

Pottsville, USA: Psychosis and the American "Emptiness" in Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280*

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Most commentators on Jim Thompson's "rediscovered" crime fiction have acknowledged the range and variety of social consciousness displayed in his novels. Amongst other themes, Thompson "describes the social and economic impact of soil erosion" on the uprooted poor whites of the Southwestern states, "the betrayal of the people by railroad corruption, the shenanigans of corrupt politicians . . . the constricted lives of sharecroppers and the plight of Indians."¹ Thompson's plots often contain implicit judgments on the condition of the American (usually small-town) psyche and the state of the national Dream. R.V. Cassill has described *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) as "a hard, scary, Sophoclean statement on American success" and on an "American dream" which "makes no provision for an asylum for failures."² Stephen King has commended Thompson's "examination of the alienated mind, the psyche wired up like a nitro bomb, of people living like diseased cells in the bowel of American society"³; and Thompson's biographer, Michael McCauley, has argued that the novels present a "unique vision of America and the plight of its inhabitants," and expose "the big lie of capitalism as manifested in its most deadly form—the split souls of psychotic, doomed pursuers of the American Dream."⁴ Thompson's alienated protagonists exhibit varying degrees of insight into the complex causes of their psychosis and the extent to which it may be an expression of a deeper cultural neurosis. Heredity and social circumstances usually play a large role, but the more insightful of these characters (like Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me* and Nick Corey in *Pop. 1280*) find ways to vent their disgust with what they see as the hypocrisy and the cynicism that infect the American world around them and in which they find themselves trapped. This article takes one of Thompson's later novels, *Pop. 1280* (1964), as an example of his use of crime novel conventions to deliver a subversive critique on the failure of the national myth, and—on the widest scale—of small-town America as the existential stage for the disintegration of the modern personality.

Pop. 1280 opens with Sheriff Nick Corey's announcement that he has already achieved what many other men would consider an acceptable version of American success. "Here I was," he says, "the high sheriff of Potts County, and I was drawing almost two thousand dollars a year—not to mention what I could pick up on the side. On top of that, I had free living quarters on the second floor of the courthouse, just as nice a place as a man could ask for; and it even had a bathroom so

¹ William E. Pemberton, Biographical entry on "Jim Thompson," in *Critical Survey of Mystery and Detective Fiction*, ed. Frank N. Magill (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1988) 1591.

² R.V. Cassill, "The Killer Inside Me: Fear, Purgation, and the Sophoclean Light," in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968) 233.

³ Stephen King, Introduction to Jim Thompson, *Now and On Earth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) ix.

⁴ Michael J. McCauley, *Jim Thompson: Sleep With The Devil* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1991) 31.

that I didn't have to bathe in a washtub or tramp outside to a privy, like most folks in town did. I guess you could say that Kingdom Come was really here as far as I was concerned."⁵ This is a parody of the American Dream achieved, of course, but the more serious implication is that it has been so devalued that for many it has come to connote nothing more than an exclusively material comfort of the meanest and shallowest kind. Like Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me*, Nick Corey is one of Thompson's role-playing psychotics—perceptive and intelligent men who make use of sarcasm and irony as part of their protective weaponry. The language in the above passage is heavily self-mocking. For Nick is actually a man in "agony," and in the course of the novel the stress of having to "bear up under the unbearable" (183) will see him turn into a serial killer who commits four murders himself and arranges for two others. In spite of his pretence of feeble-mindedness, he sees and understands a great deal more than any of the other characters in the novel. He has a nagging sense of the hollowness of his achievement; in a bleakly existential turn of phrase he admits that he has become "just a nothing doing nothing" (11). What Nick means is that his success has come to depend on his remaining a nonentity, by performing the public masquerade of an ineffectual and dim-witted small-town policeman whose inaction in the face of blatant lawbreaking has won him the support of most of the Pottsville electorate. Like Lou Ford, Nick Corey has learned how to turn a blind eye to the dishonesty and corruption of his community, but at the same time cannot remain totally untroubled by its shams and villainies.

Both Ford and Corey are locked into similarly self-created roles of survival. It could be Nick Corey himself speaking, when in *The Killer Inside Me* Lou Ford says to a young man he is about to murder: "You ask me why I stick around, knowing the score, and it's hard to explain. I guess I kind of got a foot on both fences, Johnnie. I planted 'em there early and now they've taken root, and I can't move either way and I can't jump. All I can do is wait until I split. Right down the middle."⁶ Ford and Corey share similar visions of a morally bankrupt American society which is terminally sunk in corruption, injustice, and unrelieved human suffering. In Ford's words, "we're living in a funny world, kid, a peculiar civilization. The police are playing crooks in it, and the crooks are doing police duty. The politicians are preachers, and the preachers are politicians. The tax collectors collect for themselves. The Bad People want us to have more dough, and the Good People are fighting to keep it from us" (*KIM* 118). As Ford sees it, this "screwed up, bitched up" American world is beyond reform because "no one, almost no one, sees anything wrong with it" (*KIM* 118).

Nick Corey's morbid insights into the malaise of his society are darkened by the demoralizations of poor-white southern life that he understands intimately; "there were the helpless little girls, cryin' when their own daddies crawled into bed with 'em. There were the men beating their wives, the women screamin' for mercy. There were the kids wettin' in the beds from fear and nervousness, and their mothers dosin' 'em with red pepper for punishment. There were the haggard faces, drained white from hookworm and blotched with scurvy. There was the

⁵ Jim Thompson, *Pop. 1280* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 3. Subsequent citations are to this edition and will be given in the text.

⁶ Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 119. Subsequent citations will be given in the text, after the abbreviation *KIM*.

near-starvation, the never-bein'-full, the debts that always outrun the credits. There was the how-we-gonna-eat, how-we-gonna-sleep, how-we-gonna-cover-our-poor-bare-asses thinkin'. The kind of thinkin' that when you ain't doing nothing else but that, why you're better off dead" (198). This was a state of mind with which Thompson had been personally familiar for long periods of his own life, just as he had come to know the lives of the forgotten and downtrodden at the margins of American society.⁷ What these terrible images amount to is an indictment of an American promise betrayed. Against this catalog of human degradation and misery, "something like murder didn't seem at all bad by comparison," as Corey puts it, and in the closing pages of the novel he will be able to rationalize his own mission as an avenging angel sent by a "merciful and wonderful" Creator to end such pointless suffering as well as to rid the world of sinners.

There are other instances in *Pop. 1280* where Nick reveals an almost political point of view toward more concrete aspects of modern American life. Nick has no sympathy for George Barnes's record as a strikebreaker for the Talkington Detective Agency, for example, and mocks Barnes's "nerve" in having crushed a railroad workers strike armed with only shotguns and automatic rifles. "And them low-down garment workers," Nick continues, "you really took care of them, didn't you? People that threw away them big three-dollar-a-week wages on wild livin' and then fussed because they had to eat garbage to stay alive! I mean, what the heck, they was all foreigners, wasn't they, and if they didn't like good ol' American garbage why didn't they go back to where they came from?" (172-73). For Nick, Barnes is merely the representative of an oppressive status quo which crushes freedoms and encourages the exploitation of society's weakest. Nick's sarcasm seems to disguise a very real anger at the way in which those at the bottom of the social heap are terrorized into obedience. Coercion, threats, violence, and blackmail are the common strategies governing human interaction in Thompson's fictional world.

Thompson is usually careful to ground the psychosis of his killer-narrators in some deformative childhood incident or experience which they try unsuccessfully to block from their memories but which leaves them emotionally scarred, experiencing feelings of guilt and inadequacy and a need to lash back against an unfair world. In *The Killer Inside Me*, Lou Ford's compulsive homicide (what he refers to as "the sickness") is traced back to his boyhood, when he had been seduced into a sadistic sexual relationship by Helene, his father's housekeeper, and as a result was left by his father with "a burden of fear and shame" (*KIM* 215). In Nick Corey's case, it is also the father who figures as the unjust victimizer. Nick recalls being routinely beaten by his father, who held the boy responsible for the fact that his mother had died in giving birth to him: "I dreamed," Nick says poignantly, "I lived—showing him the reading prize I'd won in school. Because I was sure that would please him, and I just had to show it to someone. And I dreamed—lived—picking myself up off the floor with my nose bloodied from the little silver cup. And he was yelling at me, shouting that I was through with school because I'd just proved I was a cheat along with everything else. The fact was, I guess, that he just couldn't stand for me to be any good. If I was any good, then I

⁷ In the autobiographical *Now and On Earth*, Thompson recounts some of the deprivations he and his family suffered while he was working in a San Diego aircraft factory during World War II.

couldn't be the low-down monster that had killed my own mother in getting born. And I had to be that. He had to have someone to blame" (37). As children, both Ford and Corey have been emotionally maimed by the irrationality and unthinking cruelty of the adult world; both of them speak for "all of us that started the game with a crooked cue, that wanted so much and got so little, that meant so good and did so bad" (*KIM* 244), in the final words of Lou Ford. Unlike Ford, Nick does not attempt to account for his murderousness entirely on the grounds of a single destructive childhood episode, but he does find his father's kind of unreasoned loathing reflected in the social and racial prejudices of the Potts County citizenry. "I've seen a lot of people pretty much like he was," says Nick. "People that blame the Jews or the colored folks for all the bad things that happen to 'em" (37). Perhaps this is one reason why Nick makes his own quietly satiric stand against the anti-Black discrimination of local whites.

If Nick Corey does finally come to see himself as "the savior himself, Christ on the Cross come right here to Potts County" (179), then Pottsville is his southern version of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. Nick is trapped in a society whose hypocrisy and depravity he despises. Occasionally, he expresses his disgust with the backwardness and ingrained bigotry of rural southern life, as when he explains how he had allowed himself to be duped into marrying his wife, Myra, when she had engineered a compromising incident which left Nick looking like a rapist and facing a lynching by the men of the neighborhood. "I figure sometimes," says Nick ironically, "that maybe that's why we don't make as much progress as other parts of the nation. People lose so much time from their jobs in lynching other people, and they spend so much money on rope and kerosene and getting likkered-up in advance and other essentials, that there ain't an awful lot of money or man-hours left for practical purposes" (98). For Nick, this shotgun wedding had been a double blow, which left him saddled with the domineering and mean-minded Myra just a week before he had been due to marry the beautiful Amy Mason, "one of the quality" and the only woman with whom Nick is able to experience anything like a meaningful relationship.

Thompson reserves some of his most vitriolic descriptions for the caricatured poor-white community, of which Henry Clay Fanning is a fairly typical example. Fanning is a local farmer, says Nick, who "didn't have much sense of his obligations. None of his fourteen kids had ever been to school, because making kids go to school was interferin' with a man's constitutional rights. Four of his seven girls, all of 'em that were old enough to be, were pregnant. And he wouldn't allow no one to ask 'em how they'd got that way, because that was *his* legal responsibility, it was a father's job to care for his children's morals, and he didn't have to tolerate any interference. Of course, everyone had a pretty good idea who'd gotten those girls pregnant" (128). Like most of the local white population, Fanning is blindly and violently racist; when he brings into town the dead body of Uncle John, the elderly Black murdered by Nick, Fanning insists that "a white man ought to get some kind of ree-ward for handlin' a nigger" (127). But it is not only at the lowest social level that such blatant racism flourishes; Robert Lee Jefferson (a combination of names which Thompson clearly means as ironic) is the county attorney who dismisses as "ridiculous" Nick's suggestion that the dead Black's kinfolk might insist on an inquest, because "no doctor is going to do a post mortem on a Negro. Why, you can't get a doctor to touch a live Negro, let alone a dead one" (130).

The existence of racial prejudice in a small southern town is not in itself surprising or especially significant, of course. What is significant is that in his own straight-faced and ironic way Nick serves as the mouthpiece for a more tolerant and decent point of view (nowhere in the novel does he express racist views himself, and he does not murder Uncle John simply because he is a Black). Nick is continually prompting those around him to question the correctness of their prejudice. An instance of this comes in a farcical argument between him and the overbearing and boorish Ken Lacey, the sheriff of a neighboring town, over whether Blacks have souls. Lacey's deputy, Buck, explains that "Niggers ain't got no souls because they ain't really people" (25)—to which Nick counters that as an infant he "was put to suck with a colored mammy. Wouldn't be alive today except for her suckin' me." In Nick's eyes, this proves that the Black is human if nothing else, but the grotesque Lacey retorts that "you could have sucked titty from a cow, but you can't say that cows is people." Nick offers further defense of the Black's humanity by pointing out that he has had "certain relations with colored gals that I sure wouldn't have with a cow" (25). The debate gets nowhere, and Nick realizes that the high sheriff's racist bigotry is too deeply implanted for him ever to change.

One striking aspect of Thompson's tortured protagonists is their ability as intelligent and thoughtful men to articulate something like a coherent personal philosophy or worldview. Underlying this outlook, usually, is a powerful awareness of the determining influences which deprive men of genuine freedom of will. "Just how much free will does any of us exercise?" Nick asks George Barnes. "We got controls all along the line," Nick continues, "our physical make-up, our mental make-up, our backgrounds; they're all shapin' us in a certain way, fixin' us up for a certain role in life, and George, we better play that role . . . or all hell is going to tumble out of the heavens and fall right down on top of us. We better do what we're made to do, or we'll find it being done to us" (179).

What adds an extra dimension to Nick's agony is the fact that he has not succumbed entirely to this sense of futility; he does have a fragile vision of perfect satisfaction in his passion for Amy, through whom Nick manages the occasional glimpse of an idyllic happiness. Nick recalls how, after one evening's lovemaking, he and Amy "were lying side by side, holding hands. Breathing together, our hearts beating together. Somehow, there was perfume in the air, although I knew Amy never wore none; and somehow you could hear violins playin', so sweet and so soft, playing a song that never was. It was like there wasn't any yesterday, like there'd been no time before this, and I wondered why it should ever be any other way" (143). But such moments are rare and short-lived; the ecstasy is soon soured when Amy tells Nick that she had witnessed him kill the two town pimps (his first murders) and she knows that Nick has arranged matters so that Ken Lacey will take the blame. Amy's news prompts Nick to brood over the impossibility of holding on to "heaven": "I looked at her," says Nick, "and I thought, god-dang, if this ain't a heck of a way to be in bed with a pretty woman. The two of you arguing about murder, and threatening each other, when you're supposed to be in love and you could be doing something pretty nice. And then I thought, well, maybe it ain't so strange after all. Maybe it's like this with most people, everyone doing pretty much the same thing except in a different way. And all the time they're holding heaven in their hands" (148-49).

Much of Nick Corey's dilemma is due to the fact that he is in part a frustrated idealist; he does understand the things in human life that should really matter (like a satisfying marriage relationship, in his own case), but he has come to recognize that these ideals are unlikely ever to be realized. "Nothing that really mattered was any better" (10), he says of his marriage at one point. In a curious and perverted way, Nick is able to justify his murders on the grounds of social conscience; with the exception of the hapless Uncle John (Who "has to" die because he gets in the way of Nick's plan), the murders are the twisted expressions of Nick's uncontrollable urge to eliminate some of the wickedness from the world and to redress the balance of things in favor of reasonableness and decency. His argument is that by killing the likes of the two pimps and by murdering the drunken wife beater, Tom Hauck, he is helping to make his world a slightly less evil place, and is therefore acting in the best interests of the community. "I'd've sworn," Nick tells us, "that I never held no malice toward no one, never a speck of hatred. Or if I ever had felt sort of a teensy twinge of dislike, it hadn't been the motivatin' factor in whatever I'd done" (187).

The same kind of rationale applies to the deaths of the despicable Myra and the slaving idiot Lennie (Myra's alleged "brother," who is actually her in-house stud behind Nick's back), whose shooting Nick engineers at the hands of his other mistress, Rose Hauck. One of Thompson's subtle successes is in almost persuading the reader that the world loses nothing when the likes of Tom, Myra, and Lennie are despatched: "Tom Hauck was completely no good," says Nick, "and the community was well shot of him" (116). For a moment, the reader may agree; we share the viewpoint of the psychopathic killer and, briefly, we are able to glimpse the world through his eyes—until, of course, we remember that Uncle John dies unjustly, and that two comparative "innocents," the obscenely vindictive Ken Lacey and the willing adulteress, Rose Hauck, are also likely to pay with their lives through Nick's machinations.

Ultimately, Nick Corey's attempts to play Jesus Christ and to exact social retribution are futile gestures in the face of his overriding sense of the vacuum at the center of things. One of the most powerful images of this comes when he peers through a window of Rose's house in order to watch the events inside (Myra plans to take photographs of Rose in an apparently compromising situation with the idiot Lennie). As Nick peers into the room, he is overtaken by a profound sense of alienation. Nick is able momentarily to see past the pettiness and cruelty of the people in the room to the moral void which lies beyond them. Nick describes this as "the emptiness. The absence of things. I'd maybe been in that house a hundred times, that one and a hundred others like it. But this was the first time I'd seen what they really were. Not homes, not places for people to live in, not nothin'. Just pine-board walls locking in the emptiness. No pictures, no books—nothing to look at or think about. Just the emptiness that was soakin' in on me here. And then suddenly it wasn't here, it was everywhere, every place like this one" (197-98). It is an appalling vision of the spiritual deadness of the small-town American heartland—and therefore of America itself and its failed Dream.

Schizophrenia, psychosis, delusion, and the dislocation of the personality are the clinical conditions which Thompson uses as tropes to describe the fractured and chaotic condition of the American psyche as he perceived it. At the close of

Pop. 1280, with Nick Corey convinced by now that he is both Judas Iscariot and Christ Almighty returned to Potts County, we listen to him trying desperately to establish some sort of coherence, to "sort things out. Trying to fit them back together in the only way they made sense" (212). It is much too late, of course, and Nick slides off into total psychic disintegration. Through the plight of Sheriff Corey, as with many other of his doomed and demented narrators, Jim Thompson undermines the all-American cliché that it is every man's right to realize his dream and his destiny. For this is surely impossible while protagonists like Nick Corey are actually engaged in a terrible struggle just to maintain sanity and unearth the truth in an American world which seems to have declared war on both.