The Renegade Mood in Thomas Berger's Fiction

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> Suddenly, one morning, on a gloomy day in December, I found in the skull of a brigand a very long series of atavistic abnormalities . . . analogous to those that are found in inferior vertebrates. At the sight of these strange abnormalities—as an extensive plain is lit up by a glowing horizon—I realized that the problem of the nature and generation of criminals was resolved for me.

These remarks by nineteenth-century criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, reflect, in an admittedly melodramatic and hyperbolic manner, the attitudes of many concerning the nature of crime and the criminal. The widely accepted stereotype of the criminal is that of a being set apart from the rest of humanity, either by virtue of innate physical or psychological defects, social conditioning, or free will. For many, the criminal is the epitome of evil incarnate, a creature driven by selfish and destructive urges he cannot or simply will not control. Because of his manifest depravity, he stands as the Other, a figure divorced from the mainstream of "normal" life.

In Thomas Berger's fiction, however, the criminal is anything but such an Other; he is, in fact, nearly anyone. For Berger's characters crime is not so much a matter of overwhelming inevitability as one of accident. And although each of his twelve novels reveals some form of criminal behavior, five in particular—*Killing Time* (1967), *Regiment of Women* (1973), *Sneaky People* (1975), *Who is Teddy Villanova?* (1977), and *The Feud* (1983)—offer a representative cross section of Berger's treatment of this persistent theme. In each of these works the criminal is an everyman figure, someone who indeed appears "normal," is usually accepted by others, and often enjoys the privileges of relatively good standing in his community. Crime for these characters is either something thrust upon them or a perfectly natural reaction to their world.

Surely the most comprehensive treatment of the theme of criminality occurs in *Killing Time* with the mad protagonist, Joe Detweiler. As a psychopath, Detweiler comes very close to the stereotypical killer; however, for all his psychological abnormality, he is the least threatening figure in the novel. In fact, he is the most outwardly civilized and polite of any of the characters. Utterly

devoid of a sense of humor, a fact which is itself humorous, Detweiler is unfailingly earnest and scrupulously honors the truth by refusing to tell a lie. While awaiting a trial and consulting with his lawyer, Detweiler recoils in shock at the thought that he may escape punishment, wanting instead to pay for his crime. As more than one character notices, Detweiler is unique because he is a man of principle, one who has "a moral force to him."[1]

However, values such as his do not define the other characters, who respond to the crime by revealing the worst features of their personalities, as each struggles to gain some profit from the adventure. Andrew Starr, estranged husband and father of the murder victims, uses his notoriety to go on a bender, while his remaining daughter, Betty, manipulates her fame to launch a writing career as a romance novelist. Alloway, the journalist assigned to get her story for a tabloid, unsuccessfully lusts after Betty, while two of his colleagues from a rival paper vainly struggle to land a big scoop from a drunken Andrew. Once the trial is under way, the district attorney attempts to further his political ambitions, and Melrose, the defending attorney, labors to win the case and preserve his unblemished record of legal success.

Also deeply involved in the crime are the police, symbols of an authority they exploit, abuse, or only dimly understand. As Tierney, the arresting officer, views it, ". . . the police must be made to seem as ruthless as the man who had committed the murders, else the public would have no confidence in the Department. . . . The Force *was* force, not justice or understanding or pathos or regret" (p. 28). It is this force which compells one cop to beat a man on the street for carrying a steel bar concealed in a newspaper because he *might* be a mugger and Tierney to have intercourse with Betty in her slain family's apartment when he feels she has morally conquered him. The result, he realizes, is that the police are "mistrusted by everybody and respected only by criminals" (p. 149).

It is with the criminal, especially in the person of the informant, that the police have the deepest personal connection, "a peculiar mutual loyalty, much more reliable than any association based on sex or even money. . . . Tierney would sooner have sold his wife on the street than to reveal the identity of one of his stoolies. . ." (pp. 210-11). A good portion of their intimacy issues from the affinity they have for one another, which Detweiler explains as the police's instinctive attraction to crime. For Tierney

the situation is even more complex, for "peculiar to his profession was the enemy: one's fellow townsfolk. But it was not peculiar; that was also true of the profession of crime" (p. 278).

Beyond even their mutual contempt for the rest of society, the criminal and cop are joined by the guilt and responsibility for the crime. Both share in the moral consequences of crime and become scapegoats for the expiation of society's guilt. As Tierney regards it, "In apprehending the malefactor, the police take responsibility for his crimes: he who is powerless can no longer be evil" (p. 152). Detweiler too holds something of this view when he explains to the detective that he will confess his crimes only to Tierney because he now possesses the victims just as Tierney will in turn incorporate Detweiler's soul when he is executed. Because of this role, Tierney sees the police as secular priests, figures entrusted with sinners whose confessions they must elicit and then use to produce legal penance. Yet, in spite of their morally responsible duty, the police remain unappreciated by those they serve. Again it is Tierney who clarifies the dilemma when he complains, " '. . . we might get killed for you, yet you give us little money and less respect: in reality, *we* are *your* victims' " (p. 351).

Tierney's words prove ironically prophetic, for by the end of the novel every character has reaped some benefit from his association with the crime, with the exception of the detective who is inexplicably knifed on the street. What emerges from all this is a view of a world gone awry in which crime festers everywhere beneath a placid surface of mundane repetition, a view that is more dramatically represented in the twenty-first century New York of *Regiment of Women*. This is a place where air pollution is so thick that inhabitants regularly wear gas masks, one room apartments on the East Side rent for over $1,500.00 a month, a turreted wall surrounds the Republic of Harlem, the Hudson River acts as a vast sewer system, and Rockefeller Center serves as an immense detention center. Environment mirrors personality here, with women assuming the role of the dominant sex and the city teeming with anger, violence, and crime.

For the protagonist Georgie Cornell, a thoroughly demoralized male secretary, crime begins as an accident, grows into an inevitability, and ends as an act of personal rebellion and emancipation. His crimes are products of his personality but more importantly of his environment, and the words of criminologist

Leon Radzinowicz explain the situation best, "While the nature of crime depends upon the changing social and historic context, the organization of society determines to a considerable degree which segments of it are most likely to commit the principal crimes during a given period."[2] Thus it is that in this world sex determines Georgie's criminality, and it is gender, or more specifically his confusion over his sexual and personal indentity, that lies at the heart of his criminal responses to his world.

Possessed of a rootless anxiety and dissatisfaction, Georgie finds it increasingly difficult to accommodate himself to the strictures of his society. His job is boring, his looks are fading, and he cannot find pleasure in anal intercourse, and once he is arrested for transvestitism, his life takes a rapid and dramatic turn. After his escape from jail, Georgie grudgingly accepts his alienation and becomes a cause célèbre for an underground men's liberation movement. Through his shifting fortunes he suffers the fate that has been his all along: he is forever an object, a thing that is used, manipulated, and always deceived by those in control. He is a victim of a series of institutions, and it is only in his escape from institutions (business, jail, the military, psychotherapy) that he can arrive at a sense of an identifiable self.

Once he bolts from the sperm camp, holds up a gas station, and steals a senator's car and clothes, he realizes he and his companion, Harriet, can only "survive as outlaws."[3] Enjoying the first genuine relationship of this life, he discovers that shared dependence on another human being offers the solution to each of their identity crises. Together as outlaws, they eagerly commit the society's capital offense—sexual intercourse, an act universally regarded as destructive and homicidal. In so doing Georgie and Harriet offer a sane alternative to the society they are escaping, with their criminal acts underscoring a tenet defined by Emile Durkheim. Crime, he claims, is "bound up with the fundamental conditions of all social life, and by that very fact it is useful, because these conditions, of which it is a part, are themselves indispensable to the normal evolution of morality and law."[4] Thus, Georgie and Harriet's "crime" can only exist in such a world, a place of distorted values and decadent institutions, and their final act signals the kind of change that is needed if this society is ever to regenerate itself.

In some ways *Who is Teddy Villanova?* stands as a contemporary version of the future world of *Regiment of Women*. The closest thing to a master criminal here is a parsimonious

New York landlord who tries to coerce a tenant into breaking his lease. But for the most part, crime is distant or illusory, acts staged by a crew of professional actors posing as corrupt police. What is not illusory, however, is the debased world through which the detective hero, Russel Wren, stumbles. Like Georgie's city of the twenty-first century, Wren's New York of the present is a "cesspool" that breeds suspicion and hate, a place "under constant Vandal siege."[5] Here a citizen protecting himself may "well provoke the frustrated assailant to bring a successful suit for damages" (p. 2), children brutalize candy-store owners, shoplifters regularly ignore uniformed security guards, and a "new breed of criminal uses his swag to pay tuition fees at one of the many local institutions of higher learning" (p. 120). Wren shares Georgie's predicament—reality reversed—and his search, like Georgie's, is for a way to make some sense of or at least cope with this mess.

Though one of the imposter policemen complains of living " 'under the pressure of a sense of futility' " (p. 150), Wren resists such capitulation by engaging himself fully in his undertakings. Truth, he quickly learns, is elusive, and loyalty an attribute prized by few. In attempting so doggedly to solve the case, Wren yearns to create a scrap of order and sanity in his world. What he seeks is the coherence and symmetry of art, and his ornate, overwritten account of his adventures is testament to his desire to make some sense of all that transpires. In accepting his secretary, Peggy, as a sexual partner at the end of the work, Wren reminds one of Georgie and his solution to the dilemma he wrestles with. However, Wren's difference is that his acts are not potent antidotes to the pervasive corruption that surrounds and demoralizes him.

Despite the fact that they are frauds, the police in *Teddy Villanova* epitomize the "ruthless, brutal, vicious" creatures one character warns Georgie about in *Regiment.* Ironically named after leaders in the Protestant Reformation, these dope addicts, pimps, sadists, and lechers actually encourage and abet the ineffectual criminal. They are, then, as corrupt as their declining world and stand as degraded symbols of all from which Wren seeks a release. They are worse than their counterparts in *Killing Time,* for they lack even the level of reflection that informs Tierney's actions.

Sneaky People is unique in this context for the remarkably minor role police (one vice squad officer enters briefly at the end)

play in the criminals' lives. In this novel, as well as in the recent *The Feud,* Berger moves back in time to the Depression years, a period many regard with nostalgic fondness as being simpler, harmonious though difficult, and in a curious way idyllic. No one had anything, and all were linked by a common fate that created cohesion rather than separation. Each of these novels, of course, refutes this notion, as characters unsuccessfully attempt to hide their private selves through lies, deceits, and bluff swaggering. In *Sneaky People,* Buddy Sandifer, a small town used-car dealer whom Berger has described as "a kind of perfect symbol of American civilization,"[6] decides that the only way to escape his wife and satisfy his mistress is through murder. For Buddy this amounts to another business transaction, albeit one with larger stakes involved. His motive, he tells himself, is "because of the way she talks,"[7] but his fifteen-year old son Ralph explains the relationship between his parents when reflecting:

> She lived on a different layer of being from the rest of the race, now that he thought about it: quietly, serenely, above the battle as it were, which is why she was so suited to his father, who was always in the thick of it and seething behind his mask of apparent self-confidence. . . . It occurred to him now that his father was a nervous wreck, unable to remain at rest for three consecutive minutes, unable even to speak without frantic gestures of the chin and fingers soon followed by a kind of dancing escape. (pp. 254-55)

To aid him in his plan, Buddy enlists the services of Clarence Honeywell, a black employee, who he feels is uniquely qualified for the job because of his race. Buddy's is a life of cheating—cheating customers, cheating on his wife, cheating his mistress out of any life beyond serving him—so it is only natural that in striking a bargain with Clarence, Buddy decides to cheat once again. After settling on a fee of $200.00, half of which will be paid before the murder, Buddy plans to renege on surrendering the other half because Clarence would have no one "to whom [he could] complain" (p. 96). Later, after dining with his wife and being "fascinated by her complex ignorance of him" (p. 245), Buddy decides against murder and intends to shoot Clarence as a burglar when he enters the house. The irony, of course, is that Buddy is the ultimate victim, falling down the basement stairs, breaking his neck.

Criminality also extends to many of the novel's other characters, who differ from Buddy in that theirs are victimless offenses. In almost every case, their criminal acts erupt

spontaneously, often without clear provocation, and spring from deep-seated fears and resentments. Ralph's teen-age friend, Horse Hauser, offers the best example when he impulsively steals money from his employer's cash register and cannot return it without being discovered. While as the boy confesses to Ralph, his longstanding resentment of his boss blossoms into laughable anger as he rails:

"That lousy bastard Bigelow, leaving the register open. He did it to trap me, is what he did. I see it all now. You know I don't get no discounts? I got to pay full price for Pepsis and Nabisco wafers and stuff? I want to make a sandwich or eat a pickle, I got to pay? He hates my guts, that prick." (p. 73)

Laverne Lorraine, Buddy's paramour, literally stumbles into prostitution when she is unwittingly seduced by a sleazy band leader she finds debonair and glamorous. She soon begins charging a dollar for subsequent seductions, and for the next decade continues satisfying men's appetites by alternating between waitressing and prostitution. Like Horse and Buddy, Laverne can rationalize her actions, in this case with the excuse that she has never once enjoyed sex. She even amusingly imagines a special affinity with the Virgin Mary, "with whom she secretly felt a common cause that no priest, being male, could ever understand, Laverne having taken a thousand cocks and never been touched by any, while Mary had accepted none" (p. 208).

Clarence, who begins his association with Buddy by attempting to steal a car, ends by doing the same, but for rather cloudy reasons. The strong implication is that Clarence, who enters his agreement with Buddy reluctantly, intuits what his employer has in store for him, and rather than be cheated, framed, or killed, he buys a chauffeur's cap, steals the license plates from Buddy's family car, and sets out for California. He and all the characters, as the novel's title suggests, move about in surreptitious ways, concealing secrets that the rest of the community already know and take for granted, and their crimes arise out of this very sneakiness rather than from some overwhelming defect of personality or psyche.

The Feud further develops this notion of the origins of crime, but in this case the root of evil is not so much sneakiness as it is pride. Where the characters of *Sneaky People* want to shield themselves from those around them, the characters in *The Feud* are concerned with defending themselves against their neighbors. As with other Berger novels, setting is linked closely to criminality,

and the inhabitants of Hornbeck and Millville continually see themselves in opposition to one another. They exist in a kind of siege mentality, inhabiting an us/them world where neighbors and co-workers are constantly viewed as "the enemy."

When they confront one another, they do so to save face and maintain appearances, and as Reverton, the most paranoid of the bunch, puts it, " 'We got our pride at stake here. They get away with that, and the next thing you know they'll be riding us down like dogs and violating our women and all.' "[8] Matters never go that far, though characters do hound each other with threats and accusations that result in a heart attack, a nervous breakdown, sexual humiliation, arrest, and deaths. Most of these people, like those in *Sneaky People,* react blindly to the world about them.

A perfect example of such instinctive responses can be seen in the actions of Junior Bullard, adolescent son of a hardware store owner and the cause of much of the enmity which exists between the warring families. Initially Junior appears to be a well-heeled, polite boy, yet once he comes in possession of cousin Reverton's pistol (actually only a starter's gun), he goes on his own crime spree. His personality changes almost instantaneously, for "He felt like a new man. All his peevishness was gone . . . the gun against his belly caused him to grasp life in a new way" (p. 147). Emboldened by the authority the piece gives him, Junior heads off through the town hoping for and getting an encounter with local toughs whom he frightens, and then brandishes the weapon in a diner, where on impulse he rifles an unattended cash register "merely to punish Curly [the owner] for running out before feeding him" (p. 151). His adventures end when he pulls the same stunt in a bar and is knocked unconscious with a baseball bat.

The novel's other criminal, a professional bank robber whom Junior meets in the diner and decides against robbing because of his cool manner, ironically is the least obvious figure for such an occupation. Reno Fox is a taciturn, polite man (Curly notices he takes only one rather than a handful of toothpicks like most of his patrons) who poses as a businessman but is wanted in a number of states. Unlike the other characters, Fox carefully plans his caper and resorts to violence only when he is physically threatened.

While the various characters quarrel and threaten each other,

the police chiefs of the two towns quickly enter the fray, seeking redress for old, lingering grievances, with setting playing an equally significant role in their actions. Theirs are not the places of seething corruption and decadence that one finds in *Regiment* and *Teddy Villanova,* for Millville and Hornbeck are small, insular burgs that offer little stimulation. Therefore, in the absence of anything better to worry about, the two cops envy one another and what they imagine are the other's better working conditions. Millville's Clive Shell, for instance, is in competition with all the other police departments in the county, especially priding himself on having a larger appropriation than neighboring Hornbeck. As a result he is able to hire and underpay his brother-in-law, and when he learns that there is a reward for killing Fox, he chafes at not being able to claim it for the department. Shell is a vain man who uses his office "to throw his weight around" (p. 249), as he does in telling Eva Beeler to keep her "goddam trap shut" (p. 109) when she tries to explain her son's driving through a stop sign. To his shame, he is knocked out by the boy, who later throws a pie in the chief's face when he again attempts an arrest.

Like Shell, Hornbeck's Harvy Yelton also throws his weight around with the vulnerable and weak, though his favorite targets are children and teen-agers. Yelton gives a seventeen-year old Bernice Beeler her first taste of sex after he catches her smoking cigarettes with a boy, and throughout the novel he threatens children if they do not behave. Their infractions are usually minor, which do not, however, disabuse the chief of his relentlessly apocalyptic vision. The following is an hilarious example of Yelton's fatalistic bullying:

> "You know better than that, Willis. You oughtn't play ball so it comes into the street. You know why? It could hit somebody's automobile and scare them so they would lose control of the wheel and drive up over the curb and turn over and burst into flames, and everybody in the car would be burned to a crisp, see? Or the driver might just lose his head and turn and run over your pooch. Or you and your friends might tear after the ball onto the road and you'd all be killed if a big Mack truck was coming along real fast, or you'd scare the truckdriver and he'd smash into them high-tension wires, which would fall down and electrocute the whole neighborhood and kill everybody and burn up all your houses, maybe get outa control and burn everything in the whole town, see. Now, you wouldn't want that to happen, woudja?" (pp. 67-68)

Later, when another child admits damaging a neighbor's car, Yelton decides against making "resitooshun to the man whose

propitty the car was" (p. 229), deciding instead to have the boy work at the station.

Like the police in other novels, Shell and Yelton are venal creatures, though men less sorely tempted than some of their counterparts. They illustrate a constant feature in Berger's prose—that figures of authority and power are really no different from those they control, and that in this context, the police differ little from the criminal except in attire and the ways they can use the law to their advantage.

Perhaps the most telling hint to Berger's vision of the universality of crime can be found in the narrative method employed in all but one of these novels. With the exception of *Teddy Villanova,* each work is presented by a third person, omniscient narrator who has the paradoxical ability to appear both detached yet deeply involved in the activities of the characters. In so doing, the narrator is chameleon-like, capable of linguistically assuming the thoughts, perceptions, desires, and prejudices of nearly every figure. Consequently, the reader enjoys a remarkably privileged, though not always reliable, view of the world the characters inhabit, and this technique may also clarify Berger's insistence that "It is . . . my characters who write my books not me."[9]

Resulting from this method is the consistently teasing ambiguity that informs the writer's best work, and which clearly disturbed a reviewer of of *Regiment of Women* into complaining that the novel "is either a grossly awkward takeoff on the excesses of Women's Lib or a blundering satire about the way men treat women. The fact that a careful observer cannot decide which is one indication of what is wrong with the kind of novel Berger has written."[10] What the reviewer obviously misunderstands is that the ambiguity is, in fact, the point. For in a world where the cop and the criminal appear indistinguishable and where the rules of the social contract no longer apply, ambiguity may offer the only sane approach possible.

Berger's use of ambiguity is equally important as a comic device. Viewed only in one way, men such as Shell and Yelton are malignant types which most readers would doubtless find repugnant; however, they are also weak, transparent, and vulnerable fools whom we can laugh at for their obvious fallibility. In this way, Berger's consistent ambiguity not only adds a moral dimension to his perspective on crime and the police but also

makes such an otherwise serious topic both endurable and entertaining for an audience.

What remains unambiguous in these novels is a view of worlds which are either unstable, decadent, or absurd. Social institutions of nearly every kind offer little comfort or sense, and characters, even the most outwardly self-assured, appear to be wandering in a moral daze. Naomi Sandifer could be speaking for most of them when she remarks that she cannot " 'decide what is more real than anything else' " (p. 262), an attitude that may at least partially explain the vulnerability of many of these people to crime. Another explanation can be found in H. L. Witmer's definition of anomie which she characterizes as, "The condition of social disorganisation and social instability in which the power of social norms to control the conduct of individuals is slight—perhaps because the norms (the rules of the game in social life) are not clearly expressed or firmly implemented, or sharply because conflicting norms obtain in the area under consideration. This condition of normlessness leaves people at loose ends, not knowing how they ought to behave and often not caring."[11]

Berger's shifting of the temporal setting from past to present to future suggests crime is not the province of any one group of people or any one period. The good old days may not have been all that good, and the bright future may actually be rather dim. Crime and the potential for crime have always been and will always be there, and as Berger responds in one of his interviews, "A life free of corruption is an infantile *dream* of what ought to be."[12] In short, what these novels and their views of crime imply may have been stated best by A. Lacassagne's dictum that "societies have the criminals they deserve."

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NOTES

[1]Thomas Berger, *Killing Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1967), p. 171. Further citations noted parenthetically.

[2]Leon Radzinowicz, *Ideology and Crime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 71.

[3]Thomas Berger, *Regiment of Women* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 293.

[4]Emile Durkheim. *The Rules of Sociological Method,* trans. Sarah A. Solovay & John H. Mueller (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1938), p. 70.

[5]Thomas Berger, *Who is Teddy Villanova?* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977), p. 191. Further citations noted parenthetically.

[6]Charles Rydell, "Book-Maker-of-the-Month: Thomas Berger," *Andy Warhal's Interview* (July 1975), p. 38.

[7]Thomas Berger, *Sneaky People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), p. 234. Further citations noted parenthetically.

[8]Thomas Berger, *The Feud* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1983), p. 27. Further citations noted parenthetically.

[9]Douglas Hughes, "Thomas Berger's Elan," *Canfrontation,* 12 (Spring/Summer, 1976), 30.

[10]*Time* (21 May 1973), pp. 103-04.

[11]Radzinowicz, pp. 92-93.

[12]Rydell, pp. 38-39.