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“I’m not lost anymore:”
Hyperreal Self-Realization amidst Hostile Father-Son Relationships in *Lunar Park*

Bret Easton Ellis, author of seven books, including *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, currently generates more interest and controversy for his abrasive, insightful Twitter feed than any of his published writing. A *Vulture* article even declared in its title that “Bret Easton Ellis’s Real Art Form Is the Tweet.” He has come under fire for tweets celebrating J. D. Salinger’s death, offending people’s personal taste (for example, on April 12, 2011, he tweeted “I like the idea of ‘Glee’ but why is it that every time I watch an episode I feel like I’ve stepped into a puddle of HIV?”), insulting people who disagree with him by implying they are “wusses” or “snowflakes,” and most recently, insinuating that Kathryn Bigelow’s films are only popular because she is a “very hot woman” director (“An Apology”). In response to the backlash of his tweets about Bigelow, Ellis published an apologetic article in *The Daily Beast*, in which he describes his tweets as “just flashing thoughts, immediate responses to cultural stimuli floating in the air, allowing me to unleash the mind of a consciously groomed brand built for outrage and skepticism” (“An Apology”).

In the same article, Bret says “No one asked me to write this [apology]. I simply write something like this when I’m in pain” (“An Apology”). He uses Twitter in the same way. More important to Ellis than stirring up controversy with outlandish tweets is conducting self-analysis on such a public, community-based platform. Even the article apologizing to Bigelow is more about excising Bret’s own guilt and regret than it is about repairing the public’s opinion of him. *New Republic* wondered if “perhaps Ellis’s Twitter account is indeed conceptual art or a public version of the writer’s notebook” (Malone). But in any case, these “pop-cultural observations, L.A. vignettes, and world-weary little outbursts” shared with over 400,000 followers seem to have replaced Ellis’s need to write new books (Grigoriadis). On December 4, 2012, Ellis admitted as much via Twitter: “FYI: There. Is. No. New. Novel. Being. Written.” His horde of

followers is merely the audience for Bret's main project: talking through issues in his own mind and life. In other words, Ellis performs self-analysis on Twitter using the hyperreal Internet community as a supportive audience.

In this way, Ellis's Twitter use only continues the project of his 2005 novel, *Lunar Park*. "I write books to relieve myself of pain," he said, reminiscent of his statement in *The Daily Beast* article. "That's the prime motivator. Period" ("Interview"). However, though this project is one of self-analysis, it still requires a supportive community to be successful. Attempting to perform self-analysis in total isolation is much more likely to result in failure than working within a helpful community. Thus, the last line of *Lunar Park* speaks directly to the reader and asks for her help: "So, if you see my son, tell him I say hello, be good, that I am thinking of him and that I know he's watching over me somewhere, and not to worry" (*Lunar* 308). Now, Ellis asks for help—even if it requires no more effort than clicking the "follow" button—every day on the more obviously communal, virtual spaces of social media.

Filling in the Blank

Lunar Park came as somewhat of a surprise upon its publication. Often described by Ellis as part Philip Roth, part Stephen King, the book is a supernatural, psychological thriller about a haunted house—starring a quasi-fictional Bret Easton Ellis as narrator. After a lengthy, exaggerated description of Bret's vault to fame and subsequent collapse into drugs and depression, he marries actress Jayne Dennis and moves to the suburbs with her, where he tries to connect with his son, Robby, and is haunted—literally and symbolically—by the ghost of his father.

Until 2005, Ellis had been mainly considered under the umbrella of 'blank fiction,' which Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney describe as "a flat, affectless prose which dealt with all

aspects of contemporary urban life: crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay and fashion-crazed nightlife” (Young xii). *American Psycho*, Ellis’s most famous and most controversial novel, is the epitome of blank fiction. The fight between feminists who saw the book as “a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women” and Ellis and his defenders is well-documented (Leo 23). Ellis describes Patrick Bateman’s complete existential despair, emptiness, hatred of yuppie culture, and even his appalling crimes of rape and murder in the deadpan, matter-of-fact way blank fiction requires. The first-person, present tense style in which Ellis writes prevents him from adding an explicit moral critique to Bateman’s actions. As “it becomes clear that our own eyes are the eyes of a character in a novel,” the book, “which begins with the imperative to ‘abandon all hope’ and ends with the bleak statement, ‘this is not an exit,’ effectively traps the reader within the confines of the text” (“Right Here” 3).

Understandably, readers often recoil from being so closely associated with a demented serial rapist and murderer such as Patrick Bateman. The easiest way out is to blame the novel for endorsing the violence and hatred of its main character. However, “far from endorsing the worst aspects of a greedy and corrupt consumer society,” *American Psycho* fulfills the calling of blank fiction to “constitute a revealing critique of this society and illuminate all its darkest, weirdest corners” (Young xiv). Georgina Colby reads Ellis’s novels as “a contemporary form of refusal” in which he follows “a process of underwriting by which he critiques the sociopolitical structures of late capitalism” (Colby 1). Writing in first-person, present tense is crucial to this project of “documenting the cultural conditions of the past three decades,” because it allows Ellis’s own commentary to exist implicitly, not explicitly in the text (Colby 2). Ellis does not allow Patrick Bateman a critical voice, but his “complex act of underwriting” creates one for itself (Colby 2).

Yet even Ellis cannot quite reconcile with the depths he sunk to in the violent scenes in *American Psycho*. While he was writing *Lunar Park*, he reread *American Psycho* and said “I can’t believe that I wrote that. Looking back, I realize, God, you really sort of stepped over a line there” (Wyatt).

In *Lunar Park*, therefore, he transcends the blank fiction genre, eschewing the present tense, affectless style of *American Psycho* and allowing the true meaning of the book to exist on the surface of the narration for the first time, instead of being buried under satire. In *Lunar Park*, Patrick Bateman and other monsters from Ellis’s previous writing come alive and terrorize him, but the writing of the book itself traps them in text just the way the reader was trapped in text in *American Psycho*. *Lunar Park* responds to, overwrites, and redeems *American Psycho*, the way a son’s life can redeem a father’s sins.

Therefore, *Lunar Park* represents growth in Ellis’s perspective as an author. On page 375 of *American Psycho*, Ellis writes, “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in,” but on page 172 of *Lunar Park*, he directly counters this by saying “I understood that there was another world underneath the one we lived in. There *was* something beneath the surface of things” (original emphasis). *Lunar Park* is Ellis’s first book in past tense, which allows “a seeming sincerity and closeness” impossible in blank fiction and provides the reader with the necessary distance to judge characters and actions, instead of being trapped on the surface of the present tense (Baelo-Allué 175). This distance also allows “characters to evolve and learn from their actions in a chronological plot” (Baelo-Allué 177). These stylistic changes directly and specifically counteract *American Psycho* and allow *Lunar Park* to lead its narrator to an ending featuring forgiveness and redemption. Finally, fourteen years after *American Psycho*’s original publication, Ellis has found an exit.

Two Brets Become One: *Lunar Park* as Autofiction

Instead of being considered as blank fiction, *Lunar Park* belongs in the genre of autofiction because “it is a novel labeled as fiction in which one of the characters (in this case, the protagonist) has the same name as the author” (Nielsen 131). Nielsen further defines *Lunar Park* as an “overdetermined autofiction,” which urges “readers to read...as at once fictional and nonfictional” (Nielsen 134). Naomi Mandel similarly defines autofiction as “a work of fiction that cannot be dissociated from autobiography,” and therefore states that “as autofiction, *Lunar Park* invites investigation of the biographical as well as the autobiographical (“Introduction” 114). The autofiction genre provides the critic with a free pass to do something that usually requires much research and proof to be acceptable: treat the author and the narrator as one and the same.

Once one sees the narrator Bret Easton Ellis and the author Bret Easton Ellis as synonymous, a great pressure is lifted in one’s attempt to interpret *Lunar Park*. Most reviews and blog posts about *Lunar Park*, as well as interviews of Ellis concerning the book, fixated on finding the line between what is biographically true and what is fictional invention in the novel. Labeling *Lunar Park* as autofiction makes that project not only unnecessary, but also impossible. Jeff Karnicky, using Derrida’s definition of “testimony” as a replacement for the term “autofiction,” points out that “attempts to separate fiction from fact in *Lunar Park* are continually undermined” (Karnicky 118). Ellis the author did little to clear things up; in fact, the marketing campaign surrounding *Lunar Park* exacerbated the confusion. A promotional website, www.2brets.com, featured “two versions of Bret Easton Ellis, illustrated by a head shot of the author split by a jagged line” (Karnicky 118). A fake webpage was also created for Bret’s fictional wife, Jayne Dennis. There were some “FBI files regarding Ellis and his role in the

events that took place in the house” published online. As a final theatrical touch, Ellis “claimed that he would be doing the book tour in character as the Bret Easton Ellis of the novel but, after two interviews, he became exhausted and changed his mind” (Baelo-Allué 176).

Ellis teases those who wish to parse “truth” from “fiction” in the novel because such a wish misses the point of the novel. “My worry is that people will want to know what’s true and what’s not,” he was quoted in *The New York Times*. “All these things that are in my book—my quote-unquote autobiography—I just don’t want to answer any of those questions. I don’t like demystifying the text” (Wyatt). Not only does he not like to answer those questions, he simply cannot answer them because, as *Lunar Park*’s placement within the autofiction genre demonstrates, the Bret of the novel *is* the real life Bret. The Bret Easton Ellis of *Lunar Park* is forever tied to the “real” Bret Easton Ellis’s identity.

Therefore, all the critics complaining about the confusing, unresolved identities in *Lunar Park* do not concern Bret. “You do not write a novel for praise, or thinking of your audience,” he said. “You write for yourself; you work out between you and your pen the things that intrigue you” (Wyatt). Ellis did not change from present tense to past tense and allow critical distance from the narrative in *Lunar Park* as acquiescence to his critics’ requests; instead, he allows distance so he can perform self-analysis. He says “and now it’s time to go back into the past” because that is how he can understand his own personal demons and excise them through the therapeutic process of writing (*Lunar* 30). The reader is just along for the ride.

“I want to be real:” The Need for Self-Analysis

Lunar Park was written out of necessity: Bret Easton Ellis has lost his identity and must strive to regain it before the confusing postmodern world pushes past the possibility of a return to sanity and stability. Jeff Karnicky and Henrik Skov Nielsen have both worked to prove the

centrality of forging, maintaining, and blurring identities in *Lunar Park*. Karnicky states that “there seems to be more than one Ellis in the novel” and that “all of these ‘I’s become indistinguishable as the book goes on (Karnicky 123). Nielsen uses the photography term “double exposure” to explain Ellis’s presentation of identities, and names “the writer”—the voice that Ellis the narrator splits into halfway through the novel and seems to be an overt outpouring of Ellis’s subconscious—as “Bret’s double” (Nielsen 135). Karnicky and Nielsen are both still attempting to parse out these different narrative voices; I see them instead as different, even sometimes contrary facets of a unified identity named Bret Easton Ellis. *Lunar Park* may present a fragmented sense of identity, but the fragments are simply different manifestations of that identity, not separate identities. Ellis perhaps lost a fully realized identity long before the writing of *Lunar Park*. Now he seeks to find it again in fiction because “fiction is now the closest we’re likely to come to truth and as such it should be loved and cherished” (Young xiv). Therefore, far from losing his identity in *Lunar Park*, Ellis had to disappear into his literary universe—to become a character himself—in order to reclaim his identity.

Two major factors led to this disintegration of identity, forcing Ellis to perform this project of self-analysis in *Lunar Park*: Ellis’s longstanding, mistaken equation with his narrators by his critics, which is only exacerbated by advancements in technology that lead to simulacra, and the controlling, terrifying, and constraining figure of “the father” that is central to all of Ellis’s fiction up to *Lunar Park*.

Constantly “Mistaken for Autobiography”

Ellis has always written from the perspective of characters that closely mirror his own personal life at the time of the writing—for example, Clay in *Less Than Zero* demonstrates Ellis’s existential angst as a desperate young affluent American and Patrick Bateman in

American Psycho illuminates Ellis's deep hatred of yuppie culture and how it tore out the soul of an entire generation. His first-person, present tense narratives help imply that the narrator should be read as equal to the author. Ellis has been fighting this association with his narrators his whole career. "The novel was mistaken for autobiography" he says of *Less Than Zero* (*Lunar 7*). An interviewer said "readers have always assumed that Clay, the narrator [of *Less Than Zero*], is your [Ellis's] alter ego." Ellis responded: "And when *American Psycho* came out, people assumed I was Patrick Bateman, and when *Glamorama* came out, they assumed I was Victor Ward. And when *Imperial Bedrooms* came out, they assumed I was Clay again" (Goulian). Notice that he skips Bret Easton Ellis in *Lunar Park*—the first of his books that is not a present tense, first-person narrative. Thus, Ellis silently implies *Lunar Park*'s difference from his blank fiction oeuvre, making it safe to assume he *is* synonymous with the narrator this time.

More serious and more damaging psychologically was the outcry of feminists following the publication of *American Psycho*. Tammy Bruce led the charge, claiming that Ellis was "a very confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women" because of his creation of Patrick Bateman and his unflinching description of Bateman's graphic crimes (qtd in Baelo-Allué 1). Critics insinuated that Ellis may have been a latent serial killer himself, that Patrick Bateman's crimes were sure to be copied in real life, and that Ellis would be held responsible for those deaths. When asked point blank if Bateman was based on anyone, Ellis answered, "Partly guys I met on Wall Street, partly myself, partly my father" (qtd in Clarke 81). But, in *Rolling Stone*, Bret defended himself: "Patrick Bateman is a monster. I am not. The outrage that has been expressed is totally disconnected from what this book is about" (Love).

Even though he denied the allegations that Patrick Bateman was an autobiographical creation, years and years of being compared to a serial rapist and soulless murderer eroded

Ellis's assurance about his own identity. In the opening chapter of *Lunar Park*—"the beginnings" of the process of disintegration and reformation of identity for Ellis—he compares the opening sentences of each of his novels and admits that he was slipping: "As anyone who had closely followed the progression of my career could glimpse—and if fiction inadvertently reveals a writer's inner life—things were getting out of hand" (*Lunar* 4). Ironically, *Lunar Park* begins with the sentence "You do an awfully good impression of yourself" (*Lunar* 1). Ellis, who says he was "overwhelmed by my life" hoped that sentence would "start the process" of "get[ting] back to basics" (*Lunar* 5). To reclaim his identity, for the first time he granted his critics their wish and freely equated his real self with his fictional narrator. Therefore, far from losing his identity in *Lunar Park*, Ellis had to disappear into his literary universe—to become a character himself—in order to reclaim his identity. But, of course, it had to get worse before it could get better.

Ellis told *The Paris Review* that "*American Psycho* came out of a place of severe alienation and loneliness and self-loathing," (Goulian). For this reason, Ellis does admit "it's the most autobiographical of all my novels, because the mood of the book completely mirrored the mood I was in the three years it took to write it" (Clarke 75). However, this does not equate him with Patrick Bateman: the mood of the book is autobiographical, but Bateman's graphic crimes are not. Still, in *Lunar Park*, Ellis becomes frightened of *American Psycho*:

When I realized, to my horror, what this character [Patrick Bateman] wanted from me, I kept resisting, but the novel forced itself to be written...My point—and I'm not quite sure how else to put this—is that the book *wanted* to be written by someone else...I was repulsed by this creation and wanted to take no credit for it...even years later I couldn't

look at the book, let alone touch it or reread it—there was something, well, evil about it.

(*Lunar* 13)

Ellis is, of course, dramatizing his feelings about the book, but the “something else” he mentions—intimating that it and not Bret himself was the true author of *American Psycho*—indicates how the book failed: instead of expiating his pain and angst about the eighties, it fragmented his identity. It would be a long, fourteen year road back to self-realization.

The Shadow of the Ever-Absent Father

One central figure is responsible for the crumbling edifice of signifiers previously known as Bret Easton Ellis: “the Father.” As previously stated, Ellis writes to relieve himself of pain, and in *Lunar Park*, he reveals the original source of his pain: “The thing I resented most about my father was that the pain he inflicted on me—verbal and physical—was the reason I became a writer” (*Lunar* 6). Alan Bilton traces the presence of a threatening father figure all the way back to *Less Than Zero*. He describes a scene in which Clay meets a business man, who “disturbs [Clay] because he is connected with Clay’s father... a fixation which Clay cannot shake” (Bilton 206). The “shadowy father” figure “is central to Ellis’s *oeuvre*, and provides a sense of dread which cannot be dismissed” (Bilton 206). The father figure returns in *American Psycho*: Patrick Bateman’s father is an important top-level executive at Pierce & Pierce, the company on Wall Street where Patrick works. *American Psycho*, as a whole, was “a criticism of the way my father lived his life,” said Ellis, “because he did slip into that void. He was the ultimate consumer” (Clarke 82). Yet again, Ellis admitted that his fourth novel, *Glamorama*, “was initially built on the idea of a father’s dislike for his son and his desire to replace him with a different son” (Goulian).

None of these father characters actually appear very often in the text because “the Father in Ellis threatens the self not by censure, but by vacancy” (Bilton 213). The father rips away identity as he “doesn’t define, but dissolves. His wealth makes all things possible, whilst his absence makes all things meaningless” (Bilton 213). This describes not only the father figures in the novels, but Ellis’s real life father as well. This erasure of identity caused by father absence is the main catalyst, not only for *Lunar Park*, but for much of Ellis’s writing overall, and it is amidst this hostile relationship that Ellis tries to rise back to self-realization.

According to *Lunar Park*, Bret’s father taught him “that the world lacked coherence” and “within this chaos people were doomed to failure” (*Lunar* 6). Because of their father, for Ellis and his sisters, “the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, *we were lost*” (*Lunar* 6, emphasis added). Robert Ellis’s “sneering, sarcastic attitude towards everything” determined Bret. He “had blackened my [Bret’s] perception of the world...It had soaked into me, shaped me into the man I was becoming” (*Lunar* 6). Writing, therefore, has always been an escape for Ellis. He states that, “My father created me, criticized me, destroyed me” (*Lunar* 7). Publishing *Less Than Zero* gave Bret a chance at autonomy: “I reinvented myself and lurched back into being” (*Lunar* 7). When his first novel came out, “three things happened simultaneously: I became independently wealthy, I became insanely famous, and most important, I escaped my father” (*Lunar* 5).

This escape proved very temporary. Ellis told Jaime Clarke that *American Psycho* “was a criticism of his [Robert Ellis’s] values. And they were values that he passed on to me and I still can’t say I’ve completely shaken them off” (Clarke 82). He claims he wrote *American Psycho* as a “send-off to my dad, my way of saying, ‘I’m going to escape your grasp somehow,’ and I think that’s how he informed the book” (Clarke 82). Instead of escaping his father, however, *American*

Psycho transformed him and preserved him as a literary monster that would haunt Ellis. In *Lunar Park*, the death of Robert Ellis comes directly after the paragraph describing the “something else” that forced him to write *American Psycho*. Robert Ellis, already absent from Ellis’s everyday life, becomes even more inaccessible through his death.

Since Bret’s identity had been determined by Robert, his death devastates Bret: “I had no idea what to do, who to call, how to cope. I collapsed into shock” (*Lunar* 14). Yet on the next page he proclaims his father left him “two Patek Philippe watches and a box of oversized Armani suits, as well as a monumental relief that he was gone” (*Lunar* 15). This relief would be short-lived, for several reasons. First, Ellis had subconsciously preserved his father through the creation of Patrick Bateman. Second, Bret’s son Robby enters the scene, trying to connect with his father. At a wedding, Robby “instinctively reached for my hand...to show me a lizard he thought he had seen” (*Lunar* 17). Bret’s wife, Jayne, “named the child after my [Bret’s] father,” the second way that Robert Ellis’s influence perpetuated in Bret’s life after his death (*Lunar* 16). Bret believes his son’s name “is the reason that the following events in *Lunar Park* happened—it was the catalyst” (*Lunar* 16). By fathering Robby, Bret recreates his father in his own son. Robby becomes a moment by moment reminder of Robert’s traumatic influence on Bret. As a result, Bret wants nothing to do with Robby. Robby is not only a reflection of Robert Ellis; he causes Bret to turn into a carbon copy of Robert himself, perpetuating father absence to a new generation.

Finally, in the story of *Lunar Park*, his father literally starts appearing to Bret and haunting him, an outworking of how Robert haunted Ellis even after his death in real life. In *Lunar Park*, at a scheduled reading, Ellis states, “I had thrown the book aside and started ranting about my father” (*Lunar* 23). The absence created through death caused greater damage to Bret’s

identity even than Robert's emotionally violent relationship to Bret when alive. Because Ellis's identity was determined by Robert's influence on him, he cannot let go of him even when he dies, so he neurotically keeps both Robert and Bateman alive in the story of *Lunar Park*. "He's back," Ellis whispers to himself after finding a gravestone marked "Robert Martin Ellis" in his backyard after a Halloween party (*Lunar* 96). Later, he says he "had been involuntarily thinking of my father and not Patrick Bateman" when he said this. "But I had been wrong," he concludes. "Because now they were both back" (*Lunar* 126).

Therefore, while *Less Than Zero*'s publication had initially been a text that provided escape for Bret, he thwarted that escape by writing *American Psycho*, breathing new life into his father's determining absence on his life. Fourteen years later, he published *Lunar Park*, a book whose central themes deal with the relationships between fathers and sons, and which treats the text of *American Psycho* like a terrifying, domineering father. *Lunar Park* exists to re-establish the escape Ellis first achieved in *Less Than Zero*. Bret makes this connection in the very "first line of *Lunar Park*" which "in its brevity and simplicity...was supposed to be a return to form, an echo of the opening line from my [Ellis's] debut novel, *Less Than Zero*" (*Lunar* 1). However, while *Less Than Zero* only sought to escape, *Lunar Park* sets out to redeem Bret's father by remembering him as a good person after his death, overwriting the heinous portrait of his father Bret had created in his previous fiction.

Colby rejects this apparently sincere attempt at self-analysis and redemption in her reading of *Lunar Park*. She says "the book is a trap" and that it continues Ellis's ongoing project of "underwriting the contemporary" (Colby 136). For Colby, the book interacts with "an era of fear in the wake of 9/11 and, through self-parody, works to refuse it" (Colby 135). Colby focuses on Ellis's move from the city to the suburbs and how it "it exemplifies the problematic

relationship of the individual to the post-9/11 urban landscape” (Colby 140). She notices how “proximity to the city is feared” in *Lunar Park* (Colby 140). While this is an important aspect of the book, Colby eschews the importance of the father-son narrative, which is too earnestly portrayed and too central to the novel to be read as self-parody. Where Colby sees the missing boys in the novel as “running away precisely because of the social control,” I think both Bret and Robby’s desires to escape their fathers shows the boys are running from *parental* control (Colby 147). Thus, the move away from the city could be “seen as an attempt at self-preservation...after the traumatic event” of 9/11, but the central traumatic event in the novel is not post-9/11 fear, but the continual rejection of sons by fathers (Colby 151). For Colby, *Lunar Park* “parodies this demand for contrition by his own [Ellis’s] critics, “providing a surface narrative that shows the author suffering retribution for...Patrick Bateman” (Colby 136). However Colby forget that Ellis’s books are not novels built for consumption, but that at his most sincere moments, Ellis has admitted he writes only for himself for the purpose of processing pain. *Lunar Park* is not a response to critics, but a response to Ellis himself. He uses the act of writing *Lunar Park* as a platform for self-analysis to escape his father-induced traumas and achieve self-realization. The audience exists for only one reason, though it is an important reason: as a community of support that allows Ellis to conduct this extensive self-analysis on a hyperreal level.

“What’s Known as the Official Face:” Hyperreality and *Lunar Park*

In *The Precession of Simulacra*, Jean Baudrillard argues that the postmodern world exists in a “*desert of the real itself*” (Baudrillard 1557, original emphasis). The real, something that can be pointed to as the origin of representations, has been lost. There is “no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept” (Baudrillard 1557). Instead of being copied from an external reality, “the real is produced from minituarised units, from matrices, memory

banks and command models—and...can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (Beaudrillard 1557). Therefore, the real is lost, just one more grain of sand in the desert of endless, indistinguishable copies. Once this happens, Beaudrillard says, there is “no longer real at all. It is a *hyperreal*, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Beaudrillard 1557). The hyperreal occurs when external signifiers are replaced “by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs” and by “substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Beaudrillard 1557). Thus, a hyperreal exists when something real, such as a man named Bret Easton Ellis, is no longer represented by an external, tangible real self, but is masked by many artificial representations of that self. Ellis plays off this idea in the scene where Ellis tries on his costume for Halloween. He tells Jayne that he “decided to go simply as ‘me’” and that he’s “decided against wearing masks” (*Lunar* 31). The irony is overwhelming; Bret says “I want to be real,” but the only way he can be real is by wearing himself as a costume. He tells Jayne it is “what’s known as the Official Face,” but official or not, it remains an artificial attempt to define himself in a tangible way grounded in a true “real” (*Lunar* 31).

Hyperreality necessitates the existence of simulacra, the signs one erects to replace the real and mask the fact that the real is impossible to obtain. Beaudrillard marks an important difference when he states: “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t. One implies a presence, the other an absence” (Beaudrillard 1558). Simulacra attempt to keep out of mind the frightening possibility that nothing exists behind the erected false signs; simulacra provide a coping mechanism for a hyperreal condition where finding an original real is impossible. Beaudrillard uses religion as an example, wondering if iconoclasts attempted to substitute “the visible machinery of icons...for the pure and

intelligible Idea of God” (Beaudrillard 1559). Beaudrillard perceives icons as images that become representations, and therefore simulacra, of religious belief. They are upheld because those who believe know “it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (Beaudrillard 1559). In the same way, Ellis holds onto the identity his father determined in him because he subconsciously recognizes it as a simulacrum. There is a double absence here: father absence in the psychological sense and the absence of a real Bret Easton Ellis, a void created by Ellis’s father.

That the hyperreal condition is only aggravated by a rise in information technology, with its endless possibilities for fashioning and representation, is no surprise. Katherine Hayles, in her book *How We Became Posthuman*, draws this connection out more explicitly. Hayles shifts the focus of information theory: “it is a pattern rather than a presence...if information is pattern, then noninformation should be the absence of pattern, that is, randomness” (Hayles 2165). Presence would only still be possible if some real could be identified; therefore, hyperreality necessitates a shift to the binary of pattern and randomness.

This concept has a profound impact on one’s ability to form identity; in fact, information technologies “fundamentally alter the relation of signified to signifier” (Hayles 2169). There can no longer be a stable, precisely situated and present “self,” but rather one must cobble together a pattern of meaning out of the morass of randomness. Hayles sees this morass as filled with “flickering signifiers,” which result directly from advancements in information technology and are “characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions” (Hayles 2169). These signifiers are flickering because there are so many of them, they are temporary and shifting, and they are given to dangerous mutations, which create “a rupture of pattern so extreme that the expectation of continuous replication can no longer be

sustained” (Hayles 2172). One might feel either tremendously freed or extremely paralyzed by this project of snatching identity out of a sea of randomness. In *Lunar Park*, Ellis experiences this paralysis but does not understand how flickering signifiers are affecting him. However, “retelling this story taught” Bret that “these events were inevitable, and would have occurred no matter where I was at that particular moment in my life” (*Lunar* 30). It is not until he is able to reflect on his lack of identity and reflexively write the book that he can harness the randomness and create a pattern out of it.

Flickering signifiers abound in the text of *Lunar Park*. First, there are the sconces in the upstairs hallway of Bret’s house on Elsinore Lane which act strangely every time Bret walks past them. The first time this happens, Bret says the light “flickered, then dimmed,” a process that repeats itself each time Bret walks past another sconce (*Lunar* 49). A couple pages later, something scares him out of his daughter’s room, and as he runs downstairs again, he describes “the sconces flickering on and off as I rushed past them” (*Lunar* 51). Bret’s bodily presence seems enough to ignite the flood of flickering signifiers. Later, when Bret hires Robert Miller, a paranormal investigator, to cleanse his house, they expose what one of Miller’s assistants describes as “a human form...skeletal” (*Lunar* 271). When Bret himself sees the form, he sees the following: “Rapidly my father’s face was illuminated in the skull. And then another face replaced it. Clayton’s.” Again, later on the same page: “My father’s face flashed on again, followed by Clayton’s...It was the face of a father being replaced by the face of a son” (*Lunar* 272). This demonic presence symbolizes the clash between different flickering signifiers vying to claim Ellis’s identity. Except the spirit of Robert Ellis, who ultimately is a good force trying to warn Bret, all the “demons” in the house—the Terby, the thing in the hall, Clayton, the voice of “the writer”—are all signifiers for Bret.

Beaudrillard believed that ultimately simulacra would lead humanity to destroy itself via nuclear holocaust, which is the supreme technical achievement of information technology. This explains away the paranoia and sense of impending doom that underlies much of the book and which Colby latched onto as the key to the book's thesis. However, this paranoia is actually an outworking of Ellis's loss of identity; if he is unstable in his own self, it is impossible for him to interact meaningfully in as complex a setting as a city. "Cities had become mournful places" instead, filled with "faceless enemies...no one was certain who we were fighting or why" (*Lunar* 27). Ellis reinforced his own loss of identity on a national scale; since versions of himself will not stop flashing on and off his face, he sees everyone else as faceless as well.

Ellis's descriptions of cities also reveal how integrally information technology and modern progress in general confuse Ellis with their lack of presence and thus how they impede his ability to achieve self-realization after the death of his father. Cities are "jagged mounds of steel and glass and stone," materials testament to the advancements of technology (*Lunar* 28). In an interview, Ellis stated that "the randomness of it all [Los Angeles] based on the city's geography, of just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, played heavily on my fears growing up. At the same time, there was a lot of scary drama in my family" (Goulian). He calls it "incongruous—beautiful Southern California, unhappy kids, awful kids, a scary house. I guess that fear I felt could be traced back to the idea that when a bad divorce goes down, a house that shouldn't be scary becomes really scary" (Goulian). Therefore, the city intertwined with Bret's hostile relationship with his father, cementing the father absence as the main catalyst for moving to the suburbs. Instead of processing this fear and paranoia through a healing self-analysis, Bret hides—first through the move to the suburbs, and later, when things frighten him in the house, by locking himself in his office.

Technology, as the impetus for the pattern/randomness binary and the main perpetrator of hyperreality, is involved in almost every aspect of the haunting and attacks Bret experiences throughout the novel. He receives mysterious emails from a Bank of America in Sherman Oaks that always at 2:40 am, the exact time of his father's death. The flickering of the lamps turns into a full-scale electrical problem later, when "the thing in the hall" attacks and the electricity in the entire house goes out. Then, when it comes back on (again at 2:40 am), "everything that had been off before bed was now on. Every light in the house was burning. The television was blasting. From the stereo blared a Muzak version of 'The Way We Were.' My computer flashed on" (*Lunar* 240). The television also has a habit of randomly turning on, always playing Steven Spielberg's *1941*. Even a lesser form of technology, an electronically powered doll called a Terby, comes to life and terrorizes Bret.

Bret and Jayne's children, Robby and Sarah, do not struggle with technology's grip on their lives. In fact, in the first chapter Robby rejects Bret's gift of a robot; "it was the astronomy CD-ROM he wanted instead" (*Lunar* 28). In the same paragraph, Bret reads *The Poky Little Puppy* to Sarah "on CD-ROM, which made the book seem cold and barren...from the empty glow of the computer screen" (*Lunar* 29). Bret's failure to connect with his son also centers on technology. Robby constantly plays violent video games and spends much of his time on his computer. Bret finds out too late that Robby is emailing the missing boys on the computer and planning to become one of the missing boys himself. When he hacks into Robby's computer, it shuts itself down, and "within the random flashing and static" Bret sees, among many things, his father, the Bank of America where his father's ashes are kept, and "another familiar apparition: Clayton's face." Afterwards, "the computer whirred itself into silence and died" (*Lunar* 218).

The flickering signifiers confuse Bret so much, and are reflected so painfully in the technology, that he is unable to even use technology. When Bret admits to Robby, “I saw what was on your computer,” Robby feels betrayed. He turns to Bret “in horror,” and then adopts a new tactic: suddenly Robby started smiling” (*Lunar* 220-21). Because Robby used technology as an escape from Bret, Bret’s intrusion into his computer is unforgivable. This chapter is called “the actor” because from the moment Bret admitted to hacking the computer, he lost the real Robby forever. He is replaced by a representation of himself—the smiling kid pretending everything is suddenly alright—and not too long after that conversation, Robby is gone from Elsinore Lane forever. After the attack by “the thing in the hall,” Bret does not notice “Robby taking the cell phone from my [Bret’s] hand” (*Lunar* 243). This symbolic gesture shows how technology separates father and son. One knows how to navigate the hyperreal and one is controlled by it.

The Bret in the novel fails to harness the hyperreal, but the act of writing *Lunar Park* reflexively achieves self-realization, even if it is only after his son is gone from the text and his father is gone in real life. Bret complains that, when the Brat Pack was in vogue, “the novel itself didn’t matter anymore—publishing a *shiny booklike object* was simply an excuse for parties and glamour” (*Lunar* 9, emphasis added). According to Twitter, the novel does not matter as much to Ellis as an author anymore either, but *Lunar Park* is also a shiny booklike object—not because it was another excuse to party, or an act of defiance to his critics, but rather because Ellis finally learns to harness the hyperreal and achieve self-realization through textual self-analysis. *Lunar Park*, therefore, is more than a book: it is an act of creating and stabilizing identity made possible by the reader’s help, encouragement, and applause.

“These Spirits Might be Projections from Your Inner Self:” Self-Analysis in *Lunar Park*

Karen Horney explores self-analysis in her book of the same title. Even though Horney is a disciple of Freud, she breaks with Freud in her thesis because Freud did not believe neurotic people were capable of achieving self-realization on their own. His reasoning was simple: to achieve self-realization, there needs to be “an incentive to grow” and “Freud emphatically denied that such a wish exists...as if the positing of such a wish were a sort of hollow idealism” (Horney 21). Horney not only believes self-analysis can be successful, but that it can also lead to a person becoming fully realized; Freud was skeptical of this possibility as well. Horney, a very optimistic psychoanalyst, claims effective self-analysis “give him [the individual] a chance for self-realization...the development of his potentialities as a strong and integrated human being, free from crippling impulses” (Horney 12). Horney, true to her Freudian roots, recounts how most neuroses are instilled in individuals by their parents while they are children. Parents can cause neuroses in many different ways; they can “exert so much pressure on the child that his initiative becomes paralyzed,” or exude “a combination of smothering love and intimidation, of tyranny and glorification” (Horney 41). Closer to the source of Bret’s own neurosis, though, is how “a child may be led to feel that his right to existence lies solely in living up to the parents’ expectations” (Horney 41). This parental determinism afflicts Bret in the novel, and he unwittingly afflicts Robby in the same way, even as he seeks to connect with him.

Horney does agree with Freud that performing self-analysis is difficult, that the individual often resists attempts at self-analysis, and that self-analysis can only be successful if there is an extremely strong incentive for it to succeed. While self-analysis is “bound to be painful and upsetting at times and requiring all available constructive energies,” and while a person performing self-analysis might “despite his best intentions to be cooperative,” end up resisting the self-analysis, Horney argues that self-analysis should succeed where the incentive is

strong enough for a very simple reason: neuroses work against one's true self-interest and so eliminating them leaves one "free for the development of his [one's] best potentialities" (Horney 21).

While normal psychoanalysis has two participants, patient and analyst, in self-analysis, the one conducting self-analysis must act as both patient *and* analyst. The patient has three tasks: "to express himself as completely and frankly as possible," "to become aware of his unconscious driving forces," and "to develop the capacity to change those attitudes that are disturbing his relations with himself and the world around him" (Horney 93). The analyst is responsible for "five main divisions: observation; understanding; interpretation; help in resistance; and general human help" (Horney 113). "The ultimate goal" of all these tasks is "self-recognition and change" but this goal will only be achieved if one engages in what Horney terms "systematic self-analysis" (Horney 171). Systematic self-analysis requires frequent and continuous sessions of self-analysis and a willingness to "take up the battle with these opposing forces" (Horney 160). In *Lunar Park*, one can trace three different efforts at such a systematic self-analysis. All three of these attempts at self-analysis feature a son attempting to overcome neuroses instilled in him by a domineering, hostile father.

"The Disaster that is Bret Easton Ellis:" Bret's Unsuccessful, In-Text Attempt

The first of these three processes of self-analysis centers on Bret's in-text attempt to escape his father. This first attempt fails miserably and directly leads Robby to escape Bret, thus reinforcing the cycle of father absence. Horney lists a patient's "resistances" to analysis, whether conscious or unconscious, as the strongest argument against the possibility of successful systematic self-analysis. While Bret does spend the entire book trying to unravel the forces,

supernatural and natural, haunting him, ostensibly with the goal of salvaging his marriage with Jayne and connecting with Robby, he resists himself at every turn.

In normal psychoanalysis between a patient and analyst, these resistances make the patient “refuse to cooperate. He is late or forgets the appointment...His associations become shallow, unproductive, and evasive. Instead of examining suggestions made by the analyst, he resents them and feels attacked, hurt, misunderstood, humiliated” (Horney 127). Bret is actually seeing a psychiatrist named Dr. Kim in *Lunar Park*, and he shows the classic signs of resistance. He makes up the dreams she wants him to bring in for interpretation, he is late for appointments, he avoids talking about himself and only wants to talk about the missing boys. Dr. Kim reminds him that “the main reason you are here is to find ways to get to know your son.” She then reprimands him: “I don’t think you are.” When he questions her, she pushes on: “because you haven’t mentioned him once since you’ve been here” (*Lunar* 86). His resistance to connecting with his son is intimately connected to his own absent father: “I’m getting these weird e-mails from L.A. that have something to do with my father, I think, and all those missing boys are scaring the hell out of me and it’s all causing enormous conflicts within my psyche” (*Lunar* 86). Bret readily admits his own resistance here, a resistance that arises because “certain insights are not acceptable to the patient; they are too painful, too frightening, and they undermine illusions that he cherishes and is incapable of relinquishing” (Horney 127).

Bret is also resisting, less consciously, his own attempts at self-analysis, which go much deeper than his pretending and play-acting with Dr. Kim. On page 60, he admits: “I was the one who needed to make a connection, to mend us, but his reluctance—as loud and insistent as an anthem—seemed impossible to overcome.” Even though he knows he “failed him utterly,” he “still resented the fact that he—not myself—lacked the courage to make that first move” (*Lunar*

60). Here Ellis avoids blame as a way of resisting the insight that he is the one to blame, that he is acting just as Robert Ellis did towards him as a child. Resistances come from a divided self-identity: “the interest of the one group is to maintain unchanged the illusions and the safety afforded by the neurotic structure; that of the other group is to gain a measure of inner freedom and strength through overthrowing the neurotic structure” (Horney 243). The part of Ellis that wants to maintain the status quo wants to blame Robby for the disconnect between them, while the part that wants freedom realizes his own failure is the true root of the problem.

Unfortunately, the part resisting self-analysis is the stronger of the two through most of the novel. Horney states that “the stronger and the less hampered a patient’s incentive towards liberation, the more productive activity will he display” (Horney 15). When Bret’s handler for a book tour tells him he needs to hit rock bottom, he responds “it’s a difficult thing to hit rock bottom when you are making close to \$3 million a year” (*Lunar* 23). He might have reached rock bottom earlier, but when “no one else wanted me,” Jayne offers to marry him (*Lunar* 25). His marriage to Jayne reinforces his resistances, as the status quo now includes a movie star wife, an easy life, and a beautiful house in the suburbs.

Bret’s adolescent disconnect from responsibility, a continuous sense of victimization, is Bret’s central resistance to self-analysis, and can be traced back to his relationship with Robert Ellis. Gray and Anderson quote a study that found “that greater father involvement earlier in life was associated with higher educational attainment, lower delinquency rates, and lower psychological distress among children” (Gray 126). While Bret attained a great education and even had a novel published while still in college, he certainly fell into delinquency and psychological distress. This distress returns in *Lunar Park* when the ghost of Robert Ellis comes back to haunt Ellis. The tragedy of Bret’s failure is that, of all the forces haunting Ellis in the

book, Robert's ghost is actually a benevolent force, perhaps the only one in the novel. All the other forces are hyperreal creations of Bret's subconscious, false representations of his own identity that terrorize him so much that it paralyzes him. He cannot overcome these resistances, and thus cannot achieve self-realization.

Bret's adolescent resistance to responsibility is apparent very early in the novel. At the Halloween party, he costumes himself childishly in "faded jeans, sandals, an oversized white T-shirt with a giant marijuana flower emblazoned on it, and a miniature straw sombrero" (*Lunar* 31). He tells Jayne he is attending the party "simply as 'me'" (*Lunar* 31). By disguising himself as himself, Bret illustrates that his identity is now a hyperreality—no longer attached to a real signifier, just another patterned mask to be put on or taken off at will. Jayne is disgusted by this and tells Bret "you do an awfully good impression of yourself" (*Lunar* 31). This hearkens back to Patrick Bateman's insistence that "I simply am not there" in *American Psycho* (*American* 377). Bret earned the right to have a Halloween party by being "'a good boy' for four months" and laments that "Jayne never understood that the Party had *been* my workplace" (*Lunar* 32-33). He takes an Oedipal view of Jayne: she is more of a mother to him than a wife and co-caretaker of their children. "The lack of sex in our [Bret and Jayne's] marriage" was what led them to couples counseling. Bret "couldn't figure out where this lack of interest on my part was coming from. Jayne...resembled something new to me now, something other than the hot girlfriend. She was the wife, the mother, my savior." Bret then wonders, "But how did that begin to constitute a celibate relationship?" (*Lunar* 83). The answer to this question, which proves that Ellis is attempting self-analysis in the text, is that Bret is no longer attracted to his wife because intimacy with her would cement his role as a husband and father, something of which he is gravely afraid. Finally, Bret explodes in a couples counseling session: "I didn't want a kid!" (*Lunar* 196).

This fear leads him to misinterpret the hyperreals that surround him in the novel, unable to recognize that they are all contradictory patterns for his own identity. His father's absence has erased his true identity; therefore, when his father returns, he still sees him as a force of terror, rather than a friendly warning that Bret himself is the terror. A close reading reveals that Robert Ellis's ghost simply yearns for forgiveness and reconciliation from Bret and is seeking to save Bret from a painful separation from his own son. However, to Bret, this was "something I didn't want to give" because it would require him to conquer his resistances (*Lunar* 96).

Bret finally realizes these things towards the end of the novel, but by then it is too late. His bifurcated identity is represented by the narrator's division between "Bret" and "the writer." The writer is the part of Bret resisting the self-analysis, seeking to keep the status quo, while Bret seeks to escape into a more healthy view of himself and relationship to those around him. The first time "the writer" appears, on the morning after Bret panics after seeing Clayton in his house, the writer convinces Bret "that everything was normal even though I knew the day's surface tranquility was something brief, the respite from a nearing and total darkness" (*Lunar* 148). He admits that the writer's life "is a maelstrom of lying. Embellishment is his focal point. This is what we do to please others. This is what we do in order to flee ourselves" (*Lunar* 146). The writer resists the systematic self-analysis that would save Ellis and his family. The writer becomes more and more prominent as things escalate towards the end of the book, foreshadowing Ellis's eventual failure to escape his father's influence in the text.

For the first half of the book, all the forces attacking 307 Elsinore Lane—the Terby, Clayton, Robert's ghost, the thing in the hall, Patrick Bateman—seem to be in league with each other, working with the sole purpose of destroying Bret. However, the reader learns, mostly through the writer, that this is not entirely true. Robert's ghost actually opposes the rest of the

supernatural forces. Bret realizes “my father wanted to give me something. And as I kept repeating his name I realized what it was. A warning” (*Lunar* 170). This revelation comes a few pages after this one: “I was now my father. Robby was now me...Why hadn’t I noticed him until he was lost to me?” (*Lunar* 160). The writer tells Bret that Robert’s ghost “*wanted you [Bret] to notice things*” but that “*something else did not*” (*Lunar* 190, original emphasis). The writer recognizes the two parts warring inside Bret, but does not allow Bret to resolve the conflict: “*there could never be any explanations because explanations are boring*” (*Lunar* 190). Robert’s ghost consistently tries to warn Bret that he is pushing an oppressive, absentee fatherhood on Robby the same way Robert pushed it on him; however, Bret knows no other way of parenting and so oppresses his son in the same way Robert oppresses him, by being absent from his life.

Aligned against Robert’s ghost are the many hyperreal signifiers of Bret himself: the Terby, the thing in the hall, Clayton, and Patrick Bateman. Little by little, it is revealed that all these things are manifestations of Bret haunting himself. The Terby, which is “Y Bret” backwards, and the “thing in the hall,” are both childhood creations of Bret Easton Ellis. The writer reminds Bret that he wrote “The Tomb,” the story featuring the thing in the hall because he was scared of his father, and that the thing “broke into the homes of families because it wanted to eat the children” (*Lunar* 250). The thing in the hall represents Bret’s subconscious resentment of Robby’s very existence. Likewise, Clayton and Patrick Bateman both first appear as demonic forces outside of Bret seeking to destroy him. At the Halloween party, “someone I [Bret] didn’t recognize came as Patrick Bateman, which I didn’t find funny and had a problem with;” however, the person he did not recognize was Clayton, who is revealed to be the same person as Bret at the end of the novel. Therefore, both Clayton and Bateman are not outside forces haunting Bret, but creations of Bret’s own mind into which hyperreality has breathed life.

All four forces have this in common: they rise up out of both Bret's subconscious and out of his written fiction. In a moment of clarity, Bret reflects: "Writing will cost you a son and a wife, and this is why *Lunar Park* will be your last novel" (*Lunar* 252).

Bret experiences several key moments of revelation at the end of the novel, especially after he hires Robert Miller, the paranormal investigator, but he is too late. His resistance to self-analysis has done its damage by then. Miller asks him "if you have perhaps antagonized—inadvertently in some way—the house itself." He then tells Ellis: "I feel your fear, but I also sense anger and an antagonizing personality." Finally, he dramatically states: "I have seen a person turn to ash because of their antagonism" (*Lunar* 258). Ellis's own antagonism, his resistance to self-analysis, his inability to form a stable identity, is literally setting fire to his soul. Miller later changes his mind about the house. "But if the house is not the source," Ellis asks, "what is the source of the haunting?" Miller answers with "You are" (*Lunar* 264). All the forces emanate from Bret himself. When Ellis realizes that "Clayton and I were always the same person," Robby is already gone, and the writer, still resisting, "whispered, *Go to sleep*" (*Lunar* 295). Not only does Bret's inability to see the forces attacking him as hyperreal manifestations of himself lead him back towards the trauma first caused by his father instead of away from it, but it also drives his own son away from him. The writer responds to Bret's final agonizing cries of "why" by telling him: "*Because you never existed for him. Because—in the end, Bret—you were the ghost*" (*Lunar* 298). The writer finally hammers the responsibility home to Bret: his failure to cope with his father's absence made him an absent father himself.

In an attempt to understand his complicated relationship to his now deceased real-life father, Bret Easton Ellis gives birth to a son in fiction. "The feelings of a growing pregnancy, the arrival of a helpless child, the impact on sleep, the readjustments in a marital relationship" Gray

and Anderson write, “are real to a father in ways they might not be to a son” (Gray ix). In *Lunar Park*, Ellis discovers through his own failed attempts at parenting, how much he has in common with his father. While Robert Ellis was not physically absent in Ellis’s life, as Bilton stated, Bret interprets his relationship to Robert as one of father absence in his novels. Therefore, in *Lunar Park* he makes himself an absent father so he can understand his own father and put his ghost to a more peaceful rest.

Horney makes sure to point out that resistance, especially as an interest in maintaining the status quo, is “not—and emphatically not—identical with a wish to remain ill” (Horney 246). Ellis’s own resistances work to maintain his distance from his responsibility as a son, a husband, and a father, to sustain his adolescent dependence on Jayne’s nurturing while pretending to have autonomy, to be in control of the party. However, these resistances also make him paranoid, sleep-deprived, angry, and alienated from his family and friends. They lead him further and further away from self-realization and further and further into meltdown. At the Halloween bash, after being frightened by the Terby and running to hide in his haven—his home office—Bret glimpses the final failure of his resistance to maintain the status quo: “I realized that for me the party had ended” (*Lunar* 51). Bret’s resistances not only support the status quo, but they slowly deconstruct him mentally and emotionally.

Bret fails to escape the trauma induced by his father’s absence because he allows his fictions, his mental realities to be “artificially revived as though real, in a world of simulation” (Beaudrillard 1562). This is a “hallucination of truth” instead of a real truth. Beaudrillard recounts how dead “Savages” were “frozen, cryogenised, sterilized, protected to *death*, they have become referential simulacra” (Beaudrillard 1562, original emphasis). Bret keeps his father’s ashes in a safe-deposit box in the bank at Sherman Oaks; he holds onto a simulacrum of the

father figure in his head, instead of releasing his ashes to freedom for both Robert and Bret. He participates in hyperreality, even creates it, but does not understand how “the book is a form of information transmission and storage” and that “books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns” (Hayles 2169). This pattern/randomness binary leads to “unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions,” which Bret experiences in spades. His fears and fantasies, tied up in his fictions, use information technologies to leap off the page and out into the real world—Bret does not know how to deal with them or how to face what Clayton calls “the disaster that is Bret Easton Ellis” (*Lunar* 230).

“Our Son Was Lost:” Robby’s Tragically Successful Attempt

Robby, however, does know how to deal with information technologies. He is constantly surrounded by a technology of one kind or another. He uses this knowledge of information technology, of how one can use simulacra to create a new virtual pattern of identity for oneself, as a buffer between him and the traumas the world and his father seek to foist on him. Technology provides him with a supportive community of friends who want what is best for him and therefore allows him to successfully perform systematic self-analysis and reach self-realization despite his hostile relationship with his father.

Through Robby, Ellis addresses the generational gap between fearing and utilizing technology. In an interview, Bret stated that the first four books he published were all written on a typewriter. He admits that he “was kind of suspicious...so technologically immature that I really couldn’t work a computer...I was afraid of the computer” (Clarke 68). He translates this fear to the book—the flickering sconces, the television and computers that outwit and thwart Bret, the video games and cell phones Robby constantly uses, much to Bret’s ignorant confusion. Robby’s morning routine before school underlines this gap. He tells Jayne “that he’d just

downloaded something from a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Web site” and later “was checking his palm pilot while swaggering around the kitchen—his way of acting tough” (*Lunar* 61-62).

Finally, he “pulled out his cell phone to make sure it was charged” (*Lunar* 63). Bret asks why Robby is taking a cell phone to school, initiating a quick argument between Bret and Jayne. Bret observes that “Robby seemed lost, as if he didn’t know what to do” (*Lunar* 63). While Bret is suspicious of technology and its effects on his son, Robby needs technology to escape his father’s absent parenting techniques.

Bret’s absence from the first ten years of Robby’s life—his militant desire to deny his son’s existence—created the hostile atmosphere between father and son that comes to the surface when Bret moves in to the house on Elsinore Lane. Bret “begged her [Jayne] to have an abortion” when he first found out about Robby. He yells at her “Change it! Fix it! Do something!” He complains that “children had voices, they wanted to explain themselves, they wanted to tell you where everything was—and I could easily do without witnessing these special skills” (*Lunar* 15). His fear of fatherhood causes him to reject his son, to keep Robby his “secret son” (*Lunar* 17). Robby noticed: he asked “where his father was, why his dad wasn’t living with them, why he never came to visit.” Bret’s absence led to problems for Robby like “anxieties, irrational fears, attachment disorders, tantrums at school” (*Lunar* 17). Eventually, Robby adjusts to being fatherless; by the time Bret moves in, Robby’s “usual stance when talking to an adult” is “You mean nothing to me” (*Lunar* 46). In fact, when Bret moves in, thus moving from absence to presence, he only further disrupts Robby’s pattern of identity. He says Robby’s “future [was] flattened by my presence” (*Lunar* 116). Robby seeks to create his own world to shelter himself from the harsh, rejecting world of adults, dominated by the great void of his father. He even denies the reality of his father: “he spoke very clearly, his back still to me—‘you’re not my

father, Bret”” (*Lunar* 164). Robby creates a new space for himself predominantly through technology, where he uses virtual space to get closer to what really fascinates Robby—outer space itself. Robby’s response to his father’s absence is to fall in love with the greatest absence in the universe, that of outer space.

Horney noted that “there are undoubtedly certain advantages in writing down one’s associations” when performing systematic self-analysis (Horney 170). Writing out one’s self-analysis allows one to look over notes afterwards and to search for revelations there. Most of Robby’s interactions with technology involve written text: emails to the other missing boys and to his best friend Ashton Allen, text messages, and saved documents. These texts allow Robby to record his self-analysis, but as “text[s]-as-flickering-image[s]” they morph from words only he can access to words sent out to a virtual community of support (Hayles 2166). Robby turns hyperreality to his benefit through text, crafting a pattern for himself that might not line up with his original self, the self located in the house on Elsinore Lane, but a self that is the patterned, stabilized identity of Robby.

Bret’s inability to recognize how hyperreality affects him causes his attempt at self-analysis to fail; Robby, however, does recognize this and integrates his understanding of hyperreality into his self-analysis. Both are trapped by their hostile relationships with absent fathers, but Bret is unable to get to the root of the trauma the way Robby does. Therefore, Robby escapes while he still can, but Bret’s chances at a relationship with his son are ruined.

In chapter seven, titled “robbys room,” Robby’s use of technology as a means to escape away from his father and into hyperreality is established. When Bret walks in, Robby does not even notice because “the TV’s volume was so high” (*Lunar* 88). He sees “video game cartridges...scattered across the floor in front of the wide-screen TV, now hooked up to

PlayStation 2 amid a pile of *Simpsons* and *South Park* DVDs” and “a Starbucks iced chai next to a giant translucent moon that glowed from the computer—Robby’s screensaver” (*Lunar* 88). The computerized image connects Robby, via technology, to the moon itself, a virtual reality the rest of his room works to support: “planet and comet and moon decals were pasted all over the walls suggesting that you were now floating within a black sky somewhere deep in space” (*Lunar* 88). Bret does not understand Robby’s interest in space, thinks that his desire to go as an astronaut for Halloween is boring. Bret laments that Robby “wanted to start an astronomy club but due to lack of interest among his peers it never materialized and his favorite songs had the world *flying* in the title, and all of this saddened me” (*Lunar* 89). To Bret, the desire to explore space was “horribly useless...because the sky was always black in space and there was no sound on the moon and it was another world where you would always be lost” (*Lunar* 90). Robby’s room ties technology and the cosmos together: both are places of unlimited, new space where one can forge a new identity unencumbered by previous, earthly societal or psychological realities. Bret is overwhelmed and terrified by this blank expanse, but he “knew that Robby would argue that far beneath its freezing craters and treacherous sand-blown surfaces lay a warm and yielding heart” (*Lunar* 90). This holds true not only for the moon, but also for technology, a seemingly cold tool that Robby uses as a platform where he can find a community that allows him to successfully perform self-analysis.

Robby and his friends are in contact with the missing boys and together this group of boys constitutes Robby’s virtual online community that allows him to perform self-analysis. It is not enough for them to be friends in real life, because only in hyperreal situations can they no longer have parents or adult supervision intervening in the way they choose to pattern themselves. When Robby accidentally meets “a group of his disaffected clique” when he is at the

mall with Bret, he is forced to admit that Bret is his dad. However, he does not introduce the boys to Bret, making it clear that he is an unwanted outsider. “When one of the boys finally glanced over at me as if I were contagious,” Bret notes, “I finally understood that I was The Distraction—the reason this conversation was not going to last much longer” (*Lunar* 113). Their ability to maintain their chosen identities and communicate these to each other fails in Bret’s presence. Bret is worried that “none of them seemed scared” about the missing boys. In fact, “what bothered me [Bret] most was how they had to dampen their enthusiasm—their glee—in front of the adult” (*Lunar* 114). They know the missing boys have escaped; therefore, talking of them is a subject of joy and anticipation, not dread as it is for Bret.

Bret and three other fathers comment on how technology separates them from their sons after a dinner party. “They’ve developed an entirely new set of skills that sets us way apart,” Mark Huntington says after Adam Gardner says his son “just goes and sits in front of the computer. Stares into that damn thing all day long.” One of the men even calls what the kids use all day “disruptive technology” (*Lunar* 136). Bret is first introduced to the idea that the boys are not being kidnapped, but using technology to create a community and then disappearing altogether into that community, when Nadine Allen approaches him drunk on parent-teacher night. “I think they’re leaving us,” she tells Bret, adding that her son “Ashton collects information about the boys...and he trades it with his friends.” Ashton’s best friend is Robby Dennis. Nadine says Ashton is even e-mailing the missing boys, and he only “e-mailed them *after* they disappeared” (*Lunar* 154-55, original emphasis). Later, Bret discovers that Nadine was correct and that Robby was also communicating with the missing boys over email. These boys have created a community through technology, a community united by the absence of parents.

Robby escapes from a problem of oppressive father absence by voluntarily choosing a pattern of identity that does not include a father at all.

When Bret finally hacks into Robby's computer at the end of the novel, he discovers "a digital photo of Cleary Miller [one of the missing boys] accompanied by a long letter dated November 3 that began with the words 'Hey RD.'" Bret realizes immediately that "Robert Dennis was RD" (*Lunar* 210). Robby's computer includes a file for each of the missing boys, each filled with correspondences. But he is too late, as the writer points out "*Robby won't need the computer from now on*" (*Lunar* 222, original emphasis). Robby's new patterned identity has by this time been solidified and he slides out of his life on Elsinore Lane into a new one that he has chosen for himself. This new identity exists outside of Bret's existence, allowing Robby to escape Bret's void in his life by denying its existence. As usual, Bret is blind to this attempt. One of the last times he sees Robby, "the image of Robby's face became multiplied through my tears, and each face held a different expression," (*Lunar* 224). Robby's hyperreality shows here, he is no longer a stable reality, but a simulacrum without a signifier, and Bret fails to get the message. Robby's self-analysis, performed through his online community, allows him to pinpoint Bret's absence and oppression as the underlying trauma blocking self-realization, and remove that trauma to become a stable, fully realized individual. When he meets Bret years later as an adult, he tells Bret "'don't worry...I'm not lost.' He said it again. 'I'm not lost anymore'" (*Lunar* 305).

"Not Lost Anymore:" Bret's Redemptive, Meta-textual Success

Robby's success is a bittersweet one as it is only made possible by the destruction and dissolution of the Ellis family. Bret and Jayne get divorced, and since "the word 'custody' never came up" because "our son was lost" (*Lunar* 302). Bret fades back into listless drug addiction. Therefore, Robby's success still leaves Bret without a redemptive solution to hostile

relationships between fathers and sons, and also without a salve to the pain that induced Bret to write in the first place. Even Robby's successful attempt at self-analysis fails to help Bret find a path to forgiving his own father or removing the central Father figure from Ellis's fiction, a figure that oppresses through its absence. Thus, the writing of *Lunar Park* itself becomes a successful, meta-textual attempt at systematic self-analysis—made possible because Bret finally recognizes how to harness the hyperreal—in which Bret forgives his father, thus redeeming his memory and restoring Bret himself to self-realization.

Though Ellis described his real life father as “an abusive alcoholic, an angry ‘control freak’ who, after separating from Mr. Ellis’s mother, bought a Ferrari and a condominium and wore ‘age-inappropriate clothing,’” when Robert died Bret “found himself longing for reconciliation” (Wyatt). His death was unexpected and “father and son had not spoken for several months” (Wyatt). However, Bret laments this estrangement: “Because he had a couple of qualities that I liked a lot...And I think those qualities—which were often hidden by all the bad qualities—I think in the end might have emerged and taken over his personality.” Obviously, Robert died before this was possible, and “the impossibility of that happened, Mr. Ellis said, ‘makes me sad’” (Wyatt). The bad qualities of Robert Ellis are on full display in *American Psycho*. Therefore, Bret wrote *Lunar Park* to redeem his father's memory and let those good qualities take over his personality, imprinted forever in the fictional text of *Lunar Park*.

This redemptive project proves that Bret's meta-textual attempt at systematic self-analysis is possible, because it leads him to a place of greater peace and resolution at the end of the book—not only for the Bret Easton Ellis character, but, as the character is one and the same with the real self, that peace extends to Bret's real self as well. In other words, the writing of *Lunar Park*, a textual attempt at self-analysis conducted on a hyperreal platform with a captive

audience functioning as a community of support, allows Bret Easton Ellis to achieve self-realization. By finally pinpointing his father's determining absence as the traumatic trigger for his neuroses, Bret is able to overcome those neuroses, forgiving his father and restoring a stable identity for himself in the process.

Ellis employs hyperreality to his advantage in two ways in the book. First, he bifurcates his personality into the fictional and the real halves of Bret Easton Ellis. This makes it easier for him to perform the roles of both patient and analyst. The Bret in the text becomes the patient that the Bret writing the text seeks to analyze. Ellis also uses hyperreality by involving his readers directly in the project of *Lunar Park*, an admission that Bret now understands how technology affects texts and causes them to live and change after their original publication. Remember again the last paragraph where Bret speaks to the reader, asking her, "if you see my son, tell him I say hello" etc. He recognizes that this community of readers allows him to conduct self-analysis without falling apart in isolation—like the Bret in the text does, constantly locking himself alone in his office. Finally, the fact that *Lunar Park* is more than a book and is a "shiny booklike object," allows the book to continue to exist in a hyperreal present. Through virtual reality and technology, it becomes an actual place one can visit again and again, a place where Bret says "he [Robby] can always find me here, whenever he wants, right here, my arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*" (*Lunar* 308). The text is used to communicate, both to Bret and to Robby, just the way Robby's use of text enabled him to escape Bret: "The title *Lunar Park*...means something only to my son" (*Lunar* 30). Bret's writing carves a space of reconciliation out of the cosmic void of father absence.

Bret's in-text attempts at self-analysis failed not only because he was unable to harness hyperreality, but also because that hyperreality kept him from overcoming his own resistances to

self-analysis. Bret's meta-textual attempt at self-analysis solves this difficulty by finding a way to make the incentive to achieve self-analysis stronger than the desire to resist and maintain the status quo. The added incentive is Robert Ellis's death. Two changes occur in Bret's neurosis when his father dies. First, the damage his father inflicted on him is finalized. Because Bret now can see the final scope of his trauma and knows that no more can possibly be added, he is able to relax and start to work towards reconciliation. This change is reflected in those earlier quotes where Bret began to remember good qualities about his father and become sad about his loss. Therefore, Robert's death takes the pressure off of Bret. However, in a different way, Robert's death pushes Bret's project into hyperdrive. Because Bret's identity was determined by Robert's influence on him, he is lost in an empty space after Robert's death. It is impossible for Bret to maintain the status quo any longer, so he writes *Lunar Park* as a necessary project of overcoming his neuroses and realizing a stable identity.

This project takes a very Freudian path. *Lunar Park* is filled with Freudian references and elements. Bret and Robby are both classic examples of the Oedipal complex as they both cling to Jayne while hating their fathers. Even more important, however, is Ellis's incorporation of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Ellis says that "Dr. Kim, the diminutive Korean shrink" was "a strict Freudian and a big believer in how the unconscious expressed itself in dream imagery" (*Lunar* 76). Later, when Bret writes a story in which Patrick Bateman dies, he states that "It wasn't a dream—which is what a novel should be" (*Lunar* 283). In fact, *Lunar Park* is exactly like a dream, a fictional outworking of the deepest issues of Bret Easton Ellis's subconscious. Bret's writing of *Lunar Park* follows the process of the dream-work outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which thus provides the exact framework for how Ellis conducts a successful self-analysis, according to Horney's terms.

In Freud's theory, the manifest content of the dream is a representation of some latent content, and it is from "this latent content, not the manifest, that we worked out the solution to the dream" (Freud 211). In other words, the "dream-thoughts and the dream-content lie before us like two versions of the same content in two different languages" (Freud 211). The manifest content is "a translation of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression" (Freud 211). It is the analyst's job to decode the latent meaning, the roots of the desires, fears, or other emotions expressed in the dream, from the manifest dream content. Likewise, novelists translate their thoughts into text, which must then be interpreted by critics, who only have the text and not the original thoughts of the author. The text only provides the "manifest content" and readers must work out the latent content from that text. In *Lunar Park*, specifically, Bret Easton Ellis translates the latent content of his neurotic sense of identity formed by his father's absence into the manifest content of a novel. Then, because he is both analyst and patient, Bret uses the writing of that novel to interpret the meaning of the manifest content—that he is haunted by his own lack of identity and his inability to forgive his father. This adds new dimensions of meaning to Bret's final words to his father's memory: "From those of us who are left behind: you will be remembered, you were the one I needed, *I loved you in my dreams*" (*Lunar* 308, emphasis added).

Beyond *Lunar Park*

In the final chapter, Bret succinctly, poignantly, piercingly summarizes the results of his successful self-analysis. He recalls "the last time I saw my father alive." He wanted to tell him "*You're my father and I love you*" and he "realized that it could actually happen, and that by saying this I would save him. I suddenly saw a future with my father" (*Lunar* 304, original emphasis). He fails to say this, of course, because his resistances to overcome his neuroses were

still too strong at the time. He “half smiled at the memory, for thinking that I could just let go of the damage that a father can do to a son” (*Lunar* 304). But then he adds, “I also realized what I hadn’t learned from him [Robert]: that a family—if you allow it—gives you joy, which in turn gives you hope. What we both failed to understand was that we shared the same heart” (*Lunar* 304). These painful, true admissions prove that Ellis’s meta-textual attempt at self-analysis has succeeded. He understands who his father was and is which enables him to forgive Robert and forge a new, stable identity for himself.

Bret can finally form himself after a new, healthier pattern of signifiers, connected to his father and his fictional son, but not determined by them. When Bret meets Robby again years later, Robby draws a picture of the moon on a napkin. Bret notices “also...that one word was written on it.” Then, he remembers visiting his father’s ashes at the bank: “what remained of my father had burst apart and the ashes now lined the sides of the oblong safe. And in the ash someone had written, perhaps with a finger, the same word my son had written on the moonscape he had left for me” (*Lunar* 306). Ellis does not tell us what this word is--reinforcing the notion that *Lunar Park* is a novel meant for self-analysis, not for the reader’s understanding—but this is inconsequential. The word is one piece of Bret’s new, stable identity, a piece that ties three generations together in reconciliation instead of hostile absence. Bret is not lost anymore, either. He is situated in the hyperreal spaces of *Lunar Park*.

Bret Easton Ellis writes to alleviate pain. Therefore, it is not to be lamented that he has only published one novel after *Lunar Park*—and that novel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, was a sequel to *Less Than Zero* and thus a continuation of an old project and not an excision of new pain. This only speaks to the success of *Lunar Park*’s central project: alleviating the painful traumas Bret’s father afflicted upon him and which colored all of his previous fiction. He now uses his Twitter

feed to maintain the identity he forged in the writing of *Lunar Park*—typing out rhetorical thoughts and questions, bits of analysis, that use the hyperreal audience of 400,000 followers as a community of support.

The pages of *Lunar Park* are littered with ash, a trope that Ellis returns to again and again as a symbol of the disastrous end results of hostile father-son relationships. In a beautiful, stream-of-consciousness passage that takes up the last three pages of the novel, Ellis describes how he “finally put my father to rest” (*Lunar* 306). He describes how the ashes of his father “began moving backwards, falling into the past and coating the faces that lingered there, dusting everything” and follows their path all the way until “they rustled across the pages of this book, scattering themselves over words and creating new ones—they began exiting the text, losing themselves somewhere beyond my reach, and then vanished...and thought it was all over, something new was conceived” (*Lunar* 306-08). He finally achieves self-realization, conducting self-analysis through a combination of text and hyperreal technology. That “something new” that was created is Bret’s now stable identity, his more fully realized self putting his neuroses to rest and learning from the tragic past how to form a more perfect future. Bret will eventually return to writing novels—perhaps sooner than later, according to a link he published to his Twitter on February 27, 2013. He admitted that “for the past five years I didn’t want to write a novel,” but now has started feeling the need to work my way through that transition—the world in which I used to write and publish novels, and the world we live in now” (“On a New Novel”).

Therefore, Ellis may return to the landscape of American fiction—but he will do so as a more fully realized individual who has put the ashes of his hostile relationship with his father behind him and who writes perhaps not solely out of pain but because he is a naturally gifted stylist and insightful social critic. More than anything else, Bret Easton Ellis is *the writer*. This is

Robert Ellis's greatest redemption: though the pain he inflicted upon Bret forced him to become a writer, Bret laid that pain to rest in *Lunar Park*, a book dedicated partially to Robert. Now Robert's legacy lives on, immortalized by the hyperreality of books published today, redeemed by the blood of his son's words bled out onto page after page. *Lunar Park*, the textual son of *American Psycho*, redeems the sins of its textual father, posthumously absolves Robert Ellis of his traumatic influence on Bret, thus allowing Bret to achieve full self-realization. The book paints a luminescent path through the frightening ashes of the real and provides a blueprint for harnessing hyperreality to achieve a stable pattern of identity through systematic self-analysis.

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