10 Conclusion

This investigation into young adult life in the urban consumer society of the 1980s as presented in and instanced by the works of Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney suggests that the self as a stable entity is in serious trouble. First, this study of three major representatives of the literary-commercial phenomenon of the so-called “brat-pack” fiction of the 1980s has sought to reconstruct the self-concepts held by the protagonists of these fictions. Second, it has examined the authors’ efforts to establish a critical position vis-à-vis their protagonists’ views and towards the society about which and in which they write. It has been proposed that the three fields of interest addressed in these two main queries—the problems of forming a viable self-concept in the contemporary consumer society, the difficulties faced by a representationalist literature, and the dilemma of a literary art that is aware of its own modification—may be theorized around the basic distinction of a liberal-humanist view of the self as an autonomous essence as opposed to an antihumanist concept of the subject in discourse. It has been shown that the liberal-humanist belief in an autonomous, essential self, which held sway from the Enlightenment until Modernism and continues to have a powerful influence today, is an important premise of traditional concepts of identity, of the representational principle, and of the nature and function of art in society. Furthermore, it has been proposed that what may be called the growing “ontological uncertainty” in postmodernity—that is, the gradual erosion of this belief in an autonomous, essential self along with its attempted displacement by an anti-humanist, constructivist concept of the subject—is a serious challenge to traditional notions of identity, representation, literature, and art in general.

10.1 The Self in Trouble

The analysis has demonstrated that all three authors examined here believe in the
existence of a basic self and reject the extreme notion of a self that only exists as a subject within discourse. Their characters’ battles against the fragmentizing forces that assail them are fought out against the backdrop of a humanist notion of an essential self struggling to survive. In the works of these three writers, the idea of a basic self as an Archimedean point of reference looms large, if only in the background.

Janowitz is concerned with the possibilities of self-realization on the fringes of the urban consumer society. Her ex-centric characters differ in their perceptions and their evaluations of their marginality. A small group of her characters have been forced into ex-centricity. Despite their disenfranchisement, they do not question the foundations of this society but endorse its values. In these individuals the self is most profoundly at risk, their identities largely corresponding to the subject roles marked out for them by the culture industries. They are, in a Marxist sense of ideology, enveloped in a “false consciousness.” Their pitiful and unsuccessful efforts at self-realization only mirror their “false consciousness” of themselves and are evidence of their inability to formulate self-concepts that are in opposition to the ideology of consumer capitalism.

If the fight for the basic self seems a lost cause in these forced ex-centricics, it is still raging at full force in the ambivalent ex-centricics—the type of character Janowitz has created most often and developed most fully. These protagonists—women all of them—are acutely and painfully aware of their marginal positions. They are forever desperately trying to advance to the center of power and culture in the consumer society even as they come to grips with their deeply ambivalent feelings towards its value system. Their ambivalence makes them insecure and vulnerable. They are involved in dependence-based gender relations, in which they are prone to suffer oppression and exploitation at the hands of their partners. Their undecided stance towards the consumer society is also the cause for a strong sense of random menace. Feeling that they are cut off from the forces that empower people to
lead successful lives in these urban environs, they are incapable of fully making sense of this world and of developing violable behavioral patterns and leading successful lives in these urban environs.

The voluntary ex-centrics, on the other hand, share the former group’s awareness of their own situation but embrace it confidently and even enthusiastically. This third group has an ability and a willingness to take an oppositional stand towards mainstream culture. Janowitz’s humorous and sympathetic portraits suggest that she endorses voluntary ex-centricity. Yet, they also make clear that she believes such a position to be very precarious.

Ellis’s assessment of the threat to individual identity within the urban consumer society is the bleakest of those discussed here. To a much greater extent than Janowitz’s or McInerney’s characters, Ellis’s protagonists are determined by mass culture. His characters illustrate Christopher Lasch’s notion that these circumstances give rise to the “narcissistic personality” who sees everything as a reflection of himself or herself and withdraws to the small defensive core of a “minimal self” in an attempt to shore up against complete disintegration and dissolution. Like Lasch, Ellis interprets his characters’ rampant consumerism and their search for pleasure and gratification as an attempt to assert an identity that is felt to be in a very perilous state.

After a hesitant beginning with Less Than Zero with its interspersed “memory” chapters, Ellis has created near-ahistorical portraits of his characters. Since these deliberately flat characterizations do not present any other motives of action than those immediately visible, they force the reader to conclude that in Ellis’s imagination the individual’s thinking and behavior is completely conditioned—indeed, almost materialistically determined in a Marcusian sense—by the urban consumer society in which they live. This approach is particularly manifest in American Psycho. In Ellis, the dissolution of individual identity, the disintegration of basic social structures, the blurring of the fact-fiction distinction, the bankruptcy of
traditional sense-making institutions and the resultant moral disorientation are shown to be direct results of contemporary consumer capitalism. They pose a serious, existential threat to the individual, forcing him or her to withdraw to the “defensive core” of the self, to a minimal self.

Of the writers studied here, McInerney is the one who adheres most closely to a traditional, essentialist concept of the self as a basic, inviolable entity. Not to put to fine a point on it, in McInerney the threat to the self is never existential. Neither the characters nor the readers are left in “ontological uncertainty” for long. The “impostor” and the “child” as types of characters indicate that the protagonists are alienated from themselves in the traditional sense as they perceive a gap between the perceived self and the true self, which they must close. Emotional disengagement and withdrawal, the survival strategy developed by Ellis’s narcissistic characters, is only a temporary remedy until the character has overcome that sense of self-alienation.

The other character types McInerney creates—the “pioneer,” the “Puritan,” and the “renegade”—are meant to be read as American archetypes, which indicates that their individual identities are deeply rooted in the national psyche. In contrast to Ellis, McInerney also makes clear that the individual is first and foremost a product of his or her own history: “My own feeling is that one's family history is hugely determinate, and I find that a very rich mine of character determination” (in Faye 1992: 115; reference omitted). In McInerney’s fictional universe, most of the protagonists’ themes—otherness, self-alienation, the disintegration of basic social structures, power struggles between the sexes, the longing for simplicity—have evolved in a lifetime.

10.2 “The Age Deserves an Image of Its Accelerated Grimace”

In clear contradistinction to the metafiction emerging in the 1960s and in line with a trend beginning in the 1970s back towards neorealism, Ellis, Janowitz, and McInerney subscribe to a literature that wants to give an image of the world. Like the
other young writers that belonged to the literary-commercial phenomenon examined here, they have their roots in minimalist realism. However, the interpretation of their novels has also revealed a moral impetus in all three authors that constitutes a clear departure from minimalist aesthetics. McInerney writes, “The age deserves an image of its accelerated grimace” (McInerney 1989b: 107). He regards himself, Ellis and, in part, Janowitz as exponents of a “new realism” that represents “a serious countertradition of recent American letters that engages the structural issues of our alleged culture and politics…” (McInerney 1989b: 114).

Aesthetically, Janowitz and Ellis have remained most faithful to the legacy of minimalist realism, albeit in different ways. Janowitz writes about a world that closely resembles that portrayed by Andy Warhol in his underground movies of the 1960s and 1970s. These films, Warhol says, “document a wild loquacious society of colorful junkies, prostitutes, and transvestites I call my superstars” (in a letter of 14 November 1976). While Janowitz’s debts to her friend and mentor—in her choice of subject matter, in the way she numbers some of her stories which is reminiscent of the serial paintings of pop art, in her quirky humor, in her controversial use of her public persona which effectively combines self-promotion and self-effacement—are rather obvious, her vignettes of the art world of Manhattan lack the coolness of pop. Quite the opposite is true: Janowitz’s fiction is a strong indictment of the egocentricity and epigonism she sees in this world and a plea for individuality and actual achievement. This is where she departs from minimalist realism. Even though she insists that she regards herself as an impartial reporter, the passion of her critique against the absurd excesses of the urban consumer society in her fiction as well as her provocative engagement of her implication in this culture through her public persona are evidence to the contrary. Such ethical commitment is quite alien to either pop art or minimalism.

True to his strategy of crystallization and radicalization, Ellis has perfected his minimalist realist approach. His first novel and the early fiction collected in _The
Informers still show traces of a realistic attempt to impose wholeness and order on his material and to guide his readers in their reception of his work. In the course of his career, Ellis has purified his approach and eradicated these leftovers from traditional realism. He has increasingly withdrawn as an overtly ordering subject. As a consequence, his readers are called upon to construct meaning from the text in a more drastic way than one is used to from realism. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ellis’s increasingly radical aesthetic minimalism, which reached a climax in American Psycho, is not morally ambiguous. Much like Janowitz, Ellis voices a powerful critique of the urban consumer society, whose passion and commitment to the individual is quite incompatible with orthodox minimalist realism. Ellis, then, moves towards an increasingly self-conscious realism.

Jay McInerney goes quite the opposite direction. In his first novel, his tackling of what in his hands merely looks like the empty clichés of postmodernist literature was merely playful banter. From the beginning of McInerney’s career, the traditional realist tendencies are visible and strong in him. In his third novel about the urban consumer society of the 1980s, he finally abandons minimalist aesthetics for good and confidently endorses a traditional realism. By resorting to the devices of traditional realism, McInerney is able to create a vision of wholeness and order that is an effective counterbalance to the fragmented and chaotic world he perceives. Of course, the bildungsroman-pattern, which McInerney employs in all three novels studied here, must be regarded as the paradigmatic genre of the enlightenment view that the self strives for fulfillment and emancipation from “self-incurred immaturity” (Kant).

Thus, the readings of Janowitz’s, Ellis’s, and McInerney’s urban fiction of the 1980s clearly indicate that it is completely amiss to chide them of moral indifference or even of valorizing the mores and manners in the sections of the urban consumer society they have chosen to portray. This study has shown that these authors strongly condemn the excesses of the contemporary urban consumer society.
This critique is manifested in different ways though: Whereas Janowitz and Ellis depend to a large extent on the reader to construct the morals of the books, McInerney increasingly returns to a self-confident affirmation of traditional realism.

### 10.3 Literature Goes Pop

The writers discussed here clearly realize that they are part of a literary-commercial phenomenon and use their “betweenness” (Girard 1996) to challenge the traditional distinction of art and mass culture in different ways and to varying degrees. For instance, the extent to which they rely on mass cultural references goes far beyond that encountered in minimalist realism or anywhere else though it is clear that they are standing in a long tradition. Another example is their usage of their public personae as aesthetic and critical enrichments of their fictions.

These writers’ decision to write “from within the urban consumer society they portray” is perhaps the most powerful declaration that—in characteristically postmodern fashion—they acknowledge their implication in the system they portray and the discourses and power relations they thematize. They insist that their very closeness to this culture is also the necessary precondition of their incisive critique of this culture. In McInerney’s words, “a novel of manners has to be in and of the milieu it presumably examines, and it is perhaps inevitably contaminated—rather like the doctor in a leper colony contracting leprosy” (in Pinsker 1986b: 108). Aesthetically, this means that with the “brat pack,” literature has become “an event” (Caveney in Young and Caveney 1992: 46; original italicized) and the writers are “literary performers, allowing their reader to observe the observers...” (Caveney in Young and Caveney 1992: 47) Admittedly, Janowitz, Ellis, and McInerney are playing a dangerous game. Yet, the evidence presented and discussed here shows that they are

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able to preserve their artistic integrity while making significant contributions towards urban fiction.

In conclusion of this study of the urban fiction of Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney in the 1980s, it appears legitimate and called for to restate and affirm the main thesis proposed and argued in these pages: Under the conditions of the urban consumer society of the 1980s, the self is in serious trouble. These authors demonstrate this in their protagonists’ attempts to formulate viable self-concepts, in their modes of representation, and in their very personal, often provocative engagement of their own cultural and economic implication in the society they portray.