- Goldstein, Robert Justin. *Political Repression in Modern America from 1870 to the Present*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978. Print.
- Heise, Thomas. *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-century American Literature and Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2011. Print.
- Higgs, Christopher, and Dennis Cooper. "What Is Experimental Literature: Five Questions for Dennis Cooper." *HTML Giant*. 29 June 2011. Web. 21 June 2012.
- Houlbrook, Matt. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.
- Jensen, Richard. "The United States, International Policing and the War Against Anarchist Terrorism, 1900–1914." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13.1 (2001): 15–46. Print.
- Martin, James Joseph. *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827–1908*. New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1957. Print.
- Morrissey. "Piccadilly Palare." *Bona Drag*. By Morrissey and Kevin Armstrong. HMV, 1990. LP, CD, cassette.
- "Morrissey Misery over Court Verdict." *BBC* 6 Nov. 1998. Web. 23 June 2012.
- Nair, Sashi. *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism: Reading "Romans à clef" Between the Wars*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Neeper, Layne. "On Teaching Transgressive Literature." *CEA Forum* 37.2 (2008): n. pag. Print.
- Obscene*. Dir. Daniel O'Connor and Neil Ortenberg. Perf. Amiri Baraka, Lenny Bruce, William S. Burroughs. Double O, 2009. Film.
- Picano, Felice. *Art and Sex in Greenwich Village: Gay Literary Life after Stonewall*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007. Print.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. "Message to Both Houses of Congress." *Washington Evening Star* 9 Apr. 1908: 13. Print.
- Rosset, Barney. "Barney Rosset Interviews Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, WNET Radio (1959)." *The Grove Press Reader: 1951–2001*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove, 2001: 3–9. Print.
- Silverblatt, Michael. "SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression." *Los Angeles Times*. 1 Aug. 1993. Web. 2 June 2012.
- Stadler, Matthew. "An Exacting Laxness." *Enter at Your Own Risk: The Dangerous Art of Dennis Cooper*. Ed. Leora Lev. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006. 238–40. Print.
- Stosuy, Brandon, with Dennis Cooper. "Combustible Romanticism: Interview with DC by Brandon Stosuy." 2001. MS. Dennis Cooper papers. MSS 85. Fales Lib. New York U Libs., New York.
- Weinger, Mackenzie. "Bill Clinton: Occupy Wall Street Must Get Specific." *POLITICO*. 13 Oct. 2011. Web. 26 Aug. 2012.
- Young, Elizabeth. "On the Buttocks." *New Statesman* (20 Nov. 2000): 52. Print.