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From Disaffected Youth to Dangerous Adults: The Brooding Evil of the Familiar in Bret Easton Ellis's Fiction

"Turn up the TV, no one listening will suspect
Even your mother won't detect it
No your father won't know
They think that I've got no respect but
Everything means less than zero."

Elvis Costello, "Less Than Zero," 1977

"Here come the man
With the look in his eye
Fed on nothing
But full of pride
Look at them go
Look at them kick
Makes you wonder how the other half live."

INXS, "Devil Inside," 1988

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Abstract: Contemporary American author Bret Easton Ellis has written seven novels, one collection of interrelated short stories, multiple screenplays, one long work of non-fiction, and a number of essays throughout the better part of the past four decades. In addition, in recent years, he has cultivated a significant online presence through social media, as well as a popular podcast. From the time of his debut novel, published while he was still an undergraduate student, until the present day, his works have been the subject of much scrutiny in terms of subject matter and style. Particularly in the case of the release of his best-known novel, *American Psycho* (1991), a good deal of the criticism of Ellis has shifted between the text and the public persona of the author himself. In typical postmodern style, this blurring of boundaries was not only welcomed, but frequently precipitated by Ellis, his publishers, and the public relations machinery at work on his

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behalf. The focus of the majority of this attention, self-perpetuated and otherwise, has been on the apparent element of *evil* at work in terms of the amorality of his characters and a corresponding lack of moral certitude. Firmly rooted in theoretical tradition established by Georges Bataille, as well as the work of numerous recent scholars, this project examines the squandering of youth and its damaging impact upon contemporary society as a consistent thread running through Bret Easton Ellis's oeuvre, particularly in his characters' pervasive drug use and conspicuous expression of sexuality. The trajectory of narrator-protagonist Clay, from isolated college student in *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) into savage narcissist in *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) is a prime illustration of *evil, as inherent in the familiar,* throughout Ellis's postmodern landscape. As opposed to presenting an external perpetrator of evil as a threat to an existing moral order, Ellis's narrator reports on the evil at work in these young people's daily lives. The reader, therefore, as this project contends, is placed in the uncomfortable, but imperative and at times voyeuristic, position of determining the extent of culpability for an entire society—one that is all too familiar.

Youth and Consequences: The Fictionality of Bret Easton Ellis

For more than thirty years, Bret Easton Ellis's name has been synonymous with the concept of *evil*. Ever since the controversy surrounding the publication of his second novel, *American Psycho,* became fodder for media scrutiny even before its eventual publication in 1991, many have deemed him a scourge upon the literary world, as well as a symptom of a larger cultural affliction. While the reception of his work has evolved over time, there still does not seem to be any critic, popular or academic, who does not have an opinion on Ellis. There also seems to be no middle ground—opinions tend to vacillate between labeling him as misogynist or moralist. In 1994, Matthew Tyrnauer's *Vanity Fair* article "Who's Afraid of Bret Easton Ellis?" questioned the lasting impact of the *American Psycho* controversy. Tyrnauer recounts the time between Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho,* when at the ripe age of twenty-seven, "The *enfant terrible* was suddenly merely *terrible*" (96). Apparently, more than three decades later, many people are still afraid of Bret Easton Ellis. I believe this is a warranted and healthy fear and I tend to think that Ellis, himself, has played a large part in cultivating it.

As opposed to simply presenting his readers with the object of his critique, our contemporary amorality, which he has ironically been accused of perpetuating, Ellis depicts it in the same discourse that also confronts us. His efficacy in this pursuit is largely due to the *familiarity* with which these signs encircle and define our society. As artifacts of the culture that has both produced it and is reflected by it, the borders of Ellis's texts have necessarily been blurred, adding

to the mythos of his works, as well as the author, himself, again impacted by our familiarity with the subject matter, its marketing, as well as the resulting public perception of author and text. This media focus surfaced initially as a publicity campaign thrust upon him. However, using the same signs of the culture designed to malign him, Ellis has learned to cunningly subvert the public-relations machinery to his advantage. As Sonia Baelo-Allué points out in *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, "Ellis's novels have been promoted through posters, trailers, fake web pages and TV appearances . . ." (20). In early 2010, he lit up the blogosphere with a celebratory message from his Twitter account in was believed to be a reference to the death of J.D. Salinger. Ellis cheered that someone thought to be the reclusive writer is "finally dead" and suggested that he will "Party tonight!!!" almost immediately after news broke of the legendary author's demise (Ellis). As one would expect, many took this as an opportunity to once again brand him as an aberration—gloating over the death of a literary icon. A more astute reading would reveal that this message was not celebrating the end of Salinger as a man as much as a standard by which Ellis's work has always been judged—one that not only questions the morality of the society that is reflected in his work, but also the ways in which the notion of evil is represented. In Ellis's fictional representation of his contemporary society, the relationship between perpetrator and victim is necessarily upended, and frequently reversed in unexpected ways. While, at one time, Salinger and other post-World War II writers valorized protagonists that exposed society's foibles by means of a firm, independent moral compass, Ellis's critique is rooted in the absence of such an instrument in our current late capitalist era. Once one understands the logistics of the reversals that have taken place, both intentional and unintentional, in the marketing of Ellis's fiction, an elucidation of his textual positioning of perpetrator and victim, in terms of the acts of evil reflected in his texts, will follow.

An extreme depiction of late 1980s New York City, Ellis's third novel, *American Psycho*, attacks capitalism and male vanity as savagely as Patrick Bateman, its serial-killer protagonist and narrator, butchers his victims. Here, Ellis depicts Bateman as representative of the cannibalistic aura of 1980s capitalist America—the homicidal Gordon Gekko. As one may expect, due to the proximity of Ellis's target to its cultural context, many within the literary world at that time seemed to miss Ellis's point. Once advance galleys of the book were distributed among employees of Simon & Schuster, its original publisher, some of the more objectionable passages were leaked, out of context, to *Time* and *Spy* magazines. The result was a public outcry for the publisher to

forego the release of this book. As a result, *American Psycho* was dropped from its catalogue, Ellis was contractually permitted to keep his $300,000 advance, and Alfred A. Knopf immediately picked up the novel for release as a paperback under its Vintage imprint. In Ellis-like ironic fashion, the firestorm of controversy led to increased sales for the book and iconic status for its author. Certainly, the conditions leading to the publication of *American Psycho* and the text itself have become enmeshed. While it made him a literary phenom, his shifting of the boundaries between Ellis and his work during this time also led to a serious misreading of this text, as well as others throughout his career. However, to the assiduous Ellis scholar, it becomes apparent that these reversals taking place between author and text largely mirror the relationship between perpetrator and victim in his novels. The absence of moral certitude within the culture is, in actuality, the source of evil identified by Ellis, for which he was personally held accountable.

Rarely in the contemporary age has an author been personally vilified to this extent for a work of fiction. The National Organization of Women called *American Psycho* "a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women" (McDowell). Interestingly, spearheading a boycott of the novel was the then-president of the Los Angeles branch of the National Organization of Women (NOW), Tammy Bruce, who has experienced a resurgence of publicity in recent times as a conservative pundit. In fact, she has been one of the most vocal supporters of the US Presidential campaigns of Donald Trump, whose fictional representation is a repeated trope in *American Psycho* as one of Patrick Bateman's media idols.[1] However, as indicated, the believed perpetration of violence in his fiction by Bruce and others has simply shifted the target of the omnipresent evil from the prevailing culture to Ellis himself. In a 1995 web interview with *HotWired*, Ellis recounts receiving threats calling for him to be "raped with a nail-studded baseball bat" ("Bret Easton Ellis on *HotWired*"). This conflating of author and work within the prevailing culture is one of those now relatively commonplace moments in the contemporary media, which have only been exacerbated with the advent of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, in which the publicity defines the event. Since, on the surface, the text of *American Psycho* does depict the victimization of women, and incidentally an equal number of men, at the hands of an "alpha-male" protagonist, it is not surprising that the out-of-context excerpts would be misread in the manner of Ellis's most virulent critics. The irony is not lost on the fact that one of the prime targets of Ellis's satire is an acute obsession with *surface* in the American society he starkly depicts.

The most strident criticism of *American Psycho* occurred before anyone had the chance to read it. Recent academic critic Marco Abel points to the extent of "critical violence exerted" in response to a believed violent text (57). Before the book ever hit the shelves, upon the mere credibility the non-contextualized leaked passages, Roger Rosenblatt decried its publication in a *New York Times Book Review* article, "Snuff this Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?" Rosenblatt goes as far as equating the release of this novel with corporate greed, one of the major targets of the satire, on the part of Ellis's publisher (3, 16). This apparent call for censorship could not be simply dismissed as a partisan or publicity-seeking lark from an activist or name-seeking rogue journalist. While no stranger to controversy, at the time, Roger Rosenblatt represented the upper echelon of journalistic integrity as a prolific, award-winning, magazine writer, whose image has only been further lionized in recent years as a novelist and public intellectual. Solidified by the legitimacy of sources at the center of this controversy, considered to be bastions of free-speech, media figures such as Rosenblatt have forever fused the image of Ellis with his fictional characters. As a result, Ellis has often been relegated as a relic from the 80s "brat-pack" literati, along with his young, or youthful, contemporaries such as Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz, at the cusp of the American *fin de siècle* in which, in typical postmodern style, subsequent media coverage of the novel focused mainly on the scandal, as opposed to the text itself.

This critical shift of attention to a *meta* level in the popular press unintentionally served to sell more books while, unwittingly and unfortunately, removing the teeth from Ellis's satire. The intentional *evil* that takes place on the part of his protagonists, therefore, had become inseparable from the evil that Ellis is purported to have thrust upon our culture. While Ellis's intent was to shine a light on our unsettling familiarity with the cultural context that produces the perpetrators of the vile acts he depicts in his fiction, the outcome was to shift the blame to the author, as opposed to the institutions that create a world in which Patrick Bateman, and others of his ilk, could thrive. Unsurprisingly, the societal context to which Ellis takes his aim is the same context that attempts to suppress his critique. With its publication date of 1991 and the fictional events of the novel taking place roughly five years earlier, the Ellis debate and its residual impacts on literary production demonstrate the immense difficulty in satirizing a culture in its own place and time. Interestingly, the earliest critical work on Ellis has traditionally been conducted outside of the United States, possibly appealing to a prurient interest in American life, with Ellis as a sort of

documentarian of its amorality. It does, however, offer an antidote to the myopic readings of his texts at that time. Elizabeth Young, in *Shopping in Space*, the first serious collection of what was termed "Blank Generation" fiction, by she and her coeditor, Graham Caveney, in 1992, more accurately refers to Ellis as "Savagely puritanical" (40). Instead of regarding Ellis's texts as artifacts that offer insight into our cultural condition, many others chose to dismiss them as symptomatic of a collective obsession with extreme depictions of sex and violence.

Evil at the Intersection of the Fictional and the "Real"

The main deficit in the early, if not pre-natal, readings of Ellis's work is that they were, as a matter of course, incomplete. Critics decried the lack of a moral center in his fiction, while this *absence* was precisely Ellis's point. The subsequent discomfort, to put it mildly, with texts such as *American Psycho* is rooted in Ellis's intentional reversals of perpetrator and victim and the related associations with his reader. These reversals rely upon the reader's familiarity with the cultural signs that produce these characters. Specifically, this produces an *uncanny* level of familiarity, in the Freudian sense, with the perpetrator due to the reader's implication in the evils committed. While at first glance, one is led to believe that identification must take place on the part of the victim, it is the perpetrator to which the reader is grudgingly linked. In order to identify these concepts in Ellis's fiction, and the relationship between and among them, one must take a holistic view of Ellis's oeuvre, its related criticism, and how his public persona has contributed to them over the years.

The difficulties situating Ellis's work within the contemporary canon would be expected in light of the deleterious impact upon the focus his satire by the prevailing culture. Adding to the vastly distinct strains of literary critique, a number of genre critics read *American Psycho* as a work of gothic or horror literature. S.T. Joshi, in his examination of this work, points out that "a horror story is not necessarily a story in which horrible things happen" (188). While Joshi's assessment is correct, even in his disqualification of *American Psycho* as a proper genre work, this type of attention frequently served to ghettoize the text, outside of the literary canon, as a fringe novel. As the introduction to *Shopping in Space* admits, "In the mid-eighties, when the writers derisively known as the 'brat-pack' began to be published in Britain, critics were swift to describe them as lightweight and inconsequential without any consideration of the background to their fiction"

(Young and Caveney xi). More recently, while a great deal of scholarship on Ellis is still coming from abroad, now that there is a significant distance, at least in terms of temporality, from the era depicted, it is being presented in an accurate context as a critique of the United States in the late-capitalist era. In the decidedly polemic *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary*, published in 2011, Georgia Colby claims that, in *American Psycho*, "Ellis shows the effect of the reactionary politics of the Reagan administration on the consumer choices of the public, and points to the influence that the measures taken in the culture war period had on American society" (70). However, it is imperative that one take this line of thought further and discuss this novel, as well as Ellis's corpus as a whole, in terms of the discourse at work, and how his textual language serves to represent a specific time, place, and subject. The presence of evil is palpable from the outset in *American Psycho*. Opening with an admonishment appropriated from the third canto of Dante's *Inferno,* Ellis equates New York in the latter half of the 1980s with a forsaken underworld. As Bateman acknowledges, the initial sign is boldly, and publicly, represented: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab . . ." (3). From the novel's first scene, the reader is reminded of the textuality of Ellis's fictional landscape and the reader's presence within it.

While there is now a relative expanse of over thirty years between the time and place of Ellis's early work and today, his warnings about the direction of US culture have only become more prescient since then. The distance that Colby's analysis presupposes is additionally untenable because Ellis, his characters, and his themes are all part of the same, uncannily familiar, text. Ellis, viewed as inseparable from the characters he created, inevitably used this to his advantage as a self-promoting media figure. Correspondingly, it is clear that Ellis's intended reader is also a part of this overarching text. As James Annesley points out in another early analysis of the literary trend forged by Ellis and his contemporaries, "Blank fiction," in his qualification of Young and Caveney's term, "does not just depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language *of* its own period" (7). In terms of his frame of mind while writing *American Psycho,* Ellis, in hindsight, admits in a recent interview with *The Paris Review*, "I was pursuing a life—you could call it the *Gentleman's Quarterly* way of living—that I knew was bullshit, and yet I couldn't seem to help it" (180).

In terms of perpetration, if Ellis is guilty of anything, it is attempting the inherently challenging task of satirizing a culture through its own cultural signs. As Patrick Bateman muses in *American Psycho*, "Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?" (377). Although, at first glance, there is a sense of irony in Bateman making this observation, it does reflect one of the key elements of Ellis's writing—the ontologies of evil at work in contemporary society and the actions that produce those ontologies. As he does in the opening of the novel, Ellis concludes his text with another semiotic warning. Bookending the novel's textual surface, the sign that states "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" at the close of *American Psycho* punctuates the theme of the illusive nature of justice in a society that perpetuates violence and degradation (399). One of the most controversial aspects of the book is the lack of a resolution in which Bateman could be brought to justice. In this vein, Kathryn Hume makes a salient point in *Aggressive Fictions*:

> Instead of giving us the comfort of aligning with law enforcement, Ellis not only puts us nominally outside the law because of our narrative point of view but gives us a different sort of tingle as well. We put ourselves outside the 'laws of decency' by continuing to read, by letting those agonizing images enter and dwell in our imaginations. That, of course, assumes that the law governs what goes on in our heads, and the degree of discomfort we feel reading tells us just how much we have internalized such laws. (125)

The initial, reductive analysis of Ellis at the hands of the mass media as a source of evil is precisely the narrow cultural view that his work serves to critique. The literary reception, or lack thereof, of *American Psycho* was due in large part to the difficulty positioning it within the existing American canon. This novel was written and marketed as a book of "serious" fiction, not a genre or fringe work. The inability, or unwillingness, for critics to fairly judge Ellis is precisely a symptom of their respective culture's societal ills. To view ourselves in the mirror Ellis holds for us is to admit our own *evils*.

Anyone familiar with Ellis's oeuvre would be aware that the groundwork for the *familiar perpetrator* in *American Psycho* was firmly set into place years earlier in his first novel, *Less Than Zero*. Ellis's rise to fame and notoriety in the mid-80s and early 90s coincided with a glut of media attention being garnered upon the notion of celebrity wherever it could be found—including literature. In what appeared to be a paradox to those who were already skeptical about his talents,

Ellis seemed to encourage the publicity created by the same culture industry that he purported to condemn in his books. For someone who appeared to be building a literary career on satirizing commodity culture, Ellis seemed to fit right in with the prevailing media-constructed narrative. For Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), he chose to set the action, or, once again, inaction, in a fictionalized version of Bennington called Camden College, of which Clay is an undergraduate and, by extension, now a minor character. While weathering the controversy over *American Psycho* (1991), Ellis released a collection of previously-developed, interrelated short stories entitled *The Informers* (1994), taking time to process the media onslaught he apparently instigated before devoting serious attention to his next novel. As established earlier, even in the pre-publication stage of *American Psycho*, there were allegations in the national press concerning the book's apparent misogyny and its supposed endorsement of sexual violence.

The notoriety following the release of *American Psycho* seemed daunting to Ellis as he continued to work on his most ambitious project to that point, *Glamorama* (1999), in which he overtly focuses upon the celebrity-saturated culture of the time. The cause célèbre of *American Psycho* and the amount of success, and infamy, he had achieved at such a young age, contributed to his fictionalized memoir, or work of autofiction, titled *Lunar Park*. Released in 2005, it received positive reviews for its self-deprecating look at media-hype and a very personal view of his shifting position, both wittingly and unwittingly, within the prevailing landscape. Presenting this narrative within the frame of a former "bad-boy" writer, coincidentally named "Bret Easton Ellis" and retreated to the suburbs to raise a family, Ellis clarifies his position as an author who, like his characters, is trapped by the signs of his culture. Derived from his successful podcast, *White*, Ellis's first non-fiction long work was released in 2019. Most recently, *The Shards*, fist released in serial form on the podcast and subsequently published early in 2023, offers a fictionalized account of his time at Los Angeles's prestigious Buckley School, marking Ellis's return to the novel.

Squandering of Youth and the Evil of the Everyday

In advance of inquiring how contemporary society could produce Patrick Bateman, one must go back and closely examine the constituency of Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*. Youth, and the value of youth, has always been at the center of both Ellis's fiction as well as the conditions that determined it. Ellis wrote his debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, while an undergraduate

at Bennington College. He developed the project in a fiction workshop course taught by legendary non-fiction writer and novelist Joe McGinniss and populated by future literary *wunderkinder* such as Donna Tartt and Jonathan Lethem. With McGinniss's assistance, the novel was published in 1985, while Ellis was still enrolled at Bennington. Soon, the book garnered a great deal of attention, assisted by the big-budget, but loosely-based, Hollywood adaptation from 1987, catapulting Ellis to celebrity authorship at a very young age. In her generally positive *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani calls it "one of the most disturbing novels I've read in a long time" (32). Not long after, the young author, as a celebrity and burgeoning cult figure, was gaining as much attention as his book. This was a role, to Ellis's simultaneous detriment and benefit, which he relished.

Much to the chagrin of his early critics, but imperative to the fate of his characters, Ellis does not make use of a moral center in his work and there is no whitewashing of the social, cultural, and economic manifestations of this prevailing amorality. Ellis purposefully does not avoid the evil at work in his fiction. In fact, he forces one to confront it head-on, in terms of content as well as the residual effects upon the reader. Ellis writes about people with familiar qualities doing bad things and, as a result, his readers *feel bad*. In Marco Abel's estimation, in his consideration of the *affective response* to *American Psycho*, "[I]f nothing else, the value of the book is that it forces its audience to encounter the undeniably visceral response they have" (48). This does not mean, of course, that one should expect readers to attempt to replicate the evil deeds Ellis depicts, as several of his detractors warn. If a rationale is needed for his choice of subject matter, it is a fairer statement to say that these acts are being committed, literally and metaphorically, and it is Ellis's responsibility, and in turn, his protagonists, to report them. As Georges Bataille asserts in *Literature and Evil*, authorship requires "complicity in the knowledge of Evil" (ix). In his analysis, fiction is responsible for representing this "big-e" Evil through its inherent excesses. This is a direct response to Jean Paul Sartre's view of art's "moral" responsibility. Knowledge of evil, passed from author to reader is a means by which one can achieve *sovereignty*, which is for Bataille, in the aforementioned text, the realization of a heightened intellectual state (178). Though Ellis's work represents and reflects evil in both word and deed, as Bataille suggests, Ellis is not producing evil for its own sake. This evil is the mirror that Ellis holds to his own culture, as well as himself, in the guise of his protagonist. In "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille contends that "[h]umanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes

in principle *nonproductive expenditure*" (117). It is this nonproductive expenditure that Ellis is putting on display in these novels. The result of this waste, due to abject consumption, is the destruction of youth and the innocence associated with it. In a very literal way, these characters *have been sold a bill of goods* by the culture they inherited.

Long before his depiction of his Wall Street executive and serial killer, Patrick Bateman, and his heinous crimes, whether real or imagined, Ellis's work had always been steeped in evil,—actuated through both action and inaction. Confronting his reader with signs of the familiar, in which reading becomes a transgressive act in itself as suggested by Hume, Ellis implicates us in the narrative as well. As Ellis illustrates, our contemporary amorality is both pervasive and pervasively reproduced through mass media and its associated technologies. Clay, the narrator-protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, habitually watches music videos, one of which presents "buildings being blown up in slow motion and in black and white" (100). Patrick Bateman, in *American Psycho*, with the assistance of his VCR and the neighborhood video store, feeds his insatiable hunger for horror films and pornography. The deleterious and numbing impact of the proliferation of visual media forecasts our twenty-four-hour news cycle which provides endless repetition of tragic events, such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, until they are bereft of all meaning. In a decidedly *affectless* manner, Ellis's narrators speak in response to the discourse that envelops them, providing the reader with much knowledge about not only what they report but also *how* they report it. As opposed to presenting a wise-beyond-his-years main character exposing the phoniness in contemporary American culture through his inability to fit in, Ellis's protagonist offers an anti-Holden Caulfield in which a relatively vacuous character simply reports on society's ills, requiring the reader, as a constituent of the respective morality of the prevailing culture, to make their own judgements.

The loss of youth and its damaging impact upon contemporary society is a consistent thread running through Ellis's fiction, beginning with *Less Than Zero*. These texts, collectively, are emblematic of the natural progression of the evil inherent in the society in which Ellis situates his fictional avatars. The squandering of youth through the use of drugs and conspicuous sexuality is presented as a scourge upon our culture. There is no place for the innocence and purity of childhood and adolescence in postmodernity's flat, affectless world. Ellis's postmodern landscape acutely reveals the evil inherent in our society's view of youth. Following this theme throughout his novels, in the evolution from *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* to *American Psycho* and

Imperial Bedrooms, Ellis goes as far as showing us how disaffected youth inevitably become dangerous adults. Georges Bataille, in his assertion that literature is guilty of perpetuating evil, claims that "[l]iterature is a return to childhood" (x). Ellis's use of intertextuality emphasizes this notion within his postmodern milieu. Through the progression, or possibly regression, of Ellis's protagonist, Clay, for example, from an isolated college student in *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* into a savage narcissist in *Imperial Bedrooms*, one may trace a prime illustration of the impact of evil. Ellis's focus upon youth delivers a particularly salient warning about the direction of the contemporary American system of values. His portrayal of our children as drug-addled, oversexed automatons is reflective of the evil at work in our culture. The hedonistic impulses of his characters, and actions taken to fulfill these desires, both serve to facilitate and produce this evil.

In the absence of the moral certitude of the institutions of the family and larger community to rely upon, Clay and his contemporaries in *Less Than Zero* find themselves adrift in their most formidable years, attempting to moor themselves to the surrogate pleasures of sex and commodity. They appropriate their discourse from their culture, primarily through the mass media and consumer items. They eschew the values of the previous generation, which they find to be hypocritical, and accept *emptiness* as an alternative. As Clay vehemently states in *Less Than Zero*, "Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing" (205). In actuality, *nothing-ness* makes Clay happy. He is intent on removing all emotion from his life by disrupting his relationships with his sometimes-girlfriend, Blair, and apparent friend-of-convenience, Julian. When pressed by Blair at the end of the novel, Clay says, "I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care" (205). He is making a conscious choice not to care. He also, perhaps surprisingly, admits to the ability to feel pain. This may imply the existence of remnants of language at work in Clay, while quickly evaporating into the larger context of the Los Angeles cityscape. The presence of Blair and Julian in his life makes him feel insignificant precisely because they make him *feel*.

The Performativity of Evil in Ellis's First-Person Narration

In *Less Than Zero*, Clay attempts to construct his identity through a series of performative utterances to the reader that suggests a tension between *otherness from* and *incorporation with* the

prevailing discourse. This style of narration contributes to the novel's episodic structure and repetition of phrases and themes, which Annesley, citing David Pan, identifies as "the MTV style in Ellis's work" (90). In this way, Ellis employs a form of intermediality in which characters communicate through the use of song lyrics, sound bites, and catch phrases, lifted directly from the material they consume on a daily basis. According to James Annesley, "Blank fiction," as discussed earlier, "does not just depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language *of* its own period" (7). Ellis's characters, and the extent of their personal agency as a function of their performative speech, are linguistically limited by the signs of their culture. This sampling of the prevailing discourse reifies these subjects, renders meaningful communication virtually impossible, and makes them practically indistinguishable from each other. Their language, therefore, intrinsically tied to the respective subject, is *performative* in its response to these subjects' social context. As Annesley goes on to state, "Using a language that seems to resonate with the accents of commercial culture, these texts develop formal dimensions that appear, in some cases commodified and in others, part of a wider engagement with consumer culture" (8). The signs, both literal and figurative, composing these characters' environment continuously dictate their desires. They become walking advertisements for the lifestyle that is concurrently being marketed to them. In this way, Ellis relegates authority over his characters, and by extension his reader, to wade through the discourse that serves to constitute them. Presenting an image-saturated landscape in both form and content, *Less Than Zero* serves to interpolate one into a commodified culture that is as completely familiar to his reader as it is to his characters.

Ellis's characters, through their appropriation of the commodified signs that confront them, are able to comment on their culture while remaining firmly entrenched in the prevailing discourse. Critics frequently lament the seemingly endless listing of products in *American Psycho*. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent however that Patrick Bateman, the novel's narrator and protagonist, communicates something quite meaningful to the reader through this vast array of names. The names that form Bateman's language are not those of his friends, family, or coworkers—he barely seems to know those names. The names that populate this novel, and Bateman's consciousness, are those attached to designer apparel and goods. Even the most assiduous reader of *GQ* and *Stereo Review* would struggle to identify and visualize each item in Bateman's inventory with the level of exacting detail provided. In what has become his signature style, Ellis's text reflects the excess of 1980s materialism critiqued through the prevalence of the

commodity object, and the resulting power of its image, in contemporary society. In turn, within the world depicted in these works, relationships between subjects have been supplanted by relationships between commodities. In an extreme depiction of what Marx observes in the connection between producer and product, Ellis presents a culture in which commodity, and the image associated with it, has completely erased the subject. Joshi correctly notes that the listing of items "horrify in exactly the same way as his murders: by excess" (188). In order to differentiate themselves from the world around them and from each other, mass-mediated brands and labels are the only privileged signs available to these characters.

The first-person narrative presented in *Less Than Zero* and Ellis's subsequent works compels a form of performance from each narrator-protagonist. These characters are always *speaking*, and therefore always *becoming*. Their tenuous existences and apparent awareness of this state of being is imperative in placing the reader in a perpetual position of unease. In turn, Ellis tests his reader's moral certitude, particularly in terms of excess, drug-use, and prurient sexuality. As the "Ellis" narrator recounts in *Lunar Park*, a member of his publisher's editorial board was to have said, "'[i]f there's an audience for a novel about coke-snorting, cock-sucking zombies, then by all means let's publish the damn thing' . . . " (6). At the time of publication, many critics contended that Ellis's portrayal of youth signified a negative cultural shift in American values and voiced nostalgia for an earlier time. A careful reading of Ellis illustrates that his characters are also wistful for the past in the face of contemporary violence and despair. However, as Ellis demonstrates in his characters' performative use of language, the nostalgia they experience is simply for an image created, reproduced, and marketed by the mass media, bereft of any related referent.

The fragmented subjectivities of Ellis's characters are reflected in the apparent instability of their sexual identification. Their androgynous sexualities represent their immersion into the signs that encircle them and ensure their relative interchangeability. As Judith Butler contends in *Gender Trouble*, "[G]ender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (33). Clay identifies other characters in *Less Than Zero* through various sexual cues. This mode of discourse is clearly performative on Clay's part. Specifically, he remembers acquaintances by whether he has had sex with them or not. As he tells the reader, "I realize for an instant that I might have slept with Didi Hellman. I also realize that I may have

slept with Warren also. I don't say anything. They probably already know" (28). What is startling about Clay's statement is not his admission to sexual activity with both genders, but his apparently frivolous attitude about these choices. Again, Ellis plays upon the assumed, relatively middle-class, sensibilities of his readers. Here, Clay's performance is a response to what Butler refers to as the *compulsory heterosexuality* of contemporary society. In line with the concept of Annesley's theorizing of "blank fiction," one is provided with a prime example of these characters being written in the discourse of their society. Clay's indication of his bisexuality to the reader, however, is no different than the manner in which he would broach the subject with a friend. They live in this insular, somewhat incestuous society of the affluent enclaves of Los Angeles, in which this behavior is not only common, but apparently expected. In the context of Ellis's readership, these casual asides create alarm, precisely because they are so *casual*. Their seeming promiscuity, as a challenge to the supposed value of monogamous relationships, is a stark response to the compulsory heterosexuality that Butler posits.

In the absence of a moral center in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis compels the reader to respond as an arbiter of good and evil. The characters' obliviousness actually heightens the seriousness of the matter. At a party, Clay is informed that he cannot use a bathroom, "Because Julian and Kim and Derf are fucking in there" (35). Clay, unable to register shock or disapproval, responds with "Derf's here?" (35). In this case, Clay is made aware of a casual sexual encounter that involves three of his friends. Again, Ellis challenges the moral position of the reader in two ways. First, the reader is made privy to an act which one would be expected to consider objectionable. Then, to magnify the moral challenge, the reader is confronted with Clay's lukewarm response. Clay's gender is constituted through a series of *performative utterances*. Again, Clay is positioned as a removed observer. His reaction, or lack thereof, signifies this moral stance. For Clay, performative gender formation occurs not in what he does, but what he witnesses. In the case of the alleged *ménage à trois*, Clay does not directly observe this act, nor does he partake in it. He engages, instead, in the discourse that illustrates the overarching morality, or lack thereof, of his culture. Clay's culpability reflects the reader's culpability. There is no such thing as a passive observer in Ellis's work. Their sexualities are constituted by the milieu in which they inhabit. Clay's *lack* of shock is intended to elicit shock in the reader. By mediating the line of moral certitude, Ellis wants to test Clay's limits of acceptance while testing the reader's moral sensibilities. On the one hand, we are challenged to reject Clay for his amorality. At the same time, however, we are tempted to

care about him because of his apparent innocence, with which we identify. The familiarity with which we recognize Clay, particularly through the signs that constitute him, forces us to confront our own moral code.

The Sin of Omission Preceding the Sin of Commission

Throughout his oeuvre, the prevailing cultural media representation of Ellis's depiction of decadence and vacuity has directly fed into his work. Each of his subsequent books can be seen as a response to the reception of both the previous text as well as the various accounts of his personal life. Ellis relies upon one's awareness and familiarity of the signs that produce the mythologies populating his texts, including those at work on a larger meta-level. In 2010's *Imperial Bedrooms* Ellis goes as far as directly responding to the film adaptation of his first novel, which Hollywood attempted to sanitize and recast as a cautionary tale against drug abuse. Early in *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay talks about the time many years before the novel takes place when he and Julian were watching the movie version of *Less Than Zero*, which he admits is loosely based on their experiences. Julian ruefully laments to Clay, "They killed me off" (9). In the film, Julian's death seems to represent a moral consequence for a life of drug addiction and hustling. In actuality, not only was the character of Julian "killed off" in this adaptation, but Ellis's moral challenge was eradicated from the narrative as well. Ellis capitalizes on this familiar cultural touchstone to hold the mirror before which his readers must make their own moral judgments.

In a very literal way, the statement about Julian has been *underwritten*, in Georgina Colby's use of the term, by the rewritten text of the cinematic adaptation, in which it is both accentuated and modified. Colby, in her discussion of underwriting in his work, claims, "Ellis, through the process of double-voicing, writes narratives below the surface narrative of both his work and of the contemporary culture of which his works are (intentionally) products" (5). Clay is clear, however, that Julian's eventual injuries and textual death were the result of drug addiction and prostitution throughout the earlier narrative. Physically, Julian has become both a commodity and a casualty of the prevailing culture. The subsequent, underwritten, entry in *Imperial Bedrooms*, however, sheds additional light on Julian's situation and, in turn, the major themes of the book. Although Julian is still alive while viewing the film with Clay and the others upon which the adaptation was supposed to have been based "on a warm October night three weeks prior to its

theatrical release, in a screening room on the 20th Century Fox lot," in the sense of being a breathing organism, he no longer exists to Clay in the way he once was (6). This discourse is taking place outside of the boundaries of Julian in Clay's consciousness and therefore outside of the events that perpetuates his textual existence. Julian's erasure has been ensured by the failings of his friends, family, and the institutions that have purported to protect him.

Ellis's cultural critique is based upon his reader's appreciation of his doubling of characterization and one's willingness to essentially "play along" with the joke. In this way, Ellis compels one to look at the lack of morality reflected in the actions of the characters and the society they inhabit, as well as textual effects of evil in a literary sense. This is represented by both Georges Bataille's transgressive approach to evil, as well as Ronald Paulson's more classical definition, which he presents from a decidedly moral distance. The loss of youth, and the perceived residual loss of *subjectivity*, results in a social and political chasm in which destruction and consumption are the only available means of exchange. When Clay realizes that he and Rip, a major source of the prevailing evil in both texts, are actually driving on a dead end in *Less Than Zero*, Rip requests that he continue driving. When Clay tells him, "But this road doesn't go anywhere," Rip tells him that all that matters is that, "Just that we're on it, dude" (195). This is a poignant representation of the mediated discourse of their society and these young subjects. Attempting escape is precisely the wrong action; their condition must be embraced.

The children of Ellis's fiction are largely progeny of the Original Sin of the previous generation. Their parents' worship of material goods and social status has produced a cold urban landscape and a generation of young people who are unable to connect with anything except for objects and labels. Indeed, these brand names represent the shared language among this collective society. One's familiarity with this nomenclature allows for communication among Ellis's subjects. Concordantly, this obsession with *surface*, and the identification of one another by means of the superficial perpetuates evil through their gradually fragmenting subjectivities. Citing the *OED*, Paulson claims that *evil* can be categorized as either *suffering*-evil or *doing*-evil. He defines suffering evil as "the condition of being unfortunate, miserable, wretched (as in evil health), a victim of calamity and misfortune" (2). He goes on to state, "An extension of suffering-evil (death, pain, natural disaster, murder), doing-evil has tended to designate the suffering of one sentient being imposed by another; it is the pain that matters and the fact that it is deliberately inflicted (as opposed to a natural disaster or accident)" (4). Ellis's characters frequently blur the lines between

suffering-evil and doing-evil, causing his reader to question the apparent reversals between victim and perpetrator. One may be led to believe that in *Less Than Zero*, Clay is responsible for the evil befallen his circle of friends through a sin of omission. His guilt is much deeper than that, however. He is not simply reporting the conditions of a nihilistic society. His desire "to see the worst" is both affecting and facilitating evil (172). Clay is not an aberration. He is not an anomaly. He is the natural product of his environment—inseparable from his surroundings. The same can be said of the textual world of the book itself, which revels in the excesses of its characters. The reader is therefore placed in the uncomfortable position of determining the extent of culpability for an entire society—a society that is totally familiar.

In line with the signs with which they are constituted, Bret Easton Ellis's characters are the ultimate consumers. They engorge themselves with media, drugs, and luxury items. They also seem to have an insatiable appetite for sexual consumption, beginning at a very young age. The sexualization of youth, a major theme in Ellis's writing, is frequently presented as a source of evil. Again, these are the signs that encircle, define, and serve, however tenuously, to connect them. Deviance on the part of the young people in *Less Than Zero* seems to be directly attributable to the lack of active parenting and the seemingly unlimited availability of financial resources and recreational drugs. The opening scene of the novel illustrates this overarching theme. Upon his arrival from LAX, Clay flatly informs the reader, "Nobody's home" (10). Clay has very little interaction with his family with the exception of shopping excursions and the occasional tedious meal. It should be noted that Clay's family name is never mentioned in the novel. This signifies his lack of identification as the only son and heir to his father. Clay's parents are rarely provided a direct quotation in *Less Than Zero*. The few occasions in which his mother is reported to speak to her children are delivered through Clay's consciousness. The grandparents are the only family members besides his two sisters who provide any significant dialogue, and that is only through flashbacks from Palm Springs. In one notable scene, upon approaching his mother's bedroom, Clay notices that his sisters are "leafing through old issues of *GQ*, watching some porno film on the Betamax with the sound turned off" (75). Again, media and technology, and their prurient uses, are described as accessories to sexuality. As Nicki Sahlin points out, "A large part of the psychic horror forming a strong undercurrent in the novel is the tendency of those who should be protectors and caretakers to act instead as predators and destroyers" (35). In the absence of traditional parenting, and the correspondingly implicit moral guidance, children are left to simply consume.

Pornography serves as wallpaper, while boredom is sated with fashion magazines. In this scene, one of his sisters offers, eliciting no reaction from Clay, that "she hates it when they show the guy coming" while they watch the pornographic film (75). In terms of those that reside in this privileged world, according to Elizabeth Young, "Ellis's own response to their behavior, and this remains constant throughout his work, is essentially one of puritan disgust" (25-26). Ellis plays upon the reader's expectations concerning a moral framework, but there may not be the necessary distance between his characters and their actions to present a "puritanical" response. It is left to the reader to distinguish between right and wrong based upon what one brings to the text. Clay finds it relevant to report upon his sisters' conduct, but provides no response to them or the reader. He also, at least within the context of the narrative, does not disclose his knowledge to any parent or authority figure. Ellis's indictment of contemporary morality and the associated infiltration of evil is established in the unmoored lives of these adolescents.

Ellis presents evil as a conflict between the sacred and profane in contemporary life, largely subverting our expectations about what literature can and should do. He juxtaposes our traditional values with the affectless consumption of the postmodern subject. Ellis relinquishes the authorial voice to his characters to amplify their atonal sensibility. Although these characters engage in evil deeds, they derive no pleasure from them. In fact, they merely find themselves falling deeper into their own personal hells. According to Andrew Delbanco in *The Death of Satan*, "The question of where responsibility lies for the perpetration of evil is, of course, an ancient one; but the brazenness of these disavowals is new, and it is one of the most striking features of contemporary culture—a mutant form of irony, but a form nevertheless" (215). Degradation of the sacred, therefore, results from the condition in which the individual is unable to release the object of desire and in which liberty, in terms of clarity of consciousness, is only achieved through death—a specter of the bodily death that is always lurking under the surface of Ellis's work to match the preceding spiritual death of his characters.

Loss of Innocence via Authorial Absence

Consistent with the discourse of the postmodern world his work inhabits, Ellis purposefully relinquishes authorial voice to his characters and, by extension, his reader. Employing a first-person narrative in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis continues to challenge his reader's expectations

concerning victim and perpetrator. In *The Accursed Share, Volume 1*, Georges Bataille asserts the following: "The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed" (59). Victimization is rooted in the excess that constitutes the characters of *Less Than Zero*, as well as all of Ellis's subsequent work. In this way, Ellis raises numerous questions about the level of agency on the part of the victim. To a large extent, Ellis is arguing that the victimization of the *Other* leads to the victimization of the subject and that, as a function of society, all parties are complicit in this relationship. Looking back upon Old Testament tradition, Ronald Paulson maintains that "crimes against the social order, the kingdom, and the family" in which "there was no victim, in the sense of some one person injured, there was a corruption of the whole body politic" (62). As mere signs within the consumer culture, the subjects that populate Ellis's recycled landscape are to be consumed as readily as a magazine or pop song.

Ellis's reliance upon contemporary cultural signs situates his fictional world in a specific time and place. The built-in obsolescence of these references reflects the fleeting relevance of the culturally familiar music and images that define these young characters. The recurrence of images that have a significant impact upon Ellis's own youth, such as Elvis Costello, emphasizes that the voices of these narrators speak for this specific generation. Representations of musician Elvis Costello operate on a variety of levels in this novel in terms the power of the *familiar image* upon how these characters view themselves and their outlook for the future. Again, Ellis is relying upon his reader's awareness and understanding of the relevance of these signs. The title of *Less Than Zero* is appropriated from Costello's song of the same name, "Thus both the book's title and its singer are second-hand," according to Elizabeth Young, "and revealing the way in which Ellis's teenagers feel themselves to be at the *end* of things" (22). When Clay arrives at his empty home, commencing his Christmas vacation from his Eastern school, Costello is the only familiar image there to greet him: "Elvis looks past me, with this wry ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window" (11). A clear distinction is drawn between the "Elvis" of Clay's generation and that of his parents. Since Clay's only exposure to religion is the chance viewing of a television preacher, in his mass-mediated world, Costello takes on a deified role for Clay. Awoken by unusual sounds coming from the windows of his house, Clay states the following: "It wakes me up and I sit up in bed and look over at the window and then glance over at the Elvis poster, and his eyes are looking out the window, beyond, into the night, and his face looks almost alarmed at what it might be

seeing, the word 'Trust' above the worried face" (63). Each time Clay fixates upon the poster, his mind turns to his childhood friend, Julian. For Clay, this image on his bedroom wall is a signpost serving to direct him. In the absence of parents, both physically and emotionally, Clay relies upon the sage advice of this icon. "There's an old, expensively framed poster of The Beach Boys hanging over Rip's bed," Clay observes, "and I stare at it trying to remember which one died, while Rip does three more lines" (50). Clay's attitude signifies an absence of meaning in the icons of his parents' generation. The illusion of youthful innocence, once imbued in the Los Angeles lifestyle by such media images as the Beach Boys, no longer has meaning for Clay's generation. These signs are only relevant in their death. As James Annesley elucidates, Clay exhibits an "implicit hostility towards contemporary culture and an anxiety about conditions in the late twentieth century" (86). On one occasion, when he becomes "tired of watching videos," Clay reports that he is watching two televangelists "talking about Led Zeppelin records, saying that, if they're played backwards, they 'possess alarming passages about the devil'" (87). Clay goes on to say that one of them "then begins to talk about how he's worried that it'll harm the young people. 'And the young are the future of this country,' he screams, and then breaks another record" (87). Here, Ellis lampoons the culture wars of the 1980s concerning music and other forms of popular entertainment. On the one hand, he is showing how these texts that were vilified by certain members of the "Religious Right" actually do contribute to evil, though in a way that would not have been identified by their detractors. On the other, he is presenting their discourse as just another cultural sign that is indistinguishable from the media it purports to disparage. The evil, therefore, is entrenched in the polyphony of voices that encircle Clay and his generation. Not only does Ellis require his readers to make moral judgements for these characters, but he also relies upon them to translate these signs in order to make those judgements, fully interpolating them into the narrative.

Clay's affectless narration reflects a boredom and malaise that comes from his recycled, mass-mediated existence. This nihilistic attitude is rooted in the *death drive* posited by Freud. The *ennui* exhibited by Clay and his friends is sated, however temporarily, by instruments of mass media. As a result of his consumption of the violent cultural signs presented on television and in the print media, Clay is obsessed with destruction and wants to remain in Los Angeles just as long as he can withstand the ensuing damage inflicted upon him. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud identifies death-instincts that serve to bring back an earlier state of being. As Freud contends,

"They operate against the purpose of the other instincts, which leads, by reason of their function, to death . . ." (40). He connects these death-instincts to the sexual-instincts in their relationship to the destruction of the object. In the case of Clay, death is a manifestation of a desire to return to an earlier state. However, this is a decidedly ambivalent desire since there is no available moral alternative. Although Clay does not provide a direct critique to the evil he witnesses, he does frequently look back to what he considers having been a more innocent time in his life. The novel is punctuated by Clay's memories of childhood excursions in Palm Springs. There is a palpable sense of innocence and love presented in these flashbacks, clearly absent from the present time. Clay states, albeit in his typically ambivalent manner, "*I wanted to remember the way things were*" (44). However, as the flashbacks are presented, it becomes clear that, even in this earlier time, there were premonitions of horror on the periphery of his existence. It appears as if there was a looming monster poised to strike at his family and, as a result, Clay's childhood innocence. Clay offers the following memory: "*There'd be these strange sounds and lights next door, and I'd go back upstairs to my room and lock the door and finally fall asleep*" (70). In one of his most descriptive recollections from Palm Springs, Clay shares an early memory of learning to drive at the age of fifteen. As he approaches a car accident, which he first believes is a bonfire, he sees a crying Mexican woman and "*two or three kids*" sitting by the flaming wreck (76). Although he wonders why no one has stopped on the highway to help, Clay speeds off after initially slowing down. He admits, "*I had an urge to stop, but I didn't*" (76). Later in the day and into the next, Clay becomes concerned that a child had fallen victim to the accident. As he speculates, "*Maybe some kid, thrown through the windshield and who'd fallen onto the engine, and I asked my sisters if they thought they saw a kid burning, melting, on the engine and they said no, did you?, neato, and I checked the papers the next day to make sure there hadn't been one*" (76). After that experience, Clay admits that he began collecting newspaper articles reporting horrific maimings and deaths, some accidental and some purposeful. As he recalls, "*I collected a lot of clippings during that time because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected*" (77). These photographic images of human death provided by the mass media represent the Freudian drive on Clay's part to return to an inorganic state.

The desire to return to a regressed manner of existence, manifest in the *death drive*, is reflected in the compulsive behaviors of Ellis's characters toward self-destruction and moral decay. The impulse to experience death through the observation and collection of violent, and

familiar, images, and the incessant repetition of these behaviors is apparent throughout Ellis's work. In this way, these subjects are directly confronted with the source of their fears. The mechanization of urban life assists in their reification. To a large extent, particularly in the case of Southern California, evil is represented by the influx of people into the cities and the resulting destruction that ensues. This concept of evil is also frequently aligned with the fear of impending tragedy in *Less Than Zero*, particularly as a component of the urban lifestyle. As Clay keeps reminding himself, from first line of the novel, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (9). This sentence becomes a mantra for Clay. In response to his lack of a functional home life, Clay fears relationships with other people. He does not trust his friends or his family. Ruminating about a band named "Fear" that is scheduled to perform, Clay tells us that "Fear never shows up and the party ends early" (87). This specter of fear is repeated throughout the novel. In one of the essays in *Shopping in Space*, Graham Caveney juxtaposes the media's interpretation of the California lifestyle with its all-consuming influence upon the American sensibility arguing, "The co-existence of ominous portents and plush materialism suggests that the key to the myth of LA is to be found in its fears" (125). Clay's fears are rooted in his inability to forge authentic relationships. The preoccupation with death and decay among Clay and his acquaintances serves to interpersonally disconnect them from each other. Someone named Spit adamantly testifies: "I don't keep dead animals in my room anymore" (79). When Clay stops into a convenience store, he reports that "the checkout clerk is talking about murder statistics" (74). It seems like everyone is very literally simply passing the time until death arrives. As a result, the primary goal for the youth of Los Angeles is merely the desire to leave an attractive corpse. According to Young, "One of the central issues in Ellis's novel is how the self-indulgent paradise of California teen-hood is simultaneously the Gothic hell that Clay observes" (25). Again, the pastiche of familiar cultural images, collected and curated by these characters, serve as a self-imposed prison, in which the reader finds themself trapped, as well.

"Disappearing" into the Prevailing Narrative

Despite his own indiscretions, largely influenced by his environment, Clay aptly serves as a judge of his family and friends. Even though he is complicit in the behavior of his contemporaries, Clay manages to maintain a decided distance. Through the ironic sensibilities of

his reader, this combination of culpability and detachment as it relates to Ellis's engagement with evil becomes increasingly apparent throughout Clay's narration. Andrew Delbanco examines the relationship between the postmodern sense of irony and consciousness. This view of the self as a function of language, according to Delbanco, "is a way of thinking about the self that is incompatible with personal responsibility" (214). The knowledge that he will be returning to school at the end of his Christmas break provides Clay with a means of escape. This is presented in stark contrast to the fate of his friends. Clay frequently describes Julian as "looking almost dead" (91). His own image of himself, however, distorts as he becomes increasingly engaged with his surroundings. Clay admits, "Sun is flooding the room through the venetian blinds and when I look in the mirror it gives the impression that I have this wild, cracked grin" (40). According to Elizabeth Young, Clay's "very name denotes adolescent malleability" ("Vacant Possession" 23). Again, indicative of Freud's *death drive*, the narrator with which Ellis compels his reader to identify is represented as an inert, affectless mass. Clay's unformed, almost embryonic personality accentuates the distinction between his home and Camden College. His lack of affect in his reportage serves to accentuate the other characters' transgressions and, in turn, heighten the darkly satirical elements of the text. With almost documentary-style precision, Clay takes equal care in his descriptions of both the mundane and the exceptional. As Alan Bilton contends, "Clay's quiescence forms the moral focus of the novel; in the light of his passivity, the reader is forced to assume an active moral position—to draw the line somewhere" (203). In *Less Than Zero*, as well as the rest of Ellis's work, the actions are extreme, but his characters' reactions to them are decidedly not. As discussed earlier, Ellis defies his reader's expectations through the absence of a moral center to his novels. In presenting these narratives through the discourse of "blank fiction," that would be an impossibility. There is, however, a morality at work here. The *absence* of an intervening voice represents a firm moral perspective and Ellis challenges the reader to make moral judgments along the way. Only through his implication of the reader, Ellis is able to critique the prevailing culture. Time and again, one comes to realize that the most troubling part of Ellis's work is that the fictional world he portrays is so eerily reminiscent of our own.

Clay is frequently disturbed by the events he witnesses, but never enough to intervene. At one party he attends, there is a group of young people viewing what is purported to be a snuff film. Although he decides to "sit in the sun and light a cigarette and try to calm down," Clay says nothing while they discuss how much the video costs and debate its authenticity (153). In one of the most

horrific scenes in the book, Clay finds himself witnessing the gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl. When he questions the morality of this, Rip replies, "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (189). When Clay informs him that he already has everything, Rip asserts that he doesn't. Upon Clay's confusion about what he could mean, Rip states: "I don't have anything to lose" (190). Like Ellis's reader, Clay receives knowledge through the confidence of an external source. Clay seems only able to interact with information as it is reported to him, outside of his immediate sphere of experience. The demise of Clay's friends is never presented first-hand. He only learns about the fate of his cohorts through rumor, gossip, and conjecture. In this world, people just disappear.

The recurring theme of disappearance represents Clay's view of the emptiness of his society. Clay first encounters the signs that become another mantra for him throughout the novel on a roadside billboard. As he dutifully reports, "All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light" (38-39). Clay, among Ellis's other characters, frequently exhibits an apparent confusion between mass media representations and authentic existence. He looks to commodified depictions of culture, such as a poster of Elvis Costello for the "Truth." The inability to gain any useful knowledge from other people further isolates them. As Clay testifies, "Whenever I'm on Wilshire or Sunset during lunch hour, I try to make eye contact with the driver of the car next to mine, stuck in traffic. When this doesn't happen, and it usually doesn't, I put my sunglasses back on and slowly move the car forward" (41). This sense of isolation, even among millions in Los Angeles, convinces Clay of the unreal nature of his environment and those that inhabit it with him. As previously discussed, people are as readily, literally, labeled as mass-market products. These labels represent the sense of isolation experienced by Clay and his resulting inability to connect with other people. Clay states, "Trent stops by and tells me about how 'a couple of hysterical J.A.P.'s' in Bel Air have seen what they called some kind of monster, talk of a werewolf. One of their friends has supposedly disappeared" (77). In a culture where people communicate through rumor and conjecture, it is appropriate that this is how the Clay is informed of the danger inherent in his existence. Again, nothing is authentic; all information is transmitted second-hand, but still quite familiar. In place of the lost referent, the familiarity of the image serves as a suitable identifier.

The fear of "disappearing" is the only feeling keeping Clay engaged in the events occurring around him. This absence of individuality informs the shared language among his friends. In Clay's circle, people are never addressed by more than a first name. Identity is usually relegated to a violent pseudonym such as Rip or Spit, or some derogatory categorization. Not only does Clay not intervene in the violence that these names represent, he also clearly possesses a voyeuristic sensibility about the evil befallen upon others. As a result of their perceived interchangeability and insignificance, these characters have already disappeared. This blurred line between truth and fiction frequently operates on textual level in *Less Than Zero*. In his description of a recent session with his therapist, Clay states, "I'll start to laugh for no reason and then feel sick. I lie to him sometimes" (25). The truth is irrelevant here, because people's motivations are not connected to the trustworthiness of the information they receive. When Clay's friend, Daniel, calls to ask for advice about whether or not to contact a former girlfriend he might have impregnated, Clay is "surprised at how much strength it takes to care enough to urge him to do so" (64). By the end of the brief conversation, of course, Daniel "says that he doesn't see the point" (64). When Clay learns that Julian is involved in hard drugs and prostitution, he decides to accompany him on one of his calls to "see if things like this can actually happen" because of his repeated desire to "see the worst" (172). Clay's interest in Julian's demise is admittedly prurient, as opposed to any actual concern with his well-being.

The gradual loss of self, memorialized as a constant reminder on a billboard, as a public signifier of commerce, follows Clay throughout Los Angeles. Immediately after seeing the "Disappear Here" sign for the first time, Clay states the following: "[I] keep looking into the rearview mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone's following me" (39). His anxiety is due to his repression of the belief that he is not simply going to be able to resume the life he left before leaving for college and that his friendships do not have the meaning that he believes they once did. As Freud states, "[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The 'Uncanny'" 220). The only remaining connection between Clay and Julian, if there ever was one, is the repetition of a memory of what may have or have not once existed in an imagined past.

Confronting the Evil in the Familiar

The value of youth and innocence are gradually, but impactfully, diminished throughout Ellis's oeuvre. Moving from *Less Than Zero* into *American Psycho,* Ellis shows us how disaffected youth do become dangerous adults. Youth, and the desire for youth, is manifested in the signs that constitute the culture that defines Ellis's characters. The postmodern subject, ascribed by those signs, is presented as an object of pervasive evil. One of Ellis's major themes, and the source of much misguided criticism, is the inescapability of this dominant discourse. Although our culture defines subjectivity through language, rarely are we forced to confront its effects on us. When we do recognize these aberrant elements in our society, it is always from an outside, decidedly moral perspective. This is simply another way of separating ourselves from the destructive behavior. The mirror that Ellis provides through his fiction forces us to reconcile our actions as inscriptions of a larger cultural text, in which the functions of victim and perpetrator are upended in unexpected, and respectively impactful, ways.

Squarely situated in a time of social and moral crisis in our history, the trajectory of evil through a confrontation with the familiar at work in Ellis's texts suggests how we might move forward. While Ellis challenges the conventional notion of authorial voice as a force of agency, he does offer a salient warning concerning our greater cultural context. In the case of Clay as the adolescent, and Patrick Bateman, along with the elder Clay, among others, following him into adulthood, it is the lack of interest in the crimes they witness, and potentially participate, which appears to be more tragic than the crimes themselves. The abject apathy among his characters is the familiar source of evil at work throughout Ellis's literary project. As Terry Eagleton observes, "In a curious sense, evil is a protest against the debased quality of modern existence" (119). He continues with the following: "By setting its face against the spirit of utility, evil also has a seductive smack of radicalism about it, since utility lies at the root of our kind of civilisation" (120). The contemporary notion of evil has been colored by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in which the "axis of evil" is a political signifier used to describe enemies of the United States from abroad. Collectively, our focus has moved from transgressions within our culture to those who appear to challenge the Western, and by extension morally superior, way of life. At the turn of the millennium, we are seeing evil becoming increasingly politicized to an extent not witnessed since Reagan's vilification of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," in an era thoroughly interrogated in Ellis's early work.

Bret Easton Ellis is, in Georges Bataille's terms, pleading guilty and he is speaking for us all. However, for the most part, his plea has fallen upon deaf ears. The personal vilification of Ellis and subsequent misreading of his work have stunted the impact of a serious indictment. In Ellis's fiction, evil is represented by our corruption and loss of contemporary youth, as a direct result of our consumer culture. As with any effective satire, Ellis's critique is illustrated in an extreme, but solidly recognizable, way. As we navigate the boundaries between perpetrator and victim, Ellis's admonishment becomes acutely apparent. In a post-9/11 world when "evil" is seen to be something that exists merely outside of our society, as opposed to firmly within, these warnings are particularly salient.

[1] For a comprehensive study of the representation of Donald Trump in *American Psycho*, see the first four essays in *Trump Fiction: Essays on Donald Trump in Literature, Film, and Television* (Lexington Books, 2019) by contributors David Markus, Caitlin R. Duffy, Clinton J. Craig, and William Magrino.

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