

The “Slice”: Dennis Cooper’s Materiality of Fiction

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Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'*, 1960.

It was by no mistake that Lucio Fontana’s immortal canvas was presented as a surface slashed open, the tight-knit threads freed from their purpose, and the immateriality of the canvas undone. The *slice*, brought into full literal visibility in this piece, is harder to locate in a work of literature. Further, to examine something as visceral, and yet, surgical, as a slice and its intent in a work of art requires some careful investigation. Dennis Cooper’s novel *Period* inherits Fontana’s use of a slice and renders the work plastic as a piece of fiction and as a physical object, in such way that enforces its materiality *a priori*.¹ Drawing on the theories of Murray Krieger and Roland Barthes, I will attempt to show that the slice Cooper makes is not done within the text, to reveal deeper meaning, but to the textual object in order to physically demonstrate fictionality, as such.

Period is a novel that is hard to trace, in that, the text we read is not much more than a trace of a narrative. We follow two or three steps behind the writer who offers us “dark” scenes of even darker content. The sight of the reader is immediately problematized in this work (for example, the piece of quasi-installation art that is just a

¹ Cooper, Dennis. *Period*. New York: Grove, 2000.

house painted completely black or the recurring radio show slogan “We’re in the Darkness.”)² Cooper describes the book as “a maze or a house of mirrors, almost like a carnival fun house. Everything is a reflection of everything else and ultimately makes everything else disappear.”³ We might “look” at this artificial darkness or mirror-maze as Cooper’s return to physicality; he rejects the “ekphrastic hope” of illustration⁴, of the text as a window and forces the reader to exist inside the text physically, while not necessarily being allowed in completely. The climax of Cooper’s structural meaning-making is the slice that he cuts right through the physical center of the text. It cannot be an accident that on page 54 of 109 in the Grove Press paperback copy of “Period,” halfway down the page, the text reads “That line is straight out of Period and I’ve been dying to use it.”⁵ This line is flanked before and after by “cutting” or “slicing” language as it refers to a boy’s ass, so the full textual moment reads:

“So this is George in quotes,” Henry says. He lifts EгореG’s bangs, then rolls his eyes as I yank down those sweatpants.

“Tell me you don’t want to swipe him with a credit card,” I say. That line is straight out of *Period* and I’ve been dying to use it.

Henry slips a knife from some part in his leathers, and menaces EгореG’s ass, which isn’t exactly what Crane had in mind.

The slice is crudely suggested here in the language of description, but these lines take on a more potent arrangement when (if) the reader realizes that they are, in fact, reading, standing on, walking along the seam of the text itself. On both sides of this “cut” there exists the nervous and erotic energy anticipating the cut, the splitting of this boy EгореG’s buttcheeks; a palindrome, of sorts, is created, which is echoed by the larger triangular structure of the novel. The boy himself is not cut in this moment, but the boy as the novel, the body of the book itself is split. We might consider the materiality of the boy’s ass as an object. It already consists of two cheeks with a crack, and thus can be swiped with something flat like a credit card, it does not need to be sliced, so perhaps the text has always had this crack, an immanent slice between the meaty globes of reading: EгореG’s fetishized body becomes synonymous with the book.

This idea of the slice or “cut” is borrowed from Roland Barthes’ “The Pleasure of the Text.” It appears in the first few pages when he discusses the pleasure of reading Marquis de Sade, of which, incidentally, Cooper’s treatment of sex and violence is reminiscent:

²Cooper, 9; 55.

³Chua, Lawrence, “Interview with Dennis Cooper”, <http://icq.planetout.com/pno/entertainment/books/cooper.html>, Accessed: October 13 2005.

⁴Mitchell, W.J.T., “Ekphrasis and the Other,” *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp.151-181.

⁵Cooper, 54.

Sade: the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions): antipathetic codes...come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models. As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, *such redistribution is always achieved by cutting*. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed.⁶

The slice, as identified by Barthes, is a useful way of describing what Cooper does with this moment in *Period*. If the reader is unaware of the importance of page 54, halfway down, then they will read on in the traditional prose format⁷, which only appears at the very beginning, end, and exact center of the text (the first of Barthes' edges.) The second edge, "never anything but the site of its effect," is what is left after Cooper slices open the novel, not intending to reveal its literary entrails, but precisely to reveal nothing but his ability to surgically cut open his work as a body. The slice does not physically enter the narrative, which is to say it does not change the contents of the first half of the novel nor does it color the second half differently. It is only *there* in the "guilty reading," to borrow a term from Althusser⁸, of Cooper's writing *Period*.

As Barthes discusses the cut where a writer or reader takes their pleasure, Murray Krieger theorizes poetry in "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry" as simultaneously becoming poetic (achieving poetry-ness) and defining its own poetic:

...the ekphrastic dimension of literature reveals itself wherever the poem takes on the "still" elements of plastic form which we normally attribute to the spatial arts. In so doing the poem proclaims its own poetic its formal necessity, thus making more than just loosely metaphorical use of spatial language to describe—and thus—arrest its movements.⁹

⁶ Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. 6.

⁷ Here I am referring to the organization of the text into paragraphs, narrated in third person present tense, where quotations are linked to character's names. This is only one of the few different writing styles that are used in the text.

⁸ Althusser, Louis "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy," Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, London: Verso, 1997. 15.

⁹ Krieger, Murray. "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited," *The Play and Place of Criticism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967.105-128.107.

In ekphrastic poetry, the poem, by freezing its object with spatial language, renders itself plastic or motionless and the poem itself becomes the object of contemplation. As we saw earlier, EgoreG's ass is not just the fetish object in this "dark" scene at the center of the novel, but it is also the novel itself. The slice is precisely that moment where the novel is returned to materiality and stillness. And what could be more "stilling" to a reader than a simple notification that they are exactly halfway through the novel they are reading and holding in their hands, and for that thought to have zero pertinence to the narrative, the characters, its objects? Once the novel begins to constitute its own discourse of novelistic structure, the role of the reader is problematized: our manner of reading and our encounter with the text, is questioned.

Krieger's ekphrastic moment in poetry can be understood as something akin to "the place where the death of language is glimpsed" in Barthes. Cooper's slice, and, by extension, the novel, "proclaims its own poetic its formal necessity." What purpose or intent, then, does Cooper have in his performative slice? Are we, after this investigation, to understand that he is essentially a formalist, setting up the entire text to be effaced by a single slice that reveals its organizational conceit?

Slicing the novel has another purpose beyond self-conscious or hypocritical writing. In the final chapter of *Period*, the character Bob shoots himself in the head in the complete darkness of the black house he created: "Bob slipped a gun from his coat, and located his head. Back in town, his death made this noise like when any guy killed something out in the woods, so no one heard."¹⁰ In an interview with the Guardian, Cooper claims he "wanted to make a book that disappeared, that committed suicide,". This passage about Bob's suicide can now be read as the central thematic of the work, especially when we trace the novel's ontology as a "grave" for Cooper's close friend George Miles who shot himself in the head.¹¹ The novel forecloses its own reading—perhaps its own existence—by committing suicide, but it still exists and we are still reading it.

The novel closes with a paragraph where a small town is described in which certain passers-through might gaze on the buildings and inhabitants for a short "period" of time but will inevitably realize how unimportant they are and forget the experience completely. If we extend the slice, pull the two edges out to the beginning and end of the novel, the single line on page 54 becomes the void into which the entire novel is swallowed. Cooper is trying to actualize this disappearance, this never-happened of the *contents* of the novel, but also of the novel itself.

If Fontana's cut into the canvas demonstrated the artificiality of the painting image and stressed the materiality of canvas, paint, stretchers, etc., Cooper's slice is a

¹⁰Cooper, 106.

¹¹Hasted, Nick. "Interview: Dennis Cooper, Writer of *Period*." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 31 Oct. 2000.

formalism that can only have one metaphorical meaning: fiction itself. A cut is made in the center of the novel and Barthes' two edges (the normative and subversive charges in a line of text) are pulled apart and around the entire novel. Cooper equates fictionality and non-being, but raises the question of a state of non-being versus a state of not-being-read. In Krieger's terms, the novel, as it works to constitute itself a "work of fiction," constitutes and achieves its particular and absolute fictionality. As the boys in this small town are ostensibly raped, stabbed with knives and have their bodies hidden in the woods, Cooper's slice is the way he manages to do away with the body of his own novel.

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Image (page 1): Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'*, 1960.