

**Université de Montréal**

**Missing-in-Action:**

**The American Cipher in Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland**

**par**

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**Thèse présentée à la Faculté des études supérieures  
en vue de l'obtention du grade de  
Philosophiæ Doctor (Ph.D.)  
en études anglaises**

**juillet 2005**

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**Université de Montréal**  
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**Cette thèse intitulée:**

**Missing-in-Action:**

**The American Cipher in Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland**

**Présentée par:**

**Nabeela Sheikh**

**a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:**

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**Thèse acceptée le .....**

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to several people for helping me to complete this dissertation. It was quite a journey from the beginning to the end of this process, and this manuscript is a testimony to the time and care of my advisor, Professor Jay Bochner. His excellent direction never faltered whether I was in the city, in the province, or even in the country. I also owe a great deal to Professor Lianne Moyes for helping to motivate my progression. I'm grateful that I was lucky enough to have worked with both Jay and Lianne, and to feel that I have made two such good friends.

No one deserves more recognition for their encouragement and support than my parents, Falahat and Iftikhar Sheikh. Their constant presence in my life tempered the ups and downs of life as a graduate student and, when necessary, rallied to maintain my progress. The text between these covers, and the text that is my life, is the result of their work as much as my own.

My husband, Nisar, also played an integral role in my completion of this project. His kindness and understanding are immeasurable, especially considering the many hours I committed myself to solitary confinement; reading, writing and thinking turned out to be rather antisocial activities.

Thank you to Nafeesa and Suleman, and to Tahir and Riffaat, for their support and encouragement. Holidays spent with them and their children—Iman and Humza, and Shaan and Shamila—were always highly anticipated events and will always be treasured. Thanks also to Mariam for consistently allowing me to steer our many coffee-break conversations over to the theoretical arena. There is always more to think about.

Nabeela Sheikh  
2005

## Abstract

In the grammar of storytelling, character is formed from context. The narrative *produces* character from the character's interaction with the narrative framework. This framework is a massive structure of already existing relations and interrelations that character needs to fit itself into in order to understand its own place in society. The authors I chose to work with are directly influenced by this framework, by the changing social conditions of the period in which they write. Because the concepts of free will and individuality have long been institutionalized and taken for granted in North America, they are elements which must be scrutinized when authors write characters whose material existence in the socioeconomic sphere determines their overall status and position of power. But classifying on the basis of social position leads to stereotype and when stereotypes become predominant, character inevitably seems to build towards a familiar *type*. How, then, can character possibly redeem itself?

This study takes as its starting point the development of character *types* in North American Literature, beginning in its Introduction with the characters in the medieval morality play, *Everyman*. The progress of character is then charted through to its Romantic renditions as the Individual who, far from the allegorical flatness of *Everyman*, possesses an inner life, the depths of which may be thousands of leagues from the surface. By the first half of the twentieth century, characters were easily available to cognizant readers who learned how to fully *know*, fully psychologize, characters according to newly popular approaches to character that complicated and complexified personality, such as that of Freud. But by the late twentieth century, these approaches become *too* well understood by readers. Detail in physical description, objects within a scene, even weather, are mere elements intended to infuse *life* into the character. But how can this exercise in mathematics create life? At best, this approach presents a series of

equations that yields only a *type* of character. And, when a reader recognizes a *type*, her cognitive faculties *fill in* the character with the residual information she has stored from all the stories, fairytales, newspaper articles and personal narratives she has ever been exposed to. In essence, she ‘skips’ over the character that is present in the text because so much information from these intertexts flood her mind. Instead, she will see only what is common and familiar: what fits into *type*.

The construction of these paradigms of cognition are both learned and, as Jung taught, innate. Over time, societal shifts have a great effect on the human ability and capacity to interpret, translate, make sense of—to *know*. The second section of this dissertation, “Commodity Fiction,” analyzes the changes that occurred in Western society that affected the individual mindset, such as industrialization, which effectively reduces the individual to a cog functioning in the machinery of society. Since the assembly-line (or storyline) had become such a well-established metaphor for living in society, it inevitably encroached upon characters in literature as a system of belief, replacing the power of a higher being or of self-reliance. “Buying into a story” also meant buying into a newly-changing lifestyle that replaced *Truths* with fictions.

It became apparent that society (including governmental and political institutions) was merely a sophisticated, interlocking system of smoothly-running machinery. At the same time, it became illogical to believe that those who inhabited this narrative machinery could really be complex beings, with complicated desires and motivations. For the machine to run so efficiently, then, it made sense that the inhabitants of the structure must be similar fits, or exactly the same: “copies of copies.” While the previous section deals with “buying into lifestyles,” Section Three: “Character as Commodity” deals with “buying into character types.”

In Sections Four and Five, I analyze two contemporary writers, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland, respectively, whose works intertwine with these issues and offer a way out of systematized *knowing*. As members of a fairly recent literary tendency, referred to by literary critic James Annesley as writers of “blank fiction,” these two writers present “flat” or “surface” characters for readerly consumption. Seemingly very little about what motivates or influences these characters can be construed from the text. What is conventionally derived from the text, then, is a literal translation of symbol—what has led to the replacement of *thinking* with *referring*. Interestingly, in an article for *The New Republic*, Coupland writes, “Demonize the symbolic analysts” (“55 Statements about the Culture” 10). Symbolic analysts, as Robert B. Reich writes,

solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols. They simplify reality into abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with. . . The manipulations are done with analytic tools . . . [which] may be mathematical algorithms, legal arguments, financial gimmicks, scientific principles, psychological insights about how to persuade or to amuse, systems of induction or deduction, or any other set of techniques for doing conceptual puzzles. (Reich, *Work of Nations* 178)

The common reader has come to approach literature in much the same way—a *puzzle* that can be *solved by manipulating symbols*. But perhaps those new pieces of information—the *affect* that life in contemporary society produces—cannot easily be put forth in conventional symbol or through the actions of a conventional character. Often the reader, consciously or unconsciously, skips over this excess of information.

“Skipping over” characters because of their apparent flatness or redundancy results in the skipping over of detail that may be crucial to a ‘fuller’ reading of the character, and also to the



wrongful assumption that alternate readings of these characters can supply no other interpretation. The fallacy here is of leaving out information that would affect the reading of the character; the reader's mind, of course, is willing to a certain extent to ignore certain details or to file them away as anomalies that bear no meaning against a seemingly perfected exegesis. On the other hand, this information sometimes provides the interpreter with a site upon which *différance* comes into play. From this approach, character finds ways of thwarting the dissecting pin, of refusing the stereotyped label. This is possible by the salvaging of the unassimilable descriptive detail, the slightest of gestures or thoughts, or the casual off-handed remark. In this way, a flat character such as Herman Melville's Bartleby can no longer be written off or rationalized as "an irreparable loss to literature," as Bartleby's employer reads him. This study shows that it is precisely this *loss* of the conventional character in literature that, paradoxically, leaves the reader with much to gain.

Keywords: American literature, Canadian literature, Douglas Coupland, characterization, Bret Easton Ellis, narrative, postmodernism

## Résumé

Dans la grammaire de la narration, le personnage est façonné par le contexte. La narration le *caractérise* à partir de ses interactions avec le cadre du récit. Ce cadre est une lourde trame de relations et d'interrelations préexistantes, dans laquelle le personnage doit s'insérer pour comprendre sa place dans la société. Les auteurs que j'ai choisi d'étudier subissent directement l'influence de ce cadre, des changements sociaux qui marquent leur époque. Les notions de libre-arbitre et d'individualité font partie depuis longtemps du cadre institutionnel en Amérique du Nord, au point d'y être tenues pour acquises; un examen attentif de ces concepts s'impose donc quand un auteur crée un personnage qui tire son statut social et son pouvoir de sa place dans la sphère socioéconomique. Mais toute classification fondée sur la position sociale mène au stéréotype. Or, là où prédominent les stéréotypes, les personnages évoluent irrémédiablement vers des *types* familiers. Comment pourraient-ils y échapper ?

L'étude qui suit examine l'évolution des personnages-*types* dans la littérature nord-américaine, avec, en introduction, ceux de la moralité médiévale *Everyman*. Nous suivons les progrès du personnage jusqu'à son incarnation romantique dans l'Individu, si étranger à la superficialité allégorique d'*Everyman* par la vie intérieure qu'il cultive à des profondeurs parfois insondables. Dans la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les personnages se dévoilent aisément aux lecteurs informés qui ont appris à les *connaître*, à déchiffrer leur psychologie en s'appuyant sur certaines méthodes récemment popularisées, qui tendent à donner plus d'épaisseur, de complexité à leurs caractères, comme celle de Freud. À la fin du siècle, ces méthodes sont toutefois *trop* bien connues des lecteurs. L'attention accordée à l'apparence physique, aux objets qui meublent la scène, au temps qu'il fait, même, est censée donner *vie* au personnage, mais comment un aride exercice mathématique pourrait-il créer la vie ? Au mieux, il fournit une série

d'équations qui se résout en un *type*. Et quand les lecteurs reconnaissent un type, leur intellect *complète* aussitôt le portrait avec le résidu des romans, contes, articles et récits vécus qu'ils ont déjà lus. Ils « escamotent » le personnage qu'ils ont sous les yeux parce que leur esprit, saturé d'images intertextuelles, ne veut percevoir que ses aspects connus, familiers.

Ces paradigmes de la connaissance sont construits, mais *aussi* innés, comme l'enseignait Jung. En longue durée, les mutations sociales ont des effets puissants sur nos facultés et capacités d'interprétation, de traduction, de décodage – de *compréhension*. La deuxième partie de cette thèse, « Commodity Fiction », analyse les mutations de la société occidentale qui ont modifié les mentalités individuelles, notamment l'industrialisation, qui réduit l'individu à un simple rouage de la machine sociale. La chaîne de montage s'est si bien imposée comme métaphore de la vie dans cette société que son inexorabilité a déteint sur les personnages de roman, sapant leur foi dans le pouvoir de l'initiative individuelle. Quand la lectrice adhérait au récit, elle adhérait en même temps à un mode de vie nouveau qui remplaçait les *Vérités* par des fictions.

La société (y compris ses institutions publiques et politiques) étant réduite à une mécanique, à un système perfectionné de pièces imbriquées, les habitants de la machine narrative pouvaient difficilement justifier une identité, des désirs et des motivations complexes. La machine ne fonctionnerait efficacement que s'ils sortaient du même moule, s'ils étaient semblables, sinon identiques : des « copies de copies ». Après l'adhésion aux styles de vie, nous examinons l'adhésion aux types de caractères dans le troisième chapitre, « Character as commodity ».

Les chapitres quatre et cinq sont consacrés respectivement à Bret Easton Ellis et Douglas Coupland, deux écrivains contemporains dont l'œuvre s'inscrit dans cette problématique, mais échappe à la *reconnaissance* systématique. Membres d'un courant littéraire relativement neuf, ils

écrivent de la « blank fiction » selon l'expression du critique James Annesley : des romans dont les personnages, parfaitement « lisses », ne révèlent que leur surface. Le texte ne livre presque rien sur leurs motivations ni sur les pressions qu'ils subissent. L'interprétation conventionnelle devient une traduction littérale de symboles – le *renvoi* remplace la *réflexion*. Ce que Coupland résume ainsi dans *The New Republic* : « Démoniser les analystes symboliques » (« 55 Statements about the Culture » 10). Comme l'écrit Robert B. Reich, les analystes symboliques résolvent, définissent et interprètent les problèmes par la manipulation de symboles. Ils simplifient la réalité, la réduisent à des images abstraites avec lesquelles on peut jouer, jongler, expérimenter. . . Ces manipulations exigent un outillage analytique . . . algorithmes mathématiques, raisonnements juridiques, montages financiers, principes scientifiques, aptitudes psychologiques à persuader ou amuser, systèmes inductifs, déductifs ou autres procédés permettant de résoudre une énigme conceptuelle. (Reich, *Work of Nations* 178)

Le lecteur moyen approche aujourd'hui la littérature d'une manière assez similaire – comme une *énigme à résoudre* par la *manipulation de symboles*. Il se peut, toutefois, que les nouveaux éléments d'information – l'*affect* produit par la vie dans la société contemporaine – se traduisent mal dans la symbolique habituelle ou la conduite d'un personnage conventionnel. Le lecteur sera alors tenté d'« escamoter », consciemment ou non, cette information jugée superfétatoire.

En « escamotant » des traits de caractère apparemment superficiels ou redondants, il escamote des détails peut-être essentiels à une interprétation plus « complète » du personnage et peut s'imaginer, à tort, qu'une relecture n'apporterait aucun éclairage nouveau. L'erreur consiste ici à rejeter des renseignements susceptibles de modifier la compréhension du personnage; le

lecteur choisit de négliger ou de traiter comme une aberration le détail impossible à concilier avec une exégèse sans faille apparente. Pourtant, cette information peut parfois inspirer à l'interprète un regard *différent*. Vu sous cet angle, le personnage ne peut plus être épinglé ni étiqueté. Ce qui rend la chose possible, c'est la récupération du détail descriptif inassimilable, du petit geste, de la pensée fugitive, de la remarque désinvolte. Du coup, un personnage sans relief comme le Bartleby de Herman Melville ne peut plus être écarté ni justifié par la « perte irréparable pour la littérature » qu'invoque son employeur. Ma thèse montre que cette *perte*, cette disparition du personnage conventionnel de roman, est, de façon paradoxale, un gain substantiel pour le lecteur.

Mot clés: caractérisation, Douglas Coupland, Bret Easton Ellis, littérature américaine, littérature canadienne, narratif, postmodernisme

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## Introduction:

### The Ordinary Man Makes Do

From the first literary depiction of the office cubicle in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" to the clockwork machinery of Chaplin's *Modern Times*, artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have portrayed the glory of technology with an accompanying paradoxical horror that arises from the processing and packaging of human lives. The lack of heroism, the kind that is worthy of admiration, resulted in a distancing from the romance of the preceding century. Emerson, Wordsworth, and Coleridge strove to uncover the glorious depths and heights of the sublime, which could often be attained through spiritual revolution. Often, they left the burgeoning cities and rejoined nature rather than suffocate in the wake of technological innovation. As industrialization took hold and spread, however, the writer's focus began to change. No longer would he cloister himself away and ignore the smokestacks of the wasteland. No longer did individualization and freedom invoke great feelings of belief in expansionism and progress. Instead of spiraling inward to great depths, or upwards towards metaphysical union, modern man found himself struggling to find space in an ever-shrinking box: the office or work cubicle became a physical manifestation of the demographic ordering of society.

Section I of this study describes how, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, individuals had more than willingly allowed themselves to be labeled and sorted; more often, they themselves strove to find social titles to designate themselves as "somebodies" who were distinct from others in society, as Deirdre Shauna Lynch discusses in her *The Economy of Character*. This is an important phenomenon to note, one that marked the return from society's focus on the Individual to its dependence on social hierarchies and demographic grids to ascertain human value and worth. But the apparent exhilaration of this activity floundered as individuality



seemed to recede from these labels. This modern stage finds its roots as far back as Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby: the Scrivener," one of the alienated "modern men" or the Modern Man, as he is referred to by Maurice Friedman in *Problematic Rebel*, his study of alienated characters in literature. From the wide-open landscapes and endlessness of the romantic idyll, our cognitive structures have no doubt changed; they have apparently been shaped by the twentieth century and industrialization to mimic the important technologies that marked our era: the production line, the computer and the binary code. Thus we look for signs, for symbols, for motifs that are easily translatable, easily consumable and turned into a product. For this reason, literary works will be approached from the perspective of critical and popular reception; it is the *consensual* interpretation of fiction that builds the stage for a more radical interpretive approach. As well, the concept of characters as icons or products will be developed through already-existing literary studies, including those of the champion of the "new novel," Alain Robbe-Grillet, which criticize the practice of evaluating narrative description as a revelation of the psychosocial nature of a character.

Section II outlines a vision of 'progress' in this realm of art, a progression from the absolutes of rules and convention, to loss of formal convention, to loss of almost any convention which is where we are today. As the focus on classical forms and conventions waned, new ideas of freedom and liberalism took hold; the sense of a work of art evoking feelings of admiration or sublime was a greater reward than the sense of admiration for the correctness of an object's outer form, as in the classical age of art. Part of this may be linked to the increasing presence of institutional forms in society, structures which began to make us think after them. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* shows how the subject not only began to think in the received form of logic that was passed through the structures which held him, but began to propagate it forward, through to the relationships and effects he had within society. More and more, as the twentieth century progressed, the art form fell back to a sort of

structure that bespoke of “form” and “function,” yet lacked the familiar sense of completion and beauty that the classical emphasis on these things produced. The problem was that the “structure” of forms, while not necessarily manifest in the actual art object, had been internalized in the artist’s psyche. The difference in the artists’ renderings between the two time periods is obvious; while classicists upheld structure as a way to *present* their imaginary, the imaginaries of artists today are built *on top of the structure*. The modern complaint that all stories have been done would seem justified. Where writers of romanticism often escaped from the burgeoning cities to reflect on beauty, writers today may escape physically but remain psychically entrenched within both positive and negative processes of industrialization. Critics such as Fredric Jameson argue that postmodernism began when society abandoned the production line as a sustaining metaphor of motivational drive and took up the consumption of the production line instead. This development has a great impact on the focus of this study, especially when it is considered in the light of Michel de Certeau’s *the Practice of Everyday Life*, in which the author writes,

To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called “consumption.” The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (xiii-xiv)

It is also about this time that the writer’s consumption of narrative (codes) went into overdrive and remains today, pumping out the same *process* that narrative provides a sequence for, rather than the writer stepping back for a moment and attempting to change the *product* for a moment and go into a new direction. This naturally derives from the sociological acknowledgement that, to some degree, most people’s everyday appearance is a

good part production, even part “packaging.” This is discussed in Section III, where it is noted that characters on a page, over whom it is assumed the author has total control, must be products in the truest sense of the word. The authors studied here seem to be aware of the truth behind Robbe-Grillet’s criticism; they tend not to supply much physical detail. Even the main character in Ellis’s *American Psycho*, who obsessively lists, via interior monologue, brands and prices of each product he uses, still neglects physical description of himself.

Accordingly, most popular fiction of the late twentieth century maintains a strong grip on narrative as its saving value. But as Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk-tale* shows, there are a limited number of narratives available. The question, then, is whether there is a way to figure character into the plot so as to significantly alter the *meaning* of the narrative. What if character, long despised for its flatness or, conversely, for its overpsychologized portrayal, were able to act as an agent of its own fate? To take himself somewhere other than where the overarching narrative intends to deposit him? De Certeau writes that even those artists who are consumers have the power to make something new from their acts of using old formulas: there is “a whole literature called “popular” . . . [that] present[s] [itself] essentially as “arts or making” this or that, i.e., as combinatory or utilizing modes of consumption. These practices bring into play a “popular” *ratio*, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using” (*Practice* xii). This study hopes to uncover a way to read characters in a way that usurps the narrative meant to contain them. The similarity they share is that of the “ordinary man,” to whom de Certeau dedicates *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

To the ordinary man.

To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. . . . What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to

him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses..

. . . The increasingly sociological and anthropological perspective of inquiry privileges the anonymous and the everyday in which zoom lenses cut out metonymic details— parts for the whole. Slowly the representatives that formerly symbolized families, groups, and orders disappear from the stage they dominated during the epoch of the name. We witness the advent of the number. It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics. It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rips nor darned patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one. (v)

Section IV will begin with a discussion of the tendency to valorize one type of reading over another, taking into account the “interpretive communities” of Stanley Fish. Concurrently, a particular sociohistorical time period manifests itself in different ways on the writer’s rendering (as well as on the reader’s interpretation). Referring to Philippe Sollers’s *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, it will be shown that a simple “demonstration” of character motivation or *feeling* is not always sufficient to revealing true motivation or meaning. Sollers believes the reader must be *persuaded* of something new. It is assumed that once a new perspective is glimpsed, one must investigate to find whether some kind of “intellectual proof” exists. In order to find this proof, this study uses an approach that borrows from Russian formalism, deconstruction and sociology. But, at base, it begins from the feeling that arises when one finishes reading a novel and experiences a sense of closure that is insincere. Or the feeling that the character finally “sees the light” and changes his ways only because he knows it is expected of him.

Because of this change in reading habits, Bloom is forced to call for “*the recovery of the ironic*” (25). This is one of his major principles for “the restoration of reading.” As he writes,

Think of the endless irony of Hamlet, who when he says one thing almost invariably means another, frequently indeed the opposite of what he says. But with this principle, I am close to despair, since you can no more teach someone to be ironic than you can instruct them to become solitary. And yet the loss of irony is the death of reading, and of what had been civilized in our natures. (25)

Irony, the space between what is said and what is meant, depends very much on the reader, as well as on the author’s apparent intention. The three kinds of “tactics,” in the de Certeauan sense, employed by the character that is the focus of this study will be shown, at times, to introduce irony into the narrative. The first tactic that empowers character is the Russian formalist concept of “making strange,” what will be referred to here as “overblown.” The second is by creating a state of Derridean undecideability, or *aporia*. The third tactic a character may choose is to present a “mask” behind which he proves to be “missing-in-action.”

“Tactical” readings of works by Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland will be presented, alongside their more traditional readings. These authors are significant because they often share the sensibility of using their characters’ material subjectivities as the bases of their characterizations. But what is original, and important, about their renderings is that they introduce a significant amount of material, alongside their postmodern characterizations, that work against stereotype. In this way, the character jubilantly defies being ‘flattened’ by a reader’s tendency to allot character(istics) only to certain “types” and dismiss that which does not fit.

It will be argued that the fictions of Coupland and Ellis preclude a “mathematical” symbology by utilizing methods that do not allow easy appropriation by traditional methods of literary interpretation. What will be referred to as the ‘narrative’ in their works is a traditional interpretation, using current practices of interpretation. These will not be ‘absolute’ readings, but readings in which a general “interpretive community” would find most concordance. Following this, the same works will be read in a different manner. These subsequent readings add value to the works by highlighting the existence of an excess of meaning, which will have a great impact on the way the main characters are viewed. As with de Certeau’s tactics, this reading

introduces an “art” which is anything but passive. It resembles rather that art whose theory was developed by medieval poets and romancers: an innovation infiltrated into the text and even into the terms of a tradition. Imbricated within the strategies of modernity (which identify creation with the invention of a personal language, whether cultural or scientific), the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute subtle art of “renters” who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text. In the Middle Ages, the text was framed by the four, or seven, interpretations of which it was held to be susceptible. And it was a book. Today, this text no longer comes from a tradition. It is imposed by the generation of a production technocracy. It is no longer a referential book, but a whole society made into a book, into the writing of the anonymous law of production.

*(The Practice of Everyday Life xiii)*

It is hoped that this “creation” allows the characters in Ellis and Coupland to redeem themselves, or recover agency, by throwing a wrench into the machine of narrational accommodation.

## Section I

### **A Short History of “Character”: From Everyman to the Romantic Individual to the Automaton**

If a kind of characterological history is attempted when identifying the sociohistorical underpinnings of character and characterization, a particular theme ultimately comes into focus. From its ancient beginnings, character seems to have (r)evolved from Aristotle’s functional representations, to the rounded ‘individuals’ who become much more fully realized during the descriptive age of Realism, then to the experimental age of Modernism, and back to the flattened outlines that, once again, approach allegory. Although it appears that the allegory manages to survive to the end of the second millennium, its purposive nature changes in important and meaningful ways.

#### **i. The Inclusive Spirit of Everyman**

*Everyman: A Morality Play* was written at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The particular genre to which the allegory belonged (and which also included mystery or miracle plays) maintained its popularity between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the play, Death comes for Everyman, and when Everyman attempts to persuade his friends, including Beauty, Worldly Goods, and Kindred to go with him, they each refuse. In the end, only Good Deeds is willing to go with him. The moral is that doing good deeds in life should be highly valued, rather than

worldly objects or other things of a similarly transitory nature. In her article “From *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* to Hofmansthal and Kafka,” Helen Adolf points out that

From its first appearance on the late mediaeval stage, *Everyman* had the tendency to attract and to assimilate new motifs and to alter their meaning. . . . Thus *Everyman*, having served religious tenets of the pre-Reformation and Reformation eras, survived into our times and is as poignant . . . [in the] waxing atomic age, as it was in the waning Middle Ages. (204)

That *Everyman* was written anonymously invested the morality play with a cachet of equality and brotherhood, establishing the positive social aspects of overcoming social hierarchies.

Allegories that are written today maintain the traditional concept of universal equality; the difference from the medieval version of the allegory is that the alteration of meaning that Adolf identifies in *Everyman* is radicalized, such that the dynamic in contemporary allegory between traditional and ‘new’ meanings produces the theme that democracy alone does not guarantee emancipation. Although the more obvious class markers of hierarchy have disappeared from the social sphere since the days of *Everyman*, a hierarchy based on socioeconomic authority has remained entrenched and as powerful as ever because of its internalization, not only by the collective but also by the personal unconscious. While in the past anonymity united the nameless and faceless in a spirit of brotherhood, anonymity today unites the nameless and faceless with the curse of alienation: together, they are cut off from communing.

What attracts the reader to the allegory of *Everyman* is this existential theme, as well as its continued relevance which obtains for a broader audience. But why should the theme of *Everyman* still obtain in a (post)modern world? To answer this question, another question must be answered first: Is character an intrinsic set of qualities, or something that is a result of shaping



and circumstance? Indeed, this study will approach the ‘ordering’ of character by the socioeconomic framework, including but not limited to the work-world. Today, the world of work endows one with a title and a readymade lifestyle; however, choosing to inhabit a readymade position shapes character into a final mold that is more functional than ‘full’ and, even more alarming, divests character of *agency*. As an institution, the (post)modern work-world depersonalizes and then *dehumanizes* individual character—of real-life individuals as well as those portrayed in literature—such that it may be said that the purpose of modern work is to streamline human life into an extremely basic functionality; the strategies used in effecting this “docile” state of existence are what Michel Foucault calls “disciplinary technologies.” According to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, “[w]ithout the insertion of disciplined, orderly individuals into the machinery of production, the . . . demands of capitalism would have been stymied” (135). These individual characters are consistently molded to better fit the socioeconomic system.

At this point, it is helpful to delineate an approach from which character may be studied in a fruitful and useful manner. In an article published in *Critical Inquiry*, Rawdon Wilson points out that, at its base, it is a difficult task: “It is not possible to face a text and announce ‘I shall now talk about character’ in the same way that one might say ‘I shall now talk about plot’ or ‘metaphor’” (“The Bright Chimera” 730). He summarizes the ways of examining character as follows:

- (1) characters are products of the author’s mind—memories, encapsulations of his experience or else (one might say) split-off slivers of his mind or self;
- (2) characters are functions of the text in which they appear—embodiments of theme and idea—to be considered much as tokens, pieces, or counters in a game;

(3) characters are entirely artificial, constructs to be analyzed in terms of the compositional techniques that have gone into their making;

(4) characters are, for the purposes of critical reading, to be considered as if they were actual persons, and the emphasis in criticism—its sole business, in fact—to discuss the response they engender in an intelligent reader. (730)

As Wilson emphasizes, the categories are not discrete. Certainly, any sophisticated methodology would make use of more than one of them, and this study brings each into play at certain times, focusing eventually on approaching character as a function of the text.

Then, to differentiate between the uses of ‘character’ and ‘personality’ in theoretical discussion, it is useful to turn to Christopher Gill’s articulation of the differences in his article “The Character-Personality Distinction”:

I have associated the term ‘character’ with the process of making moral judgements; and I have taken this process to involve (i) placing people in a determinate ethical framework and (ii) treating them as psychological and moral ‘agents’, that is, as the originators of intentional actions for which they are normally held responsible and which are treated as indices of goodness or badness of character. The term ‘personality’, on the other hand, I have associated with responses of a different type. I have connected it with a response to people that is empathetic rather than moral: that is, with the desire to identify oneself with another person, to ‘get inside her skin,’ rather than to appraise her ‘from the outside.’ I have also connected it with a concern with the person as unique individual (or as the possessor of a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ self) rather than as the bearer of character-traits which are assessed by reference to general moral norms. I have also associated it with a perspective in which the person is seen as psychologically passive; that is, as someone

whose nature and behaviour are determined by forces which fall outside her control as an agent and perhaps outside her consciousness as well. In defining the distinction in this way, I have drawn on some commonplace connotations of the terms 'character' and 'personality,' especially the association of 'character' with moral appraisal, and that of 'personality' both with unique individuality or identity and with 'scientific' approaches to the person. I am well aware that the meanings of the two terms, in so far as they are distinguished at all, are not always distinguished in quite this way. My main aim has not been simply to reproduce ordinary usage but to regiment or simplify it, so as to define more clearly two different ways of viewing persons, both in real life and in literature.

(Gill 2-3)

Thus, personality may be delineated only if the character has been *a priori* defined as authentic (realistic, true to life—humanized) since, along the lines of Sigmund Freud, a character requires that common basis of human psychology from which to draw.

In this study, character is generally approached with an aim to emphasizing (1) *authenticity*: where the character lends itself to a reading that problematizes itself primarily through its engagement with the socioeconomic framework (largely through the character's relationship to the institution of work as a disciplinary structure); and (2) *agency*: instances or possibilities of empowerment through, or perhaps by evading, the narrative or institutional framework. As well, it is crucial to keep in mind that "character is only one part of 'the total image of human existence' that a literary work presents" (Pelling 261). In some works, the narrative and socioeconomic frameworks seem to overlies each other: in fact, the literary narrative is posited as a framework built on the very material conditions that provide the institutional structure of contemporary society. These sometimes hidden ideologies produce literary

narratives as well as social institutions. The nature of this ideology-producing framework (both narrative and socioeconomic) is that it creates, intentionally and unintentionally, areas of privilege which function to keep *out*; spaces that are accessible to all; and ‘plots’ of space which successfully keep *in* (all this leads irresistibly to an image of the Author literally ‘plotting’ his evil machinations). The lacunae, or gaps, that remain to be found in between these ‘plots’ of space ultimately are one of the foci of this project.

The danger in attempting a kind of literary history is that contexts in which authors write may be finessed to a degree in order to uphold a chosen evolutionary theme, thereby privileging the neatness of a streamlined approach over real, historical events. On the other hand, it is crucial to attempt to show that connections of humanity as depicted in literature—whatever these connections may be—maintain over time and throughout changing social conditions. This is often one of the first things that is emphasized to students of literature, and as long as the urge to find a shared commonality among different time-periods and cultures does not fall into homogenization, this movement towards finding the “‘human intelligibility’ of the scene” (Pelling 254) is a worthy pursuit.

When the pursuit is of the ‘individual’, however, the terrain can prove rough. As Pelling writes, the “‘individual’ has always proved a slippery figure” (v). This is because, as society and its conventions change, ideas about literature and how to gauge the value of the elements (not only character, but plot, theme, etc.) within it, change as well. Different historical periods are ruled by different literary conventions and movements and, in gauging the importance of a writer’s work, one element of, or approach to, literature is often privileged over the other. For example, “the modern expectation of idiosyncrasy [to ‘mark’ character] contrasts with the Greek taste for the normative, and that is a matter of our and their unreflective popular assumptions, not

just of generic expectations” (vi). Or, “in Hindu culture, for instance [with which “Greek culture aligns more closely”], the concept of a person is more holistic and assumes a greater dependence on social context, . . . [meaning that] adults are far readier to categorize both deviant and socially commended behaviour of others in terms of circumstances rather than dispositions” (247). Still, Pelling finds significant historical traces of the ‘individual’:

He was discovered by the lyric poets, we are told; or in Athens, at the end of the fifth century; or by Plato, with his portrait of Socrates; or in the Hellenistic age, or by the Roman poets, or by the Antonines; or by Augustine. Perhaps he has been there all the time, lurking in Homer’s Achilles and Odysseus. Still, he had evidently fled away again by the early Middle Ages, only to be rediscovered first in 1050-1200; then, according to Burckhardt’s famous analysis, in Renaissance Italy; then again in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries. (v)

Again, it “all depends on what we mean” and, for Pelling as for the aims of this project, what may be inferred by the term ‘individuals’ are “men who followed their own nature (*phusis*) and despised artificial human conventions (*nomoi*). . . . [This] idea became more sophisticated in later antiquity, with much more scope for individual variations of values and aims” (vi).

Determining the status and situation of the individual in society necessitates an understanding of the effects of the nature of work in that society. To properly evaluate modern work, one must revisit what may be loosely considered the originary site of ‘authentic’ work. Almost two millennia before *Everyman* was written, Virgil began the long process of writing his *Georgics* from 36 to 29 B.C. The *Georgics* is a long poem that aims to glorify work. Images of labourers in these poems are not ‘stock’ characters that lack individuality, as those found in many contemporary works of literature. In fact, the worker is extolled, and the work itself is

honoured as a method of bringing oneself closer to God, and closer to a more authentic daily life. The *type* of work portrayed in these poems is extremely important. The labourer in the georgic works the land and enjoys the effort he puts into producing the fruits of his labour. The general theme of the poem is that by nurturing a close relationship with the earth, and a genuine appreciation for the growing cycles of nature, one will gain a powerful sense of satisfaction and “calm.” There is a natural rhythm of life to which the worker is attuned, and this creates the truly authentic individual. His calendar runs on the changing of the seasons, rather than on social engagements or the political situation. As Thomas Bailey writes in his article “Searching for ‘A Life that Will Not Cheat You,’” “Virgil could comment on contemporary Roman politics by seeming to ignore them [in his poetry, just as] contemporary writers of the georgic in spurning the contemporary world of the city are making political statements” (Bailey, par. 6). Not only do these poets build a spiritual and physical retreat from the burgeoning city, they could also reject “the economic and political systems which keep [urban] culture in place” (par. 6). This is extremely important because it maintains a crucial distance from the political and socioeconomic forces that impose excessive order on the everyday life of the modern worker. Yet, as Bailey reminds the reader, while Virgil offered a comforting retreat for the reader in his *Georgics*, he “is overwhelmingly a poet of anxiety” (par. 3). In fact, the calm and reassurance of the georgics were a counter-reaction to an increasingly unstable world, one which, if magnified in scope, can be seen to resemble contemporary society. It is noteworthy that the genre of the georgic, or “work poem,” has survived throughout the centuries, with poets contributing from diverse fields of work. For example, Tom Wayman is a prolific writer who uses work, such as teaching, but including manual labour, as subjects for his poetry. In the introduction to his collection of poetry, *Did I Miss Anything?*, he acknowledges that the workplace constitutes its own “society” in which

“democratic rights and freedoms” of individuals are suspended. Interestingly, this element is not completely absent from the old georgics which glorified agricultural work that was simpler and more “natural” than work one might have found in the bustle and disingenuousness of town. As David Slavitt believes, “No matter how clear or careful the work, [the worker suffers the anxiety of knowing that] it can all vanish in an instant” (Slavitt qtd. in Bailey, par. 3). That is to say, the fear of “redundancy” that is often considered specific to the modern worker may have long roots, and even the work that was valorized by Virgil may fall victim to a degree of the innovation found in the contemporary workplace.

While this agency or its lack comprises only one component of a character, it is especially important because it directly affects the character’s ability to engage the reader. Virgil, along with other poets of the georgic-style camp, would consider an authentic lifestyle to yield a more authentic character. This quality of authenticity has the ability to add to or detract from the reader’s interest in the story such that it is a crucial element in any critical discussion of literature. Perhaps for this reason it is also an area fraught with controversy. Writing about three hundred years earlier, Aristotle placed less emphasis on “working the earth” to evoke authenticity in his persona, and more emphasis on the literary conventions which must regulate the actions represented in poetry. That “men in action” (ch. II) are objects of representation is a recurring statement in his *Poetics*, written around 350 B.C. In writing about literature and art in general, Aristotle spoke often of “imitation” as an important human instinct. In fact, he suggests that man finds more pleasure in an imitation that is highly-wrought than in the thing itself. As well, he emphasizes, it is the *situation* that interests the reader. “Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life” (ch. VI). For Aristotle, “Dramatic action . . . is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions” (ch. VI) Such

a view suggests a devalorizing of character. Although he offers the “proof . . . that novices in the art attain to finish of diction and precision of portraiture [characterization] before they can construct the plot,” he also admits that “The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true” (ch. VI). He goes on to say that “Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait” (ch. VI). It is the importance of this “chalk outline” that maintains significance through to modern day.

Indeed, in the Conclusion to *Characterisation and Individuality in Greek Literature*, Christopher Pelling writes that Aristotle “certainly does not share the modern prejudice that the function of action is to reveal character” (Pelling 256). For Aristotle, the function of action is to precipitate catharsis, or “emotional purging” in the reader. If the artist creates a convincing imitation of circumstance, the reader will imitate the emotions of the character, either by “taki[ng] the mould of any character . . . [or being] lifted out of his proper self” (ch. XVII). The suggestion that characters are subject-positions that the reader variously inhabits is intriguing, especially for thinkers of Aristotle’s day who conceptualized themselves as contributing to a greater collective (the Church, Society) rather than the differentiation of self. Although he emphasizes the art of imitation in producing successful writing, he acknowledges the human limits of empathy. When he writes that “sameness of incident [action] soon produces satiety, and makes tragedies fail on the stage” (ch. XXIV), one wonders whether there is also a saturation point for sameness of *character*.

In America, by the early 1600s, the concepts of the individual and individual thinking faced a great challenge, particularly from changes to the constitution of the country. An immense number of people from the colonies in Great Britain came to New England within a span of



several decades. Settlers of the Plymouth Colony were known as Pilgrim Fathers, and those from the Massachusetts Bay Colony were mostly Puritans. Puritans believed strongly in the following:

1. Original Sin: every person is born sinful
2. Unconditional Election: God “saves” whom he wishes, not all
3. Limited Atonement: Jesus died for the chosen only, not everyone
4. Irresistible Grace: this is freely given and cannot be earned or denied
5. Perseverance of the Saints: saints have the power to interpret God’s will and to live uprightly (Reuben, sec. I)

These convictions had a great effect on the way Puritans thought about and wrote literature. One important example is that they used ‘types’ to understand and to propagate biblical teachings:

“Moses prefigures Jesus, Jonah’s patience is reflected in Jesus’ ordeal on the cross, and Moses’ journey out of Egypt is played out in the Pilgrims’ crossing of the Atlantic.” As well, they interpreted “natural phenomena like flooding, bountiful harvest, invasion of locusts, and lightening” as “God’s wrath and reward” (Reuben, sec. I). These beliefs contributed to a literary tradition that relied heavily, if not completely, on received notions of symbol and mythology.

While the Puritan work ethic positively influenced the development of the colonies, and the state of the nation, in general, there was certainly a point at which the Puritan lifestyle began to decay. Some of the reasons posited for this corrosion are “manifestations of pride, especially among the new rich,” a “decay in family government,” the “rise in lawsuits and lawyers” and a “decay in business morality” (Reuben, sec. VII), such as lying and underpaying which, interestingly enough, may be said of postindustrial societies. Ultimately, the religious and social regulations led many to be dissatisfied with the lifestyle, yearning for something else. One of the reasons for this was the “Dislike of a closed life” (sec. VI), in which interpretation of all rules, teachings,

writings and events were decided upon by those holding power and enforced upon the rest. Very often, this is what attracted Puritans to new ideas of individualism and self-reliance.

As Gutenberg's printing press gained popularity, these ideas, which had originally been available to a privileged few, began to circulate widely. As Marshall McLuhan writes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, "The portability of the book, like that of the easel-painting, added much to the new cult of individualism" (206). Books containing allegorical character types in the manner of Paul Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) "in which, for instance, it is clear what Obstinate means as a character" (Docherty 10), and Joseph Hall's *Characters of Virtues and Vices* (1608), which gives descriptions of familiar stereotypes like "the Wiseman" and "the Busybody," began to lose public interest. Eventually, the "17th century fashion of character-writing culminated in France [in 1694] with the much-admired *Les Caractères* of Jean de la Bruyère" (Sonjae, par. 8). Just 25 years later, Daniel Defoe would write *Robinson Crusoe* to great popular and critical acclaim, signifying the movement from depicting type in literature towards a more "unfettered human person." Although the character of Crusoe would be seen as "a modern Everyman," he was an Everyman infused with the spirit of agency, "isolated [yet] . . . refus[ing] to succumb to misfortune." The book "defined the spirit of the age that lay ahead: an age of enterprise and individualism, of hope and confidence in the benefits of material civilization" (Sonjae, par. 16) rather than its dehumanizing potential. These and other new ideas from Romantic thinkers began to intrigue people. Instead of looking at the world "'scientifically' for a truth that could be verified in this material civilization," the individual would search deeper in oneself, or, in Metaphysical terms, *upwards* towards a higher realm, in order to 'know' truth. Indeed,

The denuding of conscious life and its reduction to a single level created the new world of the unconscious in the seventeenth century. The stage ha[d] been cleared for the

archetypes or postures of individual mind, and [was] ready for the archetypes of the collective unconscious. (McLuhan 244).

Roughly speaking, the documenting of a variety of character ‘types,’ as in Bunyan’s and Hall’s books, might be seen in the seventeenth century as one writer’s *manifestation* of unconscious archetypes. Thus, whereas the older viewpoint would be that a person would generally fall under one type, the new way of thinking was that the individual personality could possess traits from one or more, or all, of these types. Personality, and the generally accepted understanding of personality, became complicated. People became aware that the surface was only part of their reality, and that there were other unseen, unquantifiable elements to human nature. Appearance was problematized, and a whole new world of understanding opened up. This “denuding of conscious life” and exploration of other kinds of awareness led to a new vogue of diary-writing. This was a new kind of literary expression that took over from “character writing,” which was the practice of sketching character types that represented familiar types of people or groups, along the lines of Bunyan and Hall. At this time, people began to be aware of the fact that there was more to tend to than the surface; everyone possessed a “self,” that may have been just as, if not more, important than their outer appearances. In Volume 3: “The Care of the Self” of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the theorist discusses the motivation behind *self*-improvement. He refers to Socrates’s message in his *Apology*, which “remind[s] men that they need to concern themselves not with their riches, not with their honor, but with themselves and with their souls” (Foucault 44). Thus, the emphasis shifts from the care and formation of the *outer* appearance to that of the inner *character*. People had been fundamentally occupied with the status of their souls during the previous centuries, shown by the principle of evaluating character based on the character’s morality (‘goodness’ or ‘badness’), and also the character’s fears about life after

death. “Morality plays spoke to medieval man’s anxiety about being prepared for death, or ‘dying well’; they offer their audience a sort of *ars moriendi* (Latin for ‘the art of dying [well]’)” (Schwartz, par. 1). Over a long period of time, popular attitude began to shift towards *living* well, too, as greater emphasis was placed on rational, scientific thought and life in the material world. In the past “scholars had been guided by the teachings of the church, and people had concerned themselves with actions leading to heavenly rewards. The writings of ancient, pagan Greece and Rome, called the ‘classics,’ had been greatly ignored” (Annenberg, par. 3). In the new age, Humanists became “influenced by the knowledge of these ancient [Greek and Roman] civilizations and by the emphasis placed on man, his intellect, and his life on Earth” (par. 4).

## ii. The Agency of the Romantic Individual

The viability of the rules of tradition and government that had been passed down began to be examined as new ways of thinking were celebrated. By the late eighteenth century, Aristotle’s emphasis on imitation would be criticized by William Blake, who saw the copying of pre-existing forms of expression as redundant rather than the true creation of the human imagination that was sorely needed. In his many works, the Romantic poet-engraver drew a “firm and determinate ‘bounding line’ (so to speak) . . . in his mind between the prevailing eighteenth-century conception of art as ‘imitation,’ ruled by the repressive and backward-looking daughters of Memory, and art as ‘inspiration,’ released by the prophetic agents of the Divine Imagination” (Klonsky 20). Most Blakean critics agree that his ideas about social strictures and their deleterious effects on human consciousness were truly prophetic, especially for a poet of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, his warnings about the ramifications of regulating the human imagination are very much cogent today. Like other Romantic poets, he

viewed the prevailing dependency on purely scientific thought as extremely detrimental to present and future generations of humankind. Patterns of thinking, at the time, were based on rational, empirical observation, in the manner of Newton, Bacon and Locke. Blake railed against these “Satans”:

Newton says Doubt

Aye thats the way to make all Nature out

Doubt Doubt & don't believe without experiment

That is the very thing that Jesus meant

When he said Only Believe Believe & Try

Try Try & never mind the Reason why.

(Blake, “To Nobodaddy” 184)

Here, the poet-prophet ridicules the scientific need to prove beyond a doubt before *belief* can occur. Belief presupposes the inability to test the supposition; earthly proof would naturally turn believing into *knowing*, the intangible into the *institution*. Blake continues,

Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau

Mock on Mock on tis all in vain

You throw the sand against the wind

And the wind blows it back again. (184)

Though he addresses these proponents of Reason and Science, Blake not only disparages these empirical thinkers for their “single-vision”; priests, teachers and other representatives of institutional thought are just as guilty, for they enforce regulations without examination and, thus, are “blind” leaders. These accepted forms of thought confine the human imagination, creating “self-clos'd” man (his focus in *The Book of Urizen*) and recalling the “[d]islike of a

closed life” that undermined the Puritan lifestyle. The “self-clos’d” man is suggested in Blake’s engraved “Preludium” to *America: A Prophecy*, where Orc, the spirit of rebellion, literally appears as if he is closing in upon himself. The chains he ultimately frees himself from are not necessarily depicted in all of Blake’s illuminations, since the chains are often mental. In this character is found the “captive,” “the slave grinding at the mill” and “the inchained soul,” among others (Blake 112). According to Blakean mythology, this figure stands for an individual who does not use his natural faculties in order to experience the world; rather, he stays cocooned in his own unexamined self. His point-of-view relies upon a knowledge that is imposed upon him, instead of one which he comes to understand for himself.

The institutions which impose point-of-view upon the unexamined self are symbolized by patriarchal types, some of whom are called “Nobodaddy,” Urizen, the Workmaster, or “Priests in rustling scales / [who] Rush into reptile coverts” (*America: A Prophecy* 119). Urizen, who possesses the “brazen lawbooks,” symbolizes the absolute rule of religion, government, and authority and the institutions which accompany each. As has been pointed out by many Blake critics, “Urizen” is a pun on “Your Reason,” and also suggests “horizon,” that is, the limit of the material world. Blake saw these figures as literal and symbolic “priests,” often cloistering themselves and others in order to enforce and maintain unexamined laws. For him, institutionalized religion was a “doctrine . . . constituting a mechanism for gaining political power over men and women through control of their minds” (Nesfield-Cookson 17). He writes of “mental chains” and the “bonds of religion” (*America: A Prophecy* 116, 119). Blake considered the practice of cloistering among priests exceptionally reprehensible because it only separated and alienated humankind. This separation is illustrated symbolically in Blake’s work when Urizen is shown with his compass, measuring, dividing and ruling the world. This is a

prescient depiction of uncannily similar theories by postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard, who recognized that once “the social” is gauged, each individual is ‘slotted’ (or ‘socialized’) into the framework; and also Michel Foucault, who identified the historical development of the framework.

Blake asked the reader to “look ‘within’ to recognize the ‘without,’ to look ‘without’ to recognize the ‘within’; to overcome set patterns, habits and conventions” (Nesfield-Cookson 12-13). These “set patterns, habits and conventions” are ways of institutional thinking that limit the human imagination such that many are doomed to live the “Sleep of Reason” or Rationality or Science; in other words, they live the “closed life.” To experience the world through one’s own faculties, sensual and imaginative, means that one will find the “New Jerusalem,” that is, spiritual freedom. Like other Romantic thinkers, the poet identifies the concept that the institution of work is a major factor in the desensitization of humankind. He delineates between a truly productive labour, and the highly industrialized work that had already begun to reveal alarming social ramifications. This “alienated work” is associated with prison and “actual dungeons” in the poet’s engravings (Punter 235). Again, Blake shows a highly astute perceptiveness in that “the significance of the associations which [he] makes between different compartments of social life is brought out in Horkheimer and Adorno’s study [*The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972)], where they comment that prison is an image of the world of industrial labour taken to its ‘logical conclusion’” (235). An extremely prolific poet and engraver, Blake was a man who was always working, for he “understood the value of steady, plodding, day-by-day work” (Johnson and Grant xxiii). Indeed, he understood that “The achievement of communality through labour defeats even Eternal Death.” However, he also recognized that “*industrial* labour, because it removes individuals from their products, carries with it the danger

that a kind of abstraction can intervene between man and his work” (Punter 229; emphasis added). Indeed, when he describes a scene of impending rebellion, it is interesting to note that it is the businessmen whose first *job* it is to put down their inauthentic dealings:

Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through America,  
And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around  
The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th'inhabitants together:  
The citizens of New York close their books & lock their chests;  
The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;  
The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;  
The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.

*(America: A Prophecy 117)*

To reunite with one's true self, then, one must first get away from commerce and apply oneself to the *real work* of realizing a new world. As David Punter writes, “the change in perception which Blake looks toward must also be . . . [a change in] methods of work and the organisation of social life” (236-37).

The necessity to reconnect with authentic labour is also found in Emerson's influential essay, “Self-Reliance” (1841): “Do your work,” he writes, “and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself” (*Essays* 38). Emerson was another thinker who had identified the disparity between a life of work that is faithful to the human spirit, and that of a more industrial type that reduces the human spirit to mere functionality. In his essay, “On Character,” he warns against the flattening of the individual by upholding the man who “animates all he can, and [who] sees only what he animates” (*Essays* 330). Here, the writer suggests not only that man



may avoid being dehumanized by institutional constraints, but that it is possible for him actually to animate or infuse the institution with humanity, a truly revolutionary concept today, let alone in the mid-nineteenth century. Just as Blake called for a movement away from the received institutions that upheld the “single vision” of Reason and Rationality, Emerson famously declared “consistency [to be] the hobgoblin of little minds” and, also, that “imitation is suicide” (41). Emerson believed “Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property” (64). Emerson’s “things” are insubstantial; they are only words that have been written or spoken by history and blindly upheld as incontrovertible. Like Urizen’s “brazen lawbooks,” they invoke fear and deference. But when the imagination conforms to that which constrains it, it becomes controlled from the *inside*; and this policing of the self requires no threat of physical enforcement. It is also at this stage that the risk of the human spirit extinguishing is at its highest. Emerson urges, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (35). Here, Emerson espouses the Blakean urgency for man to question the framework of historical tradition into which he has been born. Nothing, he says, should be upheld without interrogation, because to do so necessarily entails the undermining of one’s own self. Recalling the engraver’s “Sleep of Reason,” he writes, “Higher natures overpower lower ones by affecting them with a certain sleep. The faculties are locked up, and offer no resistance” (328) “I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions,” he continues, in “Self-Reliance” (36). He maintains, in “On Character,” that “No institution will be better than the institutor” (333). In fact, like Blake, he prophesied that the force of the individual character would not only usurp institutional rule, but begin to draw out

power and effect real change in human organization. This “force of character . . . will convert judge, jury, soldier, and king; . . . will rule animal and mineral virtues, and blend with the courses of sap, of rivers, of winds, of stars, and of moral agents” (343). The call for individuals to step back from themselves to examine and renegotiate their daily lives is not only prophetic. It is also extremely grim in that when Emerson comments on the curiousness of “the periodical disuse and perishing of means and machinery, which were introduced with loud laudation a few years or centuries before” (63), he unknowingly launches a fairly new discourse of obsolescence, one that would only increase in relevance and, indeed, grimness, as the possibility of *human* obsolescence becomes more and more real.

These themes in Emerson’s writing, most importantly the emphasis on relying on the individual self in order to navigate the increasingly institutionalized world, are found in the teachings of Walt Whitman. Whitman found the life that was highly organized by authority to be “slothful and heavy.” For him, the hero was one who “[never stagnates] in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation” (Whitman, “Preface” 1962). He marveled at the compliance of those who allowed themselves to be governed by tradition without ever examining those traditions with a critical eye. “Has any one fancied he could sit at last under some authority,” he asked, “and rest satisfied with explanations and realize and be content and full?” (1972). “Authority,” for Whitman, also included organized religion, which he saw as an “enemy of natural human pleasure and virtue” (Baym 1954). Like Blake, he too saw a need to reexamine the role of the priest in society, opting instead for a kind of spiritual guide that may be found in the poets and thinkers of the age, as well as inside of each and every individual. In his “Preface,” he writes,

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two, . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take

their place. . . . [T]he gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. (Whitman 1972)

Advocating the replacement of the priest by 'ordinary' man is a provocative statement but, in the mid-nineteenth century, it approached heresy. By asserting not only that the average man was better off resorting to himself as a source for spiritual guidance and information, but that the priest himself was ineffective, Whitman suggested that the church was outmoded. Indeed, he writes, "reexamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul" (Whitman 1963). For the poet, the individual "does not stop for regulation . . . [for] he is the president of regulation" (1963). Whether this "regulation" is found in religion, "custom or obedience or legislation," the poet spoke out against any institution that either crushed the human spirit or brought about spiritual stagnation little by little. Interestingly, this did not mean a complete refutation of all that had gone before him; in fact,

Whitman declared that the American poet would not repudiate past beliefs but would incorporate them into newer ones, just as Americans are composed of all peoples. To be commensurate with this new American stock, the poet would incarnate the American geography, occupations, and the people themselves in a new and transcendent poetic form. The great poet would find encouragement and support in the sciences and in branches of history, since his poetry would not be escapist and otherworldly but solidly tied to verifiable knowledge. (Baym 1954-55)

Whitman, then, was clearly a progressive poet and thinker. Rather than merely reacting to the past in unthinking rebellion, he incorporated what was useful to him and discarded the rest. This practice contributed to the force of his "powerful language of resistance" (Baym 1972).

Whitman's use of the customs and traditions which he found available to him are seen as acts of disobedience. Even the fact that he was "the first author of working-class origins to reach prominence in the United States" may be seen as an act of transgression (Martin, "Walt Whitman" 1). Indeed, "the essential significance of Whitman's vision . . . [is that it] returns to a state of primal consciousness that is prepatriarchal" (Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition* 14). Thus, it may be said to avoid the sociohistorical framework in which it is created. On the other hand, Whitman's writings also actively engage with "grand narratives," as Jean-François Lyotard refers to them, when he 'plays' with common notions of manliness and patriotism (Martin, "Walt Whitman" 1). For example, in short stories like "The Child's Champion" or "The Child and the Profligate" (1841), he manages not only to publish a homosexual love story but do so under the pretext of a much more acceptable tale:

[T]he moral purity tract allowed, as it always does, for a disguised presentation of a transgressive subtext: By situating the love story between men in the context of a warning about the dangers of drink, Whitman not only enables the publication of his material, but indeed identifies homosexuality not with vice but against it. (Martin, "Walt Whitman" 1)

Not satisfied merely with presenting a homosexual story to the public, or even to upend the traditional narrative (which would merely reinscribe the authority of the structure), the poet introduces to the framework an ingredient which may remain unnoticed by some, but will regardless remain forever to be discovered by one who "sees" the truth behind the cloak of standardization.

Of Whitman's works, Martin writes, "The power of love begins with the personal but extends to the social as well and is ultimately political, since it affirms a deep-rooted democracy and brotherhood across racial and national lines" (*The Homosexual Tradition* 14-15). Thus,

along with other Romantics, Whitman's emphasis on a democratic society suggests the existence of an Everyman that possesses the collective power of those who are "seers" of the objective truth behind the institutional façade. These "seers" or prophets, however, are not limited in number, but are carried in potential in each and every member of humankind. And the potential of each of these individuals is that of liberator of oneself. This is what Whitman means when he writes, "when all life and all the souls of men and women are discharged from any part of the earth—then only shall the instinct of liberty be discharged from that part of the earth" (Whitman 1968).

While democracy was Whitman's main focus for commendation as well as prescription for rejuvenating American life, the poet did not distinguish between freedom and liberty, or view democracy in any way that might detract from its virtues. It was not only the poet-prophets of the age who stepped back from society in order to evaluate institutional processes and their effects upon the individual in America and in Britain. French writer Alexis de Tocqueville observed Americans and the American lifestyle and, in doing so, yielded a critical analysis of the concepts of democracy and liberty. Many protested that de Tocqueville's conclusions were unjustly harsh but, more than a century later, many of the issues he highlighted maintain the interest of a great number of social and political writers. These conclusions, gathered while on tour during the 1830s, are presented in his *Democracy in America*. At the time of the publication of this book, the Lowell Mills had already become "the center of the industrial world" (Lowell National Historical Park, "Lowell Mills" 3). In fact, the "city's population jumped from 2,500 people in the early 1800s to 33,000 people in the mid 1800s." The mills themselves employed over 10,000 workers, and most of these were young women. In a magazine article published in *The Harbinger* in 1836, the writers report on "the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and

[the] manner in which the young women—the operatives—lived in their boardinghouses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated” (“An Account of a Visitor to Lowell” 1). The choice of the word “operative” is revealing in that it is suggestive, at once, of the individual’s loss of humanity and her use-value as a functionary in the mill. The mill, or “factory system,” is “the first germ of the industrial or commercial feudalism that is to spread over our land” (“An Account” 1). Here, the use of the word “germ” becomes even more telling. While the worker is dehumanized by the word “operative,” the institution is conversely invested with an organic characteristic more suited to something that is natural and growing. But, the writer reminds the reader, Lowell Mills is part of an “industrial discipline (should we not rather say industrial tyranny?)” (“An Account” 1). This “discipline” neatly finesses the worker into a readymade shape that best suits the single function required of him. Of course, the boom in productivity was very encouraging to supervisors, but also, to some extent, to workers who felt that they were contributing to the American economy. Workers were often commended for their productivity in ways that related labour to the ‘chosen’ status of their souls, recalling the work ethic of the Puritan settlers. For example, in a lecture given by William Ellery Channing in 1839 entitled “On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes,” Channing’s intent was to deliver a “sanctification of labor.” However, his speech proved to be “uneasily constrained by the reality of mechanization and specialization, which has the deleterious effect of narrowing, stupefying, and even flattening out individual character, until a man working may look more like a ‘machine than like a man’” (Weinstein 2). For some, the glorification of machinery and machine-like processes overtook the idea of glorifying the body, such that the rhetoric surrounding ‘production’ would lose much of the sanctity of the God-in-human discourse to the seduction of that of the innovative Machine-in-human rhetoric.

The most important element to the popular conceptualization of ‘the worker’ is also what constitutes the failure of industrialization; that is, by increasing efforts to maximize productivity, worker relations decrease. In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville explains,

When an artisan engages constantly and uniquely in the manufacture of a single object, in the end he performs this work with singular dexterity. But at the same time he loses the general faculty of applying his mind to the direction of the work. Each day he becomes more skillful and less industrious, and one can say that the man in him is degraded in proportion as the worker is perfected.

What should one expect from a man who has used twenty years of his life in making pinheads? And to what, in him, can that powerful human intelligence which has so often moved the world be applied from now on if not to the search for the best means of making pinheads!

When a worker has consumed a considerable portion of his existence in this manner, his thought is forever halted at the daily object of his labors; his body has contracted certain fixed habits from which he is no longer permitted to depart. In a word, he no longer belongs to himself, but to the profession he has chosen. (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20)

Thus, rather than one’s soul being chosen for salvation in the afterlife, it is one’s ‘calling’ that began to attain this degree of sanctification; that is, the glory once reserved for the divine election to a state of a grace soon transferred to the mundane world of daily human labour. Concurrently, a new notion of ‘individualism’ began to take hold of the worker’s imagination. As the worker’s job streamlined into a single task, his responsibility and emotional connectedness to the group decreased. As de Tocqueville writes in *Democracy in America*, “Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate

himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself" (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 2). "Abandoning "society at large" is the origin of modern-day apathy. He continues,

As conditions are equalized, one finds a great number of individuals who, not being wealthy or powerful enough to exert a great influence over the fates of those like them, have nevertheless acquired or preserved enough enlightenment and goods to be able to be self-sufficient. These owe nothing to anyone, they expect so to speak nothing from anyone; they are in the habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands. (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 2)

The supposed 'equalizing' of appalling conditions at Lowell Mills only brings worker motivation to a peak of individualistic desperation. Later, the apparent democracy of the assembly-line in the early twentieth century would produce parallel alienating effects in its workers. It is argued, as well, that postmodern workplaces in which physical hierarchies are apparently leveled (for example, different levels of management share the same floor in office buildings, and boundaries such as walls and cubicle dividers are removed) produce a similar result. At the same time, consumerism began to develop into a powerful force, as the need for new things began to blossom with intense frequency. De Tocqueville refers to this force simply as "a taste for well-being":

If commerce and industry cause the desire for well-being to increase, that comes from the fact that every passion is fortified as one is more occupied with it and is increased by all the efforts by which one attempts to assuage it. All the causes that make love of the goods of this world predominate in the human heart develop industry and commerce. Equality is



one of these causes. It favors commerce not only directly in giving men a taste for trade, but indirectly in fortifying and generalizing the love of well-being in their souls. (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 19, n. 1)

The “desire for well-being,” or what has been otherwise called the “desire for desire,” is situated by de Tocqueville as a characteristically American drive. “[L]ove of the goods of this world” is what motivates Americans; it is not the ‘natural’ instinct for commerce or industry upon which the writer aims his disparagement. More importantly, what he considers “equality of conditions” should be closely examined. Should equality not be venerated completely, rather than be subjected to the tone that it is given in the above passage? In fact, upon the end of his tour of America, de Tocqueville had some startling statements to make. America had always celebrated equality with great pride; however, the observer sets out to explain and support his theory that equality in America resulted in *decreasing* rather than increasing liberty for its citizens. This is rather a startling point of view, and de Tocqueville’s statement was in no way indirect. He writes, “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America” (vol. 1, pt. 2, ch. 7). He explains that Americans are “blind” to the “evils” that are produced by “extreme equality . . . [which] insinuate themselves gradually into the social body” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 1). The major “evil” that he sees is the “slavery” that democracy produces in America. In fact, he writes, democracy in America is simply producing a degraded version of monarchy, one in which there is no real feeling of obligation to any other but oneself. In this society, individuals have “neither common spirit nor objects, neither common traditions nor hopes. There are then members, but no corps” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20). “Members” possess nothing except for the “desire for desire,” which is individualistic at its core, and pits each one against every other. De Tocqueville writes,

As in aristocratic communities all the citizens occupy fixed positions, one above another; the result is that each of them always sees a man above himself whose patronage is necessary to him, and below himself another man whose co-operation he may claim.

Men living in aristocratic ages are therefore almost always closely attached to something placed out of their own sphere, and they are often disposed to forget themselves. It is true that in these ages the notion of human fellowship is faint and that men seldom think of sacrificing themselves for mankind; but they often sacrifice themselves for other men.

In democratic times, on the contrary, when the duties of each individual to the race are much more clear, devoted service to any one man becomes more rare; the bond of human affection is extended, but it is relaxed. (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 2)

This is revealing especially when seen in relation to postmodern workplaces, which are touted as “democratic”; in these workplaces, however, workers are exposed to the democratic process of being let go; often, the requirements of the market are what dictates who is fired rather than a merit-based system. Dependence on a transient and unstable system such as this has definite psychological ramifications on the worker’s sense of self and, also, his sense of himself *within society*. As de Tocqueville writes, “Between worker and master, relations are frequent, but there is no genuine association” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20). At least, he writes, “The *territorial* aristocracy of past centuries was obliged by law or believed itself to be obliged by mores to come to the aid of its servants and to relieve their miseries. But the *manufacturing* aristocracy of our day, after having impoverished and brutalized the men whom it uses, leaves them to be nourished by public charity in times of crisis” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20; emphasis added). In modern workplaces, especially, there is little “association” between workers, or obligation amongst them; even less

exists among workers and the companies that hire them. The chance of an individual becoming upwardly mobile in the company that originally hired him is much rarer than a career made up of several lateral moves within different organizations. In a society in which one's livelihood is constantly threatened, the individual is forced to attend to his own survival. There is no room for sacrificing oneself for other men as "human fellowship [becomes] faint." In a society such as this, deep feeling such as Whitman's brotherhood and camaraderie come dangerously close to non-existence. Also abandoned is Emerson's "profound good understanding" or the "happiness which postpones all other gratifications, and makes politics, and commerce, and churches, cheap" (Emerson 340, 341).

If the degradation of human fellowship entails the degradation of politics, commerce, churches, and other human institutions, then what follows for the institution of work? If the dedication to work has become a dedication to making money, then how does this affect human character that has been built upon the bedrock of the early settlers' Puritan work ethic and, thus, derives from work much of its self-identification? Today, one's choice of career is not the lifestyle choice it once was; rather, it is a means to making money that changes as market requirements changes. In general the postmodern worker is said to average three career changes over a span of a lifetime. But de Tocqueville identifies a similar trend as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In *Democracy in America*, he states that even the more practical kind of labour involved in agriculture is no more considered a solid means of subsistence for the farmer and his family. Instead, the farmer "brings land into tillage in order to sell it again, and not to farm it: he builds a farmhouse on the speculation that, as the state of the country will soon be changed by the increase of population, a good price may be obtained for it" (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 19). The emphasis attaches itself to the *monetary* value of that work—something that is decided upon

by the movements of the national economy—and not an *intrinsic* value to the labour and the products of that labour. This dynamic is further complicated as the advance of technology and innovation removed its focus from a single worker's productivity and placed it on the productivity of a single machine, one that may not even necessitate the contribution of one worker to render it effective. When the worker applies himself to one specialized aspect of production, he further debilitates himself by forgoing an overall understanding of the process and how future changes in society and technology will further affect that process. Emphasis is not placed on craft, or quality, or comprehension of the process in its entirety—instead, the emphasis is on *speed*. The outcomes of this process are frightening:

While the workman concentrates his faculties more and more upon the study of a single detail, the master surveys an extensive whole, and the mind of the latter is enlarged in proportion as that of the former is narrowed. In a short time the one will require nothing but physical strength without intelligence; the other stands in need of science, and almost of genius, to ensure success. (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20).

Here, by indicating the streamlining of disparate individuals into one of only two types, de Tocqueville presages the managers and engineers of Kurt Vonnegut's futuristic fiction *Player Piano* (1952). However, a more subtle envisioning of the heavy pressures of a hypercapitalized America can easily show that members of society are generally grouped as those in commerce and those who are not. Even those who are in vocations which call for a focus on handicraft or medicine may be subjected to the 'business end of things' much more than in the past. There is a greater need to 'sell oneself' above and beyond the labour one does, including both physical and intellectual. For de Tocqueville, this kind of democracy creates two men: "This man resembles more and more the administrator of a vast empire; that man, a brute" (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20). As the

emphasis on speed increases into the twentieth century, Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford would induce significant modifications in the evolution of human character. Again, as if he could foretell the future, de Tocqueville warns Americans of the changes to come. “As the principle of the division of labor is more extensively applied,” he writes, “the workman becomes more weak, more narrow-minded, and more dependent [on the machine that affords him the work of a specialized task]. The art advances, the artisan recedes” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20).

Shortly after de Tocqueville made his observations about America, British writer Charles Dickens made his own tour through several major cities in America and Canada. His observations of the four months he spent on the continent are chronicled in his book *American Notes* (1842). In it, he details his own experience of the Lowell mills. Unlike deToqueville, he finds the workers to be “healthy in appearance, many of them remarkably so, and [having] the manners and deportment of young women: not of degraded brutes of burden” (“General Appearance of Mill Workers” 1). It is important to remember that Dickens “as journalist is only considering [with pride and wonder] the machine in itself, not as part of its social and moral environment. But once these vivid evocations of technology are placed within a social context, as in *Dombey and Sons* and *Hard Times*, the machine becomes a symbol for the sins of society as a whole” (Sussman 48). Thus, although Dickens would soon go on to write *Hard Times*, an indictment of industrialization’s effects on the individual, his endorsement of the Lowell mills is part of a faction that saw in technological development a positive indicator of progress and a reason to believe in the ever-increasing promise of innovation. Writers in this group produced utopian novels, in which the commingling of humankind and technology had positive effects on society, while those who weighed the negative effects of progress more heavily wrote novels that may be considered dystopic.

At the same time, slavery had become a nationwide issue that affected the individual as well as the national self-concept. As historian Eric Foner writes,

Frederick Jackson Turner, the great historian of the late 19th century, said it was on the frontier that democracy was born, that American ideas of equality were born, individualism. But the frontier also carried with it the expansion of slavery. The westward expansion of slavery was one of the most dynamic economic and social processes going on in this country. The westward expansion carried slavery down into the Southwest, into Mississippi, Alabama, crossing the Mississippi River into Louisiana. Finally, by the 1840's, it was pouring into Texas. So the expansion of slavery, which became the major political question of the 1850's, was not just a political issue. It was a fact of life that every American had experienced during this period. (Foner, "Westward Expansion" par. 1)

As this class system had expanded to its widest range, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) would be published. Although it would not be available in English until 1888, the idea of two classes struggling against each other, rather than a hierarchical society more suited to the old aristocracy, was an accurate description of what was happening in America. They write,

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebians, slaves; in the middle ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (I: *Bourgeois and Proletariat*” 321-22)

Recalling de Tocqueville’s observations on America over a decade earlier, Marx and Engels also describe how the movement from a feudal system to one of democratic trade had resulted in the degrading of human interaction. The bourgeoisie

has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. (323-24)

This “nexus between man and man” is what de Tocqueville referred to as an “association” between men; both may be the germ of Whitman’s “adhesiveness.” Without this ingredient, humanity becomes marginalized and subject to what Whitman referred to, in his poem “In Paths Untrodden,” as the “clank of the world” (*Leaves of Grass*); then, human emotions such as “fervor,” “enthusiasm” and “sentimentalism” seem to be uncalled for, especially as “egotistical

calculation” takes over all relationships. Even his relation to work is corrupted as the bourgeoisie “strip[s] of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers” (Marx and Engels 324). Thus, rather than work being a glorification of one’s inner character, it becomes something that flattens, or detracts from, the individual. He becomes a ‘cog in the machine’ even if his job seems on the surface to be as far away from the factory-system as the poet. Dependence upon the same underlying socioeconomic framework in order to subsist means that vocations as disparate as those listed above are not independent of each other at all. In fact,

Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Hence, the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for maintenance, and for the propagation of his race. But the price of a commodity, and therefore also of labor, is equal to its cost of production. In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases. What is more, in proportion as the use of machinery and division of labor increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil also increases, whether by prolongation of the working hours, by the increase of the work exacted in a given time, or by increased speed of machinery, etc. (Marx and Engels 328)

That modern work loses “all charm for the workman” is an intriguing concept. “Charm” can mean “appeal” or “attraction”; but it also stands for words such as “magnetism,” “fascination”



and “lure,” words that denote a “magical” quality. Whenever something possesses a magical quality, it may be understood that that quality is, as per its definition, unquantifiable. Thus, what the authors suggest is that *real* work, that is, a vocation in which man thrives and produces, is something that cannot simply be broken down into its component pieces. However, as “the use of machinery and division of labor increases,” that magical quality falls away.

Myron Magnet discusses this magical quality through the work of Gabriel in Charles Dickens’s novel *Barnaby Rudge*:

Gabriel is a craftsman, not a laborer, making useful and beautiful objects with his own hands, to his own constantly varying designs, according to his own methods, and at his own pace. He is self-employed and has control over every step of production: he is his own salesman, bookkeeper, and purchasing agent. What he makes is truly his own work, bearing his imprint, the product of his hand and his brain alike. No wonder, then, that Dickens imagines Gabriel’s labor to be strenuous but not toilsome, and pictures him—by contrast with those whose work is “a dull monotonous duty”—“working at his anvil, his face all radiant with exercise and gladness, his sleeves turned up, his wig pushed off his shining forehead—the easiest, freest, happiest man in all the world. (Magnet 57-58)

But as the economy called for a regulated labour which increased production, work of this kind became scarce. As people were forced to the mills or similar places of work, their everyday lives without question were impressed upon by the severe changes. And these changes would also impress upon the worker’s psychology. As Herbert L. Sussman writes in the Preface to his *Victorians and the Machine: The Literary Response to Technology*, “the use of the machine to perform certain physical tasks created profound changes in intellectual and emotional life.” At its base, these changes were inextricably linked with “intellectual mechanism and industrial

mechanization” (60). But they did not appear simply as a result of factory life; in fact, the factory as a whole had become “fully socialized” (Magnet 24), such that it may be seen as a symbol of society. Sussman goes so far as to write, “In a society wholly mechanized . . . even the rotating earth is seen as a great iron flywheel.” Perhaps for this reason, one finds in Dickens a criticism of the system, rather than of individuals; that is, Dickens levels his criticism “not [at] a person, but [at] an emotional atmosphere, a state of mind symbolized by the machine,” so if “Gradgrind [in *Hard Times*] is a caricature, it is because rigid doctrines repress his emotional life” (61). These rigid doctrines are those which *socialize* individuals within a society; they are also what *narrates* characters within the plot of a story.

The concept of an overarching framework that governs the decisions and even the motivations of individuals is historicized by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). In this book, Foucault describes the movement from a corporeal punishment to an invisible mental one. The strategies employed by the social—in the form of written and unwritten rules, regulations, mores and values—“discipline” individuals until what remains are what Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow refer to as “orderly individuals [who are required to fit] into the machinery of production” (135). Foucault goes as far back as 1757 to describe the gory execution or *amende honorable* of a man. He then follows this description with a time-table used for prisoners the century after the abolishment of this practice. “We have, then, a public execution and a time-table. They do not punish the same crimes or the same type of delinquent. But they each define a certain penal style. Less than a century separates them” (7). Thus begins Foucault’s account of the internalization of disciplinary social structures, suggesting that the less visible the disciplinary mechanism, the more disciplinary action is at work. The metaphor of the time-table itself, then, may be seen as an oppressive force, compelling

individuals to follow arbitrary regulation on the threat of authoritative retaliation. Then, the time-table, as inextricably connected with *socialized* work, becomes doubly meaningful.

In Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), the social and the time-table become linked as the governing power of authority:

Social institutions, too, appear in the novel largely in relation to aggression. The one time we see policemen, for instance, they start pummeling innocent bystanders, when, at a farcical meeting of the Metropolitan Hot Muffin Company, the impatient audience begin to hoot and yell. The policemen, wanting "to quell the disturbance" but unwilling to fight their way through the crowd to reach those responsible,

Immediately began to drag forth by the coat tails and collars all the quiet people near the door; at the same time dealing out various smart and tingling blows with their truceons, after the manner of that ingenious actor, Mr. Punch, whose brilliant example, both in the fashion of his weapons and their use, this branch of the executive occasionally follows. (2)

This joke has reference to a stern reality, for in the world of *Nicholas Nickleby* the law itself is no more than an instrument of violence, to which, for example, Ralph Nickleby resolves to turn as his ultimate weapon against his nephew. "The protracted and wearing anxiety and expense of the law in its most oppressive form, its torture from hour to hour, its weary days and sleepless nights—with these I'll prove you," he growls at Nicholas, "and break your haughty spirit, strong as you deem it now" (45). The "torture from hour to hour" recalls the prisoner's time-table in Foucault's history of discipline. Interestingly, this is "the law in its most oppressive form." Magnet reminds us that Edmund Burke warned against a society in which "at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows" (*Reflections on the Revolution in France* 91).

Interestingly, in *Nickleby*, as well, “social authority appears as merely another engine of violence; in *Nickleby* the heart of the city (in more than a geographical sense) is the gallows” (Magnet 15). Thus, the metaphor of jail, or in this case, the gallows, as a reminder of the mental and intellectual disciplinary action of society, is found in literature at least as far back as the prisoner’s time-table; that is, a century after the abolishment of penal executions.

At the same time, the executioner himself is found in Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge*, in a portrayal that gives the reader a physical cue to the threat of authoritative punishment:

Dennis, the hangman, [was] far and away the worst of *Barnaby*’s sordid, brutal “constitutional” officers. In Dennis—at once the embodiment of public authority and pure, ferocious aggression—Dickens confronts us starkly with how literally “the authority erected by society for its own preservation” is grounded on the same violence from which it is intended to preserve us. (Magnet 162)

It is telling, as Magnet observes, that Dennis, in taking a “a true professional relish” to his work, “literally loves to hang people or to ‘*work them off*’” (163; emphasis added). The suggestion here is that the disciplines of penal punishment and of work are one and the same, for they are predicated on the same principles. Indeed, it is telling when Dennis says, “I was formed for society” because the statement “epitomizes [his] dizzy parody of Dickens’s political theory: the hangman, in that he administers the state’s legitimate violence, performs, as Dickens and Dennis would agree, an essential social function; therefore (as Dennis alone concludes) I, the hangman, am an exceptionally sociable man” (165). Rather than represent an “idiosyncratic” point of view, Dennis’s beliefs swept over the entire social network, as evidenced by Dickens’s report that “it was virtually a universally accepted principle that ‘the symbol of [the law’s] dignity,—stamped upon every page of the criminal statute-book, was the gallows’” (167).

At this point, it is useful to revisit de Tocqueville's American observations. He refers to individuals in society as being "decent and orderly" (*Democracy* vol. 1., pt. 2, ch. 7), even "immaculate in conduct," as they are socialized in a democracy. The result, however, is an ordered existence in which an individual lacks the freedom to truly live. De Tocqueville believed that the commercial imperative in America comprises a tyranny in which

the body is left free, and the soul is enslaved. The master no longer says, "You shall think as I do or you shall die"; but he says, "You are free to think differently from me and to retain your life, your property, and all that you possess; but you are henceforth a stranger among your people. You may retain your civil rights, but they will be useless to you, for you will never be chosen by your fellow citizens if you solicit their votes; and they will affect to scorn you if you ask for their esteem. You will remain among men, but you will be deprived of the rights of mankind. Your fellow creatures will shun you like an impure being; and even those who believe in your innocence will abandon you, lest they should be shunned in their turn. Go in peace! I have given you your life, but it is an existence worse than death." (vol. 1, pt. 2, ch. 7)

Here, de Tocqueville anticipates Foucault's basic themes in *Discipline and Punish*, and also assumes a strikingly similar prophetic voice. That "the body is left free" while the "soul is enslaved" is a direct prefiguring of the Foucauldian emphasis on the disciplinary strategies of authoritative social structures on the mental, rather than physical, level. Foucault himself credits the philosopher Gabriel de Mably's *De la législation*, written close to a century earlier than *Discipline and Punish*:

If the penalty in its most severe forms no longer addresses itself to the body, on what does it lay hold? The answer of the theoreticians—those who, about 1760, opened up a

new period that is not yet at an end—is simple, almost obvious. It seems to be contained in the question itself: since it is no longer the body, it must be the soul. The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations. Mably formulated the principle once and for all: ‘Punishment, if I may so put it, should strike the soul rather than the body.’

(Foucault 16).

It is interesting that Mably describes the older, corporeal forms of punishment as ‘raining down’ on the body, so that punishment is something that passes over the very surface of the skin; once the corporeal punishment has run its course, it would seem not to leave any tracks or evidence either of its intensity or its result. The punishment with which Mably suggests to replace this surface sensation is one that “acts in *depth* on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (emphasis added). As well, it cannot be dismissed that Mably’s description of corporeal punishment as ‘raining down’ denotes something that is not only natural, but has a cleansing effect on the individual, and even occurs from above without any regard to mortal wishes, as if from an omniscient power. Conversely, once the punishment shifts from its focus upon the corporeal and moves towards the inner being, the concept of ‘punishment’ itself shifts from a more passive experience of being rained upon to an experience of withstanding “acts in depth” which “strike the soul.” It is also as if the punished had once suffered nobly, in a state of communion with the Divine. Indeed, Foucault writes that “the shame inflicted on the victim [transformed] into pity or glory” (*Discipline and Punish* 9) when he was on the scaffold and subject to an executioner who was compelled to fulfill his duties in the name of a just God. Once the responsibility of punishing fell into human hands, metaphorically speaking, it degraded into

something shameful, not because of the gruesome and calculated operation but because the lasting damage turned to the psychological rather than the physical.

Indeed, as Foucault details in his *Discipline and Punish*, it is by animating the inner life with fearful thoughts of punishment that the highest level of control may be exercised by authority. He writes,

Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime. (*Discipline and Punish* 9)

Thus, while the scene of the subject under authoritative control has lost its “visible intensity,” it maintains just as much or likely more power by entering the “abstract consciousness” of the individual in everyday life. A panoptic effect occurs in which the subjects of authority begin to police themselves. Foucault takes the term “panopticon” from Jeremy Bentham, who identifies the relationship between prisoners and prison guards as being analogous to apparently free citizens and the democratic state. In the modern jail, as Bentham described it, the panopticon is a tower that allows prison guards to observe all inmates simultaneously. While the guards can monitor the prisoners at any time they choose, the prisoners cannot see the guards and, thus, never know when they are being observed. They are forced to assume that they are being surveilled at all times and modify their behaviour accordingly day and night. The “constant gaze controls the prisoners, affecting not only what they do but how they see themselves, and replaced the use of a dungeon and dark cell to control the prisoner. This image serves as a metaphor for

the power in and of governmentality in the modern state” (“Panopticon”). That is, the omniscience of the gaze became institutionalized such that the consciousness of being watched tends to curb behaviour whether one is a prisoner in jail for committing a crime, or a citizen of the state simply going about his daily activities. The characteristics of the penal institution seem to be mirrored in all institutions; that is, being subject to the jail and its regulations is equivalent in psychic effect as the subjectivity of the ordinary citizen to the disciplinary gaze in greater society. Whether the material body is imprisoned or not would seem to have remarkably little to do with whether it exhibits behaviour that befits imprisonment.

While in 1792 the introduction of the guillotine reduced the practice of execution to “a visible but instantaneous event” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 12), its abolishment thereafter was a major step towards establishing the “non-corporeal nature of the penal system” (15). However, there had been significant indications previous to this development. Foucault explains, for example, that “the guillotine [ended] life almost without touching the body” (13), which marked an important change in focus from the great amount of detail involved in torturing the body previous to the use of this machine (manipulate which body part, for how long, in what combination?). In fact, the “hold on the body” had begun to loosen. As a strategy of administering punishment, direct pain to the body had given over to the loss of wealth or rights (15). Foucault explains,

the punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions. The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property. . . . From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. . . . As a result of this new



restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists; by their very presence near the prisoner, they sing the praises that the law needs: they reassure it that the body and pain are not the ultimate objects of its punitive action. Today a doctor must watch over those condemned to death, right up to the last moment—thus juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life. This is worth thinking about. When the moment of execution approaches, the patients are injected with tranquillizers. A utopia of judicial reticence: take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it; deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain; impose penalties free of all pain. (*Discipline and Punish* 11)

The punishment for crimes of varying degree ceases to consist of physical suffering and moves toward something far less tangible, a non-corporeal punishment. Yet, the emphasis on ensuring a ‘painless’ punishment would preclude an unnecessarily harsh mental, psychological or emotional suffering. In fact, the “warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, [and] educationalists” guarantee pain-free punishment through the laws and regulations agreed upon in their respective fields. Thus, jails, hospitals, churches, law courts and schools contribute to the realm of institutional government that at once constitutes the free subject and yet constrains him. Forces of control and authority are readily apparent in establishments that are founded for these purposes, such as jails and courts of law. Even the church is widely accepted as a force equal to political government, in that it compels a great degree of compliance within segments of society according to the religious tenets it upholds. Foucault referred to the authority of the church as a “pastoral power,” one that relies on the promise of individual salvation in the next world

("Pastoral Power"). Schools are also a great influence on the shaping of individual minds, as is society in general, and both are central factors in the individual's relation to labour. In Foucault, the process of "normalisation" in a society "encourages [an individual] to regulate and achieve his or her own conformity with the established rules. . . . through governmentality" in schools and other social institutions ("Normalisation"). An intricate mesh of various institutional powers thereby appears to keep the individual at a safe distance from the punitive process, yet they are the same powers that decide upon and enforce penalties. The punisher and the protector are one and the same.

It may also be said that the punishment and the protection are one and the same. Perhaps there is no better institution to which this statement applies than that of labour. What other institutional title lends itself to slippage as easily as "labour," which immediately denotes both toil *and* worthy pursuit, something that harms *and* enriches? Foucault writes,

it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (*Discipline and Punish* 26)

In this sort of political economy, then, the productive body is useless unless its labour may be harnessed; likewise, the subjected body is of no use unless its constraints are able to move it into a state of productivity. It is within this particular dynamic, Foucault posits, that the soul is produced

permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished—and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and

corrects, over madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives. This is the historical reality of this soul . . . [which is born] out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint.

(29)

Foucault's use of the term "soul" here must be differentiated from its more popular conception as understood through traditional religion and philosophy. As he indicates, he is concerned with the "historical reality" of the subjected and productive soul; accordingly, the definition of "soul" as it is used here is understood to denote the non-corporeal substance of man *at the time that it was required to meet the needs of the expanding discourse of institutional punishment*. By breathing life, as it were, into its own version of the human soul, the institution finally assumes the place of omniscient authority once reserved exclusively for the highest power of divinity. The image of subjected and productive bodies "stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives" is fitting in that it conjures a scene of incarcerated productivity that shapes one's actions according to pressures from a higher authority. Specifically, it suggests that menial labour is an institutionalized strategy meant to enforce a thoughtless compliance.

Similar views of labour were held by many novelists who were writing during the second half of the nineteenth century. By this time, labour had become increasingly standardized and, as industry spread, workers had begun to fear the effect it would have on their inner selves. Fiction writers who depicted individuals within the work world tended to call attention to the demeaning effect of industrialization on the human spirit. Because of this, it is surprising that Mark Twain would say of his proofreader "that he must have no opinion whatever regarding the punctuation, that he was simply to make himself into a machine and follow the copy." As Cindy Weinstein concludes of Twain's remark in her book *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*,

“The ideal efficient worker is the mechanical one” (153). During the second half of the nineteenth century, prior to the printing press having achieved its omnipresent status, a great number of workers were involved with administrative tasks which called for the copying of notes and documents. It is significant to note that Twain’s

activities in the world of manufacturing, for example, demonstrate his deep commitment to efficiency techniques that workers felt to be damaging not only the ideals of the work ethic but their minds and bodies as well. The efficiency strategies which Twain praises throughout his letters and journals produced a kind of flattened character in the workplace. . . . (Weinstein 129)

Twain’s interest in efficiency naturally led to his attraction to typesetting machines, which peaked in 1882 with his investment in the Paige compositor. The development of this machine was the result of “several minds being concentrated upon the complex problem of distributing, setting and line-justifying movable type by positive, but controlled, mechanical action.” As Weinstein notes, “Twain imagined the scene of writing to be inextricably connected to the scene of industrial production” (129). But what does this say for workers whose labour is not intellectual and does not produce, but rather *reproduces*, as in the case of Twain’s copyist? If the copyist follows the guidelines and does not comment on Twain’s text, does he then simulate a machine such as the Paige compositor, which does not comment on the text either? Perhaps there is a noteworthy difference between one functionary that *cannot* comment and one that *chooses* not to. One of these functionaries has the capacity for cognition and decision-making, in other words, to think. But computers do have decision-making facilities, according to preprogrammed protocols. And, if the remark of Twain’s associate upon observing the machine at work—“This is thought crystallized” (Legros and Grant 379)—is considered along with Twain’s imposing

command on his copyist *not* to think, then the issue is not whether the individual or the machine has the capability to think. The issue, rather, is which will be permitted to do the thinking.

For Twain, along with other writers of the era, expanding technologies which emphasized efficiency greatly affected the mechanics of fiction-writing, as well as the themes with which writers grappled. The concept of one's work needing to possess a certain kind of *value* developed in significant ways, and this greatly affected the relationship of the individual to his chosen work. The Lowell mills that both Dickens and de Tocqueville visited in the 1830s and 40s were the subject of concern with regard to institutionalized work and its effects on its workers. As Cindy Weinstein writes in *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*, "the debate about the Lowell mill operatives indicated [that work] did not necessarily guarantee spiritual or economic enhancement but increasingly seemed to undermine individual agency and bodily integrity. Instead of developing character in a version of the Romantic symbol, work appeared to flatten it out in an image of Coleridgean allegory" (87). Almost a decade after Dickens's visit to the Lowell mills, Herman Melville would explore a paper mill in Dalton, Massachusetts, later including some of these observations in his story "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (87). Weinstein writes that the story depicts "a frightening scene of production," citing Melville's description of the "paper machine [that] drains the rosiness of the girls' cheeks until the product takes on the quality of natural rosiness, leaving 'rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper'" (87). As in the case with Twain's compositor which seems almost capable of thought, the paper machine in Melville's story begins to take on the living, breathing characteristics of its human caretakers.

This idea is more deeply explored in Melville's *Mardi* (1849), which is an interesting investigation of the effects of labour on the individual identity. In the novel, the narrator gives up

his life of work and turns to a life of leisure on the island of Mardi. “Characters in *Mardi* are defined by the fact of their relation to labor—either they work or they don’t” (Weinstein 94). The ones who work are employed at Hevaneva’s idol factory. Here, like the blood-sucking paper machine in the Dalton mill and Twain’s ruminating compositor, the mechanical process somehow acquires characteristics of life, while the workers recede into objectification:

Described solely in terms of function in the assembly line, the body of the workers disappears and the body of the product is foregrounded: “The journeymen were plying their tools —some chiseling noses; some trenching for mouths; and others, with heated flints, boring for ears.” Instead of describing the eyes and ears of the journeymen, Hevaneva explains how the workers repair damaged idols by “touching up the eyes and ears [and] resetting their noses.” It is as though the specialization or narrowness of the journeymen serves as the precondition for the variety of the commodity. (Weinstein 95)

Weinstein’s analysis here is on par with the widespread twentieth-century practice of self-identifying with one’s profession. Moreover, she makes the point that, for Melville, unoriginal work is equated with idleness or ‘idolness.’ In this way, the “effect of factory work on the journeymen is not a development of characterological identity but rather its flattening out. . . . Characters become allegorical as a consequence of either laboring too much or not laboring at all” (95-6). Melville concludes with the founding of a utopia called Serenia, in which “religion is based on a true understanding of Christian principles, which significantly include[s] the fair distribution of labor: Let ‘no m̄an toil too hard, that thou may’st idle be” (Weinstein 98).

### iii. The Dominated and Disconnected Automaton

The issue of the effects of 'idle' labour on the individual identity is dealt with in several of Melville's works. In his *Bartleby the Scrivener*, written in 1853, the author "savagely expose[s] the legal profession as a paternalistic institution that required its workers to engage in labor that was a waste of time" (Weinstein 118-19). The story, published in two consecutive issues of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, and later in 1856 in Melville's collected stories entitled *The Piazza Tales*, documents the experience of a lawyer who has hired Bartleby to work in his office. The scrivener's job, along with two other scriveners employed by the lawyer-narrator, is to copy documents by hand. While at first Bartleby excels at his job so that the narrator is compelled to push the other two copyists in their work, Bartleby suddenly and inexplicably ceases to do any work. When questioned by the perplexed narrator, he replies only that he "would prefer not to." What is more beguiling is that Bartleby refuses to be fired, as well. Though he does not comply with the terms set out in his contract, he refuses to vacate the position which the job with the lawyer gives him. Consistency in the ways in which capitalist society works makes us assume a degree of predictability in everyday life; these cognitive patterns are helpful and generally a necessity for the individual to manage in a society. Most significantly, this is seen in the workplace, largely because an individual must perform a function in an expected manner in order to fulfill his job obligations. There are expectations on the part of both employer and employee as to what functions each should satisfy. The narrator expects a relationship with Bartleby that is 'socialized,' one in which he may be able to rely on Bartleby fulfilling certain functions and behaving in a particular way. When he does not comply, Bartleby establishes himself as being *outside* of society and impervious to its laws, yet, paradoxically he remains deeply entrenched in it, and this is what further intrudes upon the lawyer's rationality.

But rationality and reason are not laws of the natural and physical world; they may be seen, rather, as coping mechanisms for human beings living in technological societies in which 'natural' and 'physical' become less and less pertinent. However, there is nothing physical or natural about Bartleby. His responses are very much unnatural, and though he occupies a bodily outline, it affects no quality that would define it as being capable of physicality. Our first introduction to Bartleby

requires us to look at him as if he were a photograph. He appears without context, possessing neither a past nor a future, but only a perpetual present. He is seen as if framed by the doorway of the lawyer's office: "a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby". . . It is as if anonymity engenders particularity. He becomes by not being and gains identity through featurelessness. As one man, he stands for all. This picture of Bartleby is both contentless and full of content, free of interpretation and yet demanding to be interpreted. Bartleby exists as a kind of empty form which will generate the presence of material for the lawyer's story. (Weiner 67)

The "anonymity" that engenders the "particularity" of Bartleby is arguably the same that marks any of the allegorical characters discussed earlier. If Bartleby, like Everyman, is "representative man," then his 'featurelessness' must be inclusive of all of humankind, and not differentiate itself as being atypical. Representative man "stands for all"; what can it mean, then, that he is, at the same time, "contentless and full of content"? The key is that, just like Bartleby, representative man "appears without context." At this point, he is contentless. But once a particular context springs up around him, he suddenly radiates a fully historicized meaning. In



this way, Bartleby takes over from Everyman. It is also with this view that the character of Bartleby substantiates an important milestone in literary history.

The figure of Bartleby may more profitably be used as a source than as the derivative of other sources: an archetypal figure on which to base comparisons, the ultimate passive resistor who sacrificially defies the conventional limits and barriers to the annihilating awareness of life. (Widmer, "Melville's Radical Resistance" 446)

It is with this understanding that this study places a great significance on the character of Bartleby, as a precursor of the modern worker alienated in all ways from his own labour, his product, his employer and, finally, himself. Melville strikes out against the ideas of standardization and common expectations and, in his works, proves that, as a writer, he is "no copyist of Maryat or Cooper, but has struck out an entirely new path for himself—a path in which none can hope to overtake him" (Review, *Criterion*, 74). Even into the next century, however, writers have been influenced by Melville's Bartleby and his dealings with a world in which associations between men have consistently and progressively degraded into an interaction of surfaces. "In some ways," Nicholas Ayo writes, "Bartleby appears as forerunner of Camus's *Stranger* and Kafka's Mr. K." (Ayo, "Bartleby's Lawyer" 35). He has also been compared to Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*. Perhaps this is explained by the coupling of one's realization that "Melville does not provide the reader with sufficient information to understand the scrivener" (J. Wilson 335) with the fact that he also depicts a character that compels the reader's curiosity. It must be acknowledged, then, that as a writer, he has succeeded in managing to portray the phenomena of the social hierarchy in a technological world; that is, that members are interchangeable, regardless of their places in the hierarchical network. Readers are cognizant of this quasi-natural law, such that Bartleby's refusal to be moved into action by

the hierarchy becomes a resistance championed by members of all strata of society, whether they are conscious of it or not.

The lawyer-narrator himself sways between a near solidarity with Bartleby's resistance and his absolute refutation of it. This is partially due to his oscillation between viewing Bartleby variously as a fellow human being or as an automaton. In fact, critics often share the same sense of confusion as to how to take Bartleby. "For some critics Bartleby is an 'innocent,' a 'Christ-figure,' and a 'typical Melville isolato,' while to others his behavior is categorized as 'schizophrenia' or as 'perversity'" (Ayo 28). The first interpretation views him as a symbol or allegorical figure, while the second examines him through the filter of human psychology, assuming the premise of his indisputable individuality. The interpretation of Bartleby as individual is seen, for some, as "an account of Melville's *reductio ad absurdum* of the overdone individualism" of Thoreau and others (Ayo 27). At the other end of the spectrum, the approach to Bartleby as a flat character has been taken up by several critics who "have noted that Bartleby is more like a marionette than an actual character," a "sort of animated Xerox machine duplicating the documents that reinforce and perpetuate the status quo" (Marvin Fisher qtd. in Weiner 67). In this vein, it is especially interesting that as Bartleby becomes more and more of a bodily fixture in the lawyer's office, allusions to him as being *disembodied* begin to appear. He is referred to variously as an "incubus" and a "ghost." The lawyer, in fact, claims to feel haunted by him. Perhaps the urge on the part of the lawyer and the landowner to disembody Bartleby stems from the fact that only bodies possess rights. The authority represented by these two characters is threatened by his body—humourless, motionless and apparently not subject to human needs or wants. Melville refers to Bartleby's constant consumption of ginger nuts and nothing else, as well as his immobile disposition, both in terms of his personality and his actual physical

presence. But it is his lack of engagement in activities that are *human* (eating, moving, desiring) that undermines his presence as a physical being at all: his existence constitutes as much substance as the concrete walls that box him in.

Related to the lack of concern for his human needs is his lack of concern for the “self”; this is the individualistic drive indicated in de Tocqueville’s uniquely American “taste for well-being,” as well as in the early precursors to Foucault’s “care of the self.” Inherently, this is a “selfish” desire in that its roots lie in surviving the natural world. But if the discourse of caring for the self had originated as a personal one, it has certainly established itself more fully in the political realm. This is shown by the preformulated program for “success,” indicators of which are great wealth, expensive home, big cars and decadent lifestyle. Melville’s lawyer, then, acts in a very logical manner when he attempts to win Bartleby’s compliance by offering him things that mean a great deal to the narrator, especially in the arena of the American workplace:

Absolutist Bartleby, who asserts the freedom of the will but denies it any specific reasons or moral values, lacks all selfishness. Repeatedly in the story the attorney triumphantly resorts to interest, to offers of money, better employment, letters of recommendation, travel, a home, friendship—any selfish desire with which the enlightened human might be manipulated—but Bartleby remains unamenable to the calculus of selfishness. Here the attorney cannot discover, and exploit, the useful selfishness, as he does with his other scribes. (Widmer 454)

Bartleby’s refusal of these key acquisitions is felt by the narrator as an incomprehensible act of anti-social behaviour—“anti-social” because he refuses to care for his self in the specific ways that are outlined by society as being in the best interests of each individual. These conventions are given by the narratives of progress, upward social mobility, and the American Dream. By

failing to embrace these major aims in life and, thus, eschewing “success” as a motivating factor in life, one effectively rejects the values and ethics of society. Though the narrator does not fully grasp the degree of damage Bartleby’s rejection effects on the cognitive paradigms through which he understands his world, it is certainly felt as a severe violence. This is evidenced by the force in the narrator’s responses to the scrivener’s behaviour; first, he is curious, then his authoritativeness is evoked, then charity, then wrath, then benevolence, and then sentiment.

The narrator’s responses, however, are conditioned by a rationalizing tendency that has no currency in Bartleby’s world and, thus, are precluded in moving the scrivener towards behaviour more suited to his social role. The discrepancy between the two men widens irrevocably because, as Widmer writes, the narrator “remains the defender of American utility and optimism” (457). He believes the other scriveners in the office think too much of themselves; considering their professions, Nippers suffers from “diseased ambition” (Melville, *Bartleby* 7), and Turkey is “insolent,” a “man whom prosperity harmed” (8). As an employer, understandably, he requires a specific use of each man he hires. But when confronted with the problem of their humanity, he always resorts to a utilitarian view of humankind in order to best settle the issue. For example, when Bartleby seems to develop eye strain, when Ginger Nut’s work begins to affect his health, or when Turkey complains of overwork, the narrator handles the complaints with an assembly-line manager’s smoothness rather than with a view to resolving them. This is due to his assumption of the absolute truth of “a business-is-business ethic” (Ayo 30). He does, however, seem to lapse into compassion: “The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom,” he thinks. “A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam” (Melville, *Bartleby* 20). But because these thoughts are countered by his own function of upholding the ethics of a self-serving society, these thoughts are not enough to effect

any real change in either of their lives. As well, pathos, in whatever form, means that the individual experiencing the emotion acknowledges and maintains the separation between himself and the person whom he empathizes with. Rather than feeling humanity *deeply* or as if the deplorable circumstances were his own, the person imagines, from afar, a surface relation to the unfortunate individual and, in this way, reinforces the unnatural business relationship over the more natural human relationship. This loss of relationship is the loss of association that de Tocqueville warned against when he wrote, “Between worker and master, relations are frequent, but there is no genuine association” (vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20). Thus, when the lawyer sighs, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” his “words are ironic in that he cannot respond to Bartleby as a living human being, but only as an abstraction—an abstract concept of humanity” (J. Wilson 344). The lawyer denies any sense of obligation to Bartleby, especially when he vacates his office. He leaves Bartleby behind and when the landlord requests that he remove his former employee, he insists, over and over again, “the man you allude to is nothing to me” (34). The truth is that Bartleby and the lawyer are nothing to each other; the employee-employer relationship has cheapened associations between men. The ‘bond’ exists only inasmuch as each individual receives something from the other. In *Bartleby*, this system is highlighted by the reproduction of documents that represents authoritarian law. Turkey, Ginger Nut and Bartleby (until he refuses to continue working) each contribute to the ordering of society according to a hierarchy that accords to one's function in society rather than one's humanity. As Weiner writes, “There is a hierarchy of imitation within the law office. . . . As the copyists imitate the lawyer, so the lawyer reproduces the codes that regulate the entire system” (71). This imitation benefits only the authoritarian system, as “associations” between men are reduced to mere “relations.” When

compared to earlier societies in which, say, a landowner cared for the lives of people who depended upon him for survival, this reduction of association does not bode well for humankind.

As social relations further thin out, so character as depicted in literature begins to flatten. As well, although the lawyer presumes to hold a certain prestige within the hierarchy of power, even he consciously admits the arbitrary nature of his power. At first, he claims to feel “safe” doing a “snug business” (Melville, *Bartleby* 4). He “is a man who, from youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best” (3). But, as per Melville’s concept of ‘idle’ labour which was discussed earlier, the result of this kind of work is that the individual founders when the circumstances of the position are removed. In the lawyer’s case, the position he had assumed to be a “life-lease” was taken away without any explanation or compensation, illustrating his complete lack of control and power over his own job, as well as the copyists he commands. The revelation of his absolute interchangeability, and thus, lack of individuality, occurs when he fearfully wonders whether Bartleby will take over his office because he has occupied it for so long and refuses to leave it. As Weiner writes,

[The lawyer] had been content and even eager to operate as a cog in the legal machinery of the Wall Street world by contributing to its rigidity. . . . By repetitiously writing the documents that encoded the laws of ownership or origin, the lawyer becomes a key element in maintaining the structure of the entire legal framework. (70)

However, the fact that “The lawyer automatically carries out this function much as his copyists carry out theirs” (70) indicates that he no more possesses any control over his job and, thus, position in society than do Bartleby, Turkey or Ginger Nut. This revelation—the only ‘truth’ that may be considered ‘absolute’ in this hierarchy of socioeconomic status—strikes fear and dread into the heart of any person in an apparent power position. This is because, while he may

conform to the delineation of his circumstance, there is some degree of acquiescence, conscious or unconscious, that his identity is no more stable or substantial than the thin outline of the position conferred upon him. In short, people are interchangeable within the hierarchical socioeconomic framework.

For many, this concept constitutes a veritable threat to a way of living, and it is especially intimidating for those who occupy power positions. This is why the lawyer responds with such emotion to Bartleby's refusal to work, but it also explains his general obsessive curiosity about the scrivener. Both are responses to the same lurking danger that an act of non-compliance represents to the status quo. And responses to both may be just as violent in thought as in behaviour. Because of his refusal to go along with the system requirements, "the machinery of that society is mobilized to destroy him" (Weiner 71). Yet, as supported by the anger of the lawyer, the breakdown of productivity occurs as well because the other scriveners begin thinking about their own positions relative to the hierarchy. For example, once Bartleby refuses to work, the other two begin entertaining thoughts of "preferring" not to, as well. Once the concept of not following orders enters the scriveners' minds, the office is on its way to becoming ineffective. While this results in the lawyer's feeling of being challenged, it also makes him feel less human, as if his superiority as given by his position in the hierarchy is relevant to his membership in mankind. He feels "strangely goaded" (Melville, *Bartleby* 15) by Bartleby and "burn[s] to be rebelled against" (16) or "to elicit some angry spark from him" (15). But Bartleby's manner "not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is a sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises" (19). Responding to the strong feelings evoked by what is, in effect, a provocation on the part of Bartleby, the lawyer says he should have "flown outright into a

dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence” (13). Though he claims that Bartleby’s “desk is mine, and its contents too” (21), his search of his employee’s desk is an inappropriate use of his assumed power. This is evidenced by the fact that such an act would be illegal today. This abuse of power constitutes an act of violence upon the rights of the individual worker.

Moreover, the subtitle of the short novel, “A Story of Wall Street,” brings to light the preponderance of walls in Bartleby’s and the lawyer’s lives. The lawyer begins the story by placing Bartleby’s desk some distance away from his own, facing a window whose only view consists of bricks. Eventually, he adds to this arrangement by putting up a folding screen around Bartleby to create kind of cloister, yet which allows in the all-commanding voice of the lawyer. The effect is akin to that of the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, who assumes an air of grandiosity and bombastic pretense although he is only a very ordinary man. It is easy to recognize the walls erected around Bartleby as those which constitute the modern-day cubicle. Thus, when J. Wilson writes that “the walls reflect the division of this particular society into two distinct classes: the property owners and the propertyless workers” (337), his analysis remains startlingly applicable. Critics, including Wilson, equate the walls of Wall Street to those of the jail and, eventually, the Tombs, where Bartleby ends his life. The suggestion is that working in this environment is equivalent to being dead, and this is indicated by the afterthoughts of the lawyer, who reveals that Bartleby had once worked in the Dead Letter office. Though attempts to communicate are made, dead letters symbolize the absence of true interaction in a society in which “communication” is based on terms which are strictly business and less and less “authentically human” (Widmer 450).



The walls of the Tombs also refer to those of the tombs of ancient Egypt, “equat[ing] Bartleby’s plight with the plight of the oppressed masses” (J. Wilson 343). The lawyer attempts to uphold the façade that this pyramid-like hierarchy does not exist by claiming “there is the sky, and here is the grass,” as if to say that no boundaries keep him in his place. But regardless of whether Bartleby is apparently free in the natural world, or encased in a tomb-like cubicle, his reply is still “I know where I am” (Melville, *Bartleby* 39). This is because, as the character of Bartleby indicates, the forces that keep him in his place are not only physical. Because his nature does not change as his outward circumstances undergo drastic upheavals, it is apparent that the affliction he suffers from is, as the lawyer finds, an “innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach” (22). Yet, while the narrator has been cited for irresponsibility, for inaction when faced with the sympathetic plight of another human being, it is precisely Bartleby’s soul that the lawyer—or those authoritarians in Bartleby’s past whose disciplinary role the lawyer had merely taken over for—*had* reached, and afflicted. If Bartleby’s soul is so diseased, has it become so as a result of some punishment? It would follow, then, that the lawyer would be so full of pity and compassion for Bartleby because he re-enacts the proper Foucauldian response, as a member of society who is able to sympathize while acknowledging the need for swift but painful disciplinary action. Prison walls are evident in the story, but rather than simply symbolizing the prison, they are meant to suggest the imprisoning *lifestyle*. Perhaps they function just as the stamp of the gallows which, as Dickens reports, was “stamped on every page of the criminal statute-book” and universally known. As discussed earlier, when methods of disciplinary action changed throughout the 19th century, the gallows and the jail began to represent punishment to the soul, rather than to the body. If “at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows”

(Burke 16), then it follows that the individual cannot help but see everywhere in society and its institutions indications of his own mental and emotional discipline. Bartleby's "incurable disorder" (22) of the soul is a direct result of the disciplinary action of social institutions. By actively fortifying the social codes and mores that keep Bartleby in his folding-screen cubicle on a steady progress towards self-annihilation and death, the lawyer insidiously extinguishes the life of the scrivener while maintaining an attitude of charity and sympathy. In essence, this "idle" work is what keeps the social machinery pristine and functioning at its peak. Indeed, this machine produces functionary man before he is even born, according to the standards and boundaries of conduct that are always already in effect. This explains how the lawyer is able to introduce us to Bartleby before he is even named: as J. Wilson points out, the lawyer seems to recognize Bartleby in the doorway of his office by virtue of his anonymity; it is precisely his initial accordance with the rules that extinguishes his interiority and achieves this 'absent' quality. The lawyer, too, while facing the threat of his own irrelevancy because his job is in jeopardy, continues his 'idle' work by following the law to the letter, as it were; in doing so, he contributes to the maintenance of an immaculate and orderly society. By the mid-nineteenth century, when Melville sat down to write *Bartleby: A Story of Wall Street*, it was beginning to be much clearer, and not only to the thinkers and artists of the time, that the morphology of man suggested he was losing agency—quickly. Paradoxically, representative man changed from Blake's Nobodaddy to Nobody, and then from Everyman to . . . Somebody. Everyone in capitalist society suddenly wanted to be *a somebody*, as if changing job titles would have any effect on the intrinsic structure that extinguished the life of Bartleby. Yet, this inflated lifestyle of artificial power and prestige was only a variation on that of the lawyer-narrator; in fact, it was his very lifestyle pressed to the extreme.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as the average lifestyle became more and more devoted to the appearance of affluence, new developments in human psychology and social behaviour arose, adding to the discourse of the individual. At the same time, increasing technology further affected the ways human beings worked, so that the positive impact of these drastic changes often countered any headway made by those who cited the machines for undercutting the individuality of human character and, therefore, individual agency. In fact, for many, the effects of technological progress on the economy as well as on the human being were very promising and suggested only greater prosperity and well-being for all. While the “developing market economy in antebellum” had become one of “the nineteenth century’s most powerful technologies of producing personhood,” whether this power was ultimately a positive or negative one was still a hotly debated issue. In particular, as Weinstein continues in *The Literature of Labor*, “new forms of *labor* produce new forms of personhood” (104; emphasis added). And as the language of birth and production became indistinguishable, so did the clarity of the line separating human from machine. “To most Victorian writers, however, it seemed that the inner life could still remain untouched by the machine” (Sussman 184), and this assumption constituted a blind spot for late nineteenth-century society because it threatened to broach the essentializing of human interiority. It also led to the expectation that the human spirit could not be intruded upon by what contained it, that is, its socioeconomic circumstance. As the 1900s came to a close, however, it became clear that “the twentieth-century fear [would be] that the machine will invade even this sanctuary” of inner life (Sussman 184).

Anxiety as to the possibility of this conclusion coming to fruition certainly was not reserved for writers of fiction. In fact, writers would find many points of comparison between their thoughts on how technology would affect the human being in the new millennium, and

those of writers in areas such as politics, social theory and, particularly, psychology. Writing during this time period was William Morris, whose startling observations about the effects of mechanical work on the individual in society were as important in their own right as Freud's work on the psyche. In his article "Art and Socialism," Morris begins with a distinction between the work to which man applies himself such that it provides a "natural solace" and the work that is "without meaning" which invariably becomes a "repulsive burden" (Morris, *Political Writings* 110). It is real, genuine labour that Morris cites as creating true "pleasure—or in other words, added life" (110). But the type of labour that was gaining popularity with manufacturers also vigorously attacked man's role as a craftsman. The artist's responsibility of invigorating and sustaining human spirituality was overcome with the functional, societal role of tending to the needs of machines in production.

Morris famously "blended" Art and Labour, arguably raising both to higher levels of purpose and dignity. He made a claim that all members of society should never be without work and that there were three principles that stipulated the kind of work it should be: First, that it be "work worth doing"; second, that it be work that is "pleasant to do"; and third, that the work be "done under conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious" ("Art and Socialism" 127). Furthermore, Morris hoped to "win back Art again to our daily labour" (121). Art was "the pleasure of life" (129) and "the happiness of life" (123), and this was what he hoped would infuse labour with a life-giving, rather than life-taking, toil. Morris condemned what he saw as the deterioration of mankind through the deterioration of its work. Standardization in production facilities was increasing everywhere as the demand for consumer goods amplified. Labour, which had once been a natural solace, had now become a horrible burden. And, though Morris believed that this sorry state of labour had come about directly

through the application of new mechanical technologies, he remained firm in the knowledge that these same machines might have been used to ameliorate everyday life for the average person. In fact, in his view, machines did not automatically preclude human sensibility from open expansion and growth. As proven through “his essays and his commercial practice, Morris saw no necessary conflict between the machine and the sensually liberated life. Like Carlyle, Dickens, and even Ruskin, he shared the Victorian delight in technological achievement” (Sussman 132). Instead, however, technology that might have been applied towards labour-saving strategies led to the breakdown of relations between people, as well as the threatening of the integrity of individual self-identification. The hand of the craftsman ceased in the creation of useful or artful objects, and took up with pulling levers and responding to the ever-increasing frequency of the assembly line. Thus, the meaning the craftsman once gleaned from a more traditional work dissipated—whether that meaning was generated from a learned understanding or a ‘natural’ intuition of what type of work is worthy of a particularly deeper significance (say, work that creates artful or useful objects, rather than objects that are neither artful nor useful, but simply impress upon the mind with a perfected redundancy). Morris writes,

The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimize repulsive labour and to give pleasure—or in other words added life—to the human race, have been so used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands: they have instead of lightening the labour of the workmen, intensified it, and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor have to carry. (“Art and Socialism” 110-11)

On top of this, the new types of labour that were being created were what Morris referred to as “useless toil.” In his article “Useful Work versus Useless Toil” (1885), he points out the sorry state of society in which any kind of work is praised, even if it is work of a useless variety. He suggests that there is a kind of work that, since it employs man on a very basic level of consciousness and intelligence, is beneath humankind. This is the type of work that man should do without.

Since society has been inculcated with the Puritan work ethic, however, it has come to tacitly accept the premise that *any* work is a worthwhile pursuit. In this respect, Morris’s conception of a labour that must be truly worthwhile extends much further; in fact, his may very well be the labour glorified in the early georgics. In “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil” he writes, “the creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself [is] a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others” (117). He differentiates between the state of creating, or truly producing, and the mere state of being “employed.” This higher purpose, to attain and maintain any kind of employment (regardless of its suitability with respect to the nature of the employee) requires the ultimate sacrifice of one’s time and initiative. Morris calls into question a work ethic that requires one to push away one’s true calling merely to make money and build commercial networks. His work ethic, on the other hand, requires the sacrifice of commerce in order to build upon individual initiative. In making this distinction, Morris infuses dignity and honour into true labour. He opposes the art of craftsmanship—of true creation—to mechanistic production. As mentioned earlier, it was not necessarily the mechanisms of technological innovation that Morris disparaged. In fact, what he cautioned against were the detrimental effects of mechanization on human consciousness along with “the eagerness of competitive Commerce to make the most of the huge crowd of workmen whom it breeds as unregarded instruments for

what is called the making of money” (“Art and Socialism” 114). Here, Morris’s conception of Commerce is very much in line with that of de Tocqueville. Morris goes on to write, “the Commerce they are so proud of has become their master” and they “are compelled to admit not that Commerce was made for man, but that man was made for Commerce” (116). That man “was made for Commerce” indicates that he contains himself in order to fit the form of Commerce (rather than, on the other hand, expressing himself to fully realize his organic and human qualities). This brings to fruition de Tocqueville’s prescient words, “The art advances, the artisan recedes,” or, as the worker is “perfect[ed],” “the man in him is degraded in proportion” (*Democracy in America* vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 20). It is important to note that, in these excerpts from de Tocqueville, the “art” of the “workman” is that of technological production, rather than that of the true “art” of which Morris speaks. This shift in meaning comes about because of the shift in meanings of work. In the past, work was predicated on a sense of pride in one’s individual production; eventually, it transmogrified into a sense of pride in one’s conquests. This, Morris writes, is

the present system of labour in civilized countries. That system, which I have called competitive Commerce, is distinctly a system of war; that is of waste and destruction: or you may call it gambling if you will, the point of it being that under it whatever a man gains he gains at the expense of some other man’s loss. (“Art and Socialism” 123)

Here, Morris responds to the growing sense that one’s labour constituted a waste of time, energy and monetary income if one worked for the community, rather than for oneself. The complex motivations and desires accompanying the growing system of Commerce had, indeed, altered the individual moral code. Instead of “production” connoting the concept of putting one’s efforts out into the community and sharing the benefits of that work, “producing” became synonymous with

accumulating, or 'bringing in' money from the community. One of the main draws of the new consumerism was acquiring objects that one's neighbours and friends did not have; thus, it only follows that whatever concerns were attached to community were easily abandoned for the hard work of fulfilling one's individual needs and desires.

These manufactured 'wants' were so powerful that Morris refers to them as creating a state of "war," one in which competitiveness engenders "gambling" and "destruction" as part of everyday life. In "How we Live and How we Might Live" (1884) he bluntly states that a shorter name for competition is war; in fact, he claims "our present system of Society is based on a state of perpetual war" in which one must "pursu[e] your own advantage at the cost of some one else's loss, and in the process of it you must not be sparing of destruction even of your own possessions, or you will certainly come by the worse in the struggle. You understand that perfectly as to the kind of war in which people go out to kill and be killed" (136-37). Overall, however, it is a "waste of labour, skill, cunning, waste of life in short" (139) because the product itself is cheapened; due to society's fickleness, demand is also cheapened; and finally, the worker is cheapened by a demotion from a creator to a veritable waste of life. Rather than stimulate the economy, Morris posits, this kind of production creates a damaging glut in society. It can hardly be estimated when society will choose to overindulge. Thus, the rule of supply and demand, when applied to the perpetual shifting of American fashions and desires, provides a shaky base from which to derive subsistence. This instability, added to the ubiquitous propaganda encouraging a 'healthy competitiveness' among men, pits the individual against all others. Rather than contributing towards the health of society, the individual only works in order to *take away* payment for work done; *adding to* society is hardly a consideration. The alienation of the individual began once he felt no shame in admitting that the "I" had become more important than



the community, once he realized, undoubtedly, that in order to succeed, he must take from—*deprive*—someone else.

Consumerism, then, established an individualist desire in Americans that meant the needs of community were being pushed farther and farther away from the individual's major priorities. This "individualism" proved a direct contrast to that which the country had previously known; for example, while Whitman writes about individualism only a few decades earlier, it is always with the result of increased fraternity and the betterment of society in mind. On the other hand, individualism conjoined with the new consumerism effected a selfishness that posited much more than a sense of self-preservation and well-being as its end. At some point, a personal evaluation of well-being—how one is progressing with regard to one's short- and long-term goals—was no longer valid unless it contained a comparative estimation of how *everyone else* was progressing. This competition drove many Americans to eschew the sense of purpose that came with striving towards a higher calling. In the same movement, they also tossed aside the determination necessary to focus one's abilities and energies on work that would sustain a person over a lifetime. Indeed, a vocation is defined as a "*regular* occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited or qualified" ("Vocation," *American Heritage Dictionary*; emphasis added). What is important to note here is that an individual could depend on finding work that interested him, and for which he was suited, and also, basically, that this mode of work would be available for a person over the span of his life. Both of these elements become conspicuously absent as consumerism's influence on American society increases. In addition, prior to consumerism taking hold *en masse*, people had often felt that work was a vocation, or, a "response to a summons . . . or calling" ("Vocation"). To describe one's work as a response or reply suggests that a sort of communication is taking place. Indeed, traditional conceptions of

“work” may include interaction between two individuals. It may also be indicative of one individual responding to the needs of a group, or a community. By choosing, as one’s vocation, to focus on responding to someone or something else, one relegates the concept of selfishness to a place of very little importance. To be sure, the word “vocation” suggests a higher calling; it is rooted in the Middle English *vocacioun* which is defined as “a divine call to a religious life.” But vocation soon becomes “occupation”: “An activity engaged in especially as a means of passing time” (“Occupation”). Thus, a working person, once responsible not only to the public but to a divine power, is downgraded to a holder of a position which offers merely the passing of time. Moreover, occupation is alternately defined as the “act or process of *holding or possessing a place*” (emphasis added), a meaning that holds great significance later in this study when character is discussed as a functionary of narrative.

The term that comes into popular usage after “vocation” is “job.” The transition from one word to the other marks the movement from the common notion of work as answering a life calling (vocation) to work that holds as its major concern the possibility of being fiscally short-changed (job). In fact, “job” is inextricably linked to the idea of payment as “vocation” definitely was not: *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines a job as a “specific piece of work to be done for a set fee” (“Job”). It is interesting, as well, to note that “job” has irrefutably shady delineations: as a verb, it also means “To transact (official business) dishonestly for private profit.” It again denotes negatively by its informal meaning: “A criminal act, especially robbery.” Furthermore, it must be considered that another informal meaning of “job” is “An example of a specified *type*, especially of something made or *constructed*” (emphasis added). For instance, as put forth in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, a new building might be described as “just another glass and steel job.” In this case, the concept of a job as an empty, pre-existing form that

may be possessed is clear; it has withstood time to remain in use in the phrase “having a job or a position to *fill*.” More importantly, the prevalence of this conception of the job opens the way for the popular understanding of people as flattened-out types that must conform to the roles meted out to them by the increasingly competitive structures of the socioeconomy. “Man is,” as Morris writes, “*made for Commerce*” (emphasis added).

It should be noted, as well, that the word “job” may also derive from “the obsolete *jobbe*, piece, alteration of Middle English *gobbe*, lump” (“Job”). By the seventeenth century, the phrase “*jobbe of worke*” meant a *piece* of work (contrasted with the continuous, life-long labour of “vocation”). It is interesting to note that “*gobbe*” or “*gob*” is often used in the American idiom “*gobs of money*.” It then becomes apparent that “job” signifies a potential for making (or taking) money, rather than a potential to fulfill a higher calling by creating (or adding) to the world (as is suggested by “vocation”). By the turn of the twentieth century, “to gob” meant “to swallow greedily and without tasting” (*Webster's 1913 Dictionary*), a description very near to what de Tocqueville had observed but much more fitting for the desire-for-desire consumer world. A “job,” then, had come to mean a short-term stint that reimbursed time and effort with money; a “job” had clearly dispossessed itself of the onus to provide any real sustenance, such as a greater purpose or a meaning other than the literal task at hand. (Indeed, by the late twentieth century, a “job” comes to be defined as a “Normal term for a complete item of work performed by a computer system” [*Dictionary of Science and Technology*]). In fact, a “job” had become slang for “specimen, thing, *person*” (“Job,” *American Heritage Dictionary*; emphasis added). That the word “job” could be another name for a person clearly indicated that, by the early twentieth century, the average American was aware of the life-shaping effect that a job had on the individual in society. Far from its origins as a vocation that brought out qualities of the divine in

a person, work had merely become a “job,” a showcase of humanity’s flawed, albeit mortal, selfishness. Further, the characteristic qualities of the job—the set role, way of thinking, and protocol that it provided—assimilated the individual such that he expressed only those qualities and characteristics possessed by the job or position itself. Since responding to and looking at the world from only one point of view effects a ‘flattening’ of the human personality, this assimilation led to a further dehumanized individual. Depending on the homogeneity of only one world-view became easier than maintaining different facets of one ‘rounded’ personality.

What also became easy was giving in to the seduction of this new kind of work, much of which required only a fraction of the physical or intellectual dedication and intensity than had been required by traditional work. The new work most often had something to do with the creation or maintenance of what Morris called the “‘labour-saving’ machines.” However, rather than prove an unquestionable benefit to humankind, the machines had alarming effects on society, as Morris asserts:

What [machines] really do is to reduce the skilled labourer to the ranks of the unskilled, to increase the number of the “reserve army of labour”—that is, to increase the precariousness of life among the workers and to intensify the labour of those who serve the machines (as slaves their masters). All this they do by the way, while they pile up the profits of the employers of labour, or force them to expend those profits in bitter commercial war with each other. In a true society these miracles of ingenuity would be for the first time used for minimizing the amount of time spent in unattractive labour, which by their means might be so reduced as to be but a very light burden on each individual. All the more as these machines would most certainly be very much improved

when it was no longer a question as to whether their improvement would “pay” the individual, but rather whether it would benefit the community. (“Useful Work” 133-34)

Thus, Morris viewed an individualistic society as a society at war. When a person does not improve the condition of the community in which he lives, he is leading himself and his family towards a bleak future. As he writes later in “At a Picture Show,” “The workman must learn to understand that he must have no master, no employer save himself—himself collectively, that is to say, the commonweal” (par. 19). But if the worker does not join together with the commonweal, he is at the mercy of the “gambling-market” (par. 19) and is effectively a slave, no matter how much he is financially compensated by his master. On the one hand, he has the option to create and add to the social good; on the other, he adds only to the gambling-market, or commercial world, which in turn entrenches divisive forces amongst the bonds of what De Tocqueville refers to as “human affection” or, alternately, what the lawyer in *Bartleby* calls “common humanity.”

Although *Bartleby*’s employer has been charged by some critics with being consumed by the niggling feeling that he shares a “common humanity” with the scrivener, it cannot be said that his little actions are enough to betray these feelings. In other words, consciously or not, he feels justified to a sufficient degree that as soon as he may rid himself of the physical form of *Bartleby*, business will settle into its usual pattern. As hierarchies seemingly toppled under the ‘open and fair’ competition of American Capitalism, De Tocqueville on the other hand bemoaned this degraded relationship between men. Responsibility towards those who were less fortunate slowly lifted and detached itself from those who enjoyed comparable economic stability. The meager relation that remained was a poor substitute for De Tocqueville’s “association” or Whitman’s “adhesiveness.” By the end of the century, Morris calls for the

workforce to “put Association instead of Competition, Social order instead of Individualist anarchy” (“Art and Socialism” 111). Otherwise, he warns presciently, “men will become unequally developed, and there will still be a rotten place in Society” (128).

The sense of social structures which inextricably bound the individual was further enconced by increasing mechanization and, ultimately, the introduction and propagation of Fordism and Taylorism into many workplaces. In 1911,

Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of scientific management, boldly declared: “What we are looking for . . . is the ready-made, competent man . . .in the past the man has been first, in the future the system must be first.” According to Taylor, managers should “talk to and deal with only one man at a time, since each workman has his own special abilities and limitations, and since we are not dealing with men in masses, but are trying to develop each individual man to his highest state of efficiency and prosperity.” Taylor’s system continually makes such appeals to the individual, when the very basis of that system is the denial of the individual and the construction of the generic worker. Haber characterizes Taylor’s program as one in which “methods were primary, not particular men.” The particularities of individuals disappear even though Taylor denies “dealing with men in masses.” (Weinstein 164)

And one did not need to work for an assembly-line production to comprehend that the assembly-line had become a major symbol in popular culture. The image of the assembly-line was not simply widespread but, also, crucially *meaningful*. It was received and understood by the general public as a system that could very well swallow the individual whole. The production line becomes such a prevalent image in society that it is celebrated years later by the clockwork machinery that ingests Charlie Chaplin in his film *Modern Times* (1936). If, as Morris claims, it

was “the aim of the masters or profit-makers to decrease the market value of this human part of the machinery,” then the masters seemed to have won. They had, to be sure, succeeded in reducing man to “a part of the machinery for the production of profit” (“How We Live” 143). But in the literature at the end of the nineteenth century, this apparent loss of humanity coupled with the acquisition of a machine-like quality to create a sense of humanity’s devolution.

Although Taylor claimed “The old fashioned dictator does not exist under Scientific Management” (Taylor 9), the only truth in this statement was that rules were not enforced by one man; rather, they came to be enforced by a generalized, omniscient power that held the stopwatch. The irony is that the new ‘democratizing’ or equalizing power of the assembly-line merely moved the power of the ruling class from a visible embodiment to an abstraction. The fact is that society was still heavily governed by a hierarchy of power and the change in the factory did nothing to change that.

Around this time, Thorstein Veblen wrote his well-known critique of society entitled *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899); in this work, Veblen writes a scathing review of that segment of society that glorifies a lifestyle of excess. In his writing, “we find the idea that life in a modern industrial community is the result of a polar conflict between ‘pecuniary employments’ and ‘industrial employments’, between ‘business enterprise’ and ‘the machine process’, between ‘vendibility’ and ‘serviceability’—in short, between making money and making goods. There is a class struggle under capitalism, not between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but between businessmen and engineers” (Blaug “Veblen,” *Great Economists Before Keynes*).

The emphasis on the conflict between making goods and making money is an interesting one. It highlights the tension between vocation and business, something one is ‘naturally’ suited for and something to which one applies oneself (the assumption is that selling is not a truly

honest lifestyle). From this distinction comes the relatively new problematic of distinguishing between an individual and his role in society; before this, there was no need to look at these as being distinguished from the other. But the dawn of the twentieth century gave the individual new ways of looking out at the world. Certainly, his world was changing: society was adjusting to the impact of newly acquired wealth from the Gold Rushes from the early 1800s up to just before the turn of the century. In part because of this new experience, artists began imagining new ways to situate the individual, along with his new situation, within the literary work. One of the issues that consumed many writers was the conflict inherent in the increasing emphasis on individualism, specifically, *American* individualism, and the growing exoskeleton of the social hierarchy. While seemingly America was becoming more outwardly democratic—exemplified by the growing number of individuals who were able to exercise the new social mobility—something like the superego of the social reared its ugly head. This backlash may be seen in the cultural production of the time. Attempting to disregard the demarcations of hierarchy not only robs one of “civilization” but also of humanity. Ignoring the lines of social class makes an individual, with all rights and privileges, into a grotesque. For example, the respected doctor in R. L. Stevenson’s *Jekyll & Hyde* (1886) creates an alter-ego in an attempt to escape the confines of his social role: the murderous and fearsome Mr. Hyde. With the concept of upward (and downward) social mobility gaining popularity, people began to understand and accept the idea that one’s social role could somehow be different from, even quite opposite to, the nature of one’s inner self. It is important that Freudian theory was just becoming known with the English-language publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* (1909); as well, Darwin’s controversial *Origin of the Species* (1859) was gaining a greater acceptance. Both would find wider audiences as the first decades of the twentieth century would unfold.



The idea that there was a ‘natural’ status of man in society that was somehow divinely ordained continued to lose currency as stories of the self-made man and the edification of the American Dream gained popularity. In his book, *Made in America* (1992), Jeffrey Louis Decker discusses the term, “American Dream”:

[T]he term was not put into print until 1931, when middle-brow historian James Truslow Adams coined and used it throughout the pages of a book titled *The Epic of America*. . . . The American Dream is to be understood as an ethical doctrine that is symptomatic of a crisis in national identity during the thirties. The newly invented dream calls out for a supplement to the outmoded narrative of individual uplift, which had lost its moral capacity to guide the nation during the Depression. (92)

Of course, while the term only came into vogue at the time of the Depression, it cannot be said the story, the “dream” itself, was something new. The plot of the social outsider who makes it big is found in numerous popular novels. These plots, however, necessitated their own qualifiers; there was a danger that readers would view their social-climbing heroes, or antiheroes, with admiration, rather than categorical pity and perhaps contempt for challenging tradition. At the least, moral endnotes were required to tip the scales unambiguously for readers. The balance, however, swayed precariously.

For example, these changing values in American society at the turn of the century are highlighted in Edith Wharton’s *Custom of the Country* (1913). The “hero” of the story, Undine Spragg, is a social-climbing woman of low moral character; she is also a bad mother and wife and a woman with a questionable past. She does a magnificent job of maintaining an upward movement through the echelons of society and, by the end of the novel, she is on her way towards making a move to become a respected politician’s wife. However, she is meant to be

disliked; even her name is “unattractive.” The inherent warning certainly is to avoid women like this, and to watch out for fakery and deception. Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) ends with a much stronger note: Clyde Griffiths, a “nobody” who panics at the thought of losing his entrance into high society when his poor girlfriend becomes pregnant and threatens to ruin his shiny future, ends up in jail, the object of a great scandal, and finally, executed. But in novels such as Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the empathy of the reader for Carrie and Gatsby is too great to overcome the distaste for the social-climbing that could be expected from readers at the end of the nineteenth century. These characters are not led—as much—by the ruthlessness that leads Undine Spragg and Clyde Griffiths; certainly, more than anything else, the murder of his pregnant girlfriend distances the reader from Clyde. Instead, these characters are led by a sympathetic need for acceptance and love; this is reason enough for readers to overlook the more alarming idea that people could literally make themselves what they wished simply by acting the part. It was still a threat to most of society that one might choose to—and succeed at—presenting an outer persona that was quite opposite from what they “naturally” were.

In his turn-of-the-century novel, *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser captures the spirit of the American Dream. In his Introduction to *New Essays on Sister Carrie*, Donald Pizer writes that Dreiser “had also known . . . the core of hope and expectation—usually thwarted but occasionally fulfilled—seemingly inherent in the American experience” (Pizer 2). Carrie moves from the provinces to the big city of Chicago to make a “success” of herself. Though she is read by many as prostituting herself—she immediately moves in with a married man who financially supports her—she eventually makes her own money by becoming an actress. That she is seen as a critical success by Chicagoan society is a good move, on Dreiser’s part, for it smoothes over the fact that

Carrie might be a good liar and user of people. In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser approaches the “late nineteenth-century cultural myths of the seduction of the young girl in the city and of the prosperous origins of the Bowery bum” (Pizer 7); of course, the American Dream is another myth he embarks upon; Carrie ends up a great success as an actor, but completely alone, rocking in her chair in a picture that bespeaks a lack of nurturance, past and present. Although Dreiser’s narration is sometimes too florid, the novel was initially rejected by Harper’s because of its “realism” (9). While many of his contemporaries supported Dreiser and found him a great voice for this new “realism” or “naturalism” in American fiction-writing, others found him “an agent of regression in his dramatization of the triumph of man’s ‘animal’ nature over his capacity for reason and moral choice” (14); in other words, the thirst to overcome, or simply disregard, the social hierarchy was seen as an animalistic trait in his characters. Therefore, while Dreiser’s fiction certainly depicts the triumph of the individual, the individual is no longer that great example of humankind that readers could aspire to become. Instead, Dreiser was accused by Lionel Trilling and the New Criticism of “fail[ing] to take cognizance of the role of the mental or spiritual in human affairs,” or failing to “render the complexities of life in a complex manner” (15). Indeed, Carrie acts on instinct, without thought—automatically. She is “too often depicted as a dupe of ‘consumerism’ and ‘commodification’” (18). Yet, in this, Carrie finds herself, together with much of the reading public, experiencing life in the American city at the turn of the century.

Another reason some critics despised Dreiser’s work was that Carrie is not a “solid” individual that readers would have been trained to appreciate: she “is a character whose destiny is unclear because her identity, from beginning to end, is only in the process of being formed” (Riggio 24). This is an astute observation of a character written for a public that was accustomed

to looking down upon this kind of 'shape-shifting' personality. A personality that was as yet "unformed," especially by the end of the novel, was a personality that was deficient, unsure of its own morality and, thus, a threat to those whose morality was accepted without further thought. This was a new occurrence in literature and one that heralded a definite change in society. However, for a country that prided itself on freedom of individuality, the idea that the American personality was something that merely soaked up the social context, rather than imposed itself in a larger-than-life form, was unpopular, at best. While some critics see Dreiser as a psychological realist, it is the "certain lack of individualization" (26) that is cause for concern; he "deliberately" leaves out details from Carrie's past that would, in fact, create a more "rounded" character. As it is, she is "shown as a victim of external events" and "appears to be dominated 'by conditions over which [she] had no control'" (26). As well, Dreiser describes a strange, unfulfilling relationship between Carrie and her family back home; in fact, there is barely a mention of her family beyond a paragraph in which it is mentioned that Carrie has left them behind. Later, Dreiser describes Hurstwood's home life as "lack[ing] a 'lovely home atmosphere' which makes 'strong and just the natures cradled and nurtured within it.'" Then, using

language that echoes the imagery used to explain Carrie's relation to her family, Dreiser concludes that those who miss this nurturing never know the "mystic cords which bind and thrill the heart." Those, like Carrie, for whom the cords don't bind very strongly, have been denied the family's "tolerance and love" and as a result "The song and the literature of the home are dulled." The language is full of the sentimental clichés of the day, but it points to the hidden drama behind Carrie's first "perfunctory embrace" of [her sister] Minnie on the train platform. (Riggio 29)

Because Dreiser so often employs florid language to describe Carrie or Carrie's relationships, the use of empty language and overused metaphors come to signify something in themselves: it is as if on some level Dreiser already recognizes the emptiness of the new American individual, "cradle[d] and nurtured" not by the family home but by the utter arbitrariness of the situations of everyday life in the city. It is not even necessarily her *own* situation that molds her: when she plays Laura in Augustus Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, it is the poor girl's situation that makes her better feel her own. Only then does Carrie suddenly feel "the bitterness of [Laura's] situation. The feelings of the outcast descended upon her" (Riggio 35). Perhaps Carrie's story simply has no need for a stronger individual identity since, as Ellen Moers writes in *Two Dreisers*, hers is "an old, old story: the restless country girl who comes to try her luck in the big city and never goes home again" (qtd. in Riggio 30). The story is so old that the American reader doesn't need the detail; the story unfolds itself with ease, filling in its own details as needed. In fact, *Sister Carrie* merely replays "the young man from the provinces subgenre [which] involves a predictable sequence of events" upon which Dreiser bases his narrative (Lehan 69). In any case, to portray Carrie in this way suggests unambiguously that Dreiser sees socioeconomic forces as holding more sway over the individual—this *type* of individual—than psychological makeup, or history, or fact of birth: this presents a serious controversy for a society just emerging from the traditional Victorian age, a society bred on the Romantic ideal of Individualism.

Though Carrie does attempt to disregard these traditions, she still holds them in high regard, as would the early twentieth-century reader of *Sister Carrie*. For example, she holds Hurstwood in high regard because of his status in society. He "affect[s] her as much as the magnificence of God affects the mind of the Christian" (Dreiser 129). But her obsession with life in the big city, material and monetary desires, and her "inability to be bound to anyone" (Riggio

33), make for an individual that is completely alienated from the rest of society. Of course, the “threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken,” but she leaves Hurstwood (and her sister) “like a criminal,” as well. At the beginning of the novel, she is, as Dreiser writes, “a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea” (qtd. in Riggio 29). By the end, she has not noticeably changed: “Ames recommends [Thomas] Hardy’s novels to Carrie because he says, ‘I should judge you were rather lonely in your disposition’” (qtd. in Riggio 25). The baffling question is the nature of Carrie’s inner life; it would seem that the only distinguishing characteristics of Dreiser’s hero are alienation and an attempt to comfort herself with material things. In fact, she may be described as a mere “‘medium’ for what Robert Ames later calls ‘the [world’s] sorrows and longing’” (Hochman 45). The concept of an empty conduit, or cipher, is one which finds itself in works of a more self-conscious variety, written nearly a century later. For now, the baffling question is, if Carrie’s inner life seems to remain the same from the beginning to the end of the novel although she has experienced relationships with Hurstwood and Drouet as well as the meteoric ascent of her situation and her relationships, then, as the destitute Hurstwood reflects at the end of the novel, “What’s the use?” (*Sister Carrie* 656).

One might ask, what *is* the use, when not only is the character of Carrie acting in an “old story,” but as Richard Lehan writes, “almost all relationships she incurs are involved with money,” “almost everything is quantified,” and her very life runs according to the “desiring machine” (69)? In fact, Lehan refers to life in Dreiser’s narrative as “Spencerian matter in motion,” that is, “pure mechanistic process.” Carrie, as might be said about Mr. Hyde in *Jekyll and Hyde*, has “no moral center”: she “is no longer the pure product of animal intuition, but [she] also [does] not have anything like fully developed reason” (69). What *is* useful, then, is to

attempt to decipher how the proper “young man [or woman] from the provinces” ends up with a moral turpitude that can be compared to that of Mr. Hyde.

*Sister Carrie* marks an important shift in the representation of the individual within society, the effects of which are still to be found in contemporary literature. First, of course, there is the nature of the content: as Alan Trachtenberg states, it is the “aggressively offensive content—the absence, as Randolph Bourne put it, of any hint of moral redemption (or punishment) in a story of a ‘fallen woman’ who trades her virginity for material comforts, and yet still holds our sympathy at the end, more than comfortable in her flat at the Waldorf, reading Père Goriot and still somehow dissatisfied” (A. Trachtenberg, “Who Narrates?” 120). But the fallen woman that still garners the reader’s sympathy is not a new story. Second, there are the many intrusions on the part of the author; these are necessary, Trachtenberg argues, because Dreiser’s “own characters lack the capacity to think critically about their lives; they are ‘inarticulate.’ The depth and scope of the choices they make, seemingly made without much reflection, required Dreiser’s input, his pity and insight, so as to make the possible impact of that choice hit upon the reader” (120). This is, in fact, a very interesting development: for the author to feel that he needs to tell the reader what to think about his characters would seem that he has failed to properly inject the right tone, characterization, or progress in the narrative. But, when one considers the new *kind* of individual being portrayed by the narrative, this is a very significant point. Alan Trachtenberg writes, “Complete self-awareness is indeed a high standard for the modern audience itself, thus, characters in fiction who are consistently aware of—and able to articulate—the larger impact of their every action, or inaction, smack of a kind of authorial dishonesty.” In other words, although the modern reader requires more to be convinced of the “viability” of his character than the Victorian reader, in some ways, he requires less:

Dreiser certainly departed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of characterization. . . .

Viable characters are able to understand and then articulate their experience, to express their desires and fears or, at least, make the attempt to do so, intelligent or not. “We care and sympathize comparatively less for the stupid, the coarse and the blind,” states [Henry] James. . . . “[C]haracters are only as interesting in proportion to how they *feel* their respective situations.” . . . While [Carrie] may not be the “really sentient” character that James valorizes, the reader is carried along with her through her experiences, not because of any critical self-analysis or sudden epiphanies experienced by herself, but because great *feeling* certainly is evoked—if not within Carrie, certainly *without*. (A. Trachtenberg, “Who Narrates?” 93)

In fact, this has an even greater significance when contemporary authors are discussed later in this work. Late twentieth-century characters certainly evoke feeling, but it is also *without*, rather than within themselves. As well, this kind of individual needs the exposition of the author, or at the very least, a very specific kind of positioning within the narrative so as to put the character into the light best suited to reflect upon the author’s intended meaning.

Carrie is a character whose emotions are her finest selling point because they are what carry the reader along the narrative. However, there is a difference between this and the old standard of storytelling that requires the characters to evoke the reader’s empathy. The difference is that the moments of great emotion in *Sister Carrie* occur only when the situation is presented, or recounted, as a dramatic or literary episode. Thus, Carrie’s pitiful situation truly only grabs the reader (and Carrie herself) when she plays her literary counterpart in the Augustus Daly play. She only *feels* her situation when eyes are upon her. In fact, she is only able to act in the play when, knowing that Hurstwood has joined the audience, she imagines herself acting through *his*



eyes. Carrie literally 'want[s] to be in pictures,' as the old ditty goes: it is not so much the need to see herself onscreen and on billboards, but a kind of modern reflexive need that requires she process her everyday experience in her mind first, as if watching a film, or as if she were omnisciently watching herself from above—it is as if she needs to leave the space of her self to better understand her situation. Only then does she achieve an understanding as to her status or the success of her endeavour; for Carrie, this is the only thing that begins to approach satisfaction.

Awareness of one's situation in society—of one's level of *success*—became difficult to ascertain as the twentieth century opened. The appearance of success often stood in for the sense of satisfaction that came from a job well done. Increasing prosperity and the changing role of women brought new kinds of desires into the lives of average women and men. Values that had been taken for granted for centuries were being questioned as women gained some independence. People began to critically examine their own sets of morals, as well as their acceptance of the Church and State; this, of course, was not confined to the United States. A parallel to this development in North America is French writer André Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican*, which was translated into *Lafcadio's Adventures* in 1914. In this work, the theme of fakeness, disguises, and "playing a part" is very important. Characters are truly empty; whereas even sensate experience could once keep characters 'anchored' to plot and context, it now becomes merely a fleeting sensation that floats away, never to be truly experienced or amalgamated into a Self. In the same way, characters are also detached from true emotional investments. For example, at the end of the book, Lafcadio's interest in 'the beloved' wanes; also, when Arnica cannot distinguish between the two boys that love her, and simply chooses Amedee over Blafafas because he says her name "in a way that seemed to her Italian," even

though he himself had said her name “without reflection” (Gide 105). When the academic Julius is awarded a long-awaited membership to the French Academy, it is not because he had been building towards this goal on his own merit, but because the Academy simply chooses to let him in. In response to his wife’s comment that “One has nothing to do in this world but to wait,” Julius adds, “And not to change” (226). The most important character, Lafcadio, is “set up” as a Hero figure at the fire, but then he simply abandons this role and turns to Murderer. These kinds of characters reflect Gide’s observation of society and, likely, what he saw was a growing tendency for character to be formed in response to the immediacy (and arbitrariness) of a given situation: in fact, in the intriguing words of Julius, Lafcadio is “at the mercy of the first opportunity” (Guerard 132). Gide’s waning interest in psychology led him to write this novel about the “unmotivated crime,” which may be defined as an action that cannot be thoroughly comprehended if approached from a traditionally analytic viewpoint. Lafcadio is at the mercy of the first opportunity because he is not regulated by that which regulates the traditional character: the overarching grand narrative that provides clues, motivations, and explanations of each character’s actions and thoughts, however minor and major. Lafcadio, Julius says, is free of a “calculat[ing]” system (222) that assigns every thought and motivation. This is the logical system that Gide himself had become disenchanted with when he spoke of an ‘over-all structure.’ This structure is a background matrix upon which the individual generally falls in order to prove a revelation of character according to symbolic detail and gesture. In other words, Gide allowed his characters to exist without much pinning down, literally or psychologically. The reader does not really *know* any of the characters because there is not enough material to build towards proving any of the characters’ natures. What a character may do from one situation to the next becomes arbitrary, as a set pattern of responses cannot be established; therefore, the reader

cannot expect the character to act one way or another based on previous actions. Lafcadio's beloved, Genevieve, protests against this 'slipperiness.' When faced with his murderous behaviour, she says, "[You are] a criminal. Lafcadio! How many times have I sighed your name since the first day when you appeared to me like a hero" (239). Genevieve's complaint is the same as that of the conventional reader: how can the reader "know" characters if their "inner selves" refuse to be indicated by the morality of their actions, or if the resultant degree of morality is not conclusive? Traditional literary analysis renders these types of characters ineffective and immobilized. If evidence of symbolism, action and description are not given by the narrative, the result appears to be a "sketchy" character, one that is not capable of standing alone at a time when characters must be true-to-life, *real*, and activated by the reader's identification with them. Indeed, when one character in *Lafcadio's Adventures* "perishe[s] because he penetrated behind the scenes" (Bree 187), the indication is of an all-powerful narrative that eliminates all literary material that does not settle into accepted roles *naturally*.

The threat of elimination for that which does not fit into the natural role is also a focus in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920). Carol Kennicott, like Dreiser's Carrie, is dissatisfied with what her social position requires of her. But rather than attempt to change her social role, interestingly, Carol changes herself, or at least, her viewpoint, to better fit others' expectations of her. On the very first page of the novel, Carol is introduced to us as exhibiting a "suspended freedom" (Lewis 1). The lone observer that notices Carol on the hilltops, "drinking the air as she longed to drink life" (1). The "suspended freedom" alludes to Carol's potential as a free thinker, which is held in abeyance because of her respectable position in society as a doctor's wife in a small, conventional town. It is an ominous scene, especially as the mechanisms of social power, as manifested by the gossipy townspeople of Gopher Prairie, become more apparent to the

reader. When, at first, she strives to bring “culture” (or, *différance*) into her parochial community, she is met face to face with forces that warn she should maintain the status quo. The observer at the beginning of the novel comes back in many different forms, not the least of which are sets of eyes watching her from behind closed living-room drapes. The internalization of Bentham’s panopticon, as discussed by Foucault, becomes evident in this picture of a small town, in which the collective acts upon the individual from without (rather than the superego imposing itself upon the individual from within). Carol complains of feeling “trapped,” and even that she “has been kidnapped by the town” (246). “Its philosophy and its feuds,” Lewis writes, “dominated her” (246). Yet, she realizes that fitting into this society would provide her only with “the contentment of the quiet dead” (265). Later, her friend Guy Pollack affirms that their society has made him into a “a living dead man” (157).

Whereas Richard Lehan describes Dreiser’s characters as participating in a “Spencerian matter in motion” or “pure mechanistic process” (72), it is interesting that Carol in Gopher Prairie is, at first, described as exhibiting a “suspended freedom” (Lewis 1). Clearly, both descriptions refer to “Brownian Motion,” the apparently “random movement of microscopic particles suspended in liquids or gases resulting from the impact of molecules of the fluid surrounding the particles” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). The themes of natural selection and survival of the fittest have been applied to these novels by critics writing in the early days of the twentieth century, as well as critics who approach these works from a late twentieth-century viewpoint. The fact that these concepts had just been introduced to the public with the release of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1909-14 makes the stories that much more accessible to a reading that valorizes the individual’s successful usurping of social roles to her own benefit. However, the emphasis on the random motion of particles in a liquid or gas as a metaphor for the

equally random motion of individuals in society does not obtain in all aspects. The comparison assumes an equality of particles, or individuals, which does not prove true in everyday life. The effects of the collisions, then, are actually not *as* random: movements of the particles depend upon the particle's own mass, as opposed to the particle that collides with it, thus, Lehan's qualifier of "Spencerian" (which assumes a sense of motility that "random motion" does not). For example, in *Main Street*, Fern, a young woman having an affair with Cy Bogart, is made into a villain, although all the townspeople know that Cy Bogart is the one disposed to wrongdoing. But because his mother holds a position of relative power in society, and does not acknowledge his true character, the rest of the town are forced to ignore his actions while Fern is run out of town. Similarly, Carol realizes that the only thing that saves her from Fern's fate, is the *class* to which she belongs. Her husband's stature in Gopher Prairie, which becomes her own, is what "saves" her, keeping her locked firmly in place.

While Dreiser's *Carrie* has been described as being pure emotion, Carol can be described as pure vision. Since both emotion and vision are qualities that lack delineation, the result is the implication that they have the potential to overcome social barriers or, at least, give the appearance of overcoming these barriers. However, in *Sister Carrie*, we leave Carrie at the end of the novel quite dissatisfied; moreover, at the end of *Main Street*, Carol realizes that the townspeople of Gopher Prairie have taken her "poise" from her. She no longer moves through the city confidently; now, she tries not to feel "self-conscious about the people who looked at her in the street" (382). If we take "poise" to mean balance or equilibrium, then it follows that the state of "suspended freedom" that Carol enjoys at the beginning of the novel has been knocked askew. But when her husband attempts to convince her to come back to him, all he has to do is to show her the photographs of Gopher Prairie and she is lost in her visions of bringing "culture" to

the quaint little town. Because this is exactly what he did to first attract her to the town, it becomes clear that she has not really changed. While Carrie sympathizes with her 'type' of character while acting in *Under the Gaslight* or reading *Père Goriot*, she does not understand the resonances these characters have with her own life. As well, Carol does not comprehend her own circumstance; rather than go to some literary source for identification, however, she consciously imagines herself in a story that she composes, instead, in her own head. The photographs have a narcotic effect; like Carrie's play and *Père Goriot*, they help her *imagine* the story of her life rather than participate in it as it happens. Carol wants to see herself in pictures, literally. She appreciates being able to superimpose herself onto an imaginary scene, rather than live in the reality of her everyday life. She throws theme parties which also express her need for romance and the exotic in order to bear the daily grind. Carol seems to represent the first strains of consumer culture; she succumbs to a view of everyday life that has been repackaged as something exotic and commercial, and then buys wholly into it. Like Carrie, Carol seems to *act out* her daily life, rather than live in it; she sees her life from the outside, and lives as though being watched (as she, in fact, is—the townsfolk of Gopher Prairie constitute the Big Brother of the provinces). What Carol is buying into is a scene of herself saving the small town, improving it, becoming its hero and benefactor. On the other hand, many of the people in town see her as a fool for not submitting to the reality of her situation; literary critics such as Martin Light consider her character as groundless and disengaged from the reality of her life as Don Quixote. But both characters seem to apply a kind of method to their behaviours: each acts out their chosen roles. Carol plays at being the doctor's wife, the new bride, the housewife, the entertainer and the benefactor, as well as apparently transforming from the "girl Carol to Mrs. Kennicott." Yet, she approaches each of these roles with a heavy self-consciousness that precludes her engagement

with the roles. Engaging with one of these roles would mean that she would be able to perceive some sense of the truth of her own situation, and since the novel ends with her arriving back at the beginning (being “duped” into returning to Gopher Prairie by believing she can, again, save the town by bringing culture to it), she shows that she does not come close to perceiving the truth of her situation. Thus, when Vida asks Carol, “Will you be impersonal? I’m paying you the compliment of supposing that you can be” (Lewis, *Main Street* 94), she paradoxically, and unknowingly, hits upon Carol’s sheer incapacity for being personal. Carol’s response, therefore—“I’ll be as impersonal as cold boiled potatoes” (94)—is highly comical. Carol exchanges personae as easily as a player on the stage. The practice of distancing oneself from the processing and cognition of one’s own everyday experience occurs even more in contemporary literature. As the media saturation of everyday life becomes complete, individuals in society today require the media lens to better “see” their own situations. In other words, because focus is completely outward, making sense of the world—*and of ourselves*—naturally begins with focusing on the external. Though this tendency is criticized by some critics of literature, as well as critics of society, it is one that is produced by the cognitive paradigms that are solidly entrenched within the contemporary mind.

If the subjectivities of artists in the 1980s and 1990s seem to be acting *out*, it seems that artists of the early twentieth century took as their heroes characters who were literally acting *in*. Figures such as Sister Carrie and Carol Kennicott make the reader unsure as to whether they retreat to their individual imaginaries as a result of feeling ‘boxed in’ by their communities, or whether they are boxed in by their communities *because* of their vision. It seems an inextricable relation that makes it impossible not to take the character as both subject and object. Society presumes to uphold individuality as a cherished trait of “Americanness,” but must, nevertheless,

## Section II

### Commodity Fiction: Overloading the Assembly Line

While the individual in American literature of the early twentieth century appears to distinguish (read: characterize) herself against the inner-outer problematic, fictional narratives in general fare a little differently. The distinction between “genre fiction” and “literature” stands as solidly in the twentieth century as it ever has. But if the high art of creating literature is merely a mask that covers the imitation of classic models and conventions, then how *truly* different is it from genre fiction? Just as a character imparts details to the reader which are then swept up into an analysis of his “character,” so fiction is detailed and packaged in order present a certain “type” of narrative. On any given day, there will be a book that satisfies the preconditions and desires of the book-buyer at the moment that the buyer’s eyes land on the cover and the buyer takes in the presentation and the marketing buzz surrounding it. Perhaps people who find themselves in an increasingly complex and disorienting world look for the stability of familiar plotlines in which to situate themselves, as Deirdre Shauna Lynch finds in her 1998 book *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning*. The reader’s expectations, however disjointed from the realities of everyday life, are constantly engaged and thus validated.

Perhaps a link between the classic novel and genre fiction is the kind of book which may be grouped under the label of “formula” or “commodity fiction.” The term brings to mind much publicized author appearances at chain bookstores, a dependence upon product placement, and an endorsement from Oprah Winfrey to garner inevitable bestseller status. It may require being



ostracize that individualism or vision, and push it to the outskirts of the community; this serves as a basis for the theme of illusion versus reality, one of the most prevalent concerns of artists and writers of twentieth-century North America.

on the Amazon.com recommendation list, or it may simply mean that the book has a highly processed presentation: fluorescent colours, a photograph from a concurrent filmic adaptation, or a free CD-ROM shrink-wrapped to its back cover. It is accepted that current methods to promote new novels tend towards saturation of the market. While it may be argued that reliance on “word-of-mouth,” as in earlier times, is itself a form of marketing and promotion, there is no refuting the hypermarketing tendency of today’s booksellers. One reason for this is the decline in reading for entertainment and news-gathering purposes; this has been displaced for the most part by television news and the internet.

### **i. Formula Fiction in the Nineteenth Century**

The advent of formula fiction is not specific to the age of materialism and fetishism circa the 1980s and 90s; indeed, it has been around in the form of stories that have been presented for public consumption decades, even over a century, earlier. Formula fiction, as Deirdre Shauna Lynch proposes, provided an important structure to which readers applied themselves in order to better understand their places in the nineteenth century’s changing socioeconomy. By the middle of the century, Walt Whitman felt the need to appeal for stories that were *not* the same old fantasies; in other words, he wanted stories that were anchored in the real and the unsentimental, stories that were, above all, not simply exercises in following format. In the Preface to the 1855 edition of his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, “Great genius and the people of these states must never be demeaned to romances. As soon as histories are properly told there is no more need of romances” (Whitman, “Preface” 1969). In this sense, a “romance” is a story that falls back on received tradition and expectation, such that the reader recognizes the plot and the characters, and accommodates the revelation of information until the narrative’s conclusion. For

example, in the “family romance,” the traditional family structure, characterized by the comfort and stability that is “naturally” inherent in the mother-father-child unit, is upheld at the end of the narrative; this is usually symbolically reinforced with a union (typically, a marriage) or a reunion. It was, after all, Aristotle who claimed that the skilful poet must not “destroy the framework of the received legends” (Aristotle XII). One way to understand this framework is to view it as the matrix of authorial technique used to signal the plot-points and character-types which further the story; these consist in what Raymond Williams refers to as “convention.” He writes that literary conventions were originally agreed upon by the majority and, later, passed down as “tacit agreements.” Eventually, these conventions became a kind of received knowledge, or “custom,” which would be unquestioned for generations. Ultimately, however,

An adverse sense developed, in which a convention was seen as no more than an old rule, or somebody else’s rule, which it was proper and often necessary to disregard. The meaning of “convention” in art and literature is still radically affected by this varying history of the word. (Williams, “Conventions” 185)

Rather than rebel against these received forms in a kind of reaction that merely reinforces the custom, some writers are able to “radically affect” the production of narrative in differing ways. Williams continues,

In certain periods of relative stability the conventions are themselves stable and may be seen as no more than formal, the ‘rules’ of a particular art. In other periods, the variation and indeed uncertainty of conventions have to be related to changes, divisions, and conflicts in the society, all normally going deeper (beyond what are still, in certain privileged areas, taken as ‘rules’ or as neutrally variable aesthetic methods) than can be seen without analysis. . . . The modern controversy about conventions, or the cases of

deliberate exposure or reversal of older or inherent conventions in an attempt to create new relations with audiences, thus relate directly to the whole social process, in its living flux and contestation. (190)

That the current postmodern era is itself characterized by “changes, divisions, and conflicts in the society” is already established; certainly the postmodern era has produced fiction that “attempt[s] to create new relations with audiences.” The question of “how” often is answered unclearly: the appearance of difference is sometimes mistaken for the real thing. On the other hand, the appearance of similarity is commonly understood as convention. For example, in the following excerpt from *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*, Cindy Weinstein describes how Mark Twain’s flowery language is accepted as an overuse of literary convention, rather than a possible “play” on it:

When the narrator of *Life on the Mississippi* first learns to pilot the river, much of his excitement comes from surprises in the river’s geography, such as changes in the shape of the shoreline and rocks in the river bottom, which threaten to wreak havoc upon the steamboat at any moment. In an often quoted passage, the narrator describes his experience of a Mississippi sunset before he “had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river”:

A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the

shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver.

Leo Marx argues that the conventional language of this passage illustrates Twain's inability to "affirm the landscape's beauty *in its actuality*." Similarly, Henry Nash Smith claims that Twain's highly artificial discourse "implies that the rhetoric is false, the prosaic reality true." As both critics point out, the "language of this water" is anything but "natural." The artificiality of this passage is especially important to note because, precisely when the narrator attempts to describe the "natural" river, his language becomes conventionalized through simile ("rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal") and metaphor ("the river was turned to blood"). The presence of such obviously literary language suggests that the romantic view of the river is no less contrived and no more natural than the technological perspective of the West Point engineers offered later on in the text. (132)

While some critics accuse Twain of creating inauthentic, or simply unsuccessful, literary renderings, his writing may be seen to possess a "mastery of authorial artifice" (132), according to Weinstein. It brings the description to the level of exchange between writer and reader: the writer hopes to "sell" his story and, in doing so, utilizes the conventions of language to ensure that his reader is more susceptible to accepting the story without question. Whether the reader finds truth in the story itself or in the artifice which must consist in a story depends upon what the reader is taught to look for. In the words of David Punter, with respect to the poetry of William Blake,

inauthenticity does not render a work *less* valuable but *more* so, for it means that it can represent, not a truth appropriate to the given world, but an imaginative vision in which

that truth is set off against a higher kind of comprehension. Poetry does not for Blake merely give the fullest access to “that which is”; it deals uniquely in the relation between that which is and that which could be, and beside it, all other kinds of knowledge appear positivistic. (245)

Thus, “authenticity” is not merely a factual truth, but something which *reflects* the truth.

## ii. Formula Becomes Commodity

Narrative and storytelling are always, at some level, acknowledged by consumers as “product,” leaving little room for exchange beyond the economic. The focus is on a formula that has sold before, and will, presumably, sell again. Even de Tocqueville acknowledged that the “ever increasing crowd of readers and their continual craving for something new ensure the sale of books that nobody much esteems.” In fact, he wrote, “Democratic literature is always infested with a tribe of writers who look upon letters as a mere trade” (*Democracy in America*, Chapter XIV). The creation of a work has famously fallen into the assembly-line of production and, then, consumption. The author, or “creator,” is dead. In its stead rises the fiction merchant. And thus, fiction becomes commodity.

The label of “commodity fiction” is a burden to bear for popular writers, mostly because it is assumed by most critics that commodity writing aims at the popular mind-set, foregoing the aim of “serious” writers whose works do not expect to impress upon the mainstream. It is thought that commodity writers do not offer enough, intellectually, to the reader in exchange for the act of reading. It may be surprising to realize, however, that “traditional” and well-respected authors share in some of the concerns of commodity fiction writers. For example, Melville’s *Pierre* is acknowledged to expose some of the difficulties involved in publishing a novel that

usurps popular expectations. Susan Weiner discusses this dilemma:

In addition to the difficulties inherent in the creative project, the author must also face the response of a contemporary audience that rejects grandeur and earnestness, those qualities Pierre had tried to pour into his story. Pierre's seriousness copies Melville's own attempts to dive beneath surfaces in the novel *Pierre*. But he, like his character, met with failure, and perhaps for similar reasons. Not only had both encountered critical disapproval, but another factor may have played its part—"the ever multiplying freshets of new books, seems inevitably to point to a coming time, when the mass of humanity reduced to one level of dotage, authors shall be scarce as alchemists are to-day, and the printing-press be reckoned a small invention . . ." Paradoxically, the age of serious authors was passing as printed matter proliferated. (Weiner 65)

*Pierre* was an important work for Melville because it consisted of his great effort to "dive beneath surfaces," and his "failure" at this, which was due, in large part, to an audience that did not expect, or want, this kind of novel. What the majority of the audience wants are stories based on received notions of the novel and of character, stories in which narrative elements fall automatically into their expected categories, and then, are easily absorbed by the reader.

Melville, however, felt differently:

In *Pierre*, Melville had suggested a theory of artistic creation that is put to the test by both the author/hero of the novel and the novel itself. The theory deals with the concept of originality. . . . Similarly, a man who aspires to be an author, while he must assimilate the works of his literary predecessors, must also elude and differ from them. (Weiner 65)

Melville became miserable as a result of his failure; personally, he was extremely disappointed but, in addition, his novel was also misunderstood and disparaged by critics. It is likely that, for

him, the question remained: if the reader will only accept received forms of narrative, how does one write a story which the reader will accept without oneself fully succumbing to the old forms? That is, how can one write a story that is popularly accepted (adheres to the old forms) but still sufficiently effective (departs from the old forms)?

As Susan Weiner relates, Melville began writing for magazines; likely, the freedom to do what he wished would be more acceptable because the final result would be countered by the other items in the issue. However, the problematic inherent in writing—that it must always be marketed—was still a factor that greatly unsettled him. Eventually, he

expressed disdain for [magazine writing] in a tone not far removed from *Bartleby's* famous refusal to copy. In a letter to Evert Duyckinck of February 12, 1851, Melville rejected a request to submit some writing and a daguerreotype of himself to *Holden's Dollar Magazine*:

How shall a man go about refusing a man? . . . I cannot write the thing you want. . . . I am not in the humor to write the kind of thing you need—and I am not in the humor to write for *Holden's Magazine*. . . . You must be content to believe that I have reasons, or else I would not refuse so small a thing—As for the Daguerreotype . . . that's what I can not send you because I have none. And if I had, I would not send it for such a purpose, even to you.

Melville seems to be objecting on several different but interrelated grounds. First, he does not want to write “the kind of thing” suitable for a mass market publication. He prefers not to cater to popular taste. Second, he objects to the daguerreotype because it reproduces a man. By implication this is a function formerly attributed to God or nature. Industry has usurped the spiritual and the biological. By being reproduced, a man



becomes “oblivionated” by losing his own particularity. “With the daguerreotype, everyone will be able to have their portrait taken—formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same—so that we shall only need one portrait.” Third, the daguerreotype is requested as a kind of advertisement, presumably to promote the story with which it will appear. The picture becomes a way of circulating the author, making him current by turning him into a form of currency. Just as Pierre had refused to supply a fancy title page, Melville refuses to put the daguerreotype on the page, which becomes an “unwindowed wall” that represents the economic constraints surrounding the writer. (Weiner 65)

Bartleby is invoked, first by the “refusal to copy,” and then, by Melville’s use of “unwindowed wall” in *Pierre*. This resistance is to being used by business; that is, Melville, could not stand the idea of being skillfully “managed,” or properly distributed such that he exists only in an apparently characteristic niche. Writing stands for itself, and the fact that it needed the proper image to sell meant that it was not being sold to an audience that would understand it. However, Melville was embroiled in this issue, and this is evident in several of his works. In his *Typee*, he portrays his characters as blank pieces of paper to be fed into a printing machine. Weinstein writes:

Melville makes these characters “march on in unvarying docility to the autocratic cunning of the machine.” His construction of fictional character, in other words, seems to recapitulate the machine’s relation, its “metallic necessity” and “unbudging fatality,” to the “blank-looking girls.” Both the paper and the women become “destined to be scribbled on . . . what sort of characters no soul might tell.” One might argue that because the factory women in this story object neither to the machine nor to the boss, Melville

cannot imagine an alternative to this system of production. And yet like the operatives who “handl[e] such white bits of sheets all the time which makes them so sheety,” Melville as a professional writer could become “sheety” through his necessary contact with paper. Melville risks becoming blank at the hands of a literary marketplace that he feels is determined to make him “march on in unvarying docility” to an aesthetic ideology that requires its own version of blankness—the blanking of Melville’s presence as literary laborer. (88)

That the characters are of the sort that “no soul could tell” necessarily indicates Melville’s concern with the “blankness” of character; further, he was disturbed by what this meant for him, as author and producer of the blank characters. What does it imply for nineteenth century society, and does it gain much in significance as the twentieth century comes to a close? On the other hand, is it merely a precursor to today’s “blank fictions,” a term coined by the contemporary critic James Annesley; and if so, what can it mean for American literature that one of its greatest writers can be grouped together with the young writers of today that are accused of being caught up in the superficial layer of culture that is deemed “popular” rather than focused on the more serious art and craft of writing? At the outset, both cases remind the reader that, as Wordsworth claimed early in the nineteenth century, “The world is too much with us.” Certainly, Melville would be surprised to find that the same issues that plagued him in the mid-nineteenth century maintain their hold on writers well into the twentieth century.

### **iii. Co-opting Commodity Fiction**

Wordsworth’s world of technology refers to human progress that had, in simplifying and speeding up methods, also resulted in reducing human production (e.g. thinking) into mere

process (e.g. computing). While humankind had once left questions of divine purpose to Providence, they began to insist on answers once their belief in God and Absolute order began to waver. One of the most important of these is the element of closure. The question of how and when one will ultimately die—of where life’s narrative will be marked off—translates into the need for closure at the end of a novel that sufficiently and satisfactorily answers all the questions the narrative introduces. D. A. Miller discusses this issue in his *Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*:

The accounts of traditional narrative offered by the Russian Formalists, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frank Kermode, Roland Barthes, Gerard Génette, Julia Kristeva, and Charles Grivel have enormously varied ambitions, but they all rely on the common assumption of an a priori “determination of means by the ends.” Sartre puts it in a nutshell in *La Nausée*: “Une chose commence pour finir.” (Preface xii)

The assumption inherent to most writing is that the narrative must come to a proper resolution. This is especially problematic where it concerns writing that purports to be “realistic” because questions that remain open-ended, inconclusive and ambiguous in reality are forced to resolution by the individual mind that valorizes and prioritizes closure. Historically, readers have a tendency to process narratives that do *not* answer to their expectations—that the traditions of closure, admirable heroes, description that betrays characterization (“thick” characters) and, above all, morality will be upheld—as bad writing. Thus, the pressure on the writer to maintain the priority of these elements is great. The passions of artists who envision new ways of thinking and new ways of narrating are ultimately opposed to the reader and critic who are comfortable processing narratives to which they are accustomed. Attempting to understand a new paradigm

of “story” really would compromise one’s tacitly accepted knowledge of the world and what it contains. Because what is at stake is the very belief system of the individual, this rarely occurs.

The resultant literary production, then, on the whole, is characterized by homogenization. In their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno write,

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines of different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 123)

They argue that the content of much of the culture’s artistic output is only variation on the same theme. As Philippe Sollers writes, “virtually every book published is a replacement product” (188). How, then, do these “replacement products” generate satisfaction from individuals in society. This would seem paradoxical because American society is supposed to be characterized by the expression of independence and innovation. Why, then, does this not transfer to the cultural production? An obvious answer is that writers are forced to write for their audiences, and to respond to their audiences’ expectations from a novel. The marketplace has always been an issue for most writers to contend with when attempting to publish their work. The difference in late twentieth century is the transfer of authority from individual artists and publishers to the corporate publisher. In an interview with Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, Heller says that “the effects [of this transfer of authority] will [not] be beneficial toward literature” (Mallory, par. 121). In a discussion about Simon & Schuster’s decision not to publish Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Heller concedes that the book eventually did get published. However, by the time of its

publication, Ellis's book was the topic of such controversy that it was destined to become a bestseller. The dynamics of whether or not to publish the book had significantly changed, and were no longer based upon the book's merit; it was purely a commercial decision. Assuming that this is merely an exception to the rule is a mistake. Book publishing has fallen into business, like so many other aspects of twentieth century life. John Updike, author of the Rabbit novels, complains about the ever-increasing aspects of promotion and business in novel-writing:

“When I first set out on this trail, in the Fifties, writers were not expected to promote their books, go on the road, or sign them, none of that. You were supposed to produce the books, and that was about the extent of your responsibilities. Now producing the book is almost the beginning of your real responsibilities, which are to get out and sell it.”

(Freeman, “John Updike: The Big Picture”)

Updike, who views author interviews as “a necessary evil of sorts,” still “worries that about their effect on art.” Even the interview of Heller and Vonnegut mentioned earlier is entitled “Kurt & Joe: The Big Show”; interestingly, the interview was published by *Playboy* magazine, suggesting that even criticism of the system is co-opted by the system.

Certainly, it is not new that publicity is generated around the author in order to help sell his books. This is evidenced by Melville's refusal to use a daguerrotype of himself as a form of advertising, thereby making the author himself into a form of currency. But a recent, and new, indictment is that novels have become so similar that the author's brand is needed precisely to differentiate his novel from the others. A reason for this is the reliance upon received forms of “story,” and the resulting carbon copy of the same “beginning, middle, end.” The business of writing, and writing itself, has become an institution, and as John Aldridge writes, “[t]he function of the institution is primarily the maintenance of the institution” (*The American Novel* 49). Along

these lines, Coupland includes an interesting list on his website entitled “A Marxist/Capitalist Take on the Novel.” “Borrowed, with love,” as he writes, from David Lodge’s *Nice Work*, it includes the observations “The novel is both a commodity and a mode of representation” and “The novel was the first mass produced cultural artifact” (ln. 5, 7). In other words, the mass production of institutionalized forms of the novel has resulted in a commodity, not a work of art. Moreover, it has resulted in producing a formula for the financial success of these commodities. Coupland also includes the following:

The novelist is a capitalist of the imagination: he or she invents a product which consumers didn’t know they wanted until it was made available; manufactures it with the assistance of purveyors of risk capital known as publishers, and sells it in competition with makers of marginally differentiated products of the same kind. (ln. 6)

The language of commodity culture, of the desire for desire, as it is applied to novel-writing obtains new significance for an art form that had been previously accepted as the result of imaginative work, not a process that can be efficiently managed by a machine, or an automatic process. In Aldridge’s subsequent book of literary criticism, entitled *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*, he describes the current production of literature around the 1980s as “interchangeable,” “mass-produced as if by machine” (14), and as lacking the ability to evoke a “distinct response” (24) from the reader. This type of literature, Aldridge suggests, reduces the Muse that spurs creation to a manager who pulls the “ON” lever of an assembly-line. He characterizes the emotional and spiritual void in these works as the “polite nihilism” that critic Madison Smartt Bell speaks of in his well-known essay, “Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story” (*Harper’s* 1986). Novels are mere copies of copies, so much flattened-out and overused puzzle pieces, guaranteed of a fit as long as they are put into

the proper order. There seems to be nothing left in the text to psychoanalyze or deconstruct, nothing for the reader to *take* or create from it.

Aldridge expects a “distinct response” (24) to be evoked from reading these texts; however, he does not allow for a different kind of response. With the writing of narrative conventionalized, and the reading of narrative institutionalized, it would seem hasty to presume that a group of writers would disregard or be incapable of reproducing popularly accepted fictive elements. This is more implausible when one considers that late twentieth century writers are simply more aware of the necessary elements than probably any other generation of writers. Thus, one must resort to another explanation. Philippe Sollers begins Chapter 7 of his *Writing and the Experience of Limits* with an epigraph from Kafka:

You must push your head through the wall. It is not difficult to penetrate it, for it is made of thin paper. But what is difficult is not to let yourself be deceived by the fact that there is already an extremely deceptive painting on the wall showing you're pushing your head through. It tempts you to say: “Am I not pushing through it all the time?” (“The Novel and the Experience of Limits” 185)

If read with regard to interpretation, Kafka's wall becomes the text: penetrating the wall or text is the goal. If, however, there is a painting on the wall that shows one is breaking through the wall, one would be tempted to believe it. One will likely not bother to push ahead with the attempt. This metaphor suggests that other possibilities may lay behind the masquerade of a *seemingly* complete meaning. A critic's aim is to deliberately undergo the process of interpretation—the mathematical assignation of meaning to every symbol, description and gesture—such that he may proclaim his to be the ‘authoritative’ edition. This should not, however, divest the text of other meanings. One interpretation may, like a drawn curtain, simply

give the appearance of closure. Although this is not what Aldridge and other classically-trained readers would expect, it is certainly an exciting possibility; it is also the focus of this study. Where he and other traditional interpreters see an “interchange[ability] of style and substance” (Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians* 24) among commodity fiction writers, there may yet be a *différance* that is produced by a change in the point-of-view. But Aldridge is so convinced of the completeness of his interpretation of commodity fiction-writing that he has not looked beyond his thin first-order interpretation to realize that he has been deceived—there is still something hidden behind it.

The fiction-writers who are the focus of this study slip under the radar of critical acknowledgement because they are at work under the guises of convention. One of the reasons why they remain largely unrecognized is because their work falls into the recently fashioned category of “commodity fiction,” and as such is greatly engaged with reflecting postmodern life. In his essay “Psychodrama: Qu’est-ce que c’est?” Graham Caveney writes, “[Jay] McInerney appears to offer us ‘the commodity kids’—a generation for whom capital and desire are inextricably bound up within language and the body” (*Shopping in Space* 67). In a similar manner, “commodity fiction” is fiction in which capital and desire are inextricably bound up within language and the novel. Another term for this type of novel is “blank fiction” (Annesley). Issues of importance in blank or commodity fiction are violence, consumption and sexuality; when description is used, it is sparse, and rarely applies to character. This is due, in large part, to the commodity fiction writer’s project of depicting the ‘disconnect’ between inside and outside, between signified and signifier.

There certainly needs to be more scholarship on the recent writing that has taken place in North America. Perhaps the start of a new millennium naturally evokes desires for tradition and



authority, as Mark Kingwell and other scholars of millennialism claim. While most writers agree that the methods of communication that characterize any era have a great effect on the “style and substance” of the writers of that era, there remains a great resistance to *new* forms, nonetheless. With regard to the force of this resistance, Sollers writes, “Hence, the wrath and irritation of this code’s guardians, officers of smooth-flowing literary traffic, whenever a book that does not seem to recognize any of the genre’s laws dares call itself a *novel*. . . . After all, what is a novel?—A book. And what is a book today? Now perhaps that is our question” (*Writing and the Experience of Limits* 187). What is a book today, when our methods of communication have seemingly degraded from letters to electronic notes? Everyday language, for the most part, has been replaced with visual cues, and speaking with utterances. If anything can be reserved from these exchanges and infused with meaning, for most critics, the assumption is that it will not yield enough to redeem itself. For Marjorie Perloff, however, what remains is yet meaningful. Her work

seeks to situate the flight from “transparency” (that is, language which aims to look and sound “natural,” to sound like “real” talk) to “artifice” (that is, poetic language which foregrounds its own artificiality, for instance, by arranging itself in a series of blocks or clusters on the page). This shift is characteristic of the modernist and postmodernist writers she most admires today, who write within “the discourses of art and the mass media,” for it is naive to suppose that “a ‘poem’ could exist in the United States today that has not been shaped by the electronic culture that has produced it.” (“Marjorie Perloff”)

In the same way, narrative must be affected by the electronic culture that produces it. These changes or effects, for example, are depicted visually in Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X*, in

which the artificiality of narrative is highlighted, as well as in the language of his subsequent *Microserfs*. There is something new in these writings; something is produced that perhaps lacks distinction, yet, is absolutely *not* the “distinct response” (qtd. in Miller) that Aldridge expects. Interestingly, it is not the substance that is new, but the arrangement and presentation of the codes and conventions of the traditional novel. What is new is the freedom and the ability to exercise the *limits* of interpretation. Philippe Sollers writes,

[The novel’s] devices are becoming better and better known, despite the efforts of those who would like to prevent such an awareness: someday a machine will invent the most engaging, most human, most profound novels, in which the imaginary will be at its most effective—this impoverished imaginary will be more and more easily *coded*. Men will more and more frequently ask machines to make them forget machines, and the apotheosis of the civilized individual may someday be to live in an entirely novelized manner. . . . Thus it should come as no surprise if, from now on, the accent is placed, with an increasingly inept and confused haste, on the fantastic, Epinal surrealism, the neo-baroque, cheap sexuality, more or less organized fabulation, the ciné-novel, the novel-ciné, ciné and . . . on the irresponsible *forms*. (*Writing* 188-89)

It is probable that a dependence on the “irresponsible forms” will merely exhaust these forms or, at least, the public’s desire for them. But if the accent is placed somewhere else, somewhere in the apparently “cookie cutter” form of fiction, then that is where true innovation may occur.

Sollers continues, “We call a *novel* the incessant, unconscious, mythical discourse of individuals. By that we mean that this discourse depends on a mode of interpretation tending to reveal its own *determinants*” (191). If the novel simply cannot avoid these determinants, it must approach

the investment of meaning in narrative not by changing the narrative, but by some other method. Divesting codes and signifiers of their traditional meanings is one solution.

This apparent divesting of meaning in narrative produces James Annesley's "blank fiction." Discussing the works of Ellis and Coupland, as well as other writers, such as Dennis Cooper, Susanna Moore and Lynne Tillman, Annesley recovers significance in many writers' works that other critics had not been able to detect. His *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* is reviewed in a 1999 issue of *Critique*:

Annesley clearly enumerates the distinguishing themes of these texts (that is, the themes that distinguish these texts as "blank fictions"): violence, sex, shopping, labels, and decadence. By eschewing the "slippery categories of postmodernism" in favor of the more precise and more generally applicable concept of the commodity, Annesley aims for a better sense of the qualities that mark not only this body of fictional work but the contemporary cultural moment. In his introduction, he claims that blank fictions work to "provide important insights into the contemporary scene" by illuminating the "relationship between subjectivity and commodification." (Mott 92)

The characteristics of postmodernism—consumerism, commodification, fragmented subjectivities, surfaces and surfeit—are well-known and well-played out by now. But in his *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, Dick Hebdige cautions the reader, in a discussion that includes Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein (a Coupland favourite) and Marshall McLuhan, "that that which is obvious matters, that the surface matters, that the surface *is* matter" (135). As well, this study argues, it is not simply surface that sustains today: it is the arrangement of superficial and narrative elements combined with the stance—or *poise*, if you will—of the postmodern reader, that when exposed to a particular light, provides an opportunity for

something new. It is not the content that is new, it is not the form that is new: it is the light shed on the old content and the old forms that substitutes a glimpse of the unnameable for what was once the revelation of Truth, Beauty and Knowledge. Perhaps, then, the difference between the “work of art” from the nineteenth century and the novel-as-commodity of, say, the 1990s, has more to do with this postmodern stance or poise than with the too-easy labeling of novels according to genres and of characters according to type that mechanically denote form and content. In the past, as well as today, however, it is not only that the novel is made for consumption, but that, at some level, the narrative, the plot, and even the characters are made to be consumed.

## Section III

### Character as Commodity: The Coolness of Currency

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes, “Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids” (VI). In the contemporary cultural production, however, characters in Coupland and Ellis make decisions *arbitrarily*, revealing no underlying significance. Often, the characters’ choices, though they may be moral or immoral, have no bearing on the construction of the character’s own morality. That is, even when a character chooses to act immorally in an instance, the reader cannot conclude satisfactorily that the character himself is immoral. Although it is expected that traditional literature upholds and maintains the principle of cause and effect, in some recent literature, not only are choices arbitrary, but *effects* are arbitrary. Even then, consequences are not fully realized in that the character does not necessarily *feel* the effects; to be sure, he does not reform, and neither does he feel the moral imperative to reform. If, then, the character’s actions seem *not* to express his ‘inner character,’ what does this mean about character? Was the Death of Character tacitly assumed when the Death of the Author was declared?

To be able to discuss character in this way, it is necessary to revisit the implications of a conventional and authoritative narrative as a nesting place for character. It is also helpful to think of these through the problematic that Melville’s short story “Bartleby” introduced in 1850, essentially because it remains an important issue for current writers. In the *Journal of American Culture*, Susan Weiner writes,

Melville further questioned the efficacy of writing as the predominant mode of discourse both for interpreting experience and for organizing society, and further, . . . he concluded that written representation was challenged by a new mimetic mode, the mass-produced image. The consequences of automatic reproduction had affinities with what he regarded as negative developments within the sphere of legal discourse. The simultaneous development of various aspects of photography formed a constellation of innovations closely tied to industrialization, which was fueled by the positivism that also predominated in the legal sphere. The mass production of art, represented by magazine writing, the fusion of the machine and art in the form of photography, and the mechanical encoding of law within reproduced copies of copied documents ultimately challenged prior concepts of man, the artist, and the foundation of the society of which they were both a part. The suppositions upon which the mechanical reproduction of images were grounded were akin to those upon which legal formalism was based, and these concepts further threatened the predominance of writing as a mode of understanding experience. Ultimately this becomes the tragedy of Bartleby and of the humanity he comes to represent. (Weiner 65)

Copying, photographing, mass producing and reproducing: the mimesis of forms of the narrative and of character is not simply an issue that plagues—and remains an obsession of—the twentieth century. Melville presented it succinctly in *Bartleby*, the cipher of the nineteenth century that has been *deciphered* more than any other “flat” character in American literature. The effects of industrial innovation and reproduction on Melville are quite evident in his treatment of Bartleby. In his article on “Bartleby,” J. Wilson writes, “‘the lawyer says that he would as soon throw out his plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero as he would Bartleby.’ By his comparison, he reduces Bartleby

to the status of an object, a commodity” (335). Bartleby, the man, has become a mass produced reproduction, more plaster than human. But, Wilson writes, “he prefers not to be [a commodity], which makes him the ‘forlornest’ of mankind. The lawyer describes him as a ‘lean, penniless weight’, one who spends all his days copying for ‘four cents a folio (one hundred words)’” (337). Then, Wilson points out the operative word “cost” in the following statement by the lawyer: “To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing” (338). For character to have become something of a commodity is still relatively new to literary culture at the end of the twentieth century; for Melville to have observed this when American culture was enjoying only the nascent beginnings of commodity culture is truly prophetic.

That Melville could think of a relationship having a “cost” is reflective of the newly changing social conditions at the time of the initial rise of industrialization and technological innovation. And, as the individual’s ways of thinking about social relations transformed and developed, so did his ways of thinking about himself within society. As new methods of reproducing print and photography spread, exposure to advertisements and novels became an everyday occurrence. As the commodification of images becomes more prevalent in contemporary American society, it begins to have a much greater effect on the individual self-perception. Cindy Weinstein writes that as it is “[i]nformed by the logic of the market, personhood is produced and reproduced by acts of exchange and incessant circulation” (53). But in an age where “personhood” no longer possesses a buffer of religion and strong communal ties, the individual self loses a sense of balance, basing itself precariously on the commodity values of the market.

It would be expected, then, that the identification of the individual with his work would play a significant part in the commodification of the individual. After all, social position,

especially in America, is often automatically meted out according to occupation. As occupations have become increasingly particularized and specialized, however, the volatility of one's career path further exacerbates the apparent unity or stability of the individual identity. As Horkheimer and Adorno write in their essay, "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944),

[A] kind of welfare state is coming into being today. In order to keep their own positions, men in top posts maintain the economy in which a highly-developed technology has in principle made the masses redundant as producers. The workers, the real bread-winners, are fed (if we are to believe the ideology) by the managers of the economy, the fed.

Hence the individual's position becomes precarious. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 150)

Filling a specific niche in one corporation only creates a "successful" identity as long as that corporation requires the specific service. And, as technological advances occur on a daily basis, there is now an overwhelmingly high demand for those qualified to fill a particular specialty niche, and then, there is a need to consider it defunct to make way for the latest innovation in that field. Identity, based largely upon occupation in a commodity culture, is then exhausted by its fluctuating, and thus, arbitrary status.

Adorno delineates other ways in which the individual identity, shaky at best, recedes further into social roles. These roles, he writes, "affect the innermost articulation of human characteristics, to such an extent that in the age of truly unparalleled social integration, it is hard to ascertain anything in human beings which is not functionally determined" ("Free Time" 162). For one's choices, desires and inner thoughts to be "functionally determined" is to concede to a gravely pessimistic philosophy. Yet, it is evident that much of what characterized individuals in society as "human" no longer carries much of the same significance. For example, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno cite the proper name as falling into "capricious,



manipulable designations, whose effect is admittedly now calculable” (165). First names, they write, have become “advertising trade-marks (film stars’ surnames have become first names)” and collectively standardized. “In comparison,” they continue,

the bourgeois family name which, instead of being a trade-mark, once individualized its bearer by relating him to his own past history, seems antiquated. It arouses a strange embarrassment in Americans. In order to hide the awkward distance between individuals, they call one another ‘Bob’ and ‘Harry,’ as interchangeable team members. This practice reduces relations between human beings to the good fellowship of the sporting community and is a defense against the true kind of relationship. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 165)

The loss of the “true kind of relationship” recalls the loss of true feeling and brotherhood that de Tocqueville and Whitman decried. But the instant relations, or “instant family,” a term Coupland coins in *Microserfs*, in commodity culture of which Horkheimer and Adorno speak ring true. They are “instant” because they are prepackaged and bear significance and meaning before they are even attempted. That is, audiences look to the screen to identify their ideal relationships, and then attempt to emulate these in their own social realities:

[T]he popularity of the hero models comes partly from a secret satisfaction that the effort to achieve individuation has at last been replaced by the effort to imitate, which is admittedly more breathless. It is idle to hope that this self-contradictory, disintegrating “person” will not last for generations, that the system must collapse because of such a psychological split, or that the deceitful substitution of the stereotype for the individual will of itself become unbearable for mankind. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 155-56)

In addition to resorting to imitation rather than individuation, the individual is accused by Horkheimer and Adorno of flattening language. They write that people in society utilize words and expressions “only because they trigger off conditioned reflexes; in this sense, words are trade-marks which are finally all the more firmly linked to the things they denote, the less their linguistic sense is grasped” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 166). In the same way, characters in stories gain significance because of their use-functions: the hero, the beloved, the villain, the sage—each also triggers reflexive understanding for the reader of a story. But employees of a commodity culture, as well as characters of a commodity fiction, are meant only to function within the machine of capitalist knowledge production. That is, in a system in which employees and characters are precluded from producing in accordance with their own imaginations, how else can they truly be *productive* (“bring forth something that was not already there”; 167)? Or is the possibility itself defunct?

To delve further into this question necessitates a review of convention, as it pertains to character in literature. In his “Conventions,” Raymond Williams writes,

In modern class societies the selection of characters almost always indicates an assumed or conscious class position. . . . Without formal ratification, all other persons may be conventionally presented as instrumental (servants, drivers, waiters), as merely environmental (other people in the street), or indeed as essentially absent (not seen, not relevant). Any such presentation depends on the acceptance of its convention, but it is always more than a ‘literary’ or ‘aesthetic’ decision. (187)

The presentation of characters in a narrative is always more than simply literary or aesthetic because, consciously or not, it relies upon the reader’s received bank of knowledge about the nature of the character regarding the chosen *situational* construct. Williams continues:

Consider the two standard variables in such presentation: personal appearance and social situation. Almost every conceivable combination of these elements, but also the exclusion of one or even both, has been conventionally practiced in drama and narrative. Moreover, within each, there is a significant conventional range: from briefly typical presentation to exhaustive analysis. Further, the conventional variations in the presentation of 'personal appearance' correspond to deep variations in the effective perception and valuation of others, often in close relation to variations in the effective significance of family (lineage), social status, and social history, which are variable contexts of the essential definition of presented individuals. The difference in presentation between the undelineated medieval Everyman and the nineteenth-century fictional character whose appearance, history, and situation are described in significant detail is an obvious example. (186-87)

It is interesting that, with the advent of blank fiction, characterization seems to have come around back again to Everyman. The difference is that he is not the *same* Everyman; he might be called Everyman but the reader does not wish to identify with him. Everyman has become so damaged that, although he is capable of representing all members of society, the twentieth-century reader wants to deny him, resist him and, ultimately, disown him. What has changed is that, initially, Everyman represented man's connectedness and collective humanity; today, however, we find the Everyman character, as in *American Psycho*, to be a representation of man's *disconnectedness* and alienated humanity. Whereas Everyman once stood for a universal Truth or Value, he now signifies the absolute *loss* of Truth or Value. Undeniably, the precipitating agent of this change is the intertwining of commodity culture with the practices and manifestations of everyday work. Horkheimer and Adorno write, "The capacity to find refuge, to

survive one's own ruin, by which tragedy is defeated, is found in the new generation; they can do any work because the work process does not let them become attached to any" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 154). Thus, characters in the 1990s, remaining "detached" from the sorting and signifying tendency of the workplace, would seem to be at a disadvantage. Knowing that they are free-floating workers makes their currency valid and, thus, reinscribes their commodity status. On the other hand, individuals who, decades earlier, devoted themselves to one particular job and remained loyal to their employer (barring the less likely chance of being terminated) had no currency in the market and thus, were slightly more empowered than their more recent counterparts. Being off-the-market precludes the opportunity for the individual to be pinned down by his value as a commodity in the wider sphere of work. He has no exchange value (as a consumer item) until he approaches the possibility of leaving his current job—his *monetary value* arises from the employer's desire to maintain his employee so that he does not have to expend energy (money and resources) in acquiring a new employee. Subsequently, an employee loses his sense of self-worth as a human being, and retains only his value as a drone to be shuttled back and forth between corporations. Thus, capitalist society has perfected its saturation of each member of society, infiltrating individual paradigms of cognition, as well as production.

"One upshot of capital's assault on perception is 'capitalist realism'," writes Richard Godden in his *Fictions of Capital*. Put another way, it is "what [Wolfgang Fritz] Haug calls the 'second skin' of the advertised image: 'perfect', 'disembodied' and drifting, 'unencumbered like a multicoloured spirit into every household, preparing the way for the real distribution of commodity'" (78-79). The example Godden provides is that of Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). His "'unencumbered' surfaces—car, voice, smile, shirts, suits and mansion—seem to drift directly from 'the nation's advertising showcase', that is from the

*Saturday Evening Post.*” The story of *Gatsby* chronicles the American Dream as revised by “a man whose voice sounds like a quick flick ‘through a dozen magazines’” (79). Pictures in magazines—flat, glossy, the ultimate generator of desire—are the perfect description of *Gatsby*; they also remain the definitive likenesses of character in modern fiction, and of individuals in society. Though this is not as clearly evident for individuals in society because, for the most part, it is an unpopular and cynical assessment of contemporary society, it is, nonetheless, just as true. The epigraph to an essay entitled “Vacant Possession: *Less Than Zero*, A Hollywood Hell” figures succinctly the concept of processing individuals through cognitive paradigms that seem incapable of differentiating between reality and cultural media:

It is . . . prevalent in our modern culture, the way in which things become more and more archetypal or stereotypical; even human beings become more that way, through films, so you tend to locate your friends in terms of characters in movies. It’s been the case that, more and more, images take the place of reality. Maybe you find out too late that you’ve participated in something that’s pretty damaging to the human species, when things become very collective, you lose the feeling of individuality, of uniqueness. (Claes Oldenberg qtd. in Young and Caveney 21)

It is interesting that Oldenberg describes the process of understanding one’s own friends through filmic imagery, although since the human mind does attempt to assimilate new information on the basis of patterns that have arisen from experience, it seems quite logical. In other words, the mind automatically begins to configure pre-existing loci for each friend and acquaintance within the social sphere. The danger here may be that the mind may not necessarily differentiate between “moral” and “immoral” spots in the social web; it merely continues the mechanical process of finding and depositing similar types together. On the other hand, a parallel practice is

the locating of appreciation for similar commodities. As Coupland and others believe, belonging to the same “target market” can make one a member of a generational family. It may also lead to the processing of individuals in everyday life according to their knowledge and ability to appreciate known commodities. This is why two people may form an attachment or an understanding because of their shared memory of a certain breakfast cereal, or DAS modeling clay. Of course, there is a significant element of nostalgia at play here, and whether or not it also plays a significant part in the accommodation of individuals into previously known types is an issue to be delved into further.

It has been accepted to some degree that there is an effect on the individual of the institutionalizing of cognitive paradigms, such that it shows a progress in the mind (not, as Sollers says, a ‘progress’ that is necessarily positive—just forward in linearity). The full effects are yet to be determined, however. While most acknowledge on some level that even one’s everyday appearance is a good part production, packaging and branding, so characters on the page, over which an author has complete control, must be products in the truest sense of the word. Product placement is no more alien to the page than to the movie screen. Of course, the process of selling the reader on a particular character type is crucial: even descriptions found in traditional novels fall into the definition of this kind of “selling.” In this regard, the philosophy of Alain Robbe-Grillet is especially pertinent. The authors that are the focus of this study seem to be aware of the French writer’s ideas regarding the presentation of character in that they tend towards minimizing, or even deleting, physical detail. This is a strange thing to occur in novels that are castigated for their supposed dependence on all that is superficial in culture and society. Even in Ellis’s *American Psycho*, the main character’s inner monologues obsessively list the brand, price and directions on every product he uses during the day, from exfoliating facial scrub

to socks—yet disregards the color of his hair. For a narrative built on surfaces, this is very odd, indeed. It results in a greater possibility of exchange between the reader and the character: the less physical detail supplied, the more easily the character may be accommodated into the reader's pattern of cognition. The intention no longer is to force the reader to identify with the character, but to allow the cognitive machinery, consisting of social roles and types, in the reader's mind to automatically categorize the character, without requiring much input from the reader himself. The effect is that which may be found in a deck of cards: while the images are superficially different from each other, the cards themselves are essentially all the same, except that they fit into different slots in their own hierarchy of value, or power. The niches in which they fit correspond to the notations or marks upon the individual with respect to the collective. This results in a circulation of intended *effects* on the reader/viewer, who, in acknowledging the currency of the effect thus "cashes" it in, participating in an exchange of value. The effects, as well as the individual who puts these effects into action—the *actor*—are made current by their value in a media or popular culture that subsumes, to a great extent, all other cultures within it, including corporate, ethnic and academic. John Fekete refers to this as the vampiricization of all other cultures and knowledges. In his *Life after Postmodernism*, he analyzes what he refers to as "vampire value," the result of

recycled value referents, abstracted from originating contexts and circulating *ad libitum* in a rapidly expanding value universe of tactical manipulation, infectious contact.

Baudrillard would call this the ecstasy of panic: "a mode of propagation by contiguity, like contagion, only faster—the ancient principle of metamorphosis, going from one form to another without passing through a system of meaning." In the world of hyperreal sign-values and value-signs, potentialities without end, the medium of value

tends to become the frame of a flickering half-life, anemic, parasitic, and thirsty for real bodily fluids. Insubstantial, dematerialized, dead value joins up with insubstantial, disseminated, dead power in a panic passion of resurrection through the fresh blood of desire which, upon commutative transfusion, ever recedes into a bloodless and dis-oriented desire of desire. It is not inappropriate to speak here, at least in tendency, of a culture of vampire value. In intellectual culture, both the nostalgic pursuit of the permanent value referents as regulators and the nihilistic refusals of value discourse altogether may be perhaps characterizable as mimetic replications, incarnations, and effects of the vampirical postmodern displacement of creatively oriented value-life. (74)

The exchange of signifiers with the intention of creating meaning is what Fekete refers to as “value creation in the social-ontological sense, including the project of creating representations and practices of self, society, and value that can compete successfully with the diminished figurations of life under subjection to vampire value” (75).

“The project of creating representations and practices of self” is what is integral to this study of the individual in literature, and subsequently, to the possible meanings of individual lived reality in society. Signifying oneself in order to “compete successfully in life” is not necessarily a new concept. During the time that Melville was writing “Bartleby,” Marx and Engels published their *Manifesto for the Communist Party* (1848), in which they state

These laborers [proletariats], who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. (“Bourgeois and Proletariats” 328)



For the labourer to be a commodity, an “article of commerce,” suggests that the increasing commodification of human life is inextricably linked to the lifestyle that is more and more dependent upon work in a competitive market. In fact, it follows quite logically.

What also seems a logical progression is the reading of literature, and media, as a way to figure oneself into the socioeconomy. The theory is one that Deirdre Shauna Lynch expounds in her *The Economy of Character* (1998). Lynch shows how individuals in the nineteenth century needed to find ways of envisioning their places in a newly changing society, and how they did this by “reading” themselves into the novels that they read. This chapter takes as its title Lynch’s concept of “character-as-commodity” because it is an important precursor that marks the beginnings of commodity culture and, perhaps, more importantly, the birth of the human need to see oneself flattened, glossy, commodified. For example, in Coupland’s *Generation X*, “the experience of fictional others is offered up as yet another mode of consumption” (Lainsbury 230). One assumes that individuals have always had a natural desire to add to the betterment of themselves and their communities, to add value to both; however, this wish, that began innocently enough, somehow mutated into something quite different. At one time, the individual desire was to *add* value to the social; the perversion of this desire, paradoxically, resulted in a system of “vampiric value,” which presumes the evacuation of ordinary *human* value, and substitutes the *appearance* of human value. And, in most cases, when the appearance of human need and human desire are revealed as not at all human to begin with, the result can be something quite monstrous.

The question remains: Is this dependency on Fekete’s “socio-ontological” economy the natural—and only—solution to finding value in character and characterization in contemporary literature? The key to finding a way out of this predicament is, first of all, to follow Robbe-

Grillet and admit the inadequacy of depending on signification and placement in the socioeconomic narrative to “create” character. On these grounds, the works of Ellis and Coupland—uncontested representatives of the commodity-fiction contingent—will be analyzed in order to propose that the answer to Fekete is “no.” By directly engaging with the socio-ontological problematic that Fekete identifies, rather than making the mistake of attempting to avoid it, these authors write characters that are able to maintain a hold on their own characterizations and, thus, slip out of the clutches of the conventional interpreter.

## Section IV

### Characterization and Flatness in Bret Easton Ellis

Although the average reader would not describe the writing of Bret Easton Ellis as moralistic, more and more frequently, these words are appearing in critical reviews of his best-known works, *American Psycho* (1991) and *Less than Zero* (1985). One of these critics, Elizabeth Young, claims that the absolute lack of moral order in novels such as those written by Bret Easton Ellis necessarily reveals an invocation to a moral authority to intervene. It is unquestionable that the call for intervention is experienced by the reader in Ellis's work. Indeed, the reader is "an important site in the realm of extreme, explicit literature" (Walker, par. 12). Critical interpretations of Ellis's writing face the difficulty of discerning intended meanings of characters, actions and motivations that are simply, at base, ambiguous. Often, "all political, critical engagement is *left to the reader*" (Walker, par. 9; original emphasis). Obviously, this makes it difficult to compose conclusive, or nearly conclusive, studies of Ellis. However, once it is accepted that the balance between analyst and that which is being analyzed has shifted, the approach may shift from being purely scientific to being slightly more intuitive. If much of contemporary fiction shares the underlying anxiety that humanity is becoming too automated, then the requirement of using that very human sense of intuition may be intended by the author. After all, in interviews, Ellis has repeatedly referred to his writing as an intuitive response.

Generally, the emphasis on flat, surface characterizations, as well as the explicit violence and sexuality, found in Ellis's novels make them oft-cited examples of the genre of fiction lately classed as "transgressional." The group of writers who produce this hard-hitting, often

disturbing, fiction includes Chuck Palahniuk, Irvine Welsh, Hunter S. Thompson, and Kathy Acker. And, since transgressing the norms and conventions of novel-writing manifests itself in a variety of ways, not only hinging upon graphic violence and sexuality, the anti-social nature of Douglas Coupland's novels makes him also a member of this group. As Palahniuk states in a 2002 interview with Charles Russo of *The Guardian Literary Supplement*, contemporary readers live "in an age starved for genuine experiences, instead of cathartic phony experiences through the media, structured, engineered experiences" (Russo, par. 33). Bret Easton Ellis's approach to precipitating this "genuine experience" in the reader is to write feelings and actions that he could be sure none of his readers had already experienced before, either in real life or in readerly life. Ellis forces readers through unbearable scenes, ones in which the reader's own humanity implores her to put a stop to the action, while the characters in the scenes either passively allow the action to progress or actively take control of its further progression. In this way, Ellis's novels simply cannot be read successfully in the old, accustomed ways.

In Ellis's world, characters are famously given minimum 'props' with which to proceed. On top of this, they are continuously distracted from reasoning, understanding, and even more basic functions, such as observing or communing with others. These characters are unable to intervene in the narrational action of the novel: in *Less than Zero*, "mundane" (123) Clay watches from doorways as feelings of shame pass through him; in *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman blocks doorways and "like[s] to dissect girls" (216). Yet, for both characters, the machinery of everyday life motors on, regardless of their attempts to throw wrenches into it. Clay's objections concerning the violence and cruelty that occur in front of him hardly registers on others. And, plainly, as Mike Grimshaw points out in his article in *CTheory* entitled "Cultural Pessimism and Rock Criticism: Bret Easton Ellis' Writing (as) Hell," Patrick Bateman "cannot convince anyone

that he is the horror that is his transgressive ontology” (par. 15). No matter how plainly he confesses to people, they cannot accept successful, rich, good-looking Bateman as a murderer. In these two main characters,

. . . Ellis provides what Ortega Y Gasset in *Man and Crisis* calls “crisis man,” living “*la vita minima*—a life emptied of itself, incompetent, unstable.” Crisis Man acts in two main ways—with “skeptical frigidity, anguish, desperation,” or with “a sense of fury, madness, [and] an appetite for vengeance because of the emptiness of his life.”

(Grimshaw, par. 8).

Thus, Clay—typified by his “skeptical frigidity, anguish, desperation”—and Bateman—full of “fury, madness, [and] an appetite for vengeance”—are not that distant from each other. As Ben Walker points out, “The relationship between ‘transgression’ and ‘subversion’ is not simply reciprocal, complementary, correlative but rather is *dependent on textual deployment* (how, by whom and toward what ends these texts are used, seen and read)” (par. 4). This means that the prospect of *American Psycho* successfully subverting the problems of characterization depends wholly on the individual reader. For example, if the revulsion stemming from Bateman’s cruel and insane actions does not carry over, in the reader’s mind, into the sections in which Bateman “just want[s] to fit in” by being charming, sympathetic or in his own words, “graceful,” then the critique is not communicated to the reader. But what is the attraction for the reader in reading these inconclusive shards; what is the *gain*? The result is only a reader infatuated with a narrator’s infatuation with himself (and his brand-name products). As Benjamin concludes in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1933-35), “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an

aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (*Illuminations* 242). The character is not concerned with epiphanic understanding; he is simply too engrossed with himself. The reader’s inability to roll him into a *complete* character produces a lack of cohesion that results in at least two separate strands of narrative (the narrative of the insane murderer, the narrative of the label-conscious preppy)—together in *one* character. In a commodity culture, these expressions of character still carry enough currency to warrant a “fullness” of character; what is more is that, in an age in which TV programs like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* may highlight women in love with imprisoned mass murderers, the commonly held indicators of success, romance and manliness just may suffice as justifiable reasons for a compartmentalizing reader to find Patrick Bateman a “hero” of sorts: frustrated, damaged and all the more worthy of saving.

Much of the need to justify one’s actions according to logic, regardless of how extreme and unwarranted the actions may be, is characteristic of America in the late twentieth century. Some of the topics of *The Patty Winters Show*, a daily program Patrick never fails to see, are themselves so absurd or inhumane that, eventually, they call into question the obscene nature of Patrick’s actions. The focus, instead, remains on society in its entirety, and the fact that at some level, individuals commit similar kinds of sadistic torture on each other. In his essay, “The Mechanical Bride” (1951), Marshall McLuhan writes,

For the satiated, both sex and speed are pretty boring until the element of danger and even death is introduced. Sensation and sadism are near twins. And for those for whom the sex act has come to seem mechanical and merely the meeting and manipulation of body parts, there often remains a hunger which can be called metaphysical but which is not recognized as such, and which seeks satisfaction in physical danger, or sometimes in torture, suicide, or murder. Many of the Frankenstein fantasies depend on the horror of a

synthetic robot running amok in revenge for its lack of a “soul.” Is this not merely a symbolic way of expressing the actual fact that many people have become so mechanized that they feel a dim resentment at being deprived of full human status? (McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* 27)

In Ellis, individuals have, at base, been stripped of their humanity. In *American Psycho*, it is replaced with rage; in *Less than Zero*, it is replaced with shame. Yet, the mechanization of these souls dictates that the characters no longer truly *feel* the emotions of rage or shame; instead, an overpowering fear, specifically, a “nameless dread,” follows them everywhere. In both novels, however, the author attempts to shift the grid upon which character lies, such that boundaries are blurred and some kind of new information is able to be imparted to the reader. This chapter will discuss Ellis’s *American Psycho* and *Less than Zero* with respect to the possibilities of encountering this new information. In the first section, “Living ‘la Vita Minima,’” characters are depicted as “empty” or “hollow.” This lack of substance or personality translates into a lack of agency in the second section, “Consuming Imagery.” Finally, in the third section, “Making Do: Character as Overblown, Aporetic and Missing-in-Action,” characters will be shown to retrieve a sense of agency through slips in the narrative which defy readerly expectation.

### **i. Living ‘la Vita Minima’**

In Ronald Sukenick’s short story “The Death of the Novel” (1969), the author makes the observation that “Fiction constitutes a way of looking at the world,” in which there are a set of absolutes which every individual believes. However, he points out that in our “world of post-realism,” “all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic. The contemporary writer—the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part—is forced to start

from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist." And, if there is no sense of time, then there can be "no destiny, only chance" (41). One may see that character has been divested of major elements that normally help to establish personality, and thus, viability in reality-based literature. This is most apparent in Ellis's work, which takes as its focus the individual in society. Referring again to Ellis's thematic similarity to Jose Ortega Y Gasset, Grimshaw writes that his writing is "reminiscent of the elitist societal criticism of [Gasset's] *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932). . . . Likewise Ellis' novels are tales lamenting the triumph of mass man, men who, as Ortega states, set "no value on themselves," who "feel like everybody else"—yet "are not concerned" (Grimshaw, par. 1). These one-dimensional cut-outs—mass man—abound in Ellis's novels so much that it is often difficult to differentiate one character from the other. Indeed, *American Psycho* and *Less than Zero* verge into comical and often absurd territory, emphasizing the interchangeability of men and women, the repetitiveness of everyday life and, ultimately, the hell that this creates.

Considering the purely functional nature of characters and characterization in Ellis's works, it is perhaps not surprising that family relations are drawn with respect to financial ties, rather than familial ones. When Patrick is asked by the father to uncover where his brother, Sean, has been, and what he has been doing, it is a request made in conjunction with the family lawyer. The only trace of the younger Bateman is from European hotel bills, though the family is not convinced that it was necessarily Sean who stayed at the hotel, anyway. Relationships, in Ellis, are forged on money, whether they are filial, spousal (his girlfriend imagines riches upon marrying Patrick), or even incidental (Christie, a prostitute who knows of the vicious heights of which Patrick is capable, accepts a second 'date' with him, only because she cannot afford to decline his lucrative offer—this time, she is tortured and killed). Perhaps a secondary theme is



that these financial relationships, though built on the hierarchy of American socioeconomy and possessing the appearance of permanence, are actually extremely tenuous. In Ellis's more recent novel, *Glamorama*—famously about models who happen to be terrorists—the narrator is told, “[T]here’s a hole in your truth” (397). Evidently, the hole in the Truth is the hole in the Money. In an interview with Jaime Clarke, Ellis admits that money has become “hollow”: he was “meeting a lot of young guys who were working on Wall St.,” he says, “and I thought, great, here’s the perfect takeoff point for what I want to do; it’s about money, it’s about hollow money” (Clarke 1). Literary critic Jonathan Keats writes that in keeping the “the sum total of character development in his novel less than zero, Ellis is able to suck the reader through that *Alice in Wonderland* hole as smoothly as cocaine through a \$100 bill” (2). Thus, the connections between hollow truth, hollow money and hollow men are solidified.

One connotation of “hollow money” is the manner in which the young men in Ellis’s novels make their money: passive inheritance. The suggestion is that working to earn the money oneself would somehow make that money more *solid*, worthwhile and valuable. In opposition to this is money that is not put to any functional or purposeful use, for example, the \$350 dinners that Ellis and his “friends” consume nightly. These rich diners, who are never really that hungry, and the uninterrupted presence of beggars on the street outside the restaurant make for a striking contrast, one that is emphasized by taunting of beggars with a dollar bill, and the ultimate retraction of it. As Liz Young writes, “Money remains the bottom line at all times and everyone has difficulty distinguishing their friends. They all look interchangeable and as Ellis has largely refrained from providing any detail of character the ‘human’ element is consistently devalued, adding to the impression of an author manipulating robotic puppets” (106).

The lack of meaning generated by this puppet show is further explored by the “recycling” of characters throughout Ellis’s novels, and more interestingly, by the “literary kidnapping” of characters from other novelists. *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman appears in a “sick-joke cameo” in *Glamorama*, and Victor from *The Rules of Attraction* finds himself with a seemingly much more important role narrating most of *Glamorama* until he gets replaced (Wake, *Culturevulture*). An implication here is that, although they are considered integral to some plots and peripheral in others, all characters are essentially interchangeable. The reader’s mind adjusts to accommodate the character into the particular *type* needed by the specific juncture in the plot/action. From this point of view, it is logical that Ellis professes an interest in “how pornography affects a reader.” He says, “It’s such a consumer item. It does what it’s supposed to do. Like toothpaste or coffee or clothing” (Clarke 3). This concept of character as pure function is similar to Douglas Coupland’s ‘pornographic’ denarration of Hollywood celebrity lives, in which the ‘true’ essence is voided as the proofs of ‘real life’—family, work, social position, physical description—add up.

Of these major proofs of successful characterization, work is integral to understanding the character’s place in society and, thus, historically, for the purposes of this study an even more important indicator than family. Especially in modern American society, in which family members are often detached and no longer live in the same neighbourhood or even state, much more may be said about an individual when the job type is known than when family is represented. The complex dealings with a character’s position in society—what is fictionalized, and what is wiped from the fiction—is addressed in Raymond Williams’s “Conventions,” an important report on institutionalized customs associated with writing fiction. Williams says that

throughout history there have always been certain ways of understanding literature and certain ways of understanding the *writing* of literature. In this respect, he writes,

The convention which allows [“such matters as work or income”] to be treated as unimportant, or indeed to be absent, in the interest of what is taken as primary identity or an alternatively significant social character, is as evidently general as that less common but still important converse convention through which people are specified only at that level of general and social economic facts, with no individuation beyond them.

(Williams, “Conventions” 186-87)

In *American Psycho*, Ellis plays on these conventions. Patrick Bateman is a handsome, successful stockbroker, but he is never depicted *doing* work. He inhabits that space behind the desk in the office, but his desk drawers are filled with CDs, pornography and his Zagat restaurant review guide. The top of his desk is covered with 3 copies of men’s health and fashion magazines, and his walkman earphones are constantly hooked atop his head, pumping it with pop tunes from Whitney Houston or Phil Collins. Though his secretary, Jean, dutifully “brings him the Ransom file, which she did not need to bring” (66), or later, “places a file on top of the desk” (257), these are the only mentions of his need to complete work for his job at Pierce & Pierce. Instead, Jean spends most of her time juggling his tennis court reservations with dinners. Late in the novel, he admits, “my appearances in the office the last month or so have been sporadic to say the least. All I seem to want to do now is work out, lifting weights, mostly, and secure reservations at new restaurants I’ve already been to, then cancel them” (300), though canceling sought-after reservations, especially in New York, is considered antisocial or even subversive. Patrick’s charade of working is made increasingly tenuous, as the reader learns that Patrick, as if ashamed, is hiding his family’s wealth and the fact that he does not need to work. The lack of

inner motivation for Patrick to remain at his job, and the fact that he does not *need* to—as well as the suggestion that Patrick’s father owns half of Wall Street—call into question why Patrick goes to his office at all. Even he finds this question looming before him, when a male admirer forces him “to consider that maybe a life connected to this city, to Manhattan, to my job, is *not* a good idea” (292). The emphasis on “not” suggests that most people assume that a life worth leading is one that has strong ties to the flourishing of a career. The resultant anxiety produced by this tension is indicated when Patrick, wondering if she might sleep with him again, takes his first ‘love’ Bethany, to dinner:

“*Patrick.*”

“Yes?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t want to talk about . . .” I stop. “About work.”

“Why not?”

“Because I hate it,” I say. “Now listen, have you tried Pooncakes yet? I think Miller underrated it.”

“Patrick,” she says slowly. “If you’re so uptight about work, why don’t you just quit? You don’t have to work.”

“Because,” I say, staring directly at her, “I . . . want . . . to . . . fit . . . in.”

After a long pause, she smiles. “I see.” There’s another pause.

This one I break. “Just look at it as, well, a new approach to business,” I say.

“How”—she stalls—“sensible.” She stalls again. “How, um, practical.”

(236)

Wanting to fit in—everyday society, the workplace—is a deep, underlying motivation that exhibits itself in cracks and fissures of the apparently smooth social group to which he belongs. Though Patrick maintains an appearance of a successful (and sane) Wall Street broker, he also does not try *too* hard to disguise the proofs of his insanity. While the reader is led to believe that Patrick is an anomaly in nature/society, the constant action of mistaken identities eventually wears down this assumption, as do other suggestions to the opposite.

The desire to “fit in” also brings to the reader’s mind the interchangeability of characters, and the reader’s need to *make* the character sufficiently inhabit a particular role. It creates a problematic for the reader, who is able to identify in Patrick elements of Holden Caulfield—only with a more sophisticated, witty sheen—and yet, must balance this somehow with the horrific lack of humanity he also displays. *Where* is the character when two opposing personalities may be constructed from the same text? Or, is there even *one*? When Patrick asked a friend what he told the detective regarding a missing colleague, he confesses that he was able to divulge

“Only the usual,” he sighs. “That he wore yellow and maroon ties. That he had lunch at ‘21.’ That in reality he was not an arbitrageur—which was what Thimble thought he was—but a merger-maker. Only the usual.” I can almost hear him shrug. . . . That he didn’t wear suspenders. A belt man. That he stopped doing cocaine, simpatico beer. *You* know, Bateman.” (322)

The tally of this information fails to construct any kind of real information as to *who* the missing fellow might be. The fear that is produced, in excess of that which is produced by Bateman the sadistic killer, is that this is the extent of all relationships in this world, and that none of the characters, ultimately, are able to be distinguished from each other. But this is the supposedly sane world which contrasts with Patrick’s mad one, where “everything seemed dull: another

sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made about each other”

(282). Yet, Patrick feels,

I had all the characteristics of a human being—flesh, blood, skin, hair—but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn’t figure out why.

(282)

One assumes that Patrick distinguishes himself from the rest of the characters in the novel by realizing that he is merely acting out a personality that he does not possess. But the reader begins to suspect that he is not the only one in his social sphere who feels this way. When Patrick interrupts “a total . . . Wall Street guy” writing “Kill all Yuppies” on a bathroom wall, he is momentarily confused, perhaps dismayed (374). The reason for this is that Patrick’s method of avoiding erasure is to create some kind of ‘life,’ or action, outside and unrelated to his social persona. But discovering in the men’s washroom this *other* person who maintains a charade of a Wall Street persona, without completely investing in it, perturbs Patrick. What confuses Patrick is the fear that, in creating an alternate persona, he *still* has not differentiated himself from the average guy he meets for drinks. *Patrick* is supposed to be “Mr. Wall Street” (283); even in his insanity, he cannot single himself out from the faceless crowd.

One method of distinguishing himself is the traditional dependence on physical description. Patrick’s habit, or obsession, is to detail every product he uses, wears or eats. This practice extends to those acquaintances he meets. At first it is odd, then even more disconcerting, as he interrupts murders to thoughtfully list all articles of his victim’s clothing. He even outlines

a description of a homeless person's clothing. As Elizabeth Young writes in her article, "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," it is

by his rigid adherence to an adspeak dress-code for his characters [that] Ellis continues his emphasis upon deindividuation in contemporary society. Finally, and very ironically, Ellis's use of detailed dress-code to obliterate rather than to define character in the traditional sense, ends up contributing to the mechanics of the plot in an *entirely* traditional sense—the "plot" such as it is, eventually turns upon the impossibility of anyone distinguishing one character from another. (Young, "Beast" 103)

Naturally, such a plot can only depend upon "terse writing and intentionally minimal character development" (Kocurek, par. 6). In fact, the minimalism of Ellis's characterizations is extreme. Often, the exact same descriptions are used to refer to a variety of people and, in addition, some characters are described as looking like other characters. Whereas physical attributes ought to provide the most solid of indicators, the reader has no real information (other than gender) that would differentiate any of the characters. From the beginning of *American Psycho*, mistaken identities abound. In the opening scene, "a guy who looks a lot like Luis Carruthers waves over at Timothy and when Timothy doesn't return the wave the guy—slicked back hair, suspenders, horn-rimmed glasses—realizes it's not who he thought it was and looks back at his copy of *USA Today*" (5). The formulaic description, "slicked back hair, suspenders, horn-rimmed glasses," finds itself, sometimes slightly rearranged, repeated many times throughout the novel, always describing somebody different. Product description finds itself overshadowing the characters and, eventually, the narrator's wording betrays a lack of concern, almost laziness, when it comes to identifying differences between people. At one point, he mentions, "Like me, like Charles, [Luis] wears his hair slicked back and he's wearing Oliver Peoples redwood-framed glasses"

(222). Traditionally, the display of high-end consumer goods is supposed to distinguish the monied upper-class from the lower-class poor. But these products are the minimum markers of Ellis's characters, so that individuality continues to recede. At a club, "The Chandelier Room is packed and everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same" (61). Earlier, when Patrick notices that his girlfriend, Evelyn, is flirting with Timothy Price, he engages her in the following conversation:

"Why don't you go for Price? . . . He's rich," I say.

"*Everybody's* rich," she says, concentrating on the TV screen.

"He's good-looking," I tell her.

"*Everybody's* good-looking, Patrick," she says remotely.

"He has a great body," I say.

"*Everybody* has a great body now," she says. (23)

Evelyn's emphasis on everybody and every body being the same, along with her refusal to be engaged in conversation with Patrick, indicate that it really does not matter to her whether or not it is Patrick, Timothy, or another man speaking to her in her bedroom. The interchangeability of people is highlighted when it is revealed that she *is* having an affair with Tim Price, and again, when Patrick realizes that Courtney—the woman *he* is having an affair with—"wants to *fuck* McDermott. But it doesn't really matter. Even though I'm more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same" (250). It is as if his girlfriend's infidelity would not bother him, as long as she stuck to his *type*. Later, he thinks,

Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecelia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn't matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a



penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me. (89)

Patrick accepts the fact that people mistake him for others with whom he shares either physical resemblance or socioeconomic standing because it does not occur to him that they might identify him through means other than outward appearance. In fact, Patrick also joins in this careless typecasting. When he is at the Tunnel nightclub and the doorman asks, "How are you, Mr. McCullouch," Patrick responds, "Fine, uh, Jim," as if knowingly referring to the doorman by the wrong name (78). Later, when he asks another man if his name is Ricardo, the man nods, "sure" (79). The implication is that this man's name is *not* Ricardo, but that this man does not care to identify himself, anyway. Again, what seems to make Patrick different from others—his point of view that society is full of interchangeable people—proves, in the end, to solidify his similarity with them. The result is a nihilistic community in which humans and objects are grouped together, some of whom share in the knowledge of an aporia of individual distinctness. This scene is one of "metaphorical violence," Ellis believes, because "in this society, when you look at it at a surface level, everything is flattened out to such a degree that the murder of a young woman. . . or sitting at a certain table [at a restaurant], or a Huey Lewis CD, is really flattened out to the same effect, and that's really what *American Psycho* is all about" (*This is Not an Exit*). *American Psycho* is also about a man who murders not in an effort to do away with humanity, but in an effort to *find* it. For Patrick, the object that he kills is being tested for identity: if it comes up 'missing,' it must have been a 'real' person, with family, neighbours and co-workers—with a *life*. But nobody comes up missing, so nobody must be dead.

This dystopic vision is shared by the narrator in *Less than Zero*, who, at dinner with his father, realizes that "I'm introduced only as 'my son' and the businessmen all begin to look the

same and I begin to wish that I had brought the rest of the coke" (42). Later, at a house party, he notices "there are mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them" (152). While Clay is conscious of this fear of being exactly like anyone else, it is ironic that he is not aware that his descriptions of his two sisters ultimately create just as strong an impression as the copies of himself whom he begins to fear. Although the sisters make appearances throughout the novel, they are never differentiated, except to state that one sister (not *which* one) is older than the other. At one point, he guesses, "the older of my two sisters . . . I think is fifteen" (23). But repeatedly, he refers to them only as "the older one," or "the other one": "'Why do you lock your door, Clay?' one of them, I don't know which one, asks again" (24). Interestingly, he uses the same technique when, at a café, he describes two girls sitting at a nearby table:

One's peeling an orange and the other's sipping an espresso. The one who's peeling an orange asks the other if she should put a maroon streak through her hair. The girl with the espresso takes a sip and tells her no. The other girl asks about other colors, about anthracite. The girl with the espresso takes another sip and thinks about this for a minute and then tells her no, that it should be red, and if not red, then violet, but definitely not maroon or anthracite. I look over at her and she looks at me and then I look at the Perrier bottle. The girl with the espresso pauses a couple of seconds and then asks, "What's anthracite?" (*Less than Zero* 46-7)

Although Clay notes the girls' conversation in detail, the only description he deems important to mention has to do with the objects they are holding in their hands. This is true even though he expresses an interest in them, flirting from his café table. In terms of identification, these girls

are “the one with the espresso” and “the one with the orange” (or simply, “the other one”). The effect is a gaggle of sameness, much like the “thin, tan bodies” that line the pool at the house-party.

Ellis has always been interested in the literary edict that characters should be “well rounded.” His creative expression has indicated this from an early age. As a ten year-old, he wrote a story entitled, “Harry, the Flat Pancake,” which was “about a boy who wakes up one morning and realizes that he’s a flat pancake-like thing. He just walks around and has a normal day as a pancake. . . . Then, I think, people chase him down the street and want to eat him, and pour syrup and butter on him” (*This is Not an Exit*). Ellis believes that, for a child, this storyline must be seen as a manifestation of bottled-up anger. However, the “flatness” is also suggestive of the thinness of a negative on a film reel, the movie screen, and the glossy magazine layout that have taken over the mindscape—where pictures had once been produced from the imagination, and not merely replicated visually. At the same time, however, it is obviously a metaphor for the literary consumption of character. After all, even “extreme attempts at individuality are doomed because personality itself has become a commodity” to be consumed (Young, “Children of the Revolution” 20).

For Ellis, the insincerity of traditional characterization, and the attempt to avoid its trap, is a major preoccupation. This leads to a blurring of character in his works; at times, even gender becomes unclear. In an interview for *Hotwired*, he admits that his “characters’ lives are so blurry and indistinct that it even hazes over something as primal and elemental as sexuality” (Ellis, “Bret Easton Ellis on *Hotwired*” par. 57). In *Less than Zero*, characters are identified more by the sexual act, and less by which gender they belong to. What takes the place of individual differentiation in terms of personality, career, family or even gender, are the things that hold

currency in the culture; these are, as Liz Young states, beauty and youth, essentially ‘star power.’ But these elements are limited in how they can be considered integral to character, since they are bound to change and transform as time goes on. The categories that hold currency in our culture, then, are obviously shifting and lack form. Ellis blends gender categories, signaled by the use of unisex names such as Blair (female) and Lindsay (male) and, as well, by the lackadaisical sexuality of main character Clay, who can barely remember whom he has slept with, regardless of his or her gender. Clay’s uncommented-upon bisexuality adds to the instability of his character, if only because the reader cannot add this to a stockpile of information about the character from which she can predict future events or choices. Instead, even Clay seems confused as to whom he might have chosen to sleep with:

I realize for an instant that I might have slept with Didi Hellman. I also realize that I might have slept with Warren also.

I open my menu and pretend to read it, wondering if I slept with Raoul. Name seems familiar. . . .

“Raoul is black, isn’t he?” Kim asks after a while. I haven’t slept with Raoul.

*(Less than Zero 28)*

But this gender confusion is not even an issue that plagues Clay; for him, there is barely a sign of intellectual distress, or complex personality. He is, as Ellis says in *This is Not an Exit*, “Everyboy” and, at the same time, a “moral void” that the author dares to refer to as a “conceptual character.” Earlier, he wonders how his friend, Trent, “can mistake a black teenage boy, not anorexic, for Muriel [a presumably white girl], but then I see that the black boy is wearing a dress” (21). Thus, although the characters in *Less than Zero* seem to have more

freedom to extend beyond stereotypical walls, the blurring of individual characters makes it difficult or perhaps unworthwhile to ascertain distinct personality traits.

In *American Psycho*, the blurring across individual lines only occurs within pre-set types. For example, female characters are only interchangeable within their gender-identified category. In the opening scene with Timothy, oddly, both Evelyn and Courtney are wearing “a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk-satin d’Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik” (8). Often, the only real differentiation between female characters in *American Psycho* is given by socioeconomic status: women are either rich or street prostitutes, and men are either rich or homeless beggars. Yet, at base, women are an obvious choice when it comes to stereotyping, since they have been so heavily stereotyped historically. They require money, are used for sex, and also, are used in what has been seen by some as something of a caricature of traditionally male-dominated medical knowledge: after all, Patrick admits he “like[s] to dissect girls.” Predictably, ethnic and homosexual stereotypes abound, as well. Though Patrick verbalizes tracts containing notions of equality for all, and the need to eradicate hatred and discrimination, his actions and thoughts when not at work at his public persona reveal extreme hatred towards Chinese, Jewish and African-American people, as well as women and the poor. Indeed, the characters of ethnicity are often portrayed as typical stereotypes: Chinese people own the laundry, African-Americans are on crack, and “dumb and slow” (166), and an older gay man displays effeminate affections (164). In *Less than Zero*, Clay thinks, “Nobody’s home,” although he knows that the maid, a “nobody,” is in the house (10). He thinks she is “the new maid, or maybe the old maid” (11) and, ultimately, it does not make a difference either to him or to the narrative. Conversely, in *American Psycho*, Patrick’s image as an independently wealthy, clean-cut young man is not exempt from stereotypical assumptions. In the opening scene alone, he is

referred to as “the boy next door” three times by his girlfriend, Evelyn (11, 18, 20), and once by his friend, Timothy Price (37). At the end of the novel, when he tries to divulge his sordid actions, his lawyer does not believe him because he thinks of Patrick Bateman as a “goody two-shoes” (387).

In *American Psycho*, as in *Less Than Zero*, characters are subject to a high degree of interchangeability, signaled by the repetition throughout the novel of key phrases or motifs. Some of these phrases, mentioned earlier, include descriptions such as “suspenders, slicked-back hair, horn-rimmed glasses” and “Oliver Peoples nonprescription redwood-framed glasses.” The question, “Did anyone know that cavemen got more fiber than we do?” (51), pops up more than once. Often, Patrick refers to himself as an “automaton” or describes himself as reacting unthinkingly or mechanically. Taken together, the effect is that the motif of repetition underscores the entire endeavour of characterization—and, by extension, novel-writing. In a documentary about Ellis, contemporary author Jay McInerney says that the reader can almost achieve a “Zen-like state, having to do with the repetition of phrases, the repetition of products . . . [which are] like a mnemonic” (*This is Not an Exit*). In fact, the term, “as if by rote,” is repeated numerous times by Patrick, serving to continually highlight the function of repetitive actions and behaviours. For example, he obsessively mentions or thinks, especially at inopportune moments, that he needs to return video tapes to *Video Haven*. He always rents *Body Double*, so much so that on one occasion the video store clerk is plainly unable to disguise his horror. As well, the Broadway production of *Les Miserables* plays over the entire novel, providing an ironic statement on the cognitive dissonance of the very rich who buy reams of tickets to the shows, and the real-life *Les Miserables* which they encounter, and avoid, as they exit the theatre. The play, about a man who is in flight from a discoverer of his real identity,

reflects upon Patrick's life because by the end of the play, the hero and the audience realize that the new identity is the 'real' one. He *is* the character he consciously chose to act out; there is nothing behind the pose. Indeed, Patrick enjoys the play so much that, after he kills Paul Owen, he steals a copy of the musical from his condo, even though he had already bought two copies of the CD from the store earlier (219). The question of whether the taped recording of *Les Miserables* is of the British or the American cast lingers, again and again, at various times throughout the book. When he attends a U2 concert, "The lead singer, Bono, [screeches] out what sounds like 'Where the Beat Sounds the Same'" (144). Patrick, who does not enjoy the concert, admits several times over the course of the novel that he "*hate[s]* live music" (143) and that "live music bugs" him (74); for a character obsessed with repetition—with re-watching a videotape 37 times, re-listening to one of many copies of the same *Les Miserables* recording and, essentially, interacting interchangeably with a monotony of characters, many of whom "look like models"—Patrick does not enjoy surprises. He wants live music played just like it sounds on the CD, with no variations. According to Walter Benjamin, it is irrefutable that "reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmored eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former" ("The Work of Art," *Illuminations* 223). Patrick's obsession with sameness highlights the themes of 'transitoriness' and the 'reproducibility' of human life, as well as in art. For Patrick, difference is threatening because it calls into question the world as he sees it: a place full of people who are merely copies of themselves and, thus, interchangeable. In this way, Ellis extends Benjamin's conclusion that the reproducibility of a work of art dissipates the individual aura that surrounds that work of art, ending in its ruin. Ellis imports this concept into

the novel: by making characters who are mere copies, he devalues their aura as *humans* of special interest, or as *currency*.

'Copies' that do not stray from the original 'models' proliferate in Ellis's works, so that, when they are needed, they are "fit in[to]" the structure of the narrative. An important indicator of Ellis's approach to characterization, of the appropriation, replaceability and ultimate disposability of his characters, is given in two lines from Patrick Bateman: "Last night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made of cardboard. *The Patty Winters Show* this morning was about Aerobic Exercise" (*American Psycho* 200). In this way, it may be understood why he dreams of cardboard cutouts, rather than the 'realistic' characters that appear rounded and human. By stripping character down to its cardboard cut-out, Ellis makes it easily discernible for the reader to conceive that at base all characters, like all 80s TV shows, are flattened into repeats. And, fittingly, Patrick loves reruns. But Clay is similarly haunted by monotony. After visiting his mother in a psychiatric institution, he copies her sunglasses stance while waiting for his processed meal at a Fatburger chain restaurant. Stuck, uncomfortably, staring at the walls which are an "almost painful yellow . . . under the glare of the fluorescent lights" (20), he listens to the song on the jukebox. In his tiny booth, Clay listens to what may be considered Ellis's theme song: "*Crimson and clover, over and over and over and over. . . . crimson and clover, over and over. . . . Crimson and clo-oh-ver.*" For Patrick and Clay, action provides no relief, no resolution. They are stuck in the machine of narrational reproduction, playing out their parts over and over without any hint of progress.



## ii. Consuming Imagery

The hypnotic quality of the song, “Crimson and Clover,” conjures up the drug culture of the 1960s, and adds to the mesmerizing milieu of *Less than Zero*. The repetitive nature of the song means that it coincides thematically, as well, with *American Psycho*. The image of Clay, sitting in a booth at the diner and listening to the trance-like chorus reverberate—*over and over*—is a fitting emblem for this section, in which the human instinct of communion is disabled by its absorption into the scene or spectacle. Being consumed *with* as well as consumed *by* the spectacle effectively paralyzes the character. The subject-object problematic of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Sinclair Lewis’s *Carol Kennicott* is revisited with a vengeance, close to the turn of the *next* century. In fact, Ellis states, “there’s this notion in *Glamorama* that perhaps what you’re reading might in fact be a movie and that freed me up a bit. Toying with that idea—is this real? is this a movie?—let me take chances” (Clarke 3). For Ellis, the motifs of camera, movie studio, actors and models function in a manner that is similar to *Carol Kennicott*’s envisioning of herself in the photographs of Gopher Prairie, or the stage upon which people come in droves to “see Carrie’s frown” (*Sister Carrie* 248). Ellis is intrigued with the idea that “we basically perform all the time in our daily lives.” During an interview, he says,

There’s so much surveillance in the world: in airports, banks, malls and this alters the way we move and talk and interact with each other. It’s very subtle but there’s a degree of acting going on in society. So I wanted to capture that and that performance idea meshed with how dramatic the characters in the book act. (Clarke 3)

In twentieth century America, where every transaction is made more efficient, more secure or more accessible, the theme of looking upon a scene logically transforms into a scene of surveillance. But as individuals, in Ellis, have become ‘automated,’ they begin to resemble

something of a human Automated Teller Machine, gazing out into the city streets and lacking the ability to respond or interact. In contrast, Carrie and Carol Kennicott were engaged in visions of their own interactions *within* society. Characters in Ellis, however, are disengaged from their senses, or else, being emotionally detached from each other, are precluded from communicating their own desires and fears. In his essay, “‘Makin’ Flippy-Floppy’: Postmodernism and the Baby-Boom PMC,” Fred Pfeil attributes this unfortunate state of human interaction to

[the] consumerized self’s endless construction, fragmentation and dissolution at the hands of the invasive, all-pervasive, media. . . . Otherwise the sheer confusion of contemporary consciousness, our identification with different aspects of a fictive media, the odiously intimate, constant consumption and recycling of mass fears and fantasies which comprises the media process leads to a blurring of what we regard as the self and the loss of our capacity for authentic, autonomous action without the shadow of self-consciousness. (Pfeil 1990)

It is this “authentic, autonomous action” that traditionally signified the classical hero, in whom the reader places her admiration and respect. But the shadow of self-consciousness is a detriment to *true* action, since every act in its undertaking requires so much processing that the choice to maintain one’s composure smothers engagement. In Ellis, the result is that when the intent to truly communicate, *commune*, with another, the individual expression is unable to hit its mark. Most attempts are met with stares; however, even this “response” is not intended to commune, as the stare is always aimed in another direction—the self or the spectacle. Mirrors, flashing lights, animated images—these props, always written into Ellis’s scenes, threaten to conquer the personality quotient when human characters fail to make an impression in the scene. In the process, the individual seems “lost in thought”—though it would be more precise to say “lost in

unthought”—while the dynamism of the spectacle, like a specter, seems always hovering, in close proximity, ready to take possession of those who fail to impress themselves on the scene. For Clay—whose name suggests “mundane” (something his psychiatrist accuses him of being [123]), and also, that which has yet to be molded, and gives no impression—this specter manifests itself in the constant, striking fear that surrounds Los Angeles, as well as his more personal shame. For Patrick Bateman, it takes the form of that “nameless dread” that follows him everywhere, and seemingly presents itself at even very innocuous moments. Yet, at the same time, the divestiture of thought, of compassion and of human communion means that both characters assume the role of the specter themselves. For Patrick and Clay, the inability to commune because of the constant diversion of energies towards the spectacle of self leads to decisions to act or not to act, each of which holds grave consequences. For both characters, an almost powerless absorption into the spectacle of commodity culture translates into a fixed stare that immobilizes them.

Ellis’s characters betray a fascination with representations of the self, such as mirrors, televisions, and even posters of their favourite rock musicians. Though these reflections oftentimes are typically spectacular, the extreme individualistic behaviours that the characters exhibit suggest that they are taking in the spectacle as expressions of their own personalities. After all, why else do teens put posters of sports heroes and musicians on their walls but to *be* that person, insert themselves into that particular spectacle? Thus, staring off into the distance at these posters, music videos and other emanations of commodity culture, can be identified as an act of consumption of the self. “Don’t Eat Yourself,” implores Coupland, in *Generation X*. “*Wonder if he’s for sale*” is a motif running through Clay’s mind, and the novel, *Less than Zero*. Later, listening to a song, he thinks of “Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled

they ate their own children” (*Less than Zero* 207). And a warning: *American Psycho* ends with the tag, “This is not an exit” (399), although the neon sign “MEAT” above a prostitute in an earlier scene—pointing to Patrick Bateman’s creation of murder as another purchasable commodity for consumption (Walker, par. 9)—stands in opposition to this.

Ellis has identified people in a certain segment of society that have been absorbed into the spectacle of *themselves*. This is symbolized by the mirrors and the emphasis on surfaces, paradoxically, because while the characters are thoroughly *absorbed* by the scene, they are yet deflected by the flatness of commodity culture that simply does not, and cannot, possess the ability to *contain*. In *American Psycho*, this is described in an emblematic scene of American culture in the twentieth century:

I have almost an overwhelming urge to walk in and browse through each aisle, filling my basket with bottles of balsamic vinegar and sea salt, roam through the vegetable and produce stands inspecting the color tones of red peppers and yellow peppers and green peppers and purple peppers, deciding what flavor, what shape gingerbread cookie to buy, but I’m still longing for something deeper, something undefined. . . . (*American Psycho* 163)

The difference here is that, for Patrick, the attempt to find “something deeper, something undefined” is through torture and murder. His stroll through the market—his idyll—also complicates his urges. Eventually, he becomes frustrated by too many choices—“*too many fucking videos*”—vying for his attention in the Video Haven.

The movie video, the video game: these trendy products of the 80s are important symbols in Ellis’s works because they provide the imagery of commodification that he believes has come to fill the void within American youth. Liz Young notes that it is Ellis’s “expressed belief that

only the most extreme and disruptive images or experiences can penetrate the bland vacuity of his generation” (“Beast in the Jungle” 93). In fact, in *American Psycho*, the one thing that interests Patrick—it may be too far to say that it gives him *hope*—is when someone appears to have identified this void in him. When Evelyn attempts to pressure him to commit to marriage, Patrick breaks up with her and, apparently, she becomes upset:

“You . . . are not . . . .” She stops, wiping her face, unable to finish.

“I’m not what?” I ask, waiting, interested.

“You are not”—she sniffs, looks down, her shoulders heaving—“all there.

You”—she chokes—“don’t add up.”

“I do too,” I say indignantly, defending myself. “I do too add up.”

“You’re a ghoul,” she sobs.

“No, no,” I say, confused, watching her. “You’re the ghoul.”

(*American Psycho* 343)

While Patrick is at first interested in seeing whether Evelyn will finally see things as they are, he becomes confused because she accuses him of exactly what he sees in her: emptiness. But Patrick remains dismayed because, shortly after this exchange, Evelyn “looks remarkably composed. She’s been careful not to let the tears, which actually I’ve just noticed are very few, affect her makeup” (343).

In *Less than Zero*, Clay spends an afternoon in an arcade, describing its dizzying offerings in much the same way as Patrick describes his afternoon in the grocery store:

Later, in the video arcade, Trent plays a game called Burger Time in which there are all these video hot dogs and eggs that chase around a short, bearded chef and Trent wants to teach me how to play, but I don’t want to. I just keep staring at the maniacal, wiggling

hot dogs and for some reason it's just too much to take and I walk away, looking for something else to play. But all the games seem to deal with beetles and bees and moths and snakes and mosquitoes and frogs drowning and mad spiders eating large purple video flies and the music that goes along with the games make me feel dizzy and gives me a headache and the images are hard to shake off, even after I leave the arcade. (199)

Clay is probably the most 'sensitive' of Ellis's characters, though all are in varying degrees disaffected and detached. Ellis admits Clay disturbs him the most, since he is still connected to his feelings of humanity. "I don't want to care," he says to his girlfriend, Blair. "If I care about things, it'd just be worse. It'll just be another thing to worry about. It's just less painful if I don't care" (205). Still, he cannot move to himself to act, though he may feel that something should be done and, in the end, his inaction inhibits his ability to perceive when the moral line is being pushed back. With a paucity of proof to constitute an inner life, Clay must be considered an empty void moving through the city's passageways, and taking in the most terrible images that reality can offer, a nightmare version of *flânerie*, in a slightly different arcade. "I need to see the worst," he thinks, as he goes with his friend, Julian, to watch him prostitute himself. "I wonder what the man and Julian are going to do. I tell myself I could leave. I could simply say to the man from Muncie and Julian that I want to leave. But, again, the words don't, can't, come out and I sit here and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly" (175). It is, however, precisely this measuring and fabricating of an "extreme" which an everyday sort of violence and degradation goes unchecked against. The reader's sense of morality tells her that this scene is more horrid than the previous one in the video arcade. Yet, it is the video game that makes Clay physically sick.

In Ellis, the concept of viewing, or more precisely *staring*, is an important one. In this respect, it is helpful to refer to Susan Sontag's distinction between *looking* and *staring*:

Consider the difference between looking and staring. A look is voluntary; it is also mobile, rising and falling in intensity as its foci of interest are taken up and then exhausted. A stare has, essentially, the character of a compulsion; it is steady, unmodulated, "fixed." (Sontag "The Aesthetics of Silence" 9)

Taking this definition into consideration, the repetition of staring throughout Ellis constitutes a statement that his characters are caught up in or by something, and that it is out of their control. There is no "rising and falling in intensity" as the characters exhaust the foci of interest because the characters do not register any change in consciousness. Patrick's urge is to consume the experiences of killing and torturing (corresponding to the late twentieth-century trend of buying *experiences*, such as skydiving, commando runs, etc., in which your life is on the line), just as the average consumer is filled with urges to consume imagery in the form of product. In *Less than Zero*, Clay *needs* to see Julian, and certainly seems a conflicted though attentive observer.

The character's undivided attention is compelled by the imagery of commodification, such that any attempt at interaction between characters, at true *communion*,—verbal, visual or physical—is thwarted by the demands of the distraction. This is further exacerbated by things that deflect and mirror surfaces. In *American Psycho*, much of the 'surface' is constituted in the social chit-chat and everyday conversation in which Patrick engages. For the most part, any two characters who speak to each other mistake or simply do not perceive each other. They involve themselves in conversation only "by rote," as Patrick often says, that is, they perceive only what they *expect* to hear or happen in the conventions of everyday life. So when Patrick tells a girl that he is in "murders and executions," she hears "mergers and acquisitions" (*American Psycho* 206).

When Paul Owen tells him how he got the Fisher case, Patrick “[keeps] nodding, pretending that this primitive info is revelatory and says[s] things like ‘That is enlightening’ while at the same time telling him ‘I’m utterly insane’ and ‘I like to dissect girls’” (216). Indeed, these characters, as Ellis says, are involved only with “surface transaction.” Essentially, the individualistic quality of contemporary society has blown over into something beyond narcissism, whereupon people simply are not *there* even for the most nominal exchange with others. These ‘walls’ between people are apparent in a scene in which Patrick is speaking to a doorman at his building:

When I bring my head back up to see if any of this has registered I’m greeted by the expressionless mask of the doorman’s heavy, stupid face. I am a ghost to this man, I’m thinking. I am something unreal, something not quite tangible, yet still an obstacle of sorts and he nods, gets back on the phone, resumes speaking in a dialect totally alien to me. (71)

And, yet, this is how the majority of the world’s transactions proceed; nobody really hears or conceives what the other is saying. Patrick is unreal, a ghost; however, members of society have all become specters because in consuming products in order to project a certain ‘image,’ they have ended up deflecting the possibility of human correspondence in exchange for an appreciative *look*. If, as Jay McInerney says in *This is Not an Exit*, reading *American Psycho* was like “flipping through the pages of Vogue magazine,” then in truth, the characters are *all* models, and therefore, not paid to speak. Models, like these characters, have nothing beyond the literal outlines of their bodies on the flat page. What ‘inner life’ could they possibly have? Ellis gives the reader the following example, in which Evelyn asks Patrick, “Where are you going?” In response, Patrick thinks,



I make no comment, lost in my own private maze, thinking about other things: warrants, stock offerings, ESOPs, LBOs, IPs, finances, refinances, debentures, converts, proxy statements, 8-Ks, 10-Qs, zero coupons, PiKs, GNPs, the IMF, hot executive gadgets, billionaires, Kenkichi Nakajima, infinity, Infinity, how fast a luxury car should go, bailouts, junk bonds, whether to cancel my subscription to *The Economist*, the Christmas when I was fourteen and had raped one of our maids, Inclusivity, envying someone's life, whether someone could survive a fractured skull, waiting in airports, stifling a scream, credit cards and someone's passport and a book of matches from La Cote Basque splattered with blood, surface surface surface, a Rolls is a Rolls is a Rolls. To Evelyn our relationship is yellow and blue, but to me it's a gray place, most of it blacked out, bombed, footage from the film in my head is endless shots of stone and any language heard is utterly foreign, the sound flickering away over new images: blood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their assholes, embryos frozen or scrambled (which is it?), nuclear warheads, billions of dollars, the total destruction of the world, someone gets beaten up, someone else dies, sometimes bloodlessly, more often mostly by rifle shot, assassinations, comas, life played out as a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera. It's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. I am at its center, out of season, and no one ever asks me for any identification. . . If I were an actual automaton, what difference would there really be? (342-3)

Beyond the surface, beyond superficiality, the reader is finally presented with an experience of Patrick's free-thinking unconscious—*not* the how-to's of murder which his consciousness

contains. Here, in the depths of Patrick's mind, there is only—"surface surface surface"—*more* imagery to consume. There is no inner life here, only perhaps a parody of one.

In *Less than Zero*, the reader tends to think that some degree of inner life still inhabits the form that is Clay. Yet, the bits of conversation and the sensationalistic imagery he observes resound in his head until, certainly, it approaches the parody of Patrick Bateman's interiority. In a scene very similar to that between Patrick and the doorman, Clay experiences a sudden fear that he, too, is invisible. He thinks,

Eyes suddenly focus in on the eyes of a small, dark, intense-looking guy wearing a Universal Studios T-shirt sitting two booths across from me. He's staring at me and I look down and take a drag, a deep one, off the cigarette. The man keeps staring at me and all I can think is either he doesn't see me or I'm not here. I don't know why I think that.

People are afraid to merge. *Wonder if he's for sale.* (26)

In *Less than Zero*, nobody looks anyone else in the eye, whether they are close, personal friends or strangers. The fact that Clay omits the "My," or doesn't say, simply, "*I focus in,*" at the beginning of this inner monologue means that the reader gets a filmic image of Clay's eyes *before* constructing the image of the stranger's eyes. It is as if the vast expanse of Clay's mindscape is so distracted that he literally forgets himself because his consciousness first identifies an objective view of his own eyes, not the subjectivity that he supposedly inhabits.

Clay's subjectivity, however, is not one that impresses itself upon the scene. More likely, it tends to seek out scenes in which he may lose himself: "Disappear here" is a motif that repeats throughout the novel. It first appears in the opening scene, where Clay notices it on a billboard for a hot vacation spot. Thereafter, the billboard, along with other images on posters and in advertising, seems to haunt him. In his own room, he stares at a Beach Boys poster, "trying to

remember which one died” (50); another time, he describes himself staring at an Elvis Costello promotional poster:

The word “Trust” hovering over his head, and his sunglasses, one lens red, the other blue, pushed down past the ridge of his nose so that you can see his eyes, which are slightly off center. The eyes don’t look at me, though. They only look at whoever’s standing by the window, but I’m too tired to get up and stand by the window. (11)

More often than not, Clay is so consumed with staring at something that he cannot take part in conversations, however simplistic. When Trent asks him to go to a movie, Clay thinks, “It takes me a little while to say anything because there’s a video on cable of a building being blown up in slow motion and in black and white” (100). Here, it is apparent that the human connection is waylaid in favour of the image. When Clay visits a record store, he “stare[s] at the covers and before [he] realize[s] it, an hour’s passed and it’s almost dark outside” (94). Again, flipping through a *Playboy* magazine, he “start[s] to space out and stare[s] at the framed poster for the “Hotel California” album; at the hypnotizing blue lettering; at the shadow of the palms” (111).

But Clay is not the only one. At a party, he says,

I lean against a wall and break out into a cold sweat and there’s a young guy who I sort of recognize sitting in a chair staring at me from across the room and I stare back, confused, wondering if he knows me, but I realize it’s pointless. That guy is stoned and doesn’t see me, doesn’t see anything. (181)

Clay is just as unsure about his friend, Daniel, who could be “staring in the water [of the pool] or . . . just passed out” (55). Of course, the constant presence of sunglasses on both Clay’s parents as well as his girlfriend, Blair, gives them an equally effective method of never looking another person in the eye. This fixed, yet unseeing, gaze is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s “staring forms” in

“The Wasteland.” They are suggestive of wasted attempts to commune and, ultimately, wasted lives. The staring form is found throughout the novel, but reaches emphatic peaks when Clay is urged by a friend to see a kidnapped girl tied to a bed, and again, when he is brought by the friend to see a dead body in the alley. One of the other kids who come to see the body “sticks a cigarette into the dead boy’s mouth and they look at that for five minutes” (185).

But Clay does not necessarily need sensationalistic scenes to be just as intensely taken by it. He is equally mesmerized by his own reflection in mirrors, by the ocean, by the flashing lights of the Valley, or by scenes of degradation and death. He stares blankly, waiting to identify, or waiting to *be* identified, and thus give body to himself. The novel provides the reader a kind of limbo, where characters are utterly consumed with the scene and, finally—mesmerized—fall into complete and unconscious flatness.

In both of these novels, Ellis presents moments in which the main characters are given a shred of hope to believe that someone will finally identify them for who they are: mere personas. At dinner with Evelyn, Patrick suddenly experiences a thrill of sensation because he thinks that his girlfriend has finally come to a position where she is willing to “acknowledge [his] character”: “for the first time since I’ve known her she is straining to say something interesting and I pay very close attention” (121). But Evelyn only interrupts to ask whether it is Ivana Trump at a nearby table. Later, when she tells him how she imagines their wedding ceremony, he says,

“I’d want to bring a Harrison AK-47 assault rifle to the ceremony. . . . “Or an AR-15. You’d like it, Evelyn: it’s the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny.” I wink at her. But she’s still talking; she doesn’t hear a word; nothing registers. She does not fully grasp *a word* I’m saying. My essence is eluding her.” (124)

But Patrick's "essence" is simply more surface.

Similarly, Blair tells Clay, when they were dating, "it was like you weren't there" (204). In response, Clay "stud[ies] the billboard" . . . [and thinks] "Disappear Here." He pretends not to hear her. She continues, "Other people made an effort and you just . . . it was just beyond you." Before this, he "starts making paranoid connections" when Blair mentions the film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (141). The implication is that there is an *original* Clay and that, inside the cardboard spectacle, he is a thinking, feeling, *human* character, whose purity of essence eventually will shine through. However, Clay is not simply "afraid to merge"; he is unable to. Ellis writes,

People afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. This is the first thing I hear when I come back to the city. . . . Though that sentence shouldn't bother me, it stays in my mind for an uncomfortably long time. Nothing else seems to matter. (9)

The reason why this sentence haunts Clay throughout the novel is not because he is afraid to merge, or commune, with another, but because he suspects he cannot. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* makes him "paranoid" because, just as Patrick suspects that he is just as vapid as the empty video box he takes to the counter at Video Haven, Clay distrusts the conjecture of his own humanity. Even the Elvis Costello poster, commanding him to "TRUST," cannot convince him.

### iii. Making Do:

#### **Character as Overblown, Aporetic and Missing-in-Action**

A neon-lit Christ stands forlornly in the background. 'You feel confused. You feel frustrated,' [the television evangelist] tells me. 'You don't know what's going on. You feel hopeless, helpless. That's what you feel there is no way out of the situation. But

Jesus will come. He will come through the eye of that television screen. . . . [L]et this be a night of Deliverance. (*Less than Zero* 140)

As Clay listens to the preacher on TV, the reader is set up for the “deliverance” that will bring Clay back to the living. The expectation is that the character will find some way out of the situation, though he feels boxed in by the trappings of his everyday life in a highly commodified culture. That is what a *hero* is: “a good example” . . . “an idol” . . . . A *model*.

But the fashion models of *Vogue* magazine and the models of classical literature are not so heroic. They follow rules, traditions and conventions. As Ellis says, models do nothing but stand around and do what they’re told. This, he says, about his novel, *Glamorama*, is why they make good terrorists. The true terror in *American Psycho* and *Less than Zero*, then, is not the visceral carnage or sexual degradation: it is the terror of having to decide for oneself, without the old forms, what a particular character *means*.

A true hero, in fact, is “a conqueror” who breaks down musty, old idols. Someone who truly embodies the vitality of life, which, in itself, is an unquantifiable essence. The vitality of *life*, in narrative, is as unexpected and unpreprogrammed as real life is. It forces the reader to think and create new pathways in narrational expectation. Thus, the “way out of the situation” is to not give in to the easy association that the reader—through experience and knowledge of the old forms—will provide, “as if by rote.” The way out of the situation, as Michel de Certeau suggests, is to remove the old forms from these “heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets” (de Certeau v). After all, as Bono, the lead singer of the band U2, is misheard by Patrick Bateman, “A hero is an insect in this world” (146) of convention.

Ellis utilizes three approaches to destabilizing these old forms and, thus, revitalizing character. These are (1) the **overblown** character in which excess cannot be accommodated; (2) the **aporetic** character that precludes the reader from predicting behaviours and actions from the evidence, which would provide a characterological guide or map such that, in any given situation, the reader would be able to deduce logically what the character would do next, based on what the character has done in the past; and (3) the character that is **missing-in-action**, that is, a character whose situation, setting, psychology, and so forth, are clearly set out for the reader, while there are indications that the *outer* life of the character does not match up with the *inner* life.

For the characters in *American Psycho* and *Less than Zero*, the “Me generation” culture of drugs, MTV and excess guarantees that there is no consensual “reality” to be found. For example, while some readers find that there *is* simply no agreed-upon “reality” in *American Psycho* because there are many sections which cannot be definitively classified as fact or fantasy, others insist it is more “realistic” than would have been a more sanitized version of the novel because the experience of visceral reaction to the writing is more “real” than a repetition of readerly reactions that have been well-studied and well-honed.

### The Overblown

Overblown characters create a skewed effect that prevents the reader from easy accommodations. This approach to interpretation stems from the ideas of Teresa de Lauretis and Elaine Marks. De Lauretis’s approach to breaking stereotypical roles, taking off from that of Marks, calls for “a reinscrib[ing] in excess—as excess—in provocative counterimages sufficiently outrageous, passionate, verbally violent and formally complex” to destroy the

stereotypes (27). In other words, this approach “makes strange” or defamiliarizes by allowing recognition while preventing cognition. Thus readerly assumption is problematized. This overblown character is presented in so fantastic a manner that it is difficult to accommodate it to the known types without feeling as if the character is putting on a show, just as Patrick Bateman states emphatically, *to fit in*. What occurs is a masquerade, since the character only feigns compliance with the act. This ends, essentially, in the reader’s inability to completely process the character, to really *know* the character by understanding his motivations, limitations and desires, in short, his psychological makeup. According to Georges Bataille, excess is “that which challenges a closed economy (predicated on utility, production and rational consumption)” (Walker, par. 5). Since the average reader is exposed through media imagery to serial killers, cold-blooded murderers and the insane so much, she is accustomed to the concept of them; they bear no threat to the closed system. On the other hand, the detail and graphic nature of Bateman’s killings have the function first of refusing to elide details which become uncomfortable at first, and horrific later; and second, of slowing down the acquisition of a mental picture, so that the horror is truly felt—this cannot be grouped together with those more sanitized ‘horror’ flicks made for commercial audiences that provide only a momentary thrill or *frisson*, and typically—based on the suspense or the expectation of worse—leaves the audience feeling relaxed and open to the laughter of relief. Increasingly frenzied situations remove the cool collectedness of Bateman’s outer layer and, as opposed to the gruesome act, introduce a cartoon-like quality to the scenes, because of their frantic and uncontrolled nature. His personal escapades are hyperbolic, often approaching hilarity because they spoof on received ideas of “murder.” Ben Walker finds that Patrick Bateman is “the embodiment of the postmodern condition of superfluity; money is not used for basic material satisfaction but for perpetual



excess and inhuman ends” (par. 5). But it is Ellis, as well, who becomes the embodiment of superfluity, using literary convention and traditional reader expectation *not for basic narrational satisfaction*, but for some other, opposite end. In contrast, Walker writes, “pornography is used to obtain climax, it strives for a perfection, a seriousness, an absolute.” But Ellis’s writing does strive for perfection, leaving gaps and inconsistencies throughout so that readers are called upon to adjust their understanding of the story to *fit into* traditional systems of cognition. Thus, the choice is forced upon the reader, who may either identify the ways in which the character *conforms* to type, or the ways in which the character *departs* from it. But a reading that allows Patrick to conform to type would be an incomplete and, therefore, faulty one. To understand his character, one must examine the ways in which it departs from type.

It is fitting, then, when at a party Patrick mentions that “spooky photographs by Cindy Sherman lined the walls everywhere” (279). Sherman’s works are known for attacking stereotypical assumptions through the use of exaggeration and caricature. Her self-portraits feature herself in multiple stereotypical roles, but because she ensures that the adoption of the role is never fully *complete*, the reader’s assignation of identity to Sherman is never realized. She accomplishes this by presenting herself in a way that unsettles the viewer: she is never absolutely ‘the housewife’ or ‘the sexpot’; there is always something in her presentation that belies the easy appearance of type. The result—of allowing information into the scene that contradicts initial appearances—is an eventual vacating of her ‘identity.’ Perhaps this is why Patrick finds her photographs “spooky.” The shifting images refer only to each other, never to an ‘inner’ self or personality. While indicative of a thoroughly postmodern aesthetic, Sherman’s work also reminds the reader of Ellis’s description of his writing as a compilation of “surface transactions.”

In essence, Ellis and Sherman are working on the same project, though one is labeled a feminist and the other is labeled a misogynist.

The major conceit running through *American Psycho* is that of Patrick Bateman, the psychokiller. But, as Ruth Helyer points out,

[I]n much the same way as the traditional Gothic tales, [Patrick's] frightening side is so excessive it can border on the comical. He seems to "act up" to his psychotic tag at every opportunity. At one point, having just finished murdering a passer-by and eviscerating his dog, he lets out his ecstatic "high" by streaming through the streets in his \$4000 black leather designer trench coat, thinking, "I'm running . . . screaming like a banshee, my coat open, flying out behind me like some kind of cape" (166). He is self-consciously frightening, and feels incredibly powerful, even invincible, due to his ability to distance himself from the action, yet still enjoy partaking of it, as a result of parodying himself. His larger-than-life capacities are emphasized again when he attacks Bethany:

"[E]ffortlessly I'm leaping in front of her, blocking her escape, knocking her unconscious with four blows to the head from the nail gun" (245). When he describes how evil and dangerous he is feeling, his blatant honesty is taken by the conditioned reader as melodrama: "I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage. This was the bone season for me and I needed a vacation." (730-31)

The result is not terrifying, at all; rather, Patrick is seen as a humorous figure, providing the comic relief necessary to momentarily remove or compartmentalize the scenes in which he expresses no mercy. For example, when he needs to dispose of a body, he does it so that a maximum number of people see him in this compromising situation. Patrick's clownish

buffoonery reveals that he is not adeptly skilled in murder. Patrick knows much more about luxury products than murder and intrigue. Ellis writes,

[A]fter wrapping [the body] up in four cheap terry-cloth towels I also bought at the Conran's Memorial Day sale, I place Owen head-first and fully dressed into a Canalino goose-down sleeping bag, which I zip up then drag easily in to the elevator then through the lobby, past the night doorman, down the block, where briefly I run into Arthur Crystal and Kitty Martin, who've just had dinner at café Luxembourg. Luckily Kitty Martin is supposed to be dating Craig Mcdermott, who is in Houston for the night, so they don't linger, even though Crystal—the rude bastard—asks me what the general rules of wearing a white dinner jacket are. After answering him curtly, I hail a taxi, effortlessly manage to swing the sleeping bag into the backseat, hop in and give the driver the address in Hells Kitchen. Once there, I carry the body up four flights of stairs until we're at the unit I own in the abandoned building. . . . (219)

That Patrick is so sensitive to consider Arthur Crystal a “rude bastard” for extending the forms of etiquette is hilarious, especially since Patrick is swinging a dead body in a sleeping bag. That Arthur and Kitty simply do not notice the lumpy sleeping-bag makes this a comic scene. But Patrick's ability to consistently focus on brand name and catalog-like description—even in the midst of murder—is absurd. Patrick does not allow the reader to accept him as a murderer who must be feared because he is always too delicately wrapped up in ascertaining the label of a clothing item or the gauge of a fine knit. The focus, then, is not so much on what constitutes reality but on what is really *important* in contemporary American life. Human life is overtaken, again and again, by the need to own the latest style of sunglasses, or the most coveted dinner reservations. What is real, or what should be important, is continuously called into question.

Later, he becomes the focus of a high-speed police chase in a typical, and strangely incidental, cop-and-robbers scene. At this juncture in the story, Young writes, “the novel seems to enter into a parodic version of a cop-killer thriller” (“Beast in the Jungle” 114). Of this scene, Helyer writes, “the action accelerates into a ‘cops and robbers’ type chase, complete with tires screeching, bullets ricocheting, and innocent people dying” (741). But it doesn’t really matter—Patrick is not taken into custody, nobody knows about his police chase and, indeed, nobody believes it when he tells them. Regardless of how many times the narrative literally ‘jump-cuts’ into different genres, none of these genres is able to infuse the story with the true sense of drama and tension the reader needs in order to believe in the narrative’s ‘reality.’ As a result, Patrick’s narration of his supposed reality comes across as unbelievable and comical.

Another example of Patrick’s overblown character is in the presentation of over-the-top ‘stock’ elements. Ruth Helyer writes, “Gothic characters are typically highly stereotyped and Patrick is no exception, teetering precariously between categories the reader can easily recognize” (728). Indeed, Patrick displays the proper accoutrements of a gothic madman cum master. For example, his parents are a suitably unknown and mysterious entity: his mother is in a psychological institution; his father has “something wrong with his eyes” (366). The question of his money is mysterious, as well, since it is not specified how Patrick became so rich that he does not need to work, except to suggest that his father owns “half of Wall Street.” As well, Patrick’s own “work” can be seen as mystifying; he does not *do* anything, though he has the “work space” of an office, secretary, and desk, and when he is asked *why* he works on several occasions, he is defensive, claims to “hate it,” and “chang[es] the subject.” But Helyer also points out that Patrick fits the profile of other standard characters, as well: he is the spoiled and aimless son of the wealthy, the vain egotist with ‘model’ good looks, the serial killer, the “tall, dark, and handsome

leading man” (728). The choice to present Patrick in several stereotyped ways means a constant battle in the reader’s mind to adjust and re-adjust the information already gathered on this character. Obviously, “romantic heroes” do not usually commit heinous crimes of torture and murder. Definitely, murderers do not use Clinique facial scrub and worry about aging. They do not imagine themselves in commercials for wine coolers or tanning lotion, holding the product up to the camera (372). They do not “buy balloons and . . . let them go” (266) in a corny representation of happiness and couples in love. Certainly, as in Clay’s case, they do not express dissatisfaction with their given roles, suspecting that “[l]ove affairs are fiction, or psychodramas in which the protagonists assume roles culled from collective conscious, the flickering, fluctuating fictions of fashion and film” (Young, “Vacant Possession” 38). So, when Clay escaped with Blair on their romantic retreat, they should not have succumbed to their eventual boredom, becoming irritated with each other, but should have fallen in love instead, given the wine, the beach, and all the necessary accoutrements that traditionally translate into *Romance*. These inconsistencies, however, work to overcome the stereotypes and assumptions that readers begin to “tack” onto characters as soon as they begin reading. It makes the reader’s job all the more intensive, but also, all the more rewarding.

To the same end, the language Ellis often uses to move between scenes lends a filmic—thus, distanced—quality to the narrative. Scene changes are signaled by a “slow dissolve” (7), or “smash cut” (11). Later, he describes a scene as opening with “a smash cut from a horror movie—a jump zoom” (292).” Patrick often shifts between “I” and “you,” and even refers to himself as “him” at highly stressful moments. Added to the moments when he questions whether he is asleep or awake, the question of the “reality” of the narrative is again pressed. Ben Walker

writes that if novelists continue in the employment of “forms of domination, exploitation then what has been ‘liberated’?” He finds,

*American Psycho* is redeemed by Ellis’ *purposeful* exaggeration. The author lets Patrick Bateman colonise the narrative to such an extent that it is a constant challenge to the reader to transcend, resist. There are occurrences in the text that are ‘too-obvious’ for Ellis not to be ‘aware’, for example the author places one particular prostitute girl in front of the sign “MEAT.” This comic-strip hyperreality cannot be treated in the same way as realism. (par. 8)

Thus, in determining the realism of the narrative, the reader must take into consideration the elements of description that do not necessarily call attention to themselves—like the sign that reads “MEAT”—during scenes of murder or surface transactions. One constant element in the novel is the increasing accommodation on the part of the reader while reading the many dinner scenes. First, the securing of tables at trendy restaurants gives Patrick more of an “adrenaline rush” than his many murders (75). Mostly, however, the elaboration of the presentation and dining room create a picture of typical extravagance, until the menu is discussed. Are these “real” meals that assault the reader’s mind? Characters mix meals of chicken in between absurd-sounding entrees, including “free-range squid” (95), “mud soup” and “charcoal arugula” (214). Finally, there is an exchange between the waiter and Patrick:

“. . . and for entrees we have monkfish with mango slices and red snapper sandwich on brioche with maple syrup and”—he checks his pad again—“cotton.”

“Mmmm, sounds delicious. Cotton, mmmm,” I say, rubbing my hands together eagerly.  
(235)

One may almost overlook the fact that the waiter may simply have misread his notepad because the outrageousness—*mock*—nature of the foods served in these dinner scenes has already been established. Thus, when Patrick Bateman says that he appreciates the art of David Onica because “it has a kind of . . . wonderfully proportioned, purposefully mock-superficial quality,” the reader must take this information and make it *fit in* with the narrative so far. “Purposefully mock. . . ,” Patrick repeats, and Ellis’s approach to characterization comes into focus.

### The Aporetic

It has been established that the necessary boundary between reality and fantasy is problematized in Ellis. Because of the sketchy nature of this boundary, so much that is ‘naturally’ taken for granted in traditional storytelling is lost. A solid, ‘full’ character cannot be formed, making it impossible for the reader to assemble the elements needed to construct an understanding of the character, to validate certain readerly expectations and, eventually, to be able to envision conclusion. To this end, Ellis’s use of the present tense in *American Psycho* and *Less than Zero* actively resists conclusivity by consistently pushing the past away and remaining in the immediate present. There is nothing that is ‘known’ with respect to a goal or outcome; everything is always on the verge of happening. A sense of the aleatory reigns because anything can present itself, at any given moment; the character has no control over the narrative and, moreover, no self-control. The reader cannot know what he is capable of, or whether he is capable of anything at all. In this way, the reader is precluded from total and absolute consumption of the literary character, precisely because she cannot know without a doubt what future choices he would make. Since these characters do not build towards any one type, the reader cannot know what to expect from the character. Then, one really cannot describe a given

action as being typical of any character; on the other hand, actions do not come across to the reader as surprising or out of character either, since the reader has failed to formulate expectations which govern her reading one way or the other. This glides dangerously into territory in which the reader simply does not care what the character does. So when the reader does carry on, what is her motivation for following the story? What pulls the reader forward, if not character development? Can it simply be the machinery of the narrative, itself lacking in personal investment? Is the uncovering of consequences of actions so interesting as to keep the reader reading; in fact, can it be, in some cases, that the intrigue in the narrative is not the consequence *to* the character, but merely the consequence itself?

The aporetic character embodies a set of conflicting proofs that present insurmountable obstacles to satisfactory resolution. For the average reader, a satisfactory resolution is a traditional one that settles most or all of the conflicted modes of personality in narrative. This is traditionally done in a manner that adds complexity to a character, thus, making it more *real*. But the characters found in Ellis are rife with contradictions that are ultimately unresolvable. Their decision-making processes are unknown to the reader because choices seem arbitrary or dependent only upon chance or external factors. Because characters in novels build towards some kind of enlightenment, the lack or inconclusivity of this achievement in the character often means, as well, that the narrative lacks resolution. But so many loose ends in the narrative as well as in the character's motivations—while a “messier” story—also means to many readers a more ‘realistic’ presentation. Things seem to happen for no reason, and human questions and doubts remain unanswered over the course of many lifetimes. Accordingly, the perfected, pristine qualities of the conflict, the complication, the quest, the love interest, the hero, the climax and the denouement are no longer valorized as the essential trademarks of a ‘good’ story.



However, the issue of *satisfaction* comes up once again, for the accustomed ways of processing information in the story are still the ones with which most readers approach fiction. Thus, as in the use of overblown conventions, the aporetic character or plot point depends upon a received framework of classical knowledge. So while “we are dealing with an unknown entity” in Patrick (Helyer 733), he is only really *unknown* because it becomes truly difficult to differentiate between the monster that he seems and the almost equal degree of casual brutality that is slowly uncovered about other members of this society. For example, when Patrick interrupts a “Wall Street guy” in the men’s room writing “Kill All Yuppies” on the wall, the message is that several or all of the people he meets socially are also living the life that *he* lives: one of “surface interaction,” an exchange of masks. The only variable is the degree to which the edges of their social masks approach one another. Later, when he returns to the apartment in which he has murdered and left several bodies, he has no method of dealing with the knowledge that is settling upon him that the pleasant female sales agent has cleaned up the grisly site and covered up the murders to ensure a hefty profit on her unit. He becomes as mortified as the reader in the face of this “business-casual” inhumanity. If Patrick acts insane, then how much worse are the supposedly sane agent’s actions? As Helyer writes, “if [Patrick] cannot identify himself against the likes of the real estate agent, then his boundaries become detached and free-floating” (729). If he is the “American psycho,” then how can he sustain this distinction, if the real estate agent herself commits acts that are just as horrific? Does Ellis’s first chapter title, “April Fools,” mean to suggest that Patrick Bateman is *not* so different from everybody else?

The sketchiness of the character is made worse by elements in the narrative that are casually introduced and given no further explanation, though some is required. Eventually, it has to be accepted by the reader that Patrick’s role of the narrator is played as unreliable. But the

onus of credibility shifts from under the reader's focus and begins eroding more tangible, 'factual' elements. For example, Patrick mentions his favourite talk show, *The Patty Winters Show*, almost every day, documenting each topic. As the narrative progresses, topics such as an interview with Bigfoot, or an interview with a Cheerio force the reader to question how many of the other shows mentioned were false. But when Patrick mentions topics such as Dwarf Tossing, the reader can no longer decide whether this is a fiction or a recounting of a 'true' event in Patrick's everyday reality. There are also several mentions of dreaming, or even hallucinating, that further call into question which events in Patrick's life are 'real' or fiction. He thinks,

I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop, and before stepping out of the cab, I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision. Lunch at Hubert's becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake. (86)

On another occasion, he describes throwing up on an acquaintance—who improbably remains “unfazed”—and thinks, “Oh God, this is a nightmare” (152). At a restaurant, he is “wearing a tuxedo for no apparent reason” and the bill still comes to \$300 even though they are at a restaurant with crayons on the tables (166). Evelyn is asking him questions that “belong only in someone's nightmare” (167). Later, he meets a colleague on the street:

After he says, “Hey, Davis,” I inexplicably start listing the names of all eight reindeer, alphabetically, and when I've finished, he smiles and says, “Listen, there's a Christmas party at Nekenieh on the twentieth, see you there?” I smile and assure him I'll be at Nekenieh on the twentieth and as I walk off, nodding to no one, I call back to him, “Hey asshole, I wanna watch you *die*, motherfuck-aaahhh,” and then I start screaming like a

banshee, moving across Fifty-eight, banging my Bottega Veneta briefcase against a wall.

(178)

The frequent mentions of dreams, combined with these descriptions of meetings with apparently normal people who do not react properly to the events that Patrick claims are happening, furthers the instability in the narrative. A suggestion, of course, is that members of society are so individualistic that they do not waste a moment of consciousness on anyone else, and thus, actually do not notice any of the abnormal things Patrick says or does. But ignoring the words of an acquaintance on the street is believable while ignoring fresh vomit on oneself is not. The question of whether certain scenes actually occur or not is a constant in Ellis. The reader is compelled to review the elements from a narrative continually resisting accommodation, but many of the points simply are not conclusive, leaving the reader to wonder which ones were indeed April Fools' jokes.

The title of the first chapter—April Fools—has two connotations: the first is that Patrick is pulling a joke on the other characters in the novel. He presents himself as a very successful, handsome and *normal* man, with a solid group of friends and acquaintances. He leads an envied life. But his ability to pull off another life, one in which he embodies the absolute depths of inhumanity, allows him to feel he is 'April fooling' society. On the other hand, as the narrative progresses, he begins to uncover a variety of details about his friends and acquaintances that destabilize this conceit. He begins to notice his girlfriend's "lack of carnality" (334), and it "fills [him] with a nameless dread" (336). Upon this realization, he asks her, "Why are you constantly undermining my stability?" suggesting that he feels his way of life is being threatened by the inhuman quality in her that he usually attributes to himself. Again, if he cannot use others as a "backdrop" against which he may construct a self, he falls apart. Whether this is a literary

supposition or a psychological one, ultimately, he will deconstruct himself. The quest of the subject is to impress his individuality upon the world by constructing borders that separate him from the rest of society and therefore valorize him; but, ironically, Patrick's borders lay on the shifting sands of commodity culture, and this is what threatens to topple his construction.

But the most interesting point upon which readers are bound to focus is whether the character will choose to be good or evil. Even given the horrific acts that Patrick perpetrates on society, the reader—if she chooses to read on—has been trained to look for certain things. One of these things is redemption: will he see the error of his ways, find God or hope, and “let love in?” The absurdity of this notion is yet balanced by the strength of the formula that has constituted most of his storytelling. The necessary elements are present. His secretary, Jean, is a “good girl” who, like a balm for his tortured soul, will save him, marry him—*change* him. At one point, he seems tired of the killing, and tells a woman he has just slept with that she should go home or she might get hurt. She says, “Alright. I don't want to get too involved anyway” (213), and leaves. But the question is whether Patrick does this because he is tiring of his lifestyle, losing the bloodlust—or whether this is just an arbitrary action, just as senseless as one of his unmotivated murders.

The climax of Patrick's despair at his meaningless exchanges is the action scene in which he shoots a police officer and is chased by the police. He manages to make it to his office, is relieved in the sanctuary of its “anonymity” and, apparently wanting to end this life of chaos and murder, he phones his lawyer and makes a confession over the phone:

I decide to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia, but Harold isn't in, business, London, I leave a message, admitting everything leaving nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders, and while I'm on the phone with Harold's

machine a helicopter with a searchlight appears, flying low over the river, lightning cracks the sky open in jagged bolts behind it, heading toward the building I was last at, descending to land on the building's roof across from this one, the bottom of the building surrounded already by police cars, two ambulances, and a SWAT team leaps out of the helicopter, a half-dozen armed men disappear into the entrance on the deck of the roof, flares are lined up what seems like everywhere, and I'm watching all of this with the phone in my hand, crouched by my desk, sobbing though I don't know why, into Harold's machine, "I left her in a parking lot . . . near a Dunkin' Donuts . . . somewhere around midtown . . ." and finally, after ten minutes of this, I sign off by concluding, "Uh, I'm a pretty sick guy," then hang up, but I call back and after an interminable beep, proving my message was indeed recorded, I leave another: "Listen, it's Bateman again, and if you get back tomorrow, I may show up at Da Umberto's tonight so, you know, keep your eyes open. . . (354).

At this point, there seems no going back. Patrick has confessed, his lawyer will phone the police, and Patrick will be incarcerated. But after a few days, nothing has happened, and there is no word of the bodies of which he has just disposed. Why is there no consequence to his repeated confessions, or to the police chase? Heightened narrative tension and drama seeks an outcome, if not a conclusion; instead, in *American Psycho*, the tension dissipates, and the narrative merely unravels.

Part of a character's construction, whether he is good or bad, is affected by the appearance of a "good woman" by his side. For Patrick, Jean is the woman who will straighten him out. Interestingly, Ellis provides a continuation of the novel on his website, and in it, the reader finds Patrick and Jean 'happily' married. In *American Psycho*, Patrick honestly admits to

her, "I've thrown away a lot of time to be with you, so it's not like I don't care." He thinks, "Why not end up with her?" and "Everyone is interchangeable anyway" (376). Ironically, the confirmation that individuality is only a myth comes at the very moment he contemplates making a new start in his life by making Jean an important part of it. When a baby in a nearby stroller stares at Jean and Patrick, they stare back, and he thinks, "It's really weird and I'm experiencing a spontaneous kind of internal sensation. I feel as if I'm moving toward as well as away from something, and anything is possible" (379). Patrick thinks, "[I've experienced] what I guess passes for an epiphany," and "[I] accept her love." Given that the narrative is running on well-established but dual tracks, it is difficult to fully allow this moment to set off the necessary plot points that lead to the traditionally romantic ending. At points such as these, the reader must negotiate between (at least) two paths. As Liz Young writes, "rather than being presented with a well-ordered fictive universe, secure in its moral delineation, the reader is forced to engage personally with the text, to fill in the blanks, as it were, if he is not to produce a completely coarse and slipshod reading" ("Beast in the Jungle" 100). Thus, Patrick, when looking at Jean, thinks, "It's almost as if she's making the decision as to who I am" (378), he is also talking about the reader. He continues, "It's as if her mind is having a hard time communicating with her mouth, as if she is searching for a rational analysis of who I am, which is, of course, an impossibility: *there . . . is . . . no . . . key*" (264). Given this 'clue,' the reader tends to be brought back to a balance between one reading and another. Back in the beginning of the novel, Patrick sometimes admits that he is very much "the gentleman that [he] can be" (78). He has always had the ability to be both the gentleman *and* the sadistic murderer. Nothing has changed in his character since then except that, nearing the conclusion of the book, the reader expects—*needs*—something to change. And yet, Patrick reminds the reader that he has "no patience for

revelations, for new beginnings, for events that take place beyond the realm of my immediate vision” (264). But the reader also has no patience for certain things. The reader has her own agenda to impose, just like Patrick’s ex-girlfriend, Bethany, who unfortunately meets a gruesome death: “‘Oh Patrick,’ she says. ‘You’re still the same. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. . . . Say it’s good.’” (241).

### The Missing-in-Action

For the character that can be considered missing-in-action, the line between identity as an outer construction (physical, social, public) and identity as an inner consciousness (mental, personal, private) presents indications of impermeability. A hardening of the border between the two selves occurs—not because the character is created and exists *within* a dehumanizing socioeconomic framework, but because it is constructed *by* this particular machinery. Ellis’s characters, Young writes, “by the very dint of their lack of individuality in a homogenized society, cannot be ‘created,’ cannot be born as personalities in the old sense, because as Ellis suggests, personality in the manner of individuals can no longer exist” (Young, “Children of the Revolution” 19-20). Thus, characters are compelled to act by forces outside themselves, rather than by the more classically accepted influences of psychology. And, while they possess many of the features of a typical character, there are also indications that they simply do not exist. They do not just present a set of ambiguities, as do aporetic characters; in fact, theirs is a situation in which there are no ambiguities because, at base, all information is inconclusive. With respect to the title of Ellis’s first novel, characters amount to “*less than zero*”: not only do they possess ‘zero’ character, but they are subject to a process of literary consumption that controls their

movements like so much machinery. While these characters may be conscious of their actions, there is no corresponding measure of motivation.

### *American Cipher*

At the end of *American Psycho*, the narrator says,

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman; some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me: only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable . . . I simply am not there. My self is fabricated . . . my personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep . . . my hopes disappeared a long time ago. (376-7)

The “idea of Patrick Bateman” is the idea of someone *like* Patrick: a young “Wall Street guy” who “look[s] like a model.” In other words, he represents a target market. And by taking up and fully embracing his role as consumer, he becomes “someone who is composed entirely of inauthentic commodity-related desires [and] *cannot* exist as a person” (Young, “Beast in the Jungle” 121). Critics refer to Patrick as a device or a cipher. Any information that comes from Patrick enlightens the reader as to what drives society, *not* what drives Patrick. But even Patrick doesn’t know why he chooses to do the things he does. At dinner with his brother, Sean, he “keep[s] thinking of reasons why I’m sitting here, right now, tonight, with Sean, at Dorsia, but none come to mind. Just this infinitely recurring zero floats into view” (*American Psycho* 228). Patrick has no explanation or “back story.” His is a narration that focuses on *process*—a process shorn of motivation. Whether discussing his cleansing rituals or his killing rituals, he patiently lists all pertinent details from start to finish. This is “what being Patrick means to [him]” (399), he says. But “being Patrick” is confusing. Even in the description of his skincare routine near the



beginning of the novel, he slips from “I wash” to “You should” to “One should.” This occurs, to even greater effect, near the end when his killings become more frenzied. But it only shows that he is presenting fact, not personal opinion or desire—not personality. This is merely a regurgitation of information. (Perhaps, then, his vomiting on an acquaintance on the street was only a vomiting of information, which would explain the acquaintance’s lack of response.) Patrick seems lost himself. He watches a show about multiple personalities. His thoughts are often fragmented and, at various times, completely chopped off as if he had been interrupted. In speaking to a girlfriend, he even refers to himself as “him.” Scenes are often described as opening with a “slow dissolve” or “smash cut,” and although this is the language of Hollywood and media that Ellis wants to portray, it is also suggestive of a change in consciousness. What happens in between these “scenes”? Does another consciousness take over? At a noisy bar called Tunnel, when Patrick is being introduced to someone, he can only make out, “this is You.” Eventually, “You, Hugh, Who, fades into the crowd” (56). Added to the preponderance of mistaken identities and the suggestion of split personality, a reading that takes *all* information in the novel into account can produce no definitive statement about this character.

Similarly, in *Less than Zero*, Clay describes the images or events he witnesses without actually betraying much about himself at all. Whether he grows or changes throughout the narrative is a choice that has to be left up the reader. Young writes,

This is made explicit in the succeeding novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, in which Clay appears as a comical no-account person, a joke, incapable of any sort of personal growth and the concept of the “hero” striving towards maturity is finally, in his case, deconstructed and negated. (Young, “Vacant Possession” 22).

But Clay as “hero” is already a joke in *Less than Zero*. When he is embroiled in romantic conflict with his girlfriend, and she asks him why “you were never there” (204) in him, he cannot answer because he is too busy “studying [a] billboard” (203). When he sees his friend, Julian, shooting up so he can stand prostituting himself, Clay looks down at the floor. And when he sees a girl being raped by another friend, he only wonders, “Why?” Ellis himself has said that Clay “isn’t a hero at all to me. He’s like this big void” (Amerika, par. 9). Specifically, Clay is merely a reporter of spectacle, just as Patrick is.

The question of what exactly may constitute spectacle is an important one in Ellis. This is because the meaningless shards of imagery—“A sharpei I am thinking” (80)—that occupy Patrick’s mind can be just as compelling as the video of a building being blown up by which Clay is absorbed. For the sharpei is not simply an idea of a pet; it is an idea of a particular *lifestyle* that connotes its own set of detailed minutiae. Thus, the vacation billboard that reads “Disappear Here” with which Clay is obsessed in *Less than Zero* is a spectacle in itself. And then, with the lack of any other movement in the scene, the descriptions of these spectacles—real and imagined—take the place of *action* in the scene. Raymond Williams writes that conventions for the description of action in literature are “especially marked in three kinds of human action: killing, the sexual act, and work” (“Conventions” 188), and that these vary for the particular society. For example, “violent death is ‘central’ in Greek tragedy, yet is never presented but is reported or subsequently displayed” (188). In the case of *American Psycho*, sexual acts and killing are constantly presented, in excess, suggesting perhaps that this novel is not *about* sex and murder. If Greek tragedies are about violent death, but never *show* it, perhaps *American Psycho* is also centrally about the type of action it clearly omits: *work*. The disappearance of work in Ellis mirrors a disappearance of personality: nothing is “interesting” anymore, except for Price

who promises “I’m getting out” and “I’m leaving” (60), and Patrick’s girlfriends when they seem to suspect him of being all surface. What Patrick finds interesting in these people is the possibility that they, and hopefully the reader, have done the *work of reading* the spectacle which presents itself as the narrative of *American Psycho*, rather than be absorbed by it.

One of the tasks when attempting the work of reading in Ellis, then, is to determine the purpose of the sexual and violent action and its effect on the character of Patrick. Williams writes,

the detail of the [action] is predominant. It is not a question of abstract ‘appropriateness.’

It is often a question of whether the killing is significant primarily in its motivation or consequence, or whether these are secondary or irrelevant to the event and to the intended experience of the event itself. (188)

But the killing in *American Psycho* is rarely motivated, and never has consequences. So why is this action so central to the novel? It takes over the space in which character used to reside. Pure visceral shock at unfolding events steps in where the character of Patrick disappears. But does this reaction really only occur in the case of depraved killings? No—the commodification of human life has made it such that the contemporary reader experiences a visceral reaction to signifiers of wealth and privilege, just as Patrick finds himself hyperventilating when trying to get reservations at a trendy and exclusive restaurant. In *American Psycho*, then, the increasing action that builds towards the narrative climax is merely composed of a string of brand names.

### *Characters in Place*

At the same time, action is not the only thing that ‘fills in’ for characterization. When Patrick thinks that a holiday in the Hamptons will cure him of his ailment, he “connects his geographic location, the city, with his state of mind” (Helyer 732). But characterization

according to geography is not new. For Coupland, *Generation X* is characterized by Palm Springs, *Microserfs* by Silicon Valley, and *Polaroids from the Dead* by Los Angeles. And in Ellis, *American Psycho* is characterized by New York, *Less than Zero* by Los Angeles, and *Glamorama* by Hollywood. The stories almost tell themselves. The characters remain the same. What differs is which character acts as narrator; in other words, what differs is which voice does all the 'talking' in a bid to confer a sense of his own identity. But for these authors, 'character' is not substantial enough, on its own, to give the novel purpose and meaning. Other literary elements rush in to take over for character: Young writes that *place* "has started to function as character." She explains,

The Paris Situationists of the fifties were the first to see this and they developed the idea of the psycho-geographical derive, a drifting in which the observer hoped to subvert the organization of the capitalist environment by wandering randomly through the urban [soulless] landscape. ("Vacant Possession" 23)

Much in the way of de Certeau's use of "tactics" to subvert a higher order, the Situationists' flaneur undermined the planned environment of the city and its business rationale—"to make people more organized and economically productive." In doing so, the flaneur infused a *life* into the landscape and retrieved it from corporate emptiness. Character-as-consumer, it seems, needs to be empty in order to keep up the constant consumption of artifice—new product and new imagery. Ellis's Patrick Bateman thinks, "where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending, resembling a sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level and if you came close the mind would reel backward, unable to take it in" (374). He goes on to say, "This is the geography around which my reality revolved" (375). In other words, the literary landscape has

divested itself of interiority; subsequently, it has become the final, and logical, frontier for the American spirit of Manifest Destiny, reborn as consumerism. Characters in Ellis definitely approach consumption in the manner of frontiersmen drifters—and whether they “want” to subvert the narrative-as-commodity or whether it is the reader who wants them to, they successfully thwart convention. As such, these characters are not “productive” in that they are not easily consumable as narrative products.

For Ellis, the narrative product, or depersonalized individual, is an important focus. The author admits that it is motivated by his feelings towards his father, “the ultimate consumer,” who “slipped into that void” (Clarke 2) in which consumption patterns denote personality. In an interview, Ellis admitted that he wrote *American Psycho* as a way of saying to his father, “I’m going to escape your grasp somehow” (Clarke 2). Here, the author sets up an interesting tension, since the drive to avoid the pull of authority, whether it is the Father or the Grand Narrative sometimes ends in new methods of evasion. In a discussion of Ellis, Jonathan Keats reminds the reader that while *American Psycho* may be vacuous, it is “only in the sense that Flaubert made ‘Un Coeur Simple’ vacuous that he might slip through the shackles of plot” (Keats, par. 13). And, then, the concepts of ‘slipping through’ and disappearing are fundamental to Ellis’s characters. For example, Patrick narrates,

While taking a piss in the men’s room, I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal’s handle, and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, say somehow miniaturize and slip into it, the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No . . . one . . . would . . . care. (*American Psycho* 226)

This thought of Patrick’s is mirrored by his brother Sean’s ‘disappearance’; Sean *does* disappear as if into a crack in the wall. Nobody, including his parents and family lawyer, knows where he

is. In fact, although they receive bills from France or from other parts of the world, and they pay them, they have no real proof that *he* was there, as his signatures don't match, and there is no other way of knowing if he was really there or not.

One person who does disappear is Paul Owen. Patrick murders him and disposes of his body because he is jealous of Owen's acquisition of the Frasier file. When Detective Kimball comes to Patrick's office to question him about Owen, the two men have an interesting conversation. Ellis writes,

It's very quiet in the office right now. The room suddenly seems cramped and sweltering and even though the air-conditioning is on full blast, the air seems fake, recycled.

"So. . . ." Kimball looks at his book helplessly. "There's nothing you can tell me about Paul Owen?"

"Well." I sigh. "He led what I suppose was an orderly life, I guess." Really stumped, I offer, "He . . . ate a balanced diet."

I'm sensing frustration on Kimball's part and he asks, "What kind of man was he? Besides—" he falters, "the information you've just given." (276)

Patrick's characterization of the air as "fake, recycled" is humorously suggestive of the characters that cycle in and out of the narrative. Also, Kimball "falters" because he knows that, although Patrick believes he is being helpful, he is actually not imparting any knowledge concerning Owen whatsoever. Patrick describes Paul Owen just as the reader might describe Patrick. Later, he asks the Detective how the case is looking:

He stops, looks dejected. "Basically no one has seen or heard anything."

"That's so typical, isn't it?" I ask.

“It’s just strange,” he agrees, staring out the window, lost. “One day someone’s walking around, going to work, *alive*, and then . . .” Kimball stops, fails to complete the sentence.

“Nothing,” I sigh, nodding.

“People just . . . disappear,” he says.

“The earth just opens up and swallows people,” I say, somewhat sadly, checking my Rolex.

“Eerie.” Kimball yawns, stretching. “Really eerie.”

“Ominous.” I nod my agreement.

“It’s just”—he sighs, exasperated—“futile.”

I pause, unsure of what to say, and come up with “Futility is . . . hard to deal with.” (276)

Of course, it is easy to disappear in the city. But it would be nice if someone cared, as Patrick says above. Patrick finds out that Paul Owen’s girlfriend, Meredith, was the one who hired Detective Kimball in order to find her boyfriend. But later, it is suggested that she is only interested in Owen’s whereabouts because he owes her some money. In fact, after his meeting with Kimball, Patrick runs into Meredith and sees that she is already with a new man; more surprising is that neither she nor Patrick even mention Paul Owen and the fact of his disappearance (277). Subsequently, when Van Patten asks about his meeting with Kimball, Patrick says, “all I really remember is something like how people fall between cracks” (322).

In *Less than Zero*, Clay is surrounded by news of people disappearing. He is obsessed with a phrase on a billboard that reads “Disappear Here,” which becomes a recurring motif in the novel. Whenever he drives past the billboard, it “freaks [him] out a little” (38). Of course, often

when he and his friends are together, they are metaphorically *apart*, since one or more of them are busy staring off into the distance and cannot focus on what the conversation is about. In a way, they too are disappearing because it is as if they are not *there*; Blair accuses Clay of not being there when they were going out, of it being “beyond” him to try. “You’re a beautiful boy, Clay,” she says, “but that’s about it” (204). Even their friend, Muriel, whom they visit in the hospital as she is being treated for anorexia, threatens to disappear as she continually starves herself and gets smaller and smaller. Similarly, Clay’s paleness, a symptom of having gone East to school, can be seen as making him ‘disappear’ compared to his tan friends. But in reality, as bulletins from the daily news filter through the television and radio, people are disappearing. More than one of his friends “disappears” (77) inexplicably, as does his sister’s kitten. At a party, a film student engages Clay in a conversation about the film, *Beastman!* and Clay asks how he could like the film:

“Didn’t it bother you the way they just kept dropping characters out of the film for no reason at all?”

The film student pauses and says, “Kind of, but that happens in real life. . .”

I stare ahead, at Blair.

“I mean, doesn’t it.”

“I guess.” She won’t look at me. (132)

Or perhaps she cannot *see* him to look at him; Clay’s fear is that he is going to disappear or be ‘dropped’ “for no reason at all.” Even the names of the clubs Clay frequents are suggestive of disappearance into a peripheral space: Land’s End, Nowhere Club, The Edge, The Wire. And it is the decreasing space of this periphery upon which Clay and his friends exist that is a major concern for them. He thinks, “I sit on the bench and wait for them, staring out at the expanse of



sand that meets the water, where the land ends. Disappear here. I stare out at the ocean until Griffin drives up in his Porsche,” and asks him “What’s the matter?” (73). The frightening thing for Clay, the fear that constantly haunts him throughout the novel, is that the boundary between the sea and sand seems to be forever encroaching upon the land. That is, Clay worries that the waves of commodity culture are moving in quickly to drown whatever ‘humanity’ might remain in him, and his panic is so great that he cannot move or do anything about it. At any time, he could be engulfed by it and become pure commodity, while whatever links to humanity he may still possess would invariably *disappear*. The “frontier” has changed, and rather than constantly expanding outward, it is moving *inward* to take over American souls. This is why, as the television evangelist says, “there is no way out of the situation” (140). There is nowhere to go.

By default, Ellis’s characters *absorb* into the geography of place, either by disappearing into cracks within it, or disappearing into the television screen. But the most interesting example is that of Tim Price: early in the *American Psycho*, in a club called Tunnel, he literally disappears into a ‘crack’ in the narrative. These cracks constitute spaces that technically should not be there. What is referred to as ‘well-written’ often means ‘seamless,’ where all questions are answered, all loose ends are tied up, and all obvious ‘cracks’ in the surface are patched up. In *American Psycho*, however, Tim Price simply cannot be properly integrated into the narrative. As a result, the narrative breaks down, further jeopardizing the composure of Patrick Bateman’s character. In the opening scene of the novel, Patrick calmly sits in the back of a cab as Price sounds off on the state of society, among other things. Later, we realize that Patrick is the one who thinks these things, and the manner in which he quietly observes Price suggests that maybe he is watching *himself*. When they get to Evelyn’s brownstone, Tim experiences the first of many cases of mistaken identity:

“It looked a lot like him.”

A slow dissolve and Price is bounding up the steps outside the brownstone Evelyn’ father bought her, grumbling about how he forgot to return the tapes he rented last night to Video Haven. (7)

The question is why the narrator finds it necessary to mention the “slow dissolve”; after all, there has been no scene change. The use of camera techniques such as this indicates that there has been a change in perspective, but in *American Psycho*, it is suggestive of a change in *subjectivity*. Also, as one reads further, the fact that it is Bateman who obsessively rents and returns tapes at Video Haven becomes clear. When they get to Evelyn’s apartment, Patrick wonders if he should have gotten flowers for his girlfriend. Price responds: “You’re banging her Bateman. Why should *we* get her flowers?” (7). Inside the apartment, Patrick keeps wondering when Price will “vacate the premises” (21), and later, Evelyn “laughs, then claps as if delighted by Timothy’s reluctance to vacate” (23). But this act of ‘vacating’ sounds like the moment, in a person with a ‘split’ personality, that one personality departs and another takes over. Then, when Tim teases Evelyn and she responds, “*You’re projecting,*” perhaps this is a suggestion that *Patrick* is projecting, and that Price really isn’t there. After all, Patrick refers to Tim Price as “the only interesting person I know” (22), and Patrick uses the word “interesting” only to refer to moments when he thinks people have figured *him* out, are focused on *him* alone. How could Patrick, narcissistic to an extreme, allow himself to think Tim was interesting, unless Tim is actually Patrick?

Later, at Tunnel, a club fit with a set of train tracks and a train tunnel, Price performs a stunt that further complicates his function in the narrative. First, when an acquaintance “tries to slap him in a friendly sort of way on his back he just *hits air*” (57; emphasis added) as if he isn’t

there. Then, he is described as “staring at the train tracks as if *possessed*” (56; emphasis added), until he jumps onto the rails. The narrator says,

Suddenly McDermott grabs my arm. “What the fuck is Price doing? Look.”

As in a movie, I turn around with some difficulty, standing on my toes to see Price perched on the rails, trying to balance himself and someone has handed him a champagne glass and drunk or wired he holds both arms out and closes his eyes, as if blessing the crowd. Behind him the strobe light continues to flash on and off and on and the smoke machine is going like crazy, gray mist billowing up, enveloping him. He’s shouting something I can’t hear. . . . [D]uring a perfectly timed byte of silence I can hear Price shout, “Goodbye!” and then, the crowd finally paying attention, “Fuckheads!” Gracefully he twists his body around and hops over the railing and leaps onto the tracks and starts running, the champagne flute bobbing as he holds it out to his side. He stumbles once, twice, with the strobe light flashing, in what looks like slow motion, but he regains his composure before disappearing into blackness.

“Price! Come back! “ I yell but the crowd is actually applauding his performance. . . Madison is standing nearby and sticks his hand out as to congratulate me for something. “That guy’s a *riot*.” (61-2)

The interesting thing here is Madison’s need to “congratulate” Patrick. Why would he need to congratulate Patrick at all, for something Price had done? Why does “Bateman [perk] up” when Price reveals that he is “pissed about Reagan lying; how can he be so smooth on outside” (396)?

The Tunnel club provides an important scene. Patrick’s obsession with video tapes reaches its height when it comes to the Brian de Palma film, *Body Double* (1984), which he rents

at least 37 times. Interestingly, the plot here follows a man named Jake who, in attempting to stop a thief rob a woman with whom he has become obsessed, becomes “incapacitated by claustrophobia when the thief runs through a tunnel” (Internet Movie Database). Whatever the Tunnel symbolizes in *American Psycho*, Patrick is afraid of going through it, possibly just as Clay is afraid of disappearing. Going outside the narrative plot means what, for a character, except denarration—*nothingness*? Subsequently, Tim Price does disappear: nobody is concerned or does more than casually mention him, until they all but forget him. The same occurs with all of the other characters who go missing, in any of Ellis’s novels. In Tim’s case, however, he returns: “for the sake of form,” Patrick narrates, “Tim Price resurfaces, or at least I’m pretty sure he does” (383). For the sake of *form* and of *surface*, Price comes back to the narrative, but in the language of split personality, Patrick may be describing one self taking over for the other. And when he does return, the “smudge on his forehead” that is mentioned is probably a play on the practice of expurgating or representing one’s sins on Ash Wednesday. If these are Patrick’s sins, there is no doubt that he would commit them again.

The question of *who* Patrick really is, however, cannot be answered so simply. The borders Patrick erects in order to construct his own individuality ultimately function to erase it. He uses other characters as foils against which his character should distinguish itself but, instead, these characters tend to meld into him. Eventually, the reader questions whether he is Price, or Paul Owen, or Marcus Halberstam, or even one of the more marginal characters to whom his visage has been attributed. For Patrick is a “model” for characterological form, the *physical complement* to an inner consciousness which Ellis simply did not infuse. Patrick cannot even be considered a reporter; he does not exist as a fully-functioning character. He lacks a shared sense of reality, a personality from which both history and the future can be ascertained; indeed, he

lacks *character*. As Young writes, “We might as well consider him a spirit; the *Zeitgeist*, all-yuppie, all-corrupt” (Young, “The Beast in the Jungle” 118). To be precise, Patrick is a disembodied Everyman, a perversion of the spirit of brotherhood and commonality which writers aspired to infuse into their characters throughout history. Each of Ellis’s characters—good or bad—fails to impress himself upon the scene. He is an absolute zero into which event rushes in to impart a semblance of form, of surface and, ultimately, of character. One must conclude, then, that Patrick and Clay are officially missing-in-action.

## Section V

### Characterization and Type in Douglas Coupland

During an interview with Guy Lawson, Coupland speaks of the need for a kind of “intellectual triage.” In a society in which, he says, the amount of “genuine” information doubles every few years, it is crucial that decisions are made concerning what is useful to validate and uphold and what is not. This, of course, poses a great dilemma. As well, it seems to signify a change to normalized ways of understanding, for as Coupland says, “the people who are going to be very important to the culture in the next few years are . . . [not the people who] provide content, but people who provide *context*” (109; emphasis added). Lawson finds this intriguing as Coupland “deal[s] with the tension between type and archetype, between the individual experience and the collective experience” (Lawson 109). For the purposes of this study, as well, the tension between content and context is a vital and complex one. Coupland’s observation of the waning import and privilege of content, and the subsequent waxing of context is a valuable one. Taking into account the author’s engagement with the rendering of narrative and character, it will be shown that this tension between *content* and *context* informs the tension between *convention* and *interpretation* in ways which have not been addressed either by the critical or popular reception of his works.

Lawson’s reference to “type and archetype” and “individual experience and collective experience” recalls the historical progression of the dynamic between character and characterization as set out in Section I. As discussed, archetypal character, that purveyor of collective experience, is best exemplified by Everyman. Character then developed into the

Romantic individual, the depths—and spiritual heights—of whom had been previously uncultivated. Then, at least by the nineteenth century, character was reduced to a “type” that seemed to revisit Everyman, except that this character represented the “individual” as a single, disparate unit (not as a Romantic individual, for example, connected by the fraternity of Whitman or, earlier, the metaphysical union of an earthly compass, as in John Donne). The progression argued here concludes thusly: not in a reincarnation of Everyman, but a *reproduction* of Everyman, such that he is no longer capable of embodying all that Everyman stood for. Perhaps a reason for this is that he, in fact, no longer has a leg on which to stand. Once a body invested with individual agency, with the chance for redemption, with the problems but also the hopes and dreams of the fulfillment of humankind, Everyman is now *disembodied*. For this reason, Genie Babb’s project of “reconceiv[ing] the production and consumption of narrative as not simply a mental operation, but as an embodied activity” (197) is intriguing. In this respect, Coupland’s chapter title in *Generation X* advising his reader, “Leave Your Body,” gains greater significance than the inherent suggestion to leave behind individualistic pursuits and identitarian limits. Everyman, the character of narrative and the individual of society, is divested of all those things that yield possibility for connecting, for collectivity. No longer a being that either admits his humanity or is empowered by it to change the system, Everyman has become one *with* the system; he fits into discrete slots in the overall scheme. In fact, *Everyman* is no more; there is only Everymachine.

### **i. Recycling Narrative**

In Coupland, the narratives of History, Religion and Capitalism are paramount. His knowledge of, and apparent engagement with, the postmodern project of exposing and then

rejecting these narratives is crucial to grasping the full impact of his writing. Then, it may be observed that his *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) certainly “capitulates to capitalistic forces”; indeed, James Annesley considers Coupland’s narrative to be “complicit” with them (qtd. in Mott 92). On the other hand, Coupland does not exhibit the conceit of having overcome those forces. They do, indeed, abound in his works; Coupland revels in commodity culture, whether he disparages or venerates it. As Christopher Mott points out, Coupland “is criticized for describing a protagonist who champions ‘anti-materialist’ ideology while using materialist metaphors” (93).

First, Coupland’s approach to narrative is one that rightly solicits examination. While it is true that the language in *Generation X* often inspires opposition to the commodification of everyday life, on the other hand, the structure categorically supports it. Coupland’s “interlocking narratives” (Lainsbury 233) reinscribe inherited forms of the overarching system of story. Rather than imagining, perhaps, a new kind of logic to narration, he is caught up in the reproduction of the old forms; in fact, it may be termed a hyperreproduction. While he does admit to an awareness of this reinstatement of power in his narrative, he also betrays a fascination with these forms that indicates he is perhaps optimistically engaged with the problematic; still, he is unable to depart from the systems of storytelling that have been passed down to him. In this way, he may be compared to the group of writers that are accused of producing “blank” or “assembly-line” fiction; in other words, his writing, like that of several young writers at the second millennium, is guilty of adding to the homogenization of fiction. In this regard, it is important to recall, as Lainsbury does, that Fredric Jameson, in his seminal *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logical of Late Capitalism* (1991), “presents the contemporary moment as one of historically unprecedented homogeneity.” Jameson writes, “the postmodern must be characterized as a



situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace” (309). He continues, “We no longer are encumbered . . . with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization” (310). But Jameson’s use of the word “embarrassment” bespeaks a pushing back or repression of material, the result of which, typically, is a rupture produced elsewhere. The easy containment of such emotion in a kind of synchronicity is unconvincing if it is to be maintained that the cookie-cutter fictions are produced by cognitive paradigms that are yet heavily structured and monitored, but still encased within *human form*. After all, even classical exegesis maintains the effect of form on function. In fact, Jameson writes that the individual has internalized the technological process that characterizes the age in which he lives—in this case, the computer processing unit. Benjamin, much earlier, also referred to this phenomenon, stating “the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence” (“The Work of Art,” *Illuminations* 222). The possibility, then, of the human form affecting the output of the internal machine is one that certainly warrants further discussion. In any case, Jameson’s hasty disregard of non-synchronicities is disappointing. As J. A. McClure writes, in his “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality,” “Jameson’s effort to produce an effortlessly secular and utterly desacralized present is unpersuasive but illuminating” (*Modern Fiction Studies* 144). It is indeed illuminating that there exists at least one generation that seems to have become detached from the sacred; however, it can be shown that there *is* something that survives, a residue, so to speak, that merits close examination.

The first worthwhile critical analysis of *Generation X* was written by G. P. Lainsbury and published in *Essays in Canadian Writing* in 1996. Lainsbury discusses Coupland’s

foregrounding of novel-writing as a project that places a great deal of value on inherited convention. This is accomplished, at the outset, by an emphasis on the artificiality of traditional construction and format, that is, Coupland *reacts* to the convention of traditional narrative, thereby inextricably entwining it within his own text. Lainsbury writes of the novel's

embracing of technological innovation and its appropriation of techniques from other media. The infoblip sidebars are indicative of a joy taken in the sheer profusion of terminology—they are a mutant crossbreed of the continental aphoristic tradition and the pragmatic considerations of magazine journalism in an era of declining print literacy.

The reader is aware at all times of being inside a constructed thing rather than inhabiting the capitalistic dreamspace of contemporary realism. . . . Coupland's training in the visual arts influences his construction of the book. It just does not look like a novel. Then there is a bizarre juxtaposition of the bland homogeneity of the well-groomed, white, middle-class cartoon characters and the flip iconoclasm of their utterances, not to mention a hip reference to the American pop art tradition of Roy Lichtenstein et al. Finally, there are the omnipresent paragraph symbols and the cloud-motif "openings" at the start of each chapter—a stylistic tic that calls attention, through their absence, to the conventions of the literary presentation of the material. (230-31)

It is apparent that Coupland is interested in emphasizing the structure underlying his narrative. Indeed, his chapter titles mimic these concerns: "Quit Recycling the Past," "Re Con Struct," "Eat Your Parents." In them, he communicates a desire to quit old forms and break with inherited tradition. He attempts to present a narrative that self-consciously repeats the process of narrative, through the act of storytelling. His characters decide to craft futures, through storytelling, as an attempt to impose a conclusive point to their lives. They are able to exercise control by deciding

when and how to introduce events in the lives of their characters; they measure the distance between start and finish and deposit conflict, climax and resolution accordingly. This power, however, is illusory because the repetition of beginning-middle-end structure reveals a preservation of the closed system of narrative that postmodernism abandons.

## ii. Consuming ‘Opting Out’

*Generation X* spawned a wealth of literature that disparaged the apparent ennui and idleness of late twenty- and thirtysomethings during the 1990s. Consequently, there was a backlash of criticism that recovered the balance of accusation. The book popularized the term “Generation X,” although Coupland was not the originator of the term, which is the title of an earlier Billy Idol song. It is interesting to note, however, that in 1995,

Coupland denied any connection, saying: “The book’s title came not from Billy Idol’s band, as many supposed, but from the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class structure titled *Class*, by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an “X” category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence.” (Coupland site)

This corresponds with the explanation of the term given by the narrator of *Generation X*. He speaks of “the young generation *shin jin ru*—that’s what the Japanese newspapers call people like those kids in their twenties at the office—new human beings. It’s hard to explain. We have the same group over here [in America] and it’s just as large, but it doesn’t have a name—an X generation—purposefully hiding itself” (56). From this description, the reader is provided with a more substantial understanding of the novel’s purpose. However, the image of the social dissident coincided with the arrival of grunge on the rock scene, and commingled to produce an

image of a typical GenXer that was more powerful in its attraction: young, overeducated and jobless, and disrespectful, at that. That symbol functioned as one of the most successful selling points for advertising campaigns that eschewed a pinpointed market niche for a much wider expanse of the global marketplace. This is because Generation X was mystified and expanded by sellers to maximize the target market. The most popularly accepted time period for when GenXers were born is between 1961-81, which is surprising in that Coupland was only born in 1961. Even more unexpected, considering its currency among young people born in the 1980s, is that the book itself identifies as its core constituent those who were born even earlier than Coupland, “in the late 1950s and 1960s.” But, depending on the source, there are many different dates bracketing off the generation, more often than not, including younger people who originally were too young to be part of a generation concerned with jobs, futures, and the end of the world at the beginning of the 1990s. Much of the hype that surrounded Coupland’s novel was generated by advertisers to sweep up and engage the interest (and dollars) of as many youth as possible. In this way, investigative engagement with the novel was waylaid until many years later, and the emphasis remained on stylistic techniques in a manner that was not conducive to opening dialogue.

*Generation X* begins just after the narrator, Andy, and his two friends have decided to leave the lives to which they are accustomed in order to start over in Palm Springs. Their choice is to try living “in the periphery.” They wonder if the new perspective will allow them to begin, once again, to feel and understand the effects of actions on their lives, rather than simply *knowing* what those effects should be. The book jacket describes them as “fanatically independent individuals, pathologically ambivalent about the future and brimming with unsatisfied longings for permanence, for love, and for their own home.” To embark on their

project of *feeling*, of overcoming ambivalence, they decide to make stories out of their lives by creating and sharing narratives. Their disgust with the excesses of late twentieth century society leads them to the desert, a symbol of minimalist aspirations, but also “a profound and clear cut” symbol of “the most propitious place for divine revelation” (Cirlot 79). The desert, “located outside the sphere of existence” is “susceptible only to things transcendent” (79). In fact, Andrew Tate finds that the friends’ decision to go to the desert to escape modern life “echoes Henry David Thoreau’s project of self-sufficiency at Walden Pond; the Transcendentalist desire for ‘an original relation to the universe’ by stripping away the burdens of history is also played out here” (330-31). Indeed, Andy “notes that his journey to this strange place is prompted by his desire ‘to erase all traces of history from [his] past’” (Tate 331). For Andy, the narrator, and his friends, Claire and Dag, this application of attempting a life worth living—far away from the excesses of a commodity culture that defines meanings that are incongruous to a deeper human understanding—seems to fit. The narrator writes,

Claire says that it’s not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments.

“Either our lives become stories, or there’s just no way to get through them.”

I agree. Dag agrees. We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process. Everyday life as narrative.

(*Gen X* 8)

Thus, the three form a pact which plays out over the course of the novel. The characters themselves are young, hip and cognizant of the damaging effects to their existences that will occur without the faith, hope and belief in their own futures. The friends wish to escape their everyday lives, but by attempting to control their own lives by enforcing structures that do not

truly exist in reality, they in fact reimpose the “grand narratives” that govern the representation of reality in literature. The narrator refers to their storytelling as a confessional, Alcoholics Anonymous-type of therapy (13-4), but their episodes of story-bingeing indicate that they have only become further entrenched. Their stories are predicated on commodified expressions of love, success, and paroxysms of eschatological nightmare or ecstasy. Dag’s fantasy of a nuclear attack occurring while he shops in a grocery store is not an uncommon one, though his addition of a same-sex kiss may be. When he explodes at his boss he commits a crime against social order that many employees imagine but cannot carry out. This is because the cathartic quality of immediate nuclear catastrophe is just as satisfying as that of destroying the sanctity of the socioeconomic hierarchy: in either case, it isn’t personal. Hurling human emotion at an agent that propagates an inhuman system is merely an instinctive response. These fears and anxieties are not generated in the personal realm; they certainly do not approach the level of the individual psyche.

Perhaps it is because individual anxieties have settled onto the *same* common anxiety—resulting from the urge to upset the system and the paradoxical fear of succeeding—that all stories ultimately deal with the same conflict. But if all conflict derives from the same source, then stories become homogeneous. The desire to uncover some absolute truth or meaning from a story corrodes because the newness which inspires hope is not to be found. The vastness of world cultures opposed to the apparent homogeneity of ‘everyday experience’ that is common to members of late capitalist societies has confused the reader. The function of story has become disabled. The narrator of *Generation X* admits that the world “has gotten too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it” (5). The implication is that the characters’ plan to engage in narration in order to find and attribute some meaning to their lives collapses. Andy tells a story

about a man named Edward, but first confides in the reader that this is a “secret” story that he won’t even tell Claire and Dag: “poor Edward—his life seemed to be losing its *controllability*” (48; original emphasis). Wishing to reinstate a sense of mastery and dominion over his own life, Edward cloisters himself in his room for a decade, invulnerable to the outside world:

In all the time he had been sequestering himself, being piquant in his little room, the rest of humanity had been busy building something else—a vast city, built not of words but of relationships. A shimmering, endless New York, shaped of lipsticks, artillery shells, wedding cakes, and folded shirt cardboards; a city built of iron, paper-mache, and playing cards; an ugly/lovely world surfaced with carbon and icicles and bougainvillea vines. Its boulevards were patternless, helter-skelter, and cuckoo. Everywhere there were booby traps of mousetraps, Triffids and black holes. And yet in spite of this city’s transfixing madness, Edward noticed that its multitude of inhabitants moved about with ease, unconcerned that around any corner there might lurk a clown-tossed marshmallow cream pie, a Brigada Rosa kneecapping, or a kiss from the lovely film star Sophia Loren. And directions were impossible. But when he asked an inhabitant where he could buy a map, the inhabitant looked at Edward as though he were mad, then ran away screaming.

So Edward had to acknowledge that he was a country bumpkin in this Big City. He realized he had to learn all the ropes with a ten-year handicap, and that prospect was daunting. But then, in the same way that bumpkins vow to succeed in a new city because they know they have a fresh perspective, so vowed Edward.

And he promised that once he made his way in this world. . . . he would have a little pink booth, out back near the latrines, that sold (among other things) maps.

(*Gen X* 50-1)

Edward is a traditional man, one who loves his leather and dark wood library of oak bookshelves. For ten years, he lives a life of comfort and decadence, until his faithful dog, Ludwig,

magically and (believe me) unexpectedly turn[s] from a spunky, affectionate little funmoppet with an optimistically jittery little stub of a tail into a flaring, black-gummed sepia gloss rottweiler that pounced at Edward's throat, missing the jugular vein by a hair as Edward recoiled in horror. (49)

Having created a perfect little nest of comfort and knowledge-building, Edward is forced to hover at the top of his ladder, wheeling back and forth at his bookshelves, as his fear and panic is increased by the awakening of scores of "millipedes and earwigs" and Ludwig's monstrous turn. Only because of this sudden terror in his life does Edward decide to leave his once safe abode. But when he escapes, he finds himself in a postmodernist world—"a vast city, built not of words but of relationship." He cannot navigate this new "ugly/lovely world," and decides that he needs a map, where he might find a legend to orient and define his situation and, thus, himself. All those absolutes which presented themselves as being fixed and predicated on totalities of meaning—Truth, Love, God, History—disappear in the age of postmodernism. Accompanying this disappearance is an immediate influx of anxiety, a panic attack in the suddenly 'free' world, to which Edward is subjected. Once he comes out of his room, he is instantly lost, absorbed, in a new terrain upon which meaning has completely vanished because the relationships are arbitrary and his accustomed perspective cannot be regained. Thus, Edward's future plan to sell maps reveals an endearing, because sadly human, need to be able to find himself in the chaos of postmodern society. It means that, although Edward rejoins the new world with the holy grail—a "fresh perspective"—he is already moving towards the jettisoning of it, while trying to re-



establish the old, fixed perspective that gave him a false sense of comfort and stability. He looks for the map to draw an arrow for him, situating him at once within this new shopping mall with the words, "You are here," but cannot find one. Edward's desperate search for a map replicates the friends' search for stories. Both the map and the story are structured on a supposition of historical precedent, of ways of understanding, which is the comfort for which Edward and the storytellers yearn; it is also the thing that cannot process terror, symbolized by the demonic dog, once they are faced with it. It cannot be accommodated using logical, traditional codes for understanding. *Why* Andy chooses *not* to share the Edward story with the others is curious: perhaps he feels that Edward's terror will remind them of their own predicament.

Martine Delveaux writes, "Rather than constituting a means of escaping, the act of storytelling represents a way to keep reality in check." Certainly these attempts to "keep reality in check" are fruitless; what is imperative is the acknowledgement that the practice of upholding a reality that is composed of maps, definitions and formulae adds to the support and maintenance (*not* the usurping) of the dominion that Lyotard's 'grand narratives' enjoy. Then it may be observed that, for critics, what passes for play on convention is actually a committed reliance on a grand scheme. For example, Coupland's chapter titles, typographical symbols, and definitions of "types" of people (for example, Basement Dwellers and Poverty Jet Set are sub-categories of the larger Generation X) are merely reinscriptions of "the social." Coupland's reorganization and sociological filtering of humanity cannot be seen as constituting a break with the past. Jean Baudrillard, in his essay "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities," considers the social to be all institutions of "urbanization, concentration, production, work, medicine, education, social security, insurance," and "capital, which was undoubtedly the most effective socialization medium of all" (65). Simply stated, these institutions shape and form "the masses," which are

hyperdelineated to the state of implosion, a “black hole” of nothingness. In this respect, Coupland’s narrative complies with the project of the social, in that it establishes institutionalized thinking. Even his titles, by recreating the language of sociopolitical slogans, thereby institute the power and force of convention and bureaucracy that one would assume he would wish to reject.

### iii. Jettisoning Narrative?

One of the socializing powers that Baudrillard famously discusses is the Real. The need to know what is *real*, as opposed to what is individually perceived, is a typically human one. Members of society come to consensus as to what is capable of being included in the Real; they then hold onto this constructed “truth” and refer to it as a shared sense of reality, the more true depending on the numbers who reaffirm it. When Andy begins a story about his visit to Japan, Dag is compelled to ask, “Wait . . . This is a true story?” (54). The emphasis at this moment on differentiating between Andy’s real-life experience and the “bedtime stories” they tell each other only clarifies the uselessness of attempting to distinguish between story and reality. This is especially true in a novel that accentuates the storytelling process. Even in “reality,” when one is called upon to relate an event or experience, the priority of making it sensible to the reader/listener necessitates leaving out or smoothing over excess. In other words, there is always a “point” to these revelations that has currency in the Real, though this may not be the case in truly felt experience. This obligatory logic to storytelling indicates that the conformity of accepted forms of narration is not, in fact “true to life” or perhaps even valid. This is why the narrator thinks of Rilke:

[If] *the individual who is solitary . . . goes out into the morning that is just beginning or*

*looks out into the evening that is full of things happening, and if he feels what is going on there, then his whole situation drops from him as from a dead man, although he stands in the very midst of life.* (58-9; original emphasis)

The concept of one's "situation" dropping from oneself is, because of the absolute freedom it confers, a seductive one. To find a new perspective that is unencumbered by structures of the Real would seem to bring the human mind back to an origin, to the immediate experience and perception of life, unfiltered by the lens of history and by the consensual methods of understanding. But the description is too reminiscent of Edward's story, in which he has the chance to "stand in the very midst of life," but is too weak or fearful to do it without his map. However, Rilke's words inspire Andy to conclude that there is "too much history" in the city in which he was raised, and that he "need[s] *less* in life. *Less past*" (59). While the individual is held captive by meaning that has been socially and historically inherited, Andy's desire is to divest himself of the old, and map out his own meanings. Of course, even if he did this, he would not necessarily be breaking with the past. Those who are in the positions of producing meaning inherit the accompanying power that privileges those meanings over others. This revolution of the Wheel of Fire merely allows the redistribution of privilege; surely, this does not necessitate a rupture in the meaning-making system. It is, in fact, a normalized pattern of social activity. What should be looked for, rather, is an evocation of meaning that arises from the juxtaposition of structural and characterological detail; this evocation of meaning cannot be found in any dictionary of symbols or encyclopedia of types.

Coupland's novel presents the completeness, the *perfection*, of the classic novel. At best, critical understanding of his work would posit that he plays with surfaces, yet maintains the integrity of an underlying narrative structure. In other words, the recombinatory process of

elements within his structures apparently do not evoke innovative ways of understanding. Coupland's storytellers add a "clause" to their pact to make stories out of their lives: Andy says, "The only rule is that we're not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we're not allowed to criticize. This noncritical atmosphere works for us because the three of us are so tight assed about revealing emotions" (*Generation X* 14). Instituting this clause, Andy continues, "was the only way we could feel secure with each other." In her article, "The Exit of a Generation," Martine Delvaux refers to this activity as creating a "safe house." But this law against interrupting or criticizing reinscribes an authoritarian regime. Delvaux's "safe house" only produces false comfort. In the same way, Andrew Tate finds that Coupland's "work seeks a new sacred vocabulary constructed from the detritus of an obsessively materialist culture and represents a serious attempt to read an apparently godless world in spiritual terms" (327). But it is a mistake to assume that Coupland's quest for depth relegates him simply to a spiritual man looking for God, and wondering, "Why are we here?" To do so would be to group him with writers of lesser fiction. His craft, and his quest, is larger than this. The fault in this reading, however, does not lay with the writer: it lays squarely on the interpreter who subscribes to a hegemonic interpretation. To conceive of this, one must revisit the structures and assumptions that build towards a classical reading of *Generation X*. For example, when Dag can't explain his reasons for suddenly abandoning his friends for a few days, Andy advises, "Then make a *story* out of it" (68). The result is not necessarily comic, but sad; it suggests a senseless group of people, dumb and deaf but for the exchange of explicit signs which they use to attribute meaning. In this way, they may live a "full" life, never needing to engage their minds and spirits; indeed, they recall William Blake's "fully-enclos'd man," a human being who sees knowledge as something to be inherited, never critiqued or re-evaluated. Coupland betrays his own modern

brand of the *reinstitutionalization* of thought in one of his “sidebar” definitions: a “Personal Taboo” is “A small rule for living, bordering on a superstition, that allows one to cope with everyday life in the absence of cultural or religious dictums” (76). In an attempt to raise children who would think for themselves, rather than subscribe to various codes of belief, the narrator claims the parent generation raised them “without religion.” And because, as he says, History ignored the white, middle-class demographic from which he hails, he is sufficiently unfettered, sufficiently *denarrated*, perhaps, to perceive in non-conventional ways. Yet, neither he nor the other characters in *Generation X* seem to achieve this level of perception, for their personal taboos, or “small rules for living,” merely re-impose structures on their lives of which they had believed themselves free.

Coupland, to be sure, is greatly concerned about the power of these institutions on individual lives. His *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996) is a departure from the novel proper, more so than may be claimed of *Generation X*. Whereas *Generation X* had consumed itself with the narrative, with the sped up, convulsive repetition of the group’s tag-team storytelling, his later book is comprised of short pieces of writing, which in truth cannot be called short *stories*. Combined with his “observational” approach to fiction, they lie somewhere between story and creative non-fiction. In Part Three: “Brentwood Notebook: A Day in the Life,” Coupland puts forth a concept of character, with respect to “story,” that holds great significance for the purposes of this study. In this chapter, he discusses the lives and fame of “characters” such as Marilyn Monroe, the glamorous Hollywood actress, and O. J. Simpson, the ex-football player who was later accused of killing his wife in a jealous rage; though Simpson was acquitted, he found himself the focus of the fame-making media hype. Coupland’s rationale for choosing these people, and their accompanying stories, could very well be that it is easier for the reader to

accept these *human beings* as *literary characters*. Celebrities are, in fact, the absolute intermediaries between “real” people and fictional characters, conjoining the socio-ontic narrative with that of fiction. That is, the presentation of a fully delineated character, fully-rounded, fully-knowable, is easier to accept as the “image” of a Hollywood star than in the self-constructed image of the individual in society (which is believed to be more “real”). For example, when at the end of this section Coupland informs the reader that Gloria Allred asked for the death penalty for Simpson, he mentions that she “wore what appeared to be a laminated ultraglamorous color photo of Nicole Brown Simpson, roughly the size of a playing card, attached to the front of her business suit” (189). Of course, this is a common strategy to humanize the victim to the media and the public. But when the necessity for this action is further examined, it must be acknowledged that the masses have lost the ability to fully comprehend meaning without proper signification. The implication is that the full absorption of the human loss of Nicole Simpson will not be complete unless she is properly *humanized* first. But when Melville’s resistance to the circulation of his own image is recalled, it must be acknowledged that Nicole Simpson’s image was crucial to the selling of her story to the public, just as Melville’s was needed to sell his. That the photograph was the size of a playing card is reminiscent of the illustrated cards of popular literary characters that circulated during the nineteenth century, which Deirdre Shauna Lynch discusses in *The Economy of Character*. And that the image was ultraglamorous and laminated indicates the postmodern desire for representations of humanity that are glossy and composed, for perfection that is airbrushed and edited to completion. What this means is that changes to human cognition have resulted in the privileging of image over human life; certainly, not as many people would have “bought into” or

invested in the story of Nicole Brown Simpson had the construction of her humanity not appeared on the lapel of Allred's business suit.

Alternately, O. J. Simpson's "character" was finely shaped by the note that he wrote prior to leading the San Diego police on the emblematic highway chase. It read, "*Please think of the real O. J. and not this lost person*" (Coupland, *Polaroids* 182). Again, the invitation to invest in his humanity, as opposed to "this lost person," is predicated upon the appearance of a *real* O. J., except that the *real* O. J. that he meant is the image he had constructed—not the living person who was being chased by the police at the time of the note-writing. As the thousands of supporters who lined the overpasses proved, the postmodern mind is fully directed in its understanding by the image, rather than the excess of information that has not yet been airbrushed from that image. As "Simpson once told *Sports Illustrated* about fame: 'You realize if you're living an image, you're just not living'" (*Polaroids* 182). Regardless, Simpson's dependence on the image to overcome the reality of his actions contributed greatly to the judgement of his "true" character.

Considering these examples, an individual who has become famous is a clever analogy for a character who exists only in a very specific narrative. In other words, the rise to fame is itself a narrative, one that is often, incidentally, pre-packaged. The biography of a famous person is always already a *good story*. In this way, a famous person is the perfect choice with which to open discussion concerning the portrayal of an image that hovers somewhere between personally felt existence and the manner in which that existence is received by the viewer/reader.

#### **iv. Jettisoning Character**

Coupland's last chapter in *Generation X* begins with another epigraph from Rainer Maria

Rilke:

We are born, so to speak, provisionally, it doesn't matter where. It is only gradually that we compose within ourselves our true place of origin so that we may be born there retrospectively and each day more definitely. (*Gen X* 145; *Milaneses Letters*)

Thus begins an inquiry as to the effects of story on character, or the effects of narrative on individual existence. Rilke's words suggest that the narrative that governs individual lives is one that is not only permitted but chosen and nurtured by that individual, though edified by the community and culture in which he lives. The consequence of this is that each individual is not only complicit, but truly holds authority over the process of narrativity of his own life.

In *Polaroids from the Dead*, Coupland describes the media events that were the O. J. Simpson murder trial and the Marilyn Monroe suicide; as in *Generation X*, he includes a procession of demographic detail and description of the locale (subdivisions of Los Angeles, but mainly Brentwood, where both famous people lived at the times of their deaths). It is apparent that Coupland nurtures a sense of 'the social'—according to Baudrillard, that which contains and numbers each member of society—as a force or process that subsumes individuals, regardless of their celebrity status. He accomplishes this by foregrounding sociological statistics and demographics, first of all, by identifying Generation X as a target market for his own novel. In fact, the information and detail that is required of each person or character in literature in order to attribute a value (type) to them is made much more obvious by the information-gathering of the media/public about celebrities. Coupland writes, "Many stars are refusing to hand out any private details. Revelation is no longer an issue of privacy but of dematerialization—fear of becoming a living ghost" (*Polaroids* 188). That is, as details of a person's character are meted out and then divined, by the reader/viewer, they are subsumed by the "grand narrative." Each feature is



appropriated into the narrational structure, to make a better, more engaging story. The question is, what happens once all details are fully known?

For Coupland, once the literary character has been fully delineated—psychologized and sociologized—or the celebrity fully exposed, the result is that there is no *more narrative left*. The story—introduction, rising action, climax, falling action/denouement—has come to its conclusion. Yet, the image remains. Coupland refers to this character as having been denarrated. He writes, “one fact or that sets us apart from all other animals is that our lives need to be stories, narratives and that when our stories vanish, that is when we feel lost, dangerous, out of control and susceptible to the forces of randomness. It is the process whereby one loses one’s life story.” “Denarration,” he continues, “is the technical way of saying, ‘not having a life’” (*Polaroids* 179). In other words, as Fitzgerald may have intended, “material without being real” (169). Again, the context of a character (or its physical “material”) is prioritized over its supposed humanity. Simply put, the reader of signs considers the narrative to be more real or human than the characters in it. Investment in a character depends on the currency of the image, but once the narrative completes, the character is used up and loses all currency. Nobody “buys into” the same character in a different narrative (sequels work because they are predicated upon the same basic narrative; the hero does not lose his ability to be heroic; the love interest does not lose her inherent lovability). Thus, Coupland coins the “Post Fame” state, “the intersection of human biology with information overload. . . . [I]t is about the *limits* of fame itself” (186). He explains, “Post Fame is when fame becomes a liability to its possessor, or rather, the deficits begin to frighteningly outweigh any conceivable benefits. It’s when having an actual body becomes either a liability or somewhat beside the point.” The “limits of fame” or the limits of interpretation: both exist at the point at which the story of one’s life becomes more interesting, or vital, to the

public than the humanity of that person. To revisit Aristotle, character is subordinate to plot; in fact, character is a mere function of plot. Coupland uses the example of Marilyn Monroe's life and death to clarify this:

Within the limits of her biology and intellect, Monroe went as far as it is possible for a human to travel into the hyperspace of fame. After this occurred, sex, high culture, temptations, and the sating of earthly desires has lost all attractive charms for her. She had realized the limits of how far the body can take one.

The story of Monroe's life had been stripped away. She had been denarrated and there seemed no other possible narrative arc to her life. No stencil. Marriage? Who would she have married—the president? A career? Been there; done that.

In the end it seemed she was trying too hard to put a pleasant façade onto—nothingness. Her body had become a liability. She had become post-famous. She was first; maybe JFK was second; Elvis was third.

Monroe, empty child of Los Angeles, blank screen, according to Norman Mailer, “Free of history.”

(*Polaroids* 184)

There was “no stencil” left to Monroe's life because the narrative that provided it had ended. The character of Monroe had attained a specific meaning and the chance for reinterpretation, or growth, was precluded, if indeed it had ever existed. As Fitzgerald (in)famously conceded in *The Last Tycoon*, “There are no second acts in American lives” (163). Coupland suggests any other information about Monroe would simply be redundant or swept away, ultimately ignored in the “big scheme of things” that would always view her through the lens depicting the sensual Hollywood starlet *type*. Thus, Monroe entered into a state of “Post Fame”: an existence that

“strips life of any conceivable narrative, leaving the Famed one to merely bask in a pool of Famedness, with no storyline, no narrative arc and no picture of possible futures” (188).

“No picture of possible futures”: this recalls an illustration on the margins of a page in Coupland’s earlier *Generation X*. A comic-book rendition of a business-suited woman sits at her computer desk; a balloon floating over her head reads, “I try to imagine myself in this same job one year from now . . . but I’m just not seeing any pictures” (34). This can only mean that famous people are not the only ones who are in danger of denarration: the common person has also been denarrated by the narratives of Progress and of upward social mobility that culminate in unmitigated *success* because the narratives no longer hold true. The relationship of character-to-plot thus comes full circle, providing an analogy of the relationship of individual-to-situation in the socio-ontological framework. Once the class, gender and politics that denote a particular individual is removed, then, what is left over is a state of existence that can no longer be referred to as *human*. In fact, what is left is pure event, or action. In the case of O. J. Simpson, it becomes apparent that his ‘character’ is an empty husk that becomes infused with action. Interestingly, Coupland begins referring to the man as ‘episode’: “the Simpson episode pornographically exposed the full infrastructure of the fame-generating technology in all of its scope, beauty and ugliness” (*Polaroids* 189). The concept of the infrastructure of the technological process that supplies narrative applies, as well, to the image constructed by the individual in society.

## **v. Making Do:**

### **Character as Overblown, Aporetic and Missing-in-Action**

There remains something in Coupland that saves him from being relegated to the ever-expanding group of those who are simply aware of the situation of character within narrative and

the problematic of novel-writing which yet requires a certain situated-ness. That “something” is difficult to define, but then, perhaps a composed and stable definition is not what is needed. In *Polaroids from the Dead*, Coupland writes,

One wonders if sentimentalizing the mid-twentieth-century notion of life seems at worst unproductive. Buying into an untenable 1950s narrative of what “life” is supposed to be can only lead to useless and uncreative expenditures of energy. How are we to know that people with “no lives” aren’t really on the new frontier of human sentience and perception? (182)

Coupland is aware that the new holy grail is a new way of perceiving, a new capacity for “human sentience and perception.” But, like the grail, the “new frontier” is part mythology. New ways of understanding emerge slowly and with great resistance; more importantly, they are revealed to philosophers and truth-seekers, not popular writers who coin neologisms, and certainly not, writers who are concerned with celebrity. Yet, it is the play on language that forces one to reconsider language. And it is the play on the conventional situating of individuals within everyday lives that forces one to reconsider situation. Thus, Coupland compels the reader to begin reconsidering the narrational situation given the language that describes it. By rereading Coupland, it must be acknowledged that his offering is to juxtapose these conventional elements and, in doing so, suggest new approaches to human sentience and perception. Whether this suggestiveness is acknowledged, or whether the possibilities for it are “swept away as excess” because it inhibits easy interpretations depends upon the reader.

## The Overblown

It is true that, for the most part, Coupland seems to write in closed systems. In *Generation X*, the storytelling betrays a repetition that appears Freudian; a classical interpretation would find Coupland fixated on narrative. Consider also his bouts of nostalgic remembrances of his family and childhood; Freud defines these as attempts to achieve mastery through repetition of the past. Undoubtedly, there appears to be no break from the past and, as discussed earlier, there is evidence of complicity. Yet, precisely because he knows that it is the reader who will choose *how* to read, Coupland never attempts to achieve mastery. Instead, he makes available the tools that threaten the closed systems of narrative and nostalgia. While these tools are elements of conventional narrative, it is his method of juxtaposition that problematizes and even negates closed interpretations. What makes Coupland difficult is what makes him easy for mass consumption: he is read *literally*. Although the first descriptive word from a review or critical reading is that he is “ironic,” no one has bothered to read him *ironically*. Perhaps a contributor to this state of things is the television sitcom: comedy is mistaken for humour and irony is mistaken for wit. Irony of the verbal kind—saying one thing while intending another—is perhaps less meaningful than situational irony. But it is often the situation that leads to further meaning in Coupland. The choice of Palm Springs as a refuge of sorts may be ironic: though it can be seen as a metaphor for minimalist longings, it has been called a “man-made” city, a constructed thing which must oppose, or at least, object to an easy classification as a symbol for spiritual retreat. Claire works at the Chanel counter at the mall, a meeting place for the bourgeois and decadent. Dag is a destructive vandal, who clumsily brings on a mini-catastrophe by spilling radioactive waste, though admittedly green and pretty, in Claire’s apartment. These are not characters who are at peace with the world and spiritually at ease. By moving to the “periphery,” these friends

are no more “outside” the damaging effects of commodity culture than they were before. The narrator describes the ‘equal’ disenfranchisement of all members of the social hierarchy, whether they know it or not; in essence, all are relegated to the peripheries.

This is exemplified again in *Microserfs*, in which a group of friends cannot withstand the omniscient gaze of godly Bill Gates at the Microsoft Corporation, alternately despising him and wishing to be “called up” by him. They eventually travel to Las Vegas, “Sin City,” a symbol of excess and overindulgence. Yet, paradoxically, it is a desert to which the friends journey in order to find a better way of working and living while coding. The small group cycles through almost all forms of sociopolitical or socio-ontological alterity, trying on different forms of extreme “bodies,” including marxist, feminist, religious, atheistic, asexual, hyper body conscious, redundant (the narrator’s father loses his comfortable job), and disabled (the narrator’s mother has a stroke and becomes paralyzed). But the ‘identifications’ never stick. Coupland’s protean characters go through so many costume changes that the markers of character get lost in the shuffle. While, at least, in *American Psycho*, the reader links ‘Patrick’ with a tailored suit and ‘model’ good looks, it is difficult to imagine a physical likeness of any of Coupland’s characters.

That is, it is difficult to find a description of Coupland’s characters that will distinguish *one from the other*. The physical likeness of them is basically the same, or “generic,” as the narrator describes himself in *Generation X*. In the same way, although Patrick in *American Psycho* ‘distinguishes’ himself with his expensive taste and groomed appearance, his friends and colleagues are just as ‘distinguished’; the reader, alongside many other characters in the novel, cannot actually describe one character in a way that would not just as easily describe another.

In an attempt to distinguish themselves from other members of an overindulgent, consumerist society, characters in *Generation X* and in *Microserfs* paradoxically overindulge in

minimalism. Essentially, they are characterized by the clothing store, The Gap. This is supposedly where people go to opt out of the social system, just as opting out of a career leads one to a series of “McJobs,” or opting out of a ‘mainstream’ lifestyle means eating “Kraft dinner sandwiches in grimy little shoe boxes” (21). But is it possible to opt *out*, when, on an everyday basis, they engage *with* the very multinational corporations they wish to resist (The Gap, McDonalds, Kraft)? Opting out is just opting *in* to another type of pre-packaged lifestyle. Indeed, consumerism has co-opted opting out.

Coupland elaborates on this idea in *Microserfs*, where Todd cycles through political and religious affiliations, and Karla chooses “not [to] have a body” while another experiments with extreme body consciousness. During an interview with Guy Lawson, Coupland talks about identity transformation with respect to the city he calls home; Vancouver’s founding myth, he says, “is that it’s the end of the railroad. It’s where you come to change your name, to re-invent yourself, to hide, to vanish. Every day you become someone new” (112). He expounds on this theme in *Polaroids from the Dead*:

The West Coast, with its lack of history, places a daily psychic pressure on its citizens for continual self-reinvention. If one does not change mates, religions, hairdos, bodies, politics or residence periodically, the secret and vaguely pejorative assumption among natives is: *That person really isn't trying.* (189)

But then, reinvention, like opting out, is only another choice on the spectrum, and not an engagement with the social structures that call for labels. Thus, it is inevitable that the characters in *Microserfs* exhaust themselves with identity reformations and, as a group, throw their possessions away and convert to a minimalist way of life. But the strictures of lifestyle, whichever lifestyle is chosen, eventually become burdensome, and of questionable effectiveness.

The arbitrariness of practices of belief is evident. For example, Bug decides to consume only flat foods—which will easily slide under his door—so that he is not called upon to make chit-chat with co-workers he passes in office hallways. Coupland tends to extrapolate to the highest degree with all the conventions of the narrative, whether it be within the novel, or within everyday lives. Though the aforementioned critics choose to view his approach to convention as being desirous of a return to tradition, the effects of his approach dispute this. Rather, the sped-up repetitions of story (in *Generation X*) and identity-formation (in *Microserfs*) impinge upon the reader's ability to find stability in definitions of either. The reader's knowledge of his characters, then, derives from something other than merely clothing and coloration. In Coupland, the excessive reproduction of type in each character succeeds in divesting physical markers of absolute authority in assigning character. It is ironic that description—which is conventionally relied upon to confer character—actually divests Coupland's characters of meaning. In order to make sense of these characters, then, the reader must resort to other means.

It is not just Coupland's characters, however, who need help in conferring meaning to themselves. Eventually, Karla, in *Microserfs*, comes to the understanding that “something remarkable and unprecedented has occurred to [humankind] as a *species*” (emphasis added):

“‘We’ve reached a critical mass point where the amount of memory we have externalized in books and databases (to name but a few sources) now exceeds the amount of memory contained within our collective biological bodies. In other words, there’s more memory ‘out there’ than exists inside ‘all of us.’ We’ve peripheralized our essence.” (253)

And so, the exercise of moving the disenfranchised, one by one, to the margins thus becomes a mass disenfranchisement. In *Generation X* and in *Microserfs*, Coupland commits his characters to a Baudrillardian process of hypersocialization that functions just as the



neverending circles of story in *Generation X* do. It seems that Coupland puts character and narrative into modes of hyperreproduction, such that the stability of one meaning is never secure. But while the resultant ambiguity may suffice for some readers, it is not a complete reading. As Wayne C. Booth writes, in his *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974),

The serious loss [to literature] comes when readers, barraged with critical talk hailing the discovery of ambiguities as a major achievement, learn to live with blurred senses and dulled attention, and deprive themselves of the delights of precise and subtle communication that skillful stable ironists provide. (172)

The loss Booth laments is the same as Harold Bloom's in *How to Read*; Bloom also hopes for the "recovery of the ironic." "Blurred senses and dulled attention": this is the result of a too heavy dependence on dictionaries of symbols and "authorized" interpretations of texts.

### The Aporetic

In his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson writes,

"Representation" is both some vague bourgeois conception of reality and also a specific sign system (in the event Hollywood film), and it must now be defamiliarized not by the intervention of great or authentic art but by *another* art, by a radically different practice of signs. (122)

By arguing for a "radically different practice of signs," Jameson is calling for a new method of exegesis, suggesting that the classic model of interpretation—with its privileged meanings—no longer communicates in an effective and valuable way. With respect to characters in a novel, what happens when the last of the physical descriptions is identified and read "correctly" by the reader? Or, when the last "green light at the end of the dock" is invested with

consensual meaning? It is interesting to note that the Scribner's Paperback Fiction edition of *The Great Gatsby* (1991) advertises "the authorized text"; more intriguing is the gloss at the end of the book. Entitled "Explanatory Notes," it includes a list of conventional ("authorized") meanings of elements in the story. For example, under "Gatsby," the interpretation reads, "The pun on *gat*, the slang term for pistol, is obvious" (208). The student of literature, supposedly encouraged to divine and interpret, is thus able to forego the work of interpretation because, the assumption is, all meanings have already been interrogated and the system is now *closed*.

Often, however, Coupland's injection of ambiguity into detail and description allows for more than a single, unified reading. Readerly expectation is thwarted. For example, while *Generation X* effectively churns out the beginning-middle-end narrative structure, the point at which the reader would traditionally expect the character to experience epiphany is problematized. The expectation is that the main character will eventually come to a realization that clarifies his role in the world, or at least provides him with some insight (preferably religious). In most fiction, the assumptions of gradually-building plot and character development 'naturally' lead towards epiphany. For Andy, although the appearance of epiphany (through traditional symbol and indication of catharsis) may be present at the end of the novel, there are other indications that just as convincingly indicate that epiphany was not truly experienced. The effect is ironic; however, if the irony is lost on the reader, it may simply suggest loss of affect. This is the case for those critics who read Coupland as highly religious, yearning for divine intervention. Andrew Tate, in fact, examines epiphany in Coupland's works as a "structuring motif" (327) that builds upon the privileged positions of "conversion, baptism and parable."

But Coupland's characters do not know this language; they were, after all, raised without religion. Instead, theirs is the language of cancer and non-combat war. To fully understand them,

it is important to visit the scene in *Generation X* that has been popularized as epiphanic. While driving on a highway, Andy comes across “a vision that could only have come from one of Dag’s bedtime stories: it was a thermonuclear cloud—as high in the sky as the horizon is far away—angry and thick, with an anvil-shaped head the size of a medieval kingdom and as black as a bedroom at night” (176). Andy narrates, “I saw a sight that made my heart almost hop out of my mouth, a sight that made my feet reflexively hit the brakes. . . . I panicked; blood rushed to my ears; I waited for the sirens; I turned on the radio. The biopsy had come back positive. Could a *critical situation* have occurred since the noon news?” Once Andy investigates, however, he finds that the mushroom cloud is being produced by farmers burning off their fields. Still, the enormous cloud that “defie[s] perspective” (176) attracts a great crowd; other motorists stop and get out of their cars. Eventually, when he calms himself, Andy feels that his experience is “a restful and unifying” one (177).

Soon, a van pulls over, and “out of it emerge[s] . . . a dozen or so mentally retarded young teenagers, male and female, gregarious and noisy, in high spirits and good moods with an assortment of flailing limbs and happy shouts of ‘hello!’” (177). They are “herded” by a chaperone who acts “with a kind but rigid discipline, as might a mother goose tending her goslings, forcefully but with obvious kindness, grabbing them by the neck, offering them redirection.” Within moments, the “garrulous teens become silent.” Andy follows their gaze and into his line of sight flies a “cocaine white egret.” As the bird glides back and forth across a blackened field, Andy can only think that he has never before seen it in “real life.” It must, he thinks, have been attracted to the area because of the “delicious offerings the burned fields would soon be bringing forth—now that so many new and wonderful tropisms had been activated by fire” (177). Then, suddenly, the egret swoops across the field and through the air immediately

above him, “ripp[ing his] scalp” in the process (178).

The blood from his wound is cleansing, perhaps cathartic. Witnessing the injury, one of the mentally challenged teenagers grabs him. Andy “bow[s] down on his knees again before her while she inspect[s his] talon cut, hitting it gently with an optimistic and healing staccato caress” (178-79). Bowing down before a youthful and challenged girl is an action that suggests his own redemption. This is because the figure of the inferior in literature—deaf, dumb, physically or mentally disabled or even merely unattractive—always turns out to be a superior being. It largely depends upon the common theme of appearance versus reality; the hero passes the test when he realizes that the external does not always match what is inside. In this scene, then, Andy stages the epiphany that the reader has come to expect in literature. It is especially powerful here because of the apparent paradox of a youth comforting an ‘elder,’ of a child who is physically or mentally challenged wordlessly imparting wisdom to one who ‘should know better.’ These are ‘inversions’ of the Great Chain of Being—the divine hierarchy of the universe—and, as such, Fate is asked to step in (see “inversion” in Cirlot). Perhaps, after all, it is all up to Fate, Destiny and Love—those things which generally bring the Hero from his lowest point back up to the top of the Wheel of Fire.

Though Andy is “dog-piled’ by the youths in an “adoring, healing, uncritical embrace,” and is being “winded—crushed—pinched and trampled,” he explains to the chaperone that “this discomfort, no this *pain*, [he] was experiencing was no problem at all, that in fact, this crush of love was unlike anything [he] had ever known” (179). The “crush of love” will infuse him with *life* and *meaning*, and allow him to take part in his own renewal. The egret, flying low across the burnt fields, adds to this scene of rebirth because it is suggestive of a phoenix-like rising from the ashes. The fields themselves are being burned in order to bring forth new life. In addition, the

fact that the egret—a symbol of majesty, wisdom and keen sight—skims over Andy close enough to cut his scalp is suggestive of a kind of penance, a way for Andy to atone for his past sins (of emptiness).

But because the narrator describes the girl's act as "the faith-healing gesture of a child consoling a doll that has been dropped" (179), there is a strong indication that the redemption is faked. A doll does not feel saved or secure in being picked up; in fact, it does not *know* it has been dropped in the first place. Yet the teenagers hug him "as though [he] *were* a doll" (original emphasis). Throughout this, he is struck by the feeling that he is "occupying a position of absolute privilege" in being able to witness the scene before him, emphasizing an empty seat that must be filled, and not the person who must bring substance to the position. Though several indications of redemption may be found here, they are presented in the narrative in a way that is sufficiently suggestive of a vacuity. After all, the character thinks of himself as a doll, and regards his existence in terms of filling a void. For some critics to conclude that the narrator is rejuvenated by this scene would signify nothing but that they have succumbed to easy accommodations of the narrative and the character to received concepts—of symbol, epiphany, redemption, the Wheel of Fire, and the Great Chain of Being.

By stopping his car on the side of the road and joining the others who gather to witness the burning fields, Andy characterizes himself as one of those organisms affected by the new tropisms. He is "left with no choice; possessed with lurid curiosity, [he drives] on" (176). But the term "tropism" slips easily into "trope-ism," which is a turn of language that reverses the conventional attributes of words and things (de Man 38). If the character, Dag, becomes a "play on words," can the character of Andy become "a turn of language"? Or else, in this novel, in which things are meant to be taken literally, perhaps trope itself has become symbolic. Andy's

conversion is not meant to be religious; instead, he converts language, turning it against convention. It is fitting that he evokes the Great Chain of Being, and not only because the classical hierarchy is basically the same as the hierarchy that underlies contemporary society. The Great Chain of Being held its greatest command in society until the Renaissance; as such, the all-powerful social hierarchy in *Generation X* indicates that a renaissance of symbol, and thus, a renaissance of character, must be on the horizon. When Andy thinks of the many tropisms that have been activated by the field's regeneration, he refers, as well, to the regeneration of character and symbol through trope-isms. The burning of the fields marks the end of life and, paradoxically, the beginning of life. But in Andy's case, the 'symbolic rebirth' of character is actually meant quite literally—as in the rebirth of 'symbol.'

An earlier indication that Coupland may wish the reader to come to a non-conventional interpretation is found in the chapter "Don't Eat Yourself" (*Generation X*) in which the narrator documents Claire's relationship with Tobias. He refers to Tobias as a "control freak who considers himself informed" and has "one of those bankish money jobs" (80). He dislikes Tobias greatly, saying, "To borrow a phrase from a popular song, he's loyal to the Bank of America. He's thrown something away and he's *mean*." But when Tobias comes to visit the friends in Palm Springs, Claire reveals to her friends that she is deeply in love with him, and that much of her emotion was won by Tobias because of his romantic interlude on their first night together. Andy narrates,

Tobias waltzed into the bedroom with one hundred long-stemmed roses, and he woke Claire up by gently lobbing them into her face, one by one. Then once she was fully awake, he heaped blood red Niagaras of stem and petal onto her body, and when Claire told Dag and me about this, even we had to concede that it was a wonderful gesture on

his part. (80).

To be sure, roses are always romantic, let alone one hundred long-stemmed roses that are waltzed in by a lover. Claire claims, "It had to be the most romantic moment of my life. . . . I mean, is it possible to die from roses? From pleasure?" (80). But "lobbing" roses into a woman's face is *decidedly* unromantic. It betrays, perhaps, a casualness that detracts from the formality of roses and romance; in any case, Claire's need (and the reader's need) is to fulfill the romantic story that is running in her mind. Even Andy and Dag fall for the red roses as a symbol of love, the number of stems indicating a love that is much greater in magnitude. But since the boys are truly convinced of Tobias's true love because of Claire's description of the scene, then for Andy to consider the act merely a "gesture" seems derivative. Therefore, either the narrator or Coupland is unconvinced. When Claire continues with her relation of events that morning, it is easy to see why. She and Tobias drive to a restaurant for breakfast, and then, Claire says,

I saw this huge plywood sign with the words *100 Roses only \$9.95* spray-painted on it, and my heart just sank like a corpse wrapped in steel and tossed into the Hudson River. Tobias slunk down in his seat really low. Then things got *worse*. There was a red light and the guy from the booth comes over to the car and says something like, "Mr. Tobias! My best customer! You're some lucky young lady to be always getting flowers from Mr. Tobias here!" As you can imagine, there was a pall over breakfast." (80-81)

To take this simple example, one can see that while the situation may appear one way in a certain light, Coupland himself undercuts first-level interpretations; as a result, events are able to take on very different meanings. However, if Claire and Tobias had not happened to pass the billboard, it remains to be seen whether "true," or fuller, meanings would have had a chance to emerge. By viewing this story as an analogy of interpretation, the indication is that, lacking only one or two

simple details, a very *different* story may be gleaned from the same events. Coupland believes, “In the event of no narrative of all, fantastic narratives have forever zoomed in to fill the void” (*Polaroids* 185). However, it must be noted that, when there *is* a narrative, fantastic details also zoom in to fill in gaps in the storyline. In the example above, the interpreter becomes privy to the extraneous information, in the form of the advertising billboard, that negates the typically romantic storyline. In much of Coupland, however, the “billboard” is not as blatant; at best, it offers ambiguous details from which to divine meaning. If it is true of human nature that the individual naturally seeks the *better* story, then these ambiguities will remain uninvestigated.

But the matter of ambiguity in late twentieth century has become something of a shady one. It adds another level of complexity that the reader must navigate successfully to gain a full comprehension of the text; or, to be precise, it presents itself as *less* complicated and thus easier to relegate to “understanding” than a process that requires further thought. In other words, as Booth complains, the reader is taught to identify ambiguity as characteristic of late twentieth century and, thus, as an end in itself; rather, it is a site upon which to begin exploration. What is useful in Coupland is something that has not yet been identified. Scholarship on Coupland generally discusses the themes of surface and comic-book characters, perhaps finding enough to say that he reinscribes the overarching strategies of narrative. What is important about Coupland is his ironic stance on events; thus, perhaps, what is important about Coupland is his reader.

In a 2001 interview with Linda Richards for *January Magazine*, Coupland says, “Everything I’ve done has always been really from a distance, geographically.” Writing from Vancouver, he feels he is on the periphery, observing cultural events from afar. But Richards maintains that his bestsellers have contributed to the culture from which he claims to be apart, in that they provide “a series of Coupland-created lenses through which many of us have viewed



our world.” But looking through the Coupland lens does not necessarily mean attributing values where they could and should be warranted. Though he is consistently described as having an ironic voice, readers and critics simply do not look beyond explicit associations that yield themes of yearnings for God and religion, and the nostalgia for lives that were apparently more “simple.” They do not take up the ironic stance that Coupland’s writing consistently encourages. In *Generation X*, the narrator worries sadly that his younger brother, Tyler, lacks a sense of irony. In Andy’s eyes, Tyler and his friends are suspect because of their apparent acceptance of the world as they have received it. Andy suggests these easy acceptances are signs of a deeper, perhaps even horrific, pathology:

The Tyler set can be really sucky too—no drugs, no irony, and only moderate booze, popcorn, cocoa, and videos on Friday nights. . . . They’re nice kids. None of their folks can complain. They’re perky. They embrace and believe the pseudo-globalism and ersatz racial harmony of ad campaigns engineered by the makers of soft drinks and computer-inventoried sweaters. Many want to work for IBM when their lives end at the age of 25 (excuse me, but can you tell me more about your pension plan?). But in some dark and undefinable way, these kids are also Dow, Union Carbide, General Dynamics, and the military. And I suspect . . . were their Airbus to crash on a frosty Andean plateau, they would have little, if any, compunction about eating dead fellow passengers. Only a theory. (106)

The suggestion here is that the mild-mannered “perkiness” cloaks a “dark and undefinable” nature; the narrator goes so far as to suggest that, under the proper circumstances, cannibalism would not be out of the question.

It is interesting, at this point, to consider the pages of “code” hidden in *Microserfs* (208-9); here, the narrator decides to experiment with language, separating all vowels and consonants into two pages, possibly as an exercise to show how the mind fills in information that may not, in actuality, be present in a text. But what is more intriguing is that, when “deciphered,” the pages of letters combine to produce a message written by a young person to his parents. It begins, “Mom, Dad, I’m OK,” and proceeds to tell a tale of his kidnapping and treatment by the SLA. The Symbionese Liberation Army became famous in the 1970s for its kidnapping and brainwashing of heiress Patty Hearst. The SLA manifesto, *Declaration of Revolutionary War and the Symbionese Program*, states, “The name ‘symbionese’ is taken from the word symbiosis and we define its meaning as a body of dissimilar bodies and organisms living in deep and loving harmony and partnership in the best interest of all within the body.” The seeming simplicity of working towards a “deep and loving harmony and partnership” recalls Coupland’s views on those who “embrace and believe the pseudo-globalism and ersatz racial harmony of ad campaigns.” But the supposed “harmony” of the SLA’s utopic outlook is complicated not only by the kidnapping and brainwashing, but also by their tactics of murder, robbery and terrorism. The terror of the Tyler-set agenda is, obviously, not as covert in the SLA; perhaps it is less of an agenda because it does not exhibit itself on a conscious level: much of the terror, Coupland suggests, remains in the form of potential. However, the smooth sheen of the surface—a calm, cool collectedness—is an interesting one in Coupland. Its force is such that the reader skims over the narrator’s suspicion that members of Tyler’s faction could unproblematically resort to cannibalism. But when the narrator compares this faction “in some dark and undefinable way,” to the leaders of Dow, Union Carbide, General Dynamics, and the military,” the suggestion is that the bankruptcy of character will produce a future filled with people who follow orders and

allow others to ascribe meaning to those orders. Following orders, remaining “calm,” espousing “harmony”: these are all things that, in smoothing terror (excess) into a “business-casual” presentation, preclude irony. For if irony is anything, it is decidedly “excess.” This brings to mind the next question: Given the reception of his works, how many of his readers, in Coupland’s estimation, fall into Tyler’s “no irony” set? In fact, it may be many, many more than the narrator lets on.

When Dag tells the story of why he ends up in Palm Springs to begin again with a “clean slate” (31), the suggestion is that he was motivated to make a move because he, too, was falling in with the “no irony” camp. “All events,” he says, “became omens. I lost the ability to take anything literally” (31). Because of this, he would read “Accidental eye contact with the 7-Eleven grocery clerk [as being] charged with vile meaning.” (30). His crisis, he explains, “wasn’t just the failure of youth but also a failure of class and of sex and the future and I *still* don’t know what.” But Dag’s confusion arises from his feeling that taking things “literally” has come to *mean* symbolically: the symbol has lost the power of suggestion and introspection, paradoxically, merely denoting and defining in a way that does not allow for deviation. Wayne C. Booth writes that metaphor

has ranged from a minute oratorical device, one among many, to an imperialistic world conqueror. Traditionally, the capacity to make original metaphors was [in Aristotle, for example,] the most important single gift of the poet. But . . . the device was not content until it had become a concept, an Idea. And with romanticism, it began to expand its domain, until it finally became for some the whole of the poetic art.

(*A Rhetoric of Irony* 177).

In other words, over time, the majesty of the metaphor came to overshadow all other devices, all other methods of artistic expression, in the work of art. The emphasis on metaphor or symbol means that the reader is taught to focus on it, perhaps in an unwarranted fashion. The symbol has come to magnetically attract the energies of the reader, becoming a spectacle in itself. The symbol is meant to work, together with other authorial devices, *within* the story. Oftentimes, however, it can be seen to take over the entire enterprise of the literary art, as one particular symbol comes to embody the meaning of an entire story, for example, Gatsby's green light at the end of the dock. Booth notes that Wallace Stevens has "often talked as if the whole poem were a metaphor (sometimes a "symbol") and as if its *raison d'être* were to be metaphoric" (177). In general, then, the green light that came to symbolize one man's hope, or the red rose which came to mean another man's true love, have been so overly processed in literature that they have flattened. In fact, even the disenchanted young male has come to signify a type, rather than embody a living person engaged in conflicts and desires. No longer windows to deeper understanding, symbols are literally the words that represent them, to be looked up in dictionaries and glosses by Tyler's obedient faction. This is part of the *future* that Dag and Coupland believe is lost, for the future is possibility, and all possibilities of the symbol, other than those which are conventionally agreed upon, are thus closed. Dag "needed a clean slate with no one to read it" (31), no one to read pre-set meanings into symbolic or characterological elements which were not intended. Taking things literally, not with a *literary* eye, is a place to start.

Coupland's literalness is mistaken for detachment and as indicative merely of a surface treatment of characters who lead lives "on the surface." Many literary critics read him as expressing a need for the boundaries and clean lines that were once given unerringly by tradition

and history (for example, see Tate and Young), and he has been taken up by Christian critics as a man looking for spiritual answers in a secular world (see McClure, among others). Yet, each of these approaches yields a reading that unproblematically accepts the very elements of narrative and characterization that he is known to play with in his texts. This conundrum is produced, in *Generation X*, from the *completeness* of these elements. All of the information that is required to come to a kind of perfected conclusion is available in the text. Whatever is left over remains unacknowledged by the reader because it does not fit into the traditional expectations of story—or character, symbol and epiphany. On top of this, the narrator’s detachment does not express a need for further interpretation, so that readers are left confident in the apparent simplicity of the narrative. That is, Coupland does not care to *tell* the reader how to interpret beyond the literal. This is because, in doing so, he would obviously disarm the irony of his own structures. As Linda Hutcheon reminds the reader in her *Irony’s Edge* (1994), “Critics agree that the analysis of irony is usually complex and laborious, while the practice of it appears deft and graceful. It’s not unlike the difference between a joke and explaining a joke: irony ‘cancels itself out the moment it adds a word of interpretation’” (Hutcheon 7).

As well, Coupland is highly knowledgeable about theories that attempt to take a commodity- and media-saturated culture into account. Perhaps it is helpful to approach Coupland from the combined repertoires of the novel-as-commodity and the media: can *Generation X* be seen as a demonstration of McLuhan’s “cool” media? Printed matter, after all, may be classified as either “hot” or “cool” depending on different variables, such as context. Rather than being filled with information, “cool” media depend on the viewer filling in the empty spots. Coupland, as author, utilizes a postmodern distancing to attempt to communicate via a kind of non-communication; that is, by not filling in all the information, his narratives “coolly” allow the

viewer/reader to extrapolate on given information through their greater participation. Coupland's "cool" comic strips, found in *Generation X* are not only "cool" by virtue of their 70s era sensibilities, but also by their designated McLuhanite status. While a photograph is considered an example of "hot" media because of its ability to provide information, a "cartoon is low definition simply because very little visual information is provided" (Gow). But in *Generation X*, cartoons are not only found in between chapters, or on the margins of the page, but, as Lainsbury suggests, in his characters (230). Indeed, Claire "feel[s] like a character in a color cartoon" (6).

Clues to another way of thinking Coupland's approach to narrative are found in one of his themes in *Microserfs*. The narrator's surname, Dan Underwood, is a brand of typewriter. Throughout the story, the characters engage with the concept of naming. Bug already goes by a nickname, rather than his given name. He thinks that eventually people will start using their online "handles" as their real names. Another character, Abe, concludes that people will begin referring to themselves using alphanumeric combinations, or "other letters of the keyboard . . . like %, &, ™, and ©" (91). Both typewriter and computer keyboard are made up of 'characters' which are situated in a particular spot and are immovable. Their stations do not change. This can, in fact, suggest a very dystopic view of modern society. But when, at the end of the novel, Dan's mother suffers a stroke, something occurs which definitely lends a view to thinking differently about a society that depends upon computers and one that used to depend on typewriters. Mrs. Underwood is left unable to communicate with the others except when connected to her computer; Dan says she has become "part woman/part machine, emanating blue McIntosh light" (367). Thinking her thoughts out through her keyboard, she becomes the other half, the 'key,' to the 'encrypted' pages; the computer is a necessary complement to her humanity, allowing her to 'upload' her information which is then processed into a comprehensible format that her audience

will understand. With the machine, Dan thinks, she speaks “like a license plate . . . like the lyrics to a Prince song . . . like a page without vowels . . . like encryption. All of my messing around with words last year and now, well . . . it’s real life” (370). Perhaps, in this light, it makes sense that a list of apparently random words and phrases—a computer file meant to mirror the human subconscious—includes the phrase, “I am your Personal Computer” (*Microserfs* 46). To begin formulating answers for human questions, the message is that the products of the human mind must be utilized to improve upon methods of human communication, not degrade it. But the improvements, Coupland suggests, must be made to the software, not the hardware. The reader/viewer needs to apply himself to the structure in order to get out of it what he needs, rather than allowing himself to be fixed in situ, his only tool a bank of knowledge that interprets reflexively rather than intuitively. This human ‘application’ (another word for software) is what Dan thinks is missing from much of modern life. This is why, by the last line of the novel, he realizes “that what’s been missing for so long isn’t missing anymore” (371). For the individual, the only option other than applying himself to the active informing of the structures of Progress, Technology, Narrative and the Social is to have those structures format and insert him where it deems necessary. But the active informing of the structures—*intuitively*—can shape an alternate interpretation, thus subverting the absolute power of institutionalized knowledge-gathering.

The positivity of *Microserfs* as signaled by the completeness of its story and its characters is not found in *Generation X*, where there is only a surface alliance between overarching structures and the individual. Yet, in this way, it is far more interesting. Underlying this supposed alliance—the popular notion of Coupland’s capitulation to the “grand narratives”—is a tension that erupts from time to time in the storytelling, as well as in the everyday realities of Andy, Claire and Dag. The novel is “Achingly funny, wistfully observant” (*Sante Fe Reporter*),

and “amusingly” engaged with the concerns of the twentysomething generation (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*). But these pat reductions ignore the perturbations that find expression through various narratives told by the group. Even in the desert, where things are “much, much better” (11) than the cities from which they had traveled, Andy admits (though only to himself) that there remains a “carapace of coolness” (8) surrounding his own storytelling. According to Hutcheon,

[M]any argue that ironists only *appear* cool and restrained on the surface as a way to mask actual hostility and emotional involvement. . . . Yet not all commentators see such a stand as utterly negative: for the ironist, some argue, it has the potential to moderate and to regulate excess; it can even alleviate tension. (*Irony’s Edge* 41)

Irony’s potential to “moderate and regulate excess” is a function of which the characters are fully aware. As has been noted by critics, the friends each maintain a deflective shield around themselves, even while engaging in storytelling-as-therapy. Claire’s family seems uninterested in her life; Andy cannot recall ever being “hugged by a parental unit” (134). And while Andy is cognizant of his own emotional armor, he also notices something of the “carapace of coolness” in his friends, as well. He thinks,

You know, Dag and Claire smile a lot, as do many people I know. But I have always wondered if there is something either mechanical or malignant to their smiles, for the way they keep their outer lips propped up seems a bit, not false, but *protective*. A minor realization hits me as I sit with the two of them. It is the realization that the smiles that they wear in their daily lives are the same as the smiles worn by people who have been good-naturedly fleeced, but fleeced nonetheless, in public and on a New York sidewalk by card sharks, and who are unable because of social convention to show their anger, who don’t want to look like poor sports. The thought is fleeting. (7)



While he attempts to discredit the thought by describing it only as “fleeting,” Andy’s awareness that there are conventions to be maintained is significant. The indication is that there are strong emotions under the surface that arise from the feeling of having been exploited or disenfranchised in some manner. And emotions such as these are invariably powerful, regardless of whether they are harnessed or not. This is one of several signals that point towards resultant emotions underneath socialized disguises: the exploited generally cannot help but be subject to feelings of resentment or hostility. In fact, at several junctures, throughout the novel, these feelings do impinge upon their restful so-called rehabilitation in the desert. Even on the first page of the novel, Andy relates a memory of going out into a cornfield and waiting for an eclipse, in “a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely—a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination” (3). This mood is an uneasy one, hovering upon self-destruction, as the eclipse conjures feelings of the end of the world: he watches the “sky go out” (4), as others have “since the dawn of time,” and, one assumes, until the *end* of time.

Visions of the end of the world, unrepentant gluttony, and utter *meanness* are found at some point or other in each of the character’s stories. Even simple descriptive language finds a way to release tension by expressing some degree of aggression. For Andy, it is often self-directed. He describes Palm Springs as having “so little pollution that perspective is warped; the mountains want to smash themselves into my face” (114). Later, he and his friends

peek into shop windows that hawk fluorescent swimwear, date samplers, awful abstract paintings that look like roadkill covered in sparkles. I see hats and gems and pies—such lovely loot, begging for attention like a child who doesn't want to go to bed yet. I want to slit open my stomach and rip out my eyes and cram these sights inside me. Earth. (114)

Yet, Andy is possibly the least expressive in the group of these tendencies. In this way, he is

similar to Dan Underwood, the narrator of *Microserfs*. Dan presumes to create, in his computer, an “unconscious” of sorts—apparently random pages that express his anxieties and free associations—that would seem to allow him better control of himself, and his narrative. *Microserfs* is indeed a more “controlled” novel than any of Coupland’s others. That is, it is grounded in the conceit of “everyday reality.” However, the ‘hijacking’ of pages in the novel is new, and may be seen as a kind of offering to the “other.” This is especially applicable in the instance of the ‘encrypted’ note, apparently from the teenager who is kidnapped by the SLA. Still, for the contemporary reader, the note may require too much input: it is easy to imagine that many people flip past these pages, assuming it is gibberish. This underlying violence in Coupland gains ground in his *Hey Nostradamus* (2003), in which the surface tensions of everyday life culminate irrevocably in Columbine-like terror and killing. Significantly, the parents in the story are shaken by the events. Of course, for Coupland as well as many others, the parental generation signifies convention and authority. However, for the reader of *Generation X*, it is simply easier to ingest the colourful cartoon images and consumer items offered by the text; it is, as Andy says, “such lovely loot” (*Generation X*).

Claire and Dag find themselves, more often than Andy, at that point at which gazing through shop windows turns into self-destructive hyperconsumption, and the lovely consumables transform into roadkill. The attraction quickly turns into disgust, and reminds them of those feelings of resentment and violence that had scared them into coming to the desert in the first place:

“Sometimes,” says Claire, as we drive past the I. Magnin where she works, “I develop this weird feeling when I watch these endless waves of gray hair gobbling up the jewels and perfumes at work. I feel like I’m watching this enormous dinner table surrounded by

hundreds of greedy little children who are so spoiled, and so impatient, that they can't even wait for food to be prepared. They have to reach for live animals placed on the table and suck the food right out of them." (9)

The "weird feeling" that Claire experiences results from her recognition, to some degree, that this "gobbling" is the same as Andy's desire to "cram" the lovely loot inside him. Andy describes Claire as "peddling five-thousand-dollar purses to old bags" (67), the play on "old bag" and "purse" suggesting that consumers are no more than that which they consume. Dag, too, is guilty: he eats a fifty-dollar bill and jokes, "Hey, Andy. You are what you eat" (18). Dag is the one who expresses this "weird feeling" through some sort of action. He says, "I don't know . . . whether I feel more that I want to punish some aging crock for frittering away my world, or whether I'm just upset that the world has gotten too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we're all stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers . . . . I feel insulted either way" (5). Dag then proceeds to effect his personal retribution on a car that sports a bumper sticker that reads, "WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE." Dag enjoys vandalizing personal property. This is true whether it is intentional or not, as he inadvertently dumps radioactive waste in Claire's apartment, leaving it uninhabitable. Andy seems not to understand why he acts this way. He thinks, "I wish I understood this destructive tendency in Dag; otherwise he is such a considerate guy—to the point where once he wouldn't bathe for a week when a spider spun a web in his bathtub." Later, he continues, "Dag . . . is a vandal. I try to understand his behaviour but fail. Last week's scraping of the Cutlass Supreme was merely one incident in a long strand of such events. He seems to confine himself exclusively to vehicles bearing bumper stickers that he finds repugnant. Sure enough, an inspection of [the car he is currently vandalizing] reveals a sticker saying ASK ME ABOUT MY

GRANDCHILDREN” (113). Dag’s emotions also shift from objects of wasteful consumerism to those who consume them. He begins to “find humanity repulsive, reducing it to hormones, flanks, mounds, secretions, and compelling methanous stinks” (30). Eventually, the degree of his disgust causes him to find refuge *from* the desert, just as he had originally sought refuge *in* it.

Andy also feels this way; he despises the fact that his own parents never worry about the state of the world, filling their huge cars with leaded gas, and tossing non-biodegradable trash away with abandon. He mentions that his brother, who writes jingles, always haggles with his agent over “who eats the fax—who’s going to write it off as a business expense.” So, he suggests, the only way to deal with it is to do “the same thing with your parents. Eat them. Accept them as a part of getting you to here, and get on with life. Write them off as a business expense” (85). But he does not seem able to do this himself. “Sometimes,” he continues, “I’d just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of *futurelessness*. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear” (86).

Even with the growing evidence of Andy and Dag’s emotions, the language of violence is skimmed over in *Generation X*. Such skimming renders an ‘outsider’, Tobias, ineffectual, as well. In this circle of friends, the epitome of evil in the Western world is Tobias, a man with “predatory eyes” (90). When Claire finds that he has been sleeping with someone else, Tobias, already defensive, begins attacking:

“You know, when I first met you Claire, I thought that here might finally be a chance for me to be a class-act for once. To develop something sublime about myself. Well, *fuck sublime*, Claire. I don’t *want* dainty little moments of insight. I want everything and I

want it *now*. I want to be ice-picked on the head by a herd of angry cheerleaders, Claire. Angry cheerleaders on *drugs*. You don't *get* that, do you?

I want *action*. I want to be radiator steam hissing on the cement of the Santa Monica freeway after a thousand-car pile up—with acid rock from the smashed cars roaring in the background. I want to be the man in the black hood who switches on the air raid sirens. I want to be naked and windburned and riding the lead missile of a herd heading over to bomb every fucking little village in New Zealand. (159)

Tobias's tirade makes him a contender for the consumer of excess taken to its limits: the desire for desire plus a sense of loathing that is less directed at his parents than at himself. He may not be the future President of Dow, or Union Carbide, but he may make it to the leadership of the country. He ends his argument with Claire, saying, "but hey—if more people like you choose not to play the game, it's easier for people like me to win" (160). But "opting out," as has been suggested, is just playing the game differently. Though he becomes furious at being found out, his force of emotion is eventually accommodated by the narrator and rendered ineffectual. Not much changes for the friends in Palm Springs; they still have the same worries and anxieties. As Andy says, "life goes on" (68). Disturbingly, Andy's remarks on Tobias's character reveal that he is not all that different from the rest of them. At first, Andy thinks,

I see in [Tobias] something that I might have become, something that all of us can become in the absence of vigilance. Something bland and smug that trades on its mask, filled with such rage and such contempt for humanity, such need, that the only food left for such a creature is their own flesh. He is like a passenger on a plane full of diseased people that crashes high in the mountain, and the survivors, not trusting each other's organs, snack on their own forearms. (81)

But “rage and contempt for humanity” are the very emotions that Andy, Claire and Dag are coping with in their storytelling. And their various expressions of violence or disgust for others, even their own parents, cannot be dismissed. It would be difficult to consider the trio as being “vigilant” with their own lives. In addition, when Tobias reveals later that he also has problems making ends meet, that he is not “rich enough,” Andy is overjoyed: this means he is just like us! he thinks. But Andy is comparing himself to the man he has been denouncing as a threat to humanity. Thus, like Dag, though he fears acquiring the cannibalistic tendencies that underlie the conformity of the Tyler set, his fears have not been assuaged by coming to the desert. Like the classic conclusion to the horror film in which the dead rise again in a kind of encore, the terror which the friends think they are leaving behind cannot be rid of so easily.

### The Missing-in-Action

Horror in Coupland is produced from the strength of emotion running through, and around, the characters. It is what gives the semblance of life to the surface sheen of apathy or coolness. Andy thinks that perhaps it is this horror that will force others to engage in a purging of common anxieties. He arrives at his method of therapeutic storytelling by having frequented Alcoholics Anonymous meetings:

At meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, fellow drinksters will get angry with you if you won't puke for the audience. By that, I mean, spill your guts—really dredge up those rotted baskets of fermented kittens and murder implements that lie at the bottoms of all of our personal lakes. AA members want to hear the horror stories of how far you've sunk in life, and no low is low enough. Tales of spouse abuse, embezzlement, and public incontinence are both appreciated and expected. I know this as a fact because I've been to

those meetings (lurid details of my own life will follow at a later date), and I've seen the process of onedownmanship in action—and been angry at not having sordid enough tales of debauchery of my own to share.

“Never be afraid to cough up a bit of diseased lung for the spectators,” said a man who sat next to me at a meeting once, a man with skin like a half-cooked pie crust and who had five grown children who would no longer return his phone calls: “How are people ever going to help themselves if they can't grab onto a fragment of your own horror? People want that little fragment, they *need* it. That little piece of lung makes their own fragments less scary.” I'm still looking for a description of storytelling as vital as this. (*Generation X* 13)

One wonders whether the therapeutic nature of horror stories is meant to alleviate the teller or the listener. The “spectators” want that “little fragment” of lung; “they *need* it.” The language is reminiscent of Tobias's tirade on his need for “*action*,” for spectacle. This does not do much for those who are really looking for communal healing and nurturing. The man who is speaking himself is not in touch with his own large family, and thus, makes the reader wonder just how successful this kind of therapy is. And, again, the aim in this endeavour becomes a competitive one: impressing one another with stories of depravity in order to see who can shock to the highest degree.

This is illustrated by Tobias's “game” which he is focused on winning. This is not a new theme, but an old one. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser was criticised for his rendering of Carrie as a money-hungry opportunist, without indictment. The theme of survival of the fittest was also found in Sinclair Lewis. Even now, there are strong indications that the storytellers in *Generation X* are under this social pressure: to “succeed,” where the meaning of success

continually shifts to mean more and more. They tried to leave the city behind, but in the desert, they find the same things they so despised. They are cornered; that is, they are stuck in the system and cannot avoid “class,” “sex,” and “the future,” because they cannot change or affect that which they were born into. In what was to have been their chosen paradise, Andy, Claire and Dag “eat a box lunch on a land that is barren—the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter—and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony” (16). They have tried to escape, and *think* they have achieved the social and historical freedom that is “the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter.” However, like Edward without his map, they are impinged upon by excesses of information. The landscape is too “hot,” too full of information. To make any kind of difference, to impress their own identities upon the landscape, perhaps their only refuge is to *be* cool, and remain disinterested, even *empty*.

In his attempt to locate this refuge, Dag drops out. Andy and Claire cannot find him, and he provides no explanation for where he has gone. Before this episode, Dag had attempted the same thing in Toronto. He became what he referred to as a “Basement Person” because doing so allowed him to “drop out of the system. . . . Basement People rent basement suites; the air above is too middle class” (26). He even “began occupational slumming: taking jobs so beneath my abilities that people would have to look at me and say, ‘Well, of course he could do *better*.’” Dag’s desperate attempt to outsmart the system is to underachieve, believing he will have contributed to a kind of slippage in the system, whereupon his eventual social position, as it relates to his occupation, is not indicative of his potential. But he realizes that he “needed to drop out even further” (31). Eventually, the narrator’s voice seems to lend credence to this; by wanting to drop out of the system, Dag seems to have lost his place in the narrative: he becomes less of a character, and more of a word that provides a function. For example, when Dag



disappears, the narrator assumes that he is “obviously just Dagged-out someplace” (67). Later, when Dag returns, he is not in good shape, and Andy refers to “Dag’s distress-sale condition” (74). Later, he goes to Claire’s apartment and finds the place “empty save for a heap of Dag” (81). It is as if, in dropping out of the system, one loses his substance, or Subjectivity.

### *American Generic*

Andy, too, is on the verge of disappearing. He describes himself as “being pencil thin and practically albino” (3), and that he was “born with an ectomorphic body, all skin and bones” (47). Later, he says, “I dress to be obscure, to be hidden—to be *generic*. Camouflaged” (15). These are the only physical descriptions of Andy afforded the reader. He is colourless, bodiless, unmarked. In this way, he expresses an almost anorexic need to take up as little space as possible. The “generic” look that Coupland introduces here is taken up in *Microserfs* where The Gap is ubiquitous. At one point, there is a spot-check in the office and all but one person are wearing the label. In her article on Coupland in *The Midwest Quarterly*, Martine Delveaux writes, “More than a representation of its clientele, Gap advertising participates in the construction of a generational look: the “gap” look of the disappearing body, of the fashionable societal void” (175). A “societal void” is just what these young people have been looking for. The Gap is as “brand-free” as clothing can get; it does not impress a personality onto its wearers, but sinks them deeper into anonymity.

Coupland’s aim is to preclude stable, closed definitions of character, and characters who remain anonymous undoubtedly achieve this. That no conclusive ‘identifying marks’ may be found on his characters in *Generation X* is certainly an accomplishment that resists the conventions of description-as-character. Even the generally stable category of gender is shaky in this novel, as some readers find Andy to be a homosexual man masquerading as a heterosexual

one. To be sure, he does not perform a decisively “male” gender. He says, “Claire and I never fell in love, even though we both tried hard,” and while this is not conclusive of anything, he goes on to say, “I’ve never been in love, and *that’s* a problem. I just seem to end up as *friends* with everyone, and I tell you, I really hate it. I want to fall in love. Or at least I think I do” (47). More suggestive is the scene outside Bunny’s party, where Dag and Andy smoke a last cigarette together before Dag goes into the house to confess his crimes of vandalism to the police:

“Well, Andy. Wish me luck,” he says, hopping down off of the cement pipe, then taking a few steps, stopping, turning around then saying to me, “Here, bend over to me a second.” I comply, whereupon he kisses me, triggering films in my mind of liquefied supermarket ceilings cascading upward toward heaven. “There. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

He returns to the big shiny party. (168)

The visions of liquefied supermarket ceilings refer to Dag’s earlier story about how he envisions the end of world via nuclear attack:

“. . . *just* before the fat man [ahead of you in the checkout line] is lifted off his feet, hung in suspended animation, and bursts into flames while the liquefied ceiling lifts and drips upward—

“*Just* before all of this, your best friend cranes his neck, lurches over to where you lie, and kisses you on the mouth, after which he says to you, ‘There. I’ve always wanted to do that.’” (64)

Because of the replay of Dag’s “bedtime story” in the real-life narrative of the novel, the repetition of climactic moment (the kiss) seems more of an engagement with the manipulation of identity rather than a viable “proof” of homosexuality that closes the question. Dag and Andy’s

kiss has less to do with finding one's sexual identity than with Dag's realization that he has come to "the end of the world": he has finally been caught, and the police are waiting to arrest him. He is relieved, confessing to Andy that he had wanted to get caught; his confession, however, is weak and unconvincing in its impact. Perhaps this is because, as Andrew Tate points out,

The trivial acts of vandalism committed by Dag . . . underline the sense of impotency that characterizes Coupland's fictional universe. The casual defacement of an expensive car sporting the baby boomer sticker 'WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE' is certainly anti-social but it can hardly be interpreted as politically seditious. (328)

The fact that it turns out to have been the car of their friend and host, Bunny, adds to this impotency. So does the fact that antisocial Dag, having attempted to create some disorder in the system, goes back into the "big shiny party." One gets the feeling that his slight rebellions—like the revolutions in building character or narrative—will be repeated later on, in some slightly different manner, but hardly with whole-hearted commitment.

The methods of resisting conformity, then, are ineffective in narrative and character because they are read in overly specific and predetermined ways. In fact, Dag seems to be describing the conventional reader when he airs his opinion of yuppies:

Yuppies never gamble, they calculate. They have no aura: ever been to a yuppie party? It's like being in an empty room: empty hologram people walking around peeking at themselves in mirrors and surreptitiously misting their tonsils with Binaca spray, just in case they have to kiss another ghost like themselves. There's just nothing *there*. (21)

Approaching the act of reading with this point of view is helpful. In reading traditionally, responses are more "calculated" than construed. Perhaps because of the grand attention-seizing

spectacles of everyday life, the power of speculation is no longer as easily available to the reader. Instead, a list of “proofs” that may be sufficiently calculated into a nicely balanced equation is the proper end of interpretation. But if the majority of literary works may be reduced to “universal” themes with “universal” symbols, then literature is merely calculus: no wonder people read less in the twentieth century, if the same things may be derived from almost all stories.

Perhaps, then, a reading which approaches the novel differently will yield new products. Rather than negate “feeling” and replace it with the “knowing” that comes from encyclopaedic information, a reading that privileges “feeling” may bring something truly original to texts which necessarily rely on conventions of the novel to garner a wide readership. First, the narrator describes the life which they have abandoned in the hopes of something more:

We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there’s a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now. We arrived here speckled in sores and zits, our colons so tied up in knots that we never thought we’d have a bowel movement again. Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, *much* better. (11)

The urge to quit a life, as one may quit a job, is inherent in many people in North American society. Abandonment, as if one could “abandon” that which controls one, is seductive. As Tate writes, “The desire to escape a pampered and preordained western life [in *Generation X*] . . .

echoes Henry David Thoreau's project of self-sufficiency at Walden Pond . . . [and] the Transcendentalist desire for 'an original relation to the universe' by stripping away the burdens of history" (330-31). But this is also found in the tropes of the road-trip popularized by the Beat poets, the government worker "gone postal," and even the typical mid-life crisis. And this passage from *Generation X*, while important in its revelation of the purpose towards which the storytellers are working, is severely undercut by the words that immediately follow it: the title of the next chapter, "Quit Recycling the Past." Andy's pretence that his new existence is "much, *much* better" is unconvincing; the emphasis seems uncalled for, since he has not provided the details of what has taken the place of the business of their everyday lives. *How* is it better? In essence, the lives of the characters have not changed. Perhaps, also, his words are unpersuasive because he has only divulged a change of *situation*, and not a change of attitude or behaviour or spirituality: things that commonly indicate interiority.

### *Characterizing Landscape*

The heavy burden of history is that which denotes character. The wish to act 'out of character' is gratifying, but also fraught with anxiety, as the fear of freeing oneself from earthly constraints is itself a kind of death. It is interesting, then, that Coupland's novel, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, begins and ends with the narrative of Jared, a ghost; and Andy, the narrator of *Microserfs*, frames the novel with his yearning to communicate with the spirit of his dead brother, Jed.

But once boundaries are perforated, "character" will never be "complete" again. Although Claire says, "I prefer talking with incomplete people; they're more complete" (36), Andy goes to the opposite extreme by "refus[ing] to put people in [his] vision" (8). In fact, he appreciates that "There's more space over here [in the western world] to hide in—to get lost in—to use as camouflage" (56). In the light of this statement, it may be seen that Andy's "visions," or

stories, tend to become “peopled” with landscape. As in Ellis, characterization has shifted its focus from the physical and emotional description of *character* to that of *landscape*. In a way, this eventuality was predictable. If the traditional methods of characterization described, for example, the “distant hills” as a way to signify an individual’s emotional state (as in Hemingway’s “Hills like White Elephants”), then it seems logical that the tipping of the subject-object balance that postmodernity initiated would eventually produce character that functions merely as a descriptor of the landscape. Cities themselves are considered to possess fully-rounded personalities, and how else is personality conveyed by a city than through the people that inhabit it?

The main voice of resistance to this new, postmodern ‘balance’ would be a moral one. To suggest that man is secondary to his environment, not simply in magnificence or force, but in “personality” would be hard to accept for a person of orthodox conventional views. But the constant increase of output has moved the stage from one of production to hyperproduction; subsequently, what society is working *for* is not something that may be found in a grand world-view any longer. Where, in the past, Progress—having taken over from Providence—had seemed a catch-all term for growth, increasing independence and success, it now comes loose from moral significance or meaning and attaches itself to the common landscape of everyday life: the detritus of obsolete cell phones, computers, videocassette recorders and televisions that appears at low tide. These are the images of “technology” and “progress.” The moral bliss that came from a religious belief in Progress and the continual rise in technological innovation towards the greater good dissipates, leaving a general sense of shame and disgust when faced with the constant onslaught of non-biodegradable waste. And—a sneaking feeling that the world *is* crowding in on the individual. The land that once begged for discovery and appropriation is now

fully “occupied,” while on the other hand, any sense of the interior life of the character has been evacuated or, as Coupland might say, jettisoned. While description of the landscape once served as an extension of the individual’s character or inner self, it seems that the individual now merges with the greater essence: *the individual, in fact, becomes one with the scene*. What maximizes the difficulty of accepting this concept is that the landscapes of today are not “natural,” but man-made. Palm Springs (*Generation X*), as well as Las Vegas (*Microserfs*), are “place[s] that should not exist—the city brought into the desert, manufactured and, like Eliot’s London, unreal” (Tate 330). Consider again the following passage from *Generation X*:

*Here [in Palm Springs] the three of us merely eat a box lunch on a land that is barren—the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter—and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony. (16)*

The narrator indicates that the “objects” on the landscape (Andy, Dag and Claire) are “objects of irony.” But, in fact, what irony is produced at all in this scene except that the “characters” are empty, “cool” and have nothing to say while the landscape is “hot” or full of information? The irony is that each of these characters is actually the “blank space.”

In *Polaroids from the Dead*, Coupland also departs from the convention of character because his conceit is not one that is completely fictional. But again, he substitutes a particular landscape for the “characters,” such as Brentwood, California, for O. J. Simpson, and Palm Springs for Marilyn Monroe. In this text, the pages that discuss place or neighbourhood rival those that focus on character. As the character falls into the background, the balance between subject and object suddenly tilts, and the reader finds himself considering the landscape as primary to the purpose. Subsequent to *Polaroids*, in fact, Coupland writes *City of Glass*, a book that takes as its primary subject the city of Vancouver. In other words, once character becomes

so undefined as to require contextual evidence to support its existence, landscape *becomes* character.



## Conclusion:

### Missing-in-Action

In *Generation X*, Andy disparages his parents because, he says, “[t]hey take shopping at face value” (133). He suggests that they, along with much of society, consume product unconsciously; that is, they do not interrogate the line between consumer and consumed. They are not vigilant buyers and, as such, lack the awareness that by propagating labels, they contribute to the edification of a world that privileges sameness and familiarity over the continual adjustment of cognitive paradigms. “New” knowledge cannot be gained when there are a finite number of perfected models from which to work. In the literary world, the reader who lacks this kind of vigilance “buys into” the propagation of types: both narrative and character ones. Andy’s criticism contains a warning for the reader: the reader must not take *interpretation* at face value either, where face value is the denotation of value to the interior of a commodity without further investigation as to its ‘true’ value. Face value is market value. It appraises a literary type according to its similarity to other products in the same genre. But, in some cases, the reader is ill equipped to assess the value of certain ‘products,’ and must resort to accepting market value without question. This means that a character that exhibits *some* elements of a certain type will be assimilated within that certain type; any excess information that does not fit into this process of typification will fade away from consciousness. The common reader, including Andy’s parents, generally does not have good (literary) value judgement; resorting to the rule of convention, her readings are uncritical, unconscious and exclusive.

In a contemporary postindustrial society, characters are constructed by readerly expectations that process information according to recognizable ‘type.’ That is, by

accommodating certain details—behaviour, language, inner dialogue—the reader constructs a popular storyline or narrative around the character, such that the character itself often seems, in the end, inconsequential (“flat,” “empty,” “stereotypical”). In accordance with these rules of convention, character in the fictions of Ellis and Coupland is put into motion, all the time beginning to suspect the vapidness of his inner self.

These authors, along with other writers of so-called “blank fictions,” accept that the interchange of labels is commonplace in a postmodern culture, where the slickness of a literary product is valorized over human imperfection. In this culture, character depends upon product or ‘lifestyle’ (which is merely viewed as a succession of product) to indicate what he feels or what he thinks; thus, in relegating his human essence to expressions of commodity consumption, he dispenses his ‘humanity.’ There is an evacuation of his interior life as more and more of his humanity is expressed through external markings. Eventually, any expression of his ‘true self’ yields only more product. When so much of his interiority is indicated through external products, he becomes an expression of the product that flows through him (giving an entirely new meaning to human productivity). He becomes ‘a walking billboard,’ characterizing or *giving character* to the product more than the product could ever characterize him. In both authors’ works, the landscape or cityscape figures into this equation. Popular tourist sites become commodities themselves, and since the characters in the novels have been ‘emptied out,’ the city or landscape rushes in to appropriate these spaces. After all, the absolute right of the American marketplace (as it takes over from the spirit of manifest destiny) is to ever-increasingly expand, looking for new frontiers to be appropriated.

Earlier authors, including Melville, have dealt with complex issues of characterization in a culture based on reproduction. Ellis and Coupland, however, problematize the negation of

character as well as the negation of the *process* of characterization. Clearly, some of the elements of characterization that negate themselves are physical description, speech and action. As well, where conventional symbols are commonly used in fiction to indicate the interiority of a character, Ellis and Coupland's method of juxtaposing those symbols with other elements serves to bind resultant meaning in a deadlock. In the end, the power of convention is severely undercut. For example, in Coupland's fiction, subject-positions are always in the process of destabilizing themselves. For these characters, links to their own subjectivities and bodies are tenuous, at best. Even so, Dag decides to drop out even further from this narrative system. Consequently, he becomes a play on words; his character literally becomes a twist in language. In an attempt to make an impression on the dehumanizing society in which he lives, he ineffectually starts fires or commits small acts of vandalism. In the end, he admits to Andy that he wanted to get caught, confess, and be punished. Strangely, Ellis's Patrick Bateman follows the same narrative. Though his crimes against society are much higher in degree, they too must be 'ineffectual' because they go unnoticed by society. Moreover, those who hear his confessions flatly decline the narratives of his actions, whether or not they actually occurred. Thus, the reader is precluded from attaching herself to one version of events or another. In this way, there can be no defining characteristic of Patrick because the boundaries of personality, and the line between antisocial tendencies and psychosis are never quite defined. Similarly, in *Less than Zero*, the point at which Clay would be moved to action is never quite established. In each case, boundaries are blurred such that readerly consensus is thwarted. Without ever becoming privy to a character's intentions and motivations, the reader can only attempt to determine character from the accompanying action. Thus, Patrick literally goes missing-in-action while, in *Less Than Zero*, Clay becomes missing-*inaction*.

In response to overarching domination of the narrative, Ellis's characters default to a hyperconsumption of narrative in an attempt to confer character. In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman becomes the subject of several stock narratives, such as the murder mystery, the conspiracy theory, the disenchantment of the Gen Xer, the boredom of the very rich and privileged, the desperation of the man on the run from the authorities, and even the romance. The tendency of the conventional reader is to *apply* these narratives to Patrick and then *conform* him to the pre-formed roles that are intertwined with each narrative type. However, the contradictions that arise are too much for such easy accommodations, and the end result is that Patrick himself cannot be cleanly accommodated within any of these roles. Without these roles or boundaries, I hope I have shown, Patrick successfully thwarts traditional characterization and regains an agency that had been lost in type.

In his own quest to confer agency to the individual within dominating structures, Coupland first tries to recycle narrative, to overcome it by putting narrative into fast-forward, rewind and circular repetition. In his *Generation X* and *Microserfs*, character consumes event and description in order to confer character. In a bid to gain identity, for example, Andy engages in compulsive and repeated attempts to *get to the end of story*: he erroneously believes that once he narrates the end of his own story, he will finally be able to know *who* his character is. After all, it is only when the story finishes that the reader can conclusively establish whether she has read a spiritual quest, a romance, a comedy or a tragedy. But in Coupland, one story ends where another begins; character identification is deferred again and again. The quest of 'finding oneself,' of finding one's true identity through the act of telling stories, fails. In *Polaroids from the Dead*, however, Coupland resumes his quest from a different angle. This time, he engages head-on with narrative, inquiring as to the possibility of finally 'denarrating' character. He

problematizes the assumption that a 'true' character underlies the projected image. And again, he ends with an image while the 'true' character remains missing in action.

Ellis's and Coupland's approaches to character represent a larger movement in late Modern North American literature that takes as its focus the problematization of the popular and conventional function of character. Realistic characterization is perverted as a reaction against the devolution of personality and characterization under the pressures of a commodity culture. These authors write characters that fail to act under the pressure of consumerism's assault in economies both real and imagined (literary). What the reader is left with are merely husks that once housed an event or act: the Simpson episode, Patrick-in-description, Clay-inaction and even, in Lewis's *Main Street*, Carol-in-(Brownian)motion.

Overblown characters create a slightly skewed effect that alienates the reader from making easy accommodations. Similar to de Lauretis's reinscription of types "in excess as excess," this approach defamiliarizes by allowing recognition while preventing cognition. On the one hand, Patrick presents as a psychopathic degenerate; on the other, there are indications (information in excess) that he would like to fit into an idyllic, Harlequin romance. He is the murderer, the lover; the overprivileged, the underdog; the successful businessman, the powerless social climber; and the 'model,' yet also, the generic. Descriptive types are 'overblown' because they are recycled throughout the character's progression in the story and retain no coherent social value; in other words, readerly knowing is problematized. In *Generation X*, Coupland's practice of repetitive social labeling (some of the subgroups of his conception of Generation X are black holes, squires, and earth tones) makes the reader averse to grouping according to type because it is so overdone that its usefulness is greatly undermined. At the same time, it is difficult to ascertain any knowledge of his characters *other* than the ascription of these labels. His characters

convey the sense that they are aware of their own replaceability, their own redundancy. This is signified, as well, in their compulsive approach to storytelling which constantly highlights the process of creating fiction such that the reader is always aware that she is *reading a fiction*. To the extent that the novel acknowledges its own fictiveness, reader identification with the characters is always kept at a distance.

In this study, the locus or point at which character should be affirmed proves to be vacant. The 'action' is often the character's shedding and donning of masks and disguises to cover a self that is missing in action. In *Microserfs*, the theme of identity and 'finding oneself' is overlaid by the characters' presentation of themselves in various extremes, and the expected enlightenment that the transformation traditionally promises in literature does not visit the characters. For example, Karla is psychologically detached from her body while Sue is extremely body-conscious (working out, accumulating muscle, tattoos and body-art); Todd identifies himself as a marxist socialist one day, and staunchly on the political right the next; the entire group is dedicated to consumerism until they decide to become minimalists and sell all their belongings in a garage sale. What becomes shady is the line between identity as something external and constructed, and identity as an 'inner self.' This 'shadiness' occurs because character does not simply exist *within* the socioeconomic framework in the novel, but is constructed *by* this socioeconomic world (or a microcosm of it, such as the workplace). In Ellis, the products of this framework are Clay and Patrick, both of whom exhibit indications of 'emptiness.' By the end of the novels, the reader accepts them more as place-markers on a plotline rather than *people* in the possibly real world. Charles Child Walcutt's *Man's Changing Mask* sets out to "show how characterization depends upon plot" (i), or a map of ascending and descending action. The only thing that is truly 'dependable' is this hierarchical schema that holds

human relations in place.

Even in an age in which characters are often described as “flat” and “schematized,” as William E. Gruber terms it, we are given clues that “the individual’s place in the world is not as secure or central as we imagine it once was” (1). While feeling secure is a common human desire, the insecurity of *place* also opens up possibilities for an increasing ‘solidity’ of character. When the external elements of characterization are found to be changeable and therefore unpredictable, the focus on those elements in analyzing character must dissipate. Thus, the reader must resort, as a default, to other indications of a character’s inner life. Vida E. Markovic states that the individual’s struggle with and against the institutions of everyday life “can be a threat to human destiny (individuality, agency, humanity, etc.)” (xvii). Indeed, in contemporary society, the character is basically mobilized into its primary mode of action by whatever institution it is subject to: symbolically, the panopticon, the corporate building or the world of work, or the institutions of law, the patriarchy and other “grand narratives.” His is a body that is assembled by the overarching strategies of narrative, whether it is the character’s intention to work *with* or *against* them. This is what Aristotle described in his *Poetics* as a characterization built from a character’s reactions to *situation*. However, when one scrutinizes the characters in certain works, such as those by Ellis and Coupland, characterizations tend to ‘slip,’ revealing an indeterminacy that cannot be resolved. This type of reading redeems character from being wholly subsumed by its socioeconomic or narrative framework. The shift is from a thoroughly *knowable* subject, a subject from which one may draw every unconscious urge, every motivation, every want, conscious or unconscious. In the works of fiction analyzed here, a conventional reading cannot reveal *all*. In them, there is a growing resistance to providing a ‘roundness’ to characters that paradoxically flattens them into type; this is a ‘roundness’ that allows the reader to ‘know’ the

character before getting very far in the story. Instead, these authors approach character in different ways which allow for a gap, a space of *not-knowing*, that problematizes easy interpretations of character. These characters have not only been taken in but have been *formed* by the socioeconomic sphere; Ellis, Coupland and other writers of “blank fiction,” however, succeed in leaving their characters some space to breathe among the grooves of their negative impressions, so that they may inhabit a society without allowing their social role to inhabit them.



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