

Who's Reading Whose Reading?

John Mascaro

Literature and Domination: Sex, Knowledge, and Power in Modern Fiction, by M. Keith Booker. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1993. 192 pp. \$24.95.

In *Literature and Domination*, M. Keith Booker extends the ideas developed in his 1991 *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature* by exploring the ways twentieth-century literature both thematically presents and dramatically enacts strategies of domination, oppression, resistance and subversion. These strategies, spreading outward through text and reader, reader and reader's self, that self and society, reveal a web of linkages encompassing the literature, politics and philosophy of this century. Booker analyzes the complex analogy between the urge to dominate—whether text's urge to dominate reader, reader's urge to dominate text, criticism's urge to dominate both reader and text, society's urge to dominate the self, the self's urge to dominate the other, etc.—and the act of literary interpretation. Ultimately, he wants to link his efforts to contemporary critical and philosophical trends which find the fundamental sin of Western culture to be its legacy of rationalism and bourgeois individualism spawned—according to the neo-Marxism of Adorno and Horkheimer—by the Enlightenment.

Booker's plan is broad and ambitious, perhaps a little too broad to yield satisfyingly to the approach he has taken. The book presents readings of an idiosyncratic selection of six works of twentieth-century fiction. It opens with a chapter on Beckett's *Watt* and closes with a chapter on his *Lost Ones*; between are chapters on Woolf's *Waves*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Pynchon's *V.* and Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Each chapter balances Booker's own readings of the text in question against theoretical perspectives from literary criticism, political philosophy and cultural studies. Working within a conceptual constellation of sexual domination, political oppression and totalizing reading strategies, Booker wants to show that "what is distinctive about many modern texts is the reflexive way literary meditations on power, authority and domination turn inward to involve examinations of textuality and reading as images of the kinds of struggles for mastery that inform society at large." In Booker's view, each member of his chosen textual sextet performs this double-focused interrogation

of power and authority: explicitly, as part of each book's overt content, and implicitly, through form, and through the interaction of reader and text.

With the exception of *Lolita*, Booker discusses works which have received relatively less critical attention than other works by the same authors. Moreover, these works are significant to Booker's thesis because of the degree to which they resist univocal interpretation. The critical contention they have aroused—the struggles for domination among various critics and their preferred readings—is itself part of Booker's subject. The lack of critical consensus is no coincidence; these texts represent for Booker modern literature's deliberate tendency to resist any totalizing critical strategy, a tendency which amounts to modern literature's critique of modern rationalism and its forms of domination.

Booker is a clever critic, and he says many illuminating things about the texts in his study. Perhaps he is most clever at acknowledging the paradoxes of his own thesis. If any effort at totalization—whether one person's on another, or a political system's on a person, or a critic's on a literary text—is an unjustified transgression, then the gesture of making this claim must itself be a similar transgression. There is simply no way out of this conceptual bind. When Booker argues rationally that attempts to find a "rational solution" to the textual indeterminacies of *Watt* are misplaced because *Watt* "is constructed specifically to defeat such attempts," he must be aware that he has just offered one, and a totalizing one at that ("specifically"). But this self-reflexive bind is, as Booker admits, a condition of contemporary life. His intelligence is nimble enough and his writing resourceful enough to make significant interpretive gestures toward texts which, specifically intended or not, do subvert interpretive gestures.

One of the best chapters is the discussion of *Lolita*, which is sensitive to Nabokov's verbal and conceptual game-playing and shrewd in deconstructing Nabokov's pose of social disengagement in his fiction. Though Nabokov may wince from his celestial heights at the suggestion that *Lolita* yields willingly to the advances of neo-Marxism, Booker convincingly demonstrates the novel's desire to lay bare the dehumanizing evils of consumerism. The chapter on *V.*, though bogged down somewhat by a rehashing of the overworked theme of entropy (by now called into question, partly by Pynchon himself), offers valuable commentary on the often overlooked self-reflexivity of the novel. Booker defends *V.* against some negative critical judgments by showing how those judgments attempt a mastery of the text which the text anticipates and deliberately frustrates.

The Woolf chapter is Booker's weakest, perhaps because he rests his case on a reading of *The Waves*, arguably Woolf's most problematic novel. Booker argues that Woolf was engaged against social forces which, relying on enlightenment myths of individual autonomy, in fact restrict and limit the possibilities of selfhood, especially for women, by imposing a "patriarchal mode of subjectivity." *The Waves*, in Booker's view, is Woolf's assault on the equally patriarchal literary mode of narration normalized by these myths, a narrative mode marked by its obsession with what Woolf called "the damned egotistical self." Booker contends that the six narrators of *The Waves* participate in an alternative, more communal, ultimately more feminine mode of self-construction. But if this effort truly aims to free the self from domineering limitations, why are all six voices virtually identical in style, tone, affect, texture: in short, why are these six voices the same voice? This quality of the novel, often regarded as a defect, accounts for the ennui which frequently overcomes the attempt at sustained attentive reading. Booker would redeem it by arguing that it provides a "stable subjective anchor" for the text. But whose subjectivity is doing the anchoring? Booker concedes that the subjectivity is Woolf's, yet fails to see how this undercuts his original point. Amazingly, Booker quotes with approval Maria DiBattista's observation that "To find *the author* figured forth and sublimated in the continuous style is one of the pleasures of the Woolfian text" (emphasis added). This may indeed be one of the pleasures of the Woolfian text, but it is also a flat contradiction of the premise that Woolf is trying to create a narrative mode of selfhood free of anybody's damned ego. In fact, it might be said of *The Waves* that its failure stems precisely from Woolf's refusal to relinquish her ego, her desire to subjugate her own text.

That aside, *Literature and Domination* is overall rich and productive of further thought. Booker's tactic of focusing on critical disagreements evoked by his objects of study to show how the works transcend those disagreements, a tactic most fruitfully deployed in the final chapter's discussion of *The Lost Ones*, is engaging and illuminating. It also leads to an ironic demonstration of the multifarious ways a text can obstruct comprehension; only in this case the text is Booker's own. While assessing Susan Brienza's meta-allegorical reading of *The Lost Ones*, Booker notes several objections raised against it in an essay by Peter Murphy. However, Booker lists 1987 as the date for Brienza's book and 1982 for Murphy's essay, a time warping one might almost expect to find in a Beckett novel. It is a further, and humorous, coincidence that this error occurs in a chapter which points out a number of errors in the first English edition of Beckett's novel.

Naturally, it is hard to resist sparring with some of Booker's decisions. For example, if searching Nabokov for issues of narrative domination, why ignore *Pale Fire*? Or if looking for strategies of textual resistance to totalizing critical exegesis in Pynchon, why not focus on *Gravity's Rainbow*, or even the more logistically manageable *Crying of Lot 49*? Booker's central claims are so broadly relevant to literature that scaffolding them around six works which take on a (probably unintended) air of representativeness is a little misleading. Each of Booker's textual examples calls up many others which seem to fit his analysis just as aptly. But such quibbles are displaced praise, indicating the many resonances set up by Booker's study; one doesn't fault him for the books he chose not to write. However, a final, genuine perplexity remains. It is hard to imagine how such a book, a good and solid work devoted to exploring the labyrinthine tunnels which join acts of reading and writing, literary criticism, political oppression, self-construction, epistemological limitations and the multiple alienations of the present century, can set out, make its essays, and consider its journey complete without once mentioning the name Kafka.

—University of California—Los Angeles