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Closure through Mock-Disclosure in Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*

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Jennifer Anne Phillips

In a 1999 interview with the online magazine *The AV Club*, a subsidiary of satirical news website, *The Onion*, Bret Easton Ellis claimed: "I've never written a single scene that I can say took place, I've never written a line of dialogue that I've heard someone say or that I have said" (qtd. in Klein).

Ten years later, in the same magazine, Ellis was reminded of this quote and asked why most of his novels have been perceived as veiled autobiographies. Ellis responded:

Well, they are autobiographical in the sense that they reflect who I was at a particular moment in my life. There was talk of a memoir, and I realized why I couldn't write a memoir, because the books *are* the memoir—they completely sum up how I was feeling, what I was thinking about, what my obsessions were, what I was fantasizing about, who I was, in a fictional context over the last 25 years or so (qtd. in Tobias).

Despite any protestations to the contrary, Bret Easton Ellis's novels have included various intentional and unintentional disclosures which reflect the author's personal experiences. This pattern of self-disclosure became most overt in his most recent novel, *Lunar Park* (2005), in which the narrator shares a name, vocation and many aspects of his personal history with Ellis himself. After two decades and many assumptions made about Ellis's personal life in the public media, it seems on the surface as if this novel uses disclosure as the site of closure for several rumours and relationships which have haunted his career. It is possible to see how this fictional text transgresses the boundaries between fiction and fact in an attempt to sever the feedback loop between the media's representation of Ellis and the interpretation of his fictional texts. Yet it is important to note that with Ellis, there is always more beneath the surface. This is evident after only one chapter of *Lunar Park* when the novel changes form from an autobiography into a fictional ghost story, both of which are told by Bret Easton Ellis, a man who simultaneously reflects and refracts aspects of the real life author.

Before analysing *Lunar Park*, it is helpful to consider the career trajectory which led to its creation. Bret Easton Ellis made his early fame writing semi-fictional accounts of rich, beautiful, young, yet ambitionless members of generation-X, growing up in the 1980s in America. His first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), chronicled the exploits of his protagonists as they drifted from party to party, from one meaningless sexual encounter to another; all while anesthetised on a cocktail of Valium, Prozac, Percocet and various illegal drugs. The brutal realism of his narrative, coupled with the structure—short vignettes like snapshots and short chapters told in simplistic style—led the text to be hailed as the first "MTV Novel" (Annesley 90; see also: Freese).

It is not difficult to discover the many similarities that exist between the creator of *Less Than Zero* and his fictional creation, Clay, the novel's narrator-protagonist. Both grew up in Los Angeles and headed east to attend a small liberal-arts college. Both Ellis's and Clay's parents were divorced and both young men grew up living in a house with their mother and their two sisters. Ellis's relationship with his father was, by all accounts, as strained as what is represented in the few meetings Clay has with his own father in *Less Than Zero*. In these

scenes, Clay describes a brief, perfunctory lunch meeting in an expensive restaurant in which Clay's father is too preoccupied by work to acknowledge his son's presence.

Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), is set at Camden College, the same college that Clay attends in *Less Than Zero*. At one point, Clay even guest-narrates a chapter of *The Rules of Attraction*; the phrase, "people are afraid to walk across campus after midnight" (205) recalls the opening line of *Less Than Zero*, "people are afraid to merge on highways in Los Angeles" (5). Camden bears quite a few similarities with Bennington College, the college which Ellis himself was attending when *Less Than Zero* was published and Ellis was catapulted into the limelight. Even Ellis himself has admitted that the book is, "a completely fictionalized portrait of a group of people, all summations of friends I knew" (qtd. in Tobias).

The authenticity of Ellis's narrative voice was considered as an insight which came from participation (*A Conversation with Bret Easton Ellis*). The depiction of disenfranchised youth in the Reagan era in America was so compelling because Ellis seemed to personify and even embody the malaise and listlessness of his narrators in his public performances and interviews. In the minds of many readers and critics, Ellis's narrators were a fictional extrapolation of Ellis himself.

The association of Ellis to his fictional narrators backfired when Ellis's third novel, *American Psycho* (1991), was published. The novel was criticised for its detached depiction of Patrick Bateman, who narrates in minute detail his daily routine which includes an extensive beauty regime, lunchtimes and dinnertimes spent in extravagant New York restaurants, a relationship with a fiancée and a mistress, a job on Wall Street in which he seems to do no real "work," and his night-time hobby where brutally murders women, homeless men, gay men and even a small child. Bateman's choice of victims can be interpreted as unconsciously aimed at anyone who may threaten his dominant position as a wealthy, white, heterosexual male. While Bateman kills as many men as he does women, his male victims are killed quickly in sudden bursts of violence. Bateman's female victims are the subject of brutal torture, prolonged violent sexualized attacks, and in many cases inhumane post-mortem disfigurement and dismemberment.

The public reception of *American Psycho* has been analysed as much as the text itself, (see: Murphet; Brien). Because *American Psycho* is narrated in the first-person voice of Bateman, there is no escape from his subjectivity. Many, including the National Organization of Women, interpreted this lack of authorial comment as Ellis's tacit agreement and acceptance of Bateman's behaviour. Another similar interpretation was made by Roger Rosenblatt in his pre-publication review of *American Psycho* in which he forthrightly encourages readers to "Snuff this Book" (Rosenblatt). Rosenblatt finds no ironic critique in Ellis's representation of Bateman, instead finding himself at a loss to understand Ellis's intention in writing *American Psycho*, saying "one only assumes, Mr. Ellis disapproves. It's a bit hard to tell what Mr. Ellis intends exactly, because he languishes so comfortably in the swamp he purports to condemn" (n.p.).

In much the same way as Ellis's previous narrators had reflected his experience and opinions, Ellis was considered as accepting and even glorifying the actions of a misogynistic serial killer. Ellis himself has commented on the popularised "misreading" of his novel: "Because I never step in anywhere and say, 'Hey, this is all wrong,' people get upset. That's outrageous to me! Who's going to say that serial killing is wrong?! Isn't that a given? There's no need to say that" (qtd. in Klein)

Ellis himself was treated as if he had committed the actual crimes that Patrick Bateman describes. The irony being that, as I have argued elsewhere (Phillips), there are numerous signs within the text which point to the possibility that Patrick Bateman did not commit the crimes as he claims: he can be interpreted as an unreliable narrator. Although the unreliability of Bateman's narration doesn't remove the effect which the reader experiences, it does indicate

a distance between the author and the narrator. This distance was overlooked by many critics who interpreted Ellis as agreeing and condoning Bateman's views and actions.

When Ellis's fourth novel, *Glamorama* was published, the decadent lifestyle represented in the text was again considered to be a reflection of Ellis's personal experience. The star-studded parties and glamorous night clubs seemed to be lifted straight out of Ellis's experience (although, no-one would ever claim that Ellis was a fashion-model-turned-international-terrorist like his narrator, Victor). One reviewer notes that "even when Bret Easton Ellis writes about killer yuppies and terrorist fashion models, a lot of people still think he's writing about himself" (Waldren).

With the critical tendency to read an autobiographical confession out of Ellis's fictional works firmly in place, it is not hard to see why Ellis decided to make the narrator of his fifth novel, *Lunar Park*, none other than Bret Easton Ellis himself. It is my contention that *Lunar Park* is the site of disclosures based on the real life of Bret Easton Ellis. I believe that Ellis chose the form of a mock-autobiography-turned-ghost-story as the site of exorcism for the many ghosts which have haunted his career, namely, his public persona and the publication of *American Psycho*. Ultimately, it is the exorcism of a more personal ghost, namely his father Robert Martin Ellis which provides the most private disclosure in the text and therefore the most touching, truthful and abiding site of closure for the entire novel and for Ellis himself. For ease, I will refer to the narrator of *Lunar Park* as Bret and the author of *Lunar Park* as Ellis.

On the surface, it appears that *Lunar Park* is an autobiographical memoir. In one of the many mixed reviews of the novel (see: Murray; "Behind Bret's Mask"; Hand), Steve Almond's title describes how Ellis masquerading as Ellis "is not a pretty sight" (Almond). The opening chapter is told in autobiographical style and charts Bret's meteoric rise from college student to member of the literary brat pack (alongside Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz), to reviled author of *American Psycho* (1991) reaching his washed-up, drug-addled and near-death nadir during the *Glamorama* (1998) book tour. However, careful reading of this chapter reveals that the real-life Ellis is obscuring as much about himself as he appears to be revealing. Although it takes the form of a candid disclosure of his personal life, there are elements of the narrator's story which do not agree with the public record of the author Ellis.

The fictional Bret claims to have attended Camden College, and that his manuscript for *Less Than Zero* was a college project, discovered by his professor. While the plot of this story does reflect Ellis's actual experience, he has set Bret's story at Camden College, the fictional setting of *The Rules of Attraction*. By adding an element of fiction into the autobiographical account, Ellis is indicating that he is not identical to his narrating counterpart. It also signifies the Bret that exists in the fictional space whereas Ellis resides in the "real world."

In *Lunar Park*, Bret also talks about his relationship with Jayne Dennis. Jayne is described as a model-turned-actress, an up and coming Hollywood superstar who in the 1980s performed in films alongside Keanu Reeves. Jayne is one of the truly fictional characters in *Lunar Park*. She doesn't exist outside of the text, except in two websites which were established to promote the publication of *Lunar Park* in 2005 (www.jaynedennis.com and www.jayne-dennis.com). While Bret and Jayne are dating, Jayne falls pregnant. Bret begs her to have an abortion. When Jayne decides to keep the child, her relationship with Bret falls apart. Bret meets his son Robby only twice from birth until the age of 10. The relationship between the fictional Bret and the fictional Jayne creates Robby, a fictional offspring who shares a name with Robert Martin Ellis (Bret and Ellis's father).

Many have been tempted to participate in Ellis's game, to sift fact from fiction in the opening chapter of *Lunar Park*. Holt and Abbot published a two page point-by-point analysis of where the real-life Ellis diverged from the fictional Bret. The promotional website established by Ellis's publisher was named www.twobrets.com to invite such a comparison. Although this game is invited by Ellis, he has also publicly stated that there is more to *Lunar Park* than the

comparison between himself and his fictional counterpart:

My worry is that people will want to know what's true and what's not [...] All the things that are in the book—my quote-unquote autobiography—I just don't want to answer any of those questions. I don't like demystifying the text (qtd. in Wyatt n.p.)

Although Ellis refuses to demystify the text, one of the purposes of inserting himself into the text is to trap readers in this very game, and to confuse fact with fiction. Although the text opens with a chapter which reads like Ellis's autobiography, careful reading of the textual Bret against the extra-textual Ellis reveals that this chapter contains almost as much fiction as the "ghost story" which fills the remaining 400-odd pages. This ghost story could have been told by any first-person narrator. By writing himself into the text, Ellis is writing his public persona into the fictional character of Bret. One of the effects of blurring the lines between public and private, reality and fiction is that Ellis's real-life disclosures invite the reader to read the fictional text against their extra-textual knowledge of Ellis himself. In this way, Ellis is able to address the many ghosts which have haunted his career—most importantly the public reception of *American Psycho* and his public persona. A more personal ghost is the ghost of Ellis's father who has been written into the text, literally haunting Bret's home with messages from beyond the grave. Closure occurs when these ghosts have been exorcised. The question is: is *Lunar Park* Ellis's attempt to close down the public debates, or to add more fuel to the fire?

One of the areas in which Ellis seeks to find closure is in the controversy surrounding *American Psycho*. Ellis uses his fictional voice to re-write the discourse surrounding the creation and reception of the text. There are deliberate contradictions in Bret's version of writing *American Psycho*. In *Lunar Park*, Bret describes the writing process of *American Psycho*. In an oddly ornate passage for Ellis (who seldom uses adverbs), Bret describes how he would "fearfully watch my hands as the pen swept across the yellow legal pads" (19) blaming the "spirit" of Patrick Bateman for visiting and causing the book to be written. When it was finished, the "spirit" was "disgustingly satisfied" and stopped "gleefully haunting" Bret's dreams. This shift in writing style may be an indication of a shift from reality into a fictionalised account of the writing of *American Psycho*.

Much of the plot of *Lunar Park* is taken up with the consequences of *American Psycho*, when a madman starts replicating crimes exactly as they appear in the novel. It is almost as if Patrick Bateman is haunting Bret and his family. When informed that his fictional violence has disrupted his quiet suburban existence, Bret laments, "this was the moment that detractors of the book had warned me about: if anything happened to anyone as a result of the publication of this novel, Bret Easton Ellis was to blame" (181-2). By the end of *Lunar Park* Bret decides to "kill" Patrick Bateman once and for all, by writing an epilogue in which Bateman is burnt alive.

On the surface, it appears that *Lunar Park* is the site of an apology about *American Psycho*. However, this is not entirely the case. Much of Bret's description of writing *American Psycho* is contradictory to Ellis's personal accounts where he consciously researched the gruesome details of Bateman's crimes using an FBI training manual (Rose). Although Patrick Bateman is destroyed by the end of *Lunar Park*, extra-textually, neither Bret nor Ellis is not entirely apologetic for his creation. Bret argues that *American Psycho* was "about society and manners and mores, and not about cutting up women. How could anyone who read the book not see this?" (182). Extra-textually, in an interview Ellis admitted that when he re-read "the violence sequences I was incredibly upset and shocked [...] I can't believe that I wrote that. Looking back, I realize, God, you really sort of stepped over a line there" (qtd. in Wyatt n.p.). However, in that same interview, Ellis admits to lying to reporters if he feels that the reporter is "out to get" him. Therefore, Ellis's apology may not actually be an apology at all.

Lunar Park presents an explanation about how and why *American Psycho* was written. This explanation is much akin to claiming that “the devil made me do it”, by arguing that Bret was possessed by “the spirit of this madman” (18). While it may seem that this explanation is an attempt to close the vast amount of discussion surrounding why *American Psycho* was written, Ellis is actually using his fictional persona to address the public outcry about his most controversial novel, providing an apology for a text, which is really no apology at all. Ultimately, the reliability of Bret’s account depends on the reader’s knowledge of Ellis’s public persona.

This interplay between the fictional Bret and the real-life Ellis can be seen in *Lunar Park*’s account of the *Glamorama* publicity tour. In *Lunar Park*, Bret describes his own version of the *Glamorama* book tour. For Bret, this tour functions as his personal nadir, the point in his life where he hits rock bottom and looks to Jayne Dennis as his saviour. Throughout the tour, Bret describes taking all manner of drugs. At one point, threatened by his erratic behaviour, Bret’s publishers asked a personal minder to join the book tour, reporting back on Bret’s actions which include picking at nonexistent scabs, sobbing at his appearance in a hotel mirror and locking himself in a bookstore bathroom for over an hour before emerging and claiming that he had a snake living in his mouth (32-33).

The reality of the *Glamorama* book tour is not anywhere near as wild as that described by Bret in *Lunar Park*. In reviews and articles addressing the real-life *Glamorama* book tour, there are no descriptions of these events. One article, from the *The Observer* (Macdonald), does describe a meeting over lunch where Ellis admits to drinking way too much the night before and then having to deal with phone calls from fans he can’t remember giving his phone-number to. However, as previously mentioned, in that same article a friend of Ellis’s is quoted as saying that Ellis frequently lies to reporters. Bret’s fictional actions seem to confirm Ellis’s real life “party boy” persona.

For Moran, “the name of the author [him]self can become merely an image, either used to market a literary product directly or as a kind of free floating signifier within contemporary culture” (61). *Lunar Park* is about all of the connotations of the name Bret Easton Ellis. It is also a subversion of those expectations. The fictional *Glamorama* book tour shows Ellis’s media persona taken to an extreme until it becomes a self-embodying parody. In *Lunar Park*, Ellis is deliberately amplifying his public persona, accepting that no amount of truthful disclosure will erase the image of Bret-the-party-boy. However, the remainder of the novel turns this image on its head by removing Bret from New York and placing him in middle-American suburbia, married, and with two children in tow.

Ultimately, although the novel appears as a transgression of fact and fiction, Bret may be the most fictional of all of Ellis’s narrators (with the exception of Patrick Bateman). Bret is married where Ellis is single. Bret is heterosexual whereas Ellis is homosexual, and used the site of *Lunar Park* to confirm his homosexuality. Bret has children whereas Ellis is childless. Bret has settled down into the heartland of American suburbia, a wife and two children in tow whereas Ellis has made it clear that this lifestyle is not one he is seeking.

The novel is presented as the site of Ellis’s personal disclosure, and yet only creates more fictional fodder for the public image of Ellis, there are elements of true and personal disclosures from Ellis life, which he is using the text as the site for his own brand of closure. The most genuine and heartfelt closure is achieved through Ellis’s disclosure of his relationship with his father.

The death of Ellis’s father, Robert Martin Ellis has an impact on both the textual and extra-textual levels of *Lunar Park*. Textually, the novel takes the form of a ghost story, and it is Robert himself who is haunting Bret. These spectral disturbances manifest themselves in Bret’s house which slowly transforms into a representation of his childhood home. Bret also receives nightly e-mails from the bank in which his father’s ashes have been stored in a safe-deposit

box. These e-mails contain an attached video file showing the last few moments of Robert Martin Ellis's life. Bret never finds out who filmed the video. Extra-textually, the death of Robert Martin Ellis is clearly signified in the fact that *Lunar Park* is dedicated to him as well as Michael Wade Kaplan, two men close to Ellis who have died. The trope of fathers haunting their sons is further highlighted by Ellis's inter-textual references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* including a quote in the epigraph: "From the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / all saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / that youth and observation copied there" (1.5.98-101). The names of various geographical locations in Bret's neighbourhood: Bret and Jayne live on Elsinore Lane, named for Elsinore castle, Bret also visits Fortinbras Mall, Osric hotel and Ophelia Boulevard. In *Hamlet*, the son is called upon by the ghost of his father to avenge his death. In *Lunar Park*, Bret is called upon to avenge himself against the wrongs inflicted upon him by his own father.

The ambiguity of the relationships between fathers and sons is summarised in the closing passage of the novel.

So, if you should 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: that he 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* (453).

Although Bret earlier signals the reader to interpret this passage as a message from Bret to his son Robby (45), it is also possible to interpret it as a message from the fictional Robert Martin Ellis to the fictional Bret. In this reading, *Lunar Park* is not just a novel, a game or a post-modern deconstruction of the fact and fiction binary, it instead becomes an exorcism for the author. The process of writing *Lunar Park* casts the spectre of the real-life Robert Martin Ellis out of his life to a place where Bret (and Ellis) can always find him. This relationship is the site not only of disclosure – reflecting Ellis's own personal angst with his late father – but of closure, where Ellis has channelled his relationship and indeed exorcised his father into the text.

Lunar Park contains several forms of disclosures, most of which transgress the line between fiction and fact. *Lunar Park* does not provide a closure from the tendency to read autobiography into Ellis's texts, instead, chapter one provides as much fiction as fact, as evident in the discussions of *American Psycho* and the *Glamorama* book tour. Although chapter one presents in an autobiographical form, the remainder of the text reveals how fictional "Bret Easton Ellis" really is. Much of *Lunar Park* can be interpreted as a puzzle whose answer depends on the reader's knowledge and understanding of the public perception, persona and profile of Bret Easton Ellis himself. Although seeming to provide closure on the surface, by playing with fiction and fact, *Lunar Park* only opens up more ground for discussion of Ellis, his novels, his persona and his fictional worlds. These are discussions I look forward to participating in, particularly as 2010 will see the publication of Ellis's sixth novel (and sequel to *Less Than Zero*), *Imperial Bedrooms*.

Although much of Ellis's game in *Lunar Park* is to tease the reader by failing to provide true disclosures or meaningful and finite closure, the ending of the *Lunar Park* indicates the most honest, heartfelt and abiding closure for the text and for Ellis himself. Devoid of games and extra-textual riddles, the end of the novel is a message from a father to his son. By disclosing details of his troubled relationship with his father, both Ellis and his fictional counterpart Bret are able to exorcise the ghost of Robert Martin Ellis. As the novel closes, the ghost who haunts the text has indeed been exorcised and is now standing, with "arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*" (453).

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