The Return of the Father

Lunar Park Renegotiates the Moral Issue

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According to Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of postmodern Western culture, the World Trade Center's twin towers epitomized the present day function of symbols. Reference to the "real" has become irrelevant; culture deals only in the hyperreal, in the copy of a copy. The twin towers perfected this concept as two symbols that have no referent – they only refer to each other.

> The fact that there are two towers signified the end of all competition, the end of every original reference. Paradoxically, if there were only one, the WTC would not embody the monopoly, since we have seen that it becomes stable in dual form. For the sign to remain pure it must become its own double: this doubling of the sign really put an end to what is designated. (69)

The 9/11 attacks and the destruction of the twin towers were thus an attack on the core of the postmodern West, as Baudrillard himself later observed. And the question many asked after the attacks and are still asking today is – why did we not see this coming? Obviously because we looked away. We were too preoccupied with something else. Postmodern literature has spent decades playing with the ideas of the philosophers that were its contemporaries, most notably exploring the idea that symbols only refer to themselves and each other that Baudrillard claims the twin towers demonstrate so strikingly; the production of text in the absence of any tangible concept of "reality" to refer to. And this is not at all limited to the academic world – in his 1975 essay *Faith in Fakes*, Umberto Eco argues that American culture, *especially* its "low-brow" component, has become completely obsessed with the hyperreal, with a self-referential set of symbols and that in such a world, moral codes become ambiguous, if not altogether absent. He examines first American wax museums and their reproduction of historical sites constructed so faithfully that he concludes that "[t]he sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement." (7), but then observes that many of these wax museums treat fictional worlds in the same way, placing them so closely to the reproductions of historical scenes that "the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds has been definitely undermined." (14) "[T]he thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed." (16) The "fake", to adopt Eco's terminology, thus has the power to erase the distinction between reality and fiction, and when it is the reproduction of something real, it attempts to supplant it; Eco mentions reproductions of the Venus de Milo with arms as an example. After an analysis of Disneyland, a place that exists to make a fictional world appear as real as possible, Eco finally turns to religion and the problem of the representation of God and the Devil, i.e. good and evil, if it must conform to the rules of hyperreality where the fake is more real than the original. Even if it is done obliquely, reproductions of these concepts, be it for actual religious purposes or in the form of film characters such as the animatronic shark in *Jaws*, trivialize them and effectively make them equals.

> Alongside the Good Whale there is the restless, plastic form of the Bad Shark. Both at the same level of credibility, both at the same level of fakery. Thus, on entering his cathedrals of iconic reassurance, the visitor will remain uncertain whether his final destiny is hell or heaven, and so will consume new promises. (57)

The world of hyperreality has thus effectively abolished the notion of morals by erasing the distinction between good and evil. Postmodernist philosophy would of course reject such dualistic concepts to begin with, but perhaps the problem is that they have never been replaced with anything but the ambiguity and

uncertainty Eco detects. Interestingly, this rejection of morals is reflected in how much postmodernist literature deals with what Freud postulated is the point of origin of the moral code in our culture – the symbolic father figure as that which imparts rules and punishes us for transgressions. The fathers are often absent, and the protagonists are left to their own devices in the construction of their identity, which is then seldom guided by the quest to determine what is right and or wrong. If all this, however, has led to the 9/11 attacks and our current age of religious fanaticism, one might ask if the father does not need to be reincorporated into our thought in some form.

This is precisely what Bret Easton Ellis attempts in his novel *Lunar Park.* His protagonist, a fictional version of himself, is far from being a son without a father. His father is a monstrous presence overshadowing his life, haunting him long after his death, and he struggles against this influence only to become the same man and repeat his father's mistakes in his treatment of his own son, Robby. The central tragedy of the novel is that Robby will eventually abandon Bret just as Bret abandoned his father, and while there are clear signs that this is going to happen, Bret refuses to see them until it is too late, much like America perhaps refused to see the 9/11 attacks coming. Instead, Bret engages in a game of doublings, and this is where *Lunar Park* plays with the notion of symbols that only refer to each other and the idea that reference to the real is thus irrelevant in literature. The novel is filled with various monsters Bret is haunted by that are really all doubles of each other and Bret himself, and the doubling process extends to the level of the text as well as it doubles not only itself but also other texts, most notably by Stephen King, who, according to Ellis, was a major influence on his writing Furthermore, true to Eco's *Faith in Fakes*, the novel makes it very explicit that it is not interested in what is “real” and what is not – the reader never learns if any of the ghosts and monsters are meant to actually exist or merely be paranoid delusions on the narrator's part; the question is never asked because it is irrelevant. Any attempt to play detective with the plot and determine what is meant to be reality and what is fantasy fails very quickly as Ellis makes a point of having the narrative contradict itself. What matters is not the objective reality of Bret's experience, but the text he produces. And text is not produced when the writer absorbs and digests reality to shape it into narrative and cleverly comment on it through metaphor and allegory; *Lunar Park*'s fictional Bret writes when he does precisely the opposite – look away from reality and play with symbols which are all each other's doubles and do not refer to anything else. Thus, Ellis has created a protagonist who is in a sense an embodiment of postmodern thought – obsessed with the self-referentiality of symbols and actively undermining any reference to the real – and this protagonist's life ultimately ends in tragedy. In fact, at the end of the novel, he ceases to exist in the physical sense and becomes a part of his own text. And all of this is always narrated in such a way that the reader can clearly see that the doubles Bret is preoccupied with are simply different versions of each other so as to emphasize that Bret is ignoring the obvious for the sake of maintaining his existence as a writer. We can read this as a comment on the wilful ignorance for the sake of maintaining its own self image on the part of postmodern America that has also led to tragedy.

This being clearly an ethical comment, it is only natural, at least based on Freud's theories, that Ellis would reintroduce the father as a haunting, rather than an absent presence. He even goes so far as to make explicit reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through an epigram and place names such as Elsinore Lane and Fortinbras Mall, and much like Hamlet, his fictional Bret character is haunted by the

ghost of his father and refuses to do what he must do for reasons that are difficult to discern. Ellis thus makes it clear that he is invoking a classical ideal, the heroic concept of a moral code here, precisely that which the postmodern age rejects. Of course *Lunar Park* never goes so far as to say postmodern thought must simply be replaced again with such ideas, it merely attempts to renegotiate the role of such values in the post-9/11 world, and it does so by acting out the postmodernist thought processes and confronting them with a father figure. And as mentioned above, we need not go back all the way to Shakespeare to see the father as the representative of morals; Freud directly links the father to the notion of morals and punishment in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, and Stephen King plays with the same concept very clearly taken from Freud in *The Shining*, not the only novel of his *Lunar Park* references, but the most obvious case.

To Freud, the notions of conscience and guilt, and thus by extension morals, the sense of right and wrong, are closely linked with the father figure, both for the individual and for entire societies. Conscience develops first as a form of fear of "Liebesverlust"; what we consider evil is not that which is harmful to ourselves, but that which results in our being deprived of the love of others, and as social beings, we are dependent on others, if only for protection. And the original protector whose love we depend on is of course our father. We follow the rules he imposes on us out of our fear of losing him, and the feeling of bad conscience after a transgression is merely the fear of its being discovered and the inevitable consequence of losing the love and protection of the father. This is how the guilt mechanism works in children, but Freud goes on to claim that it actually remains just as simple in most adults, with the sole modification "dass an Stelle des Vaters oder beider Eltern die grössere menschliche Gemeinschaft tritt." (88) If our sense of right and wrong is only based on the fear of discovery, it will naturally be weak, and Freud argues that this is the reason why the rules of our society are so frequently broken. A true sense of conscience and guilt only begins with the internalization of authority in the form of the Superego. However, even at this more developed stage, he still relates conscience and guilt to fate as the expression of God's will, an authority figure that is merely a replacement of the father, the original authority figure.

> Das Schicksal wird als Ersatz der Elterninstanz angesehen; wenn man Unglück hat, bedeutet es, dass man von dieser höchsten Macht nicht mehr geliebt wird, und von diesem Liebesverlust bedroht, beugt man sich von neuem vor der Elternvertretung im Über-Ich, die man im Glück vernachlässigen wollte. (90)

Freud is mainly interested in the notion of fate because he wants to explain other complexities of the notion of morals, but for present purposes, it is important to note that no psychological explanation of moral behavior seems to be possible without the literal or figurative influence of a father figure of some sort.

In fact, a few pages after the considerations outlined above, Freud concludes from a summary of his thoughts on conscience and guilt as mainly a kind of economy of aggression "dass das Schuldgefühl der Menschheit aus dem Ödipuskomplex stammt und bei der Tötung des Vaters durch die Brüdervereinigung erworben wurde" (94), speaking of "Menschheit" collectively here and still applying the father figure as a factor, thus elevating it to a universal societal force.[1] Since ethical behavior is primarily

1 There appears to be an underlying belief in a collective psyche at work here that seems somewhat esoteric today, of course.

the suppression of an aggression that we instinctively want to act out, the relationship to the father becomes ambivalent; we love him for the protection he provides, but hate him because he forces us to suppress our aggression. This ambivalence is what then produces remorse when the father is killed, and ultimately leads to the production of the Superego:

> Diese Reue war das Ergebnis der uranfänglichen Gefühlambivalenz gegen den Vater, die Söhne hassten ihn, aber sie liebten ihn auch; nachdem der Hass durch die Aggression befriedigt war, kam in der Reue über die Tat die Liebe zum Vorschein, richtete durch Identifizierung mit dem Vater das Über-Ich auf, gab ihm die Macht des Vaters wie zur Bestrafung für die gegen ihn verübte Tat der Aggression, schuf die Einschränkungen, die eine Wiederholung der Tat verhüten sollten. (95)

To Freud, this is the essential form of the conflict between Eros and the Death Drive that all societies inevitably produce; we want to love and bond with others, but we also have a drive to destroy. In its most fundamental incarnation that originally produces the moral code that is necessary for any society to function, he expresses it through our relationship with our fathers, both at the individual level and at the level of the collective psyche. How much of this model can be applied in a productive way to sociology and psychology today is for scholars of those fields to decide; the notion of the father as the point of origin of morals and the resulting question of what happens to our moral codes when the father fails to fulfill his function as “Urvater” imparting the rules our society needs to function or is removed altogether, however, produces interesting results when applied to the function of father figures in literature after Freud, by authors who are likely to be familiar with his ideas.

Stephen King's 1977 novel *The Shining*, which can safely be assumed to have been a major influence on *Lunar Park*, examines what happens to the family unit if the father no longer fulfills his function as the source of the moral code his son is to live by and instead rules by force for the sake of brutality. Interestingly, publication of the novel coincides with the Vietnam war – a time when the American government's moral authority had become questionable in the eyes of many, and appeared to be using force more for the sake of maintaining power than any “greater good”. King portrays Jack Torrance's father as little more than an overbearing bully that terrorizes his wife and children. The most vividly described memory Jack has of his father is a scene at the dinner table where he beats his wife with a cane, “for no good reason at all, suddenly and without warning.” (336) Jack remembers his father as a kind of mindless monster, “snoozing or nearly snoozing” at the head of the table, his eyes suddenly opening, “glittering with a kind of stupid, evil petulance”, flickering from one family member to the next, then suddenly grabbing his cane and smashing it into his wife's face. “Each soft *whump* against his mother's body had been engraved on his memory like the irrational swipe of a chisel on stone.” (337) At the risk of reading too much into King's choice of words here, the shaping effect of the father's hand, like a chisel shaping stone, becomes an “irrational swipe” here, failing to fulfill its purpose as that which defines and imparts the moral code. Jack's mother responds in a similarly irrational manner, getting up as her older sons are subduing her husband and babbling “Who's got the newspaper? Your daddy wants the funnies. Is it raining yet?” The aura of irrationality, if not insanity in King's description of the incident emphasizes this father's failure to fulfill the function Freud would have assigned to him. Vengeful and frightening the “Urvater” may be, but Mark Torrance's violence is merely an end in itself. The mother is

not being punished for any transgression, all we get from the father's mouth is the “take your medicine” mantra which Jack himself will later repeat along with “whelp” and “puppy”. All he does is inflict punishment and remind his family that they are inferior “puppies” to him, but there is no transgression against any rule that they are being punished for; in fact, there does not seem to be a rule to break. And he is never punished for his own transgression of unprovoked violence against his wife – she later defends him, and the examining doctor knowingly ignores the clear signs of domestic violence.

Shortly after reliving this memory, Jack hears his father's voice coming out of the CB radio, attempting to teach him how to “be a father” – apart from briefly mentioning that his son is trespassing (which is at least a reference to a rule being broken), the voice talks mainly about how his wife and son are what prevents him from being successful as a writer and says they must be killed “[b]ecause a real artist must suffer.” (341) This hallucinatory version of Jack's father, the internalized reflection of him that, according to Freud, *should* act as an ethical Superego has nothing to offer but the selfish desire to be successful and sees the family as an obstacle, a view that is repeated many times throughout the novel. Jack struggles against this idea, which will ultimately drive him to assault his wife and son in a similarly deranged manner to his father, repeating his “take your medicine” line – he destroys the CB radio from which the voice comes and reminds himself of the love he feels for his family, but ultimately, he succumbs to the drive to kill them. King thus expands on Freud's original notion of the father figure in two ways: in Jack Torrance, he creates a father who is also shown to be a son, and he answers the question of what happens if a father fails to fulfill the cultural role that Freud assigns to him. Mark Torrance, the “Urvater” within the confines of the narrative as the novel never mentions his father, is a completely immoral character who uses violence for what appears to be pure gratification rather than to enforce a moral standard, and his son, unable to construct a moral identity for himself, ends up following in his footsteps.

In later postmodern literature, the father is often absent altogether, and this coincides with an absence of morals. The protagonist of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, to cite a popular if not entirely canonical example, is a man abandoned by his father and consequently struggling with his identity and shaping his life after furniture catalogs in the absence of a human role model. His world is distinctly devoid of morals as his job consists essentially in deciding whether companies should recall products they know to be defective and potentially life threatening based on simple economic considerations. And his imaginary double Tyler Durden's notion of cultural progress is even more immoral as it is centered around the notion of human sacrifice. As he tortures the narrator with a chemical burn, he explains how soap was discovered as a result of the remains of human sacrifices seeping into rivers, which leads to what seems to him the only logical conclusion: “It was right to kill all those people.” (77) There are no moral principles at work in this conception of culture, only technological process through pain and suffering. Later on, Palahniuk relates the father directly to God, echoing Freud:

> The mechanic says, “If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?” [...] We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. (141)

In other words, in the absence of a father/God, the question of morals, damnation or redemption in the

religious terminology employed here, becomes irrelevant. All that matters is getting the father's attention, be it through right or wrong.

And therefore, Tyler Durden is mostly concerned with making noise. He first invents Fight Club, an arena for men to engage in the kind of primal masculine behavior that their lives have made impossible. There is no higher goal here except for the fights themselves, and Tyler and the narrator agree that if there is a goal, it is only self destruction. Later, Tyler invents Project Mayhem, a terrorist group whose goal, and this is where the film adaptation strangely deviates from the novel, is the erasure of history: “The last shot, the tower, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, will slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target.” (14) The film adaptation contents itself with an assault on capitalism; the novel's Tyler Durden wants to wipe out culture itself by destroying its museums. We note in passing the somewhat chilling coincidence that the building to be destroyed with bombs is a tower; if nothing else, Palahniuk seems to agree that skyscrapers make for a good symbol for the culture he is concerned with.

The novel's ending reinforces the focus on the absent father figure that is somewhat less apparent in the film. The bombing fails and the narrator, after attempting suicide, is institutionalized. However, he convinces himself that he is dead and believes the psychiatrist he has regular sessions with is God.

> I've met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him, and God asks me, “Why?” Why did I cause so much pain? Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? [...] but God's got this all wrong. We are not special. [...] We just are, and what happens just happens. (207)

He has to believe he has finally found God, of course, as the goal of Project Mayhem was to get God's attention, but the moral questions the psychiatrist asks him fall on deaf ears, and both the author and his protagonist can only rephrase them with the most scathing sarcasm. This man without a father is incapable of understanding the notion of morals; culture is about progress through destruction to him, and his relationship with the father/God figure is based solely on getting its attention any way he can.

Almost a decade after the publication of *Fight Club*, Bret Easton Ellis reintroduces the father into the narrative. Unlike the absent father of so much postmodern literature, the father figures of *Lunar Park*, (both its protagonist Bret and his father) are felt to be intrusive by their sons and they, much like Jack Torrance, try to escape their influence. What will eventually become of Bret's son Robbie the novel does not tell us, but Bret himself shares Jack Torrance's fate in that he effectively becomes his father. The similarities to *The Shining* are hardly coincidental. Ellis states in an interview on his official website that *Lunar Park* originally began with the intent “to pay homage to a genre that meant a lot to me growing up (Stephen King was an idol of mine)”, there is an explicit reference to *The Shining* when Jayne refers to Bret's behavior as his “Jack Torrance routine” (219), and the obvious fact that both novels are set in haunted mansions hardly needs to be pointed out. But *The Shining* is not the only King novel that *Lunar Park* references. In one of the many strange haunting moments at the Halloween party that starts the novel's plot, Bret hears the song “Pet Sematary” by the Ramones, the lyrics of which are based on the King novel (64). This works both as a “real life” reference to King and as a loose foreshadowing moment to various events that will follow in *Lunar Park.* The central element of King's *Pet Sematary* is an ancient Native American burial ground where locals bury their pets to bring them back to life. There are no

undead pets in *Lunar Park*, but both the family's dog Victor and Sarah's Terby doll take on monstrous roles, and the fake cemetary set up for the Halloween party functions precisely as a burial ground from which the dead rise again, which is not only alluded to by the Ramones song, but also a rather obvious reference to another King novel, *The Dark Half*. Thad Beaumont, its protagonist, is a relatively unsuccessful writer under his own name, but also writes crime novels about a killer named Alexis Machine under the pseudonym of George Stark, to much commercial success. When the truth about his double identity is discovered, he holds a fake funeral for the fictional George Stark. However, Stark takes on physical form, rises from his grave and begins killing everyone he considers responsible for his "death". The similarities to the Patrick Bateman killings in *Lunar Park* hardly need to be belabored here, but Ellis goes so far as to practically steal an entire scene from King when he has Bret find an open grave, noting how the tracks he sees are only possible if something has dug its way out of the ground. Furthermore, Bret's description of the writing of *American Psycho*, where he claims that Patrick Bateman visited him at night and forced him to write the novel during what seems like blackout episodes to him, also seems clearly influenced by *The Dark Half.* The unabashed references to King reflect the relationship between the fictional Bret and his father, of course – Ellis repeats the writing of his role model King, a father figure of sorts, through these plot elements, just as his Bret character repeats his father's actions, and there is little doubt that the reader is meant to notice this, otherwise Ellis would hardly mention King's name on his website.

This brings us to the role of the father figure in *Lunar Park* and from there to the many doubles in the novel in general. Ellis essentially takes the father/son relationship between Mark and Jack Torrance in *The Shining* and makes what he considers its essential features explicit, thus enabling himself to take the element one step further. Just like Jack Torrance, *Lunar Park*'s Bret is a son desperately seeking to escape an overbearing, immoral father who eventually finds himself doomed to repeat his father's mistakes in his treatment of his wife and son. However, while much of *The Shining* revolves around Jack's slow transformation into his own father, *Lunar Park* is much less interested in that process and makes the reader realize very early on that this is what will inevitably happen or may in fact have happened already – we learn in the first chapter that Bret's relationship with his father was troubled, and it becomes perfectly clear in the second when the interactions between Bret and the children at the Halloween party are described that he is a poor father himself. Halfway into the novel, Bret finally comes to the realization "I was now my father" (211), which seems all too obvious to the reader at this point. Bret is his own father's double. The same father/son relationship is used primarily as a source of horror by King; the inescapability of Jack's turning into the very thing he is trying to escape makes for a great amount of tragedy and foreshadowing-induced fear. Ellis, writing in the early 21st century, elevates this feature of *The Shining* beyond the mimetic level. The son's failure to define his own identity extends to the text itself in many ways.

Lunar Park's first chapter immediately begins the doubling process with its very first line, "You do an awfully good impression of yourself" (3), which the novel's protagonist then explains is "the first line of *Lunar Park"* and is repeated when the plot proper of the novel begins with chapter two. Thus doubling its own beginning, the novel effectively has no beginning anymore. The first chapter goes on to give an account of Bret Easton Ellis' career beginning with an examination of the opening lines of his previous

novels and leading up to the production of *Lunar Park*. The “autobiography” begins with what appears to be a true account, then gradually deviates from the author's life, effectively becoming another double. At the same time, it is carefully constructed so as to completely blur the line between fictional and real events; some elements, like the novels described, are clearly factual, others, like the preposterously exaggerated description of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks, are clearly fictional, everything else seems to hover between these two extremes, leaving us with the impression that it simply does not matter how much of it is “true”, which of the doubles is the “real” version. Having thus undermined the notion of the distinction between fact and fiction, Ellis wrily drives the final nails into its coffin on the last two pages of chapter 1:

> *Lunar Park* follows these events in a fairly straightforward manner, and though this is, ostensibly, a true story, no research was involved in the writing of this book. For example, I did not consult the autopsy reports concerning the murders that occurred during this period [...] (39)

If the novel is only “ostensibly” a true story, why would there be any research involved in its writing? Worse yet, the closing chapters frequently make reference to research, statements “pieced together” from various sources, giving reasons such as Bret not being able to remember certain events or not having been present when the statements were made, imitating a journalistic style, perhaps that of Truman Capote whom he invokes with his claim that “every word is true” (40). Not to mention that this claim almost directly follows the absurd admission “I'm semivague about the setting itself because it doesn't matter; it's a place like any other.” Contradictions such as this are ubiquitous in *Lunar Park*; the novel makes it absolutely clear that no amount of scrutiny will make it possible to piece together how much of it is fact and how much is fiction, how much of its protagonist Bret reflects its “real” author and how much of it is scathing self-parody. All of this seems to serve the purpose of showing that the distinction between reality and fiction itself is a meaningless doubling as it is so easily blurred, and the only one who fails to realize this almost until the end of the novel is Bret himself.

Bret will not and can not become aware that all of the various doublings that exist in *Lunar Park* are no more functioning dual distinctions than the distinction between the fictional world of the novel and the autobiographical reality it purports to contain for a very simple reason, however – without these doublings it is impossible for him to produce text. This is another point made very early in the novel that repeats itself throughout.

> It was at that moment in my lawyer's office at One World Trade Center that I realized [Jayne] had named the child after my father, but when I confronted her about it later that day, after we had tentatively forgiven each other, she swore it had never occurred to her. (Which I still do not believe, and which I am certain is the reason that the following events in *Lunar Park* happened – it was he catalyst.) (21)

In other words, the fact that Robby was named after Bret's father, making them each other's doubles in a sense, is what sets the narrative in motion. We should also note that Ellis has this scene take place at the World Trade Center, thus linking the doubling of his characters directly to the twin towers. And as is so often the case throughout *Lunar Park*, Bret refers to a what is little more than an assumption on his part as a “realization” of fact; another textual device that is ubiquitous in the novel and serves to effectively

erase the distinction between fact and fiction. And on the level of its narrative, Bret *has to* believe that Robby is his father's double because, as we will see below, it is such doublings that his ability to function as a writer depends on, so he simply chooses the version that suits him better because as he admits later, “as a writer you slant all evidence in favor of the conclusions you want to produce and you rarely tilt in favor of the truth.” (192) In other words, the question of truth is completely irrelevant.

Other doublings abound throughout the novel; the house on Elsinore Lane slowly transforms into the California house in which Bret grew up and later on, the entire landscape begins to transform into California. Bret sees palm trees springing out of the ground and hears the ocean, but he never seems to notice what it is exactly that is happening. The ghosts that are haunting him are doubles in various forms, there are two of them to begin with, one of which appears to be his father (and thus his own double), the other a creature he invented as a child to channel his fear of his father. The Terby doll, it will eventually turn out, frightens him because it reminds him of this creature, and he discovers that it originally came from Clayton, another one of his doubles.

Furthermore, there is the curious way in which the novel doubles the narrative of *American Psycho.* A chapter entitled “detective” introduces a character who poses as Donald Kimball; the character of the same name in *American Psycho* first appears in a chapter of the same title. “Donald Kimball” recounts a repetition of the murders in *American Psycho*, riddled with explicit references to the novel down to the page numbers. But later on, just as the autobiographical elements of *Lunar Park* deviate from its author's life, the murders deviate from *American Psycho*. Killings take place that according to *Lunar Park*'s Bret only existed in the original manuscript that no one but himself has ever seen, and while the police eventually apprehends Bernard Erlanger, who confesses to the murders, the fact that he could not have read the original manuscript is never explained, and Bret prefers to believe it was a physical manifestation of Patrick Bateman who committed the murders. Another one of many examples where *Lunar Park*'s plot remains simply contradictory and its protagonist chooses the more fantastic explanation, and another case of the text itself becoming a double, this time of one of Ellis' own novels.

All of these doublings serve the same purpose – they are what enables Bret to write. Ellis always makes it clear to the reader that what the fictional version of himself sees as doubles are not separate entities in any “real” sense, but the fictional Bret refuses to see this because he would cease to function if he did. When the narrative begins, he has effectively lost his ability to write and he needs a doubling of some sort to occur to regain it. Chapter 4 has Bret discussing the novel he is writing, *Teenage Pussy*, with great enthusiasm, but there does not seem to be a novel here. Bret has chapter titles and a series of scenes, mostly pornographic and/or misogynistic, that he wants to include, but all he can tell his agent is that he is “almost done with the outline” (95), at which time he feels the sudden urge for a cigarette, one of many instances of Bret drugging himself so as to not have to see the truth, albeit a minor one. There is no discernible plot, only a collection of scenes designed for shock value, a satirical comment on the part of Bret Easton Ellis on how *American Psycho* or his writing in general is often reduced to its “shocking” elements in the public eye – he has his fictional counterpart deteriorate into what his detractors (and worse yet, some of his fans) see in him. The only thing Bret is still capable of writing at this point is dreams for his psychologist Dr. Kim which he needs to invent because he no longer has any dreams, but she expects him to talk about his dreams at their sessions. We note in passing that this is yet another

way the novel undermines the distinction between fact and fiction; Bret is inventing “fake fantasies” because he no longer has any “real fantasies”. And later on, Bret explains that a dream is “what a novel should be” (368); dreaming and writing are thus interchangeable, and at this point in the story, Bret has to pretend to be dreaming.

Bret needs a doubling of himself to take place so that he can write again, the split with the writer voice in his head that exists through most of the novel[2]. And this doubling is brought about by the encounters with ghosts and monsters. The first indication of Bret's own doubling follows the nocturnal encounter with Sarah's Terby at the Halloween party in chapter 2; the next morning, in chapter 3, Bret “walked out of the room a ghost” (69) and then goes on to write about himself in the third person. In the same chapter, he finds the first traces of the house slowly morphing into his childhood home in California. After the second such encounter, he finally begins to “write” again; the writing is at this point made necessary simply by the fact that nobody will believe him that he has seen a ghost.

> I convinced myself that I hadn't seen anything. I had done this many times before (when my father struck me, when I first broke up with Jayne, when I overdosed in Seattle, every moment I thought about reaching for my son) and I was adept at erasing reality. As a writer, it was easy for me to dream up the more viable scenario than the one that had actually played itself out. (192)

Bret thus begins to construct a narrative to replace the monstrous episode that he believes to be the reality. He goes on to elaborate on how natural this is for him as a writer: “A writer's physical life is basically one of stasis, and to combat this constraint, an opposite world and another self have to be constructed daily”, in other words, writing and the creation of doubles depend on each other.

Soon after, however, Bret's production of a text to write over a “reality” he cannot face becomes troubled, and it is at this point where the issue of morals enters into the equation. When he meets Nadine Allen outside their children's school, she confronts him with what is perhaps the only major plot element in the fictional narrative that can safely be assumed to have the quality of provable fact, but Bret refuses to believe her. Young boys the age of their sons Ashton and Robby have been disappearing in the area, a story that Bret has been following in the newspapers with an uncharacteristically legitimate fatherly concern for his son. The general assumption is that the boys are being kidnapped, but Nadine has a theory of her own: “They're going to Neverland.” (201) She has found out the boys are actually running away from their parents. Bret, who has done the same thing himself, flatly refuses to believe this theory, saying it “just really doesn't resonate” (202) as if the explanation to be believed is simply the one that sounds best or makes for the best story. He prefers the dream he has been writing and realizes that this dream is now under attack and Nadine is not actually drunk, which was a comforting thought to him.

> The dream I had constructed so carefully was melting. I had to leave Nadine before it vanished totally, before it was consumed by someone else's madness. It was becoming Nadine's dream now, but the urgency in which she was relaying it to me had the horrible texture of truth. As I sat back down she said in a rushed whisper, “I think they're leaving us.” (203)

The “horrible texture of truth” Bret detects clearly indicates that he at least suspects that Nadine is right,

2 It is also interesting to note that the visual representation of the writer voice on the page, often on separate lines and in italics, is very much reminiscent of the same style element used by King in *The Shining*, invoking through the doubling of the fictional Bret and his writer identity the doubling between Bret Easton Ellis and his proclaimed role model Stephen King.

but chooses to believe his own version. This is what will ultimately lead to the tragic ending of the story when Robby leaves him, which leads to Bret's divorce and the complete destruction of the family he has tried to construct.

The refusal to see the obvious is thus what brings about the tragedy, and this behavior pattern is another element that repeats itself throughout the novel. It is not only Bret who will not see what is right in front of him, but the entire society *Lunar Park* depicts. The constant use of prescription drugs by virtually every character both for themselves and as a parenting tool is the most obvious example of this; when Bret recounts the summer before the events of *Lunar Park* and the process of learning the children's routines, he quickly turns to “the wide array of meds the kids were on” (37); they are a normal and accepted part of everyday life. Later on, Bret watches Sarah eat her candy as if it were pills, which Sarah explains she does “because this is how mommy does it when she's in the bathroom.” (141) Apparently the proper way to take your antidepressants has become one of the social norms that children learn from their parents. But for the most part, the cast of *Lunar Park* does not require drugs or alcohol to help them look away – they simply ignore what is right in front of them. Jayne notices that the paint is peeling off their house just as well as Bret does, but never seems to think about it, the ghostly footprints and the constantly rearranging furniture are noticeable to everyone, but they go ignored. And Bret himself fairly stumbles through the narrative with his eyes closed. Evidence of what he will find out towards the end is all around him and is presented in such a way that the reader can see it clearly, which serves to enhance the impression that Bret will not see it because he does not want to. The blank e-mails he receives regularly, for example, are first mentioned on page 90. At this point, we already know that his father's ashes were stored against his wishes at a Bank of America deposit box, but Bret does not make the connection.

> I had called the bank several times since I had an account at that branch (where my father's ashes were still stored in a safe-deposit box) but the bank had no record of these sent e-mails and patiently explained that no one could possibly be working at that hour (i.e., the middle of the night). Frustrated, I let it go. (90)

Bret is fully aware that the blank e-mails are essentially coming from his father's grave, but the connection is mentioned in passing, only for giving a reason why he would have an account with the particular branch in question. At the end of the same chapter, he at least becomes aware of another connection – the first e-mail he received was sent on the anniversary of his father's death, and all of them came at the precise time he died. But due to his hangover or using it as an excuse, Bret ignores the discovery and leaves his office instead. After this, it takes roughly 140 pages for him to come to the sudden realization that all of the e-mails had attachments – another clue he missed. The moment leading up to this is described as “a small implosion” that Bret “could actually feel happening [...] physically” (229); Bret is feeling the collapse of one of the forced doublings he has been maintaining in order to be able to keep up his narrative.

Another major issue Bret wilfully ignores is of course the fact that he is slowly turning into his own father. At the very beginning of the novel, he informs us, in a strange note in parentheses: “(Added fact: he also beat our dog.)” (8) It will soon turn out that Bret's relationship with the family dog Victor is not entirely untroubled either. There is a lengthy and emotional description of the negative and terrifying presence Bret's father was and of how Bret's only choice was to effectively run away from him when he

went to college. And the next chapter immediately sees Bret practically refusing to take on his role as a father. While the “added fact” above is something first time readers would miss, the previous chapter has prepared us to judge his behavior towards the children at the Halloween party based on his opinion of his own father and it is clear enough that Bret is repeating his father's mistakes. The similarities become even more clear later on when Bret's relationship with Robby is described in more detail. For instance, in chapter 1, Bret says of his success as a writer: “I became independently wealthy, I became insanely famous, and, most importantly, I escaped my father” (6) and goes on to describe his teen years, after his father had abandoned the family, as “darkened by his invisible presence.” (7) Bret's effect on Robby, “[...] you scare me. You're so angry all the time, I hate it.” (291), is “darkening” in much the same way his father's outlook tainted Bret's own. And the following description of his father's mindset bears a striking resemblance to Bret's paranoid behavior later on:

> This languid lifestyle, decadent and loose, never relaxed my father. He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury, no matter how mellow the surface circumstances of his life really were. And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way that we couldn't work ourselves out of – the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost. (7)

Very similarly, Bret finds himself in the quiet world of American suburbia but it never relaxes him any more than it did his father. He fantasizes about escaping back to New York City, clumsily attempts an affair with a college student and eventually lives in fear of the ghosts and monsters that haunt him and his family. As Jay McIerney sums it up in chapter 2 – “You don't know how to be a dad.” (56)

Perhaps even more obvious to the reader, and also ignored by Bret as long as he can ignore it, is the fact that Clayton is his double. During their first encounter at Bret's office, Clayton is described as wearing “a sweater I had once owned when I was a college student” (102) – not a sweater looking the same, but the same sweater. We learn that Clayton happens to share his name with a character from Ellis' first novel *Less than Zero* and ran away from his father, who wanted him to go to business school, to become a writer. Soon, Bret “realizes” that Clayton came to his Halloween party dressed as Patrick Bateman, who the fictional Bret at least claims was based on his father, making him another of Bret's doubles. Immediately after Clayton, who is essentially Bret during his college years, leaves, Aimee Light enters the room and Bret tries to recapture his own college days in yet another failed attempt to have sex with her. But instead, Aimee drives the point that Clayton is Bret's double home for us: Bret mentions his appearance at his party dressed as Patrick Bateman, to which she replies “I thought he looked a little like Christian Bale [...] But he also looked like you.” (109) At this point, the blurring of identities, Clayton, Patrick Bateman and Bret all being doubles of each other, becomes clear enough, but as Bret fails to see it, it is repeated in numerous ways throughout the novel. Bret later sees Clayton in the car with Aimee, followed by “I couldn't concentrate on anything except the fact that I kept thinking I had been in that car with Aimee Light” (148), and when he gets a hallucinatory phonecall and asks the voice if it is Clayton, it replies “I'm everything, I'm everyone. [...] I'm even you.” (297) And as Bret tries to trace the origin of Sarah's Terby doll, the writer he has split apart from himself into a voice in his head tells him to pick up the manuscript Clayton left at his office instead:

> Stop it, the writer interrupted. There is an empire of questions and you will never able to answer them – there are too many, and they are all cancerous. Instead, the writer was urging me to head up to the college. The writer wanted me to pick up the copy of "Minus Numbers" – the manuscript Clayton had left in my office. This would provide an answer, the writer assured me. But the answer would only lead ultimately to more questions and those were the questions I did not want answered. (276)

Reading this manuscript, which will later turn out to be identical to *Less than Zero*, would force Bret to see what every attentive reader knows at this point – that Clayton is his double. And since his reality would collapse if he followed this realization to the other questions he does not want answered, Bret pursues his Terby monster story instead, only to be led to Clayton again, as he is where the Terby originally came from.

Bret thus ignores all the evidence in order to maintain his imaginary doublings because it is what his existence and his ability to write hinges on until the narrative finally forces him to go beyond this state. Robert Miller, a "ghost hunter" of sorts that he has found on the internet, enters the story in chapter 26, and his intrusion leads to the collapse of all the doublings Bret has constructed. During the first encounter with Miller, Bret still tries to employ the help of the writer to get through the conversation, but immediately fails.

> I had somewhat prepared myself in the fifteen minutes it took to drive to Pearce, and I thought the writer and I had constructed a fairly coherent story that would move Miller to help me. But now that I was actually in front of him, I was embarrassed and I started stammering as soon as I opened my mouth. (332)

However, Bret does not need the writer to arrange the chaotic facts into "a coherent story" to convince Miller – he believes him anyway. On the following pages, he effectively deconstructs the world Bret's mind inhabits at this point. First, he talks about a videotape of an exorcism whose subject "began speaking backwards in Latin and then bled from his eyes and his head split open" (336) which he shows at lectures, to which Bret responds with disbelief; he is simultaneously forced into the position of skeptic, the opposite of what he was when he was the only one who believed in the ghosts he saw, and confronted with the notion of physical evidence for the supernatural, which he had never considered before. Miller then goes on to uncover various "coincidences", some of which readers are well aware of at this point of the story, others not. The hauntings usually take place around the time of Bret's father's death, 2:40am, Bret was born at 2:40pm, Patrick Bateman, who is also haunting Bret, was based on his father and is thus effectively identical with him, and later, moving more and more into the ludicrous, that TERBY spelled backwards is YBRET and the number of the house on Elsinore Lane is the same as Bret's date of birth. The conclusion being of course that Bret is the source of the haunting; all the monsters and ghosts are really products of his imagination. While all this is laid out in front of him, Bret feels his reality slowly dissolving. First "the diner had disappeared" (342), then "[t]he world no longer existed. [...] Everything was gone except for Miller's voice." (343) The rest of page 343 is almost all direct quotes, aided only minimally by repeated indications that Bret is whispering – on the level of visible text on the page, Bret and Miller have also been reduced to disembodied voices as Miller's discoveries cause reality to vanish. Finally, the chapter ends with Miller telling Bret who the source of the hauntings is – on a separate line, "You are." (345)

Bret's refusal to accept the obvious does not end here, however. Instead of coming to terms with what Miller has told him, he constructs another strange narrative which of course “I pretended [...] was a dream” (345) reminiscent of a science fiction or horror movie; Miller and his team of Ghostbuster-esque helpers enter his house, triggering another ghost apparition that ends with the ghost's face morphing from Bret's father's into Clayton's, which Bret realizes is his own, then turning into ash. Miller has to point out the obvious again when he asks Bret if his father was buried according to his wishes, which of course he was not; he asked for his ashes to be scattered, but instead his children stored them at the aforementioned Bank of America branch. The ghost story scenario – the dead man returning because he has not received a proper burial – could hardly be more classic, but Bret never noticed this before any more than he noticed any of the other obvious clues, and Miller forcing him to realize it apparently causes him to practically vanish as the chapter ends with Miller asking “Mr. Ellis? Are you here with us?” (357) as if he had disappeared.

And yet Bret tries to escape what he has discovered one final time. He flies to California, but the episode begins with a party so hallucinatory that it is as if there is no California to escape to anymore. At his childhood home, Bret finds the original *American Psycho* manuscript which leads to the final attempt of the text to double itself as a passage from the chapter “detective” is quoted, but this does not result in any new possibility for Bret to produce text, it only confirms what he has already known. Finally, he finds the short story where he created the strange hairy monster he has encountered in the hallway of the house on Elsinore Lane, only to realize that it *is* of course the Terby. The doublings are gone, and Bret cannot write anymore. In fact, he realizes that writing in the sense of constructing a narrative to force sense into something and thus escape from it is impossible:

> There were too many questions. This would always happen. The further you go, the more there are. And every answer is a threat, a new abyss that only sleep can close. No one would ever say, *I will show you what happened and I will make everything perfect by taking you to the vacant places where you won't need to think of this anymore.* (369)

The phrasing of the passage in italics summarizes the essential problem of writing; by constructing a narrative or a “dream” as Bret would have it, one only attempts to escape the chaos that is reality, to a “vacant place” where one “won't need to think of this anymore.” And this is impossible at this point in the story. Thus, Bret attempts to do the opposite and begins to write the story of Patrick Bateman's death, hoping to write him out of existence, but this fails as well and is marked humorously as it is written both in the third person (something Ellis has never done) and in the past tense (which Ellis never did before *Lunar Park*.) As Patrick Bateman burns to death, he reminds Bret that he is “everywhere” (369), and at 2:40pm, Bret sees Harrison Ford on TV in an old film repeating his father's name over and over.

Since Bret persistently refuses to accept what the reader has known almost all along and Miller has made clear enough for him, the final collapse of his constructed doubles must be forced on him violently. As he returns to the house on Elsinore Lane, he first sees the Terby merging with Victor in much the same way as he saw on one of his childhood drawings in the previous chapter. Victor and the Terby both being representatives of his paranoid “hairy monster” fantasy (after the encounter with the monster in the hallway, it is generally theorized that what Bret really saw was Victor), this is the first merging of doubles that he physically witnesses. The second takes place when Clayton crashes his Mercedes into

Bret's car and the two men finally become one – “[b]ecause Clayton and I were always the same person.” (383) And seconds before Bret finally, after refusing it repeatedly and running away from it all the way to the West coast, comes to this realization, something else occurs to him: “That was when I realized that there was someone else who was more important. “Robby,” I started moaning, “Robby...””(382) But now of course it is too late. Bret faints, and when he regains consciousness, Robby has run away. The one thing he should have seen coming and that he spent the entire story distracting himself from by indulging in his fantasy world of doubles, monsters and demons where he could be a writer has happened. Bret's marriage is dissolved and he returns to New York City broken, addicted to heroin and in a homosexual relationship. And after he is at least allowed to scatter his father's ashes as he had originally requested, his one moral act and the only one he is still capable of because it is never too late for it, he effectively becomes one with his text as he writes, addressing the reader asking for his message to be passed on to Robby, “he can always find me here, whenever he wants, right here, [...] in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*.” (400)

Bret Easton Ellis thus comments on the state of American culture before 9/11, taking a cue perhaps from Baudrillard with a character whose reality depends on the existence of doubled symbols that refer to nothing else, just as America is/was epitomized by the twin towers. Curiously enough, he does the opposite here of what Freud does when he bases his theory of the development of cultures on the development of the individual; Ellis sees a problem in his culture and exposes it by replacing the culture with an individual. His fictional version of himself is obsessed with doubled symbols, because it is these doubled symbols, which erase any reference to the real, that make the production of text possible for him. These doubles, however, are not really doubles but only different perceptions Bret has of himself (his father, Clayton, Patrick Bateman) or things that are products of his mind (the hairy monster, the Terby). Engaging the reader as a kind of active spectator, Ellis narrates in such a way that we can always clearly see that this is the case; Bret is immediately shown to be repeating his father's mistakes, Clayton is obviously a younger version of himself, and so on. Thus, we are aware that Bret wilfully ignores the obvious so as to be able to continue his game; he is repeatedly shown to intentionally choose fiction over reality because the question of what is real does not interest him. In fact, one of the few things he is clearly aware of is that a writer “you rarely tilt in favor of the truth” (192). The story you write is not the one closest to the truth, but the one that “resonates”, and as the writer voice says, “*explanations are boring.*” (367) When he can no longer look away, he either drugs himself or tries to escape to the other end of the USA; even after his encounter with Robert Miller, where he constantly finds himself wondering why the Klonopin he just took is not taking effect, he makes several attempts to restore his world of doubles where he can produce text until the truth forces itself on him in a violent car crash.

Such an outlook is devoid of any moral notions, and so the truth Bret should have realized, but chose to look away from haunts him in the form of his father; the source of the moral code both at the individual and the cultural level according to Freud. In various ghostly forms, Bret's father appears to him with a warning – the last word he utters on the video file attached to the blank e-mails Bret receives is his son's name, Robby. (237) But Bret does not understand the warning. Instead, he becomes preoccupied with “the anticlimax of not seeing what happened to my father at the moment of his death”. There are other warnings Bret ignores, most importantly when Nadine Allen shares her theory with him that the

“missing boys” are running away from their parents, until it is too late. Just as the twin towers collapsed, the doubles he so obsessively maintained collapse with violent force, and when he wakes up, his son has left him just like he left his father – the realization that he should have opened his eyes and seen comes too late.

One of the more astounding accomplishments of *Lunar Park* is that it makes this point without seeming overly moralizing. In this regard, it benefits from Ellis' typical laconic sense humor; so much of *Lunar Park* is self parody that Ellis hardly seems a preacher. And he never makes the mistake of pretending to be able to go completely beyond postmodern thought, be it because much of the novel's narrative actually revels in playing with it or because it gives no final answer and certainly, as mentioned above, does not suggest that we return to archaic heroic ideals. It merely suggests that sometimes, maybe there are truths that we must see. Bret should have seen that his son would abandon him. America should have seen that it would be attacked. The thought models of our culture cannot be allowed to become so absolute that we cannot at least acknowledge this possibility.

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