

# CHILDREN OF THE PIED PIPER

Mailer on 'American Psycho'

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hen

Simon and Schuster dumped  
Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*  
on the grounds that it was  
offensively tasteless and Vintage Books  
snapped it up for publication this month,  
a media slugfest ensued between  
feminists and First Amendment acolytes.

NORMAN MAILER,  
who is now *V.F.*'s writer-at-large,  
joins the battle

"THE COMMUNISTS," SAYS SOMEONE AT A literary party, "at least had the decency to pack it in after seventy years. Capitalism is going to last seven hundred, and before it's done, there will be nothing left."

If there is reality to *American Psycho*, by Bret Easton Ellis—if, that is, the book offers any insight into a spiritual plague—then capitalism is not likely to approach its septicentennial, for this novel reverses the values of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Where *Bonfire* owed some part of its success to the reassurance it offered the rich—"You may be silly," Wolfe was saying in effect, "but, brother, the people down at the bottom are unspeakably worse"—Ellis's novel inverts the equation. I cannot recall a piece of fiction by an American writer which depicts so odious a ruling class—worse, a young ruling class of Wall Street princelings ready, presumably, by the next century to manage the mighty if surrealistic levers of our economy. Nowhere in American literature can one

Illustration by PHILIP BURKE





Bret Easton Ellis:  
"The writer may have  
enough talent  
to be taken seriously.  
How one wishes he were  
without talent!"



point to an inhumanity of the moneyed upon the afflicted equal to the following description. I think it is best to present it uncut from the original manuscript:

Bags of frozen garbage line the curbs. The moon, pale and low, hangs just above the tip of the Chrysler Building. Somewhere from over in the West Village the siren from an ambulance screams, the wind picks it up and it echoes then fades.

The bum, a black man, lays in the doorway of an abandoned antique store on Twelfth Street on top of an open grate, surrounded by bags of garbage and a shopping cart from Gristede's loaded with what I suppose are personal belongings: newspapers, bottles, aluminum cans. A handpainted cardboard sign attached to the front of the cart reads: I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME. A dog, a small mutt, short-haired and rail thin, lies next to the bum, its makeshift leash tied to the handle of the grocery cart. I don't notice the dog the first time I pass the bum. It's only after I circle the block, walking up to him that I see it laying in a pile of newspapers, guarding him, a collar around its neck with an oversized nameplate that reads: Gizmo. The dog looks up to me wagging its skinny, pathetic excuse for a tail and when I hold out a gloved hand it licks at it hungrily. The stench of some kind of cheap alcohol mixed with excrement hangs over the bum like a thick, invisible cloud and I have to hold my breath, before adjusting to the stink. The bum wakes up and opens his eyes, yawning, exposing remarkably browned, stained teeth between purple lips.

The bum is fortyish, heavy-set, and when he attempts to sit up I can make out his features more clearly in the glare of the streetlamp: a few days growth of beard, triple-chin, a ruddy nose lined with thin brown veins. He's dressed in some kind of tacky looking lime-green polyester pantsuit with washed-out dated Sergio Valente jeans worn over it (this season's homeless persons fashion statement) along with an orange and brown V-neck sweater ripped and stained with what looks like burgundy wine. It seems he's very drunk—either that or he's crazy or stupid. His eyes can't even focus in on me when I stand over him, blocking out the light from a streetlamp, covering him in shadow. I kneel down.

"Hello," I say, offering my hand, the one the dog licked. "Pat Bateman."

The bum stares at me, panting with the exertion it takes to sit up. He doesn't shake my hand.

"You want some money?" I ask gently. "Some food?"

The bum nods and starts to cry, thankfully.

I reach into my pocket and pull out first a ten dollar bill then change my mind and hold out a five to him instead. "Is this what you need?"

The bum nods again and looks away, shamefully, his nose running and after clearing his throat, sobs quietly, "I'm so hungry."

"It's cold out too," I say. "Isn't it?"

"I'm so hungry," the bum moans again and he convulses once, twice, a third time, then embarrassed, looks away.

"Why don't you get a job?" I ask, the bill still held in my hand but not within the bum's reach. "If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job?"

He breathes in, shivering and between sobs, admits, "I lost my job... oh lord..."

"Why?" I ask, genuinely interested. "Were you drinking? Is that why you lost it? Insider trading? Just joking. No, really—were you drinking on the job?"

He hugs himself, inbetween sobs, chokes, "I was fired. I was laid-off."

I take this in, nodding. "Gee, uh, that's too bad."

"I'm so hungry," he says, then starts crying hard, still holding himself. His dog, the thing called Gizmo, starts whimpering.

"Why don't you get another one?" I ask. "Why don't you get another job?"

"I'm not..." He coughs, holding himself, shaking miserably, violently, unable to finish the sentence.

"You're not what?" I ask softly. "Qualified for anything else?"

"I'm hungry," he whispers, imploringly.

"I know that, I know that," I say. "Jeez, you sound like a broken record. I'm trying to help you..." My impatience rises.

"I'm hungry," he repeats.

"Listen. Do you think it's fair to take money from people who *do* have a job?" I ask him. "Who *do* work?"

His face, still contorted with sobs, crumples and he gasps, almost crying out, his voice raspy, "What am I gonna do?"

"Listen, what's your name?" I ask.

"Al," he says.

"Speak up," I tell him. "Come on."

"Al," he says, louder.

"Get a goddamn job, Al," I say, earnestly. "You've got a negative attitude. That's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together. *I'll* help you."

"You're so kind mister. You're kind. You're a kind man," he blubbers. "I can tell."

"Sssshhh," I whisper. "It's okay." I start petting the dog.

"Please," he says, grabbing my wrist, but lightly, with kindness. "I don't know what to do. I'm so cold."

I ask him, "Do you know how bad you smell?" I whisper this soothingly, stroking his face. "The *stench*. My god..."

"I can't..." he chokes, then swallows, shaking. "I can't find a shelter."

"You *reek*," I tell him again. "You *reek* of... *shit*..." I'm still petting the dog, its eyes wide and wet and grateful. "Do you know that? Goddamnit Al, look at me and stop crying like some kind of *faggot*," I shout. My rage builds then subsides and I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to the bridge of my nose which I squeeze tightly, then sigh, "Al... I'm sorry. It's just that... I don't know, I don't have anything in common with you."

The bum's not listening. He's crying so hard he's incapable of a coherent answer. I put the bill slowly back into the other pocket of my Luciano Soprani jacket and with the other hand stop petting the dog and reach into the other pocket. The bum stops sobbing abruptly and sits up, looking for the fiver or, I presume, his bottle of Thunderbird. I reach out and touch his face gently, once more with compassion and whisper, "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long thin knife with a serrated edge and being very careful not to kill the bum push maybe half-an-inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina and blinding him.

The bum is too surprised to say anything. He only opens his mouth in shock and moves a grubby, mittened hand slowly up to his face. I yank his pants down and in the passing headlights of a taxi can make out his flabby black thighs, rashed because of constant urinating in his pantsuit, the stench of shit rises quickly into my face and breathing through my mouth, on my haunches, I start stabbing him below the stomach, lightly, in the dense matted patch of pubic hair. This sobers him up somewhat and instinctively he tries to cover himself with his hands and the dog starts barking, yipping really, furiously, but it doesn't attack, and I keep stabbing at the bum now in between his fingers, stabbing the back of his hands. His eye, burst open, hangs out of its socket and runs down his face and he keeps blinking which causes what's left of it inside the wound to pour out, like red, veiny egg yolk. I grab his head with the one hand and push it back and then with my thumb and forefinger hold the other eye

open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket, first breaking the protective film so the socket fills with blood, then slitting the eyeball open sideways and he finally starts screaming once I slit his nose in two, spraying me, the dog with blood, Gizmo blinking trying to get the blood out of his eyes. I quickly wipe the blade clean across his face, breaking open the muscle above his cheek. Still kneeling I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood, both sockets hollowed out, what's left of his eyes literally oozing over his lips, creating thick, webby strands when stretched across his screaming open mouth. I whisper calmly, "There's a quarter. Go buy some gum you crazy fucking nigger." Then I turn my attention to the barking dog and when I get up, stomp on its front paws while its crouched down ready to jump at me, its fangs bared, and immediately crunch the bones in both its legs and it falls on its side squealing in pain, its front paws sticking up in the air at an obscene, satisfying angle. I can't help but start laughing and I linger at the scene, amused by this tableaux. When I spot an approaching taxi, I slowly walk away.

Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped-up, as if I've just worked out heavily, endorphins flooding my nervous system, my ears buzzing, my body tuning in, embracing that first line of cocaine, inhaling the first puff of a fine cigar, sipping that first glass of Cristal.

Obviously, we have a radioactive pile on our hands. Canceled by Simon and Schuster two months before publication at an immediate cost to the publisher of a \$300,000 advance, picked up almost at once by Vintage Books, and commented upon all over the media map in anticipation of Christmas, although the book will now not come out much before Easter, we are waiting for a work with not one, not two, but twenty or thirty scenes of unmitigated torture. Yet, the writer may have enough talent to be taken seriously. How one wishes he were without talent! One does not want to be caught defending *American Psycho*. The advance word is a tidal wave of bad cess.

The Sunday *New York Times Book Review* took the unprecedented step of printing a review, months in advance, on December 16. In the form of an editorial titled "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" it is by Roger Rosenblatt, a "columnist for Life magazine and an essayist for 'The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour,'" who writes in a style to remind one of the critical bastinadoes with which *Time* magazine used to flog the ingenuous asses of talented young writers forty years ago.

"*American Psycho*" is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest. . . . Patrick Bateman . . . is a Harvard graduate, 26 years old, is single, lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side, nurtures his

appearance obsessively, frequents health clubs by day and restaurants by night and, in his spare time, plucks out the eyes of street beggars, slits the throats of children and does things to the bodies of women not unlike things that Mr. Ellis does to prose. . . .

But his true inner satisfaction comes when he has a woman in his clutches and can entertain her with a nail gun or a power drill or Mace, or can cut off her head or chop off her arms or bite off breasts or dispatch a starving rat up her vagina.

The context of these high jinks is young, wealthy, hair-slicked-back, narcissistic, decadent New York, of which, one

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only assumes, Mr. Ellis disapproves. It's a bit hard to tell what Mr. Ellis intends exactly, because he languishes so comfortably in the swamp he purports to condemn.

The indictment becomes more personal in *Spy*, December 1990, by a young—I assume he is young—man who calls himself Todd Stiles:

[Ellis] couldn't actually write a book that would earn attention on its merits, so he chose a course that will inevitably cause controversy and get him lots of press and allow him to pontificate, kind of like the novelist and critic Leo Tolstol, on the question What is Art? *I am purposely exaggerating the way yuppie men treat women. That's the point, he will say. I meant to convey the madness of the consumerist eighties.* Not much could be more sickening than the misogynistic barbarism of this novel, but almost as repellent will be Ellis's callow cynicism as he justifies it.

In fact, Ellis has given a few indications that he is ready to justify it. For the "Arts & Leisure" section of the *Sunday Times*, December 2, 1990, he wrote a piece called "The Twentysomethings, Adrift in a Pop Landscape."

We're basically unshockable. . . . This generation has been wooed with visions of violence, both fictive and real, since childhood.

If violence in films, literature and in some heavy-metal and rap music is so extreme. . . . it may reflect the need to be terrified in a time when the sharpness of horror-film tricks seems blunted by repetition on the nightly news.

It is obvious. Ellis wants to break through steel walls. He will set out to shock the unshockable. And *Spy* writer Todd Stiles is right—we are face-to-face once more with the old



curmudgeon "novelist and critic Leo Tolstoi" (who not so long ago used to be known as Tolstoy). We have to ask the question once more: What is art? The clue presented by Bret Easton Ellis is his odd remark on "the need to be terrified."

Let me take us through my reading of the book, even though the manuscript I read was close to 200,000 words; the Vintage edition is bound to be shorter, for the novel is needlessly long—in fact, the first fifty pages are close to unendurable. There is no violence yet, certainly not if the signature of violence is blood, but the brain receives a myriad of dull returns. No one who enters the book has features, only clothing. We will learn in a while that we are in the mind of our serial killer, Patrick Bateman, but from the second page on, we are assaulted by such sentences as this: "Price is wearing a six-button wool-and-silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie, and leather wing-tips by Fratelli Rossetti." On page 5, "Courtney opens the door and she's wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk satin D'Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik."

By page 12, Price is "lying on a late 18th century French Aubusson carpet drinking espresso from a cerelane coffee cup on the floor of Evelyn's room. I'm lying on Evelyn's bed holding a tapestry pillow from Jenny B. Goode nursing a cranberry and Absolut."

Bateman's apartment has "a long, white down-filled sofa and a 30 inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-con-

ceeded in warping the parameters of the human palate is visited by the Wall Street yuppies of this book. For tens of thousands of words, we make our way through "cold corn chowder lemon bisque with peanuts and dill...swordfish meatloaf with kiwi mustard."



Themes will alternate in small variations. We pass from meetings at the office (where business is never transacted) to free-weight workouts in the gym, to Nell's, to taxi rides, to more descriptions of clothing, furnishings, accessories, cosmetics, to conference calls to expedite restaurant reservations, to acquaintances who keep mistaking each other's names, to video rentals and TV shows. We are almost a third of the way through an unending primer on the artifacts of life in New York, a species of dream where one is inhaling not quite enough air and the narrative never stirs because there is no narrative. New York life in these pages is circular, one's errands footsteps in the caged route of the prison bull pen. Bateman is living in a hell where no hell is external to ourselves and so all of existence is hell. The advertisements have emerged like sewer creatures from the greed-holes of the urban cosmos. One reads on addicted to a vice that offers no pleasure whatsoever. One would like to throw the book away. It is boring and it is intolerable—these are the worst and dullest characters a talented author has put before us in a long time, but we cannot get around to quitting. The work is obsessive—the question cannot be answered, at least not yet: Is *American Psycho* with or without art? One has to keep

reading to find out. The novel is not written so well that the art becomes palpable, declares itself against all odds, but then, it is not written so badly that one can reject it with clear conscience. For the first third of its narrativeless narrative it gives off a mood not dissimilar to living through an unrelenting August in New York when the sky is never clear and rain never comes.

Then the murders begin. They are not dramatic. They are episodic. Bateman kills man, woman, child, or dog, and disposes of the body by any variety of casual means. He has penetrated to the core of indifference in New York. Humor commences; movie audiences will

laugh with all the hysteria in their plumbing as Bateman puts a body in a sleeping bag, drags it past his doorman, heaves it into a cab, stops at a tenement apartment he keeps as his private boneyard, hefts it up four flights of stairs, and drops the cadaver in a bathtub full of lime. Smaller body parts are allowed to molder in the other apartment with the concert grand and the ashtrays from Fortunoff. To visitors, he explains away the close air by suggesting that he cannot find just where the rat has died. He gets blood on his clothing and brings this soiled package to a Chinese laundry. A few days later, he will curse them out for failing to clean his suit immaculately. The proprietors know the immutable spots are blood, but who is to debate the point? If you argue with a stranger in New York, he may kill you.

So, Bateman's murders are episodic: Nothing follows

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trast highly defined model...a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five watt-per-channel on-board amp." We progress through Super Hi-Band Beta units, three-week eight-event timers, four hurricane halogen lamps, a "glass-top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin," "crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff," a Wurlitzer jukebox, a black ebony Baldwin concert grand, a desk and magazine rack by Gio Ponti, and on to the bathroom, which presents twenty-two name products in its inventory. One has to keep reminding oneself that on reading Beckett for the first time it was hard not to bellow with fury at the monotony of the language. We are being asphyxiated with state-of-the-art commodities.

Ditto the victuals. Every trendy restaurant that has suc-

from them. His life goes on. He works out in the gym with dedication, he orders shad roe and pickled rabbit's kidney with cilantro mousse, he consumes bottles of Cristal with friends, and in discos he scores cocaine. Over one summer, he has an idyll in the Hamptons with Evelyn, the girl he may marry, and succeeds in restraining himself from murdering her; he masturbates over porny videos, he tells a friend in the middle of an acrimonious meal that if friend does not button his lip, he will be obliged to splatter friend's blood all over the blonde bitch at the next table, and, of course, the speech is heard but not taken in. Not over all that restaurant gabble, not in all that designer din. When tension builds, Bateman kills in the same state of loneliness with which he masturbates; for relief, he hires two escort girls and tortures them to death before going off to the office next morning to instruct his secretary on who he will be available to on the telephone, and who not.

The murders begin to take their place with the carambola sorbet, the Quilted Giraffe, the Casio QD-150 Quick-Dialer, the Manolo Blahnik shoes, the baby soft-shell crabs with grape jelly. Not differentiated in their prose from all the other descriptions, an odd aesthetic terror is on the loose. The destruction of the beggar is small beer by now. A boy who strays a short distance from his mother at the Central Park Zoo is killed without a backward look. A starving rat is indeed introduced into the vagina of a half-slaughtered woman. Is Bateman the monster or Bret Easton Ellis? At best, what is to be said of such an imagination? The book is disturbing in a way to remind us that attempts to create art can be as intolerable as foul manners. One finishes with an uneasy impulse not to answer the question but to bury it. Of course, the question can come back to haunt us. A novel has been written that is bound to rest in unhallowed ground if it is executed without serious trial.

So the question returns, what is art? What can be so important about art that we may have to put up with a book like this? And the answer leads us to the notion that without serious art the universe is doomed.

These are large sentiments, but then, we live in a world which, by spiritual measure, if we could measure it, might be worse than any of the worlds preceding it. Atrocities, injustice, and the rape of nature have always been with us, but they used to be accompanied by whole architectures of faith that gave some vision to our sense of horror at what we are. Most of us could believe in Catholicism, or Marxism, or Baptism, or science, or the American family, or Allah, or Utopia, or trade-unionism, or the synagogue, or the goodness of the American president. By now, we all know that some indefinable piece of the whole is not amenable to analysis, reason, legislative manipulation, committees, expertise, precedent, hard-earned rule of thumb, or even effective political corruption. We sense all too clearly that the old methods no longer suffice, if they ever did. The colloquies of the managers (which can be heard on any given TV night and twice on Sunday morning) are now a restricted ideology, a jargon that does not come close to covering our experience, particularly our spiritual experience—our suspicion that the lashings have broken loose in the hold.

In such a world, art becomes the remaining link to the unknown. We are far beyond those eras when the English

could enjoy the spoils of child labor during the week and read Jane Austen on the weekend. Art is no longer the great love who is wise, witty, strengthening, tender, wholesomely passionate, secure, life-giving—no, Jane Austen is no longer among us to offer a good deal more than she will disrupt, nor can Tolstoy still provide us (at least in the early and middle work) with some illusion that life is well proportioned and one cannot cheat it, no, we are far beyond that moral universe—art has now become our need to be terrified. We live in the fear that we are destroying the universe, even as we mine deeper into its secrets. So art may be needed now to provide us with just those fearful insights that the uneasy complacencies of our leaders do their best to avoid. It is art that has to take the leap into all the truths that our media society is insulated against. Since the stakes are higher, art may be more important to us now than ever before.

Splendid, you may say, but where is *American Psycho* in all this? Is the claim being advanced that it is art?

I am going to try an answer on these lines: Art serves us best precisely at that point where it can shift our sense of what is possible, when we now know more than we knew before, when we feel we have—by some manner of leap—encountered the truth. That, by the logic of art, is always worth the pain. If, then, our lives are dominated by our fears, the fear of violence dominates our lives. Yet we know next to nothing about violence, no matter how much of it we look at and live with. Violence in movies tells us nothing. We know it is special effects.

All the more valuable then might be a novel about a serial killer, provided we could learn something we did not know before. Fiction can serve as our reconnaissance into all those jungles and up those precipices of human behavior that psychiatry, history, theology, and sociology are too intellectually encumbered to try. Fiction is indeed supposed to bring it back alive—all that forbidden and/or unavailable experience. Fiction can conceive of a woman's or a man's last thoughts where medicine would offer a terminal sedative. So Ellis's novel cannot be disqualified solely by a bare description of its contents, no matter how hideous are the extracts. The good is the enemy of the great, and good taste is certainly the most entrenched foe of literature. Ellis has an implicit literary right, obtained by the achievements of every important and adventurous novelist before him, to write on any subject, but the more he risks, the more he must bring back or he will leach out the only capital we have, which is our literary freedom.

We have to take, then, the measure of this book of horrors. It has a thesis: *American Psycho* is saying that the eighties were spiritually disgusting and the author's presentation is the crystallization of such horror. When an entire new class thrives on the ability to make money out of the manipulation of money, and becomes altogether obsessed with the surface of things—that is, with luxury commodities, food, and appearance—then, in effect, says Ellis, we have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: the objective correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder. Murder is now a lumbermill where humans can be treated with the same lack of respect as trees. (And scream commensurately—Bateman's main tools of dispatch are knives, chain saws, nail guns.) (Continued on page 220)



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## Mailer on Ellis

(Continued from page 159)

Such a massive thesis does not sit well on underdeveloped legs—nothing less than a great novel can support a great, if monstrous, thesis. A good novel with too major a theme can only be crushed by the weight of what it is carrying. The test of *American Psycho* is whether we can ever believe the tale. Of course, it is a black comedy—that all-purpose cop-out!—but even black comedies demand an internal logic. If we can accept the idea that the political air turned flatulent after eight years with the hornpipe wheezes of the Pied Piper, we must also entertain the thesis that the unbridled manipulations of the money-decade subverted the young sufficiently to produce wholly aimless lives for a generation of Wall Street yuppies. But was it crowned by the ultimate expression of all these meaningless lives—one total monster, a Patrick Bateman? Can he emerge entirely out of no more than vapidity, cupidity, and social meaninglessness? It does not matter whether a man like him does, in fact, exist; for all we know there might be a crew of Patrick Batemans at large in New York right now.

The demand is not that Bateman be factual, but that he be acceptable as fiction. Do we read these pages believing that the same man who makes his rounds of restaurants and pretends to work in an office, this feverish snob with a presence so ordinary that most of his casual acquaintances keep mistaking him at parties and discos for other yuppies who look somewhat like him, can also be the most demented killer ever to appear in the pages of a serious American novel? The mundane activity and the supersensational are required to meet.

Bret Easton Ellis enters into acute difficulties with this bicameral demand. He is a writer whose sense of style is built on the literary conviction (self-serving for many a limited talent) that there must not be one false note. In consequence, there are often not enough notes. Even with writers as splendidly precise as Donald Barthelme, as resonant with recollected sorrow as Raymond Carver, or as fine-edged as Ann Beattie, there are often not enough notes. A book can survive as a classic even when it offers much too little—*The Great Gatsby* is the prime example forever—but then, Fitzgerald was writing about the slowest murders of them all, social exclusion, whereas Ellis believes he is close enough to Dostoyevsky's

ground to quote him in the epigraph. Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him. We pay a terrible price for reading about intimate violence—our fears are stirred, and buried savageries we do not wish to meet again in ourselves stir uneasily in the tombs to which we have consigned them. We cannot go out on such a trip unless we believe we will end up knowing more about extreme acts of violence, know a little more, that is, of the real inner life of the murderer.

Bateman, however, remains a cipher. His mother and brother appear briefly in the book and are, like all the other characters, faceless—we are less close to Bateman's roots than to his meals. Exeter and Harvard are named as parts of his past but in the manner of Manolo Blahnik and Ermenegildo Zegna—names in a serial sequence. Bateman is driven, we gather, but we never learn from what. It is not enough to ascribe it to the vast social rip-off of the eighties. The abstract ought to meet the particular. In these pages, however, the murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex. Bateman is empty of inner reaction and no hang-ups occur. It may be less simple to kill humans and dispose of them than is presented here, even as real sex has more turns than the soulless high-energy pump-outs of the pornographic. Bateman, as presented, is soulless, and because we cannot begin to feel some instant of pity for him, so the writing about his acts of violence is obliged to become more hideous externally and more affectless within until we cease believing that Ellis is taking any brave leap into truths that are not his own—which happens to be one of the transcendent demands of great fiction. No, he is merely working out some ugly little corners of himself.

Of course, no one could write if art were entirely selfless. Some of the worst in us has also to be smuggled out or we would use up our substance before any book was done. All the same, a line is always in place between art and therapy. Half of the outrage against this book is going to come from our suspicion that Ellis is not creating Bateman so much as he is cleaning out pest nests in himself. No reader ever forgives a writer who uses him for therapy.

If the extracts of *American Psycho* are horrendous, therefore, when taken out of context, that is Ellis's fault. They are, for the most part, simply not written well enough. If one is embarked on a novel



that hopes to shake American society to the core, one has to have something new to say about the outer limits of the deranged—one cannot simply keep piling on more and more acts of machicolated butchery.

The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from his imagination (which in a great writer can need no more than the suspicion of real experience to give us the whole beast), but out of what he has picked up from *Son and Grandson of Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kallikaks. We are being given horror-shop plastic. We won't know anything about extreme acts of violence (which we do seek to know if for no less good reason than to explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust) until some author makes such acts intimately believable, that is, believable not as acts of description (for that is easy enough) but as intimate personal states so intimate that we enter them. That is why we are likely never to know: where is the author ready to bear the onus of suggesting that he or she truly understands the inner logic of violence?

To create a character intimately, particularly in the first person, is to convince the reader that the author is the character. In extreme violence, it becomes more comfortable to approach from outside, as Bret Easton Ellis either chose to do, or could do no better. The failure of this book, which promises to rise occasionally to the level of the very good (when it desperately needs to be great), is that by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film. It's grunts all the way down. So, the first novel to come along in years that takes on deep and Dostoyevskian themes is written by only a half-competent and narcissistic young pen.

Nonetheless, he is showing older authors where the hands have come to on the clock. So one may have to answer the question: What would you do if you happened to find yourself the unhappy publisher who discovered this book on his list two months before publication?

I am not sure of the answer. The move that appeals most in retrospect is to have delayed publication long enough to send the manuscript to ten or twelve of the most respected novelists in America for an emergency reading. Presumably, a number would respond. If a majority were clearly on the side of publication, I would feel the sanction to go ahead. To my knowledge, that possibility was never contemplated. A pity. Literature is a guild, and in a crisis, it would be good if the artisan as well as the merchants could be there to ponder the decision.

This is, of course, fanciful. No corporate publisher would ever call on an author, not even his favorite author, on such a matter, and perhaps it is just as well. A lot of serious literary talent could have passed through a crisis of conscience. How to vote on such a book? The costs of saying "Yes, you must publish" are fearful. The reaction of certain women's groups to *American Psycho* has been full of unmitigated outrage.

Indeed, an extract from one of the most hideous passages in the novel was read aloud by Tammy Bruce, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, on a telephone hot line. The work is described as a "how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women... bringing torture of women and the mutilation deaths of women into an art form. We are here to say that we will not be silent victims anymore."

While it is certainly true that the fears women have of male violence are not going to find any alleviation in this work, nonetheless I dare to suspect that the book will have a counter-effect to these dread-filled expectations. The female victims in

*American Psycho* are tortured so hideously that men with the liveliest hostility toward women will, if still sane, draw back in horror. "Is that the logical extension of my impulse to inflict cruelty?" such men will have to ask themselves, even as after World War II millions of habitual anti-Semites drew back in similar horror from the mirror of unrestrained anti-Semitism that the Nazis had offered the world.

No, the greater horror, the real intellectual damage this novel may cause is that it will reinforce Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. It is the banality of Patrick Bateman that creates his hold over the reader and gives this ugly work its force. For if Hannah Arendt is correct, and evil is banal, then that is vastly worse than the opposed possibility that evil is satanic. The extension of Arendt's thesis is that we are absurd, and God and the Devil do not wage war with each other over the human outcome. I would rather believe that the Holocaust was the worst defeat God ever suffered at the hands of the Devil. That thought offers more life than to assume that many of us are nothing but dangerous, distorted, and no damn good.

So I cannot forgive Bret Easton Ellis. If I, in effect, defend the author by treating him at this length, it is because he has forced us to look at intolerable material, and so few novels try for that much anymore. On this basis, if I had been one of the authors consulted by a publisher, I would have had to say, yes, publish the book, it not only is repellent but will repel more crimes than it will excite. This is not necessarily the function of literature, but it is an obvious factor here.

What a deranging work! It is too much of a void, humanly speaking, to be termed evil, but it does raise the ante so high that one can no longer measure the size of the bet. Blind gambling is a hollow activity and this novel spins into the center of that empty space. □

## Memento Mori

(Continued from page 172) Egyptian, called Jean-Louis Toriel, who was very drugged," Elvira de la Fuente told me. Toriel was an unpopular figure among the fashionable friends of Donald Bloomingdale. Tony Pawson remembered that Toriel had a dachshund that he turned into a drug addict. "A horrid little skeletal thing. Too awful. He was really evil." On several occasions Bloomingdale went

away for drug cures, but, because of Toriel, he always went right back on drugs, once while driving back to Paris immediately after his release from a clinic in Switzerland.

In the winter of 1954, Enid Kenmare and Donald Bloomingdale were in New York at the same time. People remember things differently. Some told me it happened at the Pierre. Some said it happened

at the Sherry-Netherland. And some said it happened at the since razed Savoy-Plaza Hotel, which used to stand where the General Motors Building now stands on Fifth Avenue. At any rate, Donald Bloomingdale wanted some heroin, and Lady Kenmare gave it to him. One New York friend of Donald Bloomingdale's told me the heroin was delivered in a lace handkerchief with a coronet and Lady