The Self in Trouble:  
Young Adults in the Urban Consumer Society of the 1980s  
in Janowitz, Ellis, and McInerney

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GREGOR WEIBELS-BALTHAUS
Referent: Prof. Dr. David Galloway
Koreferentin: Prof. Dr. Kornelia Freitag
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1 Introduction

This is an investigation into the self-concepts of young adults in the urban consumer society of the 1980s as documented in and instanced by selected works of Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney. The main thesis advanced in these pages is that the self is in serious trouble under the conditions of the urban consumer society of the 1980s. The writers treated here show this in their protagonists’ attempts to formulate viable self-concepts, in their modes of representation, and in their very personal, active engagement of their own cultural and economic implication in the society they portray.

1.1 A Literary-Commercial Phenomenon

The writers discussed here played major parts within a literary-commercial phenomenon that caused a sensation on the American book market in the 1980s as well as some commotion in the literary world. The sheer number and diversity of phrases coined to designate the trend—among these were “MTV Novel” (Powers 1985), “Yuppie Lit” (Sheppard 1987; Kennedy 1991), “Yuppie-Backs” (e.g. Schumacher 1988), the “Young Decadents School” (Adler 1990), “Blank Generation Fiction” and “Brat Pack Fiction” (Young and Caveney 1992)—betrayed the critics’ difficulties in grappling with the new and unwieldy literary products. In retrospect, a broad description and characterization of this “Brat Pack Fiction”—the label that somehow seems to have weathered the times best—is considerably easier. The 1980s saw the happy conjunction of a whole host of young American writers of realist, often minimalist, urban literature bursting onto the scene and, equally important, a huge market eagerly awaiting them. Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Tama Janowitz were perceived as being major representatives of a larger phenomenon.1

1 In addition to the writers discussed here there were, for example, David Leavitt, Meg Wolitzer, Elizabeth Tallent, Susan Minot, Peter Cameron, Emily Listfield, and—in a
Ostensibly, here was a group of very young, ambitious literary debutantes that wrote about the young adult, white, upper middle-class urbanite. Living in the vibrant and bizarre climate that developed in American cities under the Reagan administration, the protagonists seemed to be always in tune with the most recent cultural trends. Frequently, the characters in these fictions showed a strong penchant for the glamorous side of life in such cities as New York, Los Angeles, or Pittsburgh. Often brimming with references to pop music, Hollywood movies, and upscale consumer items, the books recorded their protagonists’ efforts to negotiate the problems of early adulthood in the urban consumer society of the Reagan years with its powerful economic, social, and cultural frictions. In many cases, the thematic focus in these fictions was on the protagonist’s attempts to form self-concepts that allowed them to reconcile the often jarring discrepancies between the realities of their lives and the lurid promises this society made. These “minimalistic and regional” fictions (Irmer 1983: 350) were usually presented from a first-person narrative point of view—often combined with the present tense—and struck readers as curiously “flat, affectless narratives” (Bawer 1990).

That this impression of a uniform new trend in American urban literature was imprecise did nothing to weaken it. For one thing, Jay McInerney (b. 1955) and Tama Janowitz (b. 1957) hardly belong to the same generation as Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1964) and David Leavitt (b. 1961). Secondly, not all of these authors were in fact debutantes. Tama Janowitz, for instance, had already published the novel American Dad (1981) when her collection of short stories Slaves of New York appeared in 1986. Thirdly, the idea of a whole school of young writers obsessed with the glamor and glitter of life in the urban fast lane was simply incorrect. David Leavitt, for example, whose critically acclaimed collection Family Dancing was released on the same day as Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City, has little to do with the three second phase—Michael Chabon who enjoyed great initial successes and public attention.
writers discussed here in terms of subject matter, theme, and tone. And fourthly, as this study will demonstrate, these writers’ approaches differ so profoundly that they merit individual and detailed analysis.

One of the reasons why the new young urban writers and their works were so greedily snatched up by the publishing industry is that the books were regarded as first-hand, authentic cultural testimony. They had a great immediacy and smacked of real life. Peter Freese contends, “[W]hat provides them with the eminently marketable pseudo-authenticity of media events is primarily the fact that their authors wrote them at a surprisingly early age and developed them from their own experiences” (Freese 1992: 524). These authors were touted as the “Voices of the Young Generation”, the Fitzgeralds and Salingers and Kerouacs of the 1980s, and often quite unabashedly accepted this role (Powers 1985: 46). Predictably, this “voice-of-the-generation” gambit meant sales. This feature of Janowitz’s, Ellis’s, and McInerney’s fictions constituted their principal appeal to young readers and considerably facilitated their marketing. There is no doubt that the immense publicity and commercial success that some of these writers enjoyed was also largely a “para-publishing phenomenon” (Sheppard 1987: 78) and “a media invention, a fad,” as David Leavitt, one of the young literary celebrities points out (in Schumacher 1988: 177). Mark Fenster elaborates,

The “young adult” market, eighteen to thirty-four, represents a lucrative audience for culture industries such as recorded music, film, television, and fashion. “Young” authors like Ellis, Jay McInerney (Bright Lights, Big City) and Tama Janowitz (Slaves of New York) were quickly proclaimed the “voices of a new generation” and became the models by which other first novelists were published and marketed. Publishing houses responded either by designing new “contemporary fiction” trade paperback series or increasing the production of already established ones…. These series were marketed to both represent and to reach the young urban audience through more stylish covers, larger size, higher quality paper, and higher prices than typical mass market paperbacks, which are smaller, cheaper, and more typically associated with genres like popular biography, romance, and mystery. The former are sold in bookstores, as opposed to the drug store, supermarket, airline terminal, etc. location of mass paperbacks (Fenster 1991: 51).


2 David Leavitt, for instance, was granted the honor of writing the prestigious “My Generation” essay for Esquire (Leavitt 1985).
As Stephanie Girard (1996) demonstrates in detail, the publication history of *Bright Lights, Big City* corroborates these observations. McInerney’s novel was one of the books with which Random House/Vintage Books opened their Vintage Contemporaries series in 1984. The editor Gary Fisketjon, initiator of the series and, incidentally, a friend of McInerney’s, reasoned that “a uniform trade paperback edition with distinctive covers keyed to the quality of the contents would sell more books than the usual method of treating each book as an individual product” (in Girard 1996: 166). The new line was to have several specific features. Through cover artwork more commonly found on pop music albums; through a format and a price structure that distinguished the series from mass market paperback publishing on the one hand as well as from the hardcover market on the other; through a mixture of popular reprints and paperback originals; and through an intense strategy of self-referentiality—“cross-blurbing” among the authors publishing in this series, “cross-reviewing,” and even “cross-referencing” within the text itself—, Fisketjon hoped to incite interest for his new series and reach a primarily young, educated, and financially strong readership. Of course, the fantastic sales of *Bright Lights, Big City* proved Fisketjon correct. Its author became a highly paid darling of the media and Vintage Contemporaries a commercial success. Therefore, it was no surprise that

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3 One instance of cross-blurbing is Raymond Carver’s praise for the literary newcomer printed on the back cover of *Bright Lights, Big City*. A few years later, in a fine example of cross-reviewing, the arrivé McInerney paid tribute to the old master in a glowing review (McInerney 1989a). Similarly, McInerney referred to Thomas McGuane and J. P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* as having influenced his writing (in CA 123: 255). Both authors’ works were republished in the Vintage Contemporaries series, and McGuane provided a blurb for McInerney’s novel. Moreover, the text of *Bright Lights, Big City* cross-refers to Donleavy’s novel, whose aimlessly drifting, pleasure-seeking protagonist, Sebastian Dangerfield, outwardly resembles the “You”-narrator in McInerney’s book. See also Girard (1996: 166-169).

4 By 1988, it was estimated that the young author’s first novel had sold more than a half million copies (Girard 1996: 167).
reviewers soon came up with the nickname “Yuppie backs” for this and other trade paperback series (Schumacher 1988: 103).

Another prime example of such strategic book marketing to a young, educated and affluent audience is the publication history of Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*. Hoping to capitalize on McInerney’s runaway success, Simon & Schuster published Ellis’s book in 1985 (cf. Schumacher 1988. 195). Ellis’s editor Bob Asahina admits, “We thought that Bret’s age and the sensational aspects of his novel’s subject matter opened the book up to a much larger audience than the average first novel might have” (quoted in Davis 1985:104). The title and the cover of the book emphasized that *Less Than Zero* was targeted at a young readership. For the title, Ellis had lifted a line from a song by Elvis Costello, and a promotional poster of the singer, which also plays a pivotal role in the text itself, inspired the cover (ibid.). The strategy worked out, and at age twenty-one, while still a senior at Bennington College, the first-time novelist was already a top-earner and “was confronted with the daunting prospect of being a media celebrity, a spokesman, a prophet…” (Murphet 2002: 13).

In content and form, then, these books were felt to be as racy as the life in the fast lane with which they were associated and, consequently, they found a ready market with young adult readers. Predictably enough, the Hollywood film industry soon latched on to this literary-commercial phenomenon and, sometimes with the help of the authors, quickly churned out rather commercial movie versions of these successful titles, which in turn further increased the sales of the already bestselling

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5 Incidentally, fully in line with the marketing strategy sketched here, Random House secured the rights to Ellis’s *American Psycho* within 48 hours after Simon & Schuster had announced cancellation of its publication on November 15, 1990. Random House then published the book in its Vintage Contemporaries Series in March 1991 at the height of the heated public controversy over the violence in the book. Predictably, no extra marketing efforts were needed to make Ellis’s book an instant bestseller. For details on the history of the publication and the reception of *American Psycho* see Voßmann (2000: 21-30) and Murphet (2002: 65-71).
books. In his review of the film adaptation of *Less Than Zero*, Mark Fenster emphasizes, “What is important, then, is not so much that these novels were being commercially marketed . . . as that they were perceived as being written for, published for, and sold to the young adult audience in ways similar to the commercial manipulation of film and popular music marketing” (Fenster 1991: 51).

The authors themselves played a significant role in the marketing of their books, and the “bizarre publishing climate of the mid-80’s” (Kennedy 1991: 427)—which was made possible through “the concentration, centralization and urbanization of cultural capital” (Agger 1990: 116)—was very congenial to this kind of “literary entrepreneurship” (ibid.). Indeed, young first-time novelists were sometimes able to command such huge advances (McDowell 1991) that *The New York Times* sarcastically reassured them, “First Novelists, Don’t Fret: There’s Money in Newness” (Cohen 1991). The media-savvy Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney proved particularly adept in playing their parts in this machinery. They were prepared to live the high-life of media celebrities that reviewers and the reading public alike expected them to be living anyway. What made them so uncomfortable to their critics, so attractive to their readers, and, consequently, so valuable to their publishers was the fact that, in many ways, their public personae resembled their fictional characters. This resulted in a widespread identification of the authors with their protagonists and strengthened their reputation as voices of their generation. The authors further contributed to the public perception of a strong and common literary trend by occasionally reviewing one another (e.g. McInerney 1986b), commenting upon each other’s work and posing together for magazine

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Later movie adaptations of these authors’ books—such as the faithful *American Psycho* (Harron 2000) and *The Rules of Attraction* (Avary 2002)—are of course not part of the original literary-commercial phenomenon of the 1980s anymore.
cameras. Through such “Advertisements for Themselves,” in one infuriated reviewer’s words (Rafferty 1987), the authors acknowledged their role as contributors to a literary-commercial phenomenon.

1.2 The Authors and Their Works

In its literary analysis of “Brat Pack Fiction,” the present study of the self-concepts of young adults in the urban consumer society of the 1980s concentrates on Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, and Bret Easton Ellis, who may safely be said to epitomize this literary-commercial phenomenon. The works to be examined have been selected with a view to demonstrating the characteristic elements and the variety in each author.

The analysis of Tama Janowitz’s work will focus on the immensely successful *Slaves of New York* (1986). In her second book after *American Dad* (1981)—the tale of one Earl Przepasniak, who comes of age during the 1960s as his psychiatric father and poet mother inexorably and painfully steer for divorce—, Tama Janowitz collected her sketches of life in the vivid, intensely competitive climate of the Manhattan art world in the early 1980s. The stories share the fashionable New York East Village ambience and a pervasive sense of absurdity.

Janowitz’s third book, *A Cannibal in Manhattan* (1987), which is dedicated to her friend and mentor, the late Andy Warhol, flopped with reviewers and the public alike (e.g. Lehman 1987, Radin 1988, Sheppard 1986). The unlikely story of Mgungu Yabba Mgungu, chief of a near-extinct, formerly cannibalistic tribe on a mysterious South Seas island who is brought to Manhattan and married by a wealthy

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7 This is comically illustrated by a funny incident that McInerney reports. Some fraternity boys who had read *Bright Lights, Big City* as a factual guide to Manhattan nightlife phoned him and wanted to tap him for more details (Pinsker 1986b: 109).

8 This climate was characterized by the sharp contrast between the enormous artistic and economic success and publicity enjoyed by a few artist-celebrities on the one hand and the vast majority of ambitious artists on the other who, further inspired by such dream-like stardom, worked under increasingly harsh economic circumstances (see Zukin 1993: 279).
heiress and anthropologist, was ultimately too outlandish to be widely appreciated. The story basically hinges on a parody of the “Noble Savage” theme or on a reversal of the “Robinson Crusoe”-pattern—that is, the Noble Savage entering civilization. Narrated from Mgungu’s perspective, *A Cannibal in Manhattan* takes a critical, “alien” look at the bizarre outgrowths of the contemporary urban consumer society as instanced by the art community of the Village. To the present study, the book is chiefly of interest because Janowitz makes strategic use of her public persona in the book itself. She incorporates mock-authentic “scene of the crime” photos that in actual fact depict herself and her friends from the art scene, among them Girard Basquiat, Paige Powell, and, of course, Andy Warhol.

In *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group* (1992), Janowitz once again introduces a female protagonist and narrator that shares the sense of amazement and “ex-centricity” characteristic of her predecessor Eleanor from *Slaves of New York*. Pamela Trowel, a single New Yorker in her late twenties, is caught in a dizzying spiral of bizarre experiences that thoroughly unsettle her life and seriously challenge her beliefs about herself. The purposely incredible plot of the novel revolves around Pamela’s love for a homeless little boy, her problematic sexuality, and her profoundly ambivalent attitude toward the urban consumer society of New York at the end of the 1980s. It will be useful to examine how this book continues the themes Janowitz introduced in *Slaves of New York*. Janowitz’s subsequent works of fiction—*By the Shores of Gitchee Gumee* (1996), *A Certain Age* (1999), and, most recently, *Peyton Amberg* (2003) are not immediately pertinent to the present study as they are not concerned anymore with the 1980s.

The investigation of Bret Easton Ellis’s oeuvre will concentrate on his triumphant debut *Less Than Zero* (1985). In Ellis’s first novel, the late-adolescent protagonist and narrator Clay paints a grim picture of the shallow, violent and spiritually dead world of the super-rich in the film community of Hollywood. It will be demonstrated that *Less Than Zero* already contains, *in nuce* as it were, all the
subject matter, the themes, and the stylistic elements that are of central concern to the author in his following books.

Ellis’s second book, the campus novel *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), is mainly interesting to this investigation because of its bold experiment with narrative point of view. Its impressive host of no fewer than nine different narrators—one of them in French—effectively conveys the sense of deep confusion and futility and randomness at the heart of Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, from which the book takes its inscription.

Ellis’s third novel, the notorious *American Psycho* (1991) has long been recognized as a significant contribution to the literature of the contemporary urban consumer society. Elizabeth Young remarks, “American Psycho is of course a classic of the 1980s. In a sense, it is the 1980s. It embodies the decade and all the clichés of the decade in the West—the rampant self-serving greed, relentless aggression and one-upmanship; the manic consumer overdrive, exhaustion, wipe-out and terror” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 88). Thus, the novel is a logical point of reference when the literary treatment of the self in the American city of the 1980s is discussed. Thomas Irmer has a valid point when he argues that the book is “a literary parody, designed to bring this type of 1980s fiction about New York City to a comic end” (Irmer 1993: 353). The present study will demonstrate that in this book the author resolutely follows his hidden agenda of “crystallization and radicalization.” He takes the subject of the affluent and permissive urban consumer society, the thematic concerns, and the stylistic interests shown in the earlier novels, particularly in *Less Than Zero*, to extremes unprecedented in his oeuvre and, it seems, in all of American literature.

*The Informers* (1994)—technically speaking Ellis’s fourth book but really a collection of narrative sketches of the Hollywood film community that Ellis had been
making since the early 1980s\textsuperscript{9}—adds to the picture of this community as painted in \textit{Less Than Zero, Glamorama} (1998), a book about a netherworld of super-models and international terrorism, will not be separately studied.

In comparison to Tama Janowitz’s books and, especially, in contrast to the deliberately “narrow” fictions of Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney’s scope is much broader. He is also much more versatile in terms of technique and style and simultaneously much more conventional than his companions are. In close-reading analyses of three books by McInerney, the present study will display the considerable variety in his œuvre. Of course, \textit{Bright Lights, Big City} (1984), the book that started the phenomenon of “Brat Pack Fiction,” will be examined in detail. The conventionally structured story about a young ambitious man’s way to himself is particularly exciting because of the nameless protagonist-narrator’s verbal fireworks and the unusual choice of a second-person, present-tense narrative perspective.

Following \textit{Ransom} (1985), which was actually an earlier manuscript about a young American expatriate in Kyoto, McInerney returned to his original turf with \textit{Story of My Life} (1988). As the close reading of this novel will show, with her sharp eye and her equally sharp tongue, the twenty-year old spoiled brat Alison Poole, who is the protagonist and narrator of the book, is not only a prime example but also a perceptive chronicler of an extremely permissive, fundamentally immature urban consumer society. In fact, her \textit{Weltschmerz}, which she hides behind a tough shell, makes her a worthy successor of Holden Caulfield.

\textit{Brightness Falls} (1992) is McInerney’s swansong to the yuppie-decade and will be dealt with in detail. Set in the vibrant atmosphere of Manhattan in 1987, it tells the story of Russell and Corrine Calloway and their friends, first as they try to ride the crest of that go-go era and then, as they struggle to pick up the shreds of their

\textsuperscript{9} See \textit{Amerika} and \textit{Laurence} (1994).
lives after the stock market crash of October 19. *Brightness Falls* is easily McInerney’s most ambitious yet also his most traditionally realistic novel about this decade. Reminiscent of Tom Wolfe’s bestselling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), McInerney’s novel is constructed in the manner of a nineteenth-century social realist novel. It relies on a broad cast of narrative consciences to achieve a multi-perspectival picture of the social mores and manners of that urban consumer society at that particular historical juncture.

After the sweeping story of the intimate friendship of two very different men in *The Last of the Savages* (1996), which encompasses nearly three decades of American history, McInerney once again returned to his accustomed terrain with *Model Behavior* (1998). The novella explores the urban highlife of the 1990s and, therefore, is not of central interest to the present study.

1.3 Relevant Criticism

The general initial attitude to this “Brat Pack Fiction” among the literary establishment is nicely captured by the fact that SPY magazine published a mock version of the popular student guides to literature entitled *SPY NOTES on McInerney’s ‘Bright Lights, Big City,’ Janowitz’s ‘Slaves of New York,’ Ellis’s ‘Less Than Zero,’ and All Those Other Hip Urban Novels of the 1980s* (1989). “Brat Pack Fiction” was considered a mere fad and as such was simply not to be taken seriously. And indeed, as early as 1990, a reviewer laconically noted,

> Ironically, the publishing business' growing passion to sign up very young writers—a passion that had helped make possible the success of the Literary Brat Pack in the first place—served, after a few brief years of glory, to marginalize them. By the time the 1990s rolled around, Leavitt, Cameron, and company, most of them still barely in their thirties, seemed almost like has-beens (Bawer 1990).

It is a sad fact that this very same attitude also prevailed in academic halls for a long time and is only slowly changing. Thus, of the writers treated here, only Bret Easton Ellis has received any academic attention to speak of. Overall, however, the fictional works of Ellis, Janowitz, and McInerney have kindled very few discussions among
Michael Schumacher was the first to devote a whole book to the new literature by the young authors. In *Reasons to Believe: New Voices in American Fiction* (1988), he presented an introductory collection of portraits and interviews with the most prominent of the emerging generation of young writers and their editors.

A first serious book-length survey of this literary-commercial phenomenon was undertaken by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American “Blank Generation” Fiction* (1992). Their collection of critical essays on the writers discussed here and on some of their contemporaries is relevant to this study because they are also interested in the interrelation between this literature and its specific historical, social, and material conditions of production. Young and Caveney opt for the label “Blank Generation” as it indicates, “through Richard Hell’s anthem of the same name, the necessary link with punk and conveys something of the flat, stunned quality of much of the writing” (Young and Caveney 1992: vii). Their analyses of selected works by these young authors are informed by the conviction that it was impossible to ignore the debates surrounding postmodernism because most of the novels we looked at centred on these issues: consumer capitalism, media saturation, societal breakdown—the whole contemporary technocracy. We have tried to combine cultural analysis and literary criticism in such a way as to show how these novels, far from endorsing the worst aspects of a greedy and corrupt consumer society, together constitute a revealing critique of this society and illuminate its darkest, weirdest corners (Young and Caveney 1992: viii).

Thus, Young’s and Caveney’s critical intent is very close to the concerns of the present study.

More recently, James Annesley has proposed a synopsis of this type of American fiction in *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (1998), though his emphasis is clearly not on the 1980s anymore. He features, among others, Lynne Tillman, Dennis Cooper, Bret Easton Ellis, and Douglas Coupland. His discussion of their works is guided by “an understanding of
both the importance of commodification in late capitalism and the stress these novels place on these particular formations” (Annesley 1998: 9).

A yet small but steadily growing body of research is devoted to the writings of Bret Easton Ellis, with a clear emphasis on American Psycho. Since its publication in 1985, Less Than Zero has acquired the status of a cult book and is widely read at American colleges, both inside and outside classes. The first close-reading analysis of Less Than Zero was presented four years after the novel had been published. In his dissertational thesis Screen Play and Inscription: Narrative Strategies in Four Post-1960s Novels (1989), Rafael Mario Pérez-Torres scrutinizes Ellis’s first novel along with works by Rechy, Morrison, and Barthelme. The main purpose of his study is to show that these four novelists … employ similar tactics in incorporating, reinterpreting and rearranging various social, political and aesthetic discourses to form an aesthetic not premised upon, and therefore not subject to critical scrutiny by, the modernist dictum to “make it new.” Instead, there is an attempt at a new syntax integrally related to the general cultural condition of what has come to be termed ‘postmodernism’ (Pérez-Torres 1989: 6f).

In his essay on Less Than Zero, Peter Freese (1990) traces Ellis’s artful employment of mass culture references and a variety of narrative techniques. He sees Leslie Fiedler’s dictum of the “pop novel” fully borne out by this novel (Freese 1990: 79) and raises the closely related question if the text might not better be considered as a valid “cultural document” (Freese 1990: 71) rather than as a “‘literary’ text” (ibid.).

Nicki Sahlin (1991) reads Less Than Zero against the backdrop of Camus’s and Sartre’s philosophical writings and attempts to construct it as an existentialist novel.

The principal intention of Horst Steur’s dissertation Der Schein und das Nichts: Bret Easton Ellis’ Roman Less Than Zero. (1995) is to examine the story of

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10 Its significance as a contemporary classic may be gleaned from the fact that the Gale Group is now offering Bret Easton Ellis's "Less than Zero": A Study Guide from Gale's "Novels for Students" as an electronic, downloadable document.
the novel in its cultural context. Through meticulous, incredibly detailed research, the author is able to reconstruct the subtle and intricate network of popular cultural references within which Ellis situates his characters.

Götz Egloff (2001) compares Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* to two other important formative books from earlier decades, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. His analysis concentrates on the significance of the motif of the “lonely observer,” which is central to all three books.

Mike Grimshaw (2002) emphasizes the important and ambiguous part that Ellis’s oeuvre played in the cultural criticism toward the end of the last century: “[I]n a *fin de siècle* yet to be fully registered, catalogued and analysed, cultural pessimism ran as a discordant counter note to a carnivalistic postmodernity. Yet leading the charge was a novelist who himself seemed to embody the success mantras of late twentieth century celebrity” (Grimshaw 2002). He discerns a strong cultural pessimism in Ellis that echoes the conservative and elitist mass culture critique of Ortega Y Gasset and that is also akin to that expressed in contemporary punk-rock.

As has been said, academic interest in Ellis’s books is chiefly devoted to *American Psycho*. Since this novel will not be treated in detail, however, the bulk of the available body of research on this novel is not directly relevant to the concerns of the present study. For an introduction to the study of *American Psycho*, the interested reader may turn to Ursula Voßmann’s (2000) or Julian Murphet’s (2002) monographs.

In comparison to Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney— in many ways the most versatile and vocal of the writers examined here—has not really been able to incite, much less to sustain much academic interest. In fact, only four scholarly articles about McInerney have been published to date.

Frank de Caro (1991) argues that folklore is central to McInerney’s *Story of My Life*, and Jefferson Faye (1992) traces the motif of the “Exile” in McInerney’s oeuvre.
As with Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, Peter Freese (1992) presents a close-reading analysis of *Bright Lights, Big City*. Freese attests the author outstanding verbal skills but concludes that, ultimately, this is an “atrophied Bildungsroman” (Freese 1992: 526).

Stephanie Girard’s analysis of the novel and publishing phenomenon *Bright Lights, Big City* (1996), which has already been quoted above, is especially interesting to the present study as she constructs the meaning of the story in the context of the publication and marketing of the book as a commodity. Her main thesis is that

the novel’s strategic placement in the field of cultural production—“between” reality and representation, “between” autobiography and novel, “between” elite and mass culture—reveals a self-consciousness on the part of both author and publisher that refutes any accusations that *Bright Lights* is a naïve reflection of social context (Girard 1996: 167f).

With regard to available criticism, the situation is still bleaker for the student of Tama Janowitz’s œuvre. No scholarly article, let alone monograph has been exclusively devoted to her work yet. Apparently, being perceived as a member of the late Andy Warhol’s entourage may initially have helped get Janowitz the desired publicity and sales figures, but it also made it easy to label her as a Warhol-epigone that does not warrant exegesis on her own terms.

This brief review of the available, relevant literature on these authors is evidence of an appalling critical oversight. Reviewers and academics alike have been content to write Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney off as the “Brat Pack,” without really bothering to examine most of their writings in any detail. The present study hopes to redress this failure. It offers basic, close readings of some of these author’s works to provide a sound basis for further discussions of this literary-commercial phenomenon. As this overview demonstrates, with the exception of *Less Than Zero*, none of the books selected here have been given such exclusive scholarly attention before. The following in-depth analyses of these fictions will prove that they fully merit this attention and that they are, in fact, a significant
contribution to the treatment of the self in the urban consumer society of the 1980s in American literature.

1.4 The Guiding Questions

Specifically, this study pursues two main questions: First, as portrayed in the fictions treated here, which are the central themes in the concepts of self and society held by young adults in the urban consumer society of the 1980s? Second, how do these authors present and assess their fictional characters’ attempts to make sense of their lives?

The first leading question focuses on the psychic and social dimensions of life in the contemporary urban consumer society. It is concerned with the ways in which the fictional characters think about themselves and the people and events around them. More specifically, this question aims at the person’s self-concept. It focuses on the individual’s understanding of the structures, mechanisms, and forces at work within his or her life and social environment, and it emphasizes the person’s assessment of the encroachments on and chances of authentic self-realization. This thematic concern necessarily implies an interest in the character’s power to make sense of his or her life. This power is understood as the capacity to integrate the

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11 For the limited purpose of this study, the consumer society may be broadly defined as a society in which virtually every aspect of life has been commodified. In other words, the category of the exchange-value has entered and has come to dominate virtually every area of life and determines the way the individual conceives of the self and the social. This definition of the consumer society establishes commodification and consumption as the defining characteristics. John Fiske underlines that in this society, consumption increasingly becomes a way of communicating:

In the consumer society of late capitalism, everyone is a consumer. Consumption is the only way of obtaining the resources of life, whether these resources be material-functional (food, clothing, transport) or semiotic-cultural (the media, education, language). And, of course, the difference between the two is only analytical convenience—all material-functional resources are imbricated with the semiotic-cultural. A car is not just transport, but a speech act; cooking a meal is not just providing food, but a way of communicating. (Fiske 1989b: 34).

In *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, William Leach gives an extensive account of the beginnings and formative decades of the American consumer society. Leach summarizes, “The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the
various themes of life that the protagonist recognizes into a concept, a theory of self and society that is sufficiently coherent, consistent and in accordance with this individual’s experiences to sustain and help him or her cope with the challenges of life. Since this first leading question is asked in order to identify and examine the themes that dominate the fictional character’s self-image, it is clear that at this level the analysis must adopt that individual’s perspective and confine itself to his or her observations and insights alone.

The second guiding question concentrates on such themes that arise from the work as a whole and transcend the individual fictional character’s limited perception. This analysis from the reader’s point of view promises rich results for, as Gerd Hurm, in his study of fictional images of the American city, points out, “The thematic perspective for the fictional city is constituted by the novel as a whole. The frame of reference is the comprehensive range of incidents and motifs which the novels assemble: authors mold their cities and shape the setting, characters, and atmosphere according to their particular focus and fictional theme” (Hurm 1991: 9). The second leading question is chiefly concerned with the political and aesthetic dimensions of writing about and in an urban world marked by “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen). This question is directed at the authors’ evaluation of their protagonists’ attempts to make sense of their lives. In other words, how does the text in its entirety comment on the protagonists’ views of self and society, which are the focus of interest in the first guiding question? More specifically, to what extent are the fictional characters’ views of themselves and their social relations confirmed or rejected within the context of the work? In this context, it will also be interesting to

democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society (Leach 1993: 3).

look at how the authors through their public personae engage and enrich the texts of their books.

This second main query, then, draws attention to the writers’ responses to the conditions of living and writing in such an environment and to the challenges faced by a literature that seeks to represent “reality.” Of course, the writers examined here are fully conscious that the very “conditions of the possibility” (Kant) of an authentic art—especially when created within a highly industrialized market economy ruled by the law of supply and demand—and of representing reality have been seriously called into question by major movements in the arts and in critical theory and have been further eroded by the unstoppable industrialization of literary and other cultural production.

Generally speaking, the two guiding questions of this study touch three fields of interest, which are of course interrelated but may be separated for analytical convenience. These are (a) the psychic and social dimensions of life in the urban consumer society, (b) the relationship of art to “reality,” and (c) the position of art vis-à-vis culture-industrial production and commerce. All three areas have been subject to many investigations and intense discussions. By way of preparing the ground for a fruitful examination and a critical evaluation of Janowitz’s, Ellis’s and McInerney’s achievements with regard to these two main questions, it is prerequisite to give concise overviews of the fundamental issues at stake in each debate and to outline the most important theoretical positions taken. The salient points are presented in the three following theory chapters, which are entitled “The Rise and Demise of the Self” (chapter 2), “The Crisis of Mimesis” (chapter 3), and “Literature and the Marketplace” (chapter 4).

These theory-chapters present the self as the central idea in the present study of fictional images of young adult life in the consumer society of the 1980s. As will become clear in the course of these chapters, the self is a fundamental notion in the formation of individual concepts of the self, in the discussion of issues of
representation, and in the definition of the nature and function of art within consumer capitalism. The following discussions of issues and theories in these three fields will therefore start out from the self as the principal explanatory category. It will be argued that many opinions expressed in these debates may be traced back to one of two fundamental and diametrically opposed notions of the self. On the one hand, there is a “humanist” or essentialist idea of the self, which dates back to Descartes and the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Theories in this camp regard the self as an autonomous essence. On the other hand, there is an “antihumanist” or constructivist position, which mainly has its roots in the “linguistic turn” at the beginning of the twentieth century. Defenders of this position dismiss the term “self” because it smacks of essentialism. In place of the old self, they favor the idea of a subject that is constructed by and within discourse. It will be proposed that this basic distinction of a humanist view of selfhood and an antihumanist concept of subjectivity can help chart the central problem areas in the fields of identity formation, representation, and artistic production. In this way, the subsequent theory chapters hope to prepare the ground for a differentiating and rewarding study of young adult’s images of life in the urban consumer society of the 1980s as presented in and instanced by selected works of Tama Janowitz (chapter 5), Bret Easton Ellis (chapter 6), and Jay McInerney (chapters 7-9).\footnote{Two important qualifications with regard to the scope and the objective of this study must be made. Firstly, this study does not claim that its conclusions can justify a generalized, totalizing view of urbanity in the 1980s. The works under scrutiny here have been chosen with a view to their representativeness of a particular segment of urban life and mode of literary production. This selection corroborates Hurm’s observation of the partiality and fragmentation of urban visions. Evidently, such a selection cannot bear the weight of a generalized, encompassing concept of urban life (ibid.). Secondly, this study does not seek to define specifically and exclusively urban themes. Once again, neither the particular choice nor the limited number of works studied here would permit such all-embracing concepts. Moreover, even as the present investigation identifies themes that crystallize in urban life, it takes care not to jump to the premature and unwarranted conclusion that these themes are urban by definition. As Hurm makes clear, “the tensions and contradictions generated by American capitalism and the complexities of modern life are embodied in cityscapes, but the issues cannot always be specified or grasped as particularly urban. Topography mostly functions as metonymy” (Hurm 1991: 8). With Ihab Hassan, one might say that the city is “a magic lantern through which the human condition may be viewed” (Hassan 1981: 94).}
2 The Rise and Demise of the Self

This chapter will first offer a very concise history of ideas on the evolution of modern concepts of the self, which culminated in the imperial sense of self characteristic of the modernist period. This will be followed by a look at the cultural and social conditions that underpinned this self-concept in America and shaped the American variety of the modernist self. For the purposes of this study, two factors must be singled out: the Puritan heritage and the experience of the Frontier.

The subsequent section of this chapter will look at how the imperial self of modernity has fared under the changing conditions of the American consumer society in the course of the twentieth century. Here the account will focus on David Riesman’s concept of “other-direction” in the postwar era and on Christopher Lasch’s view of a culture of narcissism in the 1970s and 1980s. From their works, it will become clear that contemporary American society holds no place for the expansive, overpowering sense of self of modernity anymore.

While there is widespread unison about the demise of the self in the twentieth century consumer society, there is less accordance about how severely the modern self is affected by these social and cultural surroundings. As the third and final part of this chapter will show, a dwindling camp of staunch liberal humanists, who cling to the view of an essential, true self, faces a growing phalanx of antihumanist forces from all fields of cultural and scholarly life who voice a profound ontological uncertainty. Among these is Kenneth J. Gergen, whose thesis that a process “social saturation” constitutes a major threat to traditional notions of subjectivity in the contemporary consumer society will be presented. This will be followed by a short summary of the poststructuralist deconstruction of the humanist

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14 The term “imperial self” has been borrowed from Christopher Lasch (1985: 15).
self. Finally, it will be shown that antihumanists altogether abandon the belief in an essential self and instead champion various views of the self as a relational entity.

2.1 The Rise of the Imperial Self of Modernity

2.1.1 From the Origins to the Modernist Self

The Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* may be considered as the philosophical foundation of the modernist concept of the self. From his scepticist perspective, Descartes argued that the only thing he could not doubt within reason was his own existence, and consequently, concluded that the human self is an autonomous essence. Descartes claimed that the autonomous self is the *sine qua non* and the ultimate point of reference of all cognition. As such this consciousness of the self is thus prior to any concept of the self.\(^{15}\)

The idea of the human self as an essence exerted a powerful influence on the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Descartes’ dictum resonated in the emphasis that the Enlightenment placed on the powers of reason and observation and in the intense interest in the human self as a privileged object of philosophical enquiry.\(^{16}\) In “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (1784), Immanuel Kant famously defined enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” His dictum captures the enormous confidence that philosophers of the Enlightenment found in the idea of the autonomous self. It also expresses the

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\(^{15}\) See Falk Wagner’s detailed explanation (Wager 1984: 177-178).

awareness that the individual is called upon to seek to restore that original autonomy. This notion of the autonomous, essential self as taking shape in the philosophy of the Enlightenment period subsequently informed virtually every area of cultural, social and political life in the western hemisphere.¹⁷

Kenneth J. Gergen suggests that on the path from the Enlightenment to modernism, romanticism may appear as an interlude, a digression. While retaining the human self as the central object of interest, romanticism rejected the exclusive emphasis that the Enlightenment placed on the powers of reason, asserting that there was a realm of experience beyond rational access. “[T]he romantic discourse of self created a sense of reality beyond immediate, sensory awareness; the unseen, inner depths were most substantial” (Gergen 1991: 24). Gergen traces the awareness of “the world of the deep interior” (Gergen 1991: 20) through the literature, philosophy, fine arts, and music of the period and argues that the romantic conception of the self continues to be relevant today as a major frame of reference for making sense of oneself:

[M]uch of our contemporary vocabulary of the person, along with associated ways of life, finds its origins in the romantic period. It is a vocabulary of passion, purpose, depth, and personal significance: a vocabulary that generates awe of heroes, of genius, and of inspired work. It places love in the forefront of human endeavors, praising those who abandon the “useful” and the “functional” for the sake of others. It fosters a belief in deep dynamics of personality—marriage as a “communion of souls,” family as bonded in love, and friendship as a lifetime commitment. Because of romanticism we can trust in moral values and an ultimate significance to the human venture. For many the loss of such a vocabulary would essentially be the collapse of anything meaningful in life. If love as intimate communion, intrinsic worth, creative inspiration, moral values, and passionate expression were all scratched from our vocabularies, life for many would be a pallid affair indeed (Gergen 1991: 27).¹⁸

¹⁷ Irving Howe describes the triumph of the notion of the autonomous self as championed by the Enlightenment:

In the Enlightenment educated Europeans experienced ‘an expansive sense of power over nature and themselves’. The self attains the dignity of a noun, as if to register an enhancement of authority, [ . . .] The idea of the self becomes a force within public life, almost taking on institutional shape and certainly entering the arena of historical contention. For what occurs is not just a new perception of our internal space, but its emergence as a major social factor (Howe 1992: 250, references omitted).

¹⁸ Gergen’s point that one important way of conceptualizing the person today is rooted in the view of a static, essential self and in the assumption that ultimately access to this self can only be gained through emotional engagement rather than cognitive endeavor finds support in Ann Swidler’s study of the traditional American concepts of love and adulthood and the challenges these are exposed to in contemporary society. Yet, where Gergen emphasizes
The romanticist sensibility and view of the self as an ultimately unfathomable essence did not command center-stage for long. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, their powers waned and they were displaced by the more upbeat, more assertive modernist conception of the self, which was so much more in tune with the changing times. Sigmund Freud was “a transitional figure between the romantic and modernist sensibilities” (Gergen 1991: 27). The shift away from romanticism may be attributed to the inability of the romanticist self-concept to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that arose with the advances in science and technology during the late nineteenth century and that occurred as a result of the increasing industrialization and the concomitant rise of capitalism (Gergen 1991: 28).

The modernist view of the self emerging under these circumstances regarded the self as the center of an essentially comprehensible and, therefore, conquerable universe. Thus, these new conditions favored the return to the ideals and principles of the Enlightenment and gave rise to an unbounded optimism which inspired the modernist “grand narrative of progress” (Gergen 1991: 30), one of the “metanarratives” which, according Francois Lyotard (1984), served as frames of reference for modernism.

The direct roots of “rationality, observation, progress, and essentials—all of them modernist leitmotifs” (Gergen 1991: 36)—clearly must be sought in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. These principles were also thought to be decisive in the formation of personal character. While romanticism held that “such things as passion, genius, inspiration, and the like were largely inborn, inherent in the natural instincts of the individual” (Gergen 1991: 41), modernists believed that the individual’s personality basically develops in response to the environment. “In short, the importance of the romantic rejection of the supremacy of reason in the previous enlightenment period, Swidler sees the legacy of courtly love (Swidler, 1980: 121-122) and “the Protestant view of the self as having a single, unified inner essence decisive for the individual’s fate” (Swidler, 1980: 123) as the chief sources: “The love myth has it that, in a world where people are often profoundly alone, love can break through the superficial and penetrate to the true self—so that in loving one can know and be known by another person, and in doing so come to know oneself” (Swidler, 1980: 123-124).
it is not by virtue of heredity that we are what we are, but by observation of the environment” (ibid.). The image of the machine captured the new, modernist view of the person:

If machine imagery lies at the center of modernist conceptions of the person, then autonomous reliability should be the hallmark of the mature man. The well-designed machine resists deterioration and functions reliably; in the same way, if properly molded by family and society, the mature person will be “self-directing,” “solid,” “trustworthy,” “consistent.” To know him is to know what to expect of him. His words will be an authentic expression of what he truly is—now and in the future. The modernist man is genuine rather than phony, principled rather than craven, and stable rather than wavering. (Gergen 1991: 44).

As is evident from the image of the machine, the modernist self-concept adhered to the key assumptions of the Enlightenment that, in the final consequence, the self has an essence and that one can get through to this core of the self by rigorous application of reason and observation. Consequently, the modernist view of the self was enormously optimistic about the future.

Gergen demonstrates that this modernist belief in and its quest for essence as well as its confidence that it would find this essence became manifest in such diverse fields of cultural activity as architecture, dance, music, the visual arts, and literature. Furthermore, he shows that this notion of the essential self, which is accessible through exercise of the powers of reason and observation, held sway in psychology and psychotherapy far into the twentieth century:

The assumption of basic essence was steadfast . . . . Not simply did humans have an essence, but failing to possess one was tantamount to illness. Therapy functioned to build or restore essence. To illustrate, Erik Erikson proposed that the major achievement of normal development was a firm and fixed 'sense of identity.’ To cast about in a state of ‘identity diffusion’ was to fail in the basic task of personality development (Gergen 1991: 41).

2.1.2 The Emergence of the Inner-directed Character in America

David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*,
first published in 1950, concentrated on one aspect of the modernist conceptualization of the self, namely that of social character. This was understood as “that part of ‘character’ which is shared among significant social groups and which . . . is the product of the experience of these groups” (Riesman 1961: 4). Starting out from Erich Fromm’s dictum that in any society “the members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in the way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it” (quoted in Riesman 1961: 5), Riesman proposed that the predominant economic, social, and cultural conditions in any given society bring forth a type of social character that is characteristic of this society and that ensures a relative conformity with the demands that this society makes of its members.

The main finding of Riesman’s study of postwar America was that the nation had reached a watershed. An era of transitional population growth, which had fostered the emergence of a specific type of social character perfectly adapted to the challenges of life in such a society, was drawing to a close:

In western history, the society that emerged with the Renaissance and Reformation and that is only now vanishing serves to illustrate the type of society in which inner-direction is the principal mode of securing conformity. Such a society is characterized by increased personal mobility, by a rapid accumulation of capital (teamd with devastating technological shifts), and by an almost constant expansion: intensive expansion in the production of goods and people, and extensive expansion in exploration, colonization, and imperialism. The greater choices this society gives—and the greater initiatives it demands in order to cope with its novel problems—are

understanding the development of personality from adolescence into adulthood (Waterman 1982: 341).”

Fromm’s thesis specifies a general notion that is central to Marx’s analysis of capitalist economy. Louis Althusser has famously formulated Marx’s thesis:

As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year. The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production. [. . .] It follows that, in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. the productive forces, 2. the existing relations of production (Althusser 1971: 127-128).

However, Riesman rejected the notion of determinism, which, for example, lay at the heart of the kind of Marxist critique of mass culture associated with the members of the Frankfurt School. Riesman makes clear: “We did not assume that an individual would be the replica of his social role, but rather that there might be great tension between an individual’s search for fulfillment and the demands of the institutions in which he had a part, or from which he felt alienated (Riesman 1961: xvi).
handled by character types who can manage to live socially without strict and self-evident tradition-direction. These are the inner-directed types. [...] the source of direction for the individual is "inner" in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders and directed toward generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals (Riesman 1961: 14).

Riesman’s definition of this inner-directed type of social character is compatible to Gergen’s account of the modernist view of the self (Gergen 1991: 44). However, Riesman is not concerned with the philosophical roots of this self-concept; he foregrounds the shaping effect of the cultural, social, and material conditions of existence for this type of character. Arguably, in the case of the society of the United States, the inner-directed type of social character arose in response to the colonization of the continent. For the purposes of this study, two major, specifically American factors must be singled out which decisively influenced the formation of the American variety of the inner-directed type: these factors are the Puritan heritage and the legacy of the Frontier. In the following, these influences are discussed briefly.

2.1.2.1 The Puritan Heritage

The Puritan ethic is an instance of inner-direction, as Riesman explicitly mentions (Riesman 1961: 14). Many of the notions central to the Puritan ethic find expression in John Winthrop’s sermon “We Shall Be as a City Upon a Hill.” This speech is generally regarded as a key text to an understanding of the Puritan mind and is, therefore, a good reference point for the cursory overview to be given here. In this address to the 700 Puritan settlers who set sail for New England in March 1630, the elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony set forth the fundamental ethical foundations for life in the colony. With the idea of the Holy Covenant as a readily available point of reference for his congregation, Winthrop, in the very literal sense of the word, draws up a “social contract” between the colonists and God:

Thus stands the case between God and us. We are entered into a covenant with him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those ends, upon these and those accounts. We have hereupon besought of him favor and blessing.
Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a (sinful) people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other; make other's condition our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways. So that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and a glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “The Lord make it likely that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us (Winthrop).

Winthrop’s text breathes the confidence in the individual’s powers so characteristic of modernity. Yet Winthrop makes clear that, while humans have a freedom of choice and action, they depend upon God’s approval and support for their success. He is the ultimate power. Winthrop’s diction, drawing largely on the terminology of business and commerce, suggests that life is essentially a job assigned to humanity by God. The Puritans consider themselves bound to God by a contract. The clearly laid-out terms of this contract specify what humans are meant to do and what they can expect in return. The contract also provides for the case that the humans should fail to meet their side of the contract. Winthrop holds that God can and will withdraw his help and punish them if the humans breach the articles of this covenant. The pursuit of “carnal intentions” and undue personal ambition constitute such a violation of the contract. Such desires are morally wrong and will meet with God’s punishment.

Seen against the subsequent catalogue of demands made of the settlers’ social behavior, it is clear that these above desires are outlawed as sins because they are most likely to prove socially disruptive. For the list of desirable qualities and
behavior that Winthrop proclaims in the following has clearly been drawn up with a view to promoting social unity and to strengthening the community. He urges the Puritan settlers to consider themselves as social beings, as parts of one community, “as members of the same body.” Unmistakably, Winthrop’s argument runs against the pursuit of private interests for their own sake. The common goals—the preservation of the unity of faith, the prevention of social strife, the resistance against an adversary, and the promotion of economic prosperity—can only be achieved if every individual subordinates their private interests to the interests of the community at large. “As a city upon a hill”—Winthrop here quotes Matthew (5:14-16)—, the Puritans regard themselves as an outpost of Christianity. Exposed to everybody’s critical scrutiny, they are called upon to set a shining example and to be a beacon of hope.

Winthrop’s sermon spells out the most important of the principles constituting the Puritan ethic. These firm ethical principles of the Puritans function as what Riesman calls the “gyroscope” in the inner-directed character. This gyroscope made the inner-directed Puritan settler particularly well-equipped to confront the challenges of life in an uncharted continent. For later generations, the Puritan heritage formed a perfect basis that enabled them to take advantage of the opportunities arising in the rapidly changing environment of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized nation in the nineteenth century.22 Riesman explains:

The inner-directed person has early incorporated a psychic gyroscope which is set going by his parents and can receive signals later on from other authorities who resemble his parents. He goes through life less independent than he seems, obeying this internal piloting. Getting off course, whether in response to inner impulses or to the fluctuating voices of contemporaries, may lead to the feeling of guilt. Since the direction to be taken in life has been learned in the privacy of the home from a small number of guides and since principles, rather than details of behavior, are internalized, the inner-directed person is capable of great stability. Especially so when it turns out that his fellows have gyroscopes too, spinning at the same speed and set in the same direction. But many inner-directed individuals can remain stable even when the reinforcement of social approval is not available. . . (Riesman 1961: 24).

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2.1.2.2 The Legacy of the Frontier

The Frontier is the second factor promoting inner-direction in Americans that needs to be mentioned here. The idea of the decisive formative influence of the Frontier experience is most fully developed by Frederick Jackson Turner, who is credited with first putting it into the center of attention of American historiography (Sautter 1994: 268). Written after the frontier had officially ceased to exist, Turner’s seminal essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) advances a simple, all-encompassing thesis: “Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner 1920: 1) He then proceeds to set forth how American structures and the national character evolved in specific response to the westward movement of settlement. In conclusion, to his article Turner sketches the profound effect of the frontier experience on the emergence of a distinctly American national character:

[T]o the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expediency; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves (Turner 1920: 37).

Turner himself, though explicitly starting out from the fact that the frontier has effectively ceased to exist, is primarily concerned with explaining past developments and does not touch upon the problems that will inevitably occur in a completely settled continent. Despite his concession at the end of the passage quoted
above, Turner’s argument is premised on the existence of a limitless abundance of space and resources. “The most significant thing about the American frontier,” Turner writes, “is that it lies at the hither edge of free land” (Turner 1920: 3). In his quite enthusiastic celebration of “the democracy born of free land” (Turner 1920: 32), he does not directly address the question of how such a concept of democracy may fare in the face of an ever-growing population within geographic and political borders and in the face of inexorably dwindling resources. Henry N. Smith puts the problem succinctly:

But if opportunity, happiness, social harmony, and even liberty itself depended on the presence of free land beyond the frontier, what became of these values in the event that the available land should after all prove to be limited in extent? The doctrine of the safety valve implied that in these circumstances American society would become like crowded Europe. The ills of the old world . . . would become the ills of the New (Smith 1978: 254).

Smith argues that Turner, steeped in “an agrarian philosophy and an agrarian myth that purported to set forth the character and destinies of the nation,” was ill equipped to deal with the changes after the disappearance of the frontier, particularly the advances in technology and the growing industrialization (Smith 1978: 258-259).

Even so the indubitable fact remains that, although Turner theorizes the impact of the westering experience on the American mind in the past and despite the limited applicability of his theory to a nation developing within fixed bounds, his theory lent itself superbly to the creation of the powerful myth that the spirit of the frontiersman would forever dwell in the American heart.23

In sum, it may be said that the modern sense of self is truly imperial. In all its varieties discussed here—whether in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, in the romanticist or the modernist version, or in the specifically American variety that arose from the Puritan heritage and the experience of the Frontier—it is set to
explore and conquer the unknown. The firm sense of a personal essence and the belief in the possibility of self-realization, which are characteristic of the modern sense of self, provided the mainstays in an ever-expanding world.

Yet, as will be shown in the following, there is growing consensus that the modern belief in an autonomous, essential self is increasingly difficult to maintain under the conditions of the contemporary consumer culture. It will be demonstrated that the confidence inspired by Descartes’ assertion of the autonomous self, which marked the beginning of modernity, gave way to widespread ontological uncertainty in the twentieth century.

2.2 The Self on the Retreat

2.2.1 The Appearance of the Other-directed Character in Postwar America

David Riesman assumed that the inner-directed type was ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the postwar consumer society, a society marked by “the loss or attenuation of the older social functions on the frontiers of production and exploration, and the discovery of other frontiers in the realm of consumption and personal relations” (Riesman 1961: xvi). Riesman’s assumption implied that the principles and ideals associated with the legacies of the Puritan settlers and the pioneers on the Frontier, which were and still are so central to the American self-understanding and American capitalism, may in fact no longer be tenable. As a result of the current “shift from an age of production to an age of consumption” (Riesman 1961: 6), such inner-direction had become inadequate as a mode of social adaptation:

The hard enduringness and enterprise of the inner-directed types are somewhat less necessary under these new conditions. Increasingly, other people are the problem, not the material environment. And as people mix more widely and become more sensitive to each other, the surviving traditions from the stage of high growth potential—much disrupted, in any case, during the violent spurt of industrialization—become still further attenuated. Gyroscopic control is no longer sufficiently flexible, and a new psychological mechanism is called for. Furthermore, the "scarcity psychology" of

23 See, for instance, John F. Kennedy’s vision of a “New Frontier” formulated on the occasion of his nomination as the Presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in Los Angeles in July 1960 (Kennedy n. d.: 8).
many inner-directed people, which was socially adaptive during the period of heavy capital accumulation that accompanied transitional growth of population, needs to give way to an "abundance psychology" capable of "wasteful" luxury consumption of leisure and of the surplus product. . . (Riesman 1961: 18).

For Riesman the growing presence of the mass media and their intrusion into virtually every area of life accelerated the demise of the inner-directed character and brought on the emergence of a personality that depends on other-direction:

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course "internalized" in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life. This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioral conformity . . . through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others (Riesman 1961: 21-22). 24

Riesman argued that this shift away from inner-direction towards other-direction as a method of social adaptation to the demands of life in the postwar consumer society had far-reaching repercussions, some of which are relevant to the present study. With regard to child rearing, he maintained that other-directed parents, deprived of the ideals and principles that the inner-directed character possessed, were not capable of imparting a sense of clear goals in their children (Riesman 1961: 47-48, 55). What they did pass on to their children, however, was a kind of “radar” (Riesman 1961: 25) tuned in to the reactions of the social environment, especially the peer group. Such parents also helped their offspring develop the skills needed to manipulate the responses of their environment (Riesman 1961: 45). The radar and this ability to manipulate were both essential since, above anything else, the other-directed person was said to strive for social approval.

Riesman contended that the change away from inner- and toward other-direction also reflected in the worlds of work and leisure. In the latter just as at the place of work, the other-directed person was held to be engaged in what Riesman called “antagonistic cooperation,” in which
the goal is less important than the relationship to the “others.” In this new-style competition people are often in doubt whether there is a race at all, and if so, what its goals are. Since they are supposed to be cooperative rather than rivalrous, they may well feel guilt about success and even a certain responsibility for others’ failure. (Riesman 1961: 101)

Riesman further observed that at work the other-directed character, forever seeking orientation and social approval, ultimately depended on the response of his or her colleagues—who were also suspiciously regarded as competitors—for the definition of the goals and the ways in which to pursue them (Riesman 1961: 133, 137-138).

Riesman argued that for the person dependent on other-direction the area of consumption was another major field in which he or she entered into competition with and simultaneously sought the approval of the social environment. Riesman emphasized that commodities were not primarily purchased for their ostensible use-value. For the other-directed person consumption was “a preferential method of relating oneself to others” (Riesman 1961: 77-78) and a way of competing for social approval and social status (Riesman 1961: 81).

Another observation of Riesman’s pertaining to this study concerns the sexual life of the other-directed person. He took a particularly bleak view of sexuality in the other-directed person’s life. Riesman contended that to the individual dependent on other-direction sexuality had become another consumption good used “as a kind of defense against the threat of total apathy” (Riesman 1961: 146).

In Riesman’s view other-direction also becomes manifest in the way people present themselves. The other-directed individual’s ceaseless search for guidance and acceptance forced him constantly to play a role. Riesman warned that such a person might end up “being what he plays, and his mask becomes the perhaps inescapable reality of his style of life (Riesman 1961: 224). Riesman even went so far as to conclude that “the other-directed person has no clear core of self to escape from”

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24 Riesman pointed out that his notion of the other-directed character was similar to the concepts which other sociologists of the period (e. g. Fromm, Mill, and Green) had proposed to account for the change in social character (Riesman 1961: 19).
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(Riesman 1961: 157). This last statement expresses the sentiment that the conditions of the consumer society arising after the Second World War were a severe threat to the modern view of the self as an essence. Ultimately, in the light of Riesman’s analysis of the social character emerging just after the Second World War, the self, which had seemed so imperial just a few decades before, now looked badly battered indeed.

2.2.2 Narcissism and the Minimal Self in the Contemporary Consumer Society

What David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* was for the postwar period, Christopher Lasch’s much-discussed *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978) and the follow-up study *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984) were for the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. While writing within and about different decades of the twentieth century, both authors share an interest in the behavioral techniques and strategies as well as the concepts of self and social relations that people develop in order to cope with life under the conditions of the consumer society.

Like Riesman’s examination of social character in the time after World War Two, Christopher Lasch’s analysis of the problems of the self and identity in the U. S. consumer society of the 1970s and early 1980s is sustained by a profound sense that the self is in jeopardy. Yet, where Riesman wavered, Lasch is assertive. In the face of an adverse environment, *The Minimal Self* opens with a powerful affirmation of the author’s belief in the self as an inviolable essence:

In a time of troubles, everyday life becomes an exercise in survival. People take one day at a time. They seldom look back, lest they succumb to a debilitating ‘nostalgia’; and if they look ahead, it is to see how they can insures themselves against the disasters almost everybody now expects. Under these conditions, selfhood becomes a kind of luxury, out of place in an age of impending austerity. Selfhood implies a personal history, friends, family, a sense of place. Under siege, the self

25 Barely ten years after Riesman, in *The Status Seekers* (1959), Vance Packard made the same observation about the consumer society of the 1950s.
contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear (Lasch 1985: 15).

Similar to David Riesman, Christopher Lasch sees the self constantly engaged in a rearguard action against the inroads of hostile environmental forces upon the very center of the self. However, whereas Riesman concluded that the other-directed person is without a “clear core of self” (Riesman 1961: 157), Lasch is loath to abandon his belief in the basic, impervious self. Lasch advances the thesis that, under the threatening conditions of the American consumer society of the 1970s and 1980s, the self finally withdraws to a “minimal self”, a self that, because it has been stripped-down to the barest essentials, is capable of withstanding its destruction.

For Lasch many of the traits of the other-directed type of character, whose gradual emergence in the postwar period Riesman documented, are still in evidence and have even become more pronounced and dominant by the 1970s. Yet, as the subtitles of his books show, Lasch argues that in the contemporary consumer culture these traits of character, though bearing an outward resemblance to those of the other-directed personality of the forties, stem from quite different psychic roots. He maintains that the dreary economic and social realities of the 1970s simply do not provide for the complacency and optimism that the prosperity of the postwar period nurtured (see Lasch 1978: 64). Instead, he sees that the scarce resources and generally harsher circumstances in the 1970s call for a greater competitiveness: “Americans have not really become more sociable and cooperative, as the theorists of other-direction and conformity would like us to believe; they have merely become more adept at exploiting the conventions of interpersonal relations for their own benefit” (Lasch 1978: 66).

Like Riesman, Lasch directs his attention to parenthood and parent-child relations. According to Christopher Lasch, parents in the latter half of the twentieth century often lack the necessary ethical orientation and the sense of direction in life that may enable them to exercise clear parental guidance. In this, they resemble the
other-directed parents Riesman observed in the post-World War Two era. Lasch
believes that the cult of authenticity in child rearing which he sees developing since
the 1950s merely covers up the absence of such moral grounding. In *The Culture of
Narcissism* he writes, “The cult of authenticity reflects the collapse of parental
guidance and provides it with a moral justification” (Lasch 1978: 167). Of course,
the very concept of authenticity logically presupposes the belief in the existence of a
basic self as a point of reference. The overriding emphasis on authenticity as a
guiding principle that Lasch observes in child rearing may be understood as a
symptom of a widespread fear that this self as an essence is in danger and needs
protection and reassurance.

Overwhelmed by the offerings of the consumer society, contemporary
parents are increasingly becoming self-conscious about their capacity to rear and
educate their children. Their growing insecurity has powerful repercussions on the
relationship to their children. Lasch claims that

“The invasion of the family by industry, the mass media, and the agencies of
socialized parenthood has subtly altered the quality of the parent-child connection. It
has created an ideal of perfect parenthood while destroying parents’ confidence in
their ability to perform the most elementary functions of childrearing “(Lasch 1978:
170).

In *The Minimal Self*, Lasch elaborates this thought,

Reluctant to claim the authority of superior experience, parents seek to become their
children’s companions. They cultivate a youthful appearance and youthful tastes,
learn the latest slang, and throw themselves into their children’s activities. They do
everything possible, in short, to minimize the difference between generations (Lasch

And Lasch joins other scholars of contemporary American life such as Jules
Henry in their critique when he concludes that

the reversal of the normal relations between the generations, the decline of parental
discipline, the “socialization” of many parental functions, and the “self-centered,
impulse-dominated, detached, confused” actions of American parents give rise to
characteristics that . . . equip the young to live in a permissive society organized
around the pleasures of consumption (Lasch 1978: 178).

Another point of interest that Lasch has in common with Riesman is his
focus on how people employ self-representation as a means of relating to their
environment. Lasch argues that since the 1940s both working life and leisure have
become much more competitive (see Lasch 1978: 65). The ambivalent attitude
toward social relations manifest in the antagonistic cooperation that Riesman
observed after the Second World War has yielded to a tougher, more candid social
rivalry by the 1970s. In Lasch’s view, this struggle for power is not fought on the
basis of competence or actual achievement but is decided by the individual’s ability
to project a compelling self-image. Lasch finds that people strategically plan their
self-presentation to secure a competitive advantage. He writes:

Both as a worker and as a consumer, the individual learns not merely to measure
himself against others but to see himself through others’ eyes. He learns that the self-
image he projects counts for more than accumulated skills and experience. Since he
will be judged, both by his colleagues and superiors at work and by the strangers he
encounters on the street, according to his possessions, his clothes, and his
"personality" . . . he adopts a theatrical view of his own "performance" on and off
the job (Lasch 1985: 29-30).26

Furthermore, Lasch believes that such an approach to social relations is bound to
affect the individual’s view of himself or herself:

[T]he conditions of everyday social intercourse, in societies based on mass
production and mass consumption, encourage an unprecedented attention to
superficial impressions and images, to the point where the self becomes almost
indistinguishable from its surface. Selfhood and personal identity become problematic
in such societies. . . . When people complain of feeling inauthentic or rebel against
“role-playing,” they testify to the prevailing pressure to see themselves with the eyes
of strangers and to shape the self as another commodity offered up for consumption
on the open market (Lasch 1985: 30).

For Christopher Lasch the view of the self as a mere commodity—that is as a
good which has been produced expressly for the market and whose content or use-
value is negligible compared to its exchange value or the competitive advantage it
offers on the market—prompts the individual to adopt an ironically detached view of
him- or herself. In Lasch’s opinion, the self-irony with which people regard their own

26 Support for Lasch’s assertion comes from research in social psychology. Robert M.
Arkin usefully defines self-presentation and explains its significance for the individual:
We defined self-presentation as the strategies and techniques used to influence the
impressions others form of us during social interaction. Implicitly, it was assumed
that people are highly concerned about winning the approval and avoiding the
disapproval of others, and attempt to do so by presenting themselves in a positive
manner. Social approval is assumed to be a crucial determinant of behavior. . . .
Maintaining the social approval of others certainly has survival value for both the
individual and the species (those who approve of us affiliate with us and therefore are
able to meet many of our basic needs). . . (Arkin 1980: 161).
lives is an attempt to cope with the recognition of having “sold oneself” and the resultant sense of inauthenticity (see Lasch 1978: 94-95). Once again, the individual’s nagging feeling of acting inauthentically is evidence of the underlying belief in the true self. Simultaneously, it reflects the fear that this self is beleaguered under the circumstances of life in the contemporary American consumer society.

Lasch also directs his attention to the field of sexuality. Riesman already lamented that sexuality threatened to deteriorate to a mere “consumption good.” With Riesman, Lasch shares the conviction that life in the consumer society has a profoundly debasing effect on the relations between the sexes. Lasch argues that by the 1970s the glut of mass-mediated offerings that vie for people’s attention makes them profoundly uncertain about their sexuality just as, in his opinion, it undermines their self-confidence as parents (see Lasch 1978: 188).

Lash draws attention to another aspect of sexual relations in the late-twentieth century American consumer society. In his mind, they are increasingly determined by the generally more competitive outlook on social relations:

Both men and women have come to approach personal relations with a heightened appreciation of their emotional risks. Determined to manipulate the emotions of others while protecting themselves against emotional injury, both sexes cultivate a protective shallowness, a cynical detachment they do not altogether feel but which soon becomes habitual and in any case embitters personal relations merely through its repeated profession. At the same time, people demand from personal relations the richness and intensity of a religious experience. Although in some ways, men and women have had to modify their demands on each other, especially in their inability to exact commitments of lifelong sexual fidelity, in other ways they demand more than ever. (Lasch 1978: 194).

Lasch’s pessimistic view of the emerging love ethic laments the loss of the clarity and certainty of the past and that the self must withdraw into its indivisible core in order to survive. 27

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27 Ann Swidler, a student of the love ethic in contemporary America, concedes Lasch’s point but also suggests that a great potential of personal growth and renewal lies in these ongoing changes:

In some ways the most crucial shift in our culture is a change in the symbolic and moral grounding of the self in modern society. If the self can no longer find definition in a single set of adult commitments, a set of roles which consolidate identity, what can the self be? If it must be defined, as seems implicit in the modern culture of love, by its ability to resist attachment, by its ability to go through changes without being
Another aspect of life in the consumer society is consumption. Within the competitive attitude to social relations that Lasch discerns in the 1970s and 1980s both at work and leisure, consumption plays an even more crucial role than in the period examined in Riesman’s book. This social function of consumption was early commented on. Thorstein Veblen (1902) noted around the turn of the century that “conspicuous consumption” was employed in some well-to-do sections of society as a way of comparing oneself to and competing with one’s neighbors. In the America after World War Two, Riesman similarly observed that through consumption other-directed characters attempted to relate themselves to the people around them and sought social approval. Christopher Lasch is in accordance with other commentators of contemporary American consumer society when he suggests that three decades after Riesman’s seminal study the situation has become harsher, and consumption has more overtly become the field on which the contenders engage in the struggle for social position and power. Explicitly referring to Guy Debord, Lasch maintains that in the contemporary United States “society [is] dominated by appearances—the society of the spectacle. In the period of primitive accumulation, capitalism fundamentally changed, then we have an ideal of the self cut off from meaningful connection to others, from any danger of commitment, attachment, sacrifice, or self-restraint. This is a model of human relationships in which people are not willing to take the risks of disappointment and defeat that inevitably accompany meaningful love or work.

And yet, there is strength in the recognition that ‘the capacity to love and to work’ is not a one-time accomplishment that settles the adult life course once and for all. Further risks, further choices, further efforts are demanded, and further opportunities for self-knowledge, intimacy, and joy await us. In the past our love ideology has dealt largely with the problems of becoming an adult, as if after the adult course was set there was nothing left to worry about. . . . Now we have a cultural attempt to deal with adulthood, to develop a set of myths and images that can give moral meaning and purpose to a life that has no fixed end, no dramatic conclusion. In some ways the reaction to this challenge seems to be a culture of narcissism, in which the self and its perpetuation become all, in which the trick is to remain alive and whole without risking attachments or making binding choices. But the other side of these cultural explorations is a search for models of self and models of love that are compatible with continuing growth and change, that permeate with moral significance the ups and downs of daily life, the struggle to live well, rather than giving moral meaning only to the dramatic moment of the shift from youth to adulthood (Swidler 1980: 143-144).

28 “Positional” or “competitive” consumption has been the subject of much research. Celia Lury (1996, particularly chapter 4) gives a useful introduction to relevant studies.
subordinated being to having, the use value of commodities to their exchange value. Now it subordinates possession itself to appearance and measures exchange value as a commodity’s capacity to confer prestige—the illusion of prosperity and well-being” (Lasch 1978: 72). Of course, this is possible because of the fetishization of all commodities.

More recently, Juliet Schor has drawn attention to the fact that competitive consumption itself has been undergoing an important change since the 1950s. Schor first restates the now generally accepted notion “that spending is in large part driven by a comparative or competitive process in which individuals try to keep up with the norms of the social group with which they identify—a ‘reference group.’” She then goes on to argue that, in contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, the reference groups have been redefined in contemporary American society:

“[T]oday’s comparisons are less likely to take place between or among households of similar means. Instead, the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the rich have become a more salient point of reference for people throughout the income distribution. Luxury, rather than comfort, is the widespread aspiration.”

This is what she calls “upscale emulation” (Schor).

Christopher Lasch’s central concern is with the possibility of selfhood in the contemporary American consumer society. In his opinion, the living conditions in this society greatly imperil and destroy the individual’s selfhood. The commodity becomes a “fetish,” by which Marx wants to indicate that the good that is exchanged is charged up with a symbolical value that represents the relationship between the consumer and his or her environment and that is entirely independent of its physical nature or its use-value. Because of this fetishism, the commodity is able to function as a vessel for the individual’s needs and desires:

Commodity production and consumerism alter perceptions not just of the self but of the world outside the self. They create a world of mirrors, insubstantial images, illusions increasingly indistinguishable from reality. The mirror effect makes the subject an object; at the same time, it makes the world of objects an extension or projection of the self. It is misleading to characterize the culture of consumption as a culture dominated by things. The consumer lives surrounded not so much by things as by fantasies. He lives in a world that has no objective or independent existence and seems to exist only to gratify or thwart his desires (Lasch 1985: 30).
Under these conditions the narcissistic personality emerges: “A culture organized around mass consumption encourages narcissism—which we define, for the moment, as a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one’s own fears and desires—not because it makes people grasping and self-assertive but because it makes them weak and dependent” (Lasch 1985: 33). Clearly, Lasch expressly denounces any understanding of the term narcissism as merely denoting selfishness and self-love. Instead, he resorts to the Freudian concept of narcissism and its roots in Greek mythology to capture the specific nature of the imperilment of the self in the contemporary American consumer society. He further elaborates:

Narcissism signifies a loss of selfhood, not self-assertion. It refers to a self threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness. To avoid confusion, what I have called the culture of narcissism might better be characterized, at least for the moment, as a culture of survivalism. Everyday life has begun to pattern itself on the survival strategies forced on those exposed to extreme adversity. Selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, renunciation of the past and the future, a determination to live one day at a time—these techniques of emotional self-management, necessarily carried to extremes under extreme conditions, in more moderate form have come to shape the lives of ordinary people under the ordinary conditions of a bureaucratic society widely perceived as a far-flung system of total control (Lasch 1985: 58).

Lasch argues that a world manufactured to reflect the consumers’ needs and their fears back to them poses a serious threat to the sense of self because it undermines a painfully acquired insight:

The fundamental importance of the distinction between self and not-self—the source of all other distinctions, it has rightly been said—might suggest that it serves as the first principle of mental life, the axiomatic premise without which mental life cannot even begin. In fact, however, it is a distinction that is accepted, in the infancy of life, only with the greatest reluctance, after fierce inner struggles to deny it; and it remains the source of our existential uneasiness, as well as the source of our intellectual mastery of the world around us. […] “Selfhood presents itself, at first, as a painful separation from the surrounding environment, and this original experience of overwhelming loss becomes the basis of all subsequent experiences of alienation. . . (Lasch 1985: 163-164)

To the narcissistic personality in the consumer society, consumption is the strategy that holds up the devious promise of satisfying those needs and appeasing

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29 This stance is taken by such neoconservative critics of contemporary American culture as Allan Bloom (1987: 118).
those fears. A world of commodities that suggest that all needs and wishes can be fulfilled, that, in other words, the prenatal “experience of narcissistic self-sufficiency and union with the world” (Lasch 1985: 167) can be recuperated destroys the very “condition of the possibility” of selfhood, of forming a sense of being a person different and distinct from the environment.\textsuperscript{30}

In the contemporary consumer society, selfhood and personal identity become problematic because identity is furnished out of industrial artifacts. This creates a sense of inauthenticity and distrust in one’s own sense of identity. The total immersion in a world characterized by mass consumption has another inevitable and important implication. Lasch writes:

To the performing self, the only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture, themes of popular film and fiction, fragments torn from a vast range of cultural traditions, all of them equally contemporaneous to the contemporary mind. In order to polish and perfect the part he has devised for himself, the new Narcissus gazes at his own reflection, not so much in admiration as in unremitting search for flaws, signs of fatigue, decay” (Lasch 1978: 91).

“Imprisoned in his self-awareness, modern man longs for the lost innocence of spontaneous feeling. Unable to express emotion without calculating its effects on others, he doubts the authenticity of its expression in others and therefore derives little comfort from audience reactions to his own performance, even when the audience claims to be deeply moved. (Lasch 1978: 93)

Furthermore, with everything being produced for immediate consumption, the world surrounding the individual is changing rapidly. This may undermine the individual’s sense of identity because, ultimately, in the everlasting present of the contemporary consumer society, there is no stability, no fixed point of reference which to anchor

\textsuperscript{30} This view of alienation as the precondition of selfhood is also taken by other authors. David Galloway, for instance, contends, “[M]an does not become alienated . . .: alienation is his birthright, the modern, psychologically colored equivalent of original sin” (Galloway 1971: 18).

Irving Howe, who is firmly entrenched in the tradition of liberal humanism, comments to the same effect. He suggests that our frequently deplored alienation can be seen as a human conquest, the sign that we have broken out of traditionalist bonds. Psychologically: because the pain of estrangement can be seen as a necessary cost of the boon of selfhood—if we bemoan “deformed” selves we may be supposed to have a glimmer of “true” selves. And morally: because it is all but impossible to postulate a self without some intertwined belief in the good and desirable. For the self is not just an intuited supposition of a state of being; it is also a historically situated norm (Howe 1992: 251).
oneself to, and thus no sense of history.\textsuperscript{31}

In such exceedingly adverse circumstances, a formerly imperial, expansive self can hardly be asserted any longer. For Lasch, a minimal self, reduced to the essential core, is the result. Lasch vehemently rejects the idea of a self that is no more than the sum of the individual’s self-presentations.\textsuperscript{32} Even in this consumption-oriented culture, Lasch still sees the slight chance of a self that does not evaporate into mass-produced and mass-disseminated projections of fears and desires:

A genuine affirmation of the self, after all, insists on a core of selfhood not subject to environmental determination, even under extreme conditions. Self-affirmation remains a possibility precisely to the degree that an older conception of personality, rooted in Judaeo-Christian traditions, has persisted. . . . (Lasch 1985: 59).

In the end, by eroding the belief in the importance of one’s personal essence, mass production and mass consumption have also eroded the imperial self of modernity, which they helped give rise to not a century before.

\subsection*{2.3 The Self Dethroned and Shattered}

\subsubsection*{2.3.1 Social Saturation and Multiphrenia}

As has been shown above, Christopher Lasch from his humanist perspective cannot find evidence enough in contemporary American consumer society to jettison his belief in an essential self—though he concedes that the formerly imperial self of modernity has shrunken to a minimal self. In contrast to Lasch, Kenneth J. Gergen

\textsuperscript{31} In the ever-changing environment of mass production and consumption, the individual, notably the adolescent person, finds it hard to develop an “inner identity,” of which Erikson writes: “The wholeness to be achieved at this stage I have called a sense of inner identity. The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on. Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age mates and with leader figures outside of the family” (Erikson 1968: 87).

\textsuperscript{32} The social psychologists Tedeschi and Lindskold illustrate this idea: “Thomas Wolfe once likened the person to an onion. As you peel off one layer after another and finally reach the center, he said, you find . . . nothing! Perhaps the person is nothing more than all the
adopts what has been referred to as an antihumanist standpoint (Johnson 1990). In his analysis of problems of the self and identity in the consumer society of contemporary America, Gergen is unable to detect sufficient reason to retain the notion of the self as an essence. Gergen argues that, in the face of mounting evidence against the traditional humanist view, the idea of a basic, true self is no longer tenable and must give way to a constructivist, relational definition of the self.

Kenneth J. Gergen makes out a process of social saturation in “specifically affected segments of the population—often the more urban, mobile, professional, affluent, and aspiring” (Gergen 1991: 200), which he attributes to their growing dependence on the mass media as well as on modern technologies of communication and transport in their everyday lives. This social saturation, Gergen maintains, is the cause for the demise of the hitherto dominant romanticist and modernist views of the basic, true self and brings about the condition of postmodernism, in which “the very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt” (Gergen 1991: 7). He explains:

Both the romantic and the modern beliefs about the self are falling into disuse, and the social arrangements that they support are eroding. This is largely a result of the forces of social saturation. Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we “know to be true” about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all (Gergen 1991: 6-7).

Gergen suggests that social saturation profoundly affects people’s self-concepts and social interaction. He argues that social saturation has a number of effects on the ways people establish, maintain and conduct relationships. Some of these changes are relevant to this study and so may be sketched here briefly. First, relationships multiply since today great spatial distance no longer almost inevitably impedes continuation of a relationship. Relationships further increase in number presentations he makes of himself. There may be no true self or attitudes to discover” (cited in
because modern means of communication facilitate and thus accelerate the development of relationships (cf. Gergen 1991: 62). Second, as a consequence of social saturation, one comes to have a growing variety of relationships, and existing, traditional relationships undergo changes (cf. Gergen 1991: 64). Third, new forms of relationships such as the “friendly lover”-relationship originate (Gergen 1991: 65). Fourth, Gergen suggests that the “normalization” commonly found in traditionally conducted relationships is less likely to occur when the technologies of social saturation are integral to keeping up the relationship because they encourage emotional investment (cf. Gergen 1991: 67).

Gergen also believes that social saturation has a major impact on people’s self-concepts:

"As social saturation proceeds we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others’ patterns of being with us. If the conditions are favorable, we can place these patterns into action. Each of us becomes the other, a representative, or a replacement. To put it more broadly, as the century has progressed selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others (Gergen 1991: 71)."

Gergen concludes that under these circumstances, traditional notions of a unified, autonomous self become increasingly hard to maintain, and so “committed identity becomes an increasingly arduous achievement” (Gergen 1991: 73).

The populating of the self leads to a state of “multiphrenia,” by which Gergen means “the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments” (Gergen 1991: 74). A multiphrenic condition has important consequences for the individual. He or she is overwhelmed by the multitude of urges and obligations that vie for the attention of the crowded self (cf. Gergen 1991: 74). Moreover, it is more and more difficult to draw up a hierarchy of values and set one’s priorities (cf. Gergen 1991: 76-77) as one’s self is populated by other potentials of being. Finally, multiphrenia undermines rationality, which depends on one’s belonging to a

particular group. “[A]s the range of our relationships is expanded, the validity of each localized rationality is threatened” (Gergen 1991: 78).

Thus, in Gergen’s view, the increasing social saturation of the individual in the contemporary consumer society irredeemably destroys the possibility of full-hearted faith in the time-worn verities of romanticism and modernism. The condition of postmodernism, then, in which “identity has become as uncertain as everything else” (Bertens 1986: 47), calls for a reconceptualization of self and social interaction.

2.3.2 Ontological Uncertainty

As Gergen is able to demonstrate, there is a growing conviction among sociologists and psychologists that the humanist notion of a unified and essential self is becoming increasingly hard to maintain under the conditions of the contemporary consumer society, especially that of the United States of America. This recognition has also steadily gained currency in other fields of the humanities, particularly in philosophy, history, and literature, where, at least since the 1960, the humanist concept of the person has been subjected to the most powerful and devastating critique (Hutcheon 1988: 159).

In the view of its critics, the humanist notion of the self, which firmly ruled and governed virtually all human endeavor in the western hemisphere for more than two hundred years, has been exposed as what they say it has always been anyway: Its antihumanist adversaries debunk the idea of a human essence as merely one historic but today no longer tenable view of the person. Michel Foucault’s work in particular paved the way for the poststructuralist assault on the humanist notion of the self. He challenges the modern idea of a universal human essence on several accounts, which may be briefly recalled here. The first two reasons have no direct bearing on the subject of this study and so will only be mentioned in passing. First, Foucault argues that modernity was founded on an aporeethical proposition, namely that the human
self is both the autonomous subject and the object of cognition. Secondly, he criticizes the humanist self as anthropocentric. Rather than adopting a holistic perspective of all forms of life, this view is presumptuous in favoring the human subject to the obvious detriment of all other living beings.

The third point of criticism to be addressed here has enormous relevance to the present study. Foucault radically rejects the assertion that there is a universal self. He argues that neither when viewed from a diachronic nor from a synchronic perspective this statement stands up to critical scrutiny. For one thing, the claim to universality is erroneous since it ignores that the humanist view of the self emerged within the specific historical context of the Enlightenment and did not exist before. For another thing, the humanist view of the self is not justified because it is simply not true and relevant for all humans at a given moment in time—not even for all members of one and the same society. John Johnston summarizes Foucault’s argument:

In The Order of Things Michel Foucault argues that the humanist subject “man” is the product of a specific historical “episteme,” the appearance of which required the disintegration of a classical discourse and of the representation it subtended. “Before the end of the eighteenth century,” he writes, “man did not exist, any more than the potency of life, the fecundity of labour, or the historical density of language.” Foucault further argues that if indeed the appearance of the sciences humaines gave birth to humanist “man” as both the subject and object of study, modern developments in psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics are dissolving “man” into unconscious structures that no longer support any of the anthropocentric claims made on “his” behalf (Johnston 1990: 72).

Predictably, Foucault’s line of argument leaves staunch liberals such as Irving Howe unfazed. George Levine summarizes Howe’s interjection:

Having suggested that the idea of the ‘self’ may be a consequence of the growth of a market society, Howe argues that the discovery does not at all invalidate the concept, for values cannot be determined by imputed origin. The self may yet be authentic in spite of its contrived and rather commercial sources. On this line of argument . . . , the fact that all concepts, all knowledge, all apparently “natural” qualities (like selfishness,
Poststructuralist critics, drawing upon the work of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Althusser and others, argue that the charges of anthropocentrism and phallocentrism made in this passage are merely two instances of the numerous ways in which the purportedly “universal” human self is biased. It has been a primary concern of poststructuralist criticism to lay bare that the humanist conception of a human essence is anything but universal. In fact, this research has shown that the humanist self strongly privileges certain forms of human existence while failing to recognize the principal legitimacy of others. On the contrary, the “other” is marginalized and denounced as deviant and inferior. George Levine writes, “The concept of the ‘self,’ fully naturalized into a coherent, stable, and normative essence, is precisely what is invoked to dismiss deviations from the norm as symptoms of illness or criminality” (Levine 1992: 8-9).

From a poststructuralist perspective, the humanist view of the person and identity is particularly dangerous because it does not openly declare its preferences but conceals its biases and obfuscates its historical and social constructedness. In the humanist notion of the person, what are in fact merely preferred modes of existence are regarded as natural, universal essences. Through this unspoken “naturalization” of favored modes of existence, these are implicitly legitimated. They are perceived as the fixed, absolute, Archimedean points of reference, which allow differentiation between what is normal and what is not.

Race, gender, and sexuality, for instance, are among the most intensely discussed aspects of human life in the poststructuralist debate. With regard to these issues, poststructuralist criticism has demonstrated that the traditional, humanist view of the self is white-centric, phallocentric, and heterocentric, that is, within this self-concept the white, the male, and heterosexuality are always the still points of

for example) are culturally constructed does nothing to invalidate them” (Levine 1992: 5).
reference against which everything is measured and—this is important—judged to be inferior when differing. Those who are found to be wanting are “relegated to the fringes of the dominant culture—the women, blacks, gays, Native Peoples. . .” (Hutcheon 1989: 17). From this perspective, then, every “Other” is marginalized and becomes the “ex-centric” to use Linda Hutcheon’s term (Hutcheon 1988: 57-73).

Theories of the subject, Hutcheon formulates in her overview of the poststructuralist critique of the liberal humanist concept of the self, “tend to be theories of bourgeois, white individual, western ‘Man’ . . . . This is what really defines the so-called universal and timeless humanist subject” (Hutcheon 1988: 159). Accordingly, poststructuralism argues that the humanist concept of the person disempowers the non-Caucasian races, the feminine, and homosexuality, placing them at a strategic disadvantage somewhere on the margins of society. From the poststructuralist perspective liberal humanism was in fact the cause of oppressions, atrocities, and inhumanities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The fourth attack launched against the liberal humanist view of the self is a direct consequence of the “linguistic turn” in history at the beginning of the twentieth century and the basis of what has been said before. Jacques Derrida in particular contends that there is no subject outside discourse; there is no pre-discursive, inalienable human essence but only subjects existing within discourses. In line with Althusser’s view that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971: 162) and that it “hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (Althusser 1971: 172), the self and subjectivity are understood as constructs formed within a discourse. In this

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35 John Johnston explains Althusser’s view: “[I]deology is a matter of ‘subject construction,’ the net effect produced by the set of images [70] and discourses that give the subject a sense of coherent identity. Ideology thus functions to mask those contradictions that might question the legitimacy and desirability of accepting existing subject positions as binding definitions of human reality or of one’s identity” (Johnston 1990: 69-70).
sense, the subject is the product of subjection, as Hegener puts it. In accordance with Wittgenstein’s dictum that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” Derrida and others argue that there is no standpoint outside discourse.

In effect, Derrida’s attack aims right at the foundation of Western culture in a “metaphysics of presence.” As M. H. Abrams summarizes, Derrida contests the assumption of “‘a transcendental signified,’ or ‘ultimate referent’; that is, an absolute foundation, outside the play of language itself, which is adequate to ‘center’ (that is, to anchor and organize) the linguistic system in such a way as to fix the particular meaning of a spoken or written utterance within that system” (Abrams 1984: 38). Accordingly, any notion of the self and subjectivity is “always already” a product of and thus determined by discourse. Thus, poststructuralists do not simply criticize the humanist notion of the self as deficient or wanting; they radically deny the very possibility of the existence of such a universal and essential self. Johnson summarizes this position as formulated by Foucault:

Foucault adamantly rejects any notion of the subject . . . that would make it foundational or constitutive, and therefore the center or origin of an intentional act and consequently of a praxis. For Foucault there is no transcendent or universal

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36 Hegener backs this position when he criticizes the battle cry of the Enlightenment, Kant’s appeal that the individual seek to emerge from the self-incurred immaturity: „Der schlichte Ruf nach Emanzipation des Subjekts, soviel sollte deutlich werden, greift entschieden zu kurz. Denn dieses Subjekt ist nicht prädiskursiv und vor jedem Zugriff von Wissen und Macht angesiedelt, keine neutrale Form, in die unterschiedliche Inhalte eingegossen werden können, seien sie nun repressiv oder befreiend. Das Subjekt, zu dessen Befreiung wir aufgefordert werden, ist bereits in sich ein Produkt der Unterwerfung” (Hegener 1994: 12). Incidentally, Hegener’s critique is compatible with Francois Lyotard’s (1984) notion that the great metanarratives—one of these is the belief in “the gradual emancipation of humanity from slavery and class oppression” (Connor 1989: 30), which originated in the Enlightenment—have lost their legitimating and integrating power.

37 Of course, liberals concede that, inevitably, the self is historically and socially constructed but they remain convinced that this does not necessarily mean complete determination and remains the ultimate basis of any opposition. Howe contends:

I may be fixed in social rank, but that does not exhaust, it may not even quite define, who I am or what I “mean.” By asserting the presence of the self, I counterpose to all imposed definitions of place and function a persuasion that I harbor something else, utterly mine—a persuasion that I possess a center of individual consciousness that is active and, to some extent, coherent. In my more careless moments, I may even suppose this center to be inviolable, though anyone who has paid attention to modern history knows this is not so. To say that the world cannot invade the precincts of the self is to indulge in bravado, and yet, even while sadly recognizing this, I still see the self as my last bulwark against oppression and falsity. Were this bulwark to be breached, I would indeed be broken (Howe 1992: 249-250).
subject that assumes concrete form at particular historical moments and whose dialectical unfolding traces the evolution of human liberty... (Johnson 1990: 72-73).

Against the essentialism of liberal humanism, poststructuralists set social constructivism whose principal assumption is that “the categories of human thought, social organization, and psychic (even biological) organization are culturally constructed—not empirically registered aspects of reality but conceptions created by ideology and social and political power” (Levine 1992: 1). Instead of offering an equally presumptuous alternative view of the self, poststructuralists must settle to the much more modest but, they insist, the only honest and, therefore, ultimately only rewarding task of showing up the shortcomings and biases of the allegedly natural and, by implication, legitimate offered view. The aim of any such critical enterprise must be to denaturalize the seemingly natural view of the self and to decenter a self that purports to be the single, absolute still-point of reference. Such criticism “deconstructs” the concept of the self, that is, it wants to show how the subject is constructed within and by the discourse in which it occurs.

Accordingly, doing away with the liberal humanist concept of the person does not mean that subjectivity is denied. Poststructuralists insist that they do not aim at destroying the category of the subject (Foucault, Derrida). Decentering the subject means contextualizing not destroying it. "As Derrida insists: ‘The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it.’ And to situate it, as postmodernism teaches, is to recognize differences—of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on.” (Hutcheon 1988: 159, references omitted).

In conclusion, then, it appears that today, as a result of an immense body of scholarly work which one may broadly characterize as having an antihumanist thrust, a powerful ontological uncertainty prevails. The formerly imperial self of modernity is lying powerless, bereft of its previous, seemingly natural splendor and broken to pieces. Indeed, as Fredric Jameson points out, it has become fashionable in contemporary theory to declare “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego
or individual” (Jameson 1984: 63). Poststructuralism challenges the attempt of modernity to impose a seemingly natural but in fact entirely artificial order on what are actually existing differences and ambivalences. Against this endeavor of modernity, which in Wolfgang Hegener’s eyes is violent and ultimately doomed to failure, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan seek to emphasize the legitimacy of difference and plurality.38

If, then, as contemporary social psychology and social theory pretty unanimously declare, the imperial self of modernity has ceased to exist, this raises the problem of how to construct identity in these postmodern times. Surely, Terry Eagleton’s characterization of the contemporary subject—“a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion” (Terry Eagleton, 1985, 71)—is little enticing. Under the conditions of the contemporary consumer society the construction of a postmodern, “relational self” is both possible and paramount as Kenneth J. Gergen finds. He elaborates, “[Be]cause there is no self outside a system of meaning, it may be said that relations precede and are more fundamental than self. Without relationship there is no language with which to conceptualize the emotions, thoughts, or intentions of the self” (Gergen 1991: 156-157).39

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38 Wolfgang Hegener writes:

39 Ann Swidler argues along similar lines when she suggests that such current tendencies in the conduct of relationships reflect the emerging view of a constantly changing and developing self: “The tension between choice and commitment involves the problem of
identity. If identity is something that must be won only once, if the self is a stable achievement, remaining constant despite superficial flux, then the choice that symbolically consolidates identity forecloses further possibilities of or needs for choice. But when the fixity of the self cannot be taken for granted, the tensions implicit in the love myth’s treatment of choice and commitment become more apparent” (Swidler 1980: 128). In open contradiction to Christopher Lasch, Ann Swidler maintains that these tendencies are signs of a more mature, more responsible self-concept rather than symptomatic of a “new narcissism” (Swidler 1980: 130).
3 The Crisis of Mimesis

3.1 Art as Representation

“The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation,” writes Susan Sontag in her pamphlet *Against Interpretation* (1969: 14). Since Plato and Aristotle, mimesis has been regarded as a central, defining characteristic of art. This view implies that art in the traditional sense, if disputed its mimetic power and function, would cease to exist. Especially in the course of the twentieth century this fundamental assumption about art was intensely called into question at different times and with different intentions, and to this day it continues

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40 Joseph C. Schöpp provides an excellent historical account of the problem of mimesis in art (Schöpp 1990: 19-45).

41 Two of these blows against this foundation of the traditional understanding of art may be briefly mentioned here. One of these attacks—which is relevant to the subsequent analysis of the novels selected for this study—consisted in the unmodified incorporation or even the wholesale transformation of real-life objects into works of art. Peter Bürger shows that cubism and the historical avant garde attacked the traditional notion of art as representation when they inserted fragments of reality into their works (Peter Bürger refers to Picasso adding a piece of wood to one of his paintings) or simply converted real-life objects into genuine works of art (Duchamp’s ready-mades are obvious cases in point). Bürger argues, “a system of representation based on the portrayal of reality, i.e., on the principle that the artistic subject (the artist) must transpose reality, has thus been invalidated” (Bürger 1984: 78).

Terry Eagleton, from his Marxist perspective, emphasizes the political impact of this aspect of the aesthetic of the avant garde: “The productivist aesthetics of the early twentieth-century avant garde spurred the notion of artistic ‘representation’ for an art which would be less ‘reflection’ than material intervention and organizing force” (Eagleton 1985: 62). Across the political board, critics agree that the same artistic forces are also at work in the American pop art of the 1960s and its later derivatives—there is, however, considerably less unison with regard to the evaluation of the political intent and the impact of these post-avant garde movements. This challenge to the ancient concept of art as mimesis will be looked at more closely in the chapter “Literature and the Marketplace.”

Another critique of the idea that, by definition, art mirrors reality, is hidden in Susan Sontag’s intervention against the interpretation of the work of art as commonly practiced. This aspect is less pertinent to the analysis of the novels at hand and so will only be sketched in rough detail. As Sontag contends in the essay cited above, the concept of art as representation has given rise to “the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art” (Sontag 1969: 15), which asks to be brought out into the open through an act of interpretation. Sontag chides contemporary art criticism for its heavy intellectualism. In her view interpretation dulls the recipient’s sensibility, impoverishes the work of art, and bridles its subversive potential (Sontag 1969: 17). Implicitly, Sontag’s case *Against Interpretation* is also an intervention in favor of an art that abandons its time-honored, defining principle of representation. A non-representative work of art would not run the danger of blunting its provocative edges and limiting its sensual capacities because it would not need to function as a receptacle for some “content” calling for expl ication. For the discussion of the works of Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz, Sontag’s line of argument is less productive
to inspire and incite artists and theorists alike to test its validity. Here it is necessary to concentrate on one such assault which, arguably, has proved to be the most devastating for the traditional concept of art as representation.

Among artists and theorists, uncertainty has spread that art might not have the power to represent contemporary reality. This uncertainty has not only been fueled by the unsettling nature of this reality and a concomitant recognition that the old forms and techniques seem inadequate to the daunting task of creating a truthful image of such a reality. More importantly and more far-reaching, this insecurity has been nurtured by growing doubts in the very possibility of representation as such. Inevitably, this deeply-lodged uncertainty also profoundly affected fiction as the art form that by design and by tradition is most openly and most directly concerned with the representation of reality. When John Barth in 1967 pointed toward “the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities” in literature (Barth 1967: 29), or when Leslie A. Fiedler one year later portentously announced the death of the “traditional novel” (Fiedler 1984: 154), they underlined the importance of the issue of representation as such and drew attention to the grave consequences that the contemporary crisis of mimesis might have for literary art.\footnote{With reference to Erich Auerbach’s \textit{Mimesis}—a monumental investigation of the modes of representing reality in European literature from Homer to Joyce, which was written in the early 1940s—, Schöpp emphasizes the central significance of the concept of mimesis for the creation and understanding of fiction: Das Nachdenken über fiction scheint also selbst dort, wo es um eine solche Überwindung herkömmlicher Fikotionsmodi geht, ohne den Begriff der mimesis nicht auszukommen. Der Fiktion als Genre der Welthaltigkeit scheint, auch wenn diese Welt vielleicht als zunehmend gehalt- und gestaltlos und von daher immer weniger abbildbar erlebt wird, über die Abbildung immer noch am ehesten beizukommen sein,} This chapter will take a look at the foundations of representation and will discuss the objections raised against them. After that, there will be a look at how literature has responded to these challenges.

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3.2 Challenging the Premises of Representation

The term representation designates both the process and the product of constructing an image of something previously given, the real. This image or sign is not identical but equivalent to the real to which it refers. Accordingly, the image is authenticated, that is, its validity is guaranteed by the existence of a referent that necessarily must precede it (see Schöpp 1990: 20). This definition of representation rests on a number of assumptions, two of which need to be discussed here briefly.

First, representation is based on the reality principle, on the understanding that there is a reality which exists independently of representation and whose image can be created. Yet, it has become something of a commonplace in critical theory to observe that this reality principle can no longer be taken for granted in the contemporary consumer society. Where life is over-saturated with mass-produced and mass-disseminated images, the reality that is being represented is more often than not second-hand already. Under these circumstances reality itself often consists of reproductions rather than originals. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, sees the emergence of a “universe of communications,” in which the mode of representation is slowly being displaced by that of simulation, which is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1983: 2). This hyperreal is “that which is always already reproduced” (Baudrillard 1983: 146) or, as Steven Best formulates, “the hyperreal is the end-result of a historical simulation process where the natural world and all its referents are gradually replaced with technology and self-referential signs” (Best 1989: 37). As is often argued, in these postmodern times the distinction of fiction from reality has become increasingly unclear and seems almost obsolete (see Hornung and Kunow 1988: 69). What is more, in

43 Baudrillard observes that representation "starts out from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom)” (Baudrillard 1983: 11).
hyperreality simulacra—signs without referents—come before and actually give rise to the real.\textsuperscript{44} In this way, the very concept of authenticity is threatened. Thus, an elementary precondition of representation—namely, the existence of a representable reality that is not an image already—is being undermined by the omnipresence of the mass media in the contemporary consumer society.

A second pillar of representation is the notion that reality may be accessed immediately, that is directly, without mediation. This notion is closely connected to the first premise discussed above. As has been presented in some detail in the previous chapter, critical theory in the twentieth century, with Althusser, Derrida and others leading the way, went against the humanist foundation of this second basis of representation. It insisted that there is no transcendental subject positioned at an Archimedean point of reference that might be able to center the systems of representation and hold them in place. On the contrary, so this antihumanist line of argument runs, the subject is by definition socially and historically situated. Indeed, it only exists because of, through and within discourse and is therefore always already implicated in it. Baudrillard comments:

> All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference (Baudrillard 1983: 10-11).

Thus, as there can be no vantage point outside discourse, outside a system of representation, any image is necessarily a reproduction of the system of representation that brings it forth rather than a likeness of any physical reality that may exist beyond representation. Quite simply, so these thinkers maintain, there can be no perception and no representation outside discourse.\textsuperscript{45} In this way, this powerful

\textsuperscript{44} Baudrillard calls this the “precession of simulacra” (Baudrillard 1983: 2).
\textsuperscript{45} For example, Hayden White’s familiar critique of historical writing starts out from this recognition. Kenneth Gergen summarizes White’s argument: “[A] culture develops modes
antihumanist line in twentieth century thought badly damaged another important foundation of representation. In summary, then, these challenges to the premises of mimesis have rendered it an exceedingly problematic endeavor. Steven Best summarizes the precarious state of affairs, “where the subject/object distance is erased, where language no longer coheres in stable meanings, and where signs no longer refer beyond themselves to an existing, knowable world—representation has been surpassed” (Best 1989: 37). Nonetheless, it is an incontestable fact that one can relate to the world—be it the outer or the inner world—only by way of images. And this constitutes the inevitable dialectic of representation as such: The link between the subject and the world is always the image or the sign. Linda Hutcheon notes:

*Have we ever known the ‘real’ except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, and touch it, but do we know it in the sense that we give meaning to it? In Lisa Tickner’s succinct terms, the real is ‘enabled to mean through systems of signs organized into discourses on the world’* (Hutcheon 1989: 33; references omitted).

Finally, then, representation stands revealed as both the only connection of the subject and the world and the impassable barrier between them.

But all of this means that the time-honored notion of art as representation must be said to rest on very shaky foundations. Ultimately, this is chiefly because the very object of representation—namely, reality—cannot simply be taken for granted. Reality itself is not a prediscursive given but turns out to be a construct that crucially depends on the sign system in which it is framed and the representing subject, which itself is the product of discourse. This is, in very brief terms, the crisis of representation that literary and other artists are facing today—a crisis that also casts into doubt the established view of art as representation. Christopher Lasch registers that the fate of art in the traditional sense is causally linked with the crisis of mimesis and, in the final consequence, with the crisis of the self:

*The survival of art . . . has become problematical, . . . because the weakening of the distinction between the self and its surroundings—a development faithfully recorded*
by modern art even in its refusal to become representational—makes the very concept of reality, together with the concept of the self, increasingly untenable (Lasch 1985: 153).

The following sections on “metafiction” and “neorealism” in contemporary American fiction will look at two radically different, even opposing attempts to come to grips with these attacks on the time-honored view of art as mimesis. This presentation will serve to highlight and illustrate the basic points of contention in the debate over the crisis of representation. At the same time, it will quickly draw up an admittedly sketchy literary historical context in which to situate the writers to be discussed here.

3.3 Fictional Responses to the Crisis of Representation

Of course, one may safely assume that the perception of an “unreal reality” and the accompanying awareness that the available modes of representing such a reality are pitifully inadequate are not specific to the latter half of the twentieth century. In all times writers must have found themselves facing a world that appeared just as little intelligible to them as the world after World War II does to contemporary writers. For instance, this perception of living in a world of rapid changes and extreme dangers is particularly characteristic of modernism. Yet modernists confronted this world confident that they would be able to find new, more adequate ways to give a truthful image of reality. Ezra Pound’s rallying cry “Make it new!” is a case in point here. It registers the modernists’ dissatisfaction about the inappropriateness of traditional forms and conventions in the face of a world in turmoil. At the same time, it implicitly reaffirms the modernists’ confidence and conviction that it was basically possible to render a picture of the world. Clinging to an earlier, conservative conviction—which reverberates, for example, in E. M. Forster’s words, “Live in fragments no longer. / Only connect…” (Howards End)—, modernists firmly held that they had the power and the duty to oppose and contain a fragmented and chaotic world in visions of wholeness and order. Gerd Hurm notes, “The modern novel in its
search for meaning is understood as an attempt to create artistic stability and as a frame of orientation in fragmented social worlds” (Hurm 1991: 13). Because of this desire to create an artistic whole, there is always a strong sense of an “implied author” (W. C. Booth), an ordering subject, in modernist fiction.

In marked contrast to the predominantly optimistic outlook typical of modernism, the postmodernist view is characterized by the sense that “a world in need of mending is superseded by one beyond repair” (Wilde quoted in Bertens 1986: 43; references omitted). Postmodernist writers share the modernists’ discontent with traditions and conventions of representation. What has changed though is that many artists today have a strong sense that the contemporary crisis of representation cannot be mastered by developing new modes of picturing the world. Where modernists still maintained that the rapidly changing world they inhabited merely called for new and more appropriate images, postmodernists argue that this is not going far enough. Postmodernists do not only distrust the adequacy or legitimacy of any given mode of representation. They are driven by a profound ontological uncertainty (see Bertens 1986: 46) and strongly question the very possibility of mirroring the world, of giving a “truthful” image of “reality.” Brian McHale elaborates:

“The dominant of Postmodernist writing is ontological. That is, Postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is a world? what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? how is a projected world structured? and so on” (McHale 1986: 60).

This crisis of mimesis, then, has led many literary artists—John Barth, Donald Bartheleme, and Robert Coover, to name but a few prominent representatives—to conclude, in Larry McCaffery’s words, that “fiction cannot hope

46 Wilde’s comment points in the same direction: “Modernism, spurred by an anxiety to recuperate a lost wholeness in self-sustaining orders of art or in the unselfconscious depths of the self . . . reaches toward the heroic in the intensity of its desire and of its disillusion” (Wilde quoted in Bertens 1986: 43; references omitted).
to ‘mirror reality’ or ‘tell the truth’ because ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become increasingly suspect as this century has proceeded” (McCaffery 1984: 193). In response to this recognition, many authors have begun to produce what is usually referred to as “metafiction.” Peter Currie summarizes a number of features frequently found in these metafictions:

[A] metafictional novel or self-referential text refers openly to its own devices and strategies, turns on itself to debate its fictional nature, to exhibit its ‘made-upness.’ The writer’s problems in constructing the novel are prominently displayed, the reader kept constantly aware of the fabricated nature of the enterprise, the authorial voice abruptly disrupting the spectacle, dispelling the illusion, intruding like an uninvited guest into the body of the text. Unlike the novel of social realism which presents itself unproblematically to the reader as a transparent window on the world (‘Good prose’, Orwell claimed in his essay ‘Why I write’, ‘is like a window pane’), the postmodern ‘metatext’ focuses attention on the pane of glass itself, on the lexical surface of the page rather than on a reality divorced from the contrivances of fiction, the figures and practices of discourse. The postmodern novel repeatedly lays bare the conditions of its existence in signifying practice, the mode and process of its production, revealing itself as a factitious got-up assemblage. By so demystifying the activity of composition, writing is liberated from its thralldom to the referent, a reality ‘out there’ (or ‘in here’) which it was formerly its duty to transcribe. (Currie 1987: 56).

In summary then metafictional strategies and devices may be considered as an attempt to come to grips with the crisis of mimesis and the problems it raises for a fiction that understands itself as a representational genre. In dismantling the belief in literature as a “mirror of the world,” metafictionists challenge the notion of literary art as an imitation of life. To repeat, for them the real problem lies not so much in the inadequacy of existing renderings—in that case one would simply have to go in search of a more fitting one as modernists did—but in the fact that these images only function within the system of literary art, which is an entirely artificial world. The world of literature is a constructed, self-referential and self-sufficient system which

47 Raymond Federman prefers the term “surfiction.” He explains:

[For me, the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it; the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man’s imagination and not in man’s rationality. This I call Surfiction. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality. [. . .] To write, then, is to produce meaning, and not reproduce a pre-existing meaning. To write is to progress, and not remain subjected (by habit or reflexes) to the meaning that supposedly precedes the words. As such fiction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be a Reality—an autonomous reality whose only relation with the real world is to
is not grounded in and thus need not be authenticated by any factual reality outside. According to their view, literary discourse is a complex of traditions and conventions of form; it is a web of genre rules, standard plots, stock characters, and stylistic clichés, which the writer brings into play and fleshes out at will. Thus any given story automatically reflects and reaffirms the inherent logic of the system. For these structural reasons metafictionists regard literature as incapable of representing or even referring to the outside world. They dismiss traditional realism as “the paradigmatic form of ideology” (Kavanagh 1988: 311) because it seeks to hide its constructedness and thus obfuscates the politics underlying its construction. In Barthes’s terminology, the realist text wants to arouse “plaisir” not “jouissance.” Consequently, metafictionists demand that fiction give up its claim to mirror the world and instead reflect on itself.49

Within the debate about postmodernism, there has been intense discussion whether parody as a preferred mode of discourse may offer a way out of the impasse that critical theory and metafiction have exposed. Starting out from the realization that art is necessarily implicated in the systems within which it is produced, postmodern artists employ parody in an attempt to gain critical distance on a given discourse by using this discourse subversively. Special attention has been accorded to improve that world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth. (Federman 1984: 146).

48 Hutcheon makes the same point (Hutcheon 1988: 180).

49 With reference to Althusser’s concept of ideology, Raymond Tallis summarizes the ideological critique against realism:

Just as it is the essence of ideology to conceal itself, so it is the essence of realism to conceal its own constructedness and that of the reality it purports to reveal impartially. But this means it is able to support the epistemological, economic and political status quo. The realistic novel, seemingly effacing itself before the reality it impartially exposes, is politically all the more powerful for keeping its politics invisible; for pretending that it is a mere window which permits an objectively observed objective reality to be transmitted with minimal distortion from one consciousness (that of the author) to another (that of the reader). Realistic fiction is therefore an important component of the Literary State Apparatus that works to ensure the reproduction of the means and relations of production (Tallis 1988: 50-51).
the political intent of the postmodern use of parody. The critic Terry Eagleton takes issue with postmodernist parody, arguing that

What is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity of production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant garde. […] Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant garde, while monstrosely emptying it of its political content… (Eagleton 1985: 60).

Across the political board, a number of critics share the contention that postmodern parody is eclectic, nostalgic, and reactionary. This view has been most fully developed in Fredric Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor. . . (Jameson 1983: 114).

While parody is political and subversive, pastiche is reactionary in its unpoliticality. Hal Foster is similarly critical of the use of pastiche in postmodernism: “[T]he use of pastiche in postmodern art and architecture deprives styles not only of specific context but also of historical sense: husked down to so many emblems, they are reproduced in the form of partial simulacra” (Foster 1984: 69).

More favorable theoreticians of the postmodern emphasize its critical political intent. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, dismisses Jameson's negative judgment and maintains that postmodern art cannot but be political and subversive. For this reason she refutes his negative characterization of postmodern art as pastiche and prefers the concept of parody. Hutcheon contends:

On the one hand, there is a sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual and narrative representations and, on the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in both the inexhaustibility and the power of those existing representations. And parody is often the postmodern form this particular paradox takes. By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them. . . (Hutcheon 1989: 8).

Diametrically opposed to metafiction’s antihumanism and its acceptance or even celebration of the crisis of representation, there is a powerful current in
contemporary American letters which may be described as humanist in outlook. This “neorealist” literature not only staunchly defies the crisis of representation and wholeheartedly embraces the traditional notion of art as mimesis; it also often emphasizes that fiction has a social function and duty. A sizeable number of literary artists and critics in America today have set about defining the purpose of literature in such a way: It is the duty of literature to guard the humanist self against the senseless chaos of the contemporary. Clearly, this neorealism is driven by the same urge to restore order and wholeness to an apparently chaotic world as nineteenth century realism and modernism were. In a paradigmatic essay entitled “Fiction in a Media Age,” Sven Birkerts states that “the order of print has, in our era, yielded to the order of electronic communication” and warns that “the new shift might well submerge the individual subject back into the mass” (Birkerts 1987: 39). He believes that literature must accept its social functions and confront this threatening development:

Clearly something in the psyche resists integration into the mass. This something is the cause for which fiction—all art—must do battle. The writer cannot merely mirror the chaos and discontinuity of our surroundings. He has to answer to the buried needs of everyone who faces that chaos. The fate of our individuality is very much at risk… (Birkerts 1987: 43).

This conviction that literature has a social function, even a moral duty also has great currency among practitioners of the craft. Among these is Jayne Anne Phillips:

Each generation must learn the eternal verities in its own language. Within a culture, fiction has historically carried that burden, reinterpreting and repossessing the history of the moment, making it real and of relevance to both past and future. As history progresses, the events that unfold are new but the human needs that give rise to them never change: Humans will always need to be free from the vagaries of repression, to secure decent ways of living, to eat, to love. Through it all there must be a voice that speaks with purity—the voice of literature—about human rights and our rights, as humans, to dream. Contemporary writers often mirror our weightless state in their

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50 For instance, John Gardner and Gerald Graff are prominent defenders of this position. Hoffmann et. al. summarize, “Gardner wirft in einem Interview den postmodernen Autoren vor, nihilistische Bücher zu schreiben: ‘The people who write nihilistic novels in America, I believe, are pretty often people who have given up their private values and have carelessly thrown out their secure belief in universal values with the same bathwater.’ [. . .] Graff besteht . . . auf der humanistischen Aufgabe von Literatur, ‘to shore up the sense of reality’…” (Hoffmann et al. 1988: 31).
work without making any effort to ground it in history. I take the long view. I think that in every epoch there have been writers who merely reflected the present, out of context so to speak. But great literature is grounded in the world and is not simply a recapping of a current event. A great novel can teach, illustrate and involve the reader so deeply that they learn to empathize, even if the circumstances, time period and plot are completely foreign to them (Goldberg and Phillips 1990: 61-62).

Birkerts’s and Phillips’s passionate partisanship or the social function of literature amounts to a veritable creed of a socially committed realism. Lance Olsen discerns this conviction in the neorealism of Jayne Ann Phillips, Raymond Carver, and Bobbie Ann Mason, to name some of its more recent proponents.

However, Olsen registers his doubts about this “conservative vision of reality,” which he regards as an expression of “the neoconservative sociohistorical context of contemporary America” (Olsen 1987: 125). Looking at a randomly selected passage from Bobbie Ann Mason, Olsen icily observes:

Readers know that there are no narrative or metaphysical surprises in store for them. They are in the universe of pragmatism. And they are in a realm where content is privileged over form, where language is transparent, where style is secondary, where it is assumed that the word mirrors the world. Perhaps it is not such a long jump to suggest at this point that I sense in the Mason passage a gentle desire that in some world life might be like patterned fiction: coherent, interpretable, unified (ibid.).

And elsewhere he adds that neorealism is “the conservation rather than the exploration of form” (Olsen 1992: 175). In other words, by accusing the neorealists of trying to smooth over the gaping cracks in the old realist and modernist traditions and conventions, Olsen reiterates the ideological critique of realism.

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51 The wide attention that Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* received is perhaps an indication that this view of the social duty of art has many adherents. Bloom passionately declares:

Art is not imitation of nature but liberation from nature. A man who can generate visions of a cosmos and ideals by which to live is a genius, a mysterious, demonic being. Such a man’s greatest work of art is himself. He who can take his person, a chaos of impressions and desires, a thing whose very unity is doubtful, and give it order and unity, is a personality. All of this results from the free activity of his spirit and his will. He contains in himself the elements of the legislator and the prophet, and has a deeper grasp of the true character of things than the contemplatives, philosophers, and scientists, who take the given order as permanent and fail to understand man (Bloom 1987: 181).

Clearly, the cultural conservatism evident in this passage links Allan Bloom to the conservatism of the neorealists. In his useful overview of the central notions of cultural conservatism, Jim Ferreira also comments on Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (Ferreira 1990: 3).
Clearly, metafiction and neorealism are deliberately extreme answers to the crisis of representation. It is their individual extremeness that makes both of them easy targets for criticism. On the one hand, as Peter Currie points out, “the tendency of recent fiction to reflect critically on the nature of its own fictionality . . . is open to the reproach of idealism, of retreating from an empirical reality (somehow prior to signification) the better to contemplate its own navel” (Currie 1987: 56). On the other hand, there is a neorealism which may be accused of closing its eyes before the crisis of mimesis.

Somewhere on the continuum of fictional approaches to the world that is delimited by these two opposing positions there is the minimal realist literature that emerged since the 1960s and had its heyday in the 1980s. Among those most often associated with this literary movement today are writers such as Raymond Carver—who is something like the god-father of minimal realism—, Ann Beattie, Fredrick Barthelme, Mary Robison, or Tobias Wolff. Arguably, the minimal realist literature of these authors can be understood as an attempt to circumnavigate the pitfalls that metafiction and neorealism are at risk of falling into. Günter Leypoldt describes the principal features of this fiction thus:

This new writing is marked by a noticeable absence of any formal experimentation typical of modernist, fabulist or metafictionist writing, and instead features the representationalist rhetoric that one might associate with traditional realism. Yet it also differs from familiar forms of realism in that its representationalist surfaces are somewhat blurred by a pronounced structural reduction; the texts maintain a detached and recalcitrant prose that is elliptical and paratactic, and often gyrates around long-winded explorations of the ordinary. Narrative voices are noncommittal and generally evade omniscient perspectives, as if pushing Flaubert’s notion of the hidden author-god to its most radical conclusion and to the virtual disappearance of a recognizable implied author. Any textual commentary or meta-commentary that would explore the question of how the text relates to the world—or the particular to the general—vanishes along with the vestiges of the implied author, and there is a distinct absence of theoretical or philosophical reflection. Those texts that do not seem reductionist on the surface are at least structurally lean, with plots that are simple or incomplete and mostly restricted to local, ordinary, and often banal situations. Profound characterization, historical or cultural contextualization, or political and social detail are either entirely missing or only sparsely constructed by means of surface details.

52 For more details see Leypoldt’s discussion of the problems of classification of minimal realist writers (2001: 19-24).
53 In a footnote Leypoldt makes clear, “I define representationalist rhetoric as one that hides or deemphasizes its textuality…” (Leypoldt 2001: 11, fn. 1).
such as brand names or popular culture references. The paradoxical structure of this new fiction, therefore, consists in its unusual combination of absence and presence, of silence and voice. It posits a reportorial representationalism that eschews open self-reflexive irony, unreliable narrators, mise en scène, or other stylistic pyrotechnics and thus promises the fullness of meaning typical of orthodox realism; yet at the same time, it silences the text by means of the semantic gaps that stem from the minimization of the lexicon, setting, characterization, and plot (Leypoldt 2001: 11f).

To summarize: metafiction and neorealism may be regarded as diametrically opposed attempts to confront the crisis of representation which itself is the result of the crisis of the self as an ordering subject. The former is inspired by antihumanist attacks against the notion of the autonomous, basic self. The latter is motivated by the desire to rise to the defense of this endangered self. Somewhere between metafiction and neorealism there is minimal realism. Very broadly speaking, minimal realism is a literature that is strongly committed to giving a truthful picture of the world but—conscious of the adverse forces the self is battling against—refrains from making overt sense-offerings. With Christopher Lasch (1985), one may argue that this self-conscious realism is an expression of the minimal self in literature.

The authors studied here openly declare their commitment to the traditional concept of art as mimesis and announce their wish to create a realistic, socially relevant fiction. “The age deserves an image of its accelerated grimace,” Jay McInerney asserts with conviction (1989: 107). Therefore, it is within this field of tension—with metafiction and neorealism at either end and minimal realism uneasily sitting in between—that Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney are working.
4 Literature and the Marketplace

4.1 The Author and the Work in Mass-Market Publishing Today

The sea changes occurring within the publishing business since the 1950s have deeply affected the role of the author and the nature of the literary work of art. In this way they have contributed to the ubiquitous waning of the verities of liberal humanism, particularly, the belief in the autonomous, essential self.

The incorporation of independent publishing houses into gigantic entertainment conglomerates has created a “literary-industrial complex” (Twitchell 1992), which has put the book industry on an equal footing with other entertainment industries, opening up unforeseen opportunities for coordinated and combined production and promotion. The streamlining of publishing procedures, chain-store merchandising, and the creation of new so-called “Contemporaries”-series as sketched above have further facilitated a more market-oriented production. If the publishing industry was “previously thought of as differing structurally and functionally” from the entertainment industries (Whiteside 1981: 22), the new developments now call for a reconsideration of the nature of publishing. Yet the self-doubts of publishers about the ethic of their craft and their grief over dwindling editorial power have been eased considerably by the ripe profits they are now able to reap for the first time. And so, stripped of its high-culture attire, the book now stands revealed as the commodity it is underneath.  

The commercial success of the books by writers such as Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney and the celebrity-status enjoyed and cultivated by the media-savvy authors has added further fuel to the debate about the consequences of these developments for literary art. It has been pointed out that these structural

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innovations have had detrimental effects on the individual artists and their work (e.g. Agger 1990: 26; Berman 1989: 56). There is no doubt that today many authors, facing mounting economic pressures, go for the tried and accepted rather than the new and daring in order to ensure the salability of the product. Ben Agger observes, “writing like all commodities today increasingly trades only through its exchange value...” (Agger 1990: 25).

Critics of the developments in book publishing have also lamented that the author’s influence on the final product has been steadily dwindling, that in many cases the author has been effectively displaced from the former key position of creator and originator. Thomas Whiteside remarks, “actual authorship often becomes an ancillary consideration in industrial production today” (Whiteside 1981: 71-72). As a result of such subjection of the author’s wishes to economic considerations, the book is bound to lose much of its personal stamp as it undergoes culture-industrial processing.

Yet significantly, this erosion of the writer’s actual authorial power does no harm to the figure of the author. Indeed, the figure of the author is not only retained but vehemently cultivated by the publishing industry in the shape of the high-profile public persona of the writer, the figure of the “postmodern auteur” (Agger 1990: 26). As a result, the type of the literary star has come into being. This type is very similar to the celebrities common in film and other branches of the entertainment industries whose artificially created and inflated personalities are intended to make up for the loss of the aura of the work of art as Walter Benjamin already observed (Benjamin 1963: 28). Of course, this “star system” in publishing has incited strong criticism.

Daniel Boorstin, for instance, comments:

Columnists for our popular literary reviews and weekly book sections discuss star-authors less in the spirit of a Dr. Samuel Johnson than in that of a Louella Parsons. They gossip simultaneously about the star’s private life, his work, and his roles, [...] The host of other good writers who have not achieved star status, whose personalities

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have not yet become publicly mixed with their works—these writers suffer literary and personal obscurity. Here we see “massive concentration on a handful of writers (for reasons all too often nonliterary).” Publishers then, are less the midwives of literary culture than “drumbeaters for an arbitrarily limited galaxy of stars” (Boorstin 1975: 162; references omitted).

Evidently, the self-image of the literary “star”—so much more than a mere device employed to promote the book—is developed and publicized in such a way as to become itself a part of the product. This product, then, is, indeed, an orchestrated publishing event, which conflates production with promotion. Traditional approaches to book advertising insisted on keeping these spheres separate so as to ensure that the publicity necessary to launch the product on the market would not impinge upon the high-culture status of the book, which was felt to be incompatible with its commodity status. Present practices of mass-market publishing, however, all but abandon the distinction of production and promotion. When James B. Twitchell disgustedly notes that “the best-selling author has become a ‘star,’ and the book is the ‘vehicle,’” (Twitchell 1992: 105), he appears to register this shift. Yet he fails to pursue the possible implications of his own observation. For it may be necessary to reconceptualize the literary work of art to meet the demands of literary production and consumption in the contemporary consumer society. In fact, the new literary product may be conceived as a hybrid that combines with much hype the narrative text and the author’s public persona.

Thus, the wholesale commodification of literature effected by the recent changes in mass-market publishing has changed the very nature of the literary product. This product, then, is indeed an orchestrated publishing event, which

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56 Such developments seem to confirm contemporary Marxist theoreticians such as Fredric Jameson in their view that in contemporary consumer capitalism “images, styles and representations are not the promotional accessories to economic products, they are the products themselves” (Connor 1989: 46).

57 In contemporary book publishing, the publicity of an earlier period has been displaced by hype. Using Boorstin’s concept of the “pseudo-event” (Boorstin 1975), Whiteside explains, hype ”implies not one event but a series of events (pseudo-events), each of which is calculated to interact with and heighten the effect of, the next one. And it seems that hype tends to take an even greater force than what it purports to help to bring about” (Whiteside 1981: 80).
conflates production with promotion. Traditional approaches to book advertising insisted on keeping these spheres separate so as to ensure that the publicity necessary to launch the product on the market would not impinge upon the high-culture status of the book, which was felt to be incompatible with its commodity status. Present practices of mass-market publishing, however, appear to abandon the distinction of production and promotion. As Twitchell observes, “today the mass-market book is no longer a discrete object isolated in the hands first of the author, then publisher, then bookseller, and finally of reader, but is instead a point in the plasma mix of entertainment” (Twitchell 1992: 81). The developments in the publishing industry then have brought about a curious, seemingly paradoxical situation. The material conditions of literary production palpably undermine the still powerful modernist notions of the artist and the work so that, as a consequence, it may be difficult to distinguish the creation of literary art from a mass-cultural production. At the same time, however, the nimbus of the author and his or her work has retained its strong appeal and so is continuously evoked in marketing the product. Present practices in mass-market publishing, then, further unsettle the still deeply entrenched separation of art from the products of the entertainment industries and call for a closer look at its foundations.

4.2 The Eradication of the Premises of the Traditional Modernist Split between Art and Mass Culture

Leslie A. Fiedler, in his influential 1968 essay “Cross the Border—Close That Gap: Postmodernism” (Fiedler 1984), makes an all-out assault on the established distinction of high and low culture, of art and mass culture in literature. He roundly rejects the classical novel as “scripture once removed” (Fiedler 1984: 154) and rejoices that, at last, “the traditional novel is dead—not dying but dead” (ibid.). He demands that literature return to its roots in entertainment, that, in fact, it once again
THE ERADICATION OF THE PREMISES OF THE TRADITIONAL

become what it was in England “until Henry James had justified himself as an artist against such self-declared ‘entertainers’ as Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson: popular, not quite reputable, a little dangerous. . .” (Fiedler 1984: 154-155). Fiedler envisions a “pop novel” that embraces the subjects, styles, and techniques of mass culture in order to reconnect literature to its roots in popular culture. “[S]uch a closing of the gap between elite and mass culture is precisely the function of the novel now,” he declares (Fiedler 1984: 156).

Andreas Huyssen sees evidence that “since Fiedler’s battlecries a closer proximity between high and mass art has indeed evolved. . .” (Huyssen 1984a: 618). It is therefore little wonder that Fiedler’s attack on traditional notions of literary art still does not sit well with the establishment. Sven Birkerts’ above-quoted article “Fiction in a Media Age” is particularly instructive because, like Fiedler’s essay, it recognizes that the literature of an older order has come to an end. Yet for Birkerts literary art “achieved its fullest fruition in the 19th century—because it entertained, because it presented for apprehension a sensible picture of social order, because it marked the apotheosis of individuation within order. . .” (Birkerts 1987: 38). In other words, what Birkerts regards as literature’s moment of maturity is, in Fiedler’s mind, exactly that point at which literature began to betray its true vocation.

Significantly, both Fiedler and Birkerts concentrate on the traditional distinction of art and mass culture as that point at which the nature and functions of literature crystallize most clearly. This view has been central to the practice, theory, and criticism of art since the end of the nineteenth century: “The aesthetic discourse dominant in western culture from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century has polarized the popular/realist commercial text and the "high art" modernist one, making impossible a text that was at once avant-garde and popular” (Kaplan 1987: 40). In the following, the tenets underlying this binary opposition will be examined.
The criteria whereby art is conventionally held to be different from mass culture\textsuperscript{58} in great part derive from a belief in universal essences and, particularly, from the liberal humanist view of the autonomous self. Both the idea of two distinct spheres of cultural production and the liberal humanist basis of this notion have been much criticized. Throughout the twentieth century a variety of art practices and theories repeatedly challenged these tenets—similarly to the antihumanist current of thought that has been sketched in the preceding chapter. In the following discussion of the traditional characteristics of art, the present study must limit itself to those aspects that are relevant to its purpose. These are: the belief that a work of art has an inherent aesthetic value; the notion that an art work is unified; the understanding that art is complex; the view that art is subversive; and, of course, the idea that a work of art is the unique, original, and highly personal expression of an individual creative mind.

4.2.1 Aesthetic Essence

Traditionally, a literary or other work of art is thought to have an aesthetic value that is somehow inherent. This contention mirrors the belief in universal essences rooted in Enlightenment thought. In contrast to the work of art, the mass-cultural artifact is held to have a negligible use-value at best. Above all it is estimated in terms of its exchange-value since it has been produced as a commodity to be exchanged on the market-place. According to this view, aesthetic value is inherent and essential, whereas exchange-value is external and entirely depends on the interplay of supply

\textsuperscript{58} Unless otherwise indicated, the term “mass culture” is used in this study to designate the products of the culture industries. Note that it is not meant to evoke the specter of a mass society. The expression “popular culture,” which is often applied synonymously and appears to be enjoying greater currency today is not employed here because the term also refers to the ways in which consumers incorporate these products into their lives (e.g. Fiske 1889a and 1889 b).

Writings on the art-mass culture dichotomy abound. By way of introduction to the debate, one may turn to Herbert J. Gans (Gans 1974: 17-64), Umberto Eco (1986: 15-58), and Anthony Easthope (1991: 65-103), who offer useful accounts of the debate about this binary
and demand.

This conventional opposition of art work and mass-cultural artifact has been attacked because the aesthetic value of a work of art is also bound up with its status as a commodity. This inseparability of aesthetic and commodity values indicates a significant structural analogy between the processes of aestheticization and commodification, which is incompatible with modernist notions of art and so is either passed over in silence or fiercely resisted. In its categorical rejection, indeed, its haughty disdain of the marketplace, modernism ignores that aestheticization and commodification are both practices whereby an object is invested with a value that is relational to the context in which this object is presented. Thus, the aesthetic value of a work of art is greatly determined by the relation of the object to the “institution of art” (Bürger 1984). The exchange-value of a commodity, on the other hand, is basically a function of the position of this good vis-à-vis the market. While theorists of late capitalism have long stressed that use-value has been effectively displaced by exchange-value, many critics of contemporary art, still championing modernist ideals, seem loath to recognize that the notion of the aesthetic has been undergoing a similar change from inherent to relational value.

Among practitioners of the arts, however, this recognition gained currency quite early. Within the historical avant-garde movements, for example, this insight informed the programs of the most radical artists, who made every effort to dispel the devious “magic of essence” (Easthope 1991: 60). Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, for instance, not only negate the centrality of the individual artist to the concept of opposition and scrutinize its premises. Winfried Fluck provides a more extended analysis of the social and political functions of culture-industrial production (Fluck 1979).

With regard to the aesthetic value of a literary work, Anthony Easthope specifies: Literary value is a function of the reader/text relation, and cannot be defined outside the history in which texts—some more than others—demonstrably have functioned intertextually to give a plurality of different readings transhistorically: the greater the text, the more we are compelled to read it through a palimpsest of other interpretations. Not much more can be said about literature unless it is assumed to be an essence (Easthope 1991: 59).
art—a point to be discussed shortly. These objects are also a powerful manifestation of the conviction that aesthetic value—instead of being inherent and essential—is to a high degree a function of the institutional context of art in which the object is exhibited and perceived. As Andreas Huyssen notes with regard to Duchamp’s famous Fountain, “the urinal becomes a work of art only by virtue of the fact that an artist exhibits it” (Huyssen 1975: 85).

In the 1960s American Pop Art pursued the same theme by problematizing the relationship between the institution of art and the market. As one of the most illustrious proponents of this movement in the United States, Andy Warhol continued this project. While he is usually credited, albeit grudgingly, with “acknowledging the commercial dimension of art” (Walker 1983: 41) and with “drawing attention to the status of art itself as a mere commodity” (Livingstone 1990: 115), this seems to be merely one, rather spectacular facet of his program. His vision was really much more sober and substantial. Warhol theorized and put into practice the recognition uncomfortable to so many that aestheticization and commodification are to a considerable degree structurally analogous practices. This is the real, critical thrust of his half-frivolous, half-serious musings: “Business art is the step that comes after Art. . . . After I did the thing called ‘art’ or whatever it’s called, I went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. . . . Business art. Art business. The Business Art Business” (Warhol 1975: 92). Warhol’s ambiguous stance earned him the predictable criticism that in pop art “the subjugation of art by the laws of a commodity producing capitalist society” has been completed at last (Huyssen 1975: 85).

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60 In Fredric Jameson’s words, “exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced” (Jameson 1984: 66).
61 One may contend that in the 1980s this aspect of Warhol’s project was continued by Keith Haring. Marco Livingstone writes, “It was in pursuing the relentless commercialization of his work, perhaps more than in any other single respect, that Haring turned himself into a Pop artist of the 1980s” (Livingstone 1990: 228-29).
Literary artists of the 1960s, too, were spurred on by the awareness of the artificiality of the modernist split between art and mass culture and, especially, by the view that art is not essentially different from mass culture and, therefore, not contaminated and alienated from itself when introduced into the marketplace. In the above-cited essay, Fiedler admires the early proponents of what he calls the pop novel—literary texts that purposely play with mass-cultural forms—for their courage: "[I]t is not compromise by the market-place they fear; on the contrary, they choose the genre most associated with exploitation by the mass media: notably the Western, Science Fiction and Pornography” (Fiedler 1984: 156). And more than ten years on, he adds as an afterthought that, at any rate, the novel has always been "a salable commodity: the product not of lonely genius and tradition, but of technology and the marketplace” (Fiedler 1981a: 78).

4.2.2 Unity

According to Anthony Easthope the traditional, modernist “literary studies paradigm” also rests on the assumption that the literary text is unified or closed. This demand logically follows from the humanist conviction outlined above that an aesthetic quality inheres in a work of art:

The literary text is held to be self-sufficient whether (in the British emphasis) as the complete expression of an equally self-originating Author or (in the American emphasis) as what Wimsatt and Beardsley in the title of their foundational book name as ‘the verbal icon’, something fixed once and for all in language... (Easthope 1991: 11).

Easthope’s reference to the “self-originating Author” is another indication that the roots of this modernist criterion of literary art are to be sought in the liberal humanist concept of the person.

In line with the poststructuralist dismantling of the belief in universal truths, it has become a truism of contemporary literary theory and criticism to stress that “the words of the text have only a potential meaning until they are construed within discourse and so within a context, at which juncture it becomes evident that their
potential is polysemous and the text is not at one with itself. [. . .] Texts, as well as sentences, take on meaning according to the discourse within which they are construed and the context in which they are read” (Easthope 1991: 39).

Likewise, in the arts there have been numerous attempts to overcome the modernist dictum that the work of art be static, finite, and closed. In the music of Luciano Berio and Karlheinz Stockhausen, for example, as well as in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, Umberto Eco detects the emergence of the concept of an “open work of art” (Eco 1977). He argues that these artists ask the recipient to participate actively by engaging the elements of the works in a very material, practical way. To elaborate, as Easthope points out in the passage cited above, the work of art of high modernism, Indeed any text is necessarily open at the level of the signified, but “persists in an identity—these signifiers in this syntagmatic order and not others. . .” (Easthope 1991: 38). In contrast to this, the “open work” that Eco has in mind is also open at the level of the signifier. This structural openness of the work is clearly intended by the artist. The artist purposely and in a controlled manner delegates a part of the creative act to the reader. Within the limits set by the artist, the reader is invited freely to organize and interpret the material.62

4.2.3 Complexity

Adherents of the traditional art-mass culture dichotomy insist that, in direct contrast

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62 Eco explains:

[Das offene Kunstwerk] bietet die Möglichkeit für eine Vielzahl persönlicher Eingriffe, ist aber keine amorphe Aufforderung zu einem beliebigen Eingreifen: es ist die weder zwingende noch eindeutige Aufforderung zu einem am Werk selbst orientierten Eingreifen, die Einladung, sich frei in eine Welt einzufügen, die gleichwohl immer noch die vom Künstler gewollte ist.

Der Künstler, so kann man sagen, bietet dem Interpretierenden ein zu *vollendendes* Werk: er weiß nicht genau, auf welche Weise das Werk zu Ende geführt werden kann, aber er weiß, daß das zu Ende geführte Werk immer noch *sein* Werk, nicht ein anderes sein wird, und daß am Ende des interpretativen Dialogs eine Form sich konkretisiert haben wird, die *seine* Form ist, auch wenn sie von einem anderen in einer Weise organisiert worden ist, die er nicht völlig vorhersehen konnte: denn die Möglichkeiten, die er dargeboten hatte, waren schon rational organisiert, orientiert und mit organischen Entwicklungsdrängen begabt (Eco 1977: 54-55).
to the purposely simple, low-dimensional products of the entertainment industries, a work of art is complex. This assumption that an art object is by definition complex is grounded in the humanist apotheosis of the self and the undaunted faith in the creative powers of the individual mind. This decidedly conservative and elitist understanding of art was clearly stated, for example, by F. R. Leavis in his essay of 1929, which is aptly entitled *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*:

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is . . . only a few who are capable of un prompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response . . . The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognising their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time . . . Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go. In their keeping . . . is the language, the changing idiom upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” I mean the use of such language. (Leavis 1930, quoted in Easthope 1991: 3-4).

Clearly, Leavis and others endorsing similar views (see Ferreira 1990: 1) were concerned with protecting “high culture.” The term itself not only signals that this culture originated in the courts of feudal Europe but also betrays their conviction that this culture is superior to all other forms of cultural production such as mass or folk culture. Among other things, the term high culture implies the existence of a universally accepted canon of works in the arts, humanities, and sciences. This canon is believed to have explanatory and integrative powers, which may help endow the base and the quotidian with meaning and dignity.

By and large, however, this elitism has run its course and fallen into disrepute. The validity of the established canon has been challenged with reference to its many political biases. This is why the cultural elitism sketched above has

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63 Nonetheless, this cultural elitism resurfaces in the writings of contemporary conservatives such as Allan Bloom (1987).

64 The canon must be considered as the result of a long process of selection and oppression in favour of the particular interests of the dominant social group. Accordingly, the canon has been accused of being phallo-, euro-, and heterocentric, to name but a few of the charges, and has been subjected to serious inspection and critique.
given way to a general call for a democratization of culture and art in particular. Leslie Fiedler is an eminent proponent of this view. He clearly speaks out against cultural elitism. The democratization of art, Fiedler maintains,

is desirable as well as inevitable in a mass society. This seems especially true in the case of the novel, which was from the start a salable commodity: the product not of lonely genius and tradition, but of technology and the marketplace. What seems to me to be aberrant and unnatural is the nineteenth century attempt to separate from the ordinary run of fiction the “art novel”; by which I mean certain dense, complex works that are immediately available to only a tiny minority of readers, and later—with a teacher’s help—to a slightly larger minority. As a result of this misguided taxonomic venture, teachers of English have indoctrinated their students to regard all prose fiction as necessarily divided into the majority novel and the minority novel, and only the latter is considered to be worth teaching or learning (Fiedler 1981a: 78).

Other critics are concerned with how the traditional separation of art from mass culture helps to manifest the privileged power position of a small educated elite over a less educated mass. The destruction of this conservative distinction, so they argue, is therefore in the best service of democracy. John Fiske, for instance, following Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of the art-mass culture split, states unmistakably,

The difficulty or complexity of “high” art is used first to establish its aesthetic superiority to “low,” or obvious, art, and then to naturalize the superior taste and (quality) of those (the educated bourgeoisie) whose tastes it meets. [. . .] Artistic complexity is a class distinction: difficulty is a cultural turnstyle—it admits only those with the right tickets and excludes the masses (Fiske 1989b: 121).

Another line of argument attacks the ideal of artistic complexity on the ground that it impedes an immediate, sensual appreciation of the art object and requires a rational approach. Thus the complex modernist art object is said to reflect a conservative, somewhat prudish and aristocratic sensibility which regards intellectually sublimated pleasure as the highest form of aesthetic pleasure. In the 1960s, this position was taken by Leslie Fiedler (1984) and Susan Sontag (1969).

In art practice, too, there has been a strong counter-current against the modernist ideal of complexity. American Pop art of the 1960s is again an obvious case in point, which need not be illustrated here. It attempted to formulate an aesthetic that resolutely breaks with the ideal of complexity. “It is so blatant, so ‘what it is,’” writes Susan Sontag that it is “uninterpretable” (Sontag 1969: 20). Similarly, Leslie Fiedler saw the turn away from “inwardness, analysis, and
pretension” as a characteristic of the new pop literature (Fiedler 1984: 156). The various contemporary minimalisms in the fine arts, in music, and in literature are also evidence that the ideal of complexity does not enjoy great currency with many artists today. Accordingly, in his review of contemporary theory and art, Fredric Jameson concludes that a marked trend towards “depthlessness” is a constituent element of postmodernism:

[W]e can say that besides the hermeneutic model of inside and outside … , there are at least four other fundamental depth models which have generally been repudiated in contemporary theory: the dialectical one of essence and appearance (along with a whole range of concepts of ideology or false consciousness which tend to accompany it); the Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression …; the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, whose heroic or tragic thematics are closely related to that other great opposition between alienation and disalienation …; and finally, latest in time, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified….. What replaces these various depth models is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses and textual play…. Here too depth is replaced by surface... (Jameson 1984: 61f).

4.2.4 Subversiveness

Within the modernist literary studies paradigm (Easthope 1991), art is by definition conceived as subversive to or at least critical of the dominant ethics and the conditions prevailing in society. Without this inbuilt rebelliousness, it is argued, a cultural product ceases to be a work of art. “The older or classical modernism was an oppositional art,” suggests Fredric Jameson, “. . . whatever the explicit political content of the great high modernisms, the latter were always in some mostly implicit ways dangerous and explosive, subversive within the established order” (Jameson 1983: 123-124). To Jameson and, similarly, to fellow Marxist Terry Eagleton, this established order was primarily that of capitalism and the development of an ethic of consumerism. Eagleton writes,

High modernism . . . was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture. This is a fact about its internal form, not simply about its external history. Modernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object. To this extent, modernist works are in contradiction with their own material status, self-divided phenomena which deny in their discursive forms their own shabby economic reality (Eagleton 1985: 67).
Typically to modernist thought, the ideal of a subversive art was logically connected to its hated binary opposite: affirmative mass culture. Modernists held that, in stark contrast to art, the products of the so-called culture industries were always—and even necessarily so—affirmative of the existing social order. Leo Lowenthal, for instance, is very clear about the basic difference between what he perceives as two distinct kinds of cultural production: “A product of popular culture has none of the features of genuine art, but in all its media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotypy, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods” (quoted in Gans 1977: 31).

This modernist rejection of mass culture as supportive and uncritical of the status quo was most vocally advanced in the ideological critique of the Frankfurt School, which Lowenthal belonged to. In the 1930s and 1940s, the critics of the Frankfurt School, who had emigrated to America, began to scrutinize the contemporary American culture of consumerism from a Marxist perspective. Under the spell of the fascist terror raging in Europe, they went about tracing the origins of fascism and totalitarianism in a capitalist society. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer launched a sharp critique of what they termed the culture industry. Reconsidering the view they took in their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodor W. Adorno writes of the culture industry:

> In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. [...] The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. [...] Although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object (Adorno 1991: 85).

Adorno's description of the culture industry reflects the familiar Marxist view of capitalism and capitalist society. According to Marxist theory, capitalism is not simply—not even in the first place!—a system enabling people to acquire the means of their subsistence. As every system must, first of all, strive to produce the means of
its reproduction, so the foremost goal of capitalism is the accumulation of capital through the consumption of goods. This is the foundation of capitalist economy. It follows that capitalism must not aim at completely gratifying the consumer’s needs because this would discourage further consumption. Rather, capitalism creates new desires and makes the consumer believe that these new desires can be satisfied by consuming more goods. Furthermore, within a capitalist society there must be a clear separation into the class of those who own the means of production and the class of those who have to sell their labor.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that it is the task of the culture industry to ensure these foundations of capitalism and capitalist society. In their view, the culture industry incites new consumer desires. It also controls and contains the disruptive potential inherent in the social injustice of class separation by winning the population’s consent to the present social conditions. This is achieved through ideological indoctrination. Enthralled in “false consciousness,” people act as a homogeneous mass obedient to the manipulations of the power elite. Working as an apparatus for ideological indoctrination, the culture industry, then, promotes and reinforces a conformist mindset in the consumers, making them accept the status quo as a natural and, consequently, legitimate condition. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors captured this idea of the ideological function of the culture industry in the brilliant aphorism: “Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1976: 137).

Herbert Marcuse shares Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s view that the culture industry serves social control and cohesion because “the products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood” (Marcuse 1966: 12). And he is even more radical than Adorno in his assessment of the culture industry when he argues that the mode of production
determines the modes of reception. In the introduction to *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse writes:

> The analysis is focused on advanced industrial society, in which the technical apparatus of production and distribution (with an increasing sector of automation) functions, not as the sum-total of mere instruments which can be isolated from their social and political effects, but rather as a system which determines *a priori* the product of the apparatus as well as the operations of servicing and extending it. In this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations. It thus obliterates the opposition between the private and public existence, between individual and social needs. Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion (Marcuse 1966. xv).

Thus, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment—which started out as an emancipatory project—has at last turned against its original purpose:

> The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer and I have noted, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop (Adorno 1991: 92).

As Adorno’s remark demonstrates, the modernist definition of art as a form of resistance to the existing order and the accompanying assertion that mass culture is always already caught up in the dominant ideology is founded on the liberal humanist premises of the Enlightenment. In Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s deeply pessimistic interpretation of the culture industry, the individual—equally passive as a consumer and producer—is completely integrated into and thus determined by the culture-industrial system. This observation inevitably leads them to conclude that, under the conditions of the consumer society, individuality, freedom, and authenticity cannot exist, and democracy is imperiled as it needs active, autonomous, educated citizens to sustain it. Instead, the members of the Frankfurt School see that, in Marcuse’s words, “a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior*” is emerging (Marcuse 1966: 12). In this way, they believe, fascism and totalitarianism are beckoned in by the conditions of production and consumption in the contemporary consumer society.

With some important modifications, the Frankfurt School’s critique of the ideological function of the culture industry has become a touchstone and pillar of
contemporary critical theory. Briefly, contemporary authors emphasize that this critique takes a reductionist view of culture by relying too heavily on economic terms. They insist that life in the contemporary consumer society is not adequately accounted for if the individual is reduced to being a consumer whose single defining activity is that of consumption. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the homogeneous mass society, whose advent the members of the Frankfurt School decry, does not exist. The term “mass society,” it is argued, refers to a dystopian vision but certainly not to any social formation actually in existence. A third objection is related to this second one. The success of ideological indoctrination crucially depends on the complete absence of all individual difference. Yet, since this condition is never reached, there is always the chance of resistance. And in any case, if there were no resistance, there would be no need for ideological indoctrination.

In answer to the bleak cultural determinism in the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry, the concept of “mass culture” has been increasingly falling into disrepute, giving way to theories of “popular culture.” Recent theories of popular culture, then, while largely sharing the Frankfurt School’s analysis of the culture industry, do not share the latter’s fear of an impending mass society in which ideological indoctrination inexorably works toward the perpetuation of the status quo. Stuart Hall, himself an eminent Marxist critic of the contemporary consumer society, flatly states, “People are not ‘cultural dopes’” (quoted in Easthope 1991: 79). Perhaps one is not completely off the mark if one suggests that the knowledge of the powerful totalizing forces of the culture industry and the ability to deal with them are elements of a general “cultural competence” that is part and parcel of living in a consumer society today. Because of this cultural competence, the individual is capable of deriving pleasure from mass-cultural artifacts as well as a certain critical

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65 The Situationists, for instance, developed this Marxist critique further in the concept of the “society of the spectacle.” For a concise summary of their position see Steven Best (1989).
aloofness to their ideology-infested contents by searching for and exposing the cracks in the smooth surface of these integrated totalities. For John Fiske, to cite one proponent of this view, the thesis that, under the conditions of the advanced industrial society, “an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole” is automatic and inescapable (Marcuse 1966: 10) is simply not true. Fiske maintains that it is exactly this subversive appropriation of mass culture, the search for the loose thread that will unravel it all, that is the source of pleasure and the foundation of an authentic “popular culture.” And he even argues that in order to become a part of the individual’s personal life, that is, in order to be incorporated into such a popular culture, mass-cultural artifacts must permit a reading against the grain of ideology:

[A]tempts to control the meanings, pleasures, and behaviors of the subordinate are always there, and popular culture has to accommodate them in a constant interplay of power and resistance, discipline and indiscipline, order and disorder. Much of this struggle is a struggle for meanings, and popular texts can ensure their popularity only by making themselves inviting terrains for this struggle; the people are unlikely to choose any commodity that serves only the economic and ideological interests of the dominant. So popular texts are structured in the tension between forces of closure (or domination) and openness (or popularity) (Fiske 1989a: 5).

Unlike modernism, postmodern art confronts its inevitable implication in the machinery of the consumer society head-on. In a characteristic movement that runs parallel to the postmodernist response to the crisis of representation described in the previous chapter, postmodernist theory acknowledges this predicament when it emphasizes that it is impossible to conceive of any form of art that is not automatically implicated by ideology. Indeed, “ideology” itself is redefined: Abandoning the older notion of ideology as false consciousness and reconceiving it in the Althusserian sense, postmodernist critical theory asserts that the subject only

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66 “Pleasure” here designates what Roland Barthes has called “jouissance” as opposed to “plaisir.” Fiske sums up Barthes’ argument: “[P]laisir is a different (and, by implication, inferior) form of pleasure from jouissance. It is socially produced, its roots lie within the dominant ideology, it is concerned with social identity, with recognition. If jouissance produces the pleasures of evading the social order, plaisir produces those of relating to it. Plaisir is more of an everyday pleasure, jouissance that of special, carnivalesque moments” (Fiske 1989b: 54).
exists because of and within ideology. Consequently, it is argued, an outside vantage point from which to survey society independently is unattainable. Postmodernists are aware that in saying this they are breaking with “a tradition in Western thought which hopes to stage just this impossible position, outside looking on” (Easthope 1991: 50). They also realize that, in Fredric Jameson’s words, in this situation “the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable” (Jameson 1984: 86).

This is the paradoxical situation in which an art that wants to be subversive finds itself in these postmodern times. In a way artists working in the contemporary consumer society are in a fix that seems to necessitate that they pull themselves up by the bootstraps—a feat of strength and inventiveness equal to that of Münchhausen, who, drowning in a swamp, only narrowly saved his horse and himself by pulling himself out by his own hair. Even though the situation may be difficult, it is not hopeless believes Andreas Huyssen: “[I] see no reason to jettison the notion of a critical art altogether. . . . [I]f our postmodernity makes it exceedingly difficult to hold on to an older notion of art as critique, then the task is to redefine the possibilities of critique in postmodern terms rather than relegating it to oblivion” (Huyssen 1984b: 9). Postmodernists attempt to come to terms with this dilemma by aiming for a politics that constantly questions its own premises and forms as the discussion of metafiction in the previous chapter has shown. Yet, as Linda Hutcheon makes unmistakably clear, the politics of such self-reflective art can never be wholly subversive but is necessarily ambiguous:

It must be admitted from the start that this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine. The ambiguities of this kind of position are translated into both the content and the form of postmodern art, which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology—but always self-consciously (Hutcheon 1989: 4).

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67 For Fredric Jameson this is a constitutive element of postmodernism: “[D]istance in general (including ‘critical distance’ in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism” (Jameson 1984: 87).
4.2.5 Uniqueness and Individuality

The last premise of the traditional modernist opposition between art and mass culture to be examined here is the notion that art as the authentic, creative expression of the independent individual stands in direct opposition to mass culture, the soulless result of machine production.\(^{68}\) This modernist criterion of art, which is still latent in contemporary criticism and certainly holds sway with the general readership, directly derives from the liberal humanist understanding of the person as possessing a unique, true self struggling to express and emancipate itself. Yet, with the ongoing destruction of the humanist self described in the first chapter, modernism has irretrievably lost its foundation. In Fredric Jameson’s words,

> The great modernisms were . . . predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style. Yet today, from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of culture and cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is "dead"; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological (Jameson 1983: 114-115).

In his essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes turns against the powerful “myth” of the author in literature. He complains, “The explanation of a

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\(^{68}\) Moreover, technical reproduction strips the work of art of its aura, as Walter Benjamin pointed out:

> Die Echtheit einer Sache ist der Inbegriff alles vom Ursprung her an ihr Tradierbaren, von ihrer materiellen Dauer bis zu ihrer geschichtlichen Zeugenschaft. Da die letztere auf der ersteren fundiert ist, so gerät in der Reproduktion, wo die erstere sich dem Menschen entzogen hat, auch die letztere: die geschichtliche Zeugenschaft der Sache ins Wanken. Freilich nur diese; was aber dergestalt ins Wanken gerät, das ist die Autorität der Sache. Man kann, was hier ausfällt, im Begriff der Aura zusammenfassen und sagen: was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura. Der Vorgang ist symptomatisch; seine Bedeutung weist über den Bereich der Kunst hinaus. Die Reproduktionstechnik, so ließe sich allgemein formulieren, löst das Reproduzierte aus dem Bereich der Tradition ab. Indem sie die Reproduktion vervielfältigt, setzt sie an die Stelle seines einmaligen Vorkommens sein massenweises. Und indem sie der Reproduktion erlaubt, dem Aufnehmenden in seiner jeweiligen Situation entgegenzukommen, aktualisiert sie das Reproduzierte. Diese beiden Prozesse führen zu einer gewaltigen Erschütterung des Tradierteren. . . (Benjamin 1963: 13).
work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (Barthes 1988: 143). Barthes’s view that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (ibid.) echoes the antihumanist argumentation outlined above. Though widely shared within the academia, this notion is, of course, much too cerebral to attract a less academically-minded readership. Furthermore, what may prevent a more general acceptance of this view is Barthes’s irreverent neglect of the reader's nostalgic and romantic yearning for individuality, which seeks an outlet in the readers’ dogged belief in the figure of the author. In the end, Barthes may have shied away the very reader he hoped to attract when he concludes full-heartedly, “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1988: 148).  

Anthony Easthope explains Barthes’s structuralist train of thought: “Against authorialism it can be argued that: there can be no signified without a signifier; the literary text consists of a structure of signifiers; so the author is an effect of the signifier. . .” (Easthope 1991: 65).

Barthes’s observation equally applies to all other arts. Quite simply, no one wants to part with the figure of the starving artist who toils away at his work alone in his [sic] garret. The idea of the individual artist is too deeply anchored in the still
prevailing, traditional understanding of art. Yet Barthes’s theoretical attack against this “myth” has found strong practical support from artists who attempt to define the nature and function of art in a mass-culturally saturated world. Once again, it was the American pop-art movement of the 1960s—with objects such as Roy Lichtenstein's benday-dot paintings of comic strips and the silkscreen paintings Andy Warhol produced in his “Factory”—which dealt the hardest blows against the “romantic cult of the individual” as Marco Livingstone puts it (1990: 23). In his words,

> traditional assumptions about the uniqueness and expressive potential of art had been questioned in a particularly disturbing way in his use of repetition and a semi-mechanical method in his Campbell's Soup Cans and other images of mass-produced products in 1962. Through the identification with consumerism and assembly-line methods of production, he implied that his ironing out of personality and individual identity was a peculiarly modern and American condition that he accepted without passing judgment on its desirability (Livingstone 1990: 115).

Livingstone summarizes that the “coupling of depersonalized form and technique with an appreciation of mass-produced objects and images as signs of contemporary culture became one of the defining characteristics of American Pop” (Livingstone 1990: 67). Broadly speaking, by reducing the role of the artist and dispensing with human subject matter, this movement radically questioned the

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70 In principle, John A. Walker (1983: 40) and Andrew Ross (1989: 149-150) arrive at the same conclusion. For Jean Baudrillard, however, Warhol's self-effacing techniques and comments are coquettish, inverse attempts to recuperate what it ostensibly negates, namely, the artistic subject. He quotes Warhol's statement “I would like to be a machine” and comments: “Of course, this formula is paradoxical, because there is no greater affectation for art than for it to pose as mechanical, nor a greater coquettishness for subjectivity than to dedicate itself to serial automatism” (Baudrillard 1981: 109).

Livingstone later suggests that in the 1980s Jeff Koons and others continued the onslaught on the cherished modernist notions of originality and authorship begun by American pop art in the 1960s (Livingstone 1990: 248).

71 Livingstone names a number of features frequently found in Pop painting. He warns that this list is not comprehensive and emphasizes that these characteristics are neither specific nor exclusive to Pop painting: “As far as Pop painting is concerned, this generally involves the use of existing imagery from mass culture already processed into two dimensions, preferably borrowed from advertising, photography, comic strips and other mass media sources; an emphasis on flatness and frontal presentation, characteristics which in modern representational painting had come to be associated largely with naive art; an associated preference (especially in American Pop) for centralized composition and for flat areas of unmodulated and unmixed colour bound by hard edges, or for mechanical and other deliberately inexpressive techniques that imply the removal of the artist's hand and suggest the depersonalized processes of mass production; an unapologetic decorativeness; a delving into areas of popular taste and kitsch
centrality of the individual both as an autonomous, creative subject and as a unique object of representation in contemporary art and culture at large.

This chapter has explored some of the issues that confront the writers discussed in this study. Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, and Jay McInerney set out to portray the very consumer society that produces and consumes their books. It has been shown that, since contemporary authors are so acutely and often painfully conscious that they are “always already” implicated in the system they wish to study and describe, the authoritativeness with which modernists answered these questions is out of place under the present, postmodern conditions. The old certainty has given way to a profound ambivalence toward the marketplace, which may be considered as constitutive of postmodernism. However, Andreas Huyssen insists despite the nearly total commodification of art one must not lose faith in the principal emancipatory power of art:

Where art is seen as commodity and as nothing but commodity, there is an economic reductionism equating the relations of production with what is produced, the system of distribution with what is distributed, the reception of art with the consumption of all commodities. This is a misunderstanding. We cannot dogmatically reduce art to its exchange value, as if its use value were determined by the mode of distribution rather than by its content. The theory of total manipulation underestimates the dialectical nature of art. Even under the conditions set by the capitalist culture industry and its distribution apparatus, art ultimately can open up emancipatory avenues if only because it is granted autonomy and practical uselessness (Huyssen, 1975: 89).
5 Ex-Centrics: *Slaves of New York*

In *Slaves of New York*, Tama Janowitz is concerned with the possibilities of self-realization in the extremely competitive environment of New York—more precisely, of the Manhattan art scene—in the early 1980s. As the epitome of the contemporary urban consumer society, New York has become a symbol of dependence and disappointed dreams to many of the characters in these twenty-two stories. All these figures share one essential property: they are social misfits. Janowitz’s protagonists, who are also usually the first-person narrators or the narrative centers of the stories, are “ex-centrics” (Hutcheon 1988, 1989). The peculiar spelling signals an extension of the meaning of the concept. It retains the accepted meaning of “eccentric” as denoting “a person who has an unusual, peculiar, or odd personality, set of beliefs, or behavior pattern.” Beyond that, it also refers to the socially marginalized individual in the consumer society. The notion of the ex-centric as an individual who lives on the margin of society and makes a challenge on the cultural center of this society is useful to characterize some of Janowitz’s fictional characters. The figures in *Slaves of New York* are “ex-centrics” in this double sense of the word. They are characters whose patterns of thought and behavior often collide with the established conventions and norms that form the cultural center or the dominant culture of the contemporary urban consumer society.

Janowitz examines her characters’ individually different ways of coping with their ex-centricity. According to their attitude and to their success, these persons may be grouped in three categories: “ambivalent ex-centrics,” “voluntary ex-centrics,” and “forced ex-centrics.”

The jewelry designer Eleanor is the most fully developed ambivalent ex-centric. She belongs to a group of young urbanites, who are not inured to the enticements of the urban consumer society but who simultaneously maintain a
detached attitude towards it. Their inability to identify fully with this society or to oppose it with conviction or to reconcile these conflicting positions makes them stand apart, forever dissatisfied and insecure of their own position.

The voluntary ex-centric, whose chief representative is the painter and sculptor Marley Mantello, are those individuals that rejoice in their marginal social position. They feel aloof from their middle-class environment and believe that they themselves have chosen their outsider status because it allows them to take a critical, unbiased look at life in the urban consumer society.

In a small number of stories, Janowitz portrays a third group of fictional characters. These individuals have followed the lures of the urban consumer society and embrace its values. Unable to cope with the numerous pressures in this competitive environment, however, they have become casualties who have been relegated to the social margins. These characters form the group of forced ex-centric.

5.1 Ambivalent Ex-centricity

The principal subject of Janowitz’s study of ambivalent ex-centricity is Eleanor, an aspiring jewelry designer and newcomer to the city in her mid twenties. Eight of the stories in Slaves of New York feature this exceedingly self-deprecating protagonist-narrator. Eleanor sees herself forever confronted with situations that undermine her self-esteem and that subvert her every attempt to master and make sense of life in New York. The stories cover a period of two years in the young woman’s life in which she struggles to establish herself socially and professionally. Narrated from her point of view, they render a very personal portrait of the Greenwich Village art

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73 In addition to the “Eleanor”-cycle of eight stories, there is one other narrative that features an ambivalently ex-centric female character. “Engagements” is about a self-conscious Yale student’s improbable affair with a wealthy, pitifully insecure young man and her
scene in the early 1980s. As a whole the “Eleanor”-stories show the young woman uneasily poised between attraction to and criticism of the glamorous offerings of the urban consumer society, especially as epitomized by the art scene of Manhattan in the early 1980s.

5.1.1 Dependence-Based Gender Relations

In Eleanor’s opinion, the urban consumer society—especially, as instanced by the glamorous art scene of Manhattan—creates dependences, which then become the basis for power relations. She believes that this development puts a serious strain on the relations between the sexes.

In “The Slaves in New York,” the first of the stories featuring Eleanor, the young woman draws the picture of a society that promotes the emergence of dependence-based relationships. To her mind, the high costs of living in New York—particularly, the desperate shortage of affordable housing—undermine the idea of a partnership as a union of equal partners and instead are the perfect breeding ground for a veritable “slave system” (15). Eleanor sees herself in the role of the slave to her boyfriend, the painter Stash Stosz. Without means of her own but firmly intent on becoming an artist in New York, she has moved in with Stash. Her material dependence—particularly, as manifest in the “apartment situation” (7)—completely determines her outlook. The constant worry that her bossy, jealous, and moody boyfriend (e.g. 10) might turn her out into the street has grown into a neurosis and keeps her constantly on guard against him (9). In her fear Eleanor settles into her role of de-facto housemaid, anticipating her “master’s” every wish, and putting up with his tempers (8).

Just how disheartening her circumstances are becomes painfully obvious to her when she meets Mikell. Much like herself, he wants to establish himself as an unsuccessful efforts to rent an apartment in Manhattan. This story will not be discussed for
artist in New York but depends on his girlfriend for a place to live. At Eleanor’s and Mikell’s first private meeting, the awareness of their dependence on their respective partners subdues their enthusiasm over their new, potential friendship and makes them careful not to get too involved:

We both just sat there. Mikell put his hand over mine. It wasn’t a sexual thing, not really, it was just the two of us sitting there at a wooden table in the White Horse Tavern, looking at each other and sitting there. We were both in the same position. Things might have been different if one of us had our own apartment (12).

The possibility of being discovered by their bossy partners fills the two with trepidation and gives this meeting an air of conspiracy (e.g. 11). In her insecurity, Eleanor hurriedly assures the reader that everything is above board (see also 10f, 13) and insists that she merely talks to Mikell as if he were a girlfriend, a confidante, rather than a potential rival to Stash (11, 13). Eleanor and Mikell hesitate to get more involved, careful not to endanger their precarious living arrangements. When Eleanor’s and Mikell’s partners throw temper tantrums (13, 14),74 the anxiety of being evicted from their apartments thwarts the tentative beginnings of their friendship, and they decide to stop seeing each other. After this brief flight of freedom, Eleanor finally reconciles herself to her old housemaid-routine:

I tried to keep the apartment clean. My mother lived upstate in a one-bedroom apartment. I couldn’t escape to her. I got up at seven-thirty to walk Andrew. Things went okay. Stash bought me a coat, Day-Glo orange wool with a green velvet collar. It wasn’t the one I would have chosen—I guess I would have selected something a little more conservative. But it was nice to have a new winter coat (14f).

Eleanor resigns herself to her position of servant and to Stash’s patronizing, almost possessive attitude, which she detects in his buying her a coat.

In the urban consumer society of New York as Eleanor perceives it—especially, in the extremely competitive market situation of the Manhattan art world—relationships are grounded on material dependence. The “apartment situation” is a symptom and a symbol of how equality, respect and affection, and the

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74 Some months later, the risk of making Stash jealous is still a real danger to Eleanor: [I]’ve figured out that Stash doesn’t like me to be friendly with other men. . .” (90).
mutual will to protect the partner are threatened as foundations of a partnership under
the harsh economic circumstances of life in an aggressively materialistic society.
Eleanor is convinced that the tough financial hardships under which New Yorkers try
to make a living do not promote respect and altruism. Accordingly, she is horrified
when her girlfriend Abby toys around with the idea of leaving her relatively safe if
boring living arrangement in Boston in exchange for New York and a new lover:

“Abby, don’t do it. In the old days, marriages were arranged by the parents, and
maybe you ended up with a jerk but at least you had the security of marriage, no one
could dump you out on the street. In today’s world, it’s the slave system. If you live
with this guy in New York, you’ll be the slave” (15).

To Eleanor, the fact that Abby’s long-time partner refuses to marry her is an example
of the kind of competitive, power-based way of conducting a partnership that she
increasingly finds in New York more than elsewhere (16). Abby’s boyfriend’s
behavior confirms Eleanor’s opinion that the dominant partner seeks to maintain
rather than to lessen the other’s dependence because it is the foundation of his
power. Of course, the relative legal and material security of marriage would
undermine this power position. In the final consequence, then, the slave system
leaves the longing for security forever unsatisfied.

This painful sense that her material reliance on Stash curbs her freedom and
restricts her options of self-determination is always with Eleanor and does not
significantly change in the course of their relationship. For example, in “Who’s on
First?,” which is set some months later, she remarks with grim humor,

    Stash has a charismatic personality: he’s authoritative and permissive, all at the same
time. In other words, I can do whatever I want, as long as it’s something he approves
of. […] Well, I’ve made up my mind in one way. If I ever get some kind of job
security and/or marital security, I’m going to join the feminist movement (87).

Clearly, the feeling of existential insecurity is essential to her self-concept. In fact, it
is so dominant that Eleanor is even ambivalent about her slavedom to Stash and
knowingly accepts that her dependence is curbed. Instead of rebelling against it
whenever she can, she also relishes the relative security it gives her.\textsuperscript{76} Her tragicomic quip at the end of this quote—which implies that she is ready to surrender her freedom only to reclaim it later—is evidence that she is conscious of her controversial stance: The relative securities afforded to the woman in a patriarchal society are more important to her than rebellion against the subordination of the woman in this society.

Eleanor’s frustration and anger at being the victim of a system of power that is founded on her material dependence are not lessened by her dawning insight that she is partly responsible for her current malaise. She begins to realize that, having allowed herself to be lured by the attractions of the consumer society and the prospect of a successful career as a jewelry designer,\textsuperscript{77} she has willingly forfeited her freedom and self-determination and entered into a system of dependence. Like her fellow-sufferer Mikell in “The Slaves in New York,” who puts up with his dismal “apartment situation” and its unpleasant attendant social circumstances because he believes New York to be the chance in his lifetime (12), Eleanor rather accepts her

\textsuperscript{75} She is aware that Stash, too, tries to keep her dependent so as not to weaken his own position of power (e.g. 127).

\textsuperscript{76} Her longing for material security is greater than her wish to be free. It pains her to be reminded of her precarious living arrangement. In “Physics,” for instance, she reports of a fancy dinner she accompanies Stash to. She cringes with embarrassment at the sight of the nameplate at her seat:

My nameplate said GUEST OF MR. STOSZ—I was seated next to the nameplate of STASH STOSZ—and my gift was apparently selected by someone who must have known my situation as well as my vocation: it was a fake diamond engagement and wedding ring set” (127).

In the same story, her longing for security prompts her to suggest to Stash that they have a baby, “Stash and I would finally be bonded and we could have a joint checking account and I wouldn’t have to be so worried about finances” (132).

\textsuperscript{77} In “Physics” Eleanor explains that the roots of her attraction to the urban consumer culture of New York lie in her efforts to emancipate herself from her parents. The child of parents who shunned the consumption-oriented culture of contemporary America, Eleanor is eager to exchange the deliberately plain and unaffected lifestyle dictated by her parents against life in the urban consumer society of New York City with its promises of excitement and fulfillment of her longings (125). To Eleanor her parents’ homely, self-styled philosophy—which appears to be fueled by a return to the agrarian roots of the American nation—is exceptionally naïve because it seeks to negate the realities of the consumer society. Thus, her decision to “join the rat race” (125) signals that she is ready to compete with others and underlines that she does not want to be an outsider.
dependence and subordination than leave Manhattan, which would be the only chance of escape from this system of dependence that she sees at this moment.

Eleanor believes that this sense of dependence and impotence and the frustration and anger resultant from unstilled cravings are widespread emotions in the contemporary urban consumer society. In “The Slaves in New York”, Eleanor sets the stage for her sketch of her present living situation with a childhood reminiscence. The story opens:

There was a joke that my cousin told my brother Roland when he was five years old. The joke went, “Fat and Fat Fat and Pinch Me were in a boat. Fat and Fat Fat fell out. Who was left?” And my brother said, “Pinch Me,” and my cousin pinched him. So when my brother got home he told my mother he was going to tell her a joke, and he said, “Fat and Fat Fat were in a boat. Fat and Fat Fat fell out. Who was left?” My mother said, “Nobody.” My brother repeated the joke, and when my mother said “Nobody” a second time, my brother kicked her (7).

Significantly, at the end of the story, Eleanor’s thoughts return to this childhood memory:

See, Fat and Fat Fat fell out, and in New York all that’s left is Pinch Me. But I’m not sure she would have understood. I remembered when my brother Roland was five he wore these little boots with metal toe caps, and after my cousin told him the joke and pinched him my brother kicked him (16).

To Eleanor, her brother’s shame and blind fury at having been the butt of a prank as well as his clumsy attempt at regaining some sense of power by playing the same trick on his mother resemble her own impotent rage. Like the child her brother was then, Eleanor now feels the victim of a system of power that she does not comprehend enough to recuperate control over herself and to find a way out.

Eleanor’s decision as a narrator to enfold her account of her present living circumstances in New York in this anecdote is also significant because the cousin’s joke and her brother’s response symbolically mirror life in the contemporary urban consumer society. In fact, the joke may be understood as a new, mock version of the familiar metaphor of the ship as society. The boat and its passengers represent a society that has lived beyond its possibilities and whose social fabric is falling apart. The joke figuratively suggests that, for the majority, the fat years never existed in the first place, and the lean years are the shabby reality. Even so, New York—especially
Manhattan—as the epitome of the contemporary urban consumer society continues to beguile newcomers with lurid promises of plenty, glamor, and success which inevitably turn out to be nothing but pipedreams. People are similar to Eleanor’s brother in their childlike gullibility. Slaves to their unfulfilled desires, they lash out at each other because they feel they have been swindled out of what they believed to be rightfully entitled to. To stay in Eleanor’s picture, people feel they have become the victims of a nasty prank, a practical joke. To all evidence, then, Eleanor regards this joke as a bitter parable of New York in the 1980s. Under these harsh conditions, a “homo-homini-lupus-est” style survival mentality has evolved and gender relations have come to be based on material dependence.

Tama Janowitz’s development of the theme of dependence in the “Eleanor”-stories is part of her treatment of female identity within a male-dominated society. As has been demonstrated, Eleanor never fully manages to emancipate herself from her “slave”-mentality. Much rather than define and shape “her” woman’s role actively and positively, she wants to be a man. The gender issue is also a central theme in other stories in *Slaves of New York*.

In “Modern Saint #271,” the opening piece of the collection, the author parodies the cliché of the saintly whore to examine the possibilities and to reveal the limitations of female self-realization in this society. The young protagonist-narrator explains how she came to be a prostitute and even extols the benefits of her profession. Seeing men as powerless caricatures of their own claims to dominance—note her relationships to the one-armed cafeteria worker, the dim-witted attendant at the gas station, and to her parasitic, good-for-nothing philosopher-pimp and boyfriend—and captives to their sex drives, she believes that her job affords her with a measure of power: “I was like a social worker for lepers. My clients had a chunk of their body they wanted to give away; for a price I was there to receive it. Crimes, sins, nightmares, hunks of hair: it was surprising how many of them had something to
dispose of” (2). The wasting body of the leper becomes a symbol for a disintegrating male identity. In this young woman’s world, men represent a power they do not actually possess. She is convinced that their sexual and economic dependence on her actually puts her in a position of strength. Yet, the young woman is also conscious of how difficult and dangerous her situation is: “[C]rouched in dark alleys, giggling in hotel rooms or the back seat of limousines, I have to be a constant actress, on my guard and yet fitting into every situation. Always the wedge of moon above, reminding me of my destiny and holy water” (6). In other words, she realizes that her position of power is precarious and that her sense of autonomy is dearly paid for. She can never openly assert her identity but must always deny it.

In the concluding piece to the collection, “Kurt and Natasha, a Relationship,” Janowitz presents another view of alternative female identity within a patriarchal society. In this tongue-in-cheek parody of Freudian symbolism, an ambitious artist’s creative powers spring from his sexual oppression of women. Ironically, his artistic energies leave him when he meets his “muse.” To his bewilderment, the woman actually enjoys his masochistic practices and takes pleasure in his humiliations. In the course of their relationship, he must see his creativity waning and he literally shrinks. In the concluding scene, their power relations are completely reversed at last:

“Natasha, Natasha, Natasha,” he whispered in a tiny voice. “I need you, therefore I am!”

In the bathroom he took out his roll of adhesive tape. Yet before he could break off a piece of tape and place it over Natasha’s mouth, she thrust his head to her bosom and snatched the tape from his hand. He found himself smothered in her tremendous breast, and he could hear her muffled laughter as she ripped the tape and started to wrap it around his wrists (277f).

As in “Modern Saint #271,” Janowitz indicates that the woman can assert her identity and gain a measure of self-determination only via submitting to her role as an object of male sexual desire.  

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78 This idea is also explored in McInerney’s Story of My Life.
In *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*, Janowitz develops this theme more fully. Pamela Trowel’s love life, like every other area in her life, is in terrible disarray. Nothing ever comes of her numerous casual relationships as all her male acquaintances are weak personalities who merely exploit her to cover up their sexual inferiority complexes in various ways. When her life takes a decided turn towards the bizarre—she fears prosecution for, among other things, manslaughter and child-abduction—she escapes from Manhattan. After several months, which are no less grotesque and exhausting than those preceding her flight, she returns, disguised as a man. Back in Manhattan, in drag and under the assumed name of Paul, she finds entrance into the very social circles she was excluded from just a few months before. As Paul, she is coveted by the very same people who shunned her as Pamela. Ironically, she even attends a meeting of a “Male Cross-Dresser Support Group” at which she confesses, “I’m uncertain of my sexuality” (*Cross*, 291). Yet, the charade is exposed only a few days later, and she can only avoid liability for the various charges that her former employer, her father and others level against her by acquiescing to psychiatric treatment in a hospital.

From the beginning sexual disorientation and discomfort with gender role expectations are major issues in *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*. Much like some of the male characters in *Slaves of New York* (e.g. Ray in “Engagement,” Wilfredo in “Patterns”), the men in *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group* are insecure of their sexuality or uncomfortable about the demands that the male role makes on them. Likewise, like Eleanor and a number of other female characters in Janowitz’s short stories, Pamela is insecure of her sexuality and feels imprisoned in the role of the female consumer (e.g. 115f, 151f, 179). As with those earlier female characters and in a manner reminiscent of Shakespearean cross-dressing, Pamela can only assert her identity in disguise, that is, by denying it.

Janowitz’s treatment of female identity and gender relations in the urban consumer society reflects current feminist thought. Incidentally, in the story
“Engagements” she gives a portrait of a student in the “Women’s Studies Program at Yale” (23), which demonstrates that Janowitz is well-versed in feminist terminology. Cora’s minutes of a “Poetics of Gender colloquium” (ibid.), in fact, amount to a list of feminist buzzwords: the “dissolving subject,” “the subject in progress,” “post-gendered identities,” and the “view of women as historical subject” (ibid.). While Janowitz is poking gentle fun at the pretentious, lofty wordiness of feminist theory—rereading her notes, Cora feels that they sound as if they have been written “in a foreign language” (ibid.)—her stories also lend support to the attack on femininity as an essentialist concept. Through her fiction, Janowitz argues that in a male-dominated society women are forced to the margins. Under such circumstances, any attempt at formulating a powerful, self-sufficient female identity as advocated by Julia Kristeva, for example, is bound to be problematic. Steven Connor summarizes,

Kristeva’s work has been extremely concerned with the issue of the “place” from which women may speak or represent themselves, struggling … to articulate the subversive potential of a marginal discourse, while avoiding a repetition of the gesture of patriarchy in lodging woman immovably in position as the marginal. The real drive of Kristeva’s thought is the attempt to undermine the very concept of intrinsic identity… (Connor 1989: 229).

Thus, Janowitz’s representation of female identity and gender relations may be understood as a sympathetic and cautioning comment on such feminist projects.

While there is no equivalent to Janowitz’s exploration of femininity in Bret Easton Ellis’s oeuvre, it will be instructive to compare it with Jay McInerney’s characterization of Alison Poole in Story of My Life. As will be shown in the analysis of that novel, McInerney is also concerned with the possibilities of woman’s self-realization within a patriarchal, consumerist society. Outside the writers under consideration here, Janowitz’s representation of women has been likened to the fictions of Mary Gaitskill and Catherine Texier, who, like Janowitz, owe much to “Bad Girl” writers Erica Jong and Lisa Alther (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 79).

At the same time, Janowitz’s compassionate sketches of the male identity crisis suggest that she acknowledges that the dissolution of the humanist self brings problems for both women and men.
148f). With regard to these writer’s engagement of feminist issues, Young correctly points out,

The novels in question, those of Tama Janowitz, Mary Gaitskill and Catherine Texier are neither straightforwardly feminist and celebratory of the women’s movement nor do they reflect French literary theory. They do not “work on the difference”; they make little attempt to undermine phallocentrism, nor do they show any profound commitment towards defusing the bottom-line binary oppositions of male/female within language. They are neither literary experimentations that aim towards an open-ended non-oppositional textuality nor feminisms presented within “ordinary” narrative forms (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 146f).

5.1.2 Random Menace, Entropy and Sense-Making

Eleanor’s feeling of being caught in and dependent on an unalterable situation is all the more oppressive to her because it is aggravated by a profound sense of random menace. In particular, the story “Physics” focuses on the unpredictability of life in New York and protocols her efforts to come to grips with this main source of anxiety. This deep insecurity is nurtured by a series of minor mishaps and unpleasant scenes that Eleanor experiences at the beginning of the story. These incidents and impressions at the beginning of “Physics” combine to convey a grim picture of life in New York. Though unrelated, in Eleanor’s eyes they are held together by a common theme. In each of these random incidents, a weaker personality suffers injustice and harassment at the hands of a stronger individual. Plus, in all cases the victims are also either surprised or unable to comprehend why they are being treated this way. Thus, what links these incidents in Eleanor’s mind is a pervading sense of random menace. In their entirety, they add fuel to Eleanor’s permanent feeling of being powerless and lack of control in the face of a dangerous and essentially unpredictable environment. Incapable of giving shape to her “entropic life” (121), she sees it founder and fall

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80 First, she is hit—though not injured—by a car only to be abused for her inattention afterwards (119). The accident makes her think of how, as a little girl, her mother once was doused with water for singing outside somebody’s window (119f). In the pizzeria where Eleanor goes after her car accident, she suffers further abuse by a gruff young woman and then witnesses how a little boy is being pestered by a blue-haired man (121). On coming home, she finds Stash and his dog lying on the bed, which makes her think of the method her boyfriend has devised to keep the dog from snoring: He simply wakes up the animal by yanking a rope tied to its leg (122).
Significantly, in Eleanor’s perception her day ends as it began, namely as a disconnected and arbitrary string of disturbing incidents and impressions. First, Stash lectures her that the idea of having a child in a city as hazardous and risky as New York is absurd and irresponsible. When she returns from walking the dog a little later, she finds Stash in a state of agitation and confusion. He has just poured a pot of dish-washing water onto a homosexual couple below his window, not realizing that the pot also contained some dishes. Of course, this again reminds Eleanor of the nasty prank played on her mother. As with the incidents at the beginning of this day, Eleanor finds that the victims in these accidents are surprised by external forces that, beyond any comprehensible logic of cause and effect, are unforeseeable to them. In her mind, this constitutes a general truth of life in New York from which no-one is exempt. Stash’s madcap attempt at driving the unwanted guests away is a particularly good case in point. Trying to defend his rude action, he shamefacedly admits, “I did feel sort of demonically possessed when I did it” (134). Even as he exerted power over others, Stash himself felt powerless and controlled by another authority. In the end then, both, the transvestite and her client on the one hand and Stash on the other hand are unsuspecting victims of forces outside their ken and command.

The scenes full of random menace at the beginning and end of Eleanor’s day and of the story set the frame for her description of the art-scene extravaganza that she accompanies Stash to. Thus, they provide the background against which she

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81 She is confirmed in her impression that she is leading an “entropic life” by the dilapidated complication of her apartment. It is overstuffed, in complete disarray, and things are falling apart (e.g. 123).
82 A news report on a woman who was crushed by a toppling crane gives him all the proof he needs (132).
83 Eleanor admits that in this respect she may not be so different from Stash or any other New Yorker for that matter. She acknowledges that she too is affected by the general hysteria that occasionally grips the people of New York. Then she is liable to lose control of herself and act incomprehensibly and destructively. In “Spells” she is jealous of Stash and plots revenge: “I start to plan his funeral. This is something I do rarely, when the mistral—or some kind of violent wind—blows in from Long Island. At times like this everyone in New
interprets her observations on the morals and manners of the bohemia. It is clear from Eleanor’s eagerness to attend the party that she regards this as a chance to escape her dreary “slave” existence. Yet the fancy dinner leaves her thoroughly disappointed. The egoism, compulsory self-presentation, and reckless fun-mentality she finds among the members of the art world are alien to her. And so, when another guest offers her a ride and suggests she leave Stash behind, Eleanor does not need long to make up her mind. The final shot of this scene evocatively pictures Eleanor’s ambivalent attitude towards this world of glamor, her desire to belong as well as her detachment from this world. Having declined the offer, Eleanor finds herself alone, “I was left standing on the curb with a glass of champagne in my hand” (131). In retrospect then, the party was no more than a brief, unsatisfactory interlude in this dismal life of hers. Her glimpse of this fascinating world leaves a stale aftertaste, and she concludes, “Obviously, based on this evening and others like it, I wasn’t meant for any glamorous night life or fast lane. . .” (132).

Eleanor’s efforts to comprehend the erratic events and impressions of her life are visible everywhere. As the title implies, in “Physics” she heavily relies on the language of concepts of science, specifically of physics, to “make sense” of and in this way control her seemingly disparate experiences. In the driver’s angry exclamation after the little car accident, Eleanor unexpectedly confronts a mathematical problem:

He leaned out the window and yelled at me, “You stupid, or what? Did you see how many feet from you I was?”

Now, I am a word person and have never been good with mathematical problems—how many miles a train can travel in five hours if its speed is forty miles per hour, and so forth. I always think, What if a cow gets in the way? Probably because of this, I almost flunked high school physics” (119).

York behaves bizarrely, as if a bunch of sparrows have pecked up a spill of rye bread infected with ergot fungus” (155).

84 For instance, “Spells” opens with Eleanor listing all the presents an acquaintance of hers receives for her birthday. The hodgepodge of consumer items leaves her bewildered: “I know that this assortment of gifts means something specific and symbolic about people my age who live in New York and are involved in the arts. A list of gifts received by a flapper in the Jazz Age could tell you things about the period, and this stuff has significance as well. But what the gifts actually represent, I have no idea” (154).
Eleanor recalls that even as a child she suspected that simple mathematical equations were inadequate as models of reality. Clearly, now as much as when she was a child, Eleanor has little faith in models of the world that start out from a limited set of variables. In her view, such low-dimensional and, therefore, simplifying models are of little use in reality because it is too complex and full of unforeseeable dangers. Nonetheless, physics as a powerful and comprehensive attempt to describe and understand the structures of life has left an indelible mark upon her, and it remains an important framework of reference to her throughout the story. The haphazard sequence of incidents that follows the accident suggests that in her opinion the events that make up her life are utterly random and cannot be compressed into a pattern. As discussed above, she believes to be leading an “entropic life” (121), in which—to borrow from thermodynamics—there is no order and each event is equally probable.

At the end of the day, Eleanor is convinced that there is no escaping this sense of random menace that she feels is part and parcel of living in New York. Again she examines the usefulness of physics to provide the theoretical frame that will make it possible for her to comprehend, evaluate, and thus come to terms with randomness and danger in this urban environment. Now she even finds a kind of consolation in the thought that randomness itself—that is the absence of all order—constitutes the governing pattern:

I suddenly wished I could go back to school and take physics again; I knew this time I would understand it. The notion of random particles, random events, didn’t seem at all difficult to comprehend. The whole business was like understanding traffic patterns, with unplanned crackups and hit-and-run accidents. Somewhere I read that increasing the rate of collisions between positrons and electrons will result in interesting “events” that physicists can study. Quarks, quirks, leptons, protons, valance electrons, tracers, kryptons, isotopes—who knew what powerful forces were at work? I saw how emotions caused objects to go whizzing about. If I had gotten into the limousine earlier that evening I’d be in the same mess, only in a different neighborhood; at least in this place I had love, a feeling that came at a person like a

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85 For example, Eleanor refers to terms, concepts, and figures in physics such as “the coefficient of diffusion” (120), entropy (121), the melting point of ice as expressed both in degrees centigrade and degrees Fahrenheit (126), and the apocryphal story of Galileo’s experiment at the Leaning Tower of Pisa (135). Furthermore, as if mimicking the format of a multiple-choice test as used in school, Eleanor repeatedly offers alternative options when she makes an observation and sometimes even indicates these as “(a)” and “(b)” (e.g. 120, 131).
A dodgem car in an amusement park, where the sign says PROCEED AT OWN RISK (135).

She feels that her life is so devoid of order and structure that prediction and planning are indeed impossible. In the hostile, essentially unpredictable, and largely incomprehensible environment that New York is basically to her, Eleanor sees little use in trying to effect a major change in her life since such an attempt would be likely to remain without any measurable and sustained consequences. She believes that in this environment the struggle to gain control over one's life and to give it shape and direction is doomed to fail. Even though people may be trying to exert power over others or may be leading lives full of glamor and amusement, they are basically victims to adverse, unpredictable, and therefore uncontrollable circumstances. This fatalistic conclusion makes it easier for Eleanor to reconcile herself to her present situation with its promise of a love that—as the image of the Dodgencar suggests—is as uncertain and risky and uncontrollable as everything else in her life.

As numerous passages in the other stories of the “Eleanor”-cycle show, the sense of random menace is central to the protagonist-narrator’s self-concept and to her view of life in New York. The texts abound with observations and occurrences that are potentially threatening and do not causally develop from the circumstances in which they occur.86 In all these cases, Eleanor is incapable of making sense of the

86 A few examples may suffice to illustrate this point. In “Spells” a gun-toting policeman accidentally knocks into a friend of Eleanor’s as they are waiting for a cab (164). In “Patterns” Eleanor falls in love with a new man. Their first date in a café is interrupted by a violent squabble between two men at a nearby table. When the two men have left, the scene continues as if nothing had happened (234). The most direct expression of her feeling of unpredictable threat outside “Physics” is found a little later in “Patterns.” On the subway Eleanor reads a newspaper article about some phenomenon that puzzles researchers. This draws her exasperated comment: “Obviously these scientists believed in an orderly universe, where there was an explanation for everything if they didn’t know what it was” (242f). Her remark again demonstrates the same distrust in a simplifying world view that she already expresses in “Physics.” And even as she muses on the hopeless inadequateness of a science that is stuck in a simplifying logic of cause and effect, she is faced with another case of unexpected danger. A man on the subway bumps into her and other passengers with his briefcase and then actually attacks them. Eleanor is confused: “Such random rage made no sense to me yet maybe this man was following some natural law. Who was I to have less faith than people who had studied such things for many years” (Slaves, 243)
situations. Eleanor as protagonist, as experiencing self, is always puzzled. Eleanor as narrator, as reflecting self, does not fare any better either. On the one hand, as a narrator she is incapable of integrating these impressions into the narrative strand. They remain alien elements and disrupt the flow of the story. On the other hand, she does not feel entitled to omit such incongruous data in order to focus her narrative. This is because as a reflecting self, as a narrator, she is always in search of the pattern, the storyline that will make sense of the individual elements. Yet without such a pattern, she cannot select the relevant detail from the glut of information that assails her. What remains is her overwhelming sense of random menace.

In her protagonist’s profound sense of the random menace, the entropy, and the incomprehensibility of urban life, Janowitz expresses a theme that is central to city life. In the post-war period, the “other-directed” person’s anxious dependence on his or her peers for a cue as to how to feel and what to want was a symptom of this experience. Likewise, the narcissistic withdrawal to a defensive core of the self that Christopher Lasch diagnosed in the 1970s and 1980s is a survival strategy developed in response to an environment that is experienced as threatening, disintegrating and chaotic. Janowitz continues to pursue this theme in her later fiction. The protagonist-narrator of The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group shares Eleanor’s profound sense of random menace and entropy. On numerous occasions she finds corroboration of her feeling that she lives in an unintelligible and threatening world. Of course, the most spectacular manifestation is her horrifying find of the severed head. Somehow she is unable to get rid of it and so it keeps troubling her for a considerable length of time. The lack of structure and direction in her social life further contributes to her apprehension. At one point Pamela exasperatedly remarks:

Life today was like life in the books of yore. [...] Characters appeared briefly and exited, never to be seen nor heard from again. Or if they were … it wasn’t for reasons
that made any sense, or furthered any sort of plot. It was all arbitrary; there was no glue holding people together.\(^{87}\)

Like Eleanor (*Slaves*, 264), Pamela believes she is the only normal person in a world where “abnormality [is] the norm” (*Cross*, 310). She cannot really make sense of her life and is often seized by a “secret, inner feeling that one was not in charge of one’s life” (261). Her incomprehension and lack of control do not only show in remarks like the above but are also manifest in her digressive narration.

Random menace, entropy and the impossibility to make sense are also central themes in the fictions of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney. Yet, as will be shown in detail in the analyses of their respective books, these authors treat these themes quite differently. Suffice it to note here briefly that Ellis’s youthful protagonist-narrator in *Less Than Zero*, seeing that traditional sense-making institutions have lost their integrative powers, turns towards the offerings of the entertainment media in search of meaning in his life. The “You” of McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, on the other hand, discovers that his overwhelming impression that “the world is out of joint” is really not caused by the living conditions in the urban consumer society—though these surely contribute to this feeling—but in fact quickly evaporates when he finally manages to view his present situation in the sense-making context of his biography.

Janowitz’s representation of the sense of random menace in the contemporary American city and the urbanite’s feeling of confronting a meaningless, rapidly disintegrating environment connects her portrait of the Manhattan art world in the early 1980s to a wealth of urban fiction. Certainly, American literature has come a long way since Blanche H. Gelfant’s basically modernist assertion that

\[^{87}\text{Similarly, after returning to Manhattan Pamela tries to confess the entire story to a social worker: “But try as I might I couldn’t build my life into something meaningful, and how quickly it was passing me by” (*Cross*, 299).}\]
as an ordered pattern of experiences consistent with the inner principles of its being. While the interpretation inheres in the total formal structure of the novel, the experiences that develop and comment upon the meaning of city life are contained in the episode (Gelfant 1970: 6)

In the aftermath of World War II such modernist optimism appears barely untenable to many writers. Pynchon’s fiction, to name but one obvious example, and all the writers of metafictionist literature are evidence that authors have lost faith in the modernist endeavour to create visions of wholeness. With regard to the writers under consideration here, it would seem that, in light of stories such as “Patterns” or Janowitz’s *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*, urban literature in the 1980s has abandoned the modernist project. Of course, this applies even more to Bret Easton Ellis’s oeuvre as will be demonstrated in Chapter Six.

### 5.1.3 A Children’s World

Eleanor frequently has a strong sense of living in a children’s world. This is visible throughout these narratives and is the main theme in “Who’s on First?,” a story about a nightly impromptu softball game of some artist friends. “More than ever, I realize, everyone I know is just playing at being a grown-up; I have to include myself” (93), she observes. Eleanor is uncomfortably aware of her own inability to distance herself clearly from a world she sees through so plainly. A moment later she adds, “I don’t know what my greatest fear is; maybe just that I’ll be caught and discovered, accused of being a child in an adult’s body” (95).

In Eleanor’s eyes, the art world of Manhattan possesses several qualities that are distinctly childlike. One of these is the apparent flatness of the characters. For example, watching another artist make a few practise swings before the game, reminds Eleanor of a cartoon program on television:

She misses three balls in a row. Her short little arms resemble Tweety Bird’s wings; her feet, in pink baseball sneakers, are oversized, cartoonish. Somewhere on this planet, I figure, there is probably a whole tribe of people who look just like her—a
neighborhood of Chilly Willy, Sylvester the Cat, Elmer Fudd. At least they probably don’t ever have to worry about how to behave (91).

Unlike mature, complex characters, the people that inhabit this cartoon world do not appear to extend beyond the surface of their visible behavior. They have simple, conspicuous, and static features. Moreover, they do not know behavioral insecurity as they have preserved a child’s outlook on the world.

The bohemian world in which Eleanor lives also often seems unreal to her like a child’s fantasy world. In “Who’s on First?” the softball game itself—in its locale and its rules—is a metaphor for a world that exists apart from the rest of society and reality. The game is to take place below a bridge and is scheduled to begin at ten at night. This “setting is truly unearthly” (98), Eleanor remarks. And even though Eleanor feels very much out of place in this strange world, the idea of returning to the dismal daylight reality of her home frightens her: “[T]he thought of stepping out from under the carbon-arc lamps of this imaginary world, a place brighter than day, into the blackness that falls immediately beyond, fills me with terror” (94).

The impression of having stepped into a child’s fantasy grows when the game starts. Mickey, the eight-year-old son of one of the participating artists, acts as umpire. He frequently makes decisions that meet with the players’ incredulity (94, 97, 99, 100) and ostensibly enjoys arbitrarily interfering with the game (101). As a result the rules and the goal of the game are not always clear to everybody.

Mickey keeps pestering Eleanor, trying to get her position on the softball team. In the course of the game, Eleanor grows increasingly irritable about the boy and about her own inability to get rid of him. Yet when Mickey almost gets hit with a baseball bat, her exasperation turns into admiration:

“You’re the only one who knows what’s going on, Mickey,” I say. He’s not so bad after all, I think. Eight years old, he’s not worrying about what’s going to happen to him. In a way he’s like Stash, grabbing things by the throat, the kind of people who don’t know that something might strangle them first. “You know what’s going on,” I say again (101).

Eleanor admires the boy because his childlike belief in a simple, clear, and unchanging world gives him a deep self-assurance. She recognizes that, together with
the single-mindedness and clarity of motive typical in children, his innocence gives
him a supreme confidence that he knows how his world functions and that he can
master it—a certainty that Eleanor so much wants to possess. In its simplicity,
clarity, and unchangingness, Mickey’s world resembles the “cartoon world” that
these artists live in. Eleanor also finds this childlike self-assurance and egocentricity
in the members of this bizarre and unreal environment. Yet, even as Eleanor admires
and envies others’ talent to project such self-assurance and realizes that in this world
this is the precondition of actual success, she is also “tired of everybody being
wrapped up in themselves” (131). She is conscious that this childlike compulsion
leads to self-delusion as people fail to see the difference between their projections
and reality.88

Furthermore, it is meaningful that the little boy reminds Eleanor of Stash. In
her view, Stash has preserved some of the child’s innocence and single-mindedness.
These qualities give him will-power, fierceness, and confidence. Eleanor begins to
understand that Stash, much like the little Mickey, has access to a deeper source of
power and knowledge from which she is barred. Her growing insight into the
underlying “Patterns” of behavior is the subject of the story thus entitled.
Accidentally meeting Stash some time after their break-up, Eleanor is shocked at first
when she learns that Stash bases his views on social relationships on television
shows such as “The Mating Game” (227). However, she realizes that this is entirely
in accordance with the qualities she used to see and admire in him. In the course of
“Patterns,” she gradually comes to understand, that these qualities spring from
Stash’s untroubled acceptance of his instincts, a natural well of power that she sees

88 For instance, at one point she notes: “Most of the people I knew were doing one
thing but considered themselves to be something else: all the waitresses I knew were really
actresses, all the Xeroxers in the Xerox place were really novelists, all the receptionists were
artists. There were enough examples of people who had been receptionists who went on to
become famous artists that the receptionists felt it was okay to call themselves artists. But if I
was going to have to do something like copy edit two or three days a week, I didn’t want to lie
to myself and say I was a jewelry designer. I figured I should just accept reality and say I was a
copy editor” (125).
deeply anchored in the evolution of humankind. Significantly, as she ponders why she has such trouble meeting the right partner, she remembers watching a television program about mating rituals among animals:

The whole business was so painful. I had seen those National Geographic wildlife specials on TV, and it didn’t seem right that animals met each other, performed some little courting dance, and mated for life. They knew exactly what to do; they relied on instinctive behavior that had not given their parents and grandparents any problems either. Maybe my mother had taken something during my prenatal months that interfered with my evolutionary, collective knowledge (240).

In her opinion, much like the little Mickey, Stash with his “animal ferocity” (122) has this immediate access to “evolutionary, collective knowledge.” His reliance on “instinctive behavior” gives him determination, power, and single-mindedness. As the story unfolds, Eleanor repeatedly observes how humans follow “some natural law” (243) and animals act on instinct (ibid.). While these archaic, evolutionary patterns of behavior may not be readily understandable to her, she acknowledges that they appear to function nonetheless.

For her own part, however, Eleanor feels that she cannot tap this “collective knowledge” of humankind. In a scene that once again refers to the “mating game,” she admits to her complete ignorance of these archaic patterns of behavior. Eleanor mentions to her new lover Wilfredo that twice already in the short time they have known each other, they have witnessed fighting scenes between couples:

“I’ve never been able to figure out the rules,” I said. “Even as a kid—with Parcheesi or Milles Borne—I never did learn what I was supposed to do. At this point it’s probably too late to even try” (238).

“Patterns” records Eleanor’s growing insight into the psychological patterns governing her own behavior and her increasing understanding of the instinctual forces that drive the people in her environment. While she recognizes that she herself does not have access to this archaic and elemental source of power, she nevertheless admires and envies it in others. Seeing that she is barred from access to these forces, she feels that she lacks the necessary orientation: “I had no map, no guidelines, no role models for how I was supposed to behave in the modern world” (241). Without
such guidance she feels “like some actress who’s walked onto the movie set without her script” and concludes, “Obviously I don’t belong” (89).

To sum up, one may say that in their entirety, the qualities of the world Eleanor lives in—the “flatness” of the characters; the air of unreality that hangs about everything; people’s egocentricity and self-indulgence, their almost compulsive inclination toward self-presentation combined with their proneness to self-delusion; their single-mindedness; but also their innocence and unreflecting reliance on instinct as a source of guidance and power—characterize this environment as immature in her eyes and make it a children’s world.

Eleanor’s impression of inhabiting a children’s world may be understood as a fictional version of the argument advanced since the 1950s that egocentricity and selfishness in the members of the urban consumer society are above all indicative of a profound fear for one’s identity. Much like Riesman in the postwar era and Lasch in the 1970s and 1980s, Janowitz’s protagonist sees the people around her fundamentally dependent on their social surrounds for a confirmation of their sense of self. She sees them fiercely projecting successful images of themselves, desperately hoping that thereby they will get the attention and recognition they need to bolster up their badly battered selves. That Eleanor does not gain strength from this insight is evidence of her ambivalent attitude toward this world and her own weak sense of identity.

In essence, Janowitz reiterates this point in *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*. On the whole, the book does not significantly add to her analysis. Upon her return to Manhattan after an absence of several months, Pamela—now in drag as

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89 It is significant in this context that Eleanor’s misfortunes make her think she has been thrown into a soap opera without a script rather than into a complex drama: “It was like I was stuck on a soap opera inside a tiny TV, and the plot wasn’t going the way I thought it should” (242). Although she recognizes that her world resembles a made-for-television serial—which, much like the world of cartoon, has stock characters or other flat, static
Paul—is surprised at seeing how much she missed the self-absorption and gross self-presentation she believes is so characteristic of this part of the urban consumer society:

Oh, it was good to be home, in a way. There really was no place like home, and it made me realize I had missed it all, the endless bits of useless information, the hustling and jousting, the electrically charged air produced by insignificant, desperate people whose minds were preoccupied primarily by themselves. But they were all alive, virulently alive, were they not, and each individual seemed ready to burst in an orgy of nonsexual replication, so desperate for love and attention were they (Cross, 281).

The passage illustrates Pamela’s ambivalently ex-centric position. As an outsider she is able to see through the psychic mechanisms governing public life in this environs. Yet, despite her reservations, she is happy to return because she recognizes the same forces in herself.

The theme of the “immature society” is not in the foreground in Ellis’s fiction. The discussion of McInerney’s novels, however,—especially of *Story of My Life* and *Brightness Falls*—will make clear that it is also central to his understanding of the American urban consumer society of the 1980s.

### 5.1.4 Insecurity as an Indication of Increasing Maturity

As a rule Eleanor is extremely uncertain about how to behave. This is in part due to her overwhelming sense of random menace, to her economic dependence, and to her impression of living in a children’s world, from whose underlying patterns and governing powers she feels excluded. As will be shown in the following, this behavioral insecurity is also the result of her lack of identification with her role as a consumer and participant of Manhattan high life. It will be argued that Eleanor’s insecurity and her insight into its causes are to be understood as the beginnings of a process of emancipation and thus as an indication of her own increasing maturity.

characters and depends on set, recurrent plot structures and stock situations,—, she feels she is not privy to these underlying patterns.
In “Sun Poisoning,” Eleanor describes her impressions of a vacation with her boyfriend on Haiti. She is disgusted and bemused with rip-off, fake, and tastelessness\(^{90}\) and points out the oddities of mass tourism and mass consumerism with acrid humor. The whole story is a protocol of her discomfort about being a female mass consumer. Before the vacation, she is critical of women’s fashion styles and complains, “Somebody made a big mistake when they assigned you to a female sex role; you’ll never get over feeling like a female impersonator” (58). By the end of their stay, her feeling of having to play a part that is alien to her is even stronger than before. “I’ve decided I’m tired of being female. […] I feel like a female impersonator,” she tells her boyfriend. “All these hormones crashing around have nothing to do with me. It’s like a façade. I’d much rather be a man” (65). Eleanor cannot reconcile herself to the role the consumer society assigns to a young adult woman. While she acknowledges her attraction to the lures of this society and desperately seeks to meet the demands the role of the female consumer makes on her, she is again and again forced to recognize that she does not fit in.\(^{91}\)

Eleanor’s sense of alienation from herself and from the consumer society fills her with great social insecurity. This is one of her constant and most pressing themes,\(^{90}\)\(^{91}\) Her sense of alienation from herself and from society is also aptly conveyed by the unusual choice of narrative perspective in this story. Eleanor views her own actions from a second-person, present-tense perspective, thus creating the impression that she is describing another person’s actions and thoughts. In essence, she is a detached observer of the actions performed by her public persona—a person she cannot identify with. The “contemplating self” does not feel at one with the “acting-self”. As a mere observer, she stands apart, looking on and alienated from herself and from the world. In the end, she resigns, “You had so wanted to look glamorous, garbed in resort wear and with a dusky tan. You are not that kind of person” (64). This sense of self-alienation is augmented by the fact that the protagonist-narrator does not give any names either. As a matter of fact, only a conclusive reference to this vacation in a later story (87) makes clear beyond a doubt that the protagonist-narrator of “Sun Poisoning” really is Eleanor.

This use of the second-person narrative perspective and the fact that the protagonist-narrator is never once identified by name are also part of the narrative strategy in McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*. In both cases, these devices signal that the protagonists are at odds with themselves, seeing that their public behavior which conforms to the role of the consumer has little to do with what they perceive as their real selves. For details see pp. 282ff.
which surfaces in numerous situations throughout the stories.\footnote{For instance, she calls herself insecure (13) and does not even object to Stash’s accusation that she is even “wilfully” insecure (87). She admits that she prefers the privacy of her apartment to the “fun” of parties, dinners in restaurants, and visits to night clubs (128, 131) and feels especially uncomfortable when left on her own at parties (9, 155, 268). In such situations she likes to withdraw from the crowd physically and psychically.} While she pities herself for her “lousy personality” (124) and envies others their outgoing natures, their popularity, and their success (e.g. 121, 128), she is also quite sure that deep down in her heart, she does not care for the glamor of the Manhattan art world. After the fancy party described in “Physics,” Eleanor takes stock of her life:

I realized that I really did want to be where I was—with Stash, in this hovel. I ran through all the parts of my life, trying to figure out which thing in particular wasn’t working for me. I supposed I could get a nose job and take one of those courses that teaches chutzpah. (I had read the leaflet on it in the supermarket.) But would this make me a more spiritual person? I doubted it. It was hard for me to keep up with the various aspects of reality. […] Obviously, based on this evening and others like it, I wasn’t meant for any glamorous night life or fast lane, but I would be a good mother (131).

Yet even as she rejects the phoniness and emptiness of this lifestyle and celebrity culture, she knows that her renunciation of this world is not as steadfast as it may sound, and that her hasty embrace of mother role and family life as an alternative is not entirely convincing (see 132). Eleanor is conscious of her own mixed feelings and is afraid that she may be rather like the fox in Aesop’s fable, who despises the grapes she will never be able to reach.

Eleanor’s feeling of lacking the social competence needed to survive and be successful in this environment is nowhere more apparent than in the story “Spells.” Her general uncertainty and her sense of being left out are aggravated by her suspicion that Stash is having an affair with fellow-artist Daria. Eleanor responds to this situation in several ways. In the course of the story, Eleanor and Stash meet Daria and her boyfriend three times. In all of these situations, Eleanor puts on a show of self-confidence, seeking to demonstrate her independence to herself and to her friends (160-162, 166). Yet she must recognize that she always fails dismally. Her boyfriend’s and her other friends’ utter indifference leaves her exasperated: “I don’t
say anything. I take out my little mirror from my pocketbook and check to make sure I’m still here, then I put on more eyeliner and lipstick” (164). Eleanor responds to this emotional stress with fantasies of power—she plans Stash’s funeral (155, 166, 169), thus casting “spells” on him—and with repeated fits of weakness (158, 165, 170). Quite clearly, these are psychosomatic symptoms of her sense of powerlessness. “There are times when the body just takes control,” she says. “Certainly its actions have nothing to do with me” (158). At the end of “Spells” the sense of insecurity and the feeling that she lacks the social skills necessary to master her situation are greater than before.

As has been demonstrated, Eleanor believes she lacks the social skills necessary in this society. “It’s hard for me to figure out how to be a social being” (157), she concedes at one point. Because of this feeling of being incapable of functioning properly in society, she relies so heavily on figures of authority. In these figures she seeks security, and she hopes that they will take responsibility for her life. In “Who’s on First?” she notes, “I remember how much I looked forward to being a grown-up: no school, no one telling you what to do. It didn’t turn out to be so much fun; I find it traumatic even to make a decision on what to order from a restaurant menu” (96).

While her relationship with Stash lasts, Eleanor’s behavioral insecurity within the art world adds to her dependence on him as a figure of authority. Eleanor appreciates Stash’s “fatherly, knowledgeable quality” (93) and, in one situation actually runs to him for protection and reassurance as if she were his little daughter. As pointed out above, Stash’s importance in Eleanor’s life dwindles after their break-up. Yet her behavioral insecurity sits very deeply (e.g. 231), and in the course of “Patterns” it becomes clear that Eleanor still heavily relies on other authorities to tell her what to do. After Stash has disappeared from her life, her mother is the most
important figure of authority. At the end of “Fondue,” as Eleanor faces the end of her relationship with Stash, she turns to her mother for comfort and guidance: “I still took my directions from her, even though it did seem a lot of the time her ideas backfired” (196). In “Patterns” Eleanor has the sorry remains of another relationship that had only just begun before her. Only with the help of a host of counsellors, she slowly begins to comprehend that to all appearances the man of her choice is gay. In all these cases—Stash, her mother, the host of other counsellors and self-help guides—Eleanor relies on outside sources for guidelines of behavior. The dependence on such support is a direct measure of her behavioral insecurity.

The analysis of Eleanor’s self-image and social views on society has shown that she is simultaneously appalled by and attracted to this glamorous world. This ambivalence toward the consumer society as epitomized by the art world of Manhattan is Eleanor’s central, unsolved conflict and the cause of her profound insecurity. As stated above, Eleanor’s behavioral insecurity is causally linked to her realization that she lives in an immature society and that she has neither knowledge of nor access to the forces and structures that govern life in this society.

Unlike her friends, who appear happy enough living along internal guiding lines without much questioning, Eleanor feels doomed to take a distanced, critical look at herself. Thus, her self-knowledge and self-reflection are the sources of her behavioral insecurity and isolate her from her environment. “Everybody’s strange or weird around here, but I’m not. I know the difference” (264), she tells an

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93 The telephone conversations with her mother provide Eleanor with the much-needed view from the outside, which may help her put her life in perspective and make sense of it. Their talk at the end of “Fondue” (195-198) is a case in point.
94 Eleanor first phones her mother for support (239). Her mother refers her to a friend to get advice from her (240). In her misery, Eleanor also seeks help from a neighbor who claims to be a psychic (242), and at the end of the story Eleanor buys no less than four self-help books (244).
95 Eleanor’s lack of self-assertion and need of behavioral guidance is also manifest in the fact that she listens to voices that come into her head. In “Who’s on First?” Eleanor follows the voice of her primary school gym teacher that instructs her how to play comes into her head, Eleanor follows her instructions: “[T]he voice of Mrs. Rourke shouts in my ear.
acquaintance. Yet, they may also open up the possibility to free herself from instinct and dependence. Her behavioral insecurity may be considered as a symptom of her late adolescence and early adulthood, a period of transition in life marked by the increasing awareness that earlier behavioral patterns are not of use anymore and former authorities are drawn into question. At the same time she painfully realizes that she feels too weak to rely on her own judgment and that new, more adequate patterns are not yet available. Seen in this way, Eleanor’s behavioral insecurity is the inevitable corollary and, therefore, an indication of her growing but not yet quite sufficient maturity.

5.1.5 Conclusion

Eleanor’s impressions of her life among the boheme of the Village document her mixed feelings toward this world. She has an acute sense of being an ambivalent eccentric. Even as she registers her own attraction to the glamorous art world, she is conscious of her disappointment and detachment. This ambivalence is indicative of a sense of identity that rests on the belief in a basic self. More specifically, losing control and finding that her rational approach, her knowledge and her skills are inadequate in a random, threatening, and immature environment are especially problematic to her because she is rooted in a modernist self-conception—of course, without possessing that expansive sense of self. For, as Kenneth Gergen points out, rationality is integral to the modernist self-conception:

For modernists the chief characteristics of the self reside . . . in our ability to reason—in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions. In the modernist idiom, normal persons are predictable, honest, and sincere. Modernists believe in educational systems, a stable family life, moral training, and rational choice of marriage partners (1991: 6).

She’s more bossy than I could ever hope to be” (95, see also 92). The story “Matches” opens with a nagging voice inside Eleanor’s head telling her to give a party (260).

Incidentally, Eleanor occasionally worries that at twenty-seven her life is still not settled (98, 124).
Of course, all these are the very things Eleanor misses so sorely. Her modernist self-concept is not compatible with the environment she lives in.

Further proof that Eleanor is conscious of an unchanging core in herself is her strong dissatisfaction with the social roles she feels forced to play. When she sees herself as a “female impersonator” (58, 65), for example, she implicitly asserts her belief that the self is an essence which exists independently of the social roles one plays. Gergen points out, “the sense of ‘playing a role’ depends for its palpability on the contrasting sense of ‘a real self.’ If there is no consciousness of what it is to be ‘true to self,’ there is no meaning to ‘playing a role’” (1991: 150). And Eleanor has a clear idea of what her self looks like:

You can’t wait for the day when humankind is so far evolved that bodies are completely unnecessary and people are nothing but large, flabby brains in Plexiglas boxes. Then maybe you’ll be appreciated for yourself. As it is, your body has evolved far past the mainstream of society already. You’ve never been interested in physical exercise. Your highly developed mind inhabits a braincase balanced on top of a large, larval body with feeble, antennalike arms and legs (59).

Her funny critique of the dominant practice of excessive self-presentation whose chief purpose is to hide one’s “real self” rests on her own firm sense of identity, of a self that accords priority to rationality. Consequently, Eleanor’s self-conception is diametrically opposed to the postmodern notion of the dissolution of the self.

5.2 Voluntary Ex-centricity

The backbone of Janowitz’s exploration of voluntarily ex-centric visions of life in the urban consumer society is formed by five stories that focus on the twenty-nine-year-old, megalomaniac painter and sculptor Marley Mantello. His belief in his own genius is not weakened by the fact that so far he has not had much publicity or recognition. In fact, the rundown, unheated apartment in which he lives and works, his constant, nagging hunger, and his disastrous financial situation only spur him further on in his commitment to his art. His enormous sense of self-importance and his missionary zeal are palpable in his main vision of building a chapel in Rome adjacent to the Vatican.
5.2.1 A Tale of Cultural Decline

Marley’s diagnosis of the cultural condition of the urban consumer society in which he lives is devastating. As will be demonstrated in the following, Marley concludes that the general population does not possess the power to cast off the bonds of capitalist ideology and better their dismal present state. The result is a pervasive impression of material and physical decay and cultural decline. Nor can Marley make out a cultural elite that would be capable of halting this process of degeneration.

Marley is obsessed by the idea that the world has not evolved very far beyond its early beginnings. This feeling is manifest throughout the stories and is the main theme of “Life in the Pre-Cambrian Era.” The title of the story already suggests as much. And indeed, the story abounds with imagery referring to the early periods of life on earth. For instance, as he walks downtown to withdraw money from his bank account, he is struck at the depressing sight of the “worker bees and drones” (43). The waitress in the restaurant where he goes afterwards hisses at him (44) and looks like a salamander (44f) with a “tail” (45) and a “clawed hand” (44). Another patron is merely a “small creature” to Marley that looks as if he has “crawled up perhaps from the subway” (ibid.). After his mother’s visit, Marley thinks of buying insect repellent to get rid of the cockroaches in his apartment (50). In the grocery store, Marley is rattled at the pitiful sight of his sick painter colleague Larry, who looks like some “preliminary reptile” (51), and he notices how Larry’s “thick tongue crept out of his mouth and gave his lips a lick” (52). Marley backs away and quickly leaves. A little later, lost in thought, he finds himself wandering along the Hudson:

An offering to the gods! I threw my ice cream into the water. The river was gray and choppy. I buried my hands in my pockets and wrapped my scarf around my nose, looking out. I could see all kinds of gooey things swimming around in the water, all sorts of primordial, primeval sludge. It was the land of the dinosaurs, out there in the water, with giant amoebas and lobster tails sashaying back and forth. Everything was alive, even though the water was so cold there were chunks of ice in it.

There were globules eating oil—these were the hungry enzymes from millennia ago that had survived through this day—and invisible lizards slithering through the waves. And volatile guy that I was, a great feeling of joy and happiness swept over me. I was not some primitive sponge or barnacle or anchorite. I was not Larry,
walking around with a condition similar to leprosy. I was not my mother, in a dream world without clouds. But I was myself, Marley Mantello (53).

Throughout the story, Marley’s choice of animal or biological imagery is telling. The people in his environment put him in mind of early, lower forms of life. In his view they do not rank higher on the evolutionary ladder than reptiles. He feels that, just like those very early but still recent creatures, many people possess a vigorous will to survive even under the most hostile conditions. Yet, on the other hand, these images also suggest that in Marley’s view the majority of the urban population entirely lack any potential of self-development. And at the same time there are others who still self-importantly strut about not realizing that they are long extinct.

Marley’s urge to set himself off from what he considers an infinitely inferior environment is visible everywhere. He regards himself as something of an alien visitor to this primordial zoo. Standing on the river bank, he feels that he has a privileged position that allows him to take a critical look at life around him from the outside. By portraying the people in his world in the imagery of low and even extinct creatures, Marley further underlines his own exceptional status as an artist. For, in line with the animal imagery present throughout the story and in stark contrast to the primitive life forms around him, Marley compares himself to a highly developed mammal. Full of power and determination, he sees himself as a predator on the prowl, who strolls up the streets “like a panther, grimacing and ready for food” (44).

Marley argues that the lack of potential of self-development which he discerns in the city dwellers of New York is intricately bound up with the rule of capitalist ideology. Capitalism has become a religion, and the banks are the churches where Mammon is worshipped. He describes his own bank as “an unusually gloomy place, built in a neofascist-religious style,” and adds, “It should have had one of those big organs at the back, or at least a baptismal font” (43). With an unrelenting eye, Marley demonstrates that the followers of this “religion” are forever caught in the
routine of their lives and tired-out from their daily drudgery. In visionless apathy they toil on without any sense of purpose or direction.

On the streets crowds of people were staggering this way and that, newly released from their office tombs. Grim faces, worn down like cobblestones, never to make anything of their lives. These were the worker bees and drones, who had been imprisoned in American thought-patterns since birth, with no hope for escape but the weekly million-dollar lottery. Walking at a slow speed, which drove me crazy. But what would have motivated them to move more quickly... (ibid.)?

In Marley’s view, people’s lack of potential of self-development is both the cause and the symptom of their “imprisonment in American thought-patterns”. Within the limited context of this passage, this means that he sees people firmly ingrained in the ideology of capitalism. Acting within the role prescribed for them, people sell their working power and buy consumer goods, thereby helping to preserve the machinery of the capitalist economy.

For Marley it is clear that, inexorably entrenched in the ideology of capitalism and without any potential of personal progress, people are bound to regress, to degenerate. He sees his views corroborated by the distinct air of decay that hangs about life in Manhattan. Indeed, signs of physical decay are ubiquitous in these stories and never fail to arouse Marley’s attention. In “On and Off the African Veldt”, the sense of decay even becomes a major theme. Bodily decay is ever-present in the form of various ill-odors, which continually assail Marley. On his way to the Museum of Natural History, he sees a homeless woman on the subway. He hesitatingly admits to himself that the terrible sight and horrendous smell fill him... 

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97 For instance, in “Life in the Pre-Cambrian Era,” his friend Larry suffers from AIDS, “a condition similar to leprosy” (53) and reminiscent of “the plague” (51). He has lost his hair, and there is a “terrible odor” about him (ibid.). In the story “Turkey Talk,” a wealthy art collector and prospective customer lives in a house “built like a coffin” (105). “In and Out of the Cat Bag” opens with a chance encounter between Marley and his friend Sherman, who is in bad shape, drunk and on crutches, because of a broken leg. Sherman reminds Marley of mushrooms, a fitting metaphor of decay: “He had the face of a woodland tuber, something unexpected and white springing up from the dense humus of the street” (140). Back in his apartment, Marley is met with a “foul reek of something fecund and feline” emanating from the excrements of a cat on his bed (145). When he goes downstairs to the landlord to complain that his apartment has been freezing cold all winter, he finds that the old man’s place is in worse condition than his own: “It was furnished with a variety of old cast-out furniture, broken chairs, and a sort of rotten desk with one leg held up by books. No windows, and old scabbed walls, cracked from the water pipes, which were covered with a fine, furry mildew” (150).
with revulsion rather than with compassion (204). Despite the woman’s young age, the foul odors exuding from her are unmistakable signs of decomposition for Marley, and her makeshift “shroud” of wet newspapers and a blanket even foreshadows her death to him. Marley’s growing impression of living in a degenerating, declining culture is further fueled immediately afterwards by the sight of another homeless person:

There on the stairway was still another bum, poised halfway up the stairs, able neither to walk up nor to come down. Wearing flipflops on his feet instead of shoes—and emitting that same stale, hideous reek, neither urine nor sweat but something much worse: the formaldehyde of decay (205).

Here Marley is even more explicit. The image of the person motionlessly standing in the middle of the stairs connects to his vision of living in a primordial world. Just as the people around him remind him of primitive creatures that appear to be stuck on a very low rung of the evolutionary ladder, this destitute person’s development has been arrested. In the absence of any potential of personal growth, there is only stagnation, which inevitably leads to decay. Further signs of physical decay continue to absorb Marley’s attention as the story proceeds.98 In their entirety, all these instances are symptoms of a general cultural malaise for Marley. At the same time, they nurture his indomitable sense of superiority.

In Marley’s tale of cultural decline, there are only few rays of hope. People’s generally limited potential of self-development and their entrenchment in the ideology of capitalism makes cultural progress virtually impossible in his eyes. Where he can discern any genuine longing of self-improvement and actual accomplishment at all, he only diagnoses very limited abilities. Here he takes major

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98 For example, in the Museum of Natural History Marley is fascinated by a striking exhibit of a group of army rats in the process of devouring a horse: “Vultures fly above to eat the small animals which their coming start from cover, the rank smell of carrion surrounds them. Ah, how human and more than human” (206)! Afterwards at the opening of Sherman’s show, Lacey wears a belt that makes Sherman think of dead rats (208). When Marley meets his former roommate from art school at the opening, he is reminded of how his roommate once allowed a canned ham to rot until it exploded and the stench of rotten meat filled the whole dormitory (210f). Over drinks after the opening, Marley and his friends discuss the necessity of masking body smells (212).
issue with his fellow artists, whom he believes to be “the highest symbol of man’s civilization” (148). As a rule, the artists he knows are mediocre at best in his eyes. Among them there are his former roommate from art school, Larry, and Sherman and his colleagues from the gallery. Neither of them he sees even remotely capable of contributing to the progress of culture and society.

5.2.2 From Fame and Glory to Mere “Well-Knownness”

In the face of primitiveness, ideological imprisonment, decay, and mediocrity, Marley is led to believe that there is no true personal greatness in the contemporary consumer society anymore. In his art Marley tries to give an image to this profound sense of cultural decline. Against his depressing diagnosis, Marley pits his eccentric, very optimistic vision of a time to come in which the ideal of individual excellence and greatness will return.

Marley shapes his ideas of such a brighter future on the Italian Renaissance. Marley’s great admiration for the painting and architecture of the Italian Renaissance and its masters is evident throughout the stories so that this epoch is permanently visible as a referential context. Firstly, he shares the Renaissance artists’ and thinkers’ deep veneration for the Greek and Roman cultures of antiquity. Secondly, the influence of Renaissance art on Marley’s painting is visible everywhere. Marley’s choice of the Italian Renaissance as his frame of reference is conducive to his aims. With its call for spiritual and intellectual renewal, its departure from a theocentric world-view, and its turn towards an individualistic ideal of the person, the Renaissance marked the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity (cf. Wilpert

99 Stash Stosz, Eleanor’s boyfriend, appears to be the only exception (105).  
100 The reader learns that as a child Marley memorized parts of The Odyssey (258). Marley also constantly refers to Greek mythology (e.g. 48) and enjoys quoting Horace (105) and Virgil (111) in Latin. At one point he even goes so far as to announce, “I should have been born in ancient Rome…. I would have liked to be an early Christian martyr” (106).  
101 For example, he occasionally entitles his paintings after great works from this epoch and compares himself with painters such as Raphael. Certainly, the by far most striking
1989: 763). Among others, these developments found expression in two ways that are essential to Marley’s appropriation of renaissance art. Firstly, as the term implies, renaissance thinkers and artists, especially in Italy, deeply revered the great cultural accomplishments of the ancient Greeks and Romans and admired the gods and mythic heroes of antiquity. Secondly, this epoch gave rise to the ideal and to some of the finest specimen of the “uomo universale” or “Renaissance Man.” In effect, the universally educated and trained natural genius may be regarded as the embodiment of the rising belief in the autonomous, self-creating subject, which eventually culminated in Descartes’ cogito, ergo sum. Thus, in the bleak present of the contemporary urban consumer society where mediocrity and self-inflation go hand in hand, the Italian Renaissance provides Marley with role models and ample illustration for his vision of an art that is capable of halting and reversing the cultural decline through a return of the ideal of individual excellence.

Much like the artists of the Renaissance, Marley regards the gods and heroes of Greek mythology as greatness personified. In the dark world that the consumer society of New York is to him, these mythic personages are his guiding stars:

You see, in times of antiquity there were real heroes, known for their great achievements. But in today's world, all we have are celebrities, people known for their well-knownness. Creations only of the media. Well, a century ago men were more heroic than people of today; and some guys in antiquity were even more heroic, while people in the times of prehistory were real gods. That's because they didn't have People magazine to create men, but the men created themselves, through their great works. But my feeling is, in the future we will have real heroes once more. Like me (200-01).

manifestation of Marley’s love of Renaissance art and architecture is his plan to build a chapel to the Holy Virgin adjacent to the Vatican (e.g. 51, 102, 110, 204).

102 This is comically accentuated in “Turkey Talk,” where Marley encounters a self-declared Renaissance Man. The art collector Chuck Dade Dolger invites Marley for breakfast at his home to discuss the purchase of some paintings. Yet, instead of talking business as the title of the story suggests, Dolger endlessly rambles on about food and the great things he claims to have accomplished during his lifetime, such as raising giant turkeys during the 1930s. Marley quickly realizes that Dolger’s incessant self-praise is often inconsistent with the facts as Marley perceives them. Everything about his host strikes him as gross in its abundance and as preposterous. Unconvinced by Dolger’s tall tales and little impressed with his other alleged talents, Marley quickly concludes that there is nothing to his host’s self-praise. In the end, this self-declared jack-of-all-trades—who full-heartedly announces, “I don’t have much faith in a man unless he’s one of your true Renaissance men. Now take me for example”—strikes Marley as a crazy impostor, the very caricature of the “self-made man” (112) he claims to be.
In order to clarify and illustrate his notion that there has been an ongoing degeneration of nobility and excellence from the past until the present, Marley draws on two important sources. Firstly, he makes a passing reference to Hesiod’s account of the five ages of man. His use of this source will be dealt with in more depth below. Secondly, Marley quotes from Daniel Boorstin's early study of the media industry *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Despite the breakneck speed of the media evolution, Boorstin's ideas have lost none of their forcefulness and significance since their publication in 1961. The lasting influence of Boorstin's book is, however, not only due to his foresight and the clarity of his concepts. Perhaps more than anything else, it is Boorstin’s passionate commitment to individuality and cultural refinement, which he felt were at stake in a media-controlled society, that makes his argument so sympathetic to Marley. Marley fully endorses Boorstin's argument and even co-opts the latter's familiar formula: “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin 1975: 57). Boorstin continues, “The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name” (1975: 61).

Individual achievement is the central category that Marley adopts from Boorstin. While heroic fame ensued from achievement, the star image is an industrial product. Nevertheless, as a jazzed-up imitation of heroic fame, the star image is still a sign unmistakably referring to individuality, identity, and achievement. In other words, through their public image, celebrities pay tribute to the very properties they had to sacrifice when entering the machinery of culture industrial production. To Marley, the celebrity culture of today expresses the nostalgic longing for actual achievement and greatness, for which there appears to be no place in the profit-oriented contemporary consumer society.
However, in Marley’s interpretation, the gods and heroes of antiquity, former personifications of greatness and accomplishment, have not really weathered the times. Transferred into the urban consumer society of the late twentieth century, they are merely sorry after-images of their former greatness. Marley's version of Ulysses' return home warrants a closer look. He proudly explains to his friend Sherman:

This part is where he's being greeted by his filthy old dog. . . . Ulysses is going to be this kind of wild-eyed guy with a beard, wearing a denim jacket and blue jeans—like Larry Rivers or Larry Poons. Late forties, the kind of artist you see hanging around a bar, hasn't made it and never will. Not exactly talentless, just gets enough attention from time to time to make him feel justified in leeching off a wife who has to support him and the kids—a minor member of a school. . . . Anyway, Ulysses gets home and his wife is living in a sort of Cape Cod beach house. Stuck between a hamburger joint and an ice-cream stand: he's back after twenty years to see if his wife has got a couple of dollars she could maybe loan him . . . (152-53)

In Marley's adaptation of the Homeric source, the returning King of Ithaca has become an aging, seedy, barely acknowledged artist, whose limited talent is but a poor shadow of his namesake's famed cunning and wit. The mythical hero's final task of winning back his wife and queen from the hands of her insolent suitors—an act by which, after twenty years of hapless wanderings, he is to regain his kingship and, in dropping the mask of the beggar, his identity at last!—is rendered here as an utterly unheroic act of parasitism that does not at all signal the happy ending of the artist's trials and tribulations.

Another instructive example of Marley’s peculiar treatment and re-interpretation of Greek mythology is his idea for a painting which is to be entitled “The Feast of the Gods” in the story “On and Off the African Veldt.” After the opening of Sherman’s show at Borali’s gallery, Marley joins his friend and some other guests for dinner in a Japanese restaurant:

“By the way,” I said to the assembled, “what’s the most disgusting meal you’ve ever eaten?”

“Ah, that’s a very good question,” Borali said. Eagerly he picked his pickerel. Anyway, it was some sort of greenish fish, perhaps a porgy or plum fish. This gave me thought for the food I was going to paint in my “Feast of the Gods.” I’d do a sort of bacchanalia, with all different food crouched around the bottom of the painting: small green and white cakes, large colourful fish of pearly-white and gold lame, mysterious fruits, some resembling the human head, others like chestnuts and bits of

103 See pp. 143ff.
amber. Even the insects from the insect world would be there, huge flies with gaily striped wings . . . in the background I’d have a swamp, with creeping things hanging from the vines and stunted trees resembling artichokes. Also a kind of sickly flower plant, with murky leaves.

And I’d do the women up in all different sorts of hairdos, some with tangled manes, bluish-silver, decorated with weeds and flowers; and there in the middle would be Poseidon, a kind of flabby guy in a fish suit, mucking about at the edge of the water and looking something like Borali, only more substantive. Maybe even an older geezer in the corner: Zeus in his old age with bits of corn and other foodstuff in his coppery beard—kind of Howard Hughes-ish. I looked at Sherman, scowling away on the other side of the table. These people I was with now—they were nothing more than furious elves and fairies, in twentieth-century disguise. But this is what has happened to gods and pixies in the twentieth century. They have forgotten their true selves and are out trying to make a buck and win influential friends. Still, in my picture most of the people would be having a good time, drinking out of goblets of red glass, yawning and carousing. The whole thing maybe twenty feet long (216).

Quite unmistakably, Marley models his idiosyncratic depiction of a bacchanalia of ancient Greek deities on Giovanni Bellini’s and Titian’s famous painting “The Feast of the Gods” (1514/1529). The remake shares the basic composition of the original—a friezelike arrangement of the figures in the foreground—and is possibly even richer in its lavish visual detail and evocative power. However, in stark contrast to the dramatic and energetic background—a forested mountain against a cloudy sky—, which Titian later added to Bellini’s painting, Marley intends to use plant imagery that suggests torpor, sickness, and decay. Similarly, the purposefully undignified figures Marley wants to paint clash strongly with the dignity and grace that the deities in the Renaissance painting preserve despite their frolicksome and even frivolous feast.

Evidently, in Marley’s eyes these ancient deities have come a long way from Mount Olympus. Their modern transfiguration is in line with Marley’s other depictions of gods and heroes (e.g. 45, 47). As in those other representations, Marley proposes here that the mighty gods of antiquity are tired-out and only pitiful shadows of their former glory. They have sold out their integrity in a desperate attempt to secure their waning reputation and dwindling status in the highly competitive vanity fair of the contemporary consumer society. In Marley’s view, this fall of the great gods of antiquity goes along with a rise of lesser powers. As the tired-out heroes and gods have sold themselves to the culture industry, the natural hierarchy is upended, and
mediocre people gain public recognition. Though average or second-rate, they can reach stardom because the exhausted and dispirited gods have left behind a spiritual void that must be filled. This is Marley’s incisive critique of the celebrity culture in the contemporary consumer society. Where real accomplishment does not exist, lesser talents will thrive and rise. This rise of the celebrity in the wake of the decline of the gods and heroes of yore makes Marley’s intention to render all participants of the feast in a joyous mood a sour expression of a bitter insight: Ultimately, Marley’s “The Feast of the Gods” forces the spectator to recognize that in the fun-morality prevalent in the consumer society of today actual accomplishment is unimportant and genuine greatness is meaningless.104

104 Interestingly, Marley’s sketch of “The Feast of the Gods” may be considered as part of a sequence of four dinner scenes, which visualize his ideal of greatness and trace its degeneration. To the artistic eye of the painter Marley, these four dinner scenes—the celebration of the opening of Sherman’s show; “The Feast of the Gods,” the episode about the Singapore businessmen who feast on a live monkey’s brains; and the scene in the fast food restaurant—together with the food consumed on these occasions illustrate Marley’s hierarchy of excellence. Highest in this social order are those in whom he recognizes a genuine heroism. Among these Marley counts himself, of course. Marley contends that, among other things, these individuals realize and even derive pleasure from the fact that in order to live one has to fight and be prepared to take life. This is vividly pictured in the sensual pleasure that Marley derives from the look and taste of bloody meat. He proudly proclaims, “I’m a carnivore. I don’t even like to use a knife and fork. If I have a steak or roast beef I’d rather tear it off, bite by bite, with my teeth. There’s nothing like the texture of meat, dense and red, the smell, the bloody taste” (ibid.). To Marley, his sister possesses a similar heroic will to exercise power, and he even devotes an “Ode to the Heroine of the Future” to her. Again, appropriate imagery indicates her position in the hierarchy. He pictures her as “a great lioness after a feed, basking with a bloodstained mouth” (250). This heroism of the future is discussed below (see pp. 142ff). Incidentally, Marley seems to be undecided about the position of the businessmen. He is revolted by their act of apparently gratuitous violence. Yet he recognizes that this violence and their detachment come from the same source as the nasty prank that his sister Amaretta plays on her lesbian lover.

Much lower in this hierarchy of excellence are the mediocre, second-rate artiste types around Sherman. While they show off with their preference for fancy food such as so-called “rice birds” (217), which disgusts Marley, they lack courage and will-power. This is evident when the art dealer Boralli finishes his story about the businessmen in Singapore: “I don’t like to watch my food die in front of me; I like my meat to be killed and cooked offstage before I eat it” (218).

Lowest in this social and cultural pecking order is the general populace. In the fast food restaurant, where Marley and Lacey go after dinner with Sherman and his friends, Marley closely watches a family eating their dinner. To his critical eye, this “nuclear American grouping” (220) is a sorry sight. He cannot discern any of the courage and will-power needed for the actual kill of the prey. There is only the faintest of memories of this heroic ancestry in the form of the artificial coloring of some sweet drink around the kid’s mouth. Marley
5.2.3 Towards a Heroism of the Future

As has been shown in detail, Marley adapts motifs and themes from the Renaissance—particularly as it developed in Italy—to life in the contemporary consumer society. His work is evidence of his belief that, counter to popular postmodern pessimism, myths are still a source of wisdom and a valid framework of reference within which to make sense of life today. Marley's optimistic confidence in the paradigmatic relevance of myths is the basis of his vision of a heroism of the future.

The fact that his treatment of mythological subjects and his idealism meet with incomprehension among his artiste friends—Sherman criticizes him for being “not exactly in sync with the times” (153)—basically leaves him unfazed. Marley is well aware that his views put him at odds with the fashionable cynicism with which mythological projections of an ordered universe are rejected in much of contemporary art. With his idiosyncratic interpretations of classical sources, he enthusiastically opposes this cynical dismissal of the old paradigms. Expressed in the humorously irreverent vernacular of popular culture, his pictures throw the pathos and pretentiousness of their mythical sources into comic relief. Yet, this self-parody does not obscure the essentially sympathetic and affirmative spirit with which Marley acknowledges the existence of these myths and underlines their pertinence.
for the present. In more theoretical terms, one may say that in a world that is increasingly perceived as chaotic and in need of guidance, mythology provides a self-consistent system of order and causality that, in M.H. Abrams words, serves
to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, as well as to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives (Abrams 1981: 111).

For Marley, myths manifest a timeless pattern that is re-enacted again and again. And so, without any embarrassment, he can offer his update-versions of these archetypal myths as serious comments on society today. For him classical mythology is still a relevant framework of reference today and the spring from which a heroism of the future may originate.

By virtue of being an artist, Marley feels superior to his environment. He announces, “I was one step above it: by that I mean I was an artist, which redeemed me” (207). In line with his deep admiration for the Italian Renaissance, the “uomo universale” is Marley’s role model in a world that he perceives as mediocre at best. Marley’s self-important manner registers his feeling of superiority towards the art world and the rest of society. His boasting is his own odd way of asserting his ex-centric identity, which depends on the sense of being unique and an exception to the norm, on the feeling of living on the margin of society. Making his way through the crowds of office workers in the financial district, Marley notes, “It didn't bother me, the looks and stares I got. People were angry with me, and why? Because I was some sort of freak, an artist. They were trapped, and I wasn't. So I felt smug, even though I

the unquestioning affirmation and worship of mythological truth—as manifest in Rubens’s canvas, for instance—is simply not an option anymore.

The analysis of the Marley-stories has revealed a similar, overpowering confidence in the protagonist-narrator to create himself through his great works. He thinks of himself as “a genius of the first degree” (49) and constantly invites virtually everyone he knows to share this view. Marley’s use of the term “genius” further connects him to Renaissance thought. During the Renaissance, the concept of the genius implied innate capability and spontaneous facility. Later, the genius was also believed to work with a furor poeticus. Significantly, Marley continually notes these qualities in himself. He insists that his great artistic talent already manifested itself at a very young age (42), that he paints because of an inner urge that he cannot suppress (ibid.), and he emphasizes that he is “a very volatile type of guy” (50) (also see Tonelli 1973-74: 293).
was starving” (43). In order to set himself apart from this faceless crowd, he calls himself a freak. To be sure, excluded from public life yet exposed to public view, the freak has always been the focal point and outlet for the fear and fascination, for the complacency and compassion that the “other” has never failed to evoke in the majority.¹⁰⁷ Yet, in characteristic fashion, Marley reads the image against the grain and turns the tables on society. In Marley’s view, the artist-freak’s inferior social position on the margin of society becomes the source of his strength and confidence. For him it is the people who are “trapped” (43) much like the caged animals in a zoo and exposed to the artist-freak’s relentlessly scrutinizing look. Accordingly, he interprets his environment’s apparent condescension towards him as signs of their uncertainty. This is why, as an artist-freak, he jubilantly takes upon himself the worries of an insecure existence in order to be free and independent, fully convinced that the crowd thoughtlessly trade in their freedom and individuality for a dismal and devious sense of security in utter conformity.

Marley argues that his status as a voluntary ex-centric, his position on the margins of society provides him with the distance and perspective necessary to exercise critique, to create an oppositional art. For herein lies the social function of art in his view.¹⁰⁸ Marley unabashedly propagates the idea of the artist as the spiritual and cultural wellspring of society. According to this view, the artist is an integral part of society who must remain an outsider in order to be able to fulfil his obligations. Marley clearly stands up for this ideal of an engaged, antagonistic art. In his view, it

¹⁰⁷ For a social history of the freak see, for instance, Fiedler (1978).
¹⁰⁸ He believes that society and art stand in a relationship of mutual exchange. In Marley’s parable from animal life, artists resemble the grubs of an ant colony. In return for a pleasurable fluid they excrete, the grubs are cared for by worker ants: If there’s a battle, or if the colony is attacked, the baby grubs are the first thing to be saved. This ensures the future of the colony. […] Artists are the highest symbols of man’s civilization. […] So they should be the first to be saved, for example, in the case of a nuclear disaster. But that’s not how it would happen. In this country the first ones to be saved would be the politicians and the corporate executives, and lastly the lunatics who have been building shelters. […] Well, what I’m saying is, this would be the equivalent of the worker ants struggling to save their own hides, without remorse or thought for the future” (148).
is the artist's duty to oppose the primitiveness, the ideological imprisonment and conformity, the decay and the mediocrity that, in his eyes, are tantamount to a cultural decline. The passionate commitment to an art which resolutely resists such a decline is the hallmark of the artist as a hero of the future.

Marley is always aware that his marginal social position does not only provide him with the critical detachment he believes is necessary for an engaged, oppositional art; it also poses a danger to his art and even his existence. The most serious material threat is his precarious financial situation. He is always broke and hungry (42f, 102), and, having neglected to pay the rent for some months, he now even faces eviction from his crummy apartment (140). However, to Marley, such untoward circumstances only further incite his poetic furor. They are mere acid tests of the genuineness of his artistic passion and, in the final consequence, without any significance. Marley emphasizes his unconditional readiness to sacrifice himself so as to be able to pursue his lofty goals as an artist:

After art school I became a starving artist. I starved with a vengeance. My mother approved. All this was for my art. Still in another sense, it didn’t matter one way or the other: I knew I wasn’t going to live very long. I expected to keel over at any minute. Every day I had to think carefully: Was I well enough to get up today? Did my stomach hurt? Was an unhealed cut on my finger a sign of cancer? What should I eat for breakfast? And none of these things would have been enough to get me out of bed except for the fact that I had to go paint a picture” (42).

109 In his missionary zeal for his vision of art, Marley even feels he has to fight supernatural forces. Indeed, his wild imagination makes Marley believe he is confronting the devil himself. In the story “In and Out of the Cat Bag,” Marley returns home, with thoughts of his impending eviction on his mind. He discovers that a cat has entered his apartment and defecated on his bed and is now in the bathroom, defending it against him. He instantly interprets the animal, which hisses and is “part-snake”, as a symbol of the devil (146). When Sherman drops by, he convinces Marley to complain to the landlord about the cat and the broken heating. The landlord, an old man named Vardig, lives in the basement. Marley’s walk downstairs turns out to be a real “descent into hell”. Vardig’s apartment is without windows and in an incredible state of disrepair and decay (150). And sure enough, another big cat is lying on a chair (ibid.). Kerosene heaters make it “toasty warm” and poison the air with carbon monoxide (151). The old man has “the accent and persona of many nationalities” (150). He has an “Armenian, Greek, Spanish, or Jewish mustache” and “soulful eyes” (ibid.), “luminous and filled with sensitivity” (151). His arms are “in good shape, burly, and sticking out from his gray slobbery undershirt” (151). Believing Vardig—whose name, incidentally, means “underwear” in Armenian—to be “very timid in his soul” (151), Marley is surprised and frustrated when this “wheeler-dealer and conniver” (150) turns out to be “a veritable magician” (151) who does not even give Marley so much as a chance to voice his complaints and calmly shows him out the door. Evidently, in Marley’s imagination, the landlord unites all the features stereotypically associated with the devil.
Still, despite his unbroken enthusiasm, Marley is also left with a sober recognition at the end. Ultimately the actual possibilities of self-realization on the margins of the contemporary consumer society—that is, independently from and in opposition to the social pressures towards uniformity and conformity—are not so ample. He must accept that his economic misery and his social near-isolation make him vulnerable. Nonetheless, it is a central aspect of Marley’s self-image as an artist and as a hero of the future that, under the most unfavorable conditions, he remains true to his goal of creating an oppositional art. These adverse circumstances even appear to sanctify his artistic campaign for an autonomous and antagonistic art devoted to greatness and excellence. Marley’s determination to stay dedicated to his high goals against seemingly impossible odds makes him a hero of the future in his eyes.

Of course, megalomaniac that he is, Marley does not believe that many people qualify as heroes of the future. Apart from himself, only his sister Amaretta appears to possess the qualities that constitute such a heroism of the future as he envisions it. This is why his loving and entirely unsentimental portrait of his rundown, alcoholic and drug-addicted sister in the story of their last evening together before her death becomes a veritable “Ode to Heroine of the Future”. Marley’s opening of the story is faintly reminiscent of an obituary. After a flat account of the miserable circumstances of his sister’s death, he tries to make sense of her death by considering it in a wider context. Characteristically, the context he chooses is the history of humankind as rendered in ancient Greek legend. Greek mythology knows five ages of man. Marley regards Amaretta as an avatar from the fourth or “heroic” age:

My sister in the end jumped naked from the window of the top floor of a seven-story building. This was after a long string of events. She couldn’t get her license back. The state had made her take a drunken-driving evaluatory test and, because of this, she fell in with some dangerous characters—a kind of guru who made her think that what she did made no difference at all. Such were the fates of the heroes in ancient Greece: some perished under seven-gated Thebes, which was one battle; others died in Troy, fighting for Helen. These were the sons of gods and mortal women.

But it is not written how the others died: some by being constantly harassed, some by being picked at, some because the world around them was too great a place
and they were never meant for it. Anyway, the sons and daughters of gods and humans were never destined to be around for very long; my sister was a throwback to these earlier times. In ancient Greece the first race of man was made of gold, and they lived like gods without labor or pain, and did not suffer from old age, but they fell asleep in death. But I'm referring now to my sister. The race of the men of gold were hollow inside and easily bent and melted (245).

This exposition to “Ode to Heroine of the Future” is further evidence of Marley’s conviction that mythological archetypes have not at all lost their paradigmatic significance for the present. Marley presents Amaretta’s death as the inescapable result of an unhappy convergence of adverse circumstance. Increasingly entangled in an inextricable network of destructive forces, his sister cannot handle her life anymore and finally loses it. For Marley, her death illustrates her exceptionalness and links her to the demigods of antiquity. Yet, she is not like those heroes of the great Greek epics, who died for noble causes and under circumstances so extraordinary as to further emphasize their heroiness; Amaretta is a forgotten heroine, whose praise needs be sung by her brother. Nor does she resemble the men of gold, in their untroubled yet shallow and ultimately unsatisfactory paradisiacal existence. Amaretta lives in the decidedly post-paradisiacal world of the contemporary urban consumer society with all its problems and perils. Amaretta cannot escape these difficulties nor is she able to adapt to life in this society. Thus, not wholly from and in this world, she remains an ex-centric, an outcast who is doomed to fail in the end. Other-worldly misfit that she is, she falls victim at last to those social forces that want to coerce her to conform to the demands of the urban consumer society. Marley believes that his sister shares the ancient heroes’ and heroines’ indomitable will to power and excellence as well as their vulnerability—a combination that is bound to lead to failure, which, whether grandiose or pitiful, always has a tragic dimension.\footnote{Incidentally, Marley here adapts Hesiod’s account of the heroic age—the fourth of the five ages of mankind—to suit his needs. His change to the original source is significant. According to Hesiod the fate of those heroes who did not die in the great battles is quite well-known.}
In the course of the story, Marley’s portrayal of his sister amidst her sordid entourage and her episode of her “lesbian experience” illustrate this notion of a heroine of the future. Marley meets his sister Amaretta in a bar where she is encircled by a group of sleazy individuals—her French boyfriend, who is a rock musician well past his prime, and a couple of German drug dealers. Marley strongly feels that, just like he himself, Amaretta stands out from this repulsive crowd. It is an observation of some importance that, completely in line with his positive view of his own marginal social position, Marley interprets her sister’s status outside the community not as a weakness but as a position of power.

Even as a mess, my sister was beautiful: I was bereaved at how badly I had treated her most of my life: Those clear eyes which nothing could muck up—like the color of the Caribbean in a National Geographic magazine photo. And that smell of raspberries she had always about her, raspberries in a field on a hot summer day. With some bees flying about: these represented her thoughts, random to others, but making sense to herself. Even in a scruffy leather jacket she looked fine—like a great lioness after a feed, basking with a bloodstained mouth.

One of the Germans brought another drink for my sister. She drank it in one gulp: something of a gold-cream color, maybe it was sherry, but I doubted it. They were all giggling in shrill French that lapsed into German, and they were all highly decorated, in a primitive way: gold clankers and leopard-skin boots and ’gator belts. And fur coats, so I guess they were doing all right (250).

Though in very poor shape (247f), Amaretta’s strength, her superiority, and, indeed, her majesty are immediately visible to her brother. Particularly, when contrasted with the surrounding crowd of shady characters, who depend on exaggerated, vulgar decoration to achieve a mere resemblance of nobility, Amaretta’s natural nobility and aristocracy shine all the more brightly to her brother. However, she does not only rank infinitely far above the cheap lot she deigns to talk to. To Marley, she is also socially isolated from these people because she is incapable of really communicating.

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[T]o the others father Zeus the son of Cronos gave a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the ends of earth. And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them (5)…. And these last equally have honour and glory (in Gantz 1993).

The thrust of Marley’s argument is clear: In contrast to the surviving heroes of antiquity, the modern and future heroes of today cannot withdraw from society. There are no “islands of the blessed” anymore, there is no earthly paradise where to retreat from the pressures and forces of the urban consumer society.
her thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, her thought patterns remain incomprehensible
to the surrounding group as the image of the bees together with the men’s foreign
gibberish suggests. Like the humorous episode of the failed drunken-driving
evaluatory test (248), the scene is sad proof to Marley that, despite his sister’s
superiority, her isolation makes her vulnerable and prone to ridicule and abuse by the
mob.

To Marley, Amaretta’s story of the “lesbian experience” (250) she once had,
which takes up the better part of “Ode to Heroine of the Future,” further corroborates
his view of her special position vis-à-vis the rest of society. Amaretta relates how,
wandering the streets alone one night, she decided on a whim to enter a lesbian bar.
To her own amazement, she allowed herself to be picked up by a much older and
apparently frustrated “real old-school dyke” (254) and followed her home. Egged on
by a nagging voice inside her head (255), she seized the initiative and actually
derived a kind of detached, cynical pleasure from watching “Dykey” (256) abandon
herself to the ecstasy of the moment. Amaretta then tells her gaping audience that she
next stuck her burning cigarette into the woman’s side and quickly left her stunned
victim (257). Amidst her listeners’ mischievous laughter, she adds with a giggle that
the woman has been following her puppyishly ever since (258).

Marley is disgusted with his sister’s behavior, yet Amaretta’s coda to her
story makes him pause: “It was like a joke to me, undressing this big quivering horse,
while she moaned with pleasure. I was like a goddess mucking about with a mortal, I
knew what it was like to have power, but it left a nasty taste in my mouth, coming too
easily” (258). Like an ancient goddess, Amaretta delights in the show of power
even if it may take the form of gratuitous violence. Marley cannot close his eyes
before the truth that his sister’s sense of superiority to her environment quite
inevitably tempts her to exercise that power for its own sake. This is an impulse he
also knows in himself (e.g. 140f). He realizes that this will to exercise power, even if only for its own sake, makes gods and heroes. In a way, Marley’s conclusion may be understood as a late confirmation of sorts of Gloucester’s dejected exclamation, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport” (King Lear, IV.1).

To summarize the principal elements of Marley’s idea of a heroism of the future: While he concedes that the gods and heroes of antiquity are tired-out and have relinquished their ideals to the competitive market of the consumer society of today, Marley emphatically insists that the concepts of individual uniqueness, greatness and accomplishment have lost none of their validity and are still worth pursuing, perhaps even more so than ever before. This conviction is rooted in classical mythology and is the foundation of his vision of a heroism of the future. Marley looks upon heroes and heroines as the incarnations of divine excellence and greatness within the frailty of human nature. They are mediators and meddlers, reminding and assuring mortals of the dominion of the divine. They are, in a word, the Olympian promise become flesh that humankind is not alone. And even the inevitable failure of this perishable union of the divine and the human—which, of course, has its cause in the “excentricity” of these demigods, in their being social misfits—does not diminish the potency of this emblem of hope but rather lends it a fitting tragic grandeur.

Thus, far from abandoning the ideal of heroism, Marley revises it and adapts it to the present. His particular brand of heroism is not reserved for the nobility, nor does it require social recognition. Rather it has become a synonym of the individual’s unconditional will, commitment, and ability to achieve something extraordinary, something that sets one apart from the mass. Marley believes that, like their ancient predecessors, the heroes and heroines of the future are committed to excellence in the face of mediocrity; they are passionately individualistic despite overpowering

111 When Marley compares Amaretta to a lioness after the kill, he may actually be
pressures towards uniformity and conformity in the consumer society; and they are prepared to show and even indulge in their power. This feeling of being unique and possessing innate grandeur fills them with a deep sense of superiority and makes them incapable of identifying with their social environment. Thus, they are forced to lead marginal existences, to live on the fringes of society.

Their precarious but freely accepted position on the social fringe allows the heroes and heroines of the future to maintain a critically detached view and to develop an antagonistic vision of the middle-class values in the contemporary consumer society. This critical attitude is an essential element of their heroism even as it contributes to their inevitable fall. Like the ancient heroes they attempt to emulate, they fail because they are other-worldly misfits or “ex-centric” that are ultimately unable to adapt to life in the consumer society. This inability to fit in, their antagonism and their hubris—all of which they share with their classical idols and which links them back to the Arestitolian hero—are the causes of their fall.

Unlike the figure of the ambivalent ex-centric, who routinely appears in Janowitz’s fiction, the voluntarily ex-centric individual is not frequently encountered in her oeuvre. In fact, outside the “Marley”-stories, the notions of voluntary ex-centricity and future heroism are developed in some detail only in “Modern Saint #271,” the self-portrait of a twentyish prostitute, which opens the collection. Much like Marley, the young protagonist-narrator of “Modern Saint #271” regards herself as an ex-centric. She defines herself in contradistinction to those people who hold the power in this society and to the values they represent. “[I] could never accept the role life had assigned to me” (4), she declares. Specifically, she develops a self-image that crucially depends on her position vis-à-vis the men in her environment thinking of Artemis, the goddess of hunt.
and the middle-class values they stand for. These are the main points of reference for her views about herself and society. It is significant that she takes pride and indulges in her ex-centricity. This fundamentally distinguishes her—as well as Marley and his sister—from those forced into marginality discussed below. Like Marley, who regards his marginal social status as an advantage, the young woman sees the chance of self-realization and a unified sense of self on the fringes of society only.

In this “modern saint”, then, Janowitz has created another character who embodies the concept of future heroism, which is here enhanced by the aspect of altruism and social responsibility. The protagonist of “Modern Saint #271” resembles Marley and his sister in her passionate commitment to individuality and outstanding accomplishment in the face of a consumer society in which pressures toward conformity and mediocrity appear to mock all such visions. These voluntary ex-centricics embody the qualities that Janowitz is most attracted to in a character: “For my own work, I look for the energy in somebody who can’t stop himself, who’s going on in a most intense, insane, extreme fashion” (cited in Schumacher 1988: 220). In this respect, it is tempting to compare Janowitz’s “future heroes” and “modern saints” to the “absurd hero” in contemporary American fiction. In his study of Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger, David Galloway outlines the evolution of the absurd hero:

The first step in the development consists in the individual’s shocking recognition of the apparent meaninglessness of the universe. The second step consists in the absurd man’s living the now apparent conflict between his intention (his inner voice) and the reality which he will encounter; the third step consists in his assumption of heroic dimensions through living the conflict and making it his god (Galloway 1971: 16).

Janowitz makes clear that her characters are equally imprisoned in the absurdity of their lives and, pursuing heroic visions, struggle to escape it with all their might. Yet, what sets them apart from the absurd heroes is that they do not possess an awareness of this absurdity. Marley, to take the obvious example, does not perceive a conflict.

The author emphasizes that the protagonist is an ex-centric many times over: She is a Jew, a social drop-out, a woman, a prostitute, a former psychiatric patient, and a self-
between intention and reality. Ultimately, the voluntary ex-centricics in Janowitz—
Marley Mantello, his sister, the modern saint—cannot really transcend their lives and
thus develop a self-critical view of their actions within an absurd world.

Janowitz’s outline of voluntary ex-centricity is, of course, totally unthinkable
within Bret Easton Ellis’s fictional universe. As will be shown in Chapter Six, the
light stirrings of an ethical conscience that may be observed in Clay, the youthful
protagonist of Ellis’s first novel, are the most extreme manifestation of an
antagonistic position encountered anywhere in Ellis’s oeuvre. It will be argued that,
indeed, the main thrust of Ellis’s work is that under the conditions of a tremendously
affluent, extremely permissive urban consumer society, it is virtually impossible to
voluntarily occupy an ex-centric, critical position. In short, after self-consciously,
uncertainly even, deliberating in his debut, Ellis confidently proceeds in
conventional postmodernist fashion, arguing that the individual is “always already”
implicated in the levelling discourses of consumer capitalism.

In its brazen self-confidence Marley’s assertion of his marginal position is
also alien to Jay McInerney’s characters. As the discussions of McInerney’s urban
novels will demonstrate, his protagonists share or gradually acquire (Russell in
Brightness Falls) a sense of critical detachment to what they must confess is their
ostensible participation in the mainstream culture of the urban consumer society.
Even McInerney’s “renegade-artist”-type characters—Jeff in Brightness Falls, Will
in The Last of the Savages—must recognize that they are inevitably implicated in the
culture they oppose. In McInerney’s fictional world, an unwillingness or inability to
acknowledge this implication—as in Alison of Story of My Life or in Jeff—is
tantamount to failure, while acceptance means salvation (Corrine in Brightness
Falls).

declared saint. Interestingly, Marley, too, likes to think of himself as a saint (143).
5.2.4 A Spenglerian View

To summarize Marley’s cultural critique, one may say that he discerns a cultural decline and identifies three causes. These are, first, the general lack of potential of personal development; secondly, people’s inability to step out of the role imposed on them by capitalist ideology; and thirdly, the limited powers of those engaged in the arts to contribute to cultural progress. Though original in form, Marley’s ideas on the state of urban culture in the United States in the 1980s are not new. Marley’s argument against the ideological indoctrination of the individual in the urban consumer society runs along the lines of traditional Marxist mass culture critique as advanced, for instance, by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School.

Marley’s blatant elitism, on the other hand, recalls the conservative mass culture critique advanced since the 1920s. Marley unabashedly considers himself as belonging to the cultural elite on whom society depends. More specifically, Marley’s views echo Oswald Spengler’s pessimistic and elitist theories in The Decline of the West (1922)—a study that, despite its enormous historical and cultural scope, clearly betrays the profound impression that World War I left on its author. As Marley’s extensive dependence on animal imagery illustrates, he has an organic view of culture quite similar to Spengler’s. Evidently, Marley regards a culture as an organism that goes through a life cycle with distinct developmental phases. All the evidence presented here suggests that Marley sees the urban consumer culture of New York in the 1980s as an instance of a culture in the “autumn” of its life cycle, to use Spengler’s analogy to the seasons of a year. Spengler calls the autumn in the developmental cycle of a culture its “Civilization.” Taking his cue from Nietzsche, he defines:

Transvaluation of all values is the most fundamental character of every civilization. For it is the beginning of a Civilization that it remoulds all the forms of the Culture

113 See pp. 85ff.
that went before, understands them otherwise, practises them in a different way. It
begets no more, but only reinterprets, and herein lies the negativeness common to all
period of this character. It assumes that the genuine act of creation has already
occurred, and merely enters upon an inheritance of big actualities (Spengler 1932:
415).

Marley’s overwhelming impression of living in a world that has ceased to develop
and that is now visibly degenerating with no one capable of halting its cultural
regress is essentially in line with Spengler’s pessimistic cultural diagnosis.

Marley’s call for a rediscovery of genuine heroism naturally develops from
his Spenglerian description of life in Manhattan as a culture in decline, as a culture in
its “autumn”. In accordance with his Spenglerian diagnosis, Marley shapes his ideas
of such a brighter future on a model that may be regarded as the epitome of the high
phase or “the summer” of western culture to use Spengler’s analogy: the Italian
Renaissance. With his demand, he joins contemporary critics in the often-heard
lamentation over the decline of greatness and excellence and in their diatribe against
leveling and mediocrity in what they regard as the contemporary mass society. Note,
for instance, the striking parallels to Allan Bloom’s best-selling The Closing of the
American Mind (1987). Bloom writes:

A man who can generate visions of a cosmos and ideals by which to live is a genius, a
mysterious, demonic being. Such a man’s greatest work of art is himself. He who can
take his person, a chaos of impressions and desires, a thing whose very unity is
doubtful, and give it order and unity, is a personality. All of this results from the free
activity of his spirit and his will. He contains in himself the elements of the legislator
and the prophet, and has a deeper grasp of the true character of things than the
contemplatives, philosophers, and scientists, who take the given order as permanent
and fail to understand man. Such is the restoration of the ancient greatness of man
against scientific egalitarianism. . . (Bloom 1987: 181).

Despite Bloom’s scholarly elevated style, the similarities between Bloom and Marley
are striking. Bloom’s argument turns on the same key terms as Marley’s. He
advocates genius, personality, and ancient greatness, and angrily does away with the
idea of unconquerable chaos. A determined will, Bloom asserts, that looks up to the
“Great Works” of the past for knowledge and guidance will undoubtedly find a way
out of the present predicament. Marley expresses a similar, conservative and elitist
conviction.
5.3 Forced into Ex-centricity: Victims of the Consumer Society

In a number of stories in this collection, Janowitz is also concerned with the indisputable victims of the consumer society. Unlike the voluntary ex-centric (Marley, his sister, the modern saint), this third group of characters does not choose to live on the fringes of society so as to avoid contamination and get a better view of this society. Nor is their outsider status a consequence of their ambivalent attitude toward this society (Eleanor, Pamela in *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*). These victims embrace the values of the urban consumer society but are forced ex-centricics because they have been relegated to the social margins against their will. Linda Hutcheon observes, “The ex-centric, the off-center is ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied” (1988: 60).

The analysis of Janowitz’s study of forced ex-centricity will concentrate on those stories in which the author emphasizes these individual’s involuntary marginal social positions by characterizing them as patients.114 The short vignette “Lunch Involuntary” features such a figure. Here the ex-centricity of the nameless and sexless protagonist is additionally emphasized by the fact that he or she lives in a clinic. The protagonist is a psychiatric patient who cannot handle the change of routine at the food-serving counter in the dining-hall. His or her initial feeling of superiority to others (137) gradually gives way to a growing uncertainty because the food rations are becoming smaller for no apparent reason. Finally, the patient is devastated to find that his or her food coupons are not accepted at all anymore. In

114 In addition to the narratives discussed in the following, there are four other stories that treat the theme of forced ex-centricity. “You and the Boss” is a farce in which a woman does away with Bruce Springsteen’s wife and usurps her place at the side of the pop icon. Yet, as she finds out that the real “Boss” is a living all-American cliché, she is desperate to escape. “Snowball” features an art dealer who is gradually losing his grip upon his life as his economic and private problems mount. In “The New Acquaintances,” a young man who is entirely inconspicuous in every respect tries to impose himself on his environment but is basically ignored and bullied about by everybody. And finally, when a promising young artist with a strong penchant for sadist displays of male power encounters a woman who actually enjoys
this case, the patient’s self-confident sense of being unique and superior to the surrounding world crumbles before the tragic realization that he or she is being socially isolated and dumped.

Tama Janowitz chooses the form of the medical case history to present two other characters who have been forced into ex-centricity. The category of the “case history” establishes illness—in particular, mental illnesses—as the referential context within which to construe these figures. In “Case History #4: Fred,” a musician who cannot find work occasionally brightens up his wretched life by pretending to be a millionaire and inviting strange, young women to shop at Tiffany’s. After watching them peruse the jewelry, he makes up some excuse that will allow him to withdraw his offer. Then, safely back at home, Fred relives the experience: “He felt he had never been more aroused, more attuned to life, than he had been in that hour and a half in Tiffany’s. Yet obviously this was not normal” (56).

Fred’s bizarre behavior helps understand his position vis-à-vis the center of society. The famous jewelry store on Fifth Avenue is, of course, the highly clichéd epitome of New York high society and of consumerism and hedonism per se. In other words, it represents the center of power and culture in this urban consumer society. Thus, Fred's hoax may be interpreted as an affirmation of these values and as a desperate attempt to exercise the influence and power he does not possess in actual life (57). Simultaneously, his ruse is an act of revenge on the establishment for denying him access to these privileges. The author makes clear that Fred is a victim being abused and humiliated, his artistic and physical energies leave him, and he literally begins to shrink physically (“Kurt and Natasha, a Relationship”).

Incidentally, in The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group, Pamela briefly ponders the fate of another forced ex-centric: “Moe—a Case of Escape from Responsibility.” But in actual fact, were this case history laid out under a magnifying glass, what would be visible were the diverse lumps, unblenched, that had been used to form this entity like so many others” (Cross, 220).

This is also illustrated by an incidence in the story “Spells”. During of a visit to her doctor, Eleanor notices him writing “furiously on a pad: probably dialogue for some autobiographical best-seller he’s working on. ‘Chapter 23: The Case of Eleanor T’” (167). Incidentally, this funny allusion to Freud—the doctor is called Bartholdi and “has brooding
of the consumer society in a more profound way than he himself realizes. What may appear to him as a manifestation of his unique identity in the face of conformity, is merely a cliché. “This is like something out of the movies” (57), the first woman exclaims excitedly and may in fact be thinking of the film classic *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961).\(^{117}\) Evidently, even in this controversial act of practicing resistance against the center of the consumer society, Fred cannot escape the mass-produced and mass-mediated images this society showers him with.

“Case History #15: Melinda” is about a one-time dancer who had to give up her profession because of an accident and who is now holding a job in a bar while waiting for the chance of her lifetime at the theater. Melinda is an outsider whose habit to care for a menagerie of old and stray animals has completely estranged her from the world around her. Her romantic notions of love are bitterly disappointed by Chicho, a young man whom she takes into her apartment and falls in love with. On returning home from an extended stay in hospital—where she had to be admitted with a disease, for which, in fact, her protégé may have been responsible—, she finds him in bed with her best friend and the apartment emptied of all animals. “[I]t was . . . difficult to accept the fact that she had been betrayed by one of God’s creatures, but eventually she got a new bunch of crippled and stray dogs, forgot Chicho, and settled into her old ways, neither joyful nor despairing” (226). Melinda's imaginary world lies on the fringe of society, and, like the “modern saint’s” and Eleanor’s worlds, it is based on dependence. Only when she confuses dependence with love, she becomes dependent herself, and her world is in danger.

The awareness of her ex-centric position in the real world has led Melinda to construct an imaginary world around her of which she is the center. Quite vampire eyes and a strong smell of foreign aftershave” (166)—loosely links Janowitz’s “case histories” to the latter’s case studies.

\(^{117}\) Incidentally, “Fred” is the name Holly Golightly gives to her friend Paul because she can never remember his name.
unmistakably, the story bears close resemblance to *The Glass Menagerie*. There are a number of obvious parallels: Melinda’s handicap, her inability to establish intimate social relationships, her escape into the imaginary world of a menagerie of dependent animals, the interruption of her uneventful life by the homeless boy, and her eventual return to her old ways after the disturbance has subsided. All these correspondences make “Case History #15: Melinda” an updated production of Tennessee Williams’s play. In her modern version, Janowitz does away with the pathos and tragedy of the classic. What remains is an almost affectless reinscription of Williams’s passionate portrait of a victim of society. In the portrayals of ambivalent ex-centricity in the “Eleanor”-cycle and of voluntary ex-centricity in the “Marley”-cycle, the intensely personal and unique styles of the protagonist-narrators capture their conscious efforts to define their positions vis-à-vis the urban consumer society. By contrast, these “case histories” of forced ex-centricics are presented in a reportorial manner, which further underlines the wretchedness of their lives.

Janowitz’s forced ex-centricics differ from ambivalent and voluntary ones in the extent of their insight into their positions on the fringes of society and its causes. For the most part, they do not realize that their marginalization is only possible because they unquestioningly assume the subject roles cut out for them within the ideology of consumer capitalism. By pursuing happiness as defined in terms of this ideology, they make themselves dependent and vulnerable and become “Slaves of New York”. The sense of self in this third type of ex-centric is more endangered than in the other two. These individuals are least capable of formulating a self-image that is sufficiently independent from and protected against the influences of the consumer society.

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118 Interestingly, with a wistful glance at *The Glass Menagerie*, Eleanor laments the decline of pathos and tragic grandeur in contemporary society (cf. 128).
5.4  

**Eiron and Alazon in a Comedy of Manhattan in the 1980s**

This extended discussion of *Slaves of New York* has shown that Tama Janowitz has her artistic roots in minimal realism. Sketchy characterizations, limited settings, weak plotlines and the virtual absence of a historical dimension are sure signs of her provenience. Morally, too, she advocates an unjudgmental attitude in the fiction writer that is in line with this literature. Commenting on the genesis of the stories in *Slaves of New York*, Janowitz states, “I don’t feel that it was my job to be in any kind of moral position of passing judgment on what I was witnessing. I simply was there as a reporter, to say that this is how it is to live in this particular time and place” (in Schumacher 1988. 221). However, the analysis has revealed an unmistakable critical impetus in her writing. In fact, the cultural critique Janowitz exercises—even though it is obscured, in typically postmodernist fashion, behind multiple layers of self-conscious parody—is distinct and quite alien to minimal realism. Looking at *Slaves of New York* as a whole, one realizes that the author aims for a careful balance of ambivalently and voluntarily ex-centric narrative perspectives on life in the urban consumer society and sets them—to twist Studs Terkel’s title—against a background of assorted, mostly clichéd American dreams, lost but not found.

It is evident from the start that in the “Eleanor”-stories Janowitz approaches the theme of identity in postmodern society from a point of view that is radically different from Marley’s brazenly self-assertive outlook. As has been demonstrated in the course of this chapter, Eleanor and Marley stand at opposite ends of a continuum between self-consciousness and self-confidence, between self-effacement and self-assertion. In contrast to Marley, who revels in his ex-centricity, Eleanor registers her outsider position in the art community with great distress. She wants to be swept up in this world yet knows that she does not belong. In her ambivalent ex-centricity, Eleanor’s is the perspective of a “normal” member of the urban consumer society who possesses “all the regular human qualities—an unlimited capacity for suffering, and spending money” (241). She is the commonsensical, unaffected, and essentially
down-to-earth woman who can stubbornly assert: “Everybody's strange or weird around here, but I'm not. I know the difference” (264). Through Eleanor's engrossing voice—which essentially recurs in the self-conscious protagonist-narrator of *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*—Janowitz invites the reader to identify with her views. In her impotent outrage over the absurdities and injustices of life in Manhattan, in her bafflement at its frantic pointlessness, in her acid derision of a hyped-up, epigonistic art scene, the reader may recognize her or his own sentiments and even enjoy a secret complicity with the author behind these stories.

By comparison, Marley's voice works in a totally different way. Within the overall design of the book, Marley has been assigned the role of the court jester: The extensive analysis of the megalomaniac artist’s self-image and view of society strongly suggests that the author has created this figure to evoke in satiric fashion the traditional genre of the *künstlerroman* and to lampoon the stereotype of the artist-genius. Of course, making the protagonist-narrator of the “Marley”-stories a ludicrously exaggerated type rather than a complex character must be regarded as a strategic choice on the author's part. Marley's unwitting self-irony exposes him to ridicule even as he exercises a powerful, valid critique. Janowitz provokes and joins her readership's amusement over a publicity-crazy, hopelessly self-inflated art world. She does this by according her protagonist-narrator the role of the court jester, the graciously tolerated ex-centric whose “foolish” wisdom time and again catches the other characters and the reader off-guard. His grotesqueness and pompousness are the mask that Janowitz dons to launch her own, quite conservative and rather pessimistic critique of this segment of the urban consumer society. Tama Janowitz

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119 The narrative perspective of a megalomaniac appears to have held Janowitz's interest for quite some time. Reportedly, an earlier, unpublished manuscript of hers was entitled "Memoirs of a Megalomaniac" (Kaye 1988: 178). As a matter of fact, Marley unites all the clichés that constitute this stereotype. He calls himself a genius and expects to lead a short, intense, and tragic life like Van Gogh (46) or Raphael (221). Like the proverbial “starving artist,” Marley is so absolutely committed to his lofty artistic goals that he feels he has no time or use for earthly matters. His superior sense of leading an ex-centric, highly
examines the status and function of art in the contemporary urban consumer society. In particular, she concentrates on New York’s dilemma: The city enjoys a high reputation as a cultural well-spring and is one of the most powerful cultural marketplaces—two functions that do not easily go together (see e.g. Zukin 1993: 284). She suggests that in this market-oriented climate there remains neither room nor time for the self-reflection on which art vitally depends. Against so much self-centeredness and indifference, Janowitz pits commitment and missionary zeal. Through the grotesque mask of her court jester, the hopelessly overbearing, self-declared genius Marley Mantello, she makes a passionate plea for individuality and for the will to greatness.

The tension between these two main narrative perspectives in *Slaves of New York* adds to the comedy and depth of the book. Specifically, the interplay of these two voices calls to mind the relationship of the *alazon* and the *eiron* in classical Greek comedy. In addition to the *bomolochos* (buffoon), the standard plot of this comedy contains the *alazon*, who is “the impostor and self-deceiving braggart”, and the *eiron*, “the self-deprecatory and understating character, whose contest with the alazon is central to the comic plot” (Abrams 1981: 185). Pursuing this comparison, one may conclude that, from the reader’s point of view, the insights offered by the *alazon* Marley and the observations made by the *eiron* Eleanor mutually enrich each other. The result is a more complex, more balanced picture of the mores and manners individualistic existence on the margin of the urban consumer society completes the stereotypical image of the artist-genius.

Incidentally, in a recent essay Janowitz takes a calmer yet equally critical view of the New York art scene in the early 1980s:

It was easy for me to be disparaging about the realm of art that I inhabited. Whether or not anybody could paint I didn’t know. It wasn’t just that the work seemed banal, simplistic, pathetic cries for attention, rip-offs of commercial imagery from popular culture, art history books, a European tradition, television cartoons and product design—beneath the lack of originality there seemed to be no real strength or compulsion, the work did not have the purity of force that I had come to associate with what I considered to be great art. I had the feeling that each painting was something completed to obtain a gallery or for an exhibition. […] The young male artists had flooded the city streets and had come to the city not in the hopes of being artists but in the hope of making money and being famous (Janowitz 2002: 175).
5.5 The Author’s Public Persona as a Means of Opening Up the Literary Work

As an author who understands how to get herself into the pages of glossy magazines, Tama Janowitz reminds one of Dorothy Parker. A founding member of the influential Algonquin Round Table in the 1920s, Parker made a name for herself as an insightful and acerbic critic and writer and a woman-about-town. In some ways, the chief female protagonists of Janowitz’s urban fiction in the 1980s—Eleanor and Pamela Trowel—even quarrel with the same kind of male-dominated society as the protagonist of Parker’s semi-autobiographical “Big Blonde” (1929), who grows weary of being a “good sport” to the men in her life.

In her own time, Tama Janowitz’s quick-witted and generally light-hearted social commentary is reminiscent of Fran Lebowitz’s Metropolitan Life (1978) (see Sheppard 1986: 81). Janowitz has further underpinned her reputation as an astute and witty observer of New York ex-centricities by the recently published collection of essays Area Code 212: New York Days, New York Night (2002). It is a telling coincidence that Andy Warhol was instrumental in launching both women’s careers. Warhol’s impact on Janowitz’s writing is palpable throughout her fiction both in the choice of subject and the manner of representation. An excerpt from The Philosophy of Andy Warhol may illustrate this point:

This is when I started realizing how insane people can be. For example, one girl moved into the elevator and wouldn't leave for a week until they refused to bring her any more Cokes. I didn't know what to make of the whole scene. Since I was paying the rent for the studio, I guessed that this somehow was actually my scene, but don't ask me what it was all about, because I never could figure it out (Warhol 1975: 24)

Some episodes in the “Eleanor”-stories and in The Male Cross-Dresser Support...
Group follow the same pattern: A bizarre, inconsequential scene is related in a perfectly straightfaced fashion. Narrator and reader alike are left baffled, wondering what the point was. Meanwhile the narrative has passed on to the next seeming triviality. As has often been noted, Janowitz’s promotion of her own person perhaps most clearly reflects Warhol’s influence on her, recalling “superstars” of the 1960s and 1970s such as Edie Sedgwick. Even a cursory look at the immense publicity surrounding Tama Janowitz and her books in the 1980s makes clear that the ongoing changes in the publishing industry as outlined above strongly reflect in the author and her work. As will be argued in the following, Tama Janowitz demonstrates ways in which these developments may be used to open up new aesthetic possibilities for the artist who is ready to creatively engage the culture-industrial machinery.

In a further parallel to Andy Warhol, Tama Janowitz may be said to model her public figure in such a way as to interact with her prose. As has been examined in detail, the majority of the stories collected in Janowitz’s Slaves of New York depict the tragicomical attempts of two young, quirky artists to promote and establish themselves in the glamorous art scene of the East Village. The trials and tribulations of her fictional characters are paralleled by Janowitz’s own extravagant efforts to promote herself, which have found a wide forum in the same publications that also printed her fiction. Consequently, her media-oriented lifestyle has been most lavishly covered, even earning her an appearance in a liquor advertisement as well as in the first “literary” video—alongside Andy Warhol—, which was produced and aired by MTV (Sheppard 1987: 79). An Esquire feature, whose title, “Fifteen Minutes over SoHo: Can Tama Janowitz Beat the Fame Clock?,” evokes Warhol’s facetious estimation of the average life-span of a celebrity, offers a detailed account of

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121 Of course, this interrelationship between the author’s persona and his work was also important in earlier writers such as Fitzgerald and Hemingway. About the latter, Edmund Wilson wrote that he was “certainly the worst-invented character to be found in the author’s work” (in McQuade 1987: 1701).
Janowitz’s self-promotional capers (Kaye 1988). The article presents and further inscribes a high-profile, public image of the author that closely matches Eleanor. The impression conveyed is one of an unconventional, hard-working, aspiring artist who doggedly and with an uneasy mixture of self-effacement and self-promotion searches for a niche in a world that is as unreal to her as it is fascinating. The essay suggests that, like Eleanor in the stories—or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, which provides the motto for the collection—, Janowitz herself is an ambivalent ex-centric, equally attracted and disturbed by the lures of a wondrous world.

The evidence presented here leaves no doubt that the author’s public persona is orchestrated to resemble and complement her fictional characters. It goes without saying that only the most tenuous of links connects this simulacrum of individual identity to the actual person it purportedly represents. Significantly, Janowitz contributes to the further blurring of the fine demarcation line between the author who draws on her own experiences and the fictional characters she creates. For example, the film version of *Slaves of New York*, written by Janowitz, features a walk-on appearance by herself as one of the minor characters (Ivory 1989).

In *A Cannibal in Manhattan*, which Janowitz has dedicated to Warhol, she goes one step further. In addition to a map of the imaginary South Seas island where the unlikely hero Mgungu Mgungu comes from and to a number of drawings which facetiously evoke the genre of a geographic and ethnographic travelogue, the author includes photo shoots of dramatic reenactments of some of the scenes in the book. Tama Janowitz herself and her artist friends—among them Girard Basquiat, Paige Powell, and the late Andy Warhol—pose for these photos. Janowitz claims to have gleaned the idea for this trick from true-crime books with their inevitable “scene of the crime” photographs (Schumacher 1988: 229), adding, “I’m surprised that

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nobody’s thought of doing this with fiction when, in this day and age, it’s a totally visual society, with TV and MTV and people going to the movies” (cited in Schumacher 1988: 230). These photographs may be regarded as another effort of Janowitz’s to blur the line between fact and fiction. If the fiction is on purpose too fantastic to be credible then, so she seems to be suggesting, reality is equally bizarre and improbable. This brief sketch may suffice to illustrate how the author helps create a public persona for herself that must be understood as an extension of her fictional characters or vice versa.

As may be expected, Janowitz’s public pose and engagement of her role as a literary celebrity have incited the wrath of the cultural establishment (Kaye 1988: 180f). Of course, their aggravated outcries about such self-promotion (e.g. Menand 1988: 31) have only served to enhance the writer’s notoriety, thus promoting the very phenomenon they hoped to contain. What is happening here is not a simple displacement of the narrative text by the author-celebrity as critics like James B. Twitchell fear, nor is it enough to lament the instrumentalization of the actual writer by the industry. In effect, Janowitz and her peers may be said to be continuing the unfinished project of the historical avant-garde to strive towards the sublation of autonomous art. They demonstrate that their art is produced and works within the institutional constraints of the culture industries. In other words, Tama Janowitz and her fellow “brat-packers” employ their public personae to draw attention to the

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Incidentally, one photo of Janowitz is captioned “A cannibal in Manhattan” (Kaye, 172) and another “A Slave of New York with Andy Warhol” (Kaye, 176).

See Bürger (1984), especially chapter 3. Bürger himself cautions: “The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life. This has not occurred, and presumably cannot occur, in bourgeois society unless it be as a false sublation of autonomous art. Pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics prove that such a false sublation exists. A literature whose primary aim it is to impose a particular consumer behavior on the reader is in fact practical, though not in the sense the avant-gardistes intended. […] In late capitalist society, intentions of the historical avant-garde are being realized but the result has been a disvalue. Given the experience of the false sublation of autonomy, one will need to ask whether a sublation of the autonomy status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable” (Bürger 1984: 53f).
profound political and aesthetic implications of the commodification of literature.

The critic Graham Caveney presses this point:

It is . . . ironic in these post-Warholian days that McInerney, Ellis and Janowitz should be attacked for their status as celebrities. It is almost as though the mass media age should not be seen to intrude upon the writer: everyone else can be made into an icon, read as texts or transformed into the public sphere, but our writers should still starve in garrets, untainted by the media glare. Again, this is an expectation based on Romantic individualism, a hangover from our pasts that McInerney & Co. refuse to accept as being valid for our present. What needs to be thought through about these writers is the critical implications of their relationship to the media, the ways in which their positions as literary socialites has worked as a para-text to their fiction. The intersections of the writers’ lives and that of their characters has been located in the nightclubs, in their sexuality, speculations about their drug use, and cynical responses to their mutual self-promotion. [. . .] Rather than dismissing their work because of their public profiles, it is necessary to look at how the conflation of these two elements works as a new and often productive model of literary relations (Caveney in Young and Caveney 1992: 45).

Indeed, with a view to the aesthetic issues involved here, one may argue that this peculiar interplay of the author’s public persona and the narrative text indicates a basic reconception of the relationship between artist and work in the manner sketched above. It is, therefore, much more to the point to insist that, in writers like Tama Janowitz—and, less clearly, less radically, in Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney—, the public persona of the artist now begins to demand attention as a text in its own right. As a matter of fact, here a concept is being introduced into the realm of “serious” literary art that has all along been the common fare in the entertainment industries as well as in the fine arts: the erasure of the distinction between the work and the artist.125

Along with the disappearance of this traditional distinction, other beliefs of modernism previously held to be sacrosanct are being undermined through such practices. Among the casualties are such cherished dichotomies as those between fact and fiction, between authenticity and artificiality, between high culture and mass culture, and between cultural production and cultural marketing. In more ways than one, then, one may extend Stephanie Girard’s concept of “betweenness” (1996) to

125 The “work-artist” dichotomy has been challenged repeatedly since the performances of surrealists and dadaists. The happenings of the 1960s and the performance art
Tama Janowitz and her fiction. If one pursues this line of thought, *Slaves of New York* or *A Cannibal in Manhattan* become points of departure and reference for a more comprehensive reading of Janowitz’s art. In this sense, the original book is not a finished work of fiction but rather a work whose offering of meaning is engaged and enhanced by the author. The emerging, more “open work” possesses new complex aesthetic structures and gives rise to meanings and pleasures that are not wholly determined by the work of fiction alone.\(^{126}\)

In the end, the question that remains to be answered is whether an artist who so actively and constructively engages her inevitable implication in the culture-industrial machinery as Tama Janowitz can preserve her artistic integrity. She certainly recognizes her difficult position. In her trademark fashion she acknowledges,

> I mean, if a serious writer is supposed to be somebody who sits at home with little glasses, I mean forget it, I'll put on a tutu and go out to a nightclub. I mean, why can't I be a serious writer and still do the other stuff? It's like you're supposed to be one thing or the other, but you aren't supposed to mix them” (Kaye 1988: 182).

Her principal means by which she signals her awareness of this predicament is that of

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of the 1970s and 1980s also worked at the erosion of this traditional division. For details see e.g. Almhofer (1986), esp. pp. 12-33.

\(^{126}\) Unfortunately, within the scope and design of the present study, it is impossible to follow the path indicated here. Suffice it to hint at some of the resultant methodological problems for the literary scholar. These problems arise from the fact that traditional literary criticism is grounded in the “modernist literary paradigm” (s. p. 83). Within this paradigm, as Antony Easthope puts it succinctly, “The literary text is treated not as transitive but as intransitive; not, that is, as an act of communication seeking to transform a situation but rather as a self-sufficient object, not as means to an end but as an end in itself. [. . . ] [T]he text has become static and an object for analysis, a ‘verbal icon’. . . ” (Easthope 1991: 16). By comparison to such “verbal icons”, the above sketch of the interaction between Janowitz’s book and her public persona illustrates that here the literary text need not be seen as a finite, autonomous entity. The text can be regarded as incomplete, as transitive rather than intransitive.

But this means that the established analytical methods must be examined with regard to their applicability to this new, unwieldy literary product. For literary analysis this means that the narrative text is aesthetically and thematically enhanced if seen in connection to the author’s interventions. What is needed to investigate the interrelations of the literary text and the author’s persona is a new analytical approach that recognizes the specific properties of such an “open work.” A solution may be found in the direction indicated by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*, which has been sketched above (s. p. 84). Even though Janowitz or any of her contemporaries discussed in this study do not have an artistic capacity or an agenda comparable to that of the artists that Eco discusses, his “poetics of the open work” may prove useful in the analysis of such works as *Slaves of New York* or *A Cannibal in Manhattan*
parody. Surely, parody—of styles, of genres, of individual works, of herself—is central to Janowitz’s approach. This, too, links her to her mentor Andy Warhol. The evidence presented and discussed here suggests that, with regard to the political intent of her parody, it appears justified to argue that she manages to establish a critical position towards her material and that her parody is subversive. Although Janowitz is by no means a radical, she manages to preserve a certain critical detachment. Her precariously dangerous project—that of preserving her personal and artistic integrity while simultaneously acknowledging her implication in the commodification of her work—is nowhere more plainly visible than in the way she employs her public persona.

because Janowitz evidently inscribed an openness and ambiguity into the texts of her books and her public persona.

127 See, for instance, the discussion of her appropriation of feminist issues on pp. 105ff.
A New Narcissus: *Less Than Zero*

“It is my contention that Ellis has been writing the same novel in various forms because he is a ‘one-trick’ writer,” a recent critic notes (Grimshaw 2002). Though somewhat disparaging, this remark is in fact a significant observation because it draws attention to a main characteristic of the author’s agenda. Ellis’s oeuvre to date is impressive evidence of his almost monomaniac preoccupation with the self in the contemporary urban consumer society. Quite clearly, ever since the Bennington writing student found his subject, his theme, and his voice in his first novel, the author has firmly held on to them. After *Less Than Zero*, there has been no major departure from this agenda. Instead, the author has focused all energies on the refinement and radicalization of the ideas and techniques already introduced in his first novel. In the course of the analysis it will be demonstrated that Ellis has basically stayed within the narrow narrative terrain staked out in *Less Than Zero* and has since charted it over and over again, perfecting his analytical tools and emerging with evermore radical results. While this intent and strategy has earned him a lot of bad press from fast-writing reviewers, it also sets Ellis apart from his contemporaries and has helped establish him as a major literary analyst of urban life in the late-twentieth century consumer society.

Bret Easton Ellis’s debut novel *Less Than Zero* (1985) introduces the “New Narcissus,”¹²⁸ the type of character whose personality the author dissects in all of his books. Ellis’s first novel portrays the hedonistic culture of the adolescent offspring of the super-rich among the Hollywood film community. Left to their own devices, the young people of this social set indulge in all kinds of excess in their ceaseless search for pleasure. Mostly, their lives revolve around casual sex, the liberal use of drugs, gratuitous violence, the copious consumption of mass entertainment, excessive partying, and a narcissistic body cult.

¹²⁸ The term has been borrowed from Christopher Lasch (1978: 91).
The Family as a Crumbling, Hollow Shell

Eighteen-year-old Clay, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, returns home from college for a Christmas vacation of one month after a four-months’ absence. Clay’s difficulties to readjust at home—his family life is empty; the tense relationship to Blair awaits a decision; his long-time buddy Julian is a heroin-addict and prostitutes himself to finance his habit and lifestyle—are the central problems around which the loosely structured plot revolves.

6.1 The Family as a Crumbling, Hollow Shell

Clay is acutely conscious of the advanced state of disintegration of his own family and the families around him. Above all, the profound fear of intimacy that goes along with the all-pervading consumerism appears to make it next to impossible to engage in familial relationships that could give meaning and create a sense of fulfillment and security in the lives of the people in Clay’s world. The central significance of this theme to Clay’s view of his social environment is clear from the force with which Blair’s casual observation that “people are afraid to merge” reverberates in his mind and becomes a leitmotif of his account (9, 10, 12, 26, 66, 183).

Symptomatic of the way mother and son communicate is their first scene together:

My mother and I are sitting in a restaurant on Melrose, and she’s drinking white wine and still has her sunglasses on and she keeps touching her hair and I keep looking at my hands, pretty sure that they’re shaking. She tries to smile when she asks me what I want for Christmas. I’m surprised at how much effort it takes to raise my head up and look at her.

“You look unhappy,” I say.

She says nothing for a long time and I look back at my hands and she sips her wine. “I don’t know. I just want to have a nice Christmas.”

“I don’t say anything.

“You look unhappy,” she says real suddenly.

“I’m not,” I tell her.

“You look unhappy,” she says, more quietly this time. She touches her hair, bleached, blondish, again.

“You do too,” I say, hoping that she won’t say anything else.

In his meticulously researched study of the novel, Horst Steur reconstructs the presumable temporal setting of the narrative on the basis of textual evidence. He concludes that Clay returns home on Monday, 17 December 1984, and stays for four to five weeks (Steur 1995: 43).
She doesn’t say anything else, until she’s finished her third glass of wine and 
poured her fourth (18).

Though ostensibly their first private encounter after a separation of four months, this 
meeting takes place only on the second day of Clay’s vacation because his mother 
failed to be at home upon her son’s return (10). At first sight, this fact may be 
understood as an instance of the parental neglect that Clay so often finds in his own 
family and in the families of his friends. For Clay it is also a significant indication of 
his mother’s inability to relate to him. In this context it is a meaningful detail that 
mother and son are having this presumably first private conversation not at home but 
in a public place. Their choice of locale illustrates the fear of intimacy they share. 
The restaurant affords them with a reassuringly formal and impersonal atmosphere. 
Moreover, the code of conduct generally observed in a restaurant requires that 
appearances be kept up. In this way the dreaded intimacy and show of feeling are 
discouraged. Evidently, Clay and his mother do not seek closeness as this might give 
rise to emotional distress or might force them to actually respond to the other’s 
wishes and concerns. 

These conclusions are fully borne out by the characters’ behavior. The 
mother’s boozing, her stylized, affected gestures and the sunglasses she does not 
remove are essentially mirrored in Clay’s own preoccupation with his hands. These 
signs of a nervous insecurity and of an inability and unwillingness to communicate 
are also in evidence in the dialogue itself. The utterances are as scarce and terse as 
the silences are long and oppressive—which is especially notable in view of how 
long mother and son were separated. When his mother half-heartedly attempts to 
abandon the trite topic of Christmas presents—an unmistakable sign of the 
consumption-orientation of Christmas—and move on to a more personal and 
substantial level of communication, Clay thwarts such weak intentions. His 
stubbornly recalcitrant answer bluntly wards off any undesired and suspicious
exhibitions of motherly care. However, his rebuke evidences more than mere adolescent touchiness. Clay clearly recognizes that his mother’s overt interest in his feelings is also a kind of reproach. He realizes that, by allowing himself to look unhappy, he is violating the code of conduct referred to above. Aware of his lapse, Clay is at once on the counter-attack and accuses his mother of the same misdemeanor—a reaction which effectively destroys whatever meager chance of actual communication between mother and son may have existed at the beginning.\textsuperscript{131}

The analysis of this scene has demonstrated, then, that the choice of a public place along with the signs of nervous insecurity and defensiveness which both Clay and his mother evince testify to their estrangement and their difficulties to communicate with each other on a closer, personal level. These problems are rooted in their deep, mutual dread of intimacy.\textsuperscript{132}

Clay’s relationship to his father is similarly troubled and distanced. With acid exactitude, Clay draws the portrait of an utterly superficial film industry executive. Whereas in Clay’s opinion his mother still shows a last vestige of motherly affection—however small and possibly insincere this may be—, he presents his father as a foolish hedonist, self-centered and skin-deep. Clay does not meet his father until the fifth day of his vacation when the latter picks Clay up for lunch in a restaurant (42). As is the case when Clay joins his mother, the reunion of father and son also takes place in a busy public location. This gives further substance to Clay’s impression that a profound fear of personal closeness underlies the relationships in his family. In Clay’s eyes, his father appears to believe that his adoption of the latest health fads may provide a patch of common ground where to meet his son. When his

\textsuperscript{130} Egloff arrives at the same conclusion (2001: 82).
\textsuperscript{131} Egloff makes the same point (2001: 62).
\textsuperscript{132} There is only one other occasion roughly a fortnight later on which Clay sees his mother alone. Clay’s brief mention of this meeting corroborates the findings of the analysis of their previous encounter. It appears that Clay is at a loss as to what to report. In fact, one terse sentence is all he manages: “[I] go home and out to dinner with my mother. When I get home from that I take a long cold shower and sit on the floor of the stall and let the water hit me full
father plays a Bob Seger tape, Clay dismisses his father’s “weird gesture of communication” (ibid.), intended to ingratiate himself with his son and establish some basis of communication. He instinctively distrusts this “gesture” and all subsequent attempts of his father’s during this lunch to engage Clay in conversation (42-43). To Clay such efforts have a ring of falseness and are aimed at pretending to a closeness that does not really exist and that is not wanted either.133

Not surprisingly, the estrangement and fear of intimacy Clay registers in his relationships to his mother and his father deeply poison the only two occasions when the family is complete. Significantly, these family gatherings are occasioned by Christmas, the traditional season of familial concord. On Christmas Eve, as Clay, his mother and sisters pick up the father at his apartment for dinner in a restaurant, Clay senses that his parents are “nervous and irritated by the fact that the holidays have to bring them together” (65). After dinner they move on to a club to have a drink. Clay is appalled and embarrassed when his father asks for a telephone: “[A] phone with a long extension cord is brought over to the couch and my father calls his father up in Palm Springs and we all wish him a Merry Christmas and I feel like a fool saying, ‘Merry Christmas, Grandpa.’ . . .” (67-68). In his view, the phone call to his grandfather—a private moment conspicuously staged for maximum public effect to demonstrate familial unison—is a particularly bitter moment in this travesty of the traditional festive season of love and peace. Clay is acutely conscious that this public display of familial bliss is a sham that mocks the occasion. Clearly, the members of this family have come together for this occasion only and, shunning the oppressive privacy of home, prefer the comforting public anonymity of two fashionable venues.

133 Clay finds his suspicions about his father’s essential unwillingness to relate meaningfully with him corroborated during the only other time he sees his father alone. More than three weeks into his vacation, Clay again meets his father in a restaurant. His father, distracted by his new fancy car, is barely able to hold up his end of the conversation, and Clay finds himself in the unwonted situation of having to strike up and maintain a conversation on” (96). This is a youngster who literally has to “chill out” and ease the tension he has built up during the meeting with his mother.
As in the scenes discussed above, to Clay this is a most striking demonstration of the fear of intimacy permeating his family.

The only family gathering that does take place at home instead of at a public locale, occurs on the morning after. This time Clay can only endure the charade with the help of drugs:

It’s Christmas morning and I’m high on coke, and one of my sisters has given me this pretty expensive leather-bound datebook. . . . I thank her and kiss her and all that and she smiles and pours herself another glass of champagne. […] My mother watches us, sitting on the edge of the couch in the living room, sipping champagne. My sisters open their gifts casually, indifferent. My father looks neat and hard and is writing out checks for my sisters and me and I wonder why he couldn’t have written them out before, but I forget about it and look out the window; at the hot wind blowing through the yard. The water in the pool ripples (72).

Clay is vaguely aware that this picture book scene of a merry Christmas morning, this tableau of familial bliss, is crudely defiled by his father’s action, which unintentionally underlines that this empty shell of a family is only held together by the materialistic motives that parents and children share. Accordingly, Clay paints a portrait of a family who anxiously keep up the appearance of a happy family life to hide the void within. He must accept that family relations have frozen into empty routine gestures and poses. For fear of having to get emotionally involved with the other members of their family, Clay, his parents and sisters take refuge to the rules of a code of conduct that helps maintain the appearance of an intact family.

Clay’s consciousness of the family as a defunct social structure is also reflected in his perception of the manifold adverse conditions threatening the family home. Of course, within the traditional understanding of the family, home occupies a pivotal position as the spatial and spiritual center of the family as the nucleus of American society. Clay continually conjures up this traditional idea of home as the backdrop for his representation of the homes in the world around him. He leaves no doubt that no actually existent home—neither the vacation home in Palm Springs nor the permanent residence in Hollywood or any other family home in this

(144-145). The scene confirms everything Clay previously thought about his father’s shallow
community—can measure up to this ideal. As has been said above, in Palm Springs the home serves as a refuge from the oppressive desert heat and as a stronghold against nightly trespassers (70). A similar constellation of forces opposes the home in the Hollywood hills. Clay is seriously disturbed when strong winds rattle the windows of his home (63) and when he reads of torrential storms washing houses down into the valley (114). A nightly scene in a restaurant, in which the animosity between the “Fucking Valleyites” and the “pill-popping bastards” in the hills erupts (62), reminds Clay of the precarious situation in which his own community of the privileged few find themselves. His anxiety is further increased when reports of social unrest disturb the rich neighborhood (78). Far removed from the traditional ideal, the family home in Clay’s world has become a fortress that is barely able to withstand the hostile natural and social forces that are gathering outside and laying siege to it. Clay sees that, in the process of this defense against outside dangers, the home estranges the family from the world and from one another so that paranoid anxiety and distrust seize them (24, 70). For Clay the family home, which is supposed to provide shelter and protection and symbolizes familial love and harmony, has turned into its very antithesis. Ultimately, he has to face up to the realization that he does not really return to a home in any traditional sense of the word. For Clay, as for his friends, the actual home does no longer offer any integrative power. Indeed, in more general terms, one may argue that in Clay’s consumerism and incapability of communicating personally.

Clay knows that the situation in his own family is representative of the family relations in this community. His observations increase his sense of being in a social environment in which families are falling apart. Practically all of his friends live in families whose social structures are gradually dissolving or already beyond repair. Against the backdrop of the Christmas holidays with their connotation of familial unity, the disintegration of these families stands out particularly sharply. Frequently, the parents are divorced (65) or deeply estranged, casually tormenting each other by publicly posing with their lovers (16). Neither do they betray any concern for their children’s needs. Instead of spending Christmas at home with their children, they are on vacation (37) or on shopping sprees abroad (55)—activities, powerfully suggestive of the socially destructive effects of consumerism. In one especially poignant case, a friend of Clay’s even depends on the reports in glamor magazines for news about her mother’s whereabouts (79, 147). In conversation with Daniel at the end of their vacation, Clay realizes that the children in this community, despite their outward show of
terrifying world “home” is a metaphor for the idea of entropy, which is central to Clay’s reasoning and often the only link between his chains of association.135

To Clay’s mind, the family is morally and emotionally eroded from within as well as threatened from without. Thus, the family is incapable of fulfilling its functions in society, leaving behind a vast array of unfulfilled desires and needs. Clay learns that adverse forces seek to profit from this situation. In particular, they seek to exploit the moral bankruptcy of parenthood. Clay’s presentation of his parents leaves no doubt that he does not accept them as figures of authority but indeed pities them. His mother is simply too much entrapped in her own self-centeredness, misery and insecurity, his father is desperately struggling to meet the harsh criteria of success in a relentlessly youth-oriented culture of consumerism. To the son the father’s shallowness, his contemptible dependence on other people’s judgments, and the “nearly adolescent concern with his appearance” (Sahlin 1991: 29) completely discredit him as a figure of authority. Clay realizes that his father is a perennial adolescent at heart, a man who tries to emulate his own son. This makes the father useless to his son as a person of reference, as a power that may offer orientation and even guidance.

Moreover, the resultant moral and emotional void is open to exploitation by anti-familial and anti-individual forces. This is evident in the use of the word “son” on three central occasions in Clay’s account. First, he notes with thinly concealed dismay that his father introduces him to other businessmen not by his name but only as “my son” (42). Clay does not only see an indication of the distance between parent and child in his father’s impersonal use of the generic term. What further contributes to Clay’s disappointment about his father’s use of the phrase “my son” is that it also

indifference, are profoundly affected by their parents’ utter neglect (160). The full force of this recognition hits Clay a little later, when he reads some teenager’s enraged invectives against his parents on the bathroom wall in a club (193). For Möllers the deep estrangement of parents and children is a direct effect of the empty consumer society of Los Angeles (Möllers 1999: 446).
conveys the delicate but distinct implication that Clay may lack a clearly recognizable and unique personality.

The father’s use of the term “son” must be read alongside two other occasions on which the word is strategically employed. In order to procure the money he owes Clay, Julian asks Clay to accompany him to a man named Finn who is supposedly going to reimburse him. Only now Clay permits himself to accept the truth about his friend, which he has been both pursuing and simultaneously avoiding for some time now: Julian evidently prostitutes himself so as to be able to finance his ravenous lifestyle and heroin habit. The pimp, as he forcibly injects Julian with heroin, promises to pay the money after Julian and Clay have visited a client. “‘Now, you know that you’re my best boy and you know that I care for you,’ the man coaxes Julian, ‘Just like my own kid. Just like my own son. . . .’ There’s a pause and then Finn says, ‘You look thin’” (171). The pimp’s flattery eerily reminds Clay of his father. Not only does Finn also use the expression “son”; he even literally echoes Clay’s father, who, towards the end of the scene discussed above, remarked on his son’s thinness in these very same words (43).

The word “son” occurs a third time in the hotel room of the client that Julian and Clay have been assigned to. The undeniable parallels between these three situations hit Clay with a vengeance:

"Can I take my jacket off?” Julian asks.
"Yes. By all means, son.” [. . .]
"What do you do?"
"I’m into real estate, son."

I look over at Julian and wonder if this man knows my father. . . . I keep wondering if my father knows this guy. I try to shake the thought from my head, the idea of this guy maybe coming up to my father at Ma Maison or Trumps, but it stays there, stuck (173-74).

Clay is truly horrified at the thought that this client may be an acquaintance of his father’s and approach him possibly during lunch with Clay himself. This vision forces Clay to come to terms with the bitter parallels: The distinctions between the

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135 Freese (1990) and Egloff (2001: 90-101) examine the role of the concept of...
three relationships of father-son, pimp-prostitute, and client-prostitute blur, the latter two essentially being distorted, perverted mirror-images of the first. In Clay’s world fatherly love and protection have become mere pretexts for the economic and sexual, even incestuous exploitation of the child, who becomes a mere commodity to be used for the gratification of the “fathers’” impulses. In fact, Julian’s client admits as much when he purrs, “[Y]ou’re a very beautiful boy . . . and here, that’s all that matters” (175). And only a few hours later these exact words reverberate in Clay’s mind as he watches the pimp again inject Julian with heroin (183). The critic Pérez-Torres is right when he comments, “the familial and the individual are dissolved through a double penetration of needle and penis” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 95). This interpretation is also shared by Nicki Sahlin. In her discussion of the pimp, of Julian’s client, and of the indifferent psychiatrist whom Clay sees at his parents’ request (e.g. 109, 123), Sahlin makes an important observation: “Taking the place of the parents so ready to abandon their offspring both physically and emotionally is an array of ironic surrogates who appear to compensate for parental shortcomings while actually exploiting the young” (Sahlin 1991: 30).

There is, however, a counterpart to the exploitation through the surrogate father-figures. For equally painful to Clay is his recognition of the “sons’” parasitic entropy in Clay’s thoughts.

136 To Sahlin’s list of “fatherly” figures in Clay’s world one may add two more names. Firstly, there is the musician Elvis Costello, whose function in Clay’s search of a figure of moral authority will be examined in a later section of this chapter. Secondly, there is a drug dealer whose nickname Dead—almost homophonous with “Dad”—emphasizes the perversion of the father role from a guarantor of his children’s safety to an exploiter and agent of their destruction. As Clay accompanies Rip and Spin to Dead’s house where they want to pick up drugs, they come upon a suggestive tableau:

It seems that there’s a party at Dead’s house and some of the people there, mostly young boys, look at the three of us strangely, probably because Rip and Spin and I aren’t wearing bathing suits. We walk up to Dead, who’s in his midforties, wearing a pair of briefs, lying in a huge pile of pillows, two tan young boys sitting by his side watching HBO, and Dead hands Rip a large envelope. There’s a blond pretty girl in a bikini sitting behind Dead and she’s petting the head of the boy who’s on Dead’s left.

“You gotta be more careful, boys,” Dead lisps.

“Why’s that, Dead?” Rip asks.

“There are narcotics crawling all over the Colony.”

“No. Really?” Spin asks.

“Yeah. Kid of mine was shot in the leg by a narc” (127).
submissiveness. Clay does not try to hide his own docility towards his father when he admits, “I’m pretty nice and I smile and nod a lot and pretend to listen to all his questions about college and I answer them pretty sincerely” (41-42). And he can even demurely decline the money his father offers him, knowing that he is going to get some anyway (43). Clay is conscious that in his world human relations are generally conceived in terms of business transactions. Social intercourse is conducted in accordance with a strict behavioral code aiming at maximizing private gratification and minimizing aggravation, particularly such as may arise from emotional entanglement. As Clay’s sober view of his own communicative strategy in his relationship with his father makes clear, he knows perfectly well that he himself partakes of this system of exchange if only uneasily. This is why he is deeply hurt when Blair, frustrated at his lack of involvement, blurts out, “You’re a beautiful boy, Clay, but that’s about it” (204). As will be argued in a later section of this chapter, in the final consequence the difference between his own parasitic subservience to his father, on the one hand, and Julian’s prostitution—that is, the voluntary commodification of his body—, on the other, is but one in degree, not in principle.

As the previous analysis has demonstrated in detail, his parents—just as all the other parents in this social set—have completely discredited themselves as moral authorities in Clay’s eyes and have willingly or carelessly abandoned their parental role to anti-individual and anti-familial forces. Thus, if being a “son” traditionally implies access to society through the identity, the protection, and the socialization which an intact family life can provide, such is not the case for Clay and his friends. As becomes clear from the example of Clay’s representation of how the father-son relationship in its various guises is perverted through prostitution, drugs and violence, central familial structures are eroded in their world. Clay understands that,

137 See pp. 196f.
THE FAMILY AS A CRUMBLING, HOLLOW SHELL

The Self in Trouble:

with the demise of the family as the nucleus of society, the individual is exposed to severe dangers.

Clay is loath to accept the break-up of his family as an inevitable fact. Numerous “memory” chapters, which are interspersed with the main narrative, testify to Clay’s desire to comprehend his family’s crisis and disintegration by locating its origins in the past. Pretty soon, however, it becomes obvious to him that the seeds of the disintegration of the family were already visible in the past. The disillusioning picture Clay draws of his family’s present desolate condition is in no way redeemed by his recollections of the family’s vacations in Palm Springs, which make up the vast majority of the “memory” chapters. In the first of these flashbacks Clay recounts his dolefully nostalgic revisit to the house at Palm Springs long after the family had abandoned it. He finds a completely dilapidated house:

The old house was empty and the outside looked really scummy and unkempt and there were weeds and a television aerial that had fallen off the roof and empty trash cans were lying on what used to be the front lawn. The pool was drained and all these memories rushed back to me and I had to sit down in my school uniform on the steps of the empty pool and cry. I remembered all the Friday nights driving in and the Sunday nights leaving and afternoons spent playing cards on the chaise longues out by the pool with my grandmother. But those memories seemed faded compared to empty beer cans that were scattered all over the dead lawn and the windows that were all smashed and broken. [. . .] I guess I went out there because I wanted to remember the way things were (44, original italicized).

The derelict old house is a palpable metaphor of Clay’s overwhelming sense that his family is falling apart. Juxtaposed with his perception of a present state of desolation, Clay’s melancholy picture of familial peace and unity in the past suggests that he believes that the social life in his family has deteriorated. By remembering “the way things were,” he hopes to put the present familial malaise into perspective. A sense of historical continuity, he hopes, might reveal the origins and causes of the tragic demise of his family in the present. Somewhere in the dark caverns of Clay’s heart there may also be the unvoiced hope that such a state of familial bliss may be restored.

However, as the family portrait gradually takes shape in the course of the memory chapters, Clay must acknowledge that the memories he had on his revisit to
the old house were nostalgically distorted, and he increasingly recognizes that the
seeds of the family’s disintegration lay in the past. In these memories, images of the
estrandment among the members of the family (163) and of the mind-numbing
boredom of months of uninterrupted eventlessness and random talk (123-124, 137, 157) abound. The oppressive, indeed, the hellish heat and winds of the desert (68-70, 138) together with numerous recollections of deaths (75-76, 124-125, 138, 145) added fuel to the vague but powerful anxiety of a family holding out by the skin of their teeth against unidentifiable, real or imagined menaces (69, 70, 138). The story of his grandmother’s slow cancer death—a family member whom he loved and respected because she appeared to be life-affirming in a simple, genuine way and to maintain a certain aloofness from the empty consumer pleasures everybody else indulged in (163)—connects these “memory” chapters and further emphasizes the inexorable disintegration of the family (125, 156, 163). In their entirety, then, these “memory” chapters render a picture of a family who unthinkingly worked their own ruin from within and thus contributed to the forces of destruction that assailed them from without. Ultimately, his nostalgic quest for a time of familial unity and peace frustrated, Clay must realize that his family’s present state of disintegration is the logical continuation of a development that began in the past.

In his first novel, Bret Easton Ellis portrays a young man to whom the erosion of parental authority and the resultant disintegration of the family are central themes. In principle, Ellis’s analysis of this process is in line with current

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138 Clay’s profound sense of the disintegration of the nuclear family finds expression in the newspaper clippings of violent deaths he used to collect (77). Nicki Sahlin usefully observes, “It is worth noting that most of these deaths involve not random violence but rather one family member killing another. The death theme in Less Than Zero thus dovetails with the theme of parental neglect. A man’s crucifying his own child or a housewife’s driving her children to their deaths may be viewed as carrying to extremes the parental neglect and abandonment with which Clay’s circle of friends is already so familiar” (Sahlin 1991: 34-35).

139 Sahlin (1991: 27) and Young (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 25) argue the same point.

140 See also Sahlin (1991: 28).
sociological theories that interpret the decline of the family as a function of the contemporary consumer society. Clay and all the other teenagers in *Less Than Zero* cannot respect their parents as persons of authority. This is because mothers and fathers alike emulate their offspring in a desperate effort to cling to their waning youth. They are also extremely status-obsessed and crave for social approval. A further reason for the decline of parental authority is that the parents demonstrate an immature inability to exercise a measure of self-restraint, which renders them incapable of establishing meaningful and permanent relationships in their lives. Moreover, the parents’ neglect and even exploitation of their children fills them with guilt, which drives them to spoil their children by indulging in their excessive material demands. Insecure of their own roles and somehow sensing their inadequateness as parents, fathers and mothers are relieved to relinquish their parental authority to dubious surrogate-figures. All this may be considered as evidence of the parents’ “other-direction” (Riesman) or, seen from a psychoanalytic angle, of their “narcissism” (Lasch). Without the inner-directed personality’s “gyroscope” of internalized values (Riesman) to steady and guide them, they are wholly reliant on whatever external signals they can pick up for a sense of place and direction. The inadequateness and guilt felt by the parents in *Less Than Zero* also roots in their awareness that they have nothing to pass on to the young, except their “radar” as Riesman calls it, the conviction that sensitivity to environmental signals, particularly when sent out by their peers, is of vital importance to life in the urban consumer society.

Christopher Lasch’s assertion that “the abdication of parental authority … instills in the young the character traits demanded by a corrupt, permissive, hedonistic culture” (Lasch 1978: 177-178) is illustrated by Clay and his companions. The teenagers respond to their parents’ departure from their familial obligations

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141 See also Peter Freese (1990: 72).
either with parasitic subservience or with brazen demands, the strategy that will allow them to take advantage of this dismal situation as best they can. Both parents and children are very self-centered and have a deeply set fear of intimacy. In these families there is no real exchange of feelings and ideas, no interest in the other for his or her own sake. As a result, parent-child relationships in Less Than Zero are defined by antagonism and indifference at heart and the endeavour to keep up the appearance of a functioning family life. Ultimately, the family—unable to provide a sense of belonging, protection, and identity—“stands as a hollow shell, as a sign devoid of reference. . .” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 91).

In his subsequent fiction, Bret Easton Ellis reiterates and, if such is possible, even radicalizes the thesis that the decline of the family in the contemporary urban consumer society is an undisputable fact and that this decline has created an ethical and emotional void. At the same time, a survey of Ellis’s oeuvre to date reveals that the break-up of the nuclear family is an important theme especially to the characters in his early writings. In his later books, this problem gradually ceases to influence people’s views of themselves and their environment, or—as in Glamorama—it reenters into their lives in completely different guise.

As a matter of fact, only in the early short fiction published as The Informers (1994) family relations play key parts in the protagonists’ lives. family relations play key parts in the protagonists’ lives.¹⁴² Five out of the thirteen stories and vignettes in The Informers treat of the protagonists’ familial relations. Of particular interest here is the cumulative portrait of the Laine family, which Ellis develops as a composite picture in a succession of four stories, narrated by four different members of the family. In “The Up Escalator”, the Laines—the film executive William Laine, his unnamed wife, their adolescent children Graham and

¹⁴² Despite its year of publication, this collection of in part interrelated short stories and narrative sketches about the mores and manners of the super-rich in the Hollywood film community of the early 1980s properly belongs among Ellis’s early writings. According to the author, the book was written over a ten year period and was originally a kind of notebook never intended to be published (Amerika and Laurence 1994).
The Family as a Crumbling, Hollow Shell

The Self in Trouble:

Susan—still manage to keep up the surface resemblance of an intact family. However, the wife, who is the narrative conscience of the story, is painfully aware of the deep fissures running through the shiny veneer. Her personal problems—a tranquilizer-addiction and an unhappy affair with her son’s friend—may be understood as an expression and an effect of the family crisis. The estrangement between the generations in this family and the parents’ waning authority are strikingly evident, for instance, in the restaurant scene (Informers, 26-29), which is reminiscent in tone and spirit of similar scenes in Less Than Zero.

“Sitting Still” continues the portrait of the Laine family from the daughter’s perspective and once again focuses on the collapse of parental authority and the void left behind in their offspring. A year has passed since the events depicted in “The Up Escalator”. Meanwhile, the parents have gotten a divorce, and Susan is a freshman at Camden—the fictitious college in New Hampshire that is the alma mater to practically all of Ellis’s youthful protagonists. The train ride across the country to Los Angeles where Susan is to attend her father’s second wedding gives her the leisure to ponder the break-up of her parents’ marriage and the bleak prospect of having a woman for a stepmother who is barely her senior and who, Susan exasperatedly observes, “has seen Flashdance nine times” (Informers, 74). Upon her arrival in Los Angeles, Susan phones but does not visit her mother, who is on tranquilizers again, and then on an impulse catches a northbound train, without going to her father’s wedding. Quite clearly, there is no home to return to, and Susan decides that she is through with pretending there is one.

In the third story about the Laines, “Water From the Sun”, William’s new wife, Cheryl, is the central character and narrative conscience. Less than a year after their wedding, the newly-weds already live separate lives and have new lovers. As Cheryl’s liaison to a boy who is not even in his twenties is running stale—in this she
parallels her predecessor\textsuperscript{143}—, she realizes that her life is falling apart. It becomes clear that, in the stories of the Laine family, Ellis employs a variation of the Oedipus motif in much the same way as he hinted at incest in the “father-son” relationships of \textit{Less Than Zero}. Through this trope, the author stresses the self-destructive forces within the families he portrays. Of course, Ellis here stands in a long tradition. At least since \textit{King Oedipus}, writers have employed the motif of incest-desire to signal the erosion of the family from within. In American literature, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Faulkner’s portrait of the McCaslin family—where the destructive powers of incest and miscegenation reinforce each other—are well-known cases in point.

In the fourth story about the Laines, which concludes Ellis’s anatomy of this family’s disintegration, the author continues to rely on the Oedipus motif to make his point that, under the conditions of the contemporary urban consumer society, families are destroyed from within. This time the author even adds the element of patricide, albeit in a very oblique manner. “Another Gray Area” consists of events that from Graham’s point of view remain haphazard and never render the sense of a coherent story. Graham learns that his father’s Cessna crashed and he was killed. He visits the site of the plane crash and shows an almost clinical interest in the gruesome details of how his father was disfigured, insisting that photos of him in front of the wreck be taken (\textit{Informers}, 166). Neither the fact nor the circumstances of his father’s death appear to touch him, and it remains a mere episode, cushioned between several other episodes. No matter how disturbing or potentially dangerous these individual experiences may be,\textsuperscript{144} none of them seem to sink in. Graham simply takes them in numbly, unable or unwilling to ponder their significance. Like Clay, Graham is

\textsuperscript{143} By her stepson’s account, she also had an affair with him (\textit{Informers}, 158).

\textsuperscript{144} Among other things, Graham is present during the making of a video clip for a pop song; he watches a shoot-out in the street; he learns that his girlfriend had sex with his friend during his absence; he is witness to a hold-up in a supermarket; and he goes to a movie center where he sits through the performances in all fourteen theatres.
basically a passive observer. However, there is no indication that this passivity is a protective shell or that it stems from a difficulty to take a moral stand as with Clay. Ultimately, Graham’s father’s death is just another incident in his life, cause for neither triumph nor dismay, as disconnected and inconsequential as all the other events in his life. Ellis argues that Graham, this latter-day Oedipus, does not need to stab out his eyes—because he is blind to the horrifying truths in his life anyway.

Seen as a unit, these four stories about the Laines render a coherent picture of a family’s disintegration. The estrangement of the family members, their fear of intimacy toward each other, and the collapse of parental authority, which Ellis already dealt with in *Less Than Zero*, are central themes again. Even more than the author’s first novel, the stories of the Laine family underline the moral bankruptcy of all members of the family and show how all of them are bitterly engaged in the same, fierce struggle for survival. Ellis achieves this effect through his multiple-perspective family portrait. Of course, this narrative technique has its great forerunners in the works of William Faulkner or in Jerome D. Salinger’s *Glass family*, for example. While parallels to these authors may not be intended, a comparison, say, to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as a prototypical application of the multiple-perspective family portrait, can throw the specific features of Ellis’s approach into relief. In his novel, Faulkner “treats the economic and emotional deterioration of the Compson family in four magnificent chapters, each one dramatizing a different consciousness with a different conception of time and

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145 This composite portrait of the Laine family is complemented by an analogous portrait of another family. In “In the Islands,” Les Price takes his nineteen-year-old son Tim, who lives with his divorced wife, to Hawaii. Their first vacation together outside the protective family ends in disaster. The father’s clumsy attempts to establish some sort of link to his son, which are much like Clay’s father’s “weird gesture of communication”, fail and at the end there is only utter silence. Tim Price—known to readers of *American Psycho* as Bateman’s arrogant and enigmatic acquaintance—emphasizes the unbridgeable gap between himself and his father in the final words spoken between the two in this story: “There’s . . . nothing. […] Nothing,” he says, “Nada.” This oblique reference to Hemingway’s distorted version of the Lord’s Prayer in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” stresses the existential void Tim feels.
language” (McQuade 1987: 1672). Ellis, on the other hand, writes his multiple-perspective accounts of disintegrating families in unmodulated, deliberately flat, disaffected prose. Significantly, while Faulkner emphasizes the individuality of his different characters’ perspectives, Ellis makes the point that the perspectives of the different family members are essentially identical. Finally, all characters are imprisoned in the same ideology of consumerism. Both as acting and as reflecting subjects, they are dominated and driven by the same forces and fears.

Ellis’s vision of the desolate condition of family life in *The Informers* and all other later books is even harsher, more uncompromising than in *Less Than Zero* if such is possible. As Clay’s flashbacks of the vacations in Palm Spring evidence, he still wants to understand when and why his family began to fall apart. This is significantly different in the following books. Ellis’s later protagonists know nothing of the urge Clay feels to trace the problems of the family into the past. All of them completely live in the present, occasional reminiscences extending no further than a few months back as may be seen, for example, in the cases of Susan Laine in “Sitting Still” (*Informers*, 68-71) or Sean Bateman in *The Rules of Attraction* (*Rules*, 231-233). In general, Ellis’s characters just do not conceive of their families as having a historical dimension, which would imply a potential of development and growth as well as the possibility of understanding. As Clay has to find out, too, in this world families are doomed, always bound for self-destruction. Patrick Bateman’s remark, “The past isn’t real. It’s just a dream…. Don’t mention the past” (*Psycho*, 340),\(^\text{147}\) is a programmatic statement and the central recognition shared by all of Ellis’s protagonists. These later characters dispassionately acknowledge that the traditional ideal of a family home has always been out of reach for them anyway. They conceive

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146 Other cumulative, multiple-perspective family portraits include those of the Prices in *The Informers* and of the Bateman brothers in *The Rules of Attraction* and *American Psycho*.  
147 Elsewhere, he admits, “I have no patience for revelations, for new beginnings, for events that take place beyond the realm of my immediate vision” (*Psycho*, 241).
of the family as a battlefield on which the generations mutually exploit and destroy each other. Of course, in *Less Than Zero* this bleak view of the family is present, too, but it is also tempered by Clay’s search for guidance and redemption. Such notions are completely alien to Ellis’s later protagonists. To them the family is nothing but the battleground on which they must perish or prevail.

Such laconic acceptance may be one of the reasons why the family is not an issue anymore to Ellis’s later protagonists. Already in Ellis’s second published book, the theme of the disintegration of the family does not have that central importance anymore and is very rarely visible. Clearly, the students at Camden College that tell their stories in *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) feel that their parents are spatially and emotionally very distant. In two relevant scenes Patrick Bateman, the deranged protagonist-narrator of *American Psycho*, is introduced. He has asked his younger brother Sean, one of the central characters in *The Rules of Attraction*, to come to New York where their father is dying in a hospital. The scene outside the father’s room captures the desolate state of the family. The head of the family is dying, his room guarded by his aides (*Rules*, 237). The mother—apparently herself a medical case (*Rules*, 238)—is not present. The brothers, estranged and full of loathing for one another, meet outside their father’s room. Patrick is enraged at Sean, who appears untroubled by their father’s condition. He challenges Sean about wasting time at college and not knowing which career to choose. Sean remains cool:


“How about the son your father wanted?” I ask.

“You think that thing in there even cares?” he asks back, laughing, pointing a thumb back at the corridor, sniffing hard (*Rules*, 239).

Sean’s contempt for his father is palpable. Emotionally, to Sean his father died long ago. As Sean expressly admits a few pages earlier, “I didn’t come to New York to see my father die” (*Rules*, 233). Clearly, authority, respect, or love are not categories in which Sean can measure his relationship to his dying father, who is not even a person to him anymore. Thus, when Sean leaves the campus for New York at the end of the
term, he is without a sense of belonging and direction: “I started driving faster as I left the college behind. I didn’t know where I was going. [...] Home was gone. New York sucked” (Rules, 282). A moment later, this feeling of uprootedness and disorientation is condensed in an image that calls to mind a similar scene in The Catcher in the Rye (Catcher, 63): Sean enters a phone booth but cannot think of anyone to call. He shares Holden Caulfield’s sense of disorientation and disconnectedness to the world he lives in. Yet, in contrast to Holden, who is intensely ambivalent toward his family, the family has ceased to matter to Sean.

Despite his self-righteous reproaches against his younger brother, this is also true of Patrick Bateman in American Psycho. On the whole, Patrick Bateman does not actively entertain relationships with his mother or his brother, and his family only figures as the basically impersonal source of his financial independence. Thus, apart from one thoroughly unpleasant encounter with his brother, which only takes place at the initiative of their late father’s initiative (Psycho, 224-230), Patrick Bateman has only one other contact to his family, which is depicted less than a fifty pages before the end of the novel. He visits his mother in the sanatorium (Psycho, 365f). Horst Steur (1995: 24f) has pointed out that Ellis has lifted this scene almost verbatim from Less Than Zero (18f, see pp. 168f) with slight but significant alterations. Through careful editing, Ellis has taken out Clay’s palpable fear of intimacy and his frustration that his mother is incapable of offering love and guidance. Such emotions are utterly unknown to the protagonist of the later novel. Bateman is through with his mother, and visiting her is a tiresome duty, reminding him of a past to which he feels no connection anymore.

In Glamorama, the family figures even less frequently in Victor Ward’s life. Yet, the mere suggestion of the distant father’s possible involvement in the psychic destruction of his son continues the theme of the mutual exploitation and destruction of the family members running through all of Ellis’s oeuvre and takes it to new extremes.
Ellis’s treatment of family relations is fundamentally different from Janowitz’s. While Janowitz’s adolescent and young adult protagonists—from Earl Przepasniak in *American Dad* to Maud Slevenowicz in *By the Shores of Gitchee Gumee*—also routinely struggle with the aftermath of a family break-up, she never constructs this as directly related to the consumer society in which they live. Unlike Ellis’s characters, Janowitz’s often female protagonists usually maintain strong ties with their mothers. The now divorced and estranged fathers were powerful, deforming, influences on their children in their youth and now still figure as powerful, potentially threatening intruders into the mother-daughter relationship (*The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*). Or the fathers’ absence and insignificance is comically accentuated as in *By the Shores of Gitchee Gumee* (1996)—the protagonist-narrator nineteen-year-old Maud Slivenowicz lives alone with her mother and her four siblings, all of whom are from different fathers who have long deserted them.

As the detailed analyses of McInerney’s works later in this study will demonstrate, Ellis’s treatment of family relations reveals important differences to McInerney’s as well as significant similarities. McInerney’s *Story of My Life* is certainly akin in message if not in spirit to Ellis’s images of parents and children divided by the consumerist attitude they share. As the extensive analysis of Alison Poole’s relationship to her father and her mother in McInerney’s third novel will show, McInerney also makes the point that consumerism undermines parental authority and erodes partnership and family relations. The discussion of McInerney’s books will also show that, in contrast to Ellis, whose family portraits have no or only very little historical depth, McInerney’s are comparatively rich with biographical detail. In line with the finding presented in this chapter, one may argue that, through such shortening or complete omission of the historical dimension, Ellis wants to drive home his point that his characters’ behavior and thoughts are directly conditioned by the circumstances of their lives in an extremely affluent and
permissive consumer society. McInerney, on the other hand, makes clear that character formation is a more complex process. Thus, McInerney’s condemnation of the consumer society is inevitably less radical.

6.2 Emotional Disengagement as a Survival Strategy

Clay’s extreme social impassiveness is conspicuous. In the following, the analysis will focus on Clay’s strained love relationship to Blair and his friendship to Julian to demonstrate that he disinvests himself emotionally so as to avoid the pain of loss. Clay is driven by the recognition that he lives in a society in which consumerism is rampant and has invaded the realm of private relations. Where everybody regards everybody else as mere consumption goods for the gratification of their own desires, emotional disengagement appears to be the survival strategy of choice.

Clay is extremely reserved towards Blair’s shows of affection and towards her attempts to induce him to some sort of commitment to their relationship. However, the nonchalance with which he meets her efforts must not be taken for indifference (e.g. 32). Nor are Clay’s casual sexual encounters with other people merely gratuitous acts of consumption intended to satisfy momentary impulses. On closer inspection, such acts reveal the seething turmoil within Clay. What gives him away are the forced casualness with which he tries to make inquiries about her (95) as well as the vehemence of his protestations towards his friends that he and Blair are not a couple anymore (e.g. 52)—he “doth protest too much,” one is inclined to say. Evidently, this is a young man violently at odds with himself. Afraid that he may not be able to cope with the pain that a failed relationship might cause him, he seeks to distance himself. Thus, Clay’s emotional disengagement from Blair must be understood as a kind of survival strategy.

148 For instance, on the fourth day of his vacation he leaves Blair’s Christmas party to have sex with a young man he barely knows and promptly forgets Blair’s Christmas gift in the
Clay is unable to have a closer relationship with Blair because of his deep dread of emotional involvement. He is always tense and taciturn (e.g. 10, 22), afraid of sharing his thoughts and feelings or of probing into hers. Predictably, their first sexual contact, five days after Clay’s return, ends in utter disappointment for both of them (58). When Blair phones him the following day, late at night on Christmas Eve, Clay is still tense and can barely cope with the situation (72). In this situation it is clear for the first time that Clay’s indifference is merely a mask he purposely dons to protect himself emotionally. Another, particularly striking manifestation of Clay’s terror of having to commit himself and possibly even assume responsibility for Blair occurs in the third week during a visit to a club. Clay sees Blair write something on a table (119) but cannot be bothered to check what it actually is. Later he reads the words “Help Me” on a table (120) but does not connect them to Blair. A moment later he leaves the club with another girl, uncertain of whom Blair is with. Scenes like these are evidence that he is protecting himself, lest his precarious emotional balance be perturbed, and instead continues to disengage himself emotionally from Blair.  

As a number of “memory” chapters reveal, his obsessive fear of getting emotionally entangled with Blair has its roots in the beginnings of their relationship. Paralleling the recollections of his family’s stays in Palm Springs, his reminiscences of the first vacation together with Blair in Monterey do not inspire nostalgia. Significantly, Clay’s memories of this trip rush back to him after their first, disappointing sexual reunion. He recalls that from the start there was no excitement latter’s house (39). Similarly, a fortnight later Clay visits a club together with Blair and some friends but then leaves to have sex with some girl he has only just met (121).  

In his relationship to Blair, Clay’s dread of intimacy is not limited to talking about their relationship itself. He also fears emotional nearness when other questions are at stake. Several times during his stay in Los Angeles, Clay and Blair together are witnesses to extreme, deeply upsetting situations—Muriel mainlines heroin (86; Blair accidentally kills a coyote (142f.); they watch a snuff movie (153). Significantly, in none of these situations, Clay is capable of communicating his thoughts and feelings. He always shies away from responding emotionally and taking a stance. In all these instances, Clay’s fear of asking about her feelings is tangible.
about that vacation. By the end of the week utter disillusionment and the tedium of aimless dissipation had gotten hold of them:

[I] soon became disoriented and I knew I’d drunk too much, and whenever Blair would say something, I found myself closing my eyes and sighing. The water turned colder, raging, and the sand became wet, and Blair would sit by herself on the deck overlooking the sea and spot boats in the afternoon fog. I’d watch her play Solitaire through the glass window in the living room, and I’d hear the boats moan and creak, and Blair would pour herself another glass of champagne and it would all unsettle me.

Soon the champagne ran out and I opened the liquor cabinet. Blair got tan and so did I, and by the end of the week, all we did was watch television, even though the reception wasn’t too good, and drink bourbon, and Blair would arrange shells into circular patterns on the floor of the living room. When Blair muttered one night, while we sat on opposite sides of the living room, “We should have gone to Palm Springs,” I knew then that it was time to leave (60-61; original italicized).

In the end the vacation did not help them to dispel the boredom and sluggishness they tried to escape from. Perceiving the town as dull, run-down and potentially threatening, they sought refuge in the narrow limits of their own premises and the beach. Thus, just as with his family’s stays in Palm Springs, Clay recognizes that he and Blair withdrew from their environment into the claustrophobia-inducing confines of their own small world. He remembers that, thus shut off from the outside, they were thrown back onto themselves and had to rely on their own resources, both in a material and a communicative sense. In the course of that week they had to make the painful discovery about themselves that they fundamentally lacked the basics to deal with their self-inflicted solitude. They were passive consumers, unable actively to shape their environment. Soon the old dissatisfaction returned as strongly as before and even grew as the week dragged on. As the images of their vacation in Monterey indicate, Clay also knows perfectly well that their and, particularly, his own inability to communicate meaningfully with each other was at the heart of the problem. This is why they were bored, inactive and lonely and escaped into a monotonous and

\[150\] In Clay’s memory, the frequency with which they had sexual intercourse during that week was not a measure of their sexual yearning nor did it attest to the strength of their love. Rather it was an indication of their sheer lack of imagination or incapacity to do anything else with each other and to confront the partner as anything other than an object of sexual consumption. Thus, the physical union which they found in the sexual act only emphasized the absence of an emotional union. In this way Clay remembers their sex as the most powerful symbol of their estrangement and their fear to communicate meaningfully with each other.
empty routine of debauchery. Elizabeth Young aptly remarks that this memory chapter “reveals very clearly the bleakness, the unappeasable hunger at the heart of the book; the continual sense of agonizing famine in the midst of plenty” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 37). In the end Clay’s memories provide a history and a foundation to the dejection and despondency that weighs so heavily on his present relationship to Blair.151

Not until their very last encounter do the “lovers” manage to address their problems explicitly. As in Clay’s meetings with his mother and father, Blair and Clay choose a restaurant for what threatens to become some kind of dreaded climax and coda to their troubled relationship. Again the anonymity of the public venue and the necessary formal code of behavior are a welcome safeguard for Clay against any unwanted intimacy that might perturb his uncertain emotional balance. However, this time Blair is determined to make a last effort at getting him to commit himself in some way:

Suddenly she looks at me and takes off her Wayfarers.
“Clay, did you ever love me?”
I’m studying a billboard and say that I didn’t hear what she said.
“I asked if you ever loved me?” On the terrace the sun bursts into my eyes and for one blinding moment I see myself clearly. I remember the first time we made love, in the house in Palm Springs, her body tan and wet, lying against cool, white sheets.
“Don’t do this, Blair,” I tell her. […] “What in the fuck do you want to hear?”
“Just tell me,” she says, her voice rising.

The exchange is symptomatic of how Clay’s fear of intimacy. Importantly, the moment of self-recognition in which he perceives himself as a caring, emotionally involved lover, is so unsettling and painful to him that it literally disables him and makes him incapable of functioning properly in this situation. This is why he believes he must suppress such self-awareness. His final answer to Blair’s question, then, is an attempt to evade the pressure she is exerting on him. Then Blair accuses

151 This conclusion is further substantiated by the other “memory” chapters presenting images from Clay’s relationship to Blair in the past. In essence, they render a picture of a relationship that has been destroyed by mutual hurts and neglect as well as by an enormous
him head-on of never having made an effort to save their relationship:

“You were never there. . . . You’re a beautiful boy, Clay, but that’s about it. […]
“What do you care about? What makes you happy?”
“Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing,” I tell her.
“Did you ever care about me, Clay?”
I don’t say anything, look back at the menu.
“Did you ever care about me?” she asks again.
“I don’t want to care. If I care about things, it’ll just be worse, it’ll just be another thing to worry about. It’s less painful if I don’t care” (204-205).

Clay’s fear of intimacy, evident throughout his social life but never more manifest than in his relationship to Blair, is a necessary protection to him. Only by shielding himself against getting emotionally involved he feels capable of enduring this world. Ultimately, then, Clay’s emotional disengagement is a strategy of survival.

Clay’s survival strategy of emotional disengagement is also evident in his relationship to Julian. Though there is a rest of affection for Julian at the beginning, this soon evaporates as Clay must find out that Julian is too passive, vague and non-committal. Clay gradually comes to discover that his motivation to maintain a relationship with Julian does not at all spring from affection or even altruism. In fact, Clay’s growing distance from Julian increasingly allows him to regard his former buddy dispassionately. Julian more and more becomes an object of clinical study for Clay that he examines impassively because it promises to reveal a glimpse of his own future.

From the moment he returns home from college, Clay has to accept that maintaining a relationship with Julian requires that he abandon his customary reserve and instead assume an active role. Though Julian evidently wants to contact him (11), Clay finds that it is not easy to track him down (11, 19, 30f). Vague hints that Julian is in some sort of trouble (e.g. 17) add to Clay’s confusion and prompt what seems like real concern. When they actually do talk to each other five days after Clay returned from college, he is almost worried (48). Clay’s misgivings about Julian fear and incapacity, especially on Clay’s part, to engage in meaningful and deep
grow as he gradually realizes just how difficult it is to get hold of his friend (74, 78, 87-89). This strange unavailability, together with more obscure talk about Julian’s line of work (81), stirs Clay out of his general apathy and inertia. He increasingly takes the initiative, actively trying to find his friend and collect more information about him.

However, just like the first time, their next meeting comes about as if by chance at the end of the second week. Clay seems genuinely perturbed when Julian asks him for a large sum of money (91). Despite his severe doubts about the alleged purpose of the loan (92, 104), Clay assents. When Clay brings him the money two days later, Julian barely acknowledges his presence. Confronted with Julian’s apathy, Clay becomes self-conscious:

"What is it really for, Julian?"
Julian watches the video until it’s over and then turns away and says, "Why?"
"Because that’s a lot of money."
"Then why did you give it to me?" he asks, running his hand over his smooth, tan chest.
"Because you’re a friend?" It comes out sounding like a question. I look down.
"Right," Julian says, his eyes going back to the television.
Another video flashes on.
Julian falls asleep.
I leave. (103-104)

Julian’s uncommunicativeness makes Clay falter and fumble for words. In vain Clay looks for an opening to pierce Julian’s impersonal, seemingly impenetrable surface, which is visually accentuated by Julian’s immaculate physique and tantalizing gestures. Clay must accept that Julian does not give him a chance to establish a personal basis of communication.

When Julian fails to return the loan and does not stay in touch either, Clay becomes nervous. His anxiety grows with each futile effort to get hold of Julian (109, 134, 135, 150) and further increases with each obscure piece of information he can gather about Julian’s activities (125-126, 137). As a consequence, he subconsciously begins to accustom himself to a possibility that he has not dared confront communication (e.g. 106).
consciously. The phrase “Wonder if he’s for sale,” which haunts Clay throughout his complete stay in Los Angeles (23, 26, 66, 103, 176, 183), is a clear manifestation of his subliminal fear that Julian might be a prostitute. Evidently, Clay has been so successful at suppressing this increasingly inescapable realization that he is genuinely taken by surprise when he eventually learns the truth about Julian: Julian is addicted to heroin and finances his habit and expensive lifestyle by prostituting himself to male clients. The pimp, a man named Finn, offers to reimburse Clay if he joins Julian in an appointment with a client. Clay is surprised at himself when he accepts this shady offer: “[J]ulian, his eyes all glassy, sad grin on his face says, ‘Who cares? Do you? Do you really care?’ and I don’t say anything and realize that I really don’t care. . . . [I] realize that the money doesn’t matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst” (172). By now he is almost completely emotionally distanced from Julian and is beginning to regard him as an object of study. Accordingly, in the client’s hotel room, Clay accepts the role of the uninvolved spectator:

The man sits me down in an easy chair and positions me nearer the bed and then, satisfied, walks up to Julian and places his hand on Julian’s bare shoulder. His hand drops down to Julian’s jockey shorts and Julian closes his eyes.

“You’re a very nice young man.”

An image of Julian in fifth grade, kicking a soccer ball across a green field.

“Yes, you’re a very beautiful boy,” the man from Indiana says, “and here, that’s all that matters.”

Julian opens his eyes and stares into mine and I turn away and notice a fly buzzing lazily over to the wall next to the bed. 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 there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly (175-176).

After unsuccessfully trying to throw up in the bathroom (176), Clay is ready to face the scene, and he admits to himself that he is even strangely and irresistibly attracted to this scene.

Watching Julian perform alters Clay’s perception of his friend significantly. The hours in the hotel room efface any lingering memories of an innocent childhood and teenage friendship (175, 177). “Julian’s face looks older to me now” (177), Clay soberly observes. To Clay, his former friend has become an adult now, whose decline he is prepared to follow with great detachment and clinical interest. Clay’s new view
of Julian is finally in evidence in the following scene at another customer’s party. Even though Clay ostensibly follows Julian and the pimp because he is supposed to receive his money after Julian has completed one more assignment, it is clear that the loan has turned into a mere pretext for Clay, permitting him to tag along and stay close to Julian, who has become his object of study. At the party Clay is in a bathroom when suddenly Julian is shoved in by the pimp. Julian wants to quit as a prostitute but the pimp berates him for being “arrogant, selfish, ungrateful” and having turned himself into a “whore” (182). All through this scene, Clay again stays inactive and intently watches as the pimp once more forcibly injects Julian with heroin:

Disappear Here.
The syringe fills with blood.
You’re a beautiful boy and that’s all that matters.
Wonder if he’s for sale.
People are afraid to merge. To merge (183).

Clay’s mantra-like repetition of these key phrases, which haunt him throughout his vacation in Los Angeles, shows how intricately the main themes are entwined in his concept of himself and the world around him: These are the dread of intimacy, the fear of losing one’s identity by selling oneself for the gratification of one’s own insatiable consumer wants, and the desire to disengage oneself emotionally from this world and thus escape commitment and shirk responsibility. Even though Clay is not quite as detached as his previous remark makes believe, he nevertheless remains a passive onlooker just as he did earlier this day when Finn subdued Julian’s protest in like manner (171) and, once again, when Clay stayed put in his chair watching Julian and his client for five solid hours (177). The previous nostalgia for their

152 Egloff, too, argues that Clay’s compulsory repetition of the question “Wonder if he’s for sale” is another manifestation of Clay’s fear of losing his identity in a commodified consumer world (Egloff 2001: 68). Freese comments, “By now the three originally unrelated phrases about disappearing, being for sale and fearing to merge have acquired manifold meanings through repetition and variation within different contexts. By simply combining them Clay can express his terror and despair about the hopelessness of a self-destructive generation suffocating on the terrible combination of spiritual poverty and material abundance” (Freese 1990: 75).
friendship is completely gone, and Clay does not intervene on Julian’s behalf in any way.

The reason why Clay studies Julian with growing, increasingly impassive interest is that Clay subconsciously begins to regard Julian as his mirror image. When Clay agrees to accompany Julian he decides to take a look into a possible vision of his own future. Clay recognizes that Julian has fallen victim to the lures of the culture of excessive over-consumption they live in. Julian has become slave to the desires awakened by the culture industries. His insatiable wants—palpable in his uncontrollable heroin addiction—can be appeased only temporarily through ever stronger acts of consumption. These, then, force him to take the ultimate step and prostitute himself, that is, to turn his body into a consumption good. In this way, Julian is inescapably caught up in a spiral of consumption and commodification. In Julian Clay also sees the same fear of intimacy that restrains himself from entering into deep and meaningful relationships. Interpreting Julian’s role in Clay’s life in this way sheds a new light on the latter’s efforts to renew his relationship with the friend. They may be understood as attempts to get in touch with himself. By following Julian through his ordeal, Clay learns about himself. He realizes that he himself is bent on the same course of self-destruction as Julian. Clay also comes to understand that his survival strategy of emotional disengagement has made him as apathetic as his former friend.

In his dejection and emotional detachment, the protagonist of Bret Easton Ellis’s first novel evinces character traits that sociologists have identified in contemporary city dwellers. More precisely, in Less Than Zero Ellis studies a young man to whom emotional distancing from his family and friends is preferable to emotional involvement. Ultimately, detachment appears to be the only strategy that promises a chance of psychic survival in a society in which relationship is considered as a form of contest and the partner as an object of consumption. The picture the
The Self in Trouble: author paints here is fundamentally in line with theories that discern a significant decrease in the ability to engage in meaningful relationships and that relate this development to the living conditions of the consumer society. For Clay and his jaded friends the traditional love myth (Swidler 1980), according to which the self finds fulfillment in a single, permanent love relationship, has lost its spell. Ellis’s diagnosis of social relations among the super-rich of Hollywood in the 1980s parallels observations made about the consumer society since the late 1940s. Specifically, in *Less Than Zero* Ellis describes a tendency that David Riesman already discerned in the postwar era. Like the other-directed personality that Riesman saw emerging then, Clay demonstrates a tendency to view partnership as a contest that, while holding the promise of sexual satisfaction and a sense of power, also involves the risk of domination and exploitation. In the casual relationships Clay and his peers engage in, the partners are basically contestants who regard each other as depersonalized objects of consumption. Clay responds to this situation much like the other-directed personality that Riesman characterized. The detailed analyses of Clay’ relationships to Blair and Julian have demonstrated that he withdraws emotionally so as to minimize the risk of defeat and exploitation.

Clay’s approach to social relations is also evidence of his narcissistic personality. In fact, in *Less Than Zero*, the author has created a protagonist that may be considered as a perfect specimen of the narcissistic personality that, according to Christopher Lasch, emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. As has been shown above, Lasch argues that to the narcissistic personality emotional disengagement is a necessary survival strategy. However, just as Lasch describes, Clay’s “protective shallowness” and “cynical detachment” (Lasch 1978: 194; quoted and discussed above) are not heartfelt, not completely authentic. Ellis suggests that his troubled teenage protagonist still harbors a passionate, if suppressed longing for intimate social relations.
A review of Bret Easton Ellis’s oeuvre to date shows that emotional disengagement is a fundamental quality in all his characters. One will also find evidence to support the thesis suggested above that Ellis found his subject, themes and tone very early on and has basically been working on refining and radicalizing them ever since. In analogy to the discussion of the author’s portrayal of family relations, one may say that emotional disengagement is a particularly pressing problem to the characters only in Ellis’s early fictions—Less Than Zero and The Informers. Their unwillingness and inability to become involved with their families, friends, and lovers troubles them even as it appears to offer the only protection against hurt and exploitation. By contrast, Ellis’s later protagonists are much more radical in their emotional detachment and entirely unperturbed about it. To the latter, emotional involvement is simply not an option, nor has it ever been one.

The strong but stifled desire for close and meaningful relationships found in Clay can also be traced in some of the characters in the early fictions collected in The Informers. For instance, the unnamed female Camden student—possibly Susan Laine—who is the narrative consciousness in both the opening and the concluding story to The Informers longs for a sign of real affection from her jaded lover. Yet, much like Blair in Less Than Zero, she must make a determined effort to withdraw emotionally from this relationship to protect herself.

In “The Up-Escalator”, the first of the Laine-stories discussed above, years of mutual hurts, indifference, and contempt have created an unbridgeable emotional rift between the spouses. This is thrown into sharp relief in the party scene at the end of the story. As husband and wife approach the crowd of photographers awaiting the party guests at the entrance, he tells her to smile:

“Smile,” he hisses. “Or at least try to. I don’t want another picture like that last one in the Hollywood Reporter, where you just stared off somewhere else with this moronic gaze on your face.”
“I’m tired, William. I’m tired of you. I’m tired of these parties. I’m tired.”
“The tone of your voice could have fooled me,” he says, taking my arm roughly. “Just smile, okay? Just until we get past the photographers, then I don’t give a fuck what you do” (Informers, 40).
This scene is a striking example of how strongly husband and wife are estranged from each other, yet how vehemently the public image of an intact marriage and family is protected. In this respect it is comparable to the Christmas family dinner in *Less Than Zero* discussed above. Such scenes also serve to emphasize the direct thematic and stylistic link between Ellis’s portrayal of morals in the perverted consumer society of Hollywood in the 1980s and Joan Didion’s picture of the same community more than a decade before in *Play It As It Lays* (1970).

In the third Laine-story, “Water From the Sun”, the final confrontation between Cheryl, William’s second wife, and her soon-to-be ex-husband, Ellis virtually copies his rendition of the last meeting with Clay. Cheryl raises the same accusation against William as Blair does towards Clay:

“[Y]ou’ve never felt anything for anybody.” […] “You were never there. You were never there.” I stop. “You were never . . . alive.” […] “You were just”—I pause, look out over the expanse of white carpet into a massive white kitchen, white chairs on a gleaming tiled floor—“not dead” (*Informers*, 102).

Like Blair, Cheryl suffers from her partner’s passivity and lack of commitment. Yet, as there is no story narrated from William’s perspective, it remains unclear if his emotional disengagement is also a strategy of survival as it is with Clay.

In Ellis’s later protagonists the longing for a romantic communion of souls—whose traces are still visible in Clay as well as in some of the female characters in *The Informers*—is not an issue anymore. Sean Bateman of *The Rules of Attraction* is a case in point. The author renders an almost satirically exaggerated portray of a young man who is only out to gratify his insatiable sexual appetite. For instance, in the course of the end-of-term party Sean has sex with no fewer than four women (*Rules*, 266). And true to himself, as Sean leaves the campus for vacation, he picks up a girl but soon tires of her: “She started telling me her life story, which wasn’t very interesting, and when Rockpile came on singing ‘Heart’ I had to turn it up,

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153 Ellis has acknowledged in interview that Joan Didion strongly influenced him especially in his early years as a writer (Carke 1998).

154 See the quotation and discussion on p. 192.
drowning her voice, but still turned to her, my eyes interested, a serious smile, nodding, my hand squeezing her knee, and she” (*Psycho*, 283). Sean’s monologue, which concludes the novel, breaks off in mid-sentence and trails off into nowhere, suggesting that the same old story of seeking gratification and staying emotionally detached goes on endlessly.

Of course, Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* is anything but dispassionate and detached toward the women in his environment. However, unlike Clay in Ellis’s first novel, Patrick does not even have the faintest desire to engage in a meaningful, intimate relationship with a woman (see Voßmann 2000: 84). Women are completely depersonified things to him that he may use to satisfy his various needs. They are the ultimate consumption good for him, and his relationship to them is essentially that of a consumer to a commodity. Patrick’s emotional disengagement springs from the same creed of consumerism as already voiced by Rip and is thus different from Clay’s. This consumer-commodity relation is bizarrely charged up with all kinds of emotions. Accordingly, Patrick only takes notice of those women who promise to still his unappeasable hunger for sexual gratification, power, and social recognition. As has been noted, his invariable shorthand description of their relevant physical features and details of clothing of these “hardbodies” and “chicks”—“big tits, blonde, great ass, high heels” (e.g. *Psycho*, 30)—is clear evidence that in Bateman’s world the women and sexual relationships are completely reified. With Julian Murphet one may argue that “reification is both what is behind the urban alienation Patrick experiences, and his only method for curing it” (Murphet 2002: 37). The woman’s role is essentially restricted to that of a male status symbol and an object that allows the man to gratify his sexual and violent impulses (see e.g. Voßmann 2000: 91, 93f). Ultimately, she is a commodity the consumption

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155 Grimshaw argues in much the same vein (Grimshaw 2000).
EMOTIONAL DISENGAGEMENT AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

The Self in Trouble:

of which promises redemption from self-alienation.\textsuperscript{156} In this context it is irrelevant whether Patrick’s atrocious acts of misogynist violence actually occur within the fictional world created in the book or whether they are merely the sick outgrowth of his warped imagination.\textsuperscript{157} The important point is that Bateman’s disaffection and violence are presented as the bizarrely exaggerated and unchecked continuation of his rampant consumerism (cf Annesley 1998: 13-16). It has been pointed out that Bateman’s crimes are consumerism taken to its heretofore unimagined extremes, both in degree and in kind. They are excessive in their brutality and in their clichéedness. In Murphet’s words, “Bateman’s sexual/textual violence is a symptom of the waning of sexual feeling under the regime of commodities in which he functions” (Murphet 2002: 39f).

In conclusion, then, it becomes clear that emotional disengagement is typical of all of Ellis’s figures. Yet, it has been shown that Ellis’s early characters—Clay, and some of the women in The Informers—affect such emotional disengagement as a shield against hurt and exploitation. It is the narcissistic personality’s response to an adverse environment. Much like Christopher Lasch, Bret Easton Ellis suggests that under such circumstances the person employs emotional disengagement as a survival strategy and withdraws to a defensive core, the “minimal self.” By comparison, the disaffection observable in Sean Bateman in The Rules of Attraction, in his brother Patrick in American Psycho, and in Victor Ward in Glamorama appears to spring from a complete internalization of the ideology of consumerism that degrades

\textsuperscript{156} It has been argued (e.g. Voßmann 2000: 100) that Bateman’s late, entirely surprising show of tenderness toward his employee Jean (Psycho,347-380) stands out as incongruous and inconsistent with his personality.

\textsuperscript{157} There is no critical consensus on this issue, and the heated debate—which led to the withdrawal of the book by Simon & Schuster and then, paradoxically, helped make it a bestseller—now continues among literary scholars. While Voßmann (2000), for example, makes a strong case for the thesis that American Psycho is a factually sound, credible portrait of a serial killer, Young (1992), Murphet (2002), and others argue no less convincingly that Bateman’s violence only exists in his imagination. Predictably, the author himself remains mute on this point: “[I]’d never commit myself on that. I think it important that fiction is left to the reader. That’s the great thing about books. No one can tell the reader which way to read
everything and everybody to consumption goods. In these books, the author does not even see the chance of a minimal self. These later protagonists are wholly subjects through and within the ideology of consumer capitalism.

Gender relations as a power contest are also dealt with in the “Eleanor”-stories of Slaves of New York and in The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group as well as in McInerney’s Story of My Life. Yet, the emotional disengagement typical of Ellis’s characters is not found in any of Tama Janowitz’s protagonists. Quite on the contrary, Eleanor and Pamela confront egocentricity and affectlessness in their environment and demand commitment and emotional engagement. As the chapters about McInerney’s fiction will show, emotional disengagement is an important survival strategy to the women protagonists in his novels (Alison, Corrine). The discussion will demonstrate that their emotional withdrawal from their partners is evidence of the same need to protect themselves that has been noted in Clay. By implication, this also means that the motives of McInerney’s Alison and Corrine are fundamentally different from the affectlessness found in Ellis’s later characters.

6.3 The Entertainment Media as a Dubious Sense-Making Institution

As has been demonstrated, Clay’s family and relationships are falling apart because egoism and an excessively consumerist attitude dominate all areas of his life. Together with their accompanying counterpart—the avoidance of intimacy for fear of exploitation—, these driving forces have completely eroded all social formations Clay belongs to. With parents incapable of acting their parts as figures of authority, his family has degenerated to an empty, crumbling structure. In the final consequence, Clay finds himself without a family that might give him a feeling of stability and belonging and that might provide his life with meaning.

and I like finding out how a reader interprets a book, it affects the way a writer comes to understand it” (Ellis in Anon. 1999).
As a brief look at the roles of the educational system and at the church in Clay’s life will show, these traditional sense-making institutions cannot give him orientation and guidance either. For Clay and his friends, university college, too, is incapable of fulfilling its sense-making function in their lives. This is why Clay is not at all certain whether to return to Camden College in New Hampshire. The question of whether or not to resume his studies after the vacation looms large over Clay’s entire stay at home (32). At a party three days after his arrival, Clay meets his friend Rip, who makes a half-hearted effort to persuade Clay of the merits of a college education (33). While both boys consider dropping out a personal failure, they are less certain about why staying on should qualify as an achievement. After all, Clay and his peers see college life not as an alternative to but essentially as a continuation of their aimless and dissolute lives at home (e.g. 13, 33). At the end of Clay’s vacation, what tips the scales in favor of college is that the situation at home has become intolerable. Accordingly, towards the end of the vacation Clay’s attempt to get his college mate Daniel to return with him sounds just as little convincing as Rip’s three weeks before (160f). The desultory conversation between them is evidence that neither of the two regards a college education as a sufficiently legitimated goal in itself. Confronted with Daniel’s apathy and torpor, Clay is at a loss for arguments and even begins to question his own decision. He realizes that he and his peers are completely left to their own devices. One may conclude, that just like the parents, the educational system is incapable of offering orientation and guidance to the young and fails to fulfill its task as a sense-making institution.

The church—here mainly the so-called electronic church—is another traditional sense-making institution which cannot satisfy Clay’s quest for moral orientation and guidance in this permissive, consumption-oriented world. That he is principally open to the offerings of the church is evident in his attention to religious TV programs, whenever he happens to come across them as he zaps through the
channels. For instance, upon his return from the New Year’s Eve party at Kim’s, Clay switches the television on:

And at home that night, sometime early that morning, I’m sitting in my room watching religious programs on cable TV because I’m tired of watching videos and there are these two guys, priests, preachers maybe, on the screen, forty, maybe forty-five, wearing business suits and ties, pink-tinted sunglasses, talking about Led Zeppelin records, saying that, if they’re played backwards, they “possess alarming passages about the devil.” One of the guys stands up and breaks the record, snaps it in half, and says, “And believe me, as God-fearing Christians, we will not allow this!” The man then begins to talk about how he’s worried that it’ll harm the young people. “And the young are the future of this country,” he screams, and then breaks another record (87).

Clay’s efforts to get the details right attest to the great interest he pays to the program. He understands that these church representatives are holding out the moral guidelines he is so desperately groping for. Yet his account indicates that he sees their offer with reservation. Clay remarks on the men’s business-like appearance, suggesting that the Christian gospel has been corrupted by its too close alliance to the gospel of the consumer society. Moreover, their self-righteous manner as well as the grotesqueness and absurd vehemence of their claim render their fundamentalist religious zeal and professed social responsibility rather questionable in Clay’s eyes.

In the final consequence, Clay concludes that the church —like the family as the core unit of society and the educational system—fails to fulfill its function as a sense-making institution. Through its grotesque religious fanaticism, the church makes it hard for Clay to believe in the existence of God, which is of course the ultimate foundation on which the Christian ethic is based. In a world without God,

158 A week later he implicitly voices the same critique again. Clay and his friends are at a club downtown: “From where I’m standing, I look out the window and out into the night, at the tops of buildings in the business district, dark, with an occasional lighted room somewhere near the top. There’s a huge cathedral with a large, almost monolithic lighted cross standing on the roof and pointing toward the moon; a moon which seems rounder and more grotesquely yellow than I remember” (139).

Shortly after, Clay watches a religious program again. He is tensely awaiting an evening with Blair alone (140). Again the preacher’s business outfit is suggestive of an unholy union of religious goals and commercial interests. Nonetheless, Clay’s yearning for security and clarity is so great that he is quite ready to believe the preacher’s promises and even considers phoning the help line advertised on the screen: “But I realized that I didn’t know
the Christian ethic cannot work. Such a world is “beyond good and evil” in the Nietzschean sense. Furthermore, the proximity of the church to the world of business and consumption serves to discredit the Christian ethic in Clay’s eyes. Thus, he feels that the church is incapable of offering a moral framework of reference to him.

As the analysis shows, the disintegration of the family as the core unit of society and the complete failure of other traditional sense-making institutions has created a moral and spiritual vacuum. Seeking to fill this void, Clay turns to the mass media, in particular to the offerings of the entertainment industries. Even a cursory reading of the novel shows that the media are ubiquitous in Clay’s world—there is always a radio or a television set playing—the latter either with or without sound—a movie showing, or a glossy magazine lying around. Because of his conspicuous consumption of media products, Clay is so completely embedded in the reality created by the entertainment industries that the media come to play an important part in his search for answers to the burning questions in his life and in the construction of his identity.159

At first sight, the sheer omnipresence of the mass media in Clay’s life seems strangely at odds with his remarkably narrow taste.160

Yet in their entirety, Clay’s peculiar media preferences are clear evidence of his preoccupation with himself. He only consumes such texts as reflect his own world view. Music and television, film and magazines, then, do not simply provide the ever-present but accidental and barely noticed background noise against which Clay acts out his life. Frequently, he consciously registers them, and they become what to say. And I remember seven of the words that the man spoke. Let this be a night of Deliverance.” (141).

159 Freese, too, emphasizes this point (Freese 1990: 77).
160 In music, Clay favors Punk and New Wave, especially local performers. He frequently watches splatter or slasher films or movies featuring the mysterious or the futuristic. His interest in the news is limited to items concerning the greater Los Angeles area, particularly about mysterious events, killings and accidents, social unrest or natural disasters.
integral to his perception and experience. As the following analysis will demonstrate, to Clay’s narcissistic personality the products of the entertainment industries function as mirrors of himself.

The names of Clay’s favorite L.A. Punk bands such as Killer Pussy (25), Fear (79, 87, 136), and Missing Persons (90) indicate his sense of doom and destruction and are a sign of the strong dose of cynicism characterizing this music. As snatches of these bands’ songs resound in Clay’s mind, it becomes obvious that to Clay this music is a reflection of his troubled self. On the fifth day, for instance, after he has visited Muriel in the hospital, a trivial mix-up makes him panic:

I leave the parking lot of Cedars-Sinai and make a couple of wrong turns and end up on Santa Monica. I sigh, turn up the radio, some little girls are singing about an earthquake in L.A. “My surfboard’s ready for the tidal wave.” A car pulls up next to mine at the next light and I turn my head to see who’s in it. Two young guys in a Fiat and both have short hair and bushy mustaches and are wearing plaid short-sleeve shirts and ski vests and one looks at me, with this total look of surprise and disbelief and he tells his friend something and now both of them are looking at me. “Smack, smack, I fell in a crack.” The driver rolls down his window and I tense up and he asks something, but my window’s rolled up and the top isn’t down and so I don’t answer his question. But the driver asks me again, positive that I’m this certain actor. “Now I’m part of the debris,” the girls are squealing.

Clay is unable to handle this harmless situation. His initial discomfort about a possibly unpleasant encounter quickly builds up into a regular panic. Clay’s response roots in his fear that he might lack a recognizable, individually unique identity. That he is mistaken for somebody else is a stab to his battered ego. The scene also fuels his xenophobia and the sense of social and physical imperilment that he has come to associate with home. As a consequence Clay is so tense that a mere song is enough to throw him off-balance. This is because to Clay’s anguished mind the artists and their music command just as much attention as the mix-up itself. The L.A. punk rock band Little Girls simply become “some little girls” to Clay, and he cannot shut out the alarming words of their “Earthquake Song.” In this way the music blends in with and thus becomes an integral element of the scene for Clay, expressing and amplifying

He is also an avid reader of magazine news stories about the Hollywood film community, which he belongs to.
his irrational fears.

Furthermore, Clay’s conspicuous consumption of entertainment media has an escapist function. It reflects his longing for tranquillity and his desire to escape from an oppressive present. The media help him ease his tension and divert his attention from his constant worries. He purposely showers himself with a flood of mindless songs and films to numb his senses. Clay’s use of MTV is certainly a case in point. It appears to be the perfect sedative for Clay, much like the artificial tranquilizers he depends on. In light of the ubiquity of Music Television in Clay’s perception,\textsuperscript{161} it may surprise that he never talks about what exactly is shown on MTV (Steur 1995: 131), that he sometimes even puts it on without sound, and on one occasion, even turns it on to help him fall asleep (39). Evidently, MTV creates the soothing background noise and blur of images which he needs to restore his peace of mind and to escape into the fantasy of a better world.\textsuperscript{162}

Moreover, the media often function as an outlet for the pent-up fury and frustration in Clay’s life. In fact, as Clay almost never speaks about his feelings to his friends and only rarely and obliquely hints at them in his report, these songs and movies provide an important, if indirect indication of his precarious emotional equilibrium. His taste for so-called splatter and slasher movies, which he shares with his friends,\textsuperscript{163} illustrates what may be called the “safety valve”-function of the media. Yet, as the following passage illustrates, Clay’s enormous rage is only equalled by his utter lack of feeling for others so that even this kind of movie leaves him basically unfazed:

We drive to Westwood. The movie Kim and Blair want to see starts at ten and is about this group of young pretty sorority girls who get their throats slit and are thrown

\textsuperscript{161} According to Steur’s count, Clay mentions MTV fifteen times (Steur 1995: 130).

\textsuperscript{162} This is also apparent at the end of this vacation of horrors coupled with mind-numbing tedium. Clay is watching his sisters having fun with “a game in which they pretend to be dead” (198). All the while, he is listening to his walkman where “the Go-Go’s are singing ‘I wanna be worlds away/I know things will be okay when I get worlds away’” (198).

\textsuperscript{163} Some friends go to a screening of a new sequel to the \textit{Friday the 13th} series (130), and a snuff movie is shown at a party which Clay’s friend Trent gives (153-154). The latter is discussed on p. 212.
into a pool. I don't watch a lot of the movie, just the gory parts. My eyes keep wandering off the screen and over to the two green Exit signs that hang above the two doors in the back of the theater (97).

Clay’s response in this scene is most telling. Utterly indifferent to the movie’s plot and characters and not interested in the girls’ company either, Clay only perks up a little when violent scenes provide him with a chance to indulge in fantasies of violence and thus to abreact his anger. That even such extreme stimulation is barely strong enough to hold his attention for any length of time is a measure of his frustration and his numbness. Clay can neither vent his anger, nor is he filled with empathy or disgust; there is only boredom, the need to release his frustration and the wish to escape.

Finally, Clay’s copious consumption of movies and songs also reflects his longing for truth and understanding. Since traditional sense-making formations and institutions have lost their powers for Clay, he turns to the entertainment media in his search of a valid referential frame within which to construe his extreme experiences. Feeling that he lives in a chaotic world of appearances, he has the desperate need of a picture of the world that is both truthful and capable of creating order and thus of making sense. However, he repeatedly finds that the products of the entertainment industries cannot fulfill their representational and ordering functions. Instead, they confirm rather than dispel his sense of doom. Clay’s persistent but futile quest for orientation and guidance in the offerings of the entertainment media is clearly in evidence in the final paragraph of his account, which he entirely devotes to the reflection on a pop song:

There was a song I heard when I was in Los Angeles by a local group. The song was called “Los Angeles” and the words and images were so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days. The images, I later found out, were personal and no one I knew shared them. The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun. These images stayed with
Clay’s meditation on this unsettling litany of mindless horrors is proof that, as has been argued above, the media provide both a mirror and a channel for the fears and frustrations he cannot and dare not express otherwise. Yet, as Clay makes clear, this song does not merely render the passions of a fleeting moment. The passage also demonstrates his efforts to use pop music as a sense-making instrument, as a frame of reference that will allow him to understand his life. The use of the past tense and the repeated references to the long time elapsed since his departure are clear signs of Clay’s new self-awareness: he is not an involved participant anymore but a consciously selecting and structuring narrator. He wants to emphasize that he is now assessing the events from a temporally, spatially and, by implication, critically distanced vantage point. For this reason it is doubly significant that Clay, the narrator, chooses to close his “narrative” with a reflection on a song. Evidently, even when “recollected in tranquillity”—to borrow Wordsworth’s phrase—, after long and careful scrutiny, the song still stands out for Clay as an authentic expression of his innermost feelings. It aptly conveys his sense of living in a consumer society which is heading for its own destruction. Without moral orientation and guidance, people evermore franticly pursue their increasingly elusive goal of self-fulfillment through ravenous and uncontrolled acts of consumption. The inevitable end is death and chaos.

A further aspect deserving close attention is that Clay realizes that his sense of reality is constantly put to the test because of the overwhelming presence of the entertainment media in his life. Everybody in this community is somehow involved.

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164 This scene has been read as loosely echoing the conclusion to Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939) (Caveney in Young and Caveney 1992: 125; Annesley 1998: 99). West’s protagonist comes to Hollywood full of high hopes, which are soon dashed however. The dark novel ends with a riot scene outside a movie premiere.

165 This feeling of Clay’s is also evident in the fact that he used to collect newspaper reports of killings (77).
in film production and their lives are highly publicized. Clay and all his friends are also enthusiastic consumers of these media products. As a result, Clay is completely immersed in an environment of images. In his opinion, the close proximity of his world to the phantasmagoria of the media gives it a strongly surreal note, which undermines his sense of reality. In this context Clay’s interest in the current re-runs of “The Twilight Zone” is of particular significance (128-129, 138, 172). Especially the last reference to the television program shows that the worlds of fact and fantasy have become inextricably intertwined. In Finn’s apartment Clay has at last learned the terrible truth about his friend Julian. Tense and shocked he turns to leave when his gaze falls on another young man:

[I] see the surfer lying in the living room on the floor, his right hand down his pants, eating a bowl of Captain Crunch. He’s alternating between reading the back of the cereal box and watching “The Twilight Zone” on the huge TV screen in the middle of the living room and Rod Serling’s staring at us and tells us that we have just entered The Twilight Zone and though I don’t want to believe it, it’s just so surreal that I know it’s true... (171-172).

In this extreme situation, the image of the surfer strikes Clay as so bizarre that it seems to prove the presenter’s announcement. Clay feels that “the twilight zone” that he calls his life is every bit as grotesque and mysterious as the stories of this television program. For Clay it is the very surreality of this concrete situation—and, by extension, of his life—which makes it believable and significant. Clay recognizes that the teenager is the epitome of the bored consumer. His posture and behavior are a powerful metaphor for the dangerous mix of conformism, narcissism, indifference, and ennui which may eventually lead to drugs and prostitution. Clay realizes that, like Julian, this young man is in fact a reflection of Clay himself, offering another dark glimpse into the future.

Constant over-consumption of film and television has left an indelible mark on Clay’s sense of reality. For Clay the worlds of fact and fiction are not necessarily

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166 For instance, Blair proudly tells Clay of the photo of herself and her father in the new issue of People (70f). The New Year’s Eve party Clay attends is covered by a press
separate and different from each other. To his oversensitive perception, the latter
often intrudes upon the former, which in turn frequently resembles a carbon copy of
the latter. Because of the formative influence of the media world of images, Clay is
sometimes incapable of telling fact from fiction. This uncertainty of his manifests
itself again and again. He feels that he inhabits a world that can no longer be
comprehended within the terms of empirical reality alone. Frequently, real life in this
world of consumerism is just as grotesque, excessive, monotonous, self-referential,
and inauthentic as the fictional worlds of science fiction movies.

A sequence of three occurrences during the fourth week of Clay’s vacation
powerfully demonstrates to him how deeply and dangerously the excessive
consumption of movies—especially, of fantasies of sex and violence—affects his
sense of reality. Significantly, each of these episodes involves the rape of a girl.
Early in the fourth week, Clay and Blair attend a party, the highpoint of which is the
screening of a “snuff movie“. For Clay and his friends, who are used to films
celebrating violence, the movie scene does not so much hinge on the graphic
depiction of atrocities but on the play with fact and fiction:

There’s a young girl, nude, maybe fifteen, on a bed, her arms tied together above
her head and her legs spread apart, each foot tied to a bedpost. She’s lying on what
looks like newspaper. The film’s in black and white and scratchy and it’s kind of hard
to tell what she’s lying on, but it looks like newspaper. The camera cuts quickly to a
young, thin, nude, scared-looking boy, sixteen, maybe seventeen, being pushed into
the room by this fat black guy, who’s also naked and who’s got this huge hardon. The
boy stares at the camera for an uncomfortably long time, this panicked expression on
his face. The black man ties the boy up on the floor, and I wonder why there’s a

photographer (82). Kim only knows about her mother’s present whereabouts through magazine
reports (79, 147).

For example, a rumor of a werewolf stalking the neighborhood actually unsettles
him (77), and, when Blair informs him that Invasion of the Body Snatchers will be on cable
television, he begins “to make paranoid connections” (141). It is significant in this context
that, as Horst Steur points out, the remake of the movie will be shown, which does not have the
happy ending of the original version. Steur elaborates:

In Clays subjektiver Erfahrung der Wirklichkeit, in seiner Konstruktion von
Wirklichkeit wird sein Wirklichkeitserleben überlagert von der fiktiven Wirklichkeit
des Film. Es gibt für Clay keine zuverlässige Trennungslinie zwischen der Medien-
und der Lebenswelt, zwischen dem, was er auf dem Bildschirm oder der Leinwand
sehen hat, und den Erfahrungen, die er in seiner „realen“ Welt gemacht hat. Fiktive
Wirklichkeit des Romans und fiktive Wirklichkeit des Films durchdringen einander
und verbinden sich für Clay zu einer mediatisierten Wirklichkeit, die er als bedrohend
empfindet und auf die er reagiert (Steur 1995: 105).
chainsaw in the corner of the room, in the background, and then has sex with him and then he has sex with the girl and then walks off the screen. When he comes back he's carrying a box. It looks like a toolbox and I'm confused for a minute and Blair walks out of the room. And he takes out an ice pick and what looks like a wire hanger and a package of nails and then a thin, large knife and he comes toward the girl and Daniel smiles and nudges me in the ribs. I leave quickly as the black man tries to push a nail into the girl's neck. I sit in the sun and light a cigarette and try to calm down (153).

Clay’s disaffected, distanced description of the movie scene demonstrates that it is very important for him to determine whether the film is a genuine documentary. As an avid movie-goer, Clay habitually doubts the authenticity of what he sees on the screen and instead repeatedly stresses that he can only judge by appearances, by “what looks like” the real thing. This is why this presentation of unspeakable acts of violence does not get to him at first. Yet as the ghastly scene unfolds on the screen, Clay is gradually less capable of sustaining his customary aloofness. He cannot be sure if the small technical imperfections of the video—the poor quality of the film material, the careless cutting of the scene—are not after all proof of the documentary nature of the film. As the actions depicted on the screen become increasingly atrocious, the mere possibility of the movie being a factual report is unbearable for Clay and prompts him to leave.

The exchange among the boys after the video shows Clay that, like he himself, the other boys are too knowledgeable as to take anything on the screen for granted (154). What sets him apart from his peers though is his response to this irresolvable uncertainty. Whereas the doubtful reality of the film confuses Clay and causes him discomfort, he must see that for the others this very dubiousness is a source of titillation. Much of their pleasure derives from the possibility that the film purports to document an actual event. Evidently, watching horror movies such as Friday the 13th (130) has hardened these boys against such graphic displays of excessive violence on the screen. Unwittingly illustrating the principle of consumerism—which is that consumption must never completely satisfy the consumers’ desires but constantly incite new, stronger ones—, they are not content anymore with merely indulging in fantasies of violence. The line between fiction and
fact must be crossed or at least blurred for these callous boys to become excited and aroused.

Significantly, none of his friends rejects the images of the film as improbable or impossible; in fact, all of them appear to be convinced that these things may very well happen in their world. When later that week Daniel tells Clay about a girl he knows who was shot “full of smack” and then “gangbanged” (159-160), Clay is not exactly shocked. The story is so plausible and true to life in his eyes that he is genuinely taken by surprise when Daniel adds that this is not an actual incident but just an idea for a screenplay he intends to write. Evidently, in Clay’s view, life is just as bizarre and horrifying as some of the films that he consumes so that he sometimes has trouble telling them apart. That Daniel has obviously been inspired by the “snuff movie” he saw a day or two before illustrates the enormous channeling of the consumers’ imagination through the media.

Shortly after, Clay is finally confronted with the ultimate dissolution of the distinction between reality and fantasy as he witnesses how a young girl is actually drugged and gang-raped by his friends (188-190). In the present context it is necessary to point out that Clay’s friends are acting out a fantasy that does not authentically originate in themselves but has been inspired by a snuff movie they enjoyed a few days before. This makes the situation a clear instance of life copying art and once again underlines the powerful impact of the media on these young people’s thinking and feeling.

A further point that needs to be discussed here is Clay’s still dim but growing awareness that the media contribute to the creation of the perfect consumer. Clay begins to sense that, as individuals emulate the role models carved out for them by the industries, individual identity is in danger of being effaced. For instance, Clay’s almost parodic sketch of his father leaves no doubt that he despises his father for his

168 This scene will be analyzed on pp. 226f.
shallow consumerism and ludicrous adherence to the ideals of health and youth propagated in the media. While the father is merely a laughable fool in Clay’s view, his stunned portrayal of his anorexic friend Muriel shows that Clay is conscious of the overpowering hold of the culture industries on the consumer and of its physically and psychically destructive potential. A few days after his return from New Hampshire, Clay visits his friend Muriel in hospital:

She’s really pale and so totally thin that I can make out the veins in her neck too clearly. She also has dark circles under her eyes and the pink lipstick she’s put on clashes badly with the pale white skin on her face. She’s watching some exercise show on TV and all these issues of *Glamour* and *Vogue* and *Interview* lie by her bed. The curtains are closed and she asks me to open them. After I do, she puts her sunglasses on and tells me that she’s having a nicotine fit and that she’s “absolutely dying” for a cigarette. I tell her I don’t have any. She shrugs and turns the volume up on the television and laughs at the people doing the exercises. She doesn’t say that much, which is just as well since I don’t say much either (45).

Her pitiful appearance shows that Muriel is a casualty of the consumer society. Having lost control of herself physically and psychically, she is virtually being controlled by the culture industries. Through the media they hold absolute power over her self-conception. As a result Muriel unconditionally accepts the subject role cut out for her and desperately clings to the self-image projected by the television program and the glossy magazines, even though they literally destroy her.

Clay realizes that his own position vis-à-vis this consumerist culture is extremely precarious. Of course, he knows full well that like his peers he excessively participates in it. It is this dawning awareness of his own deep implication that may be interpreted as a faint sign that ideological indoctrination has not been fully successful with Clay and that there still is a residue of individuality left in him. Even as he willingly surrenders to the offerings of the culture industries, it is this remnant of an individual identity that he is continually worried about. For example, at a party some time in the fourth week, Clay is openly concerned: “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). Clay’s characterization
of his “clones” underlines that he perceives them as representatives of a type rather than as individuals.

Clay’s awareness of his own profoundly ambivalent attitude toward the media is brilliantly captured in an observation he makes after the mind-rocking events of that day of horrors in the fourth week. The scene is an expression of his compliant consumerism but also of his search of a way out that allows him to escape the pressure and uniformity of the mass, without relinquishing the protection it affords:

I sat in my room a lot, the week before I left, watching a television show that was on in the afternoons and that played videos while a DJ from a local rock station introduced the clips. There would be about a hundred teenagers dancing in front of a huge screen on which the videos were played; the images dwarfing the teenagers—and I would recognize people whom I had seen at clubs, dancing on the show, smiling for the cameras, and then turning and looking up to the lighted, monolithic screen that was flashing the images at them. Some of them would mouth the words to the song that was being played. But I’d concentrate on the teenagers who didn’t mouth the words; the teenagers who had forgotten them; the teenagers who maybe never knew them (193-194).

As he did during the screening of the snuff movie, Clay now experiences both attraction and repulsion. He realizes that his own copious, almost dutiful watching of these afternoon-shows proves him to be the perfect consumer. Yet, although he stays glued to the television set, he also insists that he is simultaneously looking out for those small breaks and gaps in the seemingly impenetrable surface of this perfect media product. In his estimate, he has preserved enough individual freedom to read these patent products of ideology against the grain. Clay is able to see through the act put on by those teenagers who are conscious of being watched. He understands that these young people are mere puppets, completely controlled by the culture industries. The monolithic, flashing screen with the tiny humans dancing in front of it is an image of truly Orwellian power with strong religious overtones. It brilliantly captures Clay’s recognition that through the media the culture industries exert an overwhelming ideological influence on the individual, molding him or her into a compliant consumer. On the other hand, the teenagers who do not sing along are a source of hope to Clay. While it is true that they do take part in what is ostensibly a
sham of spontaneous joy, they nonetheless also manage to preserve a tiny rest of freedom and individuality for themselves—even though this only consists of their weak gesture of refusal to participate fully. Clay senses that much like he himself these boys and girls are afraid of completely losing their individuality in the seductive attractions offered by the media.\footnote{Egloff, too, sees evidence of Clay’s desire of individuation in this scene (Egloff 2001: 83). On the other hand, Pérez-Torres sees no chance, let alone the desire for...}

The dubious role of the entertainment media as an alternative sense-making institution in Clay’s life is also manifest in his idolization of a pop icon as a person of moral integrity and authority. The British punk-rock singer Elvis Costello, a cult figure of youthful revolt, plays a central part in Clay’s attempts to find his moral bearings and to make sense of his life. In the disintegrating and empty world of consumer pleasures that he calls his home, Clay considers the punk-rock musician as the only reliable still point. As he returns home from New Hampshire, Clay finds everything unchanged.

I look up with caution at the poster encased in glass that hangs on the wall above my bed, but it hasn’t changed either. It’s the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record. Elvis looks past me, with this wry, ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window. 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).

Clay’s great reverence, quasi-religious worship of the musician may be inferred from a number of circumstances. First, the poster is the only object described in any detail (Steur 1995: 149). Secondly, Clay has properly encased the poster to protect it. Its position above Clay’s bed is perhaps a further hint at the artist’s significance in Clay’s life. For in the culture of white middle-class America, which remains firmly rooted in Christianity despite its secularization, this spot has traditionally been reserved for a religious icon, placed there as a plea to God for guidance and protection. For Clay, the poster of Elvis Costello appears to suggest that in the

\footnote{Egloff, too, sees evidence of Clay’s desire of individuation in this scene (Egloff 2001: 83). On the other hand, Pérez-Torres sees no chance, let alone the desire for...}
contemporary urban consumer society, where the formations and institutions that used to form the social, intellectual, and spiritual nucleus of society inexorably crumble, and where the ideals and moral principles which originally supported them have become mere pretexts for mutual exploitation, an unequivocal and committed critique, coupled with a dose of playful sarcasm is the only defensible ethical position. From Clay’s particular point of view, the message of the poster seems to be that in such a world radical protest is the only response one can “trust.”

As Horst Steur plausibly argues, the promotional poster for Trust—an “old Elvis Costello record” as Clay remarks (11)—establishes a connection to a much younger Clay. That is, the poster conjures up a period of his life in which the search for values and figures of authority and the formation of a self-concept may safely be assumed to have been Clay’s chief priorities (Steur 1995: 161). Evidently, the musician, who since the late 1970s has been making a name for himself as a harsh critic of a narrow-minded, fascist, and phoney consumer society, has become such a figure of authority for Clay. As the title of the album Trust suggests, Costello stands for commitment, involvement, and reliability—none of which Clay can find in the world he lives in. Clay’s respectful glance at the poster upon first entering his room after his long absence shows that he still accepts and even idolizes Costello as a figure of moral authority.

individuation here as “the self is wholly defined by the self image. . .” (Pérez Torres 1989: 115).

170 Horst Steur, in his exhaustive study of the novel’s countless references to film and music, provides the background necessary to assess and evaluate Costello’s significance to Clay’s view of himself and the world around him (1995: 148-170). Of course, as has been noted, the novel has been named after a Costello title. For a brief interpretation of this song see Steur (1995: 154).

171 Frequently, when Clay withdraws to his bedroom, his gaze wanders to the musician’s eyes on the poster, seeking them out as a point of reference. Especially when under duress, Clay hopes to find in Costello’s eyes the reassurance and the energy which he needs to go through the ordeal that this Christmas vacation at home is to him most of the time. For example, thoroughly unnerved by the strong winds one night, Clay looks up to the poster but only sees his own fear reflected in the idol’s face. “The smile and the mocking eyes” (12) with which the singer seemed to greet Clay on his return home have vanished: “[I] sit up in bed and look over at the window and then glance over at the Elvis poster, and his eyes are looking out the window, beyond, into the night, and his face looks almost alarmed at what he might be seeing, the word ‘Trust’ above the worried face” (63). On another occasion some time later,
However, Clay’s faith in the musician’s integrity is badly rattled, when he sees a framed cover of *Rolling Stone* in his psychiatrist’s office, announcing “Elvis Costello Repents” (123). In the 1982 cover story of the magazine referred to here, Costello publicly apologized for his racist slurs against the black musician Ray Charles (see Steur 1995: 157-158). Clay is deeply confused by this reminder of his idol’s fall from grace. In his eyes Costello’s immaculate image as a sharp opponent of bigotry and phoniness has been blemished so much that he loses faith. In a later scene he even tries to dodge the singer’s gaze as he looks down at Clay from the poster on the bedroom wall (157). It is no surprise, then, that Clay leaves behind the poster when he returns to college because Costello’s eyes have lost their hold on him (207). In the end Clay resignedly concludes that the Costello of “Trust” does not exist anymore. His idol has turned out to be a mere, fallible human. In the moral void left by the demise of the traditional sense-making institutions, Costello cannot be the figure of moral authority Clay needs so badly.

The principal results of this analysis of Clay’s view of the media as an alternative sense-making institution may be summarized thus: As the family, the educational system, and the church have lost their credibility as sense-making institutions, Clay turns to the entertainment media for orientation and guidance. In Clay’s world the media with their mass-produced and mass-disseminated offerings of sense have effectively displaced those institutions which traditionally shape the moral and ethical ideas within a society. They are by far the most important referential context in which he attempts to judge and make sense of his life. The analysis has demonstrated that the media as a surrogate sense-making institution play an equally crucial and ambiguous role in Clay’s quest for orientation and guidance.

Clay almost pleadingly looks up at the poster before daring to order cocaine from his dealer (94).

172 Greil Marcus makes the same point (1985: 12).
173 As suggested above, the pop idol may be interpreted as another of those surrogate fathers in Clay’s life, all of whom fail to fulfill their roles as figures of authority. See p. 175.
In the end, though, film and music cannot really give him the much-needed direction for a number of reasons. Firstly, in essence they merely mirror his own fears and confusion back to him. That is they are extensions of his narcissistic personality. Secondly, the entertainment media contribute to the creation of a hyperreality, which makes it difficult to sustain a sense of reality. Thirdly, Clay is slowly beginning to realize that the culture industries use the media to mold the ideal consumer, who has lost all individuality and seeks to still his insatiable appetites through ever new and more extreme acts of consumption. Fourthly, the culture industries offer icons of pop culture as surrogate figures of moral authority that cannot fulfill their role. Though Clay’s insight into the ideological indoctrination through the entertainment media remains incomplete, these four aspects ultimately discredit the mass media as a surrogate sense-making institution for him.\textsuperscript{174}

Less Than Zero’s powerful portrayal of teenagehood among the super-rich in the contemporary consumer society is a horrifying vision of the disastrous consequences of mass-media oversaturation. In its indictment of this situation, the novel basically draws on well-known arguments. The protagonist’s total immersion in the mass media may be said to exemplify the ongoing shift from a “word-centered” to an “image-centered culture” that Neil Postman makes out in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Postman 1985: 61).\textsuperscript{175} Less Than Zero is thus a fictionalized version of Postman’s admonition that “we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (Postman 1985: 4). While the novel is not concerned with following the more subtle consequences of Postman’s central assumption that today “all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment” (Postman 1985: 3), it does provide

\textsuperscript{174} Egloff concludes in a similar vein, “Der Weg zur Sinnfrage ist Clay … verstellt. Die Unterhaltungsindustrie hat alle Sphären okkupiert” (Egloff 2001: 90).

\textsuperscript{175} Postman’s critique echoes Herbert Marcuse’s attack against the language of the newspapers: “This language, which constantly imposes images, militates against the development and expression of concepts. In its immediacy and directness, it impedes conceptual thinking; thus, it impedes thinking” (Marcuse quoted in Bennett 1982: 44).
stark illustration for some of Postman’s claims. For instance, the depiction of Clay’s stupefied response to television reads like a case study corroborating Postman’s diagnosis. With regard to the common juxtaposition of disparate items in news programs, Postman asserts,

One can hardly overestimate the damage that such juxtapositions do to our sense of the world as a serious place. The damage is especially massive to youthful viewers who depend so much on television for their clues as to how to respond to the world. In watching television news, they, more than any other segment of the audience, are drawn into an epistemology based on the assumption that all reports of cruelty and death are greatly exaggerated and, in any case, not to be taken seriously or responded to sanely (Postman 1985: 105).

As has been shown, the novel is a protocol of Clay’s difficulties to come to terms with this mediated world. In this hyperreal space, in which everything is “always already reproduced” (Baudrillard 1983: 2), it is exceedingly difficult for him to distinguish fact from fiction and, consequently, to arrive at a reliable view of himself and his environment.

Furthermore, Bret Easton Ellis argues that the hyperreality created by the media is not only a challenge to the protagonist’s sense of reality but also an attack on his sense of identity. Following Christopher Lasch, one may argue that Clay—whose name already signals his great impressionability and “adolescent malleability” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 23)—is Narcissus and the entertainment media are the pond he all but drowns in whilst gazing at his reflection. What he discovers in the mirror is a young man in an often surreal world who is troubled by irrational and often vague fears and possessed by unappeasable desires. He is unable to surpass these haunting images—to go “through the looking-glass” so to speak—and emancipate himself from them. The novel makes plain that the protagonist’s search for ethical orientation and guidance in the media is futile.

Undoubtedly, the powerful but dubious impact of the mass media on the individual’s self-image is a main concern in Bret Easton Ellis’s first novel. In his second published book, *The Rules of Attraction*, and in the early fiction collected in *The Informers*, this theme recedes from view somewhat, only to reappear with a
vengeance in *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*. The protagonist of *American Psycho* is a “total product of the media” (cf. Voßmann 2000: 80) in a much more comprehensive and exclusive sense than Clay. Clay is essentially a “passive” consumer. He goes through the motions of his life of overconsumption and aimless diversion, always in search for the latest kick, but his heart is not in it anymore. By contrast, Patrick Bateman is a convinced, passionate consumer and he never even once questions his consumerist ideals and values. He is a thorough-going conformist. In one of his extremely rare moments of self-awareness, Patrick confesses, “I . . . want . . . to . . . fit . . . in” (*Psycho*, 237). Patrick’s rampant consumerism determines his every thought and action. In the final consequence, everything about Patrick Bateman and his relationships can be reduced to this guiding principle. “[H]is desire is sovereign,” writes Annesley, “and his purchasing power the ultimate arbiter” (Annesley 1998: 16). For illustration of his complete internalization of the value system of consumer capitalism, absolutely any passage in the novel may be cited. It is this utter exclusiveness and grotesque vehemence with which Patrick seeks to gratify his consumerist needs—unredeemed as they are by any individualizing feature or quality—that mark him as a caricature, rather than a realistic portrayal, of the ultimate American consumer. Ellis’s reliance on caricature—much more pronounced here than in *Less Than Zero* or *The Rules of Attraction*—identifies the novel as a scathing satire of the American “pursuit of happiness” at the end of the twentieth century.

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176 Arguably, these momentary sentiments are inconsistent with his otherwise complete superficiality and have, therefore, been dismissed as a weakness in the novel (see e.g. Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 99f; Leypoldt 2001: 264; Murphet 2002: 50f).

177 The fact that Patrick Bateman is always misidentified by his colleagues is an unmistakable signpost to that effect.

178 Young emphasizes that someone like Bateman “who is composed entirely of inauthentic commodity-related desires cannot exist as a person” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 121). The author himself has commented to the same effect, “[I] can look at [Patrick Bateman] as a stylized villain or a big metaphor for a ton of stuff, and a launching pad for anything you want to say was wrong about the 80’s: consumerism, yuppiedom, greed, serial killer chic, etc.” (Ellis in Amerika and Laurence 1994).
Like Clay, Patrick depends on the mass media to an inordinate extent. Yet, it is not with his predecessor’s sense of franticness that Patrick confronts the media flood in his life. While Clay desperately searches the songs and films and television programs he ceaselessly consumes for a valid frame of reference that will help him make sense of the ennui in his life, Patrick harbours no such uncertainty. To the completely conformist protagonist of *American Psycho*, the media are not a dubious surrogate sense-making institution at all; they are the only existent, utterly unquestioned source and foundation of anything he does and thinks and is.\(^{179}\)

Patrick’s exclusive dependence on the mass media for his cultural input has powerful consequences, which the novel displays in a satirically caricatured manner. Firstly, Patrick is an unnatural exaggeration of the prototypical consumer as propagated in the media. This is, of course, evident in his unfailing allegiance to the current fashion codes and consumer tastes as preached in the relevant magazines. As argued above, it is also manifest in the fact that he essentially degrades the people in his life to mere objects to be used at will for the gratification of his needs and wants. His complete internalization of the gospel of consumer capitalism is further emphasized at the levels of thought and language. For instance, his pseudo-intellectual profiles of his favorite pop music acts (*Psycho*, 133-136, 225-255, 352-359) read as if clipped from the glossy magazines that clutter his apartment. Similarly, his words are often indistinguishable from the language of advertising copy as, for example, in the intolerably long and detailed account of his morning toilet (*Psycho*, 24-30).

Of course, the most serious symptoms of the protagonist’s psychic and intellectual imprisonment in the “epistemology” of the mass media (Neil Postman’s term) are his atrocities. As in *Less Than Zero*, where Clay’s friends enact a video

\(^{179}\) Ellis comically accentuates the protagonist’s quasi-religious reliance on the mass media through the recurrent motif of “The Patty Winters Show,” which Patrick dutifully watches every day much as a devout believer will say his morning prayers.
scene and gang-rape a girl, Patrick Bateman’s sexual violence, which he likes to record on video (e.g. *Psycho*, 246, 304), is shown to be inspired by the movies he keeps renting out. “Sex happens—a hard-core montage,” he notes laconically on one occasion. A notable example of Ellis’s strategy is Bateman’s murder of a prostitute (*Psycho*, 328). Here he practically copies the infamous “drill murder”-scene from Brian De Palma’s *Body Double* (1984), one of Patrick’s favorite movies.

Clearly, then, Patrick Bateman’s ideological indoctrination through the mass media is so completely, so exaggeratedly successful that he is a bizarre caricature of the prototypical American consumer. Even more than in *Less Than Zero*, Ellis here joins ranks with the ideological critique of the culture industries mounted by Marxists and others. Specifically, Ellis’s attack on the media calls to mind the work of the Frankfurt School. In a manner, *American Psycho* may be considered as a late, vamped-up fictional version of Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, an effort that is equal in spirit—if not in substance—to its seminal forebear.

Secondly, the author also uses Bateman’s violence to highlight another detrimental effect of the flood of mass media images that continuously assails the individual. Ellis suggests that such total immersion in the world of the media may severely endanger the individual’s sense of reality. The protagonist’s atrocities are clear evidence that his capacity to distinguish reality from illusion is severely restricted. James Annesley observes,

> In Ellis’s imagination, the madness of Patrick Bateman is the natural product of a society in which rampant consumerism intersects with the hyperreality of a media society. The nightmarish activities described are thus intended to satirise this confluence of forces (Annesley 1998: 19).

By far the most powerful indication that in the Patrick Bateman’s hyperreal world the line between fact and fiction cannot be drawn with any degree of certainty is the fact

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that it is not clear whether the crimes he lays claim to actually happen. It is a significant that, from the reader’s perspective, the evidence is not conclusive either. In this way, Ellis is making the point that his readers are implicated in the same hyperreality as his character. Within this simulated world there is no fixed, transcendent point of reference from which it would be possible to comprehend it and to launch a critique. Dante’s inscription of the gate to purgatory, cited at the beginning of the novel, and the words, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (*Psycho*, 399), with which the novel ends, emphasize the “imprisoning, claustrophobic qualities” of the narrative (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 93). To the protagonist of Ellis’s following novel, these ominous words become a palpable reality. In *Glamorama*, Ellis essentially reiterates this view. In the course of the novel, the ex-model Victor Ward is inescapably drawn into a reality that appears to exist on a separate plane, distinct from, parallel to and unnoticed by the world he used to live in. Like Patrick Bateman, Victor Ward is trapped in this hyperreality, and all his attempts to return to his previous world fail.

Compared to the other writers studied here, Ellis’s preoccupation with the effects of a hyperreal environment on individual identity is exceptional. In Janowitz, one cannot find anything remotely comparable. McInerney, on the other hand, discusses the pitfalls of a simulated world in *Bright Lights, Big City*. However, as the analysis of that novel will demonstrate in detail, for McInerney hyperreality does not really pose any existential problems: It simply ceases to be an issue as soon as the nameless young protagonist manages to relocate his roots in his biography.

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181 This question is especially prominent after the alleged killing of his colleague Paul Owen. To his bewilderment, Patrick learns that his victim is evidently alive and in London and that Patrick himself is reported to have been with some friends at the time he claims to have murdered Owen. See e.g. Murphet (2002: 45-49) for a detailed discussion of the “Paul Owen”-episode.
6.4 Moral Disorientation

Clay’s incapability of getting personally involved with the people in his life and of actively engaging himself is in great part due to his lack of an ethics that might serve as a framework of reference for his experiences. The family, the educational system, the church, the entertainment media—all potentially stabilizing and sense-making formations and institutions have failed to provide such an ethics. Without such an ethics, however, Clay feels unable to understand and assess his experiences, to make sense of his life and discover a point and a purpose in it. This is why he cannot take a stand for and commit himself to anything or anyone. Clay is loath to accept this moral vacuum. Yet such is the conclusion that he cannot escape as his stay in Los Angeles is drawing to a close.

This becomes manifest towards the end of his vacation, as a rapid succession of extremely demanding experiences thoroughly rattles Clay and at last prompts him to cast off the role of the passive onlooker and to attempt a moral position. First, Clay accompanies Julian and watches him degrade himself as a prostitute. Significantly, Clay never tries to help his friend; nausea, attraction, and the simultaneous urge to escape are the only physical and emotional responses he registers in himself. There is no moral outcry either in the next extreme situation Clay witnesses that night. Having joined his friends on his return from Eddie’s place, Clay follows them as they go to “check out” a dead drug victim (190). By the time they arrive in the alley, the body has become a must-see for other friends of theirs. Both shocked and excited at the sight of the dead boy, Clay does not object to defiling the body and treating the death of a human being as a spectacle (186-187).

It takes another, even more drastic situation immediately after to stir Clay out of his inertia and, for a brief moment, to kindle in him something resembling a moral sentiment. Having lost interest in the dead body, Rip urges his friend to come to his place, announcing something “that will blow your mind” (188). The promised sensation is a twelve-year-old girl who has been drugged, stripped of her clothes, and
tied to the bedposts in Rip’s bedroom. Only this last incident is finally strong enough to elicit something resembling a moral response from Clay. As Spin nakedly straddles the girl’s face and invites him to watch, Clay leaves the room in horror and disbelief:

“Why?” is all I ask Rip. […]
“Why not? What the hell?”
“Oh God, Rip, come on, she’s eleven.”
“ Twelve,” Rip corrects.
“Yeah, twelve,” I say, thinking about it for a moment.
“Hey, don’t look at me like I’m some sort of scumbag or something. I’m not.”
“It’s . . .” my voice trails off.
“It’s what?” Rip wants to know.
“It’s . . . I don’t think it’s right.”
“What’s right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it.”
I lean up against the wall. I can hear Spin moaning in the bedroom and then the sound of a hand slapping maybe a face.
“But you don’t need anything. You have everything,” I tell him.
Rip looks at me. “No, I don’t.”
“What?”
“No, I don’t.”
There’s a pause and then I ask, “Oh, shit, Rip, what don’t you have?”
“I don’t have anything to lose” (189-190).

This is the first time that Clay is awakened from the voyeuristic trance of the passive observer and consumer and actually, if only very hesitantly and feebly speaks out against his friends’ dehumanizing treatment of the girl. Whereas he was able to “disappear” mentally (in the hotel room, 176) or physically (at Eddie’s, 183) on earlier occasions, that is to dodge the moral implications of the scenes he was witnessing, the rape of the girl finally makes him pause and triggers in him the merest memory of a moral conscience. The girl’s tender age is one reason why Clay criticizes his friends. Apparently, the idea that a child’s innocence is worthy of protection is part of Clay’s reasoning. Another reason for Clay to object is the fact that the girl is incapacitated in every possible way. In contrast to Julian and the dead teenager, who are or were responsible for their situations and acted of their own volition, the girl in Rip’s bedroom is held and maltreated against her will. Clay’s response suggests that individual freedom and the right to personal and physical
The Self in Trouble: integrity are central to his rudimentary ethics.

However, Clay’s hesitation signals that he cannot even be sure whether these seemingly very basic moral precepts are in fact undisputed and generally recognized among his peers. And indeed, Clay’s protest, half-hearted and weak to begin with, crumbles before Rip’s indignation and entirely unabashed declaration of what may be called the creed of this extremely permissive and consumption-oriented segment of urban American society in the 1980s. “In the world according to Rip” everything and everyone can be turned into an object of consumption. Even though Clay himself is deeply immersed in this consumer culture and prone to giving in to its lurid attractions, he feels uncomfortable about its moral implications and their bizarre practical consequences.\textsuperscript{183}

The evidence presented here suggests that Clay is slowly, hesitantly, beginning to develop some deeper moral understanding.\textsuperscript{184} Yet, even though Clay senses the flaw in Rip’s impromptu philosophizing, he cannot quite pin it down. It appears to escape Clay that this permissive ethics is self-contradictory and self-destructive. It formulates the universal right of total freedom but misunderstands that such completely unrestrained freedom potentially infringes upon other humans’ right to freedom. In the final consequence, such an extremely permissive and consumerist ethics opens the door to tyranny and chaos.\textsuperscript{185} Clay does not completely understand that the rights of freedom as well as of personal and physical integrity directly derive from the concept of human dignity. This idea is a \textit{conditio sine qua non} of ethical discourse in Kantian ethics and implies that the individual is never solely a means to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} This also goes for Clay’s friend Muriel. In fact, without thinking of stopping her, Clay watches intently as she shoots up heroin (cf. 86). See p. 189.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Leyoldt shares this view (2001: 246).
\item \textsuperscript{184} Steur, too, sees the beginnings of moral stirrings here (Steur 1995: 117). In contrast to the reading offered here, other critics regard Clay’s moment of insight as incompatible with what they believe is his otherwise totally affectless, disengaged personality. Consequently, they see this scene as a late, ill-advised attempt of the author’s to give his creation some moral stature and argue that the scene constitutes a weakness of the novel (e.g. Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 25).
\item \textsuperscript{185} Horst Steur arrives at much the same conclusion (Steur 1995: 198).
\end{itemize}
an end or a good of consumption. The human being is always an end and a purpose in itself (Mieth 1992: 247). Nor does Clay fully see that the concept of human dignity is also the necessary check on individual freedom, without which any ethical system must necessarily collapse. In this context, Rip’s clever retort that he does not have anything to lose may be regarded as an indication that in his view of himself and, by extension, of humanity the concept of human dignity has no place. Quite clearly, the Hobbesian world of excessive consumerism inhabited by Rip and his friends is a relapse into pre-enlightenment darkness.

Of course, Clay cannot be credited with having a full grasp of these ethical problems. Yet he is dimly, pre-consciously as it were, aware of the issues at stake here and he knows that they are at the heart of his moral ambivalence. Ultimately though, Clay cannot find sufficient grounds to condemn this horrendous outgrowth of a permissive and consumerist ethic with any conviction. And so, after a brief effort at taking a moral stand, Clay falls back into his customary reserve and leaves the scene (190). As a recent commentator on the novel concludes, “[C]lay is the passive onlooker, and indeed the voyeur of decline and degradation who, while pricked by the stirrings of a moral conscience, cannot break his paradoxical bored fascination with banal decadence and self-destruction” (Grimshaw 2002). Nevertheless, this day has a profound and lasting impact on Clay and strengthens him in his decision to go back East. Having seen “the worst,” Clay has no more expectations for the remainder of his stay, and the rest is mere waiting for the end. Thus, without the energy and the arguments to oppose his peers, Clay opts for escape.


187 The question of his return, which was a point of internal debate for much of his vacation, has finally been decided by what Clay has learnt about himself and his home. The significance of this decision and the immense effect of these events on Clay may be deduced from the fact that the vast majority of the fourteen chapters following the account of the mind-rocking experiences of this day begin with a reference to Clay’s approaching day of departure.
Although the author in interviews routinely repeats his condemnation of his characters’ conduct (e.g. in Schumacher 1986: 120) and voices his disbelief at the inability of many reviewers to understand the “moralistic side” of his work (Ellis in Murali 1999), his books are often regarded as morally indifferent or ambiguous or—in the case of American Psycho—even as downright immoral. However, the detailed analysis of Clay’s attempts to come to terms with his moral disorientation has yielded rich evidence that the novel as a whole is anything but morally ambiguous. It is true, as Elizabeth Young correctly observes (see Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 23f), that emotional and moral issues are rarely openly addressed in the book. Yet, this is merely evidence that the protagonist-narrator suppresses them. As shown in this section, such issues are not at all ignored at the reader level. Clearly, Less Than Zero, The Rules of Attraction and, even more so, American Psycho are superbly moral fictions, their “messages” being implied in the fact that their protagonist-narrators so obviously suppress such considerations. In fact, one is inclined to agree with Young’s conclusion that Less Than Zero bespeaks the author’s plain “puritan disgust” with his characters’ behavior (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 25).

Within Ellis’s oeuvre to date, Clay is a somewhat exceptional figure. Apart from a few, much less fully developed characters in The Informers (e.g. Cheryl and

Like an incantation Clay repeats the formula “before I leave” (192, 193, 202, 205) or “before I left” (193, 194, 195, 206) or “When I left” (207) in the opening sentences. Evidently, the departure has become a fixed idea for Clay and his sole point of reference. This day of horrors and discoveries has brought about a manifest change in Clay’s attitude to the world he used to live in.

After the publication of American Psycho, Ellis was accused of misogyny, racism, and celebration—even instigation!—of violence. Voßmann (2000: 21-30) and Murphet (2002: 65-71) provide useful overviews of the public debate that broke out over American Psycho. It is understandable, of course, that the perceived moral ambiguity of Ellis’s fiction does not go down well with the literary gatekeepers and the general reading public. Nonetheless, such moralistic outrage merely clouds the issues. The more rewarding question is whether literature necessarily has to take a clear stance. In any case, the charges of moral ambiguity against Ellis are completely ungrounded and result from an ironic and fateful misreading.
Susan Laine), Clay is the only protagonist in Ellis’s books to visibly suffer because of his moral confusion. No one of Ellis’s other major figures—Sean and Patrick Bateman, Victor Ward—feels the urge to question his ethical guidelines. Undoubtedly, in American Psycho Ellis takes this to unknown extremes. What has confused and vexed so many readers and reviewers is the fact that the protagonist never examines the motives that lead him to commit his horrendous crimes. Nor does the novel as a whole explicitly formulate a critique of its protagonist. However, one may argue that it is this “virtual absence of a decided ethical commentary” (Leypoldt 2001: 262) that turns American Psycho into a moralistic, even a didactic book. In Young’s words:

   This has the effect of turning the tables on the reader; 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 course and slip-shod reading. The reader is forced to scrutinize his own values and beliefs, rather than those being provided for him within a Good-Evil fictive universe (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 100).

   It has been suggested that Ellis intentionally leaves the issue of Bateman’s motives open (Annesley 1998: 13; Voßmann 2000: 61). The author does not offer the reader the easy way out by providing his yuppie serial killer with a problem-laden biographical background to account for his warped personality. On the contrary, Ellis makes an effort to present Patrick as a specimen of a type rather than as an individual—he is a “yuppie everyman” (Annesley 1998: 19). With the escape hatch of the protagonist suffering from an individually explainable twist of character closed off, the reader is thrown back on the only available explanation. James Annesley writes,

   In order to understand the novel’s moral trajectory it is important to appreciate the ways in which Ellis establishes powerful links between the society of mass consumption and Bateman’s brutality. In the terms laid down by Ellis, Patrick Bateman’s murders are crimes for which an increasingly commercial and materialistic society must take ultimate responsibility. Though on the surface Bateman’s crimes seem motiveless, it is his rampant consumerism that provides the key to understanding his activities (Annesley 1998: 13).\footnote{Voßmann offers a similar reading (2000: 61).}
In conclusion one may say that in Ellis’s treatment of his characters’ moral disorientation or, especially in the cases of the Bateman brothers, of their lack of any moral conscience, the author’s overall strategy of refinement and radicalization is visible once again. As his protagonists—from Clay via Sean to Patrick Bateman—evince successively less moral conscience, the books become more moralistic and even didactic.

A specific characteristic of Ellis’s essentially conservative cultural critique is his critical appraisal of the 1960s. Through a number of references in the novel, Ellis relates his portrait of the Hollywood Film community in the 1980s to the counterculture of the 1960s. Apart from numerous references to the West Coast rock scene of the 1960s—idolized by Clay and his peers but usually presented with negative connotations—there are more oblique links to the counterculture. Among them, as Horst Steur points out, is Rip’s evocation of Jack Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*:

“Where are we going?” I asked him.
“I don’t know,” he said. “Just driving.”
“But this road doesn’t go anywhere,” I told him.
“That doesn’t matter.”
“What does?” I asked him, after a little while.
“Just that we’re on it, dude,” he said (195).

Of course, Rip—the very caricature of a nihilist and hedonist—is a far cry from Kerouac’s portrait of “The Fastest Man Alive“. Rip’s answer comes out tired and indifferent and utterly lacks that boundless nervous energy that makes Dean announce to his traveling companion, “Whee, Sal, we got to go and never stop going till we get there” (Kerouac 1972: 225). In the world of *Less Than Zero*—and, by extension, of *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers*—the beatniks’ and hippies’ ceaseless search for self-fulfillment outside the limits prescribed by established society has degenerated to the endless search for ever stronger doses of mind- and

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190 For instance, a framed poster of the Beach Boys in a friend’s apartment makes Clay wonder which of the singers died of an overdose (50). Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles
soul-numbing distractions to forget that gaping void within.

Another allusion to the hippie counterculture of the 1960s is the “gang-rape” scene, which occurs as an idea for a screenplay (159-160) and as an actual event (188-190). It seems evident that Ellis has lifted it from Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). Didion quotes from a communiqué of the Communication Company, the self-appointed “publishing-arm of the Diggers,” a theater group in the San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury District of the 1960s who were an influential force in the emerging counterculture:

Pretty little 16-year-old middle-class chick comes to the Haight to see what it’s all about & gets picked up by 17-year-old street dealer who spends all day shooting her full of speed again & again, then feeds her 3,000 mikes and raffles off her temporarily unemployed body for the biggest Haight Street gangbang since the night before last. The politics and ethics of ecstasy…. Kids are starving on the Street. Minds and bodies are being maimed as we watch, a scale model of Vietnam (cited in McQuade 1987: 1970).

The parallels of Ellis’s text to Didion’s are striking. Whatever ill-conceived revolutionary politics or aesthetics may have driven the sex offenders or, for that matter, the original commentator of the scene at that particular place and juncture in American history, is hard to fathom today. At any rate, Ellis makes clear that, translated into the 1980s, such acts are merely meaningless, degrading excesses of an amoral consumer society. On the whole, then, Ellis presents a negative picture of the achievements of the counterculture, which blends in with the overall conservative slant of his fiction.192

The moral disorientation experienced by the protagonist of Ellis’s first novel has no equivalent in the work of Tama Janowitz. In particular, the major figures of *Slaves of New York* and the heroine of *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group* have a powerful sense of otherness that is grounded in their—to be sure, not always determined—opposition to the permissive ethics of the urban consumer society they provide the soundtrack to Clay’s aimless car rides through hot desert nights as he tries to run away from real or imagined menaces (75) or troubling memories (191).

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191 See the discussion on pp. 213ff.
live in. This oppositional spirit isolates them from society and makes them “excentrics.” By contrast, Clay is a conformist and—despite the delicate beginnings of an oppositional moral conscience—cannot overcome his moral disorientation.

As will be detailed in the discussions of Bright Lights, Big City and Story of My Life, moral disorientation is a major issue with Jay McInerney’s protagonists. With the young man in McInerney’s first novel, however, it is only the symptom of a temporary crisis. When he finally manages to identify the real source of his unhappiness—the fact that he has not permitted himself properly to mourn his mother’s death—and to reground his present life in his biography, the young man has mastered his crisis and has rediscovered his moral bearings. By comparison, Clay’s painful sense of moral disorientation is akin to the confusion experienced by Alison Poole, the pampered brat who is the narrative conscience of McInerney’s Story of My Life. As the discussion of this novel will show, Alison—much like Clay—is no longer satisfied with the creed of permissiveness and consumerism that has guided their lives up to now.

6.5 **A New Narcissus**

As this extensive analysis of the themes in Clay’s view of himself and of his social environment has shown, he becomes increasingly conscious of the destructive effects of the extreme consumerism that pervades all areas of life. Egoism and the definition of pleasure, identity, and social relations in terms of consumption and commodification have made life monotonous, shallow, excessive, and dangerous. Under these circumstances, social formations such as the family, friendship and love relationship are falling apart or losing their integrative powers. Traditional sense-making institutions are endangered and incapable of providing orientation and guidance and filling the growing intellectual and spiritual void. Likewise, the

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192 Thomas Irmer (1993) discovers a similar anti-counterculture sentiment in
entertainment media fail as a surrogate sense-making institution and they only draw Clay deeper into the jaws of a levelling, mass-produced, and consumption-oriented culture. He sees that people respond to these conditions with a fear of intimacy. Clay concludes that in such a world commitment to any one person or cause is difficult and dangerous or simply meaningless. Protection against pain and exploitation is of paramount importance. In the end, passivity, emotional disengagement, and escape appear to him as the only possible strategies of survival in this world of excessive consumerism.193

Clay’s beginning insight into the anti-individual and anti-social forces at work in this environment is a sign that he is conscious of a position outside the ideology of consumerism even though it may be unattainable to him at present. Ultimately, it is the protagonist’s very awareness of his own susceptibility to the lures of the consumer society that holds the promise of his emancipation from its dominant ideology. All of this characterizes Clay as what Christopher Lasch calls “the new Narcissus [, who] gazes at his own reflection, not so much in admiration as in unrelenting search for flaws, signs of fatigue, decay” (Lasch 1978: 91). Of course, the critic Pérez-Torres is right when he points out that the novel examines “the construction of character as the point at which various vectors of influence cross: MTV, drugs, music, film, violence, pornography” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 4); yet to argue that all characters are “figures wholly defined by their landscape” (ibid.), that “no character exists outside these discursive trajectories” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 88), or that Clay pays his immersion in the media world with the “dissolution of the self” (see Egloff 2001: 63) is overstretching the argument. Rather, Ellis portrays a narcissistic personality who, as Christopher Lasch argues, responds to the exceeding

193 Freese seems to be wrong when he maintains that Clay’s difficulty of taking a moral stand—his inability to cast his lot either on the side of passive indifference or on the side of moral outrage and active resistance—makes him an “unconvincing character” (Freese 1990: 83). Of course, Clay “never assumes the stature of a rounded personality” (Freese 1990:
The Self in Trouble: populating of the self through the “technologies of social saturation” (Gergen) by contracting to a “defensive core”, the minimal self, so as to guard itself against utter dissolution in an adverse environment. Thus, by creating a character like Clay, Bret Easton Ellis is making a strong plea for the idea of an essential, inviolable self. From his basically liberal-humanist standpoint, Ellis is capable of envisioning a self—albeit only “as a unified entity in conditions of primitive threat” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 35)—that exists outside the limits prescribed by the ideology of consumerism.

Ellis’s essentially liberal-humanist position is decidedly unfashionable in these times, as it goes against the postmodern grain. In Fredric Jameson’s words, “[C]oncepts such as anxiety and alienation … are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. […] This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject” (Jameson 1984: 63). By comparison, the portrait of Clay in Less Than Zero suggests that the author considers the concepts of existential anxiety and alienation as relevant as ever and regards them as useful to account for the individual’s responses to life in the contemporary urban consumer society.

However, the dim ray of hope for the self at the end of Ellis’s first novel, which consists in the protagonist’s departure from and, implicitly, his rejection of his dissolute life in L.A., is soon forgotten. The Rules of Attraction paints an even bleaker picture of the possibility of self-realization within an environment wholly constructed according to the requirements of consumer capitalism. Ellis’s hilarious spoof of Clay—he has a cameo appearance and his monologue consists of the same kind of phrases that made him look so sensitive in the preceding novel (Rules, 182-184)—leaves no doubt that Clay has not been able to make good on his promise of moral growth and emancipation. Considered within the context of Ellis’s other

84). Yet, this is not to be understood as a weakness on the author’s part as Freese suggests
books, this parody of Clay’s sensitivity is another strong signal that change and liberation from ideological imprisonment are exceedingly difficult in the writer’s eyes. Therefore, there seems to be little reason for James Annesley’s optimistic assertion that the “mass cultural argot” cultivated by characters like Clay and Sean and “their repeated emphasis on brand names, labels and consumer objects … provide them with a way of communicating and establishing their identities” (Annesley 1998: 96). Quite clearly, Ellis does not envision a genuine and, by definition, adverse popular youth culture arising from the individually different appropriation of mass cultural materials. The fact is that only Clay shows a modicum of critical self-consciousness about his consumption of the products of the culture industries. As Pérez-Torres correctly, if too sweepingly observes about the first novel, “there is no tension evident between the characters and their society because they immediately identify with their society” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 95).

*American Psycho* and *Glamorama* are even stronger testimony to Ellis’s pessimistic view of the state of the self in the contemporary urban consumer society. The existence of the “minimal self” that still holds out against erosion—a “minimal self” that is still visible in Clay as well as in some of the figures in *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers*—can only be inferred from Patrick Bateman’s general tension and from the destructive energy behind the barbaric crimes he lays claim to. In Elizabeth Young’s words, “he has to reinforce his “self”, his “identity”, in ever more extreme and violent ways” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 118). Yet, as noted above, in their forms, these crimes too are clichéd and basically only mirror his consumerist mindset. In Ellis’s following novel, the protagonist’s sense of self is even more radically threatened. “Glamorama is a novel obsessed with the ambiguity of existence. Nothing is what it seems, reality is fluid, life and identity are unstable,” Mike Grimshaw writes (Grimshaw 2000). The world Victor believed to know (ibid.) but as a conscious choice.
increasingly self-conscious realism

The Self in Trouble:

dissolves into the vagaries of hyperreality, and he is quite literally entrapped in a
netherworld of simulation from which there is no return.

6.6 An Increasingly Self-Conscious Realism

The extensive discussion of Ellis’s first novel and the briefer glances at his
subsequent works have yielded ample evidence that he is devoted to a
representational fiction that seeks to render a picture of the world rather than exhaust
itself in self-reflection. From his first book, Bret Easton Ellis makes clear that he is
committed to rendering a truthful, unvarnished portrayal of his characters’ deep,
moral disorientation, of their uncertainty about “the moral and emotional
imperatives” lurid (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 23) in their tempting and
degrading environs. In an interview given after the publication of *The Rules of
Attraction*, the young author Ellis states the agenda that has guided him since, “I like
posing situations and questions, and having people react to them. I’m not a
psychologist or sociologist. I feel that, in lots of ways, what I’m doing is
documenting much more than answering questions or giving reasons why people
misbehave in this fashion” (Ellis quoted in Schumacher 1988: 122). It is Ellis’s
professed goal to abstain from auctorial intervention and not to interfere with his
characters’ perceptions. In much the same spirit, he insists ten years later that “it’s the
writer’s responsibility to be as true to those voices as possible” (Ellis in Clarke 1998).

194 See John Fiske’s definition of popular culture on p. 92.
195 In this respect, Ellis’s picture of Los Angeles is reminiscent of Raymond
Chandler’s, Nathanael West’s and Joan Didion’s fiction. Incidentally, only “The Fifth Wheel,”
a memorable story appearing in *The Informers*, features a lower-middle-class protagonist. As a
rule, the writer is concerned with rendering a momentary impression of his oversaturated
protagonists’ lives. In the short story “Letters from L.A.,” which appears in *The Informers*,
Ellis makes a notable exception from this principle. The story is set in the L.A. of the early
1980s and written in the epistolary mode. A Camden student is to spend a term with her
grandparents in L.A. and dutifully reports her experiences back to her college squeeze Sean
Bateman. Characteristically, Sean never replies. The letters not only trace her changing
feelings towards Sean. More significantly, they mirror her gradual and unstoppable
degradation as she passes from innocent bemusement at the hedonistic lifestyle of the super-
rich, through attraction and moral uncertainty, to utter depravity. Of course, as with Clay’s
In line with this principle, in his books he absolutely refuses to pass judgement on his characters’ behavior and is extremely careful about guiding his readership. Evidently, then, the author has his roots in minimal realism but, especially in his early fiction, he also depends on traditional realist devices to achieve a sense of closure. In the course of his career, then, Ellis has become increasingly self-conscious about his means of representation.

For the most part Less Than Zero is a minimal realist novel. The setting and the subject matter are a first indication as is the set of characters. Ellis designs a spatially (Hollywood and neighboring communities), temporally (the Christmas vacation), and socially (the offspring of the super-rich in the film community) reduced world. This world is peopled with a group of decidedly flat characters (e.g. Freese 1990: 83-84) who are also very homogeneous with regard to their consumerist interests (which revolve around casual sex, drugs, violence, and mass entertainment), their psychic make-up (narcissistic personality structure) and their uniformly hedonistic and permissive value system. Morally indifferent (Gray 1985: 80), they only care about gratifying their consumer desires and waste away their young lives in empty, aimless dissipation, always searching for new and ever stronger stimuli. Their near-indistinguishable names already suggest what their actions then prove: “The characters dissolve one into the other” (Pérez-Torres 1989: 99). Evidently, Ellis does not mean them to be identifiable individuals but merely copies of the prototype of the ideal consumer as propagated by the ubiquitous mass media.196
This is also true to a considerable extent of Clay himself, but, in contrast to his amorphous social environment, he shows the hesitant beginnings of self-understanding. Extremely narrow in his behavioral repertoire as a protagonist, Clay is equally limited in his capacity as a narrator, which is a measure of his imprisonment in the world of the entertainment media. Ellis highlights the limits of Clay’s narrative powers in a number of ways. Firstly, he depends on the formulaic imagery used in mass entertainment movie productions. For illustration, any passage from the novel may serve. For instance, the presentation of the first scene between mother and son entirely depends on trite imagery. The mother’s copious wine drinking; the sunglasses she will not remove; her incessant checking of her hair; the son’s shaking hands—these images are taken from the all too well-known inventory of the Hollywood film production machinery. In the present context, it is the very commonplaceness of these gestures, their very unoriginality that is so striking—particularly so since, barely ten pages into the novel, the narrator has employed most of these images more than once already. What initially may have looked like a deftly crafted scene, turns out to be a compilation of clichés, a set piece. From the reader’s perspective, such formulaic images and words are “spots of indeterminacy”—to use Roman Ingarden’s term (quoted in Iser 1980: 170)—which cannot be filled with details. Rather than “initiating the concretization of the text” (Iser 1980: 171) as a representation of a concrete reality, these clichés mainly refer to their own origin in industrial production. In the end, it is clear that the narrator’s incessant consumption of mass entertainment has profoundly affected his perception and choice of material.

\[197\] The scene (18) is quoted and discussed on pp. 212f. 
\[198\] On Blair’s party the night before, Clay describes her mother in similar terms (16). He also refers to his friend’s sunglasses several times (12, 13, 18).
\[199\] Support for this reading comes from James Annesley (1998: 96).
Secondly, this scene between mother and son also instances the narrator’s repetitive and clichéd diction, which is another stylistic characteristic of mass entertainment. In this short passage, one counts no less than five occurrences of phrases like “say/s nothing,” “don’t/doesn’t say anything,” or “there’s a pause.” Such repetitive use of language is strongly reminiscent of the functional shorthand found in film scripts, which Clay as a member of the Hollywood film community will be familiar with. Clearly, the narrator Clay is just as much caught up in the language of the entertainment media as the protagonist Clay. That the reported dialogue opens with his terse reply, “‘Nothing,’ I say,” further shows that the spoken word itself signifies “nothing”. The empty lulls in the conversation on the one hand and the hollowness of the talk on the other are fundamentally coterminous, their only difference being one of pretence.\textsuperscript{200} The whole narrative abounds with scenes and phrases like these. Their invariability and obtrusive frequency are evidence that the author wants to stress that under the strong influence of the entertainment media the narrator is essentially incapable of developing a personal language.

Thirdly, the narrator’s limitations, his intellectual and aesthetic imprisonment in the world of mass entertainment is also visible in the refrain-like quality of the images and in the episodic, often associative structure of the narrative. The author himself confirms that this cinematic effect is intended (Ellis in Schumacher 1988: 122f). As a number of commentators have observed, these characteristics betray the powerful influence of music video on Clay as a narrator (e.g. Lehman 1985: 72; Powers 1985: 44; Teachout 1986: 53; Pérez-Torres 1989: 83; Freese 1990: 71-73; Steur 1995: 39f; Annesley 1998: 90). Less Than Zero and all of Ellis’s following books are proof of the author’s efforts to find an appropriate aesthetic expression for his view that

\textsuperscript{200} It rarely happens that Clay explicitly formulates this recognition. Late into his account, he wonders, “was it better to pretend to talk than not to talk at all” (200).
Media has informed all of us, no matter what art form we pursue, whether painters or musicians. TV has unconsciously, whether we want to admit it or not, shaped all of our visions to an inordinate degree. How? I don't know. I couldn't give you specifics. Is it good or bad? I don't know. I think it just is. (Ellis in Amerika and Laurence 1994).

Finally, the first-person present-tense narrative, along with the fact that the narrator uses simple, repetitive, and paratactic sentence structures, may be understood as an illustration of the narrator’s imprisonment in the “indeterminate NOW” of the mass media (Birkerts 1987: 43). As has been shown above, Clay’s attempt at nostalgic escape in the “memory” chapters is exposed as futile. In summary, Clay is an extremely tunnel-visioned narrator. In Pérez-Torres’s words,

The novel for the most part creates a flattened narrative space—the narrator, granted no privileged, distant, critical position, functions on the same level as the world he examines. ... [T]he narrative perspective, limited and unprivileged, indicates that there is no uncontested transcendent position from which to stand in judgment (Pérez-Torres 1989: 110f).

The reduced characterization of the figures in Less Than Zero—among whom Clay is still the most complex one—shows the author’s closeness to minimal realism.

Ellis makes little effort at integrating Clay’s limited tale into a greater referential context, thereby helping the reader to make sense of it. This reluctance to guide the reader—which becomes even more prominent in The Rules of Attraction and, much to the literary establishment’s and the general readership’s chagrin, in American Psycho—is a further characteristic of the author’s minimal realism. In a way, like Benjy’s tale Clay’s is “full of sound and fury”, yet unlike Faulkner Ellis does precious little to make his narrator’s tale signify for the reader. Whether in political, social, psychological, geographical, or historical dimensions, the novel as a whole mostly sticks to its narrator’s narrow scope of vision. The result is a pervasive impression of depthlessness in Less Than Zero as well as in Ellis’s following works.

Formally, this sense of “depthlessness,” along with the author's heavy use of mass culture, identifies the book as postmodern (Jameson 1984) and may even make...
it look like a late version of the pop novel as Fiedler saw it emerging in the 1960’s. Yet, as the analysis has shown, in spirit, the book is far away from the coolness, blatantness, and resistant to analysis characteristic of Pop Art and the pop novel. Quite the opposite is true: Ellis’s books are powerful testimony to his passionate desire to preserve the “fundamental depth models” (Fredric Jameson’s term, 1984: 61). The overwhelming evidence presented here leaves no doubt that, in marked contrast to many postmodern texts, Ellis’s fictional universe can still be gauged in terms of the old dichotomies of “inside / outside,” “latent / manifest,” “authenticity / inauthenticity,” “alienation / disalienation,” “signifier / signified.”

If, from an antihumanist viewpoint, the old dichotomies are no longer tenable because the self as a transcendental subject does not exist then Ellis’s both heartfelt and desperate partisanship for these “depth models” is an indication of a cautiously humanist self-concept. His is the idea of a minimal self, a self that insists on its autonomy but is aware that it is up against overwhelming odds.

In *Less Than Zero*, the author’s struggle to protect and preserve this badly beleaguered self is most openly manifest when he departs from his basic minimal realist agenda and reverts to conventional realism to make his point. These borrowings from conventional realism—which is based on a powerful sense of an inviolable self—betray the young writer’s dissatisfaction with the limitations that minimal realism imposes on himself as the author.

Of course, the structure of the novel is reduced as is typical in minimal realist fiction. For the most part the narrative is episodic, and there is no strong, compelling plotline. The extremely short chapters follow one another in mainly chronological order, only occasionally linked by association, but almost never causally. Ellis confirms that this was his intention. Commenting on his first two books, he remarks,

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201 Freese (1990: 69) and Steur (1995: 9) argue this point.
202 See Susan Sontag’s and Leslie Fiedler’s comments quoted and discussed on p. 86.
203 See the full quotation from Jameson (1984: 61f) on p. 87.
“there is a lot of aimlessness and wandering around, and there just doesn’t seem to be any room for plot. Imposing a narrative on these books seems to make everything else you’re trying to do invalid” (Schumacher 1988: 124). Nonetheless, when halfway through the book Ellis decides to play up the “Julian”-strand, what little plot there is thickens, and the narrative gathers momentum and pulls towards a climax. This late quickening of the haphazard plot gives it a sense of closure reminiscent of traditional realist novels.

The author’s impulse to create an effect of closure is also manifest in the traditional bildungsroman-structure (e.g. Young 1992: 24) or “journey of initiation”-structure (Steur 1995: 30f) of the novel. Leypoldt argues that Less Than Zero formally resembles a bildungsroman, with the protagonist in the role of “the generic traveller who returns to his place of origin with mixed feelings and a sense of alienation” (Leypoldt 2001: 238). But, as Leypoldt insists, the novel then does not quite make good on this promise “with the result that the main premise of the bildungsroman, the hero’s attainment of maturity, must be constructed by the reader” (ibid.). He correctly interprets “the ethical non-definedness of Clay” (Leypoldt 2001: 249) as an indication of the author’s minimal realist poetics; however, as has been demonstrated here, the narrative in its entirety is anything but morally ambiguous. By refusing to let Clay make the turnaround towards full moral conscience, Ellis in fact creates a remarkable sense of closure. At this point the author departs from his minimal realist agenda and seeks recourse in the seeming certainties of traditional realism in order to get a perhaps too overtly moralistic “message” across to the reader.

Of all of Ellis’s books, Less Than Zero is closest to traditional realism and most clearly shows the author as a unifying subject at work. In his later works, notably in The Rules of Attraction and American Psycho (but also less pronouncedly in Glamorama), he makes a much more determined effort to withdraw as a selecting and ordering mind. Günter Leypoldt correctly observes,
Ellis’ now infamous serial-killer novel American Psycho is a continuation of the minimal realism of his literary debut with slightly altered parameters: the recording of empirical details is pushed to baroque extremes, while character, plot and epistemological and ethical commentary are reduced to fragments that seem even more unfinished and contradictory than those in Less Than Zero (Leypoldt 2001: 250).

This return to and affirmation of his roots in minimal realism is also one of the major differences to the other writers treated in this study.

6.7 Engaging the Book as a Commodity

The author’s choice to portray a specific segment of the urban consumer society of the 1980s by almost exclusively relying on the referential frame provided by this part of society is evidence of his roots in minimal realism. Much like the protagonist-narrator, the readers are not granted a privileged vantage point from which to assess this world critically, nor are they offered an alternative discourse within which to construe the narrative and the book as a whole. Clearly, Ellis has lost confidence in the powers of a traditional realism that aims at visions of wholeness and order. But here lies the rub: Can a book that embraces its own implication in the culture it portrays critically transcend the mass-cultural material of which it has largely been composed? Moreover, how can a book that ostensibly tends to the tastes of a large target group (sex, drugs, rock’n’roll, celebrities) avoid being reduced to the commodity it is and hope to exercise a valid critique of this consumer society? In James Annesley’s words,

The scattering of labels, the novel’s emphasis on commercial media formations and its obsession with style might on the surface function as the outward and visible signs of a text that is wholly commodified and integrated into the commercial structures of late capitalism (Annesley 91f).

Predictably, the critics are not agreed on the success or even on the artistic and political legitimacy of Ellis’s project. For instance, while Ben Agger considers Less Than Zero along with the rest of the “Brat Pack”-novel phenomenon as instances of “commodified discourse” (1990: 25), Pérez-Torres asserts, “the narrative techniques and strategies borrowed primarily from mass culture hold the practices of
that culture up to critical scrutiny as they are manifested in the novel” (1989: 111). This controversy about Ellis’s approach—especially, as realized in its purest form in *American Psycho*—is an expression of the ongoing debate about the eradication of the traditional modernist split between art and mass culture in postmodernity. The extensive analysis of Ellis’s first novel and the cursory look at his subsequent fictions have provided plentiful evidence that in his work many of the characteristics of the modernist work of art (unity, complexity, uniqueness and individuality) are radically challenged. It has also yielded ample proof that the author successfully completes his tightrope act and manages to manifest a powerfully critical stance towards the urban consumer society in his books. But, because of his own implication in the cultural industrial machinery and the discourses of consumer capitalism, Ellis refrains from offering self-confident, ready-made criticism. Instead, through his minimal realism, he emphasizes the reader’s constitutive role in the formulation of this critique. In characteristically postmodernist fashion, Ellis insists in many ways that the reader is implicated in the same structures and discourses as the characters of his books. In a way, all of Ellis’s fiction “hails” (Althusser) the reader as a subject of the ideology of consumer capitalism. His novels are in fact replete with signals to his readers that the books are a part of the very consumer society they examine.

All of this means that, driven by a “furious subterranean humanism” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 34), Ellis locates himself “as a detached observer but as a willing participant seeking a redemptive transgression where only an act of participation will free the self from terminal decline” (Grimshaw 2002). This conviction characterizes Ellis himself as something of an “absurd hero” (Galloway)

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204 The books require a reader who is intimately familiar with the culture portrayed and can decipher the numerous mass-cultural references. Ellis also uses cross-references to other “brat pack”-novels and “yuppie”-literature. For example, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* is with Pierce & Pierce, the employer of Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Patrick also fantasizes of sex with actress Jamie Gertz, who featured in the movie production of *Less Than Zero*. Ellis includes a cameo appearance for Janowitz’s character Stash Stosz in *American Psycho*, and McInerney’s Alison Poole features in both *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*. 
who defies the alienating and destructive powers of consumer capitalism. Despite the certain knowledge that his critique is bound to be coopted and instrumentalized, Ellis persists in his attacks, deriving satisfaction not from the success but from the act of criticism itself. This is the hallmark of the “absurd hero”. In the final consequence, Ellis’s oeuvre is impressive proof of what the critic Gary Davenport has formulated in a different context: “[A]n authentic imaginative treatment of a meaningless experience has meaning, in the same way that an authentic imaginative treatment of the blackest despair is, as Camus remarked, a kind of salvation” (Davenport 1988: 696).
In his first novel *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), Jay McInerney is concerned with the difficulties of making sense of life in a pleasure-oriented world that functions according to an ethic of appearances. Set in the Manhattan of the early 1980s, the novel portrays a nameless young man who came to the city two years ago, attracted by its luring extravaganza and full of high hopes of literary fame. Yet, in the aftermath of his mother's death a year ago and, more recently, of his wife's desertion, his life is in a shambles now. His situation is aggravated by his fear that he may lose his position as a verificationist at a renowned magazine. He has to realize that he has been living in a delusory world that has little to do with the facts of his life. As he numbly drifts through the high-living club-scene of downtown Manhattan and joylessly participates in its hedonistic pleasures, he recognizes that he is an impostor, that he has been playing a role and cannot keep up his act much longer.

### 7.1 An Ethic of Appearances

The protagonist is keenly aware of living in an environment that functions according to an “ethic of appearances” (81). In this environment an attractive self-image is of overriding significance to one’s social success. He realizes that where the public orchestration of the self is integral and actual achievement merely an irrelevant accessory, the authenticity of the offered self-presentation—that is, the correspondence of public persona and personal essence—as an essential prerequisite of successful communication becomes exceedingly hard to ascertain.

The protagonist comprehends that, particularly within the high-living circles that he frequents, the publicly presented self-image is generally the sole basis acquaintanceships are established upon. For instance, upon entering a favorite night spot, the protagonist is struck by the social importance of one’s public self. He is conscious of dealing with people about whose real lives outside the club scene he does not know anything beyond their offered self-presentations: “Along the bar are
faces familiar under artificial light, belonging to people whose daytime existence is only a tag—a designer, writer, artist” (44-45). Evidently, the protagonist is also aware of the danger emanating from the fact that the publicly presented self is so carefully orchestrated and guarded against inspection. In this situation the authenticity of the public persona becomes simultaneously more significant and more elusive to him the harder it is to verify the image. In this world the publicly presented self is so impenetrable as to completely hide the real self and indeed raise the question whether such a real, authentic self exists at all. The protagonist clearly feels his powerlessness in the face of this situation because he realizes that many self-representations are fake but finds himself at a loss as to how to verify their genuineness. So it is with a certain sense of self-irony that he remarks, “You have been known to be deceived by first appearances” (67). Helplessness in the face of such vagaries is a recurrent feeling, for example, when he is being expelled from the fashion show for disrupting the proceedings:

Two large men in suits are hurrying down the aisles. The wires hanging from their ears probably connect earplugs with small transmitter receivers. But it is more interesting to consider the possibility that the men could be robots. How do you know that the terrified-looking woman sitting next to you is actually feeling what you would call terror? If you were to step on her foot she would cry out, but how do you know she would feel what you call pain? You could observe one of these robots for years and never know. You could even be married to one (126).

The protagonist is troubled by the impossibility of determining whether the responses of the people he is dealing with are genuine, that is, whether their present conduct springs from actual emotions. The image of the “robot” captures his concerns by comparing the people in his environment to machines which perform preprogrammed tasks in an unvarying manner. In other words, he sees that the people in his environment merely respond to a set stimulus in a conventional way, that is, in a publicly expected and fairly narrowly prescribed manner. This makes them predictable and lifeless and raises doubts about the existence of authentic selves

205 This is the young man’s conclusion, for example, when he mistakes a man in drag for a woman (9) and later when he dances with Stevie, who, much to his dismay, turns out to
behind the automaton-like behavior.

The main source of the young man’s feeling of powerlessness is his wife Amanda. Shortly before the scene just discussed, he anticipates the image of the “robot” when he describes that Amanda behaved in the manner he expected of her: “[Y]ou looked at Amanda every day for almost three years and you don’t have the ghost of a clue what was going on in her mind. She showed all the vital signs and made all the right noises. She said she loved you” (123). As with the guests at the fashion show, the protagonist feels incapable of determining with any degree of certainty if Amanda’s behavior reflects actual emotions. He is aware that Amanda’s job as a model already symbolizes the blurring of appearance and being. What enhances Amanda’s elusiveness is the fact that, except for one occasion, she only exists in the form of stylized images but never as a real individual. Apart from a few sketchy memories (69-77), the protagonist must resort to reproductions of whose fabricated nature he is only too well aware. 206 He admits,

Since she left, you have had . . . trouble identifying her face. You have gone back through her portfolio and tried to make a composite that matches the image in your memory. The photos all look slightly different. Her agent said she could do any look—temptress, businesswoman, girl next door. A designer who used her all the time said she had plastic features. You begin to suspect that all of your firm beliefs about Amanda were no more substantial than the images she bodied forth under the klieg lights. You saw what she was selling then; you saw what you wanted to see (124f).

Indeed, even her two actual appearances only further emphasize the impression that she is nothing but an assemblage of insubstantial images. Significantly, her first entrance occurs during a fashion show at which she is modeling:

When she is almost directly in front of you, she turns and looks at you. It is a look that could carry either hatred or indifference. You want to ask for an explanation. She turns away and retraces her steps down the runway as if nothing had happened. Whoever she is, she is a professional. Whoever she is, you don’t know her (125).

More disheartening than the recognition that he will never know her is the suspicion be a transsexual.

206 Among these likenesses of Amanda are a replica in a shop display (68, 78, 149), and a photo in the New York Times (59).
that there is nothing to know about her. He must abandon the idea of authenticating her purely imaginary existence, of getting an explanation that will link the images he has of her to the fact that she left him. Indeed, the very thought of giving proof and substance to these images is virtually ridiculed upon her second appearance, the only time she seems to step into real life. The scene—which to the protagonist is a kind of showdown, the denouement that will unravel all his mysteries—turns into a miserable anti-climax. With its stunning emptiness, Amanda’s only line in this scene—“So, how’s it going” (175)?—is enough to thwart the spurned husband’s last hopes of redemption and an explanation. To sum up, one may say that for the protagonist Amanda epitomizes a world characterized by the overwhelming importance of public self-representation. He sees that social life in this environment is governed by an “ethic of appearances” (81).207

However, despite his reservations against the prevailing ethic of appearances, the protagonist must also concede that he himself is deeply implicated. It is a symptom of his mounting identity crisis that he is strongly conscious of the difference between his image of himself as a cultured, well-established member of the upper middle class and his perception of his wildly divergent conduct. For a time he is able to resign himself to the shallow club life of Manhattan in the fragile hope that in the long run he will be able to redefine his own goals: “You keep thinking that with practice you will eventually get the knack of enjoying superficial encounters, that you will stop looking for the universal solvent, stop grieving. You will learn to compound happiness out of small increments of mindless pleasure” (52). Yet he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his highly ambivalent position vis-à-vis his social environment, in which the “pursuit of pleasure” rather than of happiness (3) is the ultimate goal in life and the ethic of appearances is the exclusive code of behavior. This obsession makes him an uneasy and awkwardly self-conscious

207 In the original context the protagonist uses the phrase to refer to his prestigious
participant in the club scene. His account opens on the telling remark: “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy” (1). A little later he notes, “Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren’t” (4). Despite his reservations against this social environment—his sense of inauthenticity and artifice, the impression that whatever real, basic self there may be is hidden behind convention—he must concede that he is equally attracted and appalled by this life (e.g. 3). Unable to accept his ambivalence toward this environment, he grows more and more uncomfortable with the mismatch of actual conduct and self-concept. The resulting sense of role-playing becomes increasingly unbearable and vaguely raises the old fear of being “discovered a fraud, an impostor in the social circle” (47).

The nameless young man’s sense of being an “impostor” is evidence of his belief in a basic, unchanging self that is different from the image he projects. For, as Kenneth Gergen points out, “The sense of ‘playing a role’ depends for its palpability on the contrasting sense of ‘a real self.’ If there is no consciousness of what it is to be ‘true to self,’ there is no meaning to ‘playing a role’” (Gergen 1991: 150). It has been observed that this feeling is typical of the individual in the contemporary consumer society. In fact, the picture McInerney is painting here may be taken to illustrate Christopher Lasch’s observation that

Selfhood and personal identity become problematic in such societies…. When people complain of feeling inauthentic or rebel against “role-playing,” they testify to the prevailing pressure to see themselves with the eyes of strangers and to shape the self as another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market (Lasch 1985: 30).

If the hero may be said to be adrift between two value systems “the one characterized by excess and superficiality, the other by profundity and moderateness” (Leypoldt 2001: 221), the work as a whole takes a more determined view. When the employer’s desperate efforts at keeping up high-brow standards in magazine publishing.
“You-narrator” succumbs to the manifold temptations of his surroundings, he immediately chastises himself with heavy self-irony. That the scorn he pours upon himself is not qualified anywhere in the novel is a sign of the book’s moral agenda. The novel’s critique of the urban consumer society is essentially bourgeois. From the beginning it is clear to the young man as much as to the reader that his abandonment of his bourgeois self—for instance, he is late for his job and turns in slovenly work, he indulges in a hedonistic and self-indulgent lifestyle, he disrupts public life on two occasions, he projects a self-image that is not based on actual achievement—is a response to a few heavy blows he had to take and not at all indicative of an antagonistic mindset. By implication, it is also clear, firstly, that the young man’s departure from what may more precisely be identified as a Protestant ethic and a Puritan temper is only temporary and, secondly, that he will be able to rectify his behavior as soon as he has learnt to cope with his grief, pain and mortification that have so much unsettled him. This reading is corroborated by the bildungsroman-design of Bright Lights, Big City, which will be examined below. Suffice it to say for the moment that everything in the novel—theme, content, structure, setting, imagery, etc.—is geared to achieve that “unity of effect” (Poe), that sense of closure of the young man’s moral education, which ends in his renunciation of this lurid world of appearances and excesses and in his return to his bourgeois self. In this way, the book as a whole indicates approval of its character’s change of heart and joins in the bourgeois critique of the excesses of a permissive, consumerist society.

It seems justified to say that, in the specifics, McInerney jumps on the bandwagon of conservative cultural criticism. The novel warns of the threat to the individual’s sense of reality and sense of identity in an image-based, hyperreal environment. The book also joins in the lamentation over the decline of personal relationships in the contemporary consumer society in which the ideology of consumerism penetrates into relationships, dehumanizing the partners and reducing them to mere objects of consumption. For the most part, the book suggests that the
The Self in Trouble: protagonist’s sense of self is indeed seriously threatened as he demonstrates that contraction of the self to the “defensive core” (Lasch). However, his final emergence marks a return towards a more confident affirmation of the self. It becomes clear that the protagonist’s withdrawal to the “minimal self” is only temporary and thus decidedly different from the narcissism described by Lasch and evinced by Bret Easton Ellis’s figures.

7.2 A Hierarchical Society

7.2.1 Otherness and the Need to Belong

The young man perceives himself as an outsider. Whether in clubs and bars (e.g. 1, 85), at work (e.g. 22, 58), or in the relations to his friends (32) and his family, everywhere he feels unable to relate to others because he either cannot identify with their views and goals or dreads penetration of the wall he has erected around his grieving soul. He believes that this isolation is a result of his “otherness” (47).

The narrator’s frequent comments on his social environment are proof of his sharp sense of otherness and isolation and are a sign of his great need to belong. He is keenly aware of this as he gets on the train on Tuesday morning:

The car is full of Hasidim from Brooklyn—gnomes in black with briefcases full of diamonds. You take a seat beside one of them. He is reading from his Talmud, running his finger across the page. The strange script is similar to the graffiti signatures all over the surface of the subway car, but the man does not look up at the graffiti, nor does he try to steal a peek at the headlines of your Post. This man has a God and a History, a Community. He has a perfect economy of belief in which pain and loss are explained in terms of a transcendental balance sheet, in which everything works out in the end and death is not really death. Wearing black wool all summer must seem like a small price to pay. He believes he is one of God’s chosen, whereas you feel like an integer in a random series of numbers. Still what a fucking haircut (57).

The young man’s derision and his purposely stereotyped simplifications cannot hide his admiration and envy of such devotion and firmness. He is impressed with the Jew’s apparent immunity against the temptations of urban life. The narrator suspects that the Jew’s apparent self-sufficiency springs from a firm cultural, religious, and ethnic identity that relies on God as the transcendental fixed point of reference; on
the Talmud as a practical ethics; and on the historical continuity of a people that was almost always in exile, discriminated against for their “otherness.” The young man unmistakably envies the Jew’s apparent self-confident knowledge of being securely anchored and belonging to a community. He must also admit to himself that he is attracted by the apparent simplicity and clarity of the Jewish worldview, which seems to determine life so completely that it relieves its adherents of the troublesome nuisance of individual choice. The narrator’s ill-concealed admiration evidences his own search for a simple and efficient ethics that may bind him into a community and that may provide him with clear goals and straightforward directives.208

7.2.2 A Sense of Entitlement

For the narrator American society is clearly stratified, and Manhattan is its center of power. Within the social pecking order he feels entitled to a high position, but his experiences gradually lead him to doubt his claim. He also has the impression that his claim to a high social status is constantly challenged by others whom he considers below himself. Beyond the concrete dread of his personal decline, this also raises the more general fear in the narrator that this social hierarchy may be at stake.

To the protagonist the clarity and absoluteness of this social hierarchy is reflected in a corresponding spatial hierarchy, whose center and top are the literature department of the “Magazine” and the hip club scene of Manhattan. Quite literally, the protagonist measures social esteem in terms of spatial distance from this top. The closer something is to Manhattan, and, more exactly, to the Magazine and the hip

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208 The self-confidence that develops from possessing a firm group identity is a constant, urgent theme with the protagonist. For instance, he envies three Rastafarians—whom he otherwise quite obviously detests—their sense of community (57). “Sometimes you feel like the only man in the city without group affiliation” (ibid.), he resigns. Note also his vivid presentation of a young gay man’s imaginative defense of his sexual orientation against the blunt insinuations of a bus driver (87) or his recollection of the fight that the patrons of a lesbians-only bar put up against some “illiberal youths from New Jersey” (134). These examples further demonstrate that the narrator admires the zeal and courage that these
clubs, the more highly recognized it is. Farthest from the top in the protagonist’s view of the social and cultural hierarchy both in terms of recognition and geographical distance is the “heartland“. With his trademark mixture of self-complacency and self-irony, he recalls the period before he came to New York, “You had lived on both coasts and abroad; the heartland was until then a large blank. You felt that some kind of truth and American virtue lurked thereabouts, and as a writer you wanted to tap into it” (69). His stint in Kansas, he feels, would merely add to his knowledge but not really advance him socially or professionally.

Geographically closer to New York and one rung up the social and cultural ladder in the young man’s opinion is New Jersey. In frequent asides he mocks this state as boring and petit-bourgeois (e.g. 3, 93), as narrow-minded and intolerant (134), or as provincial (10) compared to the urbane New York City with its reputation of being a cultural center (47) and its air of grandeur.

Within New York City, the protagonist senses a hierarchy of the boroughs, among which Manhattan ranks highest. He variously remarks on the superiority of Manhattan (15, 49) and, after a particularly embarrassing episode in Queens, he is even positively relieved to be back, feeling he has returned from the darker side of civilization, “across oceans and mountains” (155). Within Manhattan, this equation of geographical area and social status is continued. The young man associates the Upper East Side with promise, wealth and success (2, 6, 75, 134), whereas the area below Fourteenth Street stands for social decline (3). The Lower East Side in particular is synonymous with negligence and debauchery for the protagonist (4).

The office building of the Magazine, which is close to Times Square (13), is the geographical equivalent of the top of this social and cultural hierarchy and was the goal of his dreams when he arrived in New York (34, 107). Even in the layout of the office building the protagonist finds his view of a clear and simple social order individuals derive from the awareness of their otherness. The protagonist’s sensitivity to such
confirmed. “The editorial offices cover two floors” (15). In the Department of Factual Verification (29th floor) where the protagonist is desperately hanging on to his hated job, the employees arrogantly look down upon the Sales Department several floors below (25th floor, 16). And analogously, the Fiction Department, to which he aspires, is yet one floor above his present place of work (30th floor, 15). Within the Department of Factual Verification, too, the protagonist sees “an absolute hierarchy . . . reflected in the desk assignments” (17), with himself occupying the least prestigious position.

The protagonist also acutely senses the social stratification among the staff of the Magazine and his own precarious position when he enters the building on Monday morning:

Lucio, the elevator operator, says good morning. He was born in Sicily and has been doing this for seventeen years. With a week’s training he could probably take over your job and then you could ride the elevator up and down all day long. You’re at the twenty-ninth floor in no time. Say so long to Lucio, hello to Sally, the receptionist, perhaps the only staffer with a low-rent accent. She’s from one of the outer boroughs, comes in via bridge or tunnel. Generally people here speak as if they were weaned on Twinings English Breakfast Tea. Tillinghast picked up her broad vowels and karate-chop consonants at Vassar. She’s very sensitive about coming from Nevada. The writers, of course, are another story—foreigners and other unclubbables among them—but they come and go from their thirtieth floor cubbyholes at strange hours (15).

In a nutshell, this passage unites the different geographical equivalents of the social strata as perceived by the young protagonist. He mocks the presumptuous hierarchy observed in the Magazine but, quite clearly, subscribes to it without reservations. In this static social order every member of staff is allotted a position in which she or he is to remain and not aspire to a higher rank—of course, he believes that he himself has been assigned to a wrong tier.

Significantly, the protagonist feels entitled to an elevated social rank purely on the strength of his high hopes and ambitions. Yet he knows he has not been able to live up to his great expectations, and the novel opens when he begins to resign himself to this insight. Recalling the surges of self-importance he felt at the outset open affirmations of one’s identity reveals his own lack of such a strong identity.
when imagining his bright future in Manhattan (133) and at the Magazine, he is now forced to admit to himself that those first months seem now to have been filled with promise. You were convinced of the importance of your job and of the inevitability of rising above it... It was only a matter of time before they realized your talents were being wasted in Fact. Something changed. Somewhere along the line you stopped accelerating (34).

His disappointment about his failure often blends with self-irony. As he joins Tad and his friends in the bathroom of some club for another round of cocaine, he comments, “by the time you all troop out of the bathroom you are feeling omnipotent. You are upwardly mobile. Certainly something excellent is bound to happen” (48). At this point, however, he is not yet quite ready to let go of his high-flying dreams. And so he desperately persists in fooling himself as well as others, albeit with dwindling conviction. Haplessly trying to impress two women in a club, he puts on his “act” (28):

[Y]ou imply that your job is extremely demanding and important. In the past you could often convince yourself as well as others of this, but your heart is no longer in it. You hate this posturing, even as you persist, as if it were important for these two strangers to admire you for all the wrong reasons. It’s not much, this menial job in a venerable institution, but it’s all you’ve got left (46).

Yet, even as resignation sinks in, he nonetheless continues to cherish fantasies of literary fame and success (63, 83). The symbolic turning point is reached when he is thrown out of the Waldorf Astoria after undertaking a foolish and abortive attempt to confront his model-wife Amanda: “You expect people to gaze at you, horror-stricken, yet nobody pays any attention. […] Cautiously, as if you were entering a swimming pool for the first time in years, you ease yourself into the ranks of pedestrians” (126f). The scene suggests that he is beginning to accept that he is not superior to his environment and, therefore, not entitled to any elevated social position.

The protagonist also notes that his own claim to a high position in society is being disputed by people he considers below himself, and he becomes increasingly aware that the social order he perceives is being undermined and hollowed out. For instance, upon arriving at the Heartbreak Café the protagonist and his friends find themselves competing with others, less highly-regarded patrons for the permission to
enter: “Outside the door there is a crowd of would-be Heartbreakers with a uniform outer-borough look. Tad pushes through the supplicants, confers with the bouncer and then waves the three of you in” (48f). The protagonist’s condescending choice of words expresses his approval of Tad’s behavior and mirrors his feeling of superiority over the other patrons. Quite obviously, he considers their wish to enter the club as presumptuous and not fitting their inferior social status. The next morning “Dracula Jews and zonked-out Africans” on the subway train give him a “sense of impending disaster” (57), which is aggravated when the substitute lift operator in the office building, “a kid who looks like his last job was purse snatching,” fails to know which floor he works on (58). “This kid strikes you as a rude interloper” (ibid.), the narrator remarks, irritated at what he sees as the young lift operator’s disrespectful intrusion into the bastion of high culture. For the narrator, such incidents are suggestive of an ongoing erosion of the established social order, whose legitimacy he does not challenge.209

In their entirety, these repeated experiences of failure and incomprehension finally lead him to accept the hollowness and superficiality of the world in which he has tried so hard to excel, a world that functions on an ethic of appearances, and in which an individual’s status is determined by his or her visibility rather than actual achievement. This insight is behind the protagonist’s parody of Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn”. Sitting in a coffee shop, he notices that the paper cups are ornamented with classical Greek figures, which prompts him to quip, “O Attic shape . . . of paper men and maidens overwrought . . .” (148). At the end of the day, then, he must accept

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209 This order is also being threatened by powerful, unintelligible forces. He expresses his discomfort when he notes that “the city’s economy is made up of strange, subterranean circuits that are as mysterious to you as the grids of wire and pipe under the streets” (86) or when he remarks that Korean grocers seem to apply “secret Oriental principles of mind control” (135). On one occasion, he accidentally finds himself in the car of Bernie, a major figure in the local underworld, who informs him, “You got Ivy League written all over you. But I could buy you and your old man and his country club. I use guys like you in your button-down shirts to fetch my coffee” (116f). Bernie tells the young man of a world in which the establishment has lost its power and its criteria of success have lost their validity.
The sobering conclusion that he has not accomplished and achieved anything, that he does not belong among Keats’s heroic “marble men.”

7.2.3 A Clichéd “American Dream” of Self-Realization

In the process of coping with the fact that his wife deserted him, he gradually comes to understand the clichéd “American Dream” of self-realization that she lives and has also embodied for him. When the young man eventually recognizes that he projected his own needs and desires into Amanda and that he has actually been pursuing the same prefabricated variety of the “American Dream,” he abandons it.

When the protagonist’s attempt to confront his wife at the fashion show dismally fails, he is beginning to comprehend that the failure of their relationship cannot be satisfyingly accounted for by trying to “assign blame” (127); he is starting to realize that their relationship failed because he tried living with a product of his fancy. The “elusive” quality (75) he sensed in her made her “plastic” (124), the perfect stuff for his imagination to work upon. This is why Amanda lent herself well to “modeling” according to his dreams. His recollection of their first encounter is a case in point:

Amanda grew up smack in the heart of the heartland. You met her in a bar and couldn’t believe your luck. You never would have worked up the hair to hit on her, but she came right up and started talking to you. As you talked you thought: She looks like a goddamned model and she doesn’t even know it. You thought of this ingenuousness as being typical of the heartland. You pictured her backlit by a sunset, knee-deep in amber waves of grain. Her lanky, awkward grace put you in mind of a newborn foal. Her hair was the color of wheat, or so you imagined; after two months in Kansas you had yet to see any wheat (69-70).

His account is heavily tinged with self-irony at his own naivety and presumptuousness as well as at the unoriginality of his fantasies, which abound with stereotypical images. As the quote suggests, he was struck by her seeming virtuousness and innocence and her apparent potential of development. Filled with overwhelming self-confidence in his own powers, he was eager to be her mentor. Accordingly, he interpreted everything he learned about her in such a way as to be in line with his distribution of their roles. For instance, he remembers that “your
education daunted and excited her. Her desire to educate herself was touching. She asked you for reading lists” (70). In a way, he flattered himself with being a Professor Higgins of sorts. On looking back now, he cringes with shame at how pleased he was to support her in “her desire to start afresh” (70) and to give her the feeling of security and rootedness she so obviously craved for:

Amanda’s need to belong was part of her attraction. It was as if you came across one of those magazine ads—“You could turn the page, or you could save a child’s life”—and the child in question was right there, charming and eager to please (72).

In hindsight he realizes that this dream of self-realization is a particularly hackneyed version of the American “from-rags-to-riches” myth. It entirely consists of stock-of-the-trade clichés: the innocent uneducated country girl who is impatient to break with a dismal past and begin a new life full of hope in the faraway city.

Yet the much more sobering recognition that the protagonist must make is that his own vision of literary celebrity in Manhattan is just as clichéd as Amanda’s dream. The only real and painfully ironic difference between their respective dreams of self-realization is that it is the young man who was innocent and inexperienced, while Amanda consciously and purposefully set about realizing her dream. Allagash puts his finger into the wound when he remarks that she saw that the protagonist was “her ticket out of Trailer Park Land. Bright lights, big city” (116). The young man now understands that he projected his own needs and desires onto Amanda, that the Amanda he was together with was a “fictional character” (139), that he “made her up” (ibid.) to fit his own dream of success. The recognition of just how clichéd his own “American Dream” of self-realization is hits him with a vengeance when he walks past the Plaza Hotel. The memory of Amanda’s and his own arrival in New York fills him with shame:

When you first came to the city you spent a night here with Amanda. You had friends to stay with, but you wanted to spend that first night at the Plaza. Getting out of the taxi next to the famous fountain, you seemed to be arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be your life. A doorman greeted you at the steps. A string quartet played in the Palm Court. Your tenth-floor room was tiny and overlooked an airshaft; though you could not see the city out the window, you believed that it was spread out at your feet. The limousines around the entrances seemed like carriages,
and you felt that someday one would wait for you. Today they put you in mind of carrion birds, and you cannot believe your dreams were so shallow.

You are the stuff of which consumer profiles—American Dream: Educated Middle-Class Model—are made (151).

The protagonist’s casual adaptation of the oft-quoted Shakespearean verse at the end of the passage captures his mood. He sarcastically ridicules his own high-cultural aspirations by juxtaposing them with the bitter recognition of his easy susceptibility to the prefabricated images of American mass culture. The “American Dream” that he has been pursuing and which Amanda embodied for him now looks clichéd, fake, artificial and insubstantial to him. This recognition leaves him with a deep feeling of uprootedness and a great need to belong.

7.2.4 The Elitist Fear of Mass Society

The young man’s perception of his urban environment recalls conservative and elitist positions that have been voiced since the 1920s. Much like F. R. Leavis, for example, he sees a hierarchical society led by a cultured minority. His dream of rising to the top floors of the Magazine and of becoming a literary celebrity are proof that he endorses this view of society and that he feels he belongs among the cultured few. His nervous and contemptuous remarks about various “ex-centrics” (Hutcheon), about “others” who differ ethnically, racially, or with regard to their education or sexual orientation, are indicative of a certain xenophobia and express the traditional elitist fear of mass society. This is the anxiety that the “uncultured” masses are advancing from the social fringes towards the center, threatening to displace the establishment from its positions of power. In this “yuppie’s vision of Third World New York,” one reviewer of the novel comments perhaps a trifle too emphatically, the city is “a circus because the disenfranchised are taking over” (Seligman 1985: 210).

Stephanie Girard notes, “The evolution of Amanda as metaphor, from two-dimensional print ad to department store mannequin, reflects not only the conflation of reality and representation characteristic of the postmodern period . . . , but also the reduction of human relationships to exchanges of consumer commodities” (Girard 1996: 175).

See p. 86.
To be sure, the protagonist-narrator misses no chance to ridicule the Magazine as the embodiment of this social and cultural hierarchy. Yet, as has been demonstrated, this mockery is based on his awareness of the falseness and presumption of the Magazine’s claim to cultural leadership as well as on his insight into the insubstantiality of his belief that he rightfully belongs among the cultural elite. In other words, the young man’s aloofness towards the Magazine does not register a critique of the social and cultural hierarchy it represents and symbolizes.

The novel as a whole does little to offset the protagonist-narrator’s elitist and sometimes bigoted notions. The young man’s passage towards self-recognition, which leads him to renounce the lurid glamor of Manhattan highlife, is ultimately not enough to establish a sufficient counterbalance to the young man’s biased views. Thus, it appears inevitable to conclude that the novel in its entirety offers a conservative, elitist picture of society. *Brightness Falls*, in its sweeping panorama of the urban consumer society in the late 1980s, also devotes some space to the treatment of the ex-centric’s inroads on the establishment. In this novel McInerney focuses on African-Americans as one ex-centric group and—in a manner echoing Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—presents the color issue at various social levels. Through his multiperspectival approach in *Brightness Falls*, McInerney is able to present a much more balanced view of the tensions between the center and the fringes of society than in his first novel.

Incidentally, despite obvious differences in McInerney’s and Ellis’s treatment of the social tensions between those in the center of power and the disenfranchised on the margins of society, there are also significant parallels. Both
authors create protagonists who fear for their privileged positions. In Ellis, the protagonist’s fear—be it Clay’s or Patrick’s—is grounded in the as yet unadmitted knowledge that he is part of and, therefore, can “disappear” into the amorphous mass of American consumers. In a similar vein, though with a stronger sense of his individually unique identity, McInerney’s “You” finally accepts that he has no rightful claim to an elevated social position and that he properly belongs among the “ranks of pedestrians” (126f).

7.3 An Incomprehensible Present

7.3.1 Meaningless Facts

The young man is in a state of deep confusion and disorientation, frantically struggling to come to terms with the twists and turns of his present life in New York. This is a dominant concern of the protagonist’s, the urgency of which is evident from the start of the novel. As yet another night of club-hopping and cocaine ends in desolation and despair, he wonders in the title of the opening chapter, “It’s six a.m. Do you know where you are?” (1). This theme is then developed in the first chapter, which fittingly ends on his resigned quip, “Here you are again. All messed up and no place to go” (10).

The protagonist’s confusion is the result of his inability to make sense of the events and experiences that constitute his life in New York. Specifically, these are his deep involvement in the glamorous night-life scene of Manhattan, the loss of his wife Amanda and the mediocre job in the prestigious Magazine that was to be the launch pad of his literary career (34, 40). In the protagonist’s view this inability to make sense of these developments in his life has several causes.

Firstly, he feels overtaxed by the consequences of the prevalent ethic of appearances. He repeatedly finds himself at a loss as to how to ascertain the facticity keeping you down and killing you with dope and locking you up and shit. But it ain’t ‘cause
of any given, potentially vital piece of information. The opening remarks capture this mood:

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching powder. Then again, it might not. A small voice inside you insists that this epidemic lack of clarity is a result of too much of that already (1).

His uncertainty about the factual reality of his environment surfaces repeatedly and contributes to his mounting crisis (e.g. 9, 28, 55, 67, 177). Instances of wrong perception or cognition form the background against which he tries to assess his life with Amanda in New York. In the end he must conclude that he cannot be sure of anything with regard to Amanda. As the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the failure of his marriage, his wife gradually turns into the epitome of the inauthentic lifestyle that he makes out in his environment. In their entirety, these experiences create a feeling of deep uncertainty in the protagonist as to the correctness of his observations. He eventually realizes that this “epidemic lack of clarity” renders all his attempts at making sense of this life futile.

His frustration over his inability to make sense of his present life is not only caused by his unhappy marriage but also by his job. His work as a verificationist in the Magazine permanently forces him to do what he is loath to do, namely, to check all alleged facts and make sure that they are factually accurate. The young man is painfully conscious of the irony his job involves, and he realizes that his admittedly poor performance (23f) is symptomatic of his inability to establish a firm and correct basis for a new start in his life. The protagonist’s constant wisecracking about the uninspired “drudgery” of checking facts (22) and the limited world view it reflects in his opinion—the editor in chief is "famously nearsighted" (25)—as well as his numerous jokes and mischievous remarks about his boss’s insistence on procedural correctness and about her standoffishness mirror his own inability to face the facts of

you a nigger, nigger. Ain’t nothing personal”” (400).
The Self in Trouble:

his life and his liability to escape them into a world of fiction. Thus, fiction is both
his professional preference and his principle problem. “In fact, you don’t want to be
in Fact. You’d much rather be in Fiction” (22), he quips with fitting self-irony.213

A further cause of his inability to make sense of his present life in New York
is his impression that many things happening here are too grotesque and disparate so
that he cannot integrate them into a coherent whole. Tad’s rundown of the
“monstrous events [that] are scheduled” (31) for the evening is a mirror of the
grotesque absurdities that the protagonist frequently encounters in his environment:

Allagash tells you that Natalie and Inge are dying to meet you. Natalie’s father runs an
oil company and Inge is soon to be in a major television commercial. Moreover, the
Deconstructionists are playing the Ritz, one of the modeling agencies is sponsoring a
bash for Muscular Dystrophy at Magique and Natalie has cornered a chunk of the
Gross National Product of Bolivia (32).

To the protagonist this picture of his night life is full of bizarre and incongruous
images. In this flood of information he cannot see an order or structure nor is there
any criterion of selection except for the requirement that the event must be fun. In the
face of such apparently non-sensical occurrences, the protagonist is overcome by a
feeling of powerlessness.

The protagonist’s sense of powerlessness in the face of such grotesque things
can only be endured if the events are perceived humorously. He finds such comic
relief from the stress of the absurdities of his life in the grossly exaggerating and
simplifying articles of The New York Post. This is why he enjoys this tabloid despite
his aspirations to high culture:

213 The irony of the situation becomes directly painful when he is assigned to the
examination of an article on French politics by an author who is infamous for his carelessness
and lack of expertise: “[T]he facts are so confused as to suck you deep into vast regions of
interpretation. The writer, a former restaurant critic, lavishes all his care on adjectives and
disdains nouns” (20). He knows that the writer has failed to research the article properly. In the
protagonist’s view the writer indulges in inappropriate and irrelevant formal matters in an
attempt to cover up the lack of sound information, of hard “nouns.” Ironically, during a phone
call to the journalist (29f), the young fact checker all of a sudden finds himself preaching the
gospel of scrupulousness, factual correctness, coherence, and consistency. Of course, he knows
that he has neglected to meet these very requirements in his own life. Thus, his outrage at the
journalist’s negligence may also be understood as a subconscious comment on his own failure
to substantiate the assumptions he has predicated his life upon.
The *Post* is the most shameful of your several addictions. You hate to support this kind of trash with your thirty cents, but you are a secret fan of Killer Bees, Hero Cops, Sex Fiends, Lottery Winners, Teenage Terrorists, Liz Taylor, Tough Tots, Sicko Creeps, Living Nightmares, Life on Other Planets, Spontaneous Human Combustion, Miracle Diets and Coma Babies. The Coma Baby is on page two: COMA BABY SIS PLEADS: SAVE MY LITTLE BROTHER (11).

All these headlines share the same tone and intention. They openly celebrate the absurd and unbelievable, the spectacular and sentimental, manifesting a casual view of factual correctness and objectivity. In the world of the *Post* every news item is inflated with the same kind of attention-seeking importance—a strategy that throws the very concept of significance into doubt. With its grotesque headlines the tabloid effectively mocks all efforts at factual verification and critical assessment. Ridicule is the strategy whereby the *Post* manages “to maintain a sense of perspective” (Faye 1992: 122) and which makes the tabloid a haven of safety for the young man. What makes the *Post* even more appealing to the protagonist are its simple unambiguous patterns of explanation for all problems. The young man is perfectly aware that these explanations are inadequate to his life but he nonetheless allows himself the pleasure of reading the tabloid because it is a bulwark of stability against the “slippery flux” of his life (28) and presents “a nice, simple world view” (57).

For these reasons, it is little surprising that the protagonist frequently resorts to the mode of the tabloid so as to be able to deal with his life at all. Often the events of his present life seem so incredible to him that he can only understand them as part of the absurd world of the *Post*. He adopts the tabloid’s strategy of exaggeration and simplification and translates his bizarre experiences into humorous imaginary headlines. These help him endure the grotesqueness of his life and even make his

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214 Similarly, the protagonist sees his life in terms of a cartoon television program (33, 154).

215 For instance, when a seedy-looking, apparently disoriented man starts to molest an elderly lady on the subway, the protagonist is too stunned to rush to her aid. He tries to overcome his shame by translating the scene into the world of a *Post* headline: “GRANNY CRUSHED BY NUT WHILE WIMPS WATCH” (13). Likewise, after his stupid and ill-planned practical joke on Clara—in the course of which the drunken Alex is scared by a ferret and knocked unconscious by a toppling bookshelf—the protagonist imagines the *Post* titling, “FAULKNER FRIEND FALLS AFOUL OF FURRY FIEND” (114). Similarly, his foolish
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...life comprehensible as a part of the general absurdity of life in the urban consumer society.

Another problem that makes it difficult for the protagonist-narrator to make sense of his life in the city is the sheer abundance of information he is confronted with. In this deluge it is hard for him to distinguish the relevant data from the mass of insignificant “white noise”. He is particularly disconcerted at the amorphous mass of material in his life that he cannot integrate into a coherent whole. After being dismissed from the Magazine, he returns to his workplace to clear out his desk:

Once you open the drawers of your desk you realize it could take all night. There is a vast quantity of flotsam: files, notebooks, personal and business correspondence, galleys and proofs, review books, matchbooks, loose sheets with names and phone numbers, notes to yourself, first drafts of stories, sketches and poems. Here, for instance, is the first draft of “Birds of Manhattan.” Also the “U.S. Government Abstract of Statistics on Agriculture, 1981.” indispensable in researching the three-part article on the death of the family farm, and on the back of which you have written the name Laura Bowman and a telephone number. Who is Laura Bowman? You could dial the number and ask for her, ask her where she fits into your past. Tell her you are suffering from amnesia and looking for clues. . . .

You shovel the contents of the top drawer onto the desk and wonder how, exactly, to deal with all this paper. Some of it may be significant. Most of it is junk. How do you tell the difference (130-131)?

Overwhelmed by the immensity of the task, he resorts to throwing it all away, aware that he is making an obvious symbolic break with his life in New York until now (133).

The protagonist’s verification work draws his attention to a further aspect that makes it hard for him to deal with the facts of his present life. He understands that a fact does not simply exist as a given absolute but also crucially depends on the perceiving subject, combining a physical reality and a subjective point of view into an inextricable entity. It is this compound nature that makes facts so hard to grapple with for the protagonist. As a constant reminder of this problem, the unlikely verificationist keeps a colleague’s birthday present on his desk. The gift is inscribed with the chorus of “Crosseyed and Painless” by Talking Heads:

conduct at Amanda’s fashion show appears so unreal to him as if it were lifted directly off the pages of the tabloid: “SEXUALLY ABANDONED HUBBY GOES BERSERK” (126).
Facts are simple and facts are straight
Facts are lazy and facts are late
Facts all come with points of view
Facts don't do what I want them to (150).

Despite his problems, he accepts that there is a subjective element to all facts. While his job in the Department of Factual Verification requires him to sort out “matters of fact from matters of opinion, disregarding the latter” (17), that is, to eliminate all suggestions of subjectivity from a fact in order to ascertain its objectively verifiable core, the protagonist insists that this view is reductionist. He realizes that objective correctness is not at all identical with relevance and meaning, let alone truth. This is why he vehemently rejects his boss’s claim as presumptuous when she calls him to account for his slovenly work:

‘Do you realize just how serious this is?’ she demands. ‘You have endangered the reputation of this magazine. We have built a reputation for scrupulous accuracy with regard to matters of fact. Our readers depend on us for the truth.’

You would like to say, Whoa! Block that jump from facts to truth, but she is off and running (103).

On the contrary, he presses the point that factual correctness has no value in its own right. Following a basically constructivist notion of meaning, truth, and reality, he argues that subjectivity is not only inevitable but also necessary in order to produce meaning, to make sense of an otherwise meaningless factual reality. Eventually he finds support in Vicky’s observation “that certain facts are accessible only from one point of view—the point of view of the creature who experiences them” (101). But here lies the rub: While he recognizes that subjectivity plays a constitutive role in the creation of meaning, truth, and reality, he is unable to identify his individual point of view from which to access the facts of his present life. At this point he does not yet realize that only when he permits himself to mourn the loss of his mother, he is in a position from which he can successfully create sense of the events in his life.

To sum up, the protagonist realizes that these four problems—his inability to verify potentially crucial information, the grotesqueness of city life, the flood of information, and the problem that he has not yet found his individual vantage point—
make it impossible for him to make sense of his life in New York. The result is an incomprehensible present.

7.3.2 Ungrounded Fictions

The difficulties of making sense of his present life in the city, which have been detailed above, leave the protagonist-narrator profoundly confused and disoriented (e.g. 66, 101, 107, 117, 180f) and create a feeling of powerlessness (e.g. 79). The young man cannot get a firm grip on the events and experiences that constitute his present life. In his view his life is a “slippery flux” (28) and “chaos” (41), it feels formless, inexplicable and incalculable. What increases his anguish over his losses and failures is that they seem to have served no end. His life seems a mere “chain reaction of pointless disasters” (39). Accordingly, making sense of his present life, that is, constructing a self-image that will provide a feeling of coherence, stability and direction in his life is of vital importance to the protagonist.

The book opens at a point when he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the inadequacy of the self-image he has entertained hitherto. So far he has envisioned himself as an aspiring novelist destined to become a literary celebrity. He frequently refers to this self-image by lapsing into the mode of autobiography. His memory of his first visit to the Magazine is a good case in point:

You remember how you felt when you passed this way for your first interview, how the bland seediness of the hallway only increased your apprehension of grandeur. You thought of all the names that had been made here. You thought of yourself in the third person: He arrived for his first interview in a navy-blue blazer. He was interviewed for a position in the Department of Factual Verification, a job which must have seemed even then to be singularly unsuited to his flamboyant temperament. But he was not to languish long among the facts (34; original italicized).

His recollection of how easily he managed to interpret the disappointing first impression of the building in such a way as to suit his dream of fame and success illustrates that the self-image of the artist-to-be served its purpose very well. It justified and explained the developments in his life and provided him with an ultimate goal. For example, he remembers that “getting the job at the Magazine was
only your first step toward literary celebrity” (40). Now he recognizes that this self-
image, his version of the “American Dream” of self-realization, held such a spell
over him that he seamlessly integrated even such incidents and experiences of his life
which were objectively incompatible. This recognition is also evident in the
embarrassment and self-mockery with which he remembers the early days in New
York:

You never stopped thinking of yourself as a writer biding his time in the Department
of Factual Verification. But between the job and the life there wasn’t much time left
over for emotion recollected in tranquility. . . . You were gathering experience for a
novel. You went to parties with writers, cultivated a writerly persona. You wanted to
be Dylan Thomas without the paunch, F. Scott Fitzgerald without the crack-up. You
wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation. . . . So much was going on. Of
course, mentally, you were always taking notes. Saving it all up. Waiting for the day
when you would sit down and write your masterpiece (40-41).

Yet as his high-flying hopes—manifest in the quip on the famous Wordsworth phrase
and the references to his literary heroes—have failed to materialize, the events of his
life have become increasingly hard to fit into this fantasy of literary fame and
fortune.

For a time he persisted in keeping up this increasingly baseless self-
representation but he is now starting to comprehend that he has been deluding
himself (46). In retrospect, the young man is beginning to learn that his image of
himself as a writer did not evolve from the experiences of his life. Rather—as with
the people he meets in clubs and bars—, this projected self was a fiction that was the
blueprint according to which his life was to be modeled. Now he is embarrassed at

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206 This beginning change of heart is also visible in his controversial portrait of Alex,
a “Fiction Editor Emeritus” (63), in which ridicule and admiration uneasily sit side by side.
The protagonist criticizes Alex as a man who is out of touch with the present and caught up in
nostalgia and resignation, even as he revels in fantasies of future literary fame under Alex’s
guidance: “You are fond of this man. While others view him as a sunken ship, you have a
fantasy: Under his tutelage, you begin to write and publish. His exertion on your behalf renews
his sense of purpose. You become a team, Fitzgerald and Perkins all over again. Soon he’s
promoting a new generation of talent—your disciples—and you’re evolving from your Early to
your Later Period” (63f). The young man’s ambivalent feelings toward Alex signal that he is in
a state of transition away from a naively romanticizing self-concept towards a more realistic
one.
the stereotype and cliché that characterized his self-image as a writer.\textsuperscript{217} He has reached this moment of self-awareness when Megan offers to help him launch his writing career, but he cannot muster up the necessary enthusiasm in his old fantasies of grandeur (141). This is the point when he abandons the self-image of the writer as inconsistent with his life.

The fact that the young man has developed the self-image of a literary artist is also evidence of his conviction that fiction is a potent means of creating meaning. His firm belief in the sense-making powers of realist fiction—as well as his strong doubt of the usefulness of factual verification—is also the driving power behind his wish to change into the Department of Fiction (e.g. 83). In his view, fiction allows the writer to get to the greater truths without bothering about every detail.\textsuperscript{218} Accordingly, he consciously uses story-telling as a way of selecting the seemingly disjointed experiences that dominate his impression of his present life and of integrating them into a coherent, sense-making entity. As an aspiring author, he is quite aware that telling stories is a highly subjective activity that grants him an enormous power. He acknowledges this when he shifts into the autobiographical mode (e.g. BCLB 41, 64, 83). At such moments he casts himself in the role of the hero even as he holds the strings as the author.

The young man also wants to use this specific, sense-making power as an author when he sets out to write the story of the break-up of his marriage in an attempt to "give shape to what seems merely a chain reaction of pointless disasters"

\textsuperscript{217} In a way, he almost re-enacted familiar anecdotes from the lives of famous writers. For instance, for his first job, he went to Kansas City to work as a reporter (69). The memory of this episode fills him with shame at his own naivety and hubris. He is aware that he chose this town and job in conscious imitation of famous American authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Ernest Hemingway, who began his career as a reporter for the \textit{Kansas City Star}. In much the same way, he is mortified when thinking back of his arrival at the Plaza Hotel in New York: "Getting out of the taxi next to the famous fountain, you seemed to be arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be your life" (151). He is embarrassed to admit to himself that he imagined his life as an imitation of a fiction, as an enactment of a hackneyed movie-fantasy.
In a chapter tellingly entitled “The Utility of Fiction,” the protagonist makes an effort to construct the events of his life into a meaningful whole by composing a narrative:

You feel that if only you could make yourself sit down at a typewriter you could give shape to what seems merely a chain reaction of pointless disasters. Or you could get revenge, tell your side of the story, cast some version of yourself in the role of wronged hero. Hamlet on the battlements. Maybe get outside autobiography altogether, lose yourself in the purely formal imperatives of words in the correct and surprising sequence, or create a fantasy world of small furry and large scaly creatures (39-40).

The extent to which writing fiction is a selective, consciously structuring activity becomes abundantly clear from the protagonist's two abortive attempts to capture his situation in the form of a story (41). He comes to understand that fiction is thus crucially dependent on the writing subject who engages the “pointless disasters,” constructs them into a coordinated whole and in this way endows them with meaning. A story, then, serves as a frame of reference which the subject builds in order to understand the world. It gives meaning, direction and purpose to the subject's life.

Yet the story he sets out to compose does not advance beyond its initial stage and he abandons it disgustedly, because it strikes him as trite, hackneyed and meaningless. This is doubly hurtful to the young man as the opening is an almost photographic rendition of the actual events (76). In his second draft he drops the “in medias res”-approach of the first attempt because there is a growing awareness that he must view the events of the present in the context of their evolution. However, this time round he is no more successful. So far he does not yet see that his own biography is that context, the only appropriate frame of reference. As long as he fails to do so, his sense-making efforts remain ungrounded fictions in an incomprehensible present.

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218 This is the reason, for instance, why he quietly sympathizes with a fiction editor’s unnerved response when he has to point out a minor factual mistake in a story he has been assigned to examine.

219 Young also makes this point (Young in Young and Caveny 1992: 48).
7.4 Grounding the Self-Image in the Past

As the young man’s self-image of a literary artist and his narrative attempts at coming to terms with the breakup of his marriage turn out to be trite and ungrounded fictions, he gradually realizes that he must anchor his self-image within his own past. He recognizes that only by connecting his present life to his biography, specifically, to the memories of the last hours he shared with his mother at her sick-bed, he can begin to make sense of his present life and “learn everything all over again” (182). The tabloid story of the “Coma Baby” is the vehicle through which he establishes this connection and gains access to those suppressed memories. It thus opens up the way to an understanding of his present situation as the result of a life-long development.

In his desperate search for something that will provide his life with a measure of coherence, consistency and direction, he turns to the story of the “Coma Baby” (11f)—the melodrama of saving the life of an unborn child whose mother is in a coma—, which he follows daily in the Post. The protagonist grows virtually fixated upon the baby’s fate—a sure sign that he regards it as symbolic of his own situation. In a chapter facetiously entitled “A Womb With a View,” the young man even has a dream in which he tries to argue with the baby to leave the womb and enter the world. But, content with his comfortable situation, the fetus sees no need for change:

"Are you going to come out," you ask.
"No way, José. I like it in here. Everything I need is pumped in."
"But Mom's on her way out."
"If the old lady goes, I'm going with her." The Coma Baby sticks his purple thumb in his mouth. You try to reason with him, but he does a deaf-and-dumb routine. "Come out," you say. . . .
"They'll never take me alive," the Baby says (54-55).

Though the baby’s mother may be dying, she still signifies to him protection and security, provides a good and perfectly safe view on life outside and relieves him of any responsibility. The fact that the protagonist has this dream is proof of how much he is subconsciously troubled by his suppressed grief for his mother and his inability to take his life into his own hands. He knows that the baby’s “deaf-and-dumb
"routine" is a parallel of his own stupor, the “nice, long coma” (83) in which he wishes himself to be in order to escape the sobering facts of his life. At this point of his crisis it is only in the distorted and symbolically-charged up world of a dream that the protagonist is fully able to confront his own refusal to cut the “umbilical cord” that still connects him to his mother and at last to assume responsibility for his own life.

Coma Baby’s birth pangs haunt the protagonist as a powerful image of his own slow and agonizing process of self-recognition. That morning on the subway train he learns that there are “No developments: ‘COMA BABY LIVES’” (57). This figurative diagnosis of the young man’s own precarious state of suspension is turned into an emphatic affirmation of life in the chapter title “Coma Baby Lives!” Help comes from “the kind of girl who is not the kind of girl who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning” (3): Allagash’s cousin, the philosophy student Vicky. As a “Rationalist” (91), who reads Spinoza’s *Ethics* (ibid.) and is familiar with Thomas Nagel’s exposition of the mind-body problem (97, 101), she is singularly well suited to act as a Socrates-like midwife and—in a further reference to Plato—to lead him “from the shadow world of appearances toward things as they really are” (93). The image of “Coma Baby” continues to mirror his development. The morning after the evening with Vicky, he reads that “Coma Mom is fading fast” (99), an indication that his own crisis is mounting. Two days later, in which his crisis has reached its climax—he has lost his job and has also made a futile attempt at confronting Amanda—he reads that “Coma Baby was delivered six weeks premature in an emergency Caesarean and that Coma Mom is dead” (148). The protagonist understands this as a reflection of the turn in his own development. Finally he has awoken from his own self-incurred “coma,” ready to deal with his suppressed grief.

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over his mother and assume responsibility for his life. To sum up, the picture of “Coma Baby” is a useful image to the protagonist because it helps him come to terms with his present situation. “Coma Baby” reestablishes the severed connection between his incomprehensible present life on the one hand and the suppressed memories of his mother on the other.

Finally, then, the young man gains access to the only “story” that is a valid reference frame for his self-image. In contrast to the protagonist’s ungrounded fictions about himself, the story of his relationship to his mother is not fictitious but integrates basic facts from his life that prove crucial to his understanding of the present situation. Only when he at last allows the memories of his mother to return to him—particularly, the recollections of the last hours at her sick-bed—, that is, when he finally accepts the true cause of his agony and confusion, he can begin to make sense of his present life and start to reshape his self-image. This recognition comes as a revelation to him that marks a turning point in his life:

Your head is pounding with voices of confession and revelation. You followed the rails of white powder across the mirror in pursuit of a point of convergence where everything was cross-referenced according to a master code. For a second, you felt terrific. You were coming to grips. Then the coke ran out; as you hoovered the last line, you saw yourself hideously close-up with a rolled twenty sticking out of your nose. The goal is receding. Whatever it was. You can’t get everything straight in one night (170).

Peter Freese interprets the parallel developments of the Coma Baby and the protagonist in much the same vein (Freese 1992:535).

The protagonist has been suppressing his grief over the loss of his mother ever since her death. So far he only subliminally registers painful stabs when he is accidentally reminded of his mother and her disease (8, 27, 51, 59, 86, 107, 150), and he does not return his brother’s phone calls (28, 78, 107). His agitation and sensitivity also surface in his sadness over a poster enquiring for a missing person, which he sees again and again (13, 66, 86, 150). The end of the time of suppression is triggered by a succession of incidents: First he meets his Platonic “midwife” Vicky. Then, for the first time, he really confides in someone about the breakup of his marriage (139). Then he reads about “Coma Baby” delivery (148). He sees his brother Michael sitting on the doorstep to his apartment building and runs away (148)—a last frantic attempt to escape the inevitable. He goes straight to the Saks store, where for the past few weeks (68, 78) he has been looking at a mannequin that his wife modeled for. Now the replica has been removed, which he interprets as “a good omen” (149). Not until his brother Michael finally manages to confront him verbally and physically, the protagonist allows the memory of his mother’s death to enter his consciousness: “You knew this was coming. You weren’t watching the calendar but you could feel it coming on. You close your eyes and lean your head back against the couch. You surrender” (157). Now the period of suppression is over and he is ready to confront the true reason of his present malaise, namely the anniversary of his mother’s death.
The sick-bed scene presented in the chapter “Night Shift” is fundamentally different from the protagonist’s fictions, analyzed above. It has none of that detached and self-conscious air of his “autobiographical” visions about himself as a famous artist. And likewise, it is free of the triteness and constructedness that he so keenly feels in his attempts at fictionalizing the failure of his marriage. This is entirely different in the sick-bed scene, which is alive with distinct, memorable detail. Quite clearly, the young man senses no “epidemic lack of clarity” (1) as he vividly re-experiences his final hours with his dying mother. Indeed, in contrast to the fictional sketches of his life, there is no visible attempt of the protagonist’s at actively selecting and structuring the events here. All this suggests, one year after his mother’s death, he has not yet attained the distance necessary to make sense of them. In fact, he is anything but the critically detached author, who is in control of his work and tries to literally make sense. Quite the contrary is true: despite the lapse of time he is still deeply involved.

The protagonist’s remembrances of his wake at his dying mother’s bed are of key importance to him because, among other things, they help him reassess his sense of otherness. Specifically, he recalls a conversation with his mother shortly before her death:

The candor was infectious. It spread back to the beginning of your life. You tried to tell her, as well as you could, what it was like being you. You described the feeling you’d always had of being misplaced, of always standing to one side of yourself, of watching yourself in the world even as you were being in the world, and wondering if this was how everyone felt. That you always believed that other people had a clearer idea of what they were doing, and didn’t worry quite so much about why (166f).

He remembers that his mother did not only try to comfort him by pointing out that such self-consciousness is not uncommon (167). She also strengthened his sense of otherness when she fondly recalled that as a child he was “something else” (168). What makes the memory of his mother’s statement so precious to the protagonist now is the fact that she interpreted his otherness positively as a uniqueness that distinguishes him as an individual.
The memory of his mother’s testimony of her love for her son fills him with courage. What is more, thinking of her unembarrassed eagerness to share her son’s feelings and experiences and her repeated refusal to accept pain-killing medication—because “she wanted to be clear. She wanted to know what was happening” (165)—fills him with deep respect and shame at his own excessive consumption of drugs to forget about his worries. He sees that he has distanced himself from the “ethic of engagement with the physical world” (162) that his mother and his brother Michael stand for. Remembering his mother’s words, he now begins to understand that his long fear of being an outsider and his desire to take part in Manhattan high life made him adopt the “ethic of appearances” and, in the process, lose touch to the formative experiences in his life. He realizes that his strong sense of “misplacement” (cf. 166) and incomprehension in the face of the developments of his present life were a consequence of that separation from his roots. The recollection urges him to stop numbing himself with mindless entertainment and drugs and instead confront the facts of his own life: the end of his unrealistic and clichéd dream of fame and fortune; the breakup of a marriage to a woman who was mainly the projection of his fantasies; and most important of all, the death of his mother from whom he has not yet completely emancipated himself. In Jefferson Faye’s words, “Rather than allowing others to make his decisions, or set expectations for him, he must take his fate in his own hands. The protagonist does this by arriving at the realization that he must let his mother die” (Faye 1992: 122). Indeed, he interprets his mother’s words as a call for action to embrace his life whole-heartedly. He appears to regard this as a moral imperative because he calls a confused Vicky very early the following Sunday morning to make a clean breast of everything and start afresh:

“I tried to block her out of my mind. But I think I owe it to her to remember.”
“Wait. Who?”
“My mother. Forget my wife. I’m talking about my mother.” [. . .] I was just thinking that we have a responsibility to the dead—the living, I mean. Does this make sense?” (179).

In line with this affirmation of what he sees as his “real” life, he finally renounces his
old self-deceiving life as a member of the club scene of Manhattan along with its “ethic of appearances.” This is the beginning of a process of self-recognition and emancipation.

The young man’s return to his roots in McInerney’s first novel anticipates a major theme in the author’s oeuvre. In all his novels, including those not studied here, the protagonist’s problems are rooted in their pasts. McInerney always stresses biography as the primary formative influence. In most of McInerney’s books, this element of historical depth is limited to the personal level. In *Brightness Falls* and *The Last of the Savages*—the coy reference in the title to J. F. Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* is an indication of this—, McInerney considerably broadens his scope to encompass all of American history. Of course, this historical depth—whether at the personal or at the national level—is characteristic of traditional representationalist literature and quite alien to minimalist realism.

As has been demonstrated above, this distinct emphasis on the biographical dimension is not found in Ellis. Even in *Less Than Zero*, where the author still pays tribute to the traditional realistic mode of narration and provides his protagonist with a sketchy personal history of sorts, albeit only in the form of interspersed “memory”-chapters, he makes clear that this history is without integrating, sense-making power. Thereafter, thoroughgoing minimalist realist that he is, Ellis drops such pretences altogether and shows that his characters are completely imprisoned in a never-ending Here and Now. The analysis of Janowitz’s fiction, on the other hand, has demonstrated that—after the conventional coming-of-age novel *American Dad*, which is set against the backdrop of the 1960s and 1970s—, the biographical dimension is still there. Yet, it is always reduced to short, caricaturistically exaggerated sketches of familial strife.
7.5 A Self-Conscious Bildungsroman

A number of reviewers have been quick to denounce Bright Lights, Big City as a failed bildungsroman (novel of education or novel of initiation) or have accused McInerney of proffering a cheap, stylish update of Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (e.g. Powers 1985: 45; Klinghoffer 1988: 53). In their rash dismissal, they have not been able to see that Jay McInerney in fact attempts a daring artistic tightrope act. Bright Lights, Big City is an ambiguous parody and affirmation of the genre of the bildungsroman. McInerney evokes the genre of the novel of education at various levels and in several ways, thus firmly situating his novel within a long literary tradition that, in the words of Ihab Hassan, “recovered an ancient debate between nature and civilization, arcadia and polis, earth and fire” (Hassan 1981: 107). In her seminal study The American City Novel (1954), Blanche H. Gelfant provides a practical definition of the “portrait novel,” which she regards as one of the three main varieties of the city novel in American literature:

The portrait novel belongs in the literary tradition of the novel of initiation—that is, a novel tracing a young hero's discovery of life and growth to maturity. In the portrait novel, the hero is typically a naive and sensitive newcomer to the city, usually a country youth, as in the fiction of Dreiser, Herrick, and Wolfe…. Structurally, the novel is built upon a series of educating incidents in which the city impresses upon the hero its meanings, values and manners. As the hero responds to the insistent pressures of city life, his character undergoes a change: he learns what the city is, and this is his achievement of sophistication and maturity (Gelfant 1970: 11).

McInerney’s project is ambitious. In the end, however, the book fails to meet its own controversial claim of simultaneously lampooning and reinscribing the genre.

McInerney establishes links to this tradition at both character and reader levels. Significantly, the protagonist, who regards himself as a writer, is aware that the structure of the bildungsroman is relevant to the way he thinks of himself. Firstly, for him Amanda’s development from an ingenuous country girl to a streetwise, successful fashion model in the city illustrates the career typical of a heroine in a traditional bildungsroman. In the “novel of her education” that he used to tell himself, the young man liked to cast himself in the role of the learned and experienced mentor. Now he slowly and painfully comes to understand that he had
merely been accorded the part of the fool in what turned out to be a travesty with only the most tenuous of links to a factual reality.  

Secondly, the protagonist’s mock-autobiographical flashbacks belong to another *bildungsroman* of whose validity he has been trying to convince himself. In this fictional blueprint of his life he has the part of the aspiring young apprentice, and the down-at-the-heels fiction editor Alex is his mentor. But this draft of a life story does not fare any better than the first. He now sees that he has been fooling himself with another hackneyed pipe dream, modeled on the formula of a “Horatio Alger”-type story. At the character level, then, the *bildungsroman* is rejected as a frame of reference within which the narrator can make sense of his life.

The genre of the novel of education is also evoked at the reader level, that is, beyond the protagonist-narrator’s limited scope of vision. Thus, within the novel as a whole, the protagonist’s own trite *bildungsroman*-type visions of his future—which he only gradually and incompletely recognizes as clichéd—function as plays within the play so to speak, further throwing the young man’s hubris into comic relief. McInerney employs a whole arsenal of structural, thematic, and stylistic devices to drive home his point that his character’s way towards self-recognition is to be read within the referential framework provided by the genre of the *bildungsroman*.

The quote from a 1961 song by Jimmy Reed that serves as the book’s title already highlights the lurid temptations of the city as a standard element of the genre. The young man’s non-urban background as another fixture of the *bildungsroman* is also established early in the novel. His denial of his family ties and history, which increasingly evolves into the principal power driving him toward self-recognition, is a third important element of the genre.

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225 The recognition is also behind some chapter titles. “A room with a view” parodies E. M. Forster’s novel, and “Sometimes a vague notion” is a spoof of a title of Ken Kesey’s. The title of Sartre’s *Les Jeux Sont Faits* is used as a chapter head, too. These chapter titles are intended to drive home the point that the young man is now beginning to realize that his self-image of a writer does not fit the facts of his life and rather resembles a caricature of the great fiction he aimed at.
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With regard to structure, one must note that the action proper of the novel only covers the last part of the hero’s education and ends with the first intimations of self-recognition. The author models his character’s process of self-awareness on the phases of his grief over his mother’s death. Incidentally, these are essentially identical to the four phases of the bereavement process commonly found in survivors of terminally-ill patients, namely: shock and numbness, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization. McInerney insists that the young man’s quest for himself is inextricably entwined with the process of mourning his mother’s death, the increasing degree of self-discovery being a direct function of his progress in his grief work. Ultimately only active confrontation of his bereavement enables him to break away from the seemingly inescapable circle of sense-numbing entertainment in this world of appearances and allows him to overcome his sense of self-alienation and to find a firm foundation for his self-image in the formative experiences of his past.

This temporal structure of the novel corresponds to the strictly linear, causal, and teleological thematic structure. The plot begins and ends early Sunday morning after all-night tours of parties and clubs. The opening chapter still finishes on a note of resignation. Exhausted and frustrated, the hero must admit to himself that he has once again failed in his search of clarification and direction. “Here you are again,” he laconically remarks. “All messed up and no place to go” (10). At this point he cannot make out any sign of improvement in his condition and is aware of a gradually mounting crisis. The concluding chapter sees the young man once again aimlessly wandering the streets of downtown Manhattan after another night out. Yet now he is conscious of having weathered his identity crisis and is cautiously hopeful, with a renewed confidence in his powers to cope with the developments in his life: “You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (182). In sum the evidence presented here corroborates the conclusion that, as Günter Leypoldt observes, “The plot structure … is a variation of a common bildungsroman pattern, in
which the fallen or corrupted hero embarks on a quest for redemption” (Leypoldt 2001: 224).

McInerney signals the importance of the hero’s sense of self-alienation as the principal driving force of the narrative through the conspicuous stylistic device of the second-person present-tense narrative perspective. Even though the author suggests that the book is essentially an “interior monologue” (in Pinsker 1986b: 112) and the “you”-perspective merely “a very common form of interior monologue” (in Schumacher 1988: 101), this mode of narration strikes the reader as an unusual and significant choice. Because of its relative originality, you-narration serves to “defamiliarize” the text, drawing the reader’s attention away from the story towards the discourse. Specifically, the second-person narration focuses the reader’s interest on the meaningful fact that the functions of narrator, narratee, and protagonist are conflated in one figure. The nameless young man in Bright Lights, Big City is forced to adopt an outside perspective on his own actions even as he is performing them and listening to his own account. In other words, the narrative perspective indicates the contemporaneity of action, detached observation, and reception. “[T]he narrator is simultaneously outside and inside himself; he is both the seeing subject and the

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224 Brian Richardson offers a handy formula to describe this literary phenomenon, which also fits McInerney’s novel:
Second person narrative may be defined as any narration that designates its protagonist by a second person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sore focalizer and is generally the work’s narratee as well. In most cases the story is narrated in the present tense and some forms also include frequent usage of conditional and future tenses (Richardson 1991: 311).
Ursula Wiest’s definition is similar to Richardson’s (Wiest 1993: 81). Monika Fludernik, in her approach to second-person narrative, emphasizes another aspect relevant here:
I will propose a preliminary definition of second-person narrative as narrative whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun (usually you) and add that second-person texts frequently also have an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the “you” to (sometimes) the “you” protagonist’s present-day absent or dead, wiser, self. In such contexts the narratee acquires a fictional past through the narrative in progress (Fludernik 1994: 288).
225 Fludernik’s overview of literary uses of second-person narratives and of the relevant research reveals that Bright Lights, Big City is anything but an isolated instance. In particular, she points out major examples of you-narratives in the 1950s and 1960s and argues that there has been a growing interest in this narrative perspective since the late 1970s (Fludernik 1993).
The Self in Trouble: object seen,” as Stephanie Girard observes (1996: 170).[^226] This highly unfamiliar “narrative schizophrenia” (Freese 1992: 528), then, conveys the young man's acute self-consciousness and profound uncertainty that arise from his disunity with himself. It thus puts the reader on guard to pay particular interest to the question of the young man’s “education” towards a sustainable self-concept—which is, of course, the thematic backbone of any bildungsroman.

If the reader expects the hero of McInerney’s novel to get a more powerful critical purchase on the events and experiences of his life by looking in from the outside as it were, this expectation is refuted. The author makes clear that, instead of affording the young man a better vantage point from which to analyze his life all the more objectively and comprehensively, the narrative separation of acting and observing selves only expresses his confusion and unproductive self-torture. As his wry quip on Wordsworth’s phrase about “emotion recollected in tranquility” (40) indicates, the young man feels too deeply involved in the “pointless chain of disasters” that seem to make up his life as to be able to take a sober view of them. McInerney emphasizes this missing critical detachment in the absence of a temporal distance between the young-man-as-protagonist and the young-man-as-narrator since both are located in the present.[^227] The temporal conflation of the acting and the observing selves is not dissolved until he permits himself to recollect the night shifts at his dying mother’s bedside. Only at this point he is able to establish the necessary critical distance to the confusion of his present life and can begin to make sense of the present and overcome his sense of disunity with himself.

[^226]: A number of commentators arrive at similar conclusions: Freese (1992: 528), Faye (1992: 121), Caveney (in Young and Caveney 1992: 52), Wiest (1993: 84-85). Incidentally, in interview the author himself has characterized the protagonist’s present state of mind as one in which “he is acutely aware of the bridge between himself as a subject, as someone who is observing, and as an object, someone who is acting and being in the world.” And McInerney adds, “He is, in a sense, two people. I think that's what self-consciousness is, an awareness of this gulf within ourselves” (McInerney in Ross 1988: 254).

[^227]: In this context, it is noteworthy that, in his “autobiographical” insertions and his attempts at writing a short story on the break-up of his relationship, the young man uses the
The closure-oriented plotline and the teleological thematic structure of the novel are also reflected in the imagery. Especially, the use of the protagonist’s pair of designer sunglasses is significant here. His considerable talent of ignoring or denying the actual facts of his life in favor of an unfounded fantasy of grandeur is symbolized in his frantic groping for his Ray-Ban sunglasses whenever he steps outside. Early the first Sunday morning the protagonist is afraid of leaving the club he is still at without his sunglasses (6). Several times, he alludes to the indispensability of his sunglasses as an instrument that, figuratively speaking, blocks out the reality of his life (8, 27, 126, 180ff). Significantly, he does so in particular when he has just had a self-revelatory experience, for instance, during the club scene at the beginning of the novel (1-6) and the fashion show at which he fails to confront Amanda (126). His hectic fumbling for his sunglasses on these occasions shows that he is not yet ready "to face" these truths about himself. At the very end, however, in a gesture whose heavy symbolism is not necessarily visible to the young man, he trades his Ray-Bans, this accessory of an urban life of high consumerism, for a few rolls of bread in the concluding scene of the novel: “You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (182) The scene attests to his determination to engage the facts of his life actively. He symbolically renounces the “ethic of appearances” and embraces the “ethic of engagement with the physical world.” This is a step towards the recovery of his real self, towards forming an authentic self-image that is grounded in his past.²²⁸

²²² Peter Freese ingeniously suggests that the novel’s closing scene is a clever reference to a scene in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography. Freese explains, “The scene became one of the archetypal passages of American literature, and to me it is rather obvious that it furnishes the referential horizon for McInerney’s hero on his way towards a new life. McInerney’s link of his protagonist’s “hopeful new beginning” at the end of the novel to Benjamin Franklin, the prototypical American selfmademan, represents an optimistic confirmation of the American dream. This all-too-sweet finish takes away much of the cynical edge of the narrative. In fact, the
All this is evidence that McInerney is determined to achieve a “unity of effect” (Poe), to establish a strong sense of closure at the reader level—a satisfaction that he only partially grants his character. For the reader, then, and to a large extent also for the young hero of the book, all the major issues have been brought to successful conclusions. Leypoldt comments, “The closure of the plot … is classically neorealist, with the hero progressing through a learning process, propelled by crucial moments of insight to a state of greater understanding” (Leypoldt 2001: 227). This teleological structure of the novel, therefore, is the strongest proof that *Bright Lights, Big City* endorses the philosophy of the *bildungsroman*.

In its comical and clever treatment of the protagonist-narrator’s confusion, the novel is a textbook account of the postmodern condition. Indeed, all the old “fundamental depth models”—“inside vs. outside”, “essence vs. appearance,” “authenticity vs. inauthenticity,” “alienation vs. disalienation,” “signifier vs. signified” (Jameson) —that have been thrown into doubt in postmodernity, are addressed in the novel. However, in a decided move against the postmodern grain, McInerney does not really join in the critique of these foundations. While he coquettishly toys around with these critical ideas—the “Deconstructionists” being a hip pop music group (32)—, he ultimately endorses the traditional, that is, the modernist view and affirms the foundations. In the world of *Bright Lights, Big City*, there is no epistemological or ontological uncertainty. The old dichotomies are still in place and visible when the protagonist-narrator finally manages to “only connect” the loose ends and solve the “muddles” of his life (E. M. Forster, *Howards End* and *A radiant optimism spread by the final scene stands sharply at odds and is barely reconcilable with the self-critical pessimism of the text at large (Freese 1992: 532). Freese’s perceptive observation underscores the importance of this scene within the system of references to the *bildungsroman* genre. On the other hand, his dismissal of McInerney’s clever move as signaling an undue optimism appears unjustified within the line of argument followed here. For, as has been demonstrated in detail in the preceding analysis, the cynicism and pessimism that Freese correctly discerns in the book are entirely the narrator’s, not the text’s. On the contrary, it is largely due to the *bildungsroman*-pattern underlying the novel that the work as a whole can be said to advocate a guarded optimism.

Room With A View). In a way, one may say that the text asks the new questions only to contend itself with the old answers. Thus, the novel must be said to fall short of its critical intent. Bright Lights, Big City ends up merely reinscribing the genre of the bildungsroman in a rather conventional manner—with all this genre’s implications of a knowable, causally structured world and of human existence as directed towards “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant).

7.6 Implication and Credibility

As has been described above, the runaway success of Bright Lights, Big City is clearly the result of clever marketing, in which the author’s high public profile proved enormously instrumental. Significantly, compared to his rather traditional bildungsroman with its conventional moralistic “message,” McInerney’s public persona through which he engages the novel is rather more complex and challenges the morals and messages of the novel.

A brief look at one of the texts with which McInerney shapes his public persona may suffice to show the way. It is enlightening to view McInerney’s article “Sunglasses,” which appeared in the “Voices of Summer” section of Rolling Stone, in which young writers who are currently en vogue comment on aspects of youth culture, as a “para-text” (Caveney) to Bright Lights, Big City. Even though McInerney does not explicitly ask the reader of the article to relate it to the novel, he gives so many signals throughout the article that a reader who is familiar with the novel is in fact urged to do so. Both, the article and the novel present an inside

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230 For instance, Leypold notes with reference to the seeming erosion of the traditional “appearance vs. essence” dichotomy as manifest in the protagonist’s confusion over his fashion-model wife, “To see what one wants to see, to be sure, is resonant of postmodern epistemological relativism; yet to have to learn later that what one wanted to see was based on a misconception is precisely the kind of learning process that belongs to a more traditional epistemology, based on the hope that preliminary versions of truths are still, to an extent, falsifiable” (Leypoldt 2001: 225).

231 See pp. 11f.
portrait of the hip urban consumer culture in the 1980s. Moreover, the image of the sunglasses provides a key to the understanding of both texts. As discussed above, in Bright Lights, Big City this image occurs at central stages when the protagonist reflects his own position vis-à-vis this culture. McInerney further stresses the fact that article and novel are related when he combines his above-mentioned use of his own public persona to his use of identical stylistic techniques. His introduction to the biographical anecdote in the article illustrates this strategy: “I have been accused by even my closest friends of an obsession with shades. I am the kind of guy who wouldn't think of leaving the house to get cigarettes in the middle of a thunderstorm at sea level without at least two pairs of sunglasses designed for Himalayan mountain climbers” (McInerney 1986c: 48). The author does not only identify himself as a member of this hip urban subculture; McInerney here offers himself as an extension of the protagonist of his novel. For just like the protagonist of his novel, McInerney shows himself to be devoted to sunglasses. Particularly telling in this respect is his use of the formula “I am the kind of guy” which almost directly echoes a phrase the protagonist of the novel uses to locate himself in society. Much as Janowitz does with her public persona, then, McInerney constructs a public persona for himself that serves as an extension of the fictional character into real life. As a result of this intentional blurring of the line separating the author from the protagonist and narrator of his novel, the reader is left to wonder how much of the article as a factual text is fiction.

Further, it is no coincidence that McInerney appeals to the authority of Bob Dylan in the Rolling Stone article. He uses the idol of the 1960's counterculture as a prime example of an insider-critic—a person who lives within mainstream American culture and criticizes it in the full knowledge that he himself is implicated by the
discourses of this culture. The “I-can-see-you-but-you-can't-see-me” kind of thing that McInerney attributes to Dylan is in fact a perfect motto for the writer's own position. He insists that he participates in mainstream life and is implicated in its economic networks (McInerney 1989b: 108). Of course, he is very much aware of the pitfalls. McInerney concedes, “I suppose an unsympathetic critic might say that my ostensible critique of manners of my age is overwhelmed by my participation in that culture” (in Pinsker 1986b: 108). Yet the author insists that he is able to keep the necessary distance. McInerney resolutely exposes the ideal of an objective outsider-critic as a myth. By contrast, McInerney offers himself as a voice whose criticism is both necessarily blunted by the fact of his own implication and sharpened by the intimate knowledge he gains through this implication. In Graham Caveney’s words,

[McInerney's projection of himself as “celebrity-writer” provides him with a subjective edge and frank engagement with his fiction. We know that he is not just describing reality, he is participating in it—and this knowledge acts as an antidote to his work ever seeming monolithic or confining (Caveney in Young and Caveney 1992: 46)]

Seeing that the implication of literature in popular culture is an indisputable fact, McInerney and his peers have stepped out of the ivory tower of art into the broad limelight of TV talk shows in order take an active part in the shaping of this relation. And they have discovered that a powerful public persona is an effective strategy to achieve this goal. Through his high-profile, iridescent public persona, McInerney has been able to incite and direct the discussion of which the germs may be seen in his novel. In this way, the writer has become the author and performer of his texts, his public persona serving as a comment on and enhancing his otherwise rather traditional realism.
After the foreign intermezzo of *Ransom*, Jay McInerney returns with *Story of My Life* (1988) to the familiar literary ground he claimed and charted in his best-selling first novel. Through Alison Poole, main character and voice of his third novel, McInerney once again probes the lives of young adults who try to ride the crest of the waves of Manhattan highlife in the mid-1980s. The novel depicts Alison’s efforts to make sense of the tumultuous events and feelings that determine her life in the two-months or so period prior to her twenty-first birthday. Her excessive and expensive lifestyle, her promiscuous sexual life, and her voracious cocaine habit create a never-ending chain of troubles for her. All her attempts at giving her life some sense of purpose and direction—particularly, her efforts at attending an acting school with any regularity—are doomed to failure. The problems gradually pile up in her life—a relationship breaks up; Alison loses control of her cocaine habit; her money shortage seems beyond repair; she has an abortion; a complicated relationship to her parents bothers her—and culminate in her breakdown at the party for her twenty-first birthday. McInerney’s portrayal of Alison and her pleasure-seeking friends is a parody of an urban consumer society that is falling apart because of the libertinism and consumerism it preaches. For the author, these are evidence of an underlying childlike notion of the self and society. He argues that only if this infantile self-concept is abandoned in favor of a more holistic view, socially responsible self-fulfillment is possible and social cohesion can grow.

### 8.1 The Breakup of Basic Social Structures

Alison sees her own family, close friendships and love relationships fall apart. She believes that in her present environment these social structures have been robbed of their emotional and ethical foundations. Yet despite her profound criticism of family and love relations in particular, she deeply longs for them.
Alison’s attitude towards her family and her parents is intense and ambivalent. Clearly, her father is her main person of reference. This is already signaled through the fact that at the beginning and end of the book Alison’s thoughts wander to her father. This impression is further substantiated in the course of the book as Alison tries to contact her father in times of material (e.g. 1, 2, 8, 132, 133) or emotional (e.g. 186, 187-188) need. In the face of the father’s ostensible importance as a person of reference, it is remarkable that Alison forever rants about him and her mother—a behavior indicative of her ambivalent attitude towards parental authority.

Her rebellious stance towards her father is not only fueled by her awareness of his dishonesty (e.g. 107, 133, 175-176, 187-188). It is also driven by her strong suspicions about his involvement in the poisoning of her beloved horse as well as by her accusations that he sexually abused her as a child (1, 125, 134, 188). This is why she vehemently disputes his right to exert control over her life (1-2). In addition to these criticisms, his own lack of perseverance in his relationships, his naivety and consumerist self-indulgence as well as his unreliability and parental neglect severely undermine his authority and bespeak his immaturity. At the end of the diatribe against her father with which her account opens, Alison quips, “My old man is fifty-two going on twelve” (2). Just how much Alison’s father has lost his authority becomes evident two days later. When her father at long last manages to return her phone calls, he is too preoccupied with his own love life to pay attention to his daughter. Alison rebukes him,

Don’t come crying to me about what’s-her-name, I say. Then he starts to whine and I go, when are you going to grow up, for Christ’s sake? […] He’s fifty-two years old and it’s a little late to teach him the facts of life. . . . Anyway, I hold his hand and cool him out and almost forget to hit him up for money (15).

It is a sign of the deep erosion of the father’s authority that her rudeness goes uncommented. Alison’s snappish tone and experienced, world-weary pose strongly suggest that the power relations between child and parent have been reversed here:
The Self in Trouble:

Whereas the father is emotionally dependent, the daughter is in charge now, deftly making use of her position of power.

Quite clearly, the mother’s role in her daughter’s education strengthens Alison in her conclusion that moral authority and support are not to be found with her parents. Like the father, the mother neglected her children’s education (4, 21, 132-133). Though she leads a life of excessive self-indulgence, alcohol excesses (36-37), and shiftlessness, the mother propagates the code of behavior of an old order of temperance. Alison scorns her mother’s self-contradictoriness. Having lost her respect for her mother early in life (e.g. 21), Alison now assumes a similarly dominant role towards her mother as she does towards her father (e.g. 36). When the mother congratulates her daughter on her birthday but goes on to whine about her own lover, Alison gets impatient, “It’s not like I’m not sympathetic, but it’s a little depressing because maybe just this once on my birthday we could talk about me. I’m the kid here, after all. . . . [M]y mom might as well be sixteen the way she talks. . .” (182-183). In Alison’s view, then, her mother thoroughly disqualifies herself as a person of moral authority. In the final analysis, neither parent has the willpower and the moral integrity that Alison seeks in them. Nonetheless, she is still torn at heart between a yearning for authority and guidance and a rejection of her parents as such persons of reference.

To Alison, her parents’ lack of moral integrity does not only undermine their own authority; it has also thrown the traditional love myth (Swidler 1980) as the referential framework for family and love relations into doubt. Her concerns are nurtured by experiences in her own life and her observations among her friends. In her view, the notion of romantic love—with its implication of permanence and final

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233 Alison’s uneasy search for mature persons of reference is also in evidence in her remarks on her ex-lover Skip, whose nickname itself is a suggestion of his authority: “Skip is thirty-one and he’s so smart and so educated—just ask him, he’ll tell you. A legend in his own mind. Did I forget to mention he’s so mature? Unlike me. He was always telling me I don’t know anything. I’ll tell you one thing I don’t know—I don’t know what I saw in him” (3).
self-fulfillment—has proven useless as a basis of a relationship, deluding the partners about their own and each other’s true motives. The relationships that she knows about or conducts herself leave no room for altruism. Alison remarks in her characteristically blatant tone,

I usually figure it’s kind of a trade-off. You know, the I’ll-lick-yours-if-you’ll-lick-mine kind of thing… I suppose trading favors is what it’s all about. I mean sometimes I think we’re all just masturbating each other any way you look at it. If we’re not jerking each other around, we’re jerking each other off (31-32).

These relationships are based on the mutual understanding that both partners seek instant and complete gratification of their desires and that the other is merely a sexual commodity the consumption of which holds the promise of achieving this end; consequently, any consideration for the other’s needs is never unselfish but only the precondition for the satisfaction of one’s own impulses.234

In such an extremely consumerist environment, the traditional love myth appears to have lost its validity. Consequently, Alison shuns the language of love. For example, she characterizes her feeling for her new lover Dean as being “in lust,” painstakingly avoiding the expression “in love” (e.g. 46, 50, 84, 93, 114, 146). When she occasionally lapses into the romantic vocabulary, she always quickly checks herself. For instance, debating the desirability of performing oral sex for her partners, she muses:

When you love someone, okay, I loved Alex, and there is some kind of special thing about doing something for someone you love that’s a better feeling than anything else in the world, even if it’s something you normally wouldn’t do at all. Or maybe especially if it’s something you normally wouldn’t do.
   Did I say love? Wash my mouth out with soap (33).

She self-consciously shies away from using the term “love,” fearing that an unselfish emotion is a sign of unrealistic sentimentalism and weakness. Similarly, when performing fellatio on her new lover Dean, she feels she is doing her “good deed for the day” (30). However, Alison’s essentially economic understanding of sexuality quickly re-asserts itself, “I’m glad he’s happy, since I have to ask him for cab money.

234 Graham Caveney draws a similar conclusion (Young and Caveney 1992: 66).
T...[H]e’s real sweet about it and gives me a twenty and I kiss him again. . .” (36).

Quite obviously, love is a priceable commodity to her and—as may be inferred from Dean’s tacit agreement—to her lover.

Alison believes this business-like view of love as an exchange of favors is irreconcilable with the ideal of faithfulness, which she regards as another pillar of traditional family and love relations. This is why she deeply distrusts the institutions of marriage and family. “Families are a lie from the start,” she declares, “based on the ridiculous notion that two people can be faithful to each other” (123; see also 56, 57, 83, 86-87). Her experience has led her to doubt any form of relationship that starts out from the assumption that the partners act out of altruistic motives. In her opinion, any relationship that requires the partners to be faithful to each other is doomed to failure because faithfulness and sustained commitment imply that possibly disruptive impulses be bridled and negated. This is why she so furiously chastises herself for being jealous of her new lover when he does not phone as promised. She explains,

It’s not like we have a relationship. God, I hate that word, it’s the death sentence for fun. Like, now we’re having a relationship, how should we act? It’s almost as bad as marriage. Once you say those words you get rules and definitions and you start losing track of your feelings and then they die (86).

The principle of instant gratification of all desires, central to the permissive consumer society Alison belongs to, simply does not provide for such deferment or even denial of personal impulses. In her reasoning so-called permanent relationships harbor the seed of their own destruction. As her own experiences and observations strengthen her in this view, Alison rules out marriage for herself and laconically notes, “Show me a happy marriage and I’ll show you one fool and one hypocrite” (174).

Seeing that love and faithfulness and the social structures based on them are irreconcilable with the dominant pursuit of instant gratification and the resulting “trade-off” mentality with which partners approach their relationships, Alison seeks
refuge in loyalty and friendship. Apparently, safe from sexually motivated confusions and conflicts of power, they seem to afford a sense of continuity, stability and belonging, and thus to fill the gaping emotional void (e.g. 92). Yet loyalty and friendship are just as perishable within this permissive and consumption-oriented environment as love, faithfulness and the relationships premised upon them. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Alison learns that under these conditions conflicts of loyalty are especially troubling, and the friendship to Jeannie, which Alison prizes so highly, is destroyed by the latter’s selfish breach of trust (96).

Even though the ideas of a permanent love relationship, of marriage and of the nuclear family appear without firm emotional and ethical foundations to her, Alison longs for their promise of fulfillment and belonging. Her blunt dismissal of “emotional stuff” as a mere source of jealousy and humiliation (84, 105-106) is also an implicit confession that the notion of romantic love still has a powerful hold on her. She notes, for instance, “You know, right in the middle of a good orgasm you’ll go completely liquid and for a while afterward you’ll think about true love and marriage and other, like, ancient myths” (44). Elsewhere she self-consciously falters between disillusioned scepticism and sentimental idealism when thinking about family and home:

It never lasts. I haven’t seen one example yet. But there’s still this ideal in your head, you know, like a vision of a place you’ve never visited, but that you’ve dreamed about or seen in a movie you’ve forgotten the title of, and you know you’d recognize it immediately if you ever saw it in real life. It would be like going home, tired and whipped after a really long time on the road, if home was like it’s supposed to be, instead of the disaster area it actually is (33).

Though she repeatedly chastises herself for this ambivalence (e.g. 46, 48, 84, 120), she grudgingly accepts that, in the final consequence, she cannot completely eclipse

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235 For instance, when she sees her friend Didi unable and unwilling to fight her growing drug addiction, Alison does not know how to help. She is confused whether, by revealing the name of Didi’s drug provider, she actually proves her loyalty and responsibility or rather betrays their friendship (121).
the emotional side from her sexual relationships. In conclusion, then, Alison is intensely ambivalent about partnership, family and friendship, all of which involve an altruistic element and presuppose the possibility and desirability of permanent relationships. As people ostensibly conduct their social relations on a basis of give-and-take and seek instant and complete gratification of their desires, these social structures appear stripped of their ethical and emotional foundations. Nevertheless, Alison is not quite willing to give full credence to her own relentless analysis. Indeed, these social structures with their promise of permanent love, and a sense of continuity, stability and belonging are still attractive to her. With the critic Elizabeth Young one might say that “the nihilism of Alison’s pronouncements is outdone by the energy of their performance” (Young in Young and Caveney 1992: 64).

Like Bret Easton Ellis in *Less Than Zero*, Jay McInerney presents a protagonist on the verge of adulthood who is used to a carefree life in abundance without any ethical constraints keeping her from the instant and complete gratification of her every impulse. Both Ellis and McInerney paint a grim picture of this segment of the urban consumer society. Home as a secure and identity-forming haven does not exist anymore. The parents neglect their children. They are weak, self-indulgent personalities without an internal “gyroscope” (Riesman) to steady them. In their pitiful emulation of their offspring’s late-adolescent antics, they betray their utter incompetence as persons of authority. The only thing in the way of an

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236 Alison’s vision of the ideal family is fed by memories of her grandmother and by her relationship to her grandfather. Her reverence and deep affection for her grandparents (e.g. 28, 143) originate from her conviction that she found in them the care and love her parents were too egotistic and incompetent to give. Even as a child, she painfully sensed the emotional emptiness of her family life and longed to escape to the far-away, almost imaginary world of harmony represented by her grandmother:

*We’d always miss the bus [to school] and Mom could never get it together to drive us in, she was asleep most of the morning, totally zonked in her big canopy bed. When we were little we’d climb in and pretend it was a ship sailing off to England, where Gran was from, the chintz curtains were our sails* (132-133).

In Alison’s idealizing view her grandparents are representatives of a long-gone social order in which love and decency were valued highly.
ethical guideline they can pass on to their children is a kind of “radar” (Riesman), the sensibility to one’s environment without which the other-directed person cannot survive. In both books, the authors radically emphasize the dissolution of home and parenthood by presenting the family as that place where the exploitation and spiritual destruction of the young begins. Like Ellis, McInerney employs the incest-motif in a conventional manner as a metaphor of familial self-destruction. The children’s response to this situation is also very similar in Ellis and McInerney. Like Clay, Alison does not rebel against parental neglect and abuse. Both characters acquiesce to acting the roles assigned to them, knowing that they are parts of a system of exchange that nurtures them. Like Ellis, McInerney also makes clear that this business-like perception of human relations undermines the individual’s capacity to engage in meaningful, intimate love relationships or friendships. However, Clay withdraws emotionally for fear of the spiritual abyss he might discover in his counterpart and afraid of making himself vulnerable. Alison, on the other hand, is deeply ambivalent about the emotional void in her relationships and—despite her loud protestations to the contrary—still clings to the traditional love myth with its promise of permanence, communion, and self-fulfillment. In essence, then, McInerney shares Ellis’s bleak analysis of human relations in the affluent sections of the American consumer society in the 1980s but, unlike Ellis, suggests that redemption is possible.

8.2 Power Struggles

In Alison’s view, the maxim of seeking instant and complete satisfaction of all needs, poses a serious threat to her autonomy. Particularly in those areas in which people depend on each other for the gratification of their respective desires—in this environment these are drugs, money, and sex—, social relations are characterized by a continual struggle for positions of power. Consequently, Alison sees the need to reassert her self-determination.
Alison recognizes that her own endless pursuit of pleasure in the forms of parties, drugs and sex drains her of her energy and seriously undermines her resolve to control and redirect her life. She has identified this weakness from the start (8, 71) but is unable to make a lasting change. Significantly, she is basically fully convinced that her present lavish lifestyle is a direct, inevitable result of her upbringing. From this she concludes that her parents, particularly her father, are responsible for her material welfare. This attitude does not change and is still in evidence at the height of her crisis (168). As her diatribe against her father with which she opens her account illustrates (1), Alison is intensely and painfully aware that such material dependence on others curbs her freedom and threatens her self-determination. Her inexorably mounting financial problems strengthen her in her conviction that this dependence is the result of forces beyond her control. She essentially pictures herself as a victim at the mercy of negligent, selfish people who are in constant pursuit of instant and complete satisfaction. She believes that she has no way of permanently emancipating herself from this dependence.

Alison’s sense of being victimized leads her to regard her social life with extreme caution, in Jefferson Faye’s words, “Everyone of her relationships is a power struggle in which she sees herself as the subject of aggressive behavior” (Faye 1992: 129). This is nowhere more obvious than in the field of sexuality, which, in
Alison’s eyes, informs virtually all social interaction between the sexes (e.g. 137). Much more than just a basic instinct, sexuality is essentially the battleground on which the contenders continually challenge each other’s status as free acting subjects, seeking to instrumentalize the other as an object of desire. This attitude towards sexuality determines the way Alison and her peers talk and act. Among friends sexuality is a matter of playful rivalry (e.g. 10, 27, 50) or the subject of more serious social contest (e.g. 102, 140); among strangers braging about one’s sexual conquests signals prowess (23). In this ongoing fight, Alison is alternately an object or a subject of sexual desire.

From the start, Alison makes clear that she must fight off male-chauvinist attempts to monopolize her as a sexual object. She acridly analyses Skip’s contemptuous attitude towards women, “He doesn’t want to go out with anybody who might see through him, so he picks up girls like me. Girls he thinks will believe everything he says and fuck him the first night and not be real surprised when he never calls again” (5). At this early point, however, she is still self-assured. For instance, she easily gets rid of an unknown suitor who phones her following Skip’s recommendation (2). But when the scene almost repeats itself with another man a short time after (9), she is utterly disgusted about her ostensibly questionable reputation. Nevertheless, the unabashed way in which she handles the situation proves that Alison at this point still feels very much in control.

However, her initial confidence suffers a setback when Skip smugly informs her that apparently Dean is having an affair behind her back. Outraged and humiliated that Dean’s betrayal puts her at a strategic disadvantage towards Skip (104), Alison vents her anger, “I mean, if he’s going to fuck other women, fine, I don’t mind, really I don’t, but they better be at least in the as-wonderful-as-I-am-

that she holds drugs, always unnerving and dominating her friends, who eagerly wait for their share of her drug supplies (e.g. 40f, 61, 63f, 148).
category or how could he even consider it? . . . If he thinks she’s worth the price of dinner, how can he truly appreciate me” (106)? Her acrid directness is evidence, as has been argued above, that she basically subscribes to the underlying economic view of sexuality. Yet it also shows that now she has lost her previous self-ironic detachment perceptible in the afore-quoted advice. Quite clearly, she accepts her commodification as a sexual good and sees herself in competition with other women. Of course, this exploitation means a denial of her autonomy but, paradoxically, on this marketplace of sexuality, being chosen as a sexual commodity also proves her “market value” and provides her with a sense of power. Conversely, being ignored by the male suitor means to her that she has lost her self-determination a second time.

When Dean finally admits that he betrayed her, she feels the urge to demonstrate to herself and to him that she can fight back. In its rich detail, the following scene captures the attempt of the humiliated sexual object as which she perceives herself to seize emotional and even physical control. In this way she seeks to reassert the sovereignty as a sexual subject she believes to have lost.

Fuck me, I go.
What? he says.
Let’s fuck, I go. Let’s just go into your bedroom and fuck, okay?
So we do. So I go in and lie down on the bed and he comes in and undresses me and plays with me. I don’t play with him but he doesn’t seem to mind—he better not—he gets inside me and I clench my teeth and grind against him and practically carve my initials in his back. I have my eyes closed, I don’t even look at him, and when I come it’s good but it’s not good enough, not nearly, he comes with a sort of a shout and rolls off. I give him about three minutes, then I grab his cock and start yanking. . . . I pull on his cock like it’s attached to a busted cigarette machine and I’m having a nicotine fit, he winces and gasps through his teeth, then I climb on top of him and hump and ride, . . . and after about ten minutes I come but I keep my mouth shut about it, this isn’t one of those beautiful sharing experiences, this is something else entirely.

Then he comes. Alison, he goes. Alison Alison Alison.
That’s my name. My parents gave it to me, the creeps. Alison Poole. I’m going to make goddam sure he never forgets it. (127-128).

Alison’s indulgence in graphic details stressing her dominance in this situation is an indication of how much she is reveling in the feeling of power. The repeated references to her name indicate that she is literally claiming possession of Dean as a

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240 Alison repeatedly comments on Skip’s condescending behavior towards women
sexual “slave,” an object of her desire that does not have any sexual rights of his own. When Dean shouts her name at the moment of his climax, she regards this as a victory, as a sign that he acknowledges her as an autonomous being. No longer just an available, impersonal object of consumption, she now feels she has successfully reclaimed her identity as a sexual subject.

However, in the end Alison must understand that all her efforts to regain control over her sexual life are futile. During the second Truth-or-Dare game, she notices that Rebecca has her hand in Dean’s lap. Alison challenges her sister but only meets with nonchalant indifference (154). In their reckless pursuit of pleasure, Rebecca and Dean do not bother about those who might be hurt in the process. When, a little later in the same game, Alison herself is forced to confess having betrayed Dean, she is still more humiliated since her attempt at seeking revenge on him has only discredited her own reliability (171). In the end, then, Alison must look on powerlessly as control over her sexual life is slipping away from her.

To sum up, Alison’s relationships to the men in her life are enormously erotically charged up. In her experience of male sexuality, beginning with her father, men tend to monopolize and exploit women as objects of sexual desire. In her struggle to restore and protect her autonomy, Alison finds herself resorting to strategies that, broadly speaking, reverse the relation of power. Consequently, a strong sense of an endangered autonomy is integral to Alison’s self-concept and a permanent impetus to her actions. The threats to her sovereignty become ever more severe, and her subsequent attempts to salvage it ever more frantic and drastic. This increasingly fierce fight for her self-determination is a major cause of her growing crisis.

(e.g. 102, 140).
Much like Janowitz in *Slaves of New York*, Jay McInerney presents a male-dominated society in which women can assert their autonomy only indirectly. Alison’s paradoxical attempt to regain self-determination by first succumbing to male domination and exploiting her market value as an object of male sexual desire is reminiscent of the alternative realizations of female identity presented in “Modern Saint #271” and “Kurt and Natasha, a Relationship” and, of course, in *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*.

Like Ellis’s characters, Alison lives in an environment, in which personal relationships—particularly, sexual ones—are governed by the same consumerist attitude as everything else. This is why Alison, like Clay for instance, is so wary of the power structures in her relationships. Like Ellis’s books, McInerney’s portrait of personal relationships in *Story of My Life* fully bears out Lasch’s observation that “both men and women have come to approach personal relations with a heightened appreciation of their emotional risks...” *(Lasch 1978: 194).* Where Clay responds with emotional disengagement, Alison fights back.

### 8.3 Self-alienation

To Alison self-alienation is at the heart of many disturbances. She observes that most people often do not know their true needs and desires or do not dare admit them to themselves. She regards this lack of self-understanding and self-acceptance as a major cause of individual and social problems.

The beginning of Alison’s own sense of self-alienation is marked by the death of her horse Dangerous Dan. Her horse-riding days during her childhood were formative and retain their relevance as a vital point of reference for her self-image and for her view of her social relationships, particularly to her father. The great significance Alison attributes to horse-riding is noticeable throughout her account,

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241 Passage quoted in full and discussed on p. 45.
especially when—at the height of her crisis during the birthday party (187) or in her final words to her father (188)—her mind travels back to them. Quite early in her account, Alison talks about what riding used to mean to her and how deeply the death of Dangerous Dan struck her:

When I was a kid I spent most of my time on horseback. I went around the country, showing my horses and jumping, until Dangerous Dan dropped dead. I loved Dan more than just about any living thing since and that was it for me and horses. That’s what happens, basically, when you love something (7).

In the death of her horse, Alison does not simply grieve over the loss of her only real object of love. She also mourns the loss of her oneness. Riding was to her the quintessentially authentic activity, it meant being at one with herself. This loss is all the more far-reaching in its consequences for having been brought about by her father (187). Alison indirectly accuses him of bringing her childhood to a violent ending, of destroying her sense of oneness and taking away her innocence.

Her account opens at a point in her life at which she is trying to make a determined effort to overcome her self-alienation and restore the long-lost sense of oneness. This is the main reason why she has taken up acting. During a particularly intense sense-memory exercise, Alison experiences such a moment of utter self-contentedness:

I don’t know, I was off in my own world, acting. I’m doing something true, I know I’m not just faking it this time and even though it’s acting something I’m not really experiencing it’s absolutely honest, my reaction, the sensations I’m feeling and I’m completely in my own reality, it’s like dreaming, you know, or like riding when you feel almost like you and your horse are the same animal, taking your best jumper over a hard course and hitting everything perfectly. . . (46).

The image of Alison on horseback vividly captures the child’s state of living completely in tune with her emotions, with her whole self. Alison strongly insists that acting is an equally authentic activity and repeatedly emphasizes that in acting she is detached and free from the restrictions of her environment, creating a world of her own. She considers these as basic qualities of the state of oneness. Significantly enough, in search of an image that might express this sensation adequately, she turns to the riding-days of her childhood. Thus, acting is much more than a way out of an
aimlessly drifting life oversaturated with casual sex, cocaine, and consumer goods (8); acting allows Alison to overcome her self-alienation, that is, to get through to what she considers the real, basic self of her childhood from which she was separated through the death of Dangerous Dan.

Alison’s ideas about acting as a therapeutic means to facilitate self-realization betray her notions of self and society:

[A]cting, I don’t know, I just love it, getting up there and turning myself inside out. Being somebody else for a change. It’s like being a child again, playing something, making believe, laughing and crying all over the place, ever since I can remember people have been trying to get me to stifle my emotions but forget it—I’m an emotional kind of girl. My drama teacher has this great thing he always says—get in touch with your child, which is supposed to be the raw, uncensored part of yourself. Acting is about being true to your feelings, which is great since real life seems to be about being a liar and a hypocrite (7-8).

Alison’s idea of acting is that the restraining rules governing social life in reality are suspended in the world of the theatre. As has been shown in the previous section, she thinks that such restricting rules are irreconcilable with the principle of seeking complete gratification of one’s desires and mean that people inevitably become alienated from their true selves. By contrast, Alison regards the theater stage as a sanctuary in which she need not suppress her emotions but can let them run free. Thus, she believes to have found a sphere of authenticity in acting. According to her self-styled notions of the self and socialization—which originate in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and faintly smack of ill-digested Rousseauan or Wordsworthian thought—, the child’s primary emotions and impulses struggle for expression but are continually filtered and suppressed as the child is growing up to become a social being. As a result of this socialization, the adult has forgotten about those original, “true” emotions and impulses or has learned to negate them and ends up pretending to emotions that do not originate in himself or herself. For Alison then, socialization is fundamentally a negative process that alienates the individual from himself or herself. In her opinion, the socialized self is merely a crippled version of the original,
real self, unable to realize or communicate his or her true emotions.\footnote{She also sees this in evidence in the two men who are most important to her, namely, her father and Dean. Alison thinks her father fails to realize that his love life is fueled by inauthentic, clichéd emotions. So, when she asks her father’s secretary to tell him “to get in touch with his child” (132), it is clear that, beyond the literal level of her request, she uses her acting teacher’s expression metaphorically, appealing to her father to get to know himself better. In Dean, Alison observes a similar lack of insight into his “true” feelings (e.g. 169). Alison is disappointed and exasperated to find that Dean is losing his “spontaneity” and turning “conventional” (73), which in her eyes is synonymous to being alienated from one’s true self: “Like, we’re all pretty much raving maniacs as kids, but then some of us get all conventional. Not me, that’s why I know I’m going to be a great actress some day, I’m totally in touch with my child” (73). Her remark again illustrates her confidence in acting as an appropriate antidote for her own self-alienation. With regard to Dean, it is also an application of her idea of the crippling effect of socialization.}

Thus, in Alison’s eyes drama school is not simply, as the critic Jefferson Faye proposes, “the means by which she can release the pent-up emotions and feelings of betrayal she experiences” (Faye 1992: 128). Rather, acting is her way of defying what she believes to be the self-alienating effects of socialization, because the stage offers a refuge in which she can plumb the depths of her real self, of the “child” within her. Acting, she is convinced, gives her a chance to rediscover and unleash the genuine emotions of her “pre-socialization” self. This pre-socialization self is quite different from the socialized self, it is “somebody else” to use her words. In short, through acting she seeks to restore, in Christopher Lasch’s words, that prenatal “experience of narcissistic self-sufficiency and union with the world” (Lasch 1985: 167), where there is no distinction between bodily needs and their fulfillment, where desire and frustration do not exist.

Alison outwardly resembles Clay in her search for raw, direct experience. In Alison, this search is motivated by her overwhelming sense of self-alienation, which she seeks to overcome. Feeling that she lives in a world full of inauthentic or—to use the favorite word of her famous predecessor Holden Caulfield—“phony” people, she believes that this return to the “true” self is the precondition of successful communication. Clay, on the other hand, ceaselessly searches for evermore powerful stimuli and experiences to overcome his numbness and sense of artifice. As argued
above, Clay’s sense of self-alienation is much less pronounced and distinct than Alison’s.

### 8.4 Social Isolation

In Alison’s opinion, a wide-spread inability or unwillingness to communicate openly, honestly and meaningfully makes it exceedingly difficult to maintain close intimate relationships. Thus, below the hustle and bustle of their social life with its seeming closeness, Alison senses a profound isolation.

Alison’s communicational difficulties with her father are indicative of the problem. Now, that she is seeking her father’s support, her profound distrust is given new nourishment by his virtual non-availability. Her attempts to talk to her father almost always fail as his whereabouts are often unknown (8, 132, 133). As her repeated disgusted reactions testify (e.g. 97, 178), Alison painfully senses that her father’s non-availability itself is a sign of parental neglect and a mockery of her desire to communicate with him. Yet the sad recognition that the gulf between daughter and father has become unbridgeable hits her with a vengeance only at the very end. Trying to make a new beginning after her breakdown, she phones her father but finds to her dismay that he is as evasive and non-committal as before (188).

Alison’s sense of social distance and her longing for intimate communion are also very much in evidence in her sex life. For Alison her sexuality is a principal mode of communication, which, however, mostly leaves her dissatisfied:\(^{243}\)

> I hate being alone, but when I wake up in some guy’s bed with dry come on the sheets and he’s snoring like a garbage truck, I go—let me out of here. I slip out and crawl around the floor groping for my clothes, trying to untangle his blue jeans from mine, my bra from his Jockeys . . . without making any noise, out the door and home to where Jeannie has been warming the bed all night (5).

Alison’s candid confession suggests that underneath her voracious sexual appetite

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^(243) This is why, for instance, a “social disease” (27) she has contracted hits her particularly hard or why she refuses to make her sex partners use condoms: “[Y]ou can’t beat flesh on flesh. I want contact, right? Just give me direct contact and you can keep true love” (9).
there is a great longing for nearness. Yet, at this point she is not quite ready yet to accept that casual sex with partners she barely knows will not still her longing for company and communication. Instead she prefers the anonymity and non-commitment of sex with virtual strangers. At the end she has an all-pervading sense of distance and emptiness, and what remains is the sobering realization that once again there has been no communication beyond the merely physical.

A further manifestation of Alison’s strong sense of distance is her dependence on telecommunications. The fundamental significance of the telephone in her life hits Alison with a vengeance when the telephone service to their apartment is restricted to incoming calls: “[S]uddenly I’m cut off from all my friends and delivery service from the deli” (114-115). Alison’s heavy use of the telephone, together with the audible nervousness in her remark, betrays her fear of social isolation. This experience becomes still more oppressive to Alison as she often finds herself depending on answering machines to relay her messages. At one point this draws the exasperated comment from her, “story of my life, talking to machines” (124, and similarly 133). The telephone and the answering machine, then, are much more than indispensable devices of communication for Alison. Ultimately, she interprets them as symbols of her feelings of distance and isolation from her environment as well as of her determination to overcome them.

Yet, in Alison’s opinion, face-to-face conversations mostly do not bear the marks of successful communication either. On the contrary, conversation is often desultory and only increases Alison’s sense of detachment from her environment. Meaningful communication is particularly impeded when drugs are involved—which is the case most of the time. On her return to her apartment at three in the afternoon

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244 Her attitude is evidenced by her sex fantasy of “a harem of men to come and go as I command, guys as beautiful and faceless as the men who lay you down in your dreams” (15).
245 Of course, Alison here also metaphorically refers to the lack of individuality she diagnoses in her social world.
one day, Alison finds Rebecca and Didi still going strong after a night of partying and drugs. Their ceaseless jabbering prompts Alison to note amusedly,

I love coke conversations. They’re so enlightening. I mean, do I sound like that? It’s almost enough to make you swear off drugs forever. [. . . ] That’s the good part about dealing with coke monsters. If you don’t like the topic of conversation, just wait a minute and you’ll get a new one. On the other hand, it never really changes at all. It’s like a perpetual motion thing. The topic is always drugs (38-39).

Topics are selected and dropped at random and in quick succession, and the conversation always returns to its origin in perpetual circularity. While this display of Rebecca’s and Didi’s lack of concentration, of their single-mindedness and egocentricity makes Alison feel superior, it also simultaneously nurtures the nagging doubt in her that she herself might be equally incapable of communicating meaningfully.

The sorry sight of Didi and her sister leads Alison to conclude that drug users are less capable of relating to their environment. In Alison’s view, their drug habits aggravate their egocentricities to such an extent that they are numb and insensitive to the people around them. In Didi the effect is conspicuous but ultimately without significance for her friends. At worst she is a nuisance (e.g. 61) and—in her unlimited capacity for self-delusion—a source of amusement at best (e.g. 183-184). By comparison, Rebecca’s loss of empathy under the influence of drugs is much more severe and makes her downright dangerous to the people around her as is dramatically instanced by her indolence and indifferent behavior in the tragicomical face-offs with dealer-cum-boyfriend Mannie (159-161). Thus, one may say that Alison becomes increasingly aware of the isolating effect of drugs. She observes that under the influence of drugs, tendencies towards egocentricity and apathy become more pronounced and make it more difficult to enter into meaningful communication with one’s environment.

To sum up, one may say that Alison detects problems of communication in virtually every aspect of her life. Alison sees herself confronted with people who are unable or unwilling to communicate openly, and meaningfully. These
communicational deficits cause major disturbances in Alison’s life and ultimately leave her isolated from her environment.

8.5 Reality Testing Not Always Successful

In Alison’s opinion the maxim of acting out one’s every fantasy to the full renders her whole world in an unreal light. In this seemingly unreal world, people are liable to confuse fantasy and reality, and Alison herself begins to fear for her own sense of reality. Gradually realizing that erasing the distinction of fantasy and reality has disastrous consequences for her life, Alison seeks to distance herself from her environment at crucial moments to regain some critical perspective and thus consolidate her sense of reality.

A major cause of her sense of living in an unreal world is that it seems to be inhabited by “cartoon characters.” Her sister Rebecca is a prime example:

Becca uses things up quickly—cars, credit cards, men, drugs, horses, you name it. The men and credit cards are sort of mixed up together—after she’s totally burned out some guy she usually asks if she can have a credit card which he’ll wait for five days and then report stolen. . . . The best way I can think of to describe Rebecca is to say she’s like the Tasmanian Devil, that character in the Bugs Bunny cartoons that moves around inside a tornado and demolishes everything in his path (17-18).

Alison characterizes Rebecca as a person who recklessly reduces her social and material environment to a mere resource of her own lust for pleasure and excitement. Indeed, as the events unfold, Rebecca acts so consistently in line with this sketch (see 117, 154-157, 159-161) that Alison at one point admiringly comments, “Rebecca is totally in character” (78). When Rebecca finally departs with a new lover (167)—of course, after making her previous beau relinquish his credit cards (185)—, she has given no indication that her personality may be more highly dimensional or her behavior more complex than Alison’s initial off-hand sketch suggests. In fact, the stages of Rebecca’s ravaging campaign are so completely in tune with Alison’s prediction as if she were acting out a role in a script.

If Rebecca is a “cartoon character” of the terrifying sort, her friend Francesca is a specimen of the comic variety. To Alison, Francesca’s personality is just as little
complex as her sister’s. In her good-natured eccentricity, Francesca shows a silhouette-like flatness of character similar to Rebecca’s. This prompts Alison to remark facetiously, “Francesca is like one of those cartoon characters, I swear she can swivel her head three hundred and sixty degrees when she wants to see who’s around” (100). Like Rebecca, Francesca appears slavishly to stick to her “script” (see 19-20). Her all-absorbing and entirely unselfconscious publicity mania and passion for celebrities recur repeatedly, making her appearances resemble the antics of a buffoon stock character (51, 63, 163-164). As Alison comes to realize with growing disgust, Francesca’s enthusiastic hunt for an invitation by “Mick and Jerry”246 on the one hand and Alison’s own physical and psychic decline on the other are anti-parallel developments and reach their respective climaxes simultaneously, thus throwing a tragicomical light on Alison’s crisis. This point is reached when, amidst the rambunctious enjoyment of her friends at the Derby party, Alison realizes how meaningless and utterly without consequence her life is and becomes nauseous (147). At this moment Francesca phones, telling an incredulous Alison that she has finally managed to get invited by Mick and Jerry (149-150). For Alison Francesca’s phone call is a further ironic confirmation of her feeling that there are no criteria of relevance in her world, and her life always continues without ever changing significantly.

Surely, Mannie, Rebecca’s drug-dealing, discarded boyfriend, is the person who most strongly nurtures Alison’s doubts about the reality of this world. Twice Mannie enters on the scene in the most theatrical fashion, threatening and imploring a cold and heartless Rebecca to return to him (77-78, 159-161). On both occasions Mannie interrupts a game of Truth-or-Dare at the moment of highest tension, only to confront the players with a situation of apparently real physical danger. On his second entrance he bursts into the room, challenging Rebecca at knife point:

246 Presumably, Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall are being referred to here.
He’s got his knife out again. I don’t know, it seems kind of harmless at this point, like sort of a gimmick, you know, his schtick. Some guys wear suspenders, Mannie the drug dealer always carries a knife. [. . .] He sort of zigzags into the room, crouched down low with the knife in front of him, the way cops move on TV when they’re expecting gunfire any minute.

Cut the theatrics, Mannie, Becca says. [. . .]

Come back, he sobs. There are actual tears running down his cheeks (159).

To Alison, his intrusion has a scripted, staged quality. It seems too much like the bad performance of a poor actor playing the stock character of the unrequited Latin lover in a travesty of a love tragedy. Even at this moment of great agitation, when he is ostensibly acting on a momentary impulse, Mannie appears to be following the lines of a hidden, hackneyed script. In Alison’s mind, the fantasy of power that Mannie is acting out in this situation merely emulates the formula-like, empty images of the television screen. That is why she doubts the reality and sincerity of his threat. Yet, as her remark about Mannie’s tears suggests, she is quite at a loss as to how true and authentic his dramatic, seemingly staged and contrived shows of emotion are. When he actually injures one of the guests, the reality of the danger slowly begins to sink into Alison’s consciousness. Nonetheless, the situation as a whole continues as the badly written and choreographed scene as which it started out. The incident culminates in Mannie’s highly theatrical, if unwilling exit out the sixth-floor apartment window, which leaves Alison not completely convinced of the reality of what she has just witnessed (160). And her doubts about the factual reality of her world are again given fresh when she visits him in hospital a few days later: “Mannie’s like a cartoon version of an accident victim, they’ve got him in this body cast, he’s like a mummy in traction” (179). In fact, people like Mannie, Rebecca, and Francesca strengthen Alison in her view that this world is not peopled by human beings with complex and controversial personalities; rather, her social environment seems to be wholly made up of such silhouette-like, flat characters who interact in predictable, often bizarre episodes that ultimately remain without consequences and endlessly repeat themselves. In short, her social environment appears to her like a fantasy world characterized by excessiveness, limitedness, stagnation, repetition and
Alison initially confronts the unreality of her world with a feeling of superiority but soon registers a nagging suspicion that she herself might be just another, similarly flat character (e.g. 39). Alison’s doubts regarding her own status within this world and her fears of losing her sense of reality steadily grow (e.g. 42, 131) and reach a painful climax during the second game of Truth-or-Dare. Just before the game starts, Alison has a vision of herself as a member of a group who has suspended the rules of reality:

Reality is out the window by the time we end up back at Dean’s place. It’s like nothing can touch us as long as we stay high. Sitting down around the coffee table I’m having this déjà vu about a dream I had where Dean’s living room is a stage and we’re playing Truth-or-Dare for an audience (151).

There are several signals that Alison conceives of the situation as taking place outside the boundaries of reality. Firstly, the drug-induced euphoria of the participants takes away the edge of reality, making them think that nothing will have any real consequences. Secondly, the participants are further encouraged in their drug-stimulated illusion of being free from all constraints of the real world by the fact that everything is happening within the context of a party game. A third indication of Alison’s strong sense of the unreality of the situation is the reference to her earlier dream about a stage performance of Truth-or-Dare:

[I’ve been dreaming this dream where the bunch of us from last night are all sitting around Dean’s apartment playing Truth-or-Dare. My acting coach is there too. But it turns out that Dean’s apartment is actually on the stage of the Public Theater and there’s this huge audience out there watching us play Truth-or-Dare. TRUTH-OR-DARE is spelled out in flashing light bulbs over the stage and my acting coach has a microphone, he’s moderating the whole thing, like a TV game-show host. . . (80).

The fact that in the dream the players are acting on a stage again draws attention to the unreality of the world created by the rules of the game. The dream suggests that Alison conceives of herself and her friends as living in an imagined world that is set apart from reality. Whatever happens there “on stage,” to use Alison’s image, is entirely fictitious and thus without directly palpable consequences in the real world
“off stage.” Their imagined world is a pretense only, a travesty following the cheap formula of made-for-TV game-show productions.

Alison’s “dream world” implies a reality off stage. This is evidence that Alison does not completely succumb to the fiction of living in a world governed by the rules of a game but always retains the consciousness of a reality outside their world. In this way, her dream is proof of her profound ambivalence: even as she voluntarily and passionately submerges into this fantasy world, she is struggling for a critical distance. As the second Truth-or-Dare game gets under way, Alison must discover that her friends have wholly surrendered to the fiction of living in the world of a game where nearly anything is permitted. Alison’s horror at finding her sister trying to seduce her boyfriend during the game signals that to her the ethics of the real world cannot simply be cancelled out by the rules of a parlor game. This is why she temporarily drops out of the game at the moment of greatest tension and emotional turmoil (156-157). She weakly attempts to step out of this fantasy world back into reality in order to regain her critical distance.

For Alison the terrifying experience during the Truth-or-Dare session is yet another illustration of her contention that the maxim of completely acting out one’s fantasies may lead to a complete loss of any sense of reality because reality itself has become a fantasy.248 She contends that the critical faculty to distinguish between

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247 This aspect is fully elaborated on pp. 313 ff.
248 The incident during the Truth-or-Dare game reminds her of a scene that occurred some time ago. She recalls sitting in a hot tub together with Alex, Rebecca, and her sister’s lover at the time, a boy named Trent:

Anyway, we’re all in that condition where you can’t tell where the water stops and you begin, it’s like the same warm ooze, the four of us in the hot tub drinking Cristal wrecked on Quaaludes and we’re like joking around about having an orgy and the next thing I know I feel a hand fishing around between my legs... [W]e were all doing this underwater foreplay and it was cool, we were all friends and that was the point (155).

As in the scene discussed above, under the influence of drugs a game-like context develops, a sanctuary from the repressions of factual reality. In this arcadia the rules of conduct applying in normal life are suspended and the friends may act out their innermost sexual fantasies without fear of any sanction. Alison, however, accepts this suspension of reality only to a certain degree and is always conscious of a real world outside whose rules must not be ignored. She gets out of the tub to go to the bathroom and in this way breaks the spell of the sexual fantasy and reinstalls the rules of reality. This becomes drastically clear as
fantasy and reality is all but lost in her environment so that people fail to see the serious consequences their actions may have. Leading a borderline existence, she herself feels increasingly incapable of telling fantasy and reality apart (131). As her insecurity about this distinction grows, Alison repeatedly— but ultimately to no avail— seeks to distance herself from her environment in an attempt to regain her bearings and reestablish a critical perspective on her life.

In *Story of My Life*, McInerney once again thematizes the endangerment of the individual’s sense of reality in the contemporary urban consumer society. Whereas in *Bright Lights, Big City*— similarly to Ellis—he focuses on the overwhelming power of the hyperreality created by the mass media, he now concentrates on the impression of unreality that arises within a deeply infantile, immature society. In this respect, *Story of My Life* is akin to the “Eleanor”-cycle in Janowitz’s *Slaves of New York*. Alison’s perception of inhabiting an unreal world recalls Eleanor’s portrayal of the bohemia in “Who’s on First?.” In both cases, the authors employ the image of the cartoon character to convey their protagonists’ sense of a bizarre, fantastic, infantile, and, ultimately, inconsequential world. And like Eleanor, Alison seeks to distance herself from this world.

### 8.6 The Deceitful Attraction of a Minimalist Ethic

The individual social problems Alison identifies in her environment lead her to conclude that the permissive consumer society she lives in must be rebuilt on a new ethical foundation. In the course of the events, however, she must learn that her self-styled “personal code” cannot provide such a basis. Her sense of entrapment in a

Trent follows her to the bathroom to have sex with her: “Trent grabs me and sticks his tongue down my throat and I’m like, hey, we’re outside the theater now, this script doesn’t apply out here in the lobby...” (155). Again she uses the theater-imagery to emphasize that to her there is a clear distinction between a fantasy world and a real world and that the two must not be confused. Yet to her deep dismay she must find out that she alone is capable of drawing that
vicious circle grows and becomes so overpowering that she finally opts for escape. As argued above, Alison regards the irreconcilability of the dominant principle of seeking instant gratification with the traditional, basically Puritan, maxim of negating desires—or of delaying or denying their gratification—in favor of social stability as the chief source of social strife. In her view the pursuit of maximum satisfaction is a direct threat to the social structures that form the nucleus of society, it is largely responsible for the self-alienation and social isolation she detects in her environment, and it jeopardizes the individual’s sense of reality. In their entirety, she considers these problems as the symptoms of a society that has in effect fallen apart already. This is why, in the wake of the emotional turmoil of the first game of Truth-or-Dare, she hotly challenges Dean’s attempt to preserve what he terms the “social fabric” of society:

And I’m like, the social fabric? What the hell is that? I go, is that like dacron polyester or something? [. . .]
Actually, it’s more like silk, he says. It’s a delicate thing.
It’s like totally nonexistent is what I’m saying, I go. We’re all just pieces of lint if you ask me (73).

Alison roundly rejects Dean’s image of a sensitive, organically grown network of human relationships. Quite the opposite is true in her opinion: there is no social cohesion and stability as people lead essentially separate lives, disconnected from each other.

Alison’s disillusioned diagnosis of the present state of the urban consumer society prompts her to demand that society be founded on a new sustainable ethical basis. She envisions an ethics that starts out from and is reconcilable with the indisputable existence of this permissive, consumption-oriented environment and aims for a maximum of social stability and cohesion under such conditions. In the scene just referred to, Alison criticizes Dean for having been dishonest with her line. For while she has been fighting off Trent, her sister and her own lover Alex have not at all tried to bridle their fantasies but are in fact having sex.
during the game of Truth-or-Dare in order to spare her feelings. In the course of the ensuing debate, Alison seizes the opportunity to declare her ethical principles:

I’ve grown up around liars and cheaters and I don’t think there’s any excuse for not telling the truth. I want to be able to trust you, but if I don’t think you respect the truth, you know, then I’ll just hit the road. [. . .] I insist on honesty. You should be able to tell me whatever you’re feeling. [. . .]

There are some things you feel that you would never act on, Dean says, and there are some things you feel that you’d never want to say. Do you think I should sleep with everyone I’m attracted to? How far does this honesty go?

If I want to do something, I do it. If I feel something I say it. Otherwise you’re a hypocrite (74).

In the face of a disintegrated society, Alison frantically holds fast to the one thing she is sure of and which in her view promises a certain measure of social cohesion and stability: this is her insight that everybody is primarily driven by basic instincts. Starting out from this recognition, she advocates a very strict and pragmatic course of absolute honesty towards oneself and towards others as a practical ethical basis. This implies the willingness and ability to rediscover, accept and act out the pre-socialization, “uncensored” part of the self. She believes that the return to this basic self through honesty is prerequisite to overcoming one’s self-alienation and a necessary precondition of successful communication. For this reason she rejects all social conventions that may inhibit the realization of authentic emotions. Taken together, Alison’s unreserved affirmation of the pursuit of full satisfaction and her call for utter honesty about one’s desires form a minimalist, purely pragmatic ethic of sorts for a Hobbesian world.

Initially, she is convinced that her “personal code” (53) will bring a measure of order and stability into her chaotic life. 249 She also believes that, together with her acting, it will give her the power and the means to struggle free from a dissatisfying life characterized by excess and aimless, repetitive, and inconsequential activity. Yet as the events unfold, her trademark expression “story of my life” (2, 8, 18, 58,

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249 This is why she can self-confidently proclaim her creed and simultaneously shrug off the inconsistencies in her own behavior—for example, when she resorts to little “white” lies (13, 53) to regain control over her life—as meaningless trifles.
124),\textsuperscript{250} captures her growing exasperation about the never-changing routines and her increasing fear of inescapability. Her confidence in the practicability of her private ethic wanes as the difficulties in her relationship to Dean mount.\textsuperscript{251} This is especially manifest in her virtual obsession with the “three-great-lies” riddle. After learning about Dean’s night out with another woman, she teases him:

[I] go, what are the three greatest lies in the world?  
Is this a joke? he goes. [ . . . ]  
But I’m like, no, not really. It’s just kind of an old proverb or something. . . .  
One, the check’s in the mail? Two, I promise I won’t come in your mouth, and what’s the third?  
I forget, Dean says. [ . . . ]  
It’s really bugging me what the third greatest lie is. . . (107-108).

A little later, still hurt about Dean’s infidelity, Alison asks Alex the same question (137-138). When—some two weeks after the second Truth-or-Dare, which brings about the final rupture in her relationship with Dean—Francesca tells an unsurprised Alison that Dean has returned to his former girlfriend, Alison asks her about the third great lie (164). Yet, only at her birthday party, Alison receives an answer to her question—ironically enough—from another discarded lover:

That’s easy, he says. The third lie is, I love you.  
And I’m thinking, wow! That’s it (186)!

Significantly, all three “lies” quite literally reflect the formative and very recent experiences in her life. According to this riddle, the first “lie” is the promise of parental care and responsibility; the second “lie” is that of the male partner’s assurance that he will respect the woman’s rights and autonomy in a partnership;\textsuperscript{252} and the third one is the delusion that an altruistic and permanent relationship can exist in a consumerist environment, which is characterized by the selfish pursuit of instant gratification of all desires. In the course of her crisis, Alison becomes increasingly convinced that this cynical riddle captures indisputable truths about

\textsuperscript{250} She also applies the phrase other people (3, 37, 116, 153, 167, 178).

\textsuperscript{251} Dissatisfied with her own ethic, she even suggests a number of rules of sexual conduct (24-25, 31-32) to be collected in “a book about modern etiquette that covers this sort of thing” (31).

\textsuperscript{252} DeCaro makes the same point (1991: 248).
human relations in general and about hers in particular. Finally, Alison must accept her own moral bankruptcy. She must concede that she has not been able to construct a viable alternative to the eroded ethical foundations of society. Two weeks after the disastrous second Truth-or-Dare session, during which she has been forced to concede the limits of her minimalist ethic—“Some impulses you should stifle, right” (156)—, she accepts her predicament, “[I]t’s a vicious circle. Or is it a cycle” (168)?

Alison’s dawning realization that she is incapable of solving her problems satisfactorily and thus of breaking the “vicious circle” is accompanied by fantasies and symbolic attempts of escape until she eventually seeks professional support. The idea of escape first insinuates itself almost subconsciously into Alison’s thoughts as her problems are becoming increasingly oppressive and she is beginning to lose heart in her powers to deal with them successfully. During a visit to the observation deck of the Empire State Building, she is reminded of a magazine photo of a girl who had jumped from the building, “it was as if she was resting or floating in a pool, a girl without a trouble in the world. . . . I don’t look, I stand right in the middle of the observation desk and throw up” (138). Envisioning herself in this situation, Alison is evidently both attracted and frightened by the finality of this choice.

By the time of the Derby party a week after the above incident, Alison has already made herself more familiar with the notion of escape and explicitly considers it as an available option. Suddenly sick, Alison withdraws to the bathroom:

I put my head down on my bare knees and I listen to the shouting and talk from out there, it’s strange how you can be involved in something and then just step back out of it and it seems really distant and silly. I suddenly wonder how long it would take them to notice I was gone if I went out the fire escape or something. What if I just kept going, left New York entirely? I’m getting this really weird feeling like, I’m so involved in all this hysterical noise which is supposedly my life but it doesn’t add up to anything, if you step back far enough it’s just a dumb buzz like a swarm of mosquitoes. But everybody’s life is like that, right? It’s like, down there in Lexington, Kentucky, the derby’s the most important thing in the world to all these people, but what does it mean, really? It’s just a stupid horse race, right? From the planet Jupiter, none of it counts for shit (147).

Alison’s nausea—which is an indication of the immense emotional pressure under which she is as much as a sign of her early pregnancy, of which she does not know...
yet—prompts her to withdraw from the party, to distance herself physically and psychically from her environment. On the one hand, her reaction is further evidence of her conscious and determined search for a vantage point from which she may be able to assess her life critically and in this way consolidate her sense of reality. However, it is also her most candid confession yet that she is incapable of integrating her experiences into a consistent and coherent and valid image of herself and her environment. Instead, Alison is overwhelmed by the unimportance, incomprehensibility and uncontrollability of the events that make up her life. She responds to this bleak analysis of her situation with thoughts of escape. Then, only a little later, at the Truth-or-Dare session following the Derby party, events really do get out of control. Alison is nauseous again and retreats to the bathroom in an attempt to evade the rising tension between Dean and herself as well as the humiliation that she knows must inevitably follow (156-157). Even though Alison only escapes symbolically in all these situations, escape has finally become a very real and attractive alternative to the oppressiveness of her current life.

At her birthday party Alison at last gives up her attempts to solve her problems and opts for escape in the form of a drug counseling program. She finally

253 The growing emotional strain results in repeated bouts of nausea and dizziness (14, 138, 146, 152, 157, 171).
254 Jefferson Fay’s comment supports this reading: “[S]he has all the subconscious pieces to assemble a complete picture, but lacks the fundamental self-awareness necessary to understand why she cannot function with any success in society, why she remains an exile” (Faye 1992: 127).
255 The business card figures repeatedly and significantly throughout her account (186). This card makes a journey that mirrors to Alison the self-propelling quality of her crisis and the cyclic process of self-awareness. Early on, Alison introduces the card when Didi becomes too much of a nuisance:

So then I remember this thing in my purse, it’s like a business card from this drug counseling program, Jeannie gave it to me as a joke one night, actually one morning after we’d been up all night—somebody at work gave it to her and they were not kidding. So I open my purse, fish through my wallet, all these scraps of paper, napkins with guys’ phone numbers, and I find this thing, it says, MESSED UP? STRUNG OUT? NEED HELP? DIAL 555-HELP.

I go, Didi, I got a present for you. And I give her the card (40).

The scene proves that at this early point Alison still feels superior to her environment, confident that she has arrived at a level of self-understanding that enables her to stay atop of her problems. Didi later hands the card to Rebecca (149). And when Rebecca hands it back to Alison (157) amidst the turmoil of the second session of Truth-or-Dare, the card has travelled
The Deceitful Attraction of a Minimalist Ethic

The Self in Trouble:

concedes that her minimalist ethics of complete honesty and gratification of all desires is unlivable, and so it is a logical consequence that she uses this card to break this “vicious circle” and escape from her life to a rehab clinic of a Minnesota clinic.

In Alison, McInerney has created a protagonist who transfers Thomas Hobbes’s understanding of human nature from the time of the English Civil War into the late-twentieth-century urban consumer society. The implied parallel between that dark and violent period of social strife and the obscenely affluent and permissive world depicted in Story of My Life is suggestive in itself. In fact, Hobbes’s pragmatic ideas provide a useful philosophical background to Alison’s notions about herself and the excessively egoistic society she lives in. Hobbes proposes:

[I] put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more (Hobbes, 161).

Significantly, selfishness is first and foremost an expression of existential fear for Hobbes. He further concludes that “during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man” (Hobbes, 185). Alison’s continual power struggles are evidence of the existential fear that Hobbes speaks of, and her social strife is indeed closer to warfare than to the peaceful search of light entertainment that it seems to be. Hobbes argues that this condition requires that everybody obey the “Fundamentall Law; which is to seek Peace, and follow it”

full circle. Now at this advanced stage of her crisis, Alison regards the return of the card as yet another indication that she is stuck in a network of irresolvable problems.

256 In this, McInerney’s novel recalls William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954). Golding creates his prototypical society—a fledgling democracy that veers off into the violent turmoil of actual civil war—on some faraway, unidentified, and just possibly imaginary tropical island and eventually restores order by having his imbruted boys rescued and returned to civilization. McInerney, on the other hand, applies Hobbes’s philosophy to the Here and Now.

257 Incidentally, according to Christopher Lasch existential fear is also at the root of the narcissism in the “Me”-generation of the 1970s and 1980s.
According to Hobbes, this “Fundamentall Law of Nature” logically leads to the second law, “That a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe” (ibid., original italicized, page reference omitted).

Initially, Alison does not recognize the necessity of these basic precepts. In fact, her “personal code” may be understood as an attempt to deny their validity. When Dean feebly tries to explain why he lied to her about his affair with another woman by pointing out that “there’s a reason for manners” (74), Alison is furious. Her rage suggests that she does not yet see that manners are, in Hobbes’s words, “qualities of man-kind, that concern their living together in Peace and Unity” (Hobbes, 160). Ultimately, Alison’s painful progress towards recognizing these laws of nature and their consequences for human intercourse is the subject of McInerney’s novel.

It is also instructive to read Story of My Life as an illustration of Daniel Bell’s examination of The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism. Alison sees that life in the urban consumer society is based on the mutually exclusive premises that all desire be gratified but that socially disruptive desire be negated. This is in nuce Daniel Bell’s critique. He argues that consumer capitalism, by propagating that desires be gratified, in effect undermines the Protestant Work Ethic and the Puritan temper, which originally gave rise to it:

American capitalism . . . has lost its traditional legitimacy, which was based on a moral system of reward rooted in the Protestant sanctification of work. It has substituted a hedonism which promises material ease and luxury, yet shies away from all the historic implications of a “voluptuary system,” with all its social permissiveness and libertinism. The culture has been dominated (in the serious realm) by a principle of modernism that has been subsersive of bourgeois life, and the middle-class life-styles by a hedonism that has undercut the Protestant ethic which provided the moral foundation for the society. The interplay of modernism as a mode developed by serious artists, the institutionalization of those played-out forms by the "cultural mass," and the hedonism as a way of life promoted by the marketing system of business, constitutes the cultural contradiction of capitalism. The modernism is exhausted, and no longer threatening. The hedonism apes its sterile japes. But the
social order lacks either a culture that is a motivational or binding force. What, then, can hold the society together (Bell 1979: 84).

Much like Eleanor in Slaves of New York and Pamela in The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group, Alison is conscious of the immaturity, indeed, the infantility of this society. However, whereas Janowitz’s characters are merely amazed at the immaturity of the people in their lives, this is actually one of Alison’s central observations about her environment. For McInerney’s young protagonist-narrator, this recognition is the starting point of her efforts to formulate a minimalistic ethic that will restore a modicum of order and cohesion to the quickly disintegrating social web in the permissive consumer society she belongs to. Of course, as has been shown, Alison’s efforts are themselves a sign of her immature, insufficiently complex understanding of social relationships.

Interestingly, a comparison of Story of My Life to Ellis’s first novel shows that both protagonists attempt to furnish a minimalist ethic. For Ellis’s protagonist-narrator this minimalist ethic is a last-ditch effort to defend his “minimal self” against complete disintegration and dissolution. By comparison, Alison believes that her “personal code,” which demands the complete gratification of all desire coupled with complete honesty, is the sole ethical basis of a functioning social contract. However, she gradually and painfully comes to understand that such a minimalist ethic is childlike and immature and cannot account for the complexities of adult social life.

In her self-centered search for instant gratification of her desires, McInerney’s Alison Poole may be also understood as a revamped version of the flapper of the 1920s as immortalized in the books of F. Scott Fitzgerald. In fact, Alison’s entirely egotistic, selfish code of honor and her “Nietzschean” rejection of all traditional ethic make her a direct descendant of Gloria Patch of The Beautiful and Damned (1921), who may be regarded as the first fully developed flapper-character in literature. Gloria is unabashedly selfish. She tells her husband Anthony,
“How I feel is that if I wanted anything I’d take it. That’s what I’ve always thought all my life” (Beautiful, 156-157). As the years pass, the Patches have to pay the heavy toll for their life of dissipation. Their money runs out, the gaudy entertainments with which they fill their days leave them more and more dissatisfied, and they become increasingly estranged from one another. Yet, if possible, Gloria’s needs have become even more narrowed down to the gratification of her selfish desires. By age twenty-nine, Gloria has become disillusioned about the purpose and meaning of her life:

She was doubting now whether there had been any moral issue involved in her way of life—to walk unworried and unregretful along the gayest of all possible lanes and to keep her pride by being always herself and doing what it seemed beautiful that she should do (Beautiful, 320).

Gloria’s code of honor coupled to her “I don’t care” (Beautiful, 226) anticipates the minimalist code of behavior that the heroine of McInerney’s Story of My Life fiercely proclaims and attempts to live by. Like Gloria, Alison devotes all her energies to the satisfaction of her minimalist code of behavior. Alison’s code demands complete honesty to oneself—which for her means the realization and satisfaction of any desire—and to others and defies all traditional ethics, which she regards as hampering. In this way, Alison, like Gloria, may be said to evince a certain Nietzschean disrespect of traditional ethics coupled with the desire to furnish her own rules of conduct. As in the case of Gloria, Alison’s life gets out of control as a result of dissipation and the fierce contest between the sexes. Where Fitzgerald is concerned with the romantic side of the Patches’ personal failure, McInerney focuses on the social level, showing a permissive world in which childish morals lead to anarchy and disintegration.

### 8.7 A Novel of Initiation as a Parody of an Infantile Society

In Story of My Life, Jay McInerney employs the traditional form of the novel of initiation to expose the in many ways infantile self-concept at the heart of the
heroine’s views and of the society she belongs to. However, McInerney reverses and ironically undercuts the elements characteristically found in the novel of initiation to make his point that Alison does not progress towards a more mature, that is a more complex and critical notion of self and society. On the contrary, she and her peers are regressing towards an increasingly immature and socially disruptive self-concept.

Alison’s authoritative tone ironically stresses a central theme of the novel, namely that she is unable as a narrator to take a critical view of her actions as a protagonist, that is, to attain greater self-recognition. McInerney employs a variety of narrative means to emphasize his narrator’s basic dilemma that her deep personal involvement entails a fundamental lack of distance. At the linguistic level, Alison’s predicament is evident in her peculiar perspective and idiosyncratic style as a narrator. Alison gives her account from a first-person, present-tense perspective, always plunging in medias res and frequently seasoning her report with any stray thought that occurs to her. Her erratic, digressive trains of thought are often guided by association and analogy, rather than by cause-and-effect.258 Alison’s stylistic register is entirely colloquial and quite often even willfully vulgar; her repertoire of meta-communicational phrases strikes the reader as conspicuously limited and repetitive (e.g. “I’m like,” “I say,” “I go”). At the typographic level, report and dialogue blend into each other as the author chooses to omit quotation marks throughout the novel. In the combination of these stylistic and typographic devices, an extremely great urgency and intensity of feeling manifest themselves. Through this rampant effusion of words in the present tense, McInerney indicates that Alison is without the power or time for analytical subtleties, stylistic niceties, or “concern

258 McInerney’s usage of digression as a means of narration recalls Salinger’s employment of the same device in The Catcher in the Rye, with whose protagonist-narrator Alison has much in common. Alison resembles Holden Caulfield in her incapability and abhorrence of straight, logical thinking, “I like somebody to stick to the point and all,” Holden says. “But I don’t like them to stick too much to the point” (Catcher, 190). And his disgust at a hated teacher’s insistence that his students “simplify and unify” their arguments (Catcher, 192), is still audible in Alison’s remark, “I hate these people who try to make everything fit some scheme” (80).
for future consequences” (de Caro 1991: 241). He emphasizes that she is too deeply involved in her life to be able to take a detached look at herself—neither intellectually nor emotionally or physically: in Alison the “experiencing-I” and the “narrating-I” are conflated.

At the structural level, too, McInerney uses a number of means to draw attention to the narrator’s lack of critical distance and self-understanding. First, in Alison’s friend Didi the author designs a character that equals Alison in main aspects and foreshadows her own decline.259 By confronting the protagonist with such a virtual mirror image of herself, McInerney puts her faculty for self-criticism to the test. He shows that she is only half aware of the parallels to herself and shies away from the inevitable conclusions. Through this structural device, the author emphasizes the narrator’s ultimate lack of self-critical distance.

A further structural means by which the author exposes the narrator’s lack of critical detachment from her own experiences as protagonist is the decision to make her a student actress at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute. The author suggests in an oblique, ironic way that her efforts at overcoming her self-alienation are futile. From the reader’s point of view, the titles of chapters 2 and 8, which resemble the sections in an Actor’s Scenebook such as the one Alison herself uses (e.g. 10), turn Alison’s experiences into scenes from a resource book for acting students.260 This gives Alison’s experiences a scripted quality and strips them of the originality and individuality which she always claims for herself. Furthermore, Alison’s acting efforts provide the author with rich opportunities to lay bare her insufficient powers

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259 Among the basic similarities between the two women are their quickly tiring interest in their sex partners (compare 6 and 41), their general state of over-excitement, their disapproval of regular work made possible by generous financial support from their fathers, their relationships to their mothers (compare 10 and 182) and their strong drug habits.

260 Chapter 2 of the novel, which focuses on Alison’s first encounter with Dean, is entitled “Scenes for One Man and One Woman” and her tour of Manhattan together with Alex and Jeannie in chapter 8 carries the title “Scenes for One Man and Two Women.” Incidentally, The Actor’s Scenebook: Scenes and Monologues from Contemporary Plays, ed. by Michael Schulman and Eva Mekler (New York: Bantam 1984) has chapters with these titles.
The Self in Trouble: to adopt a self-critical position and her need for naive identification. In her eagerness to restore her sense of oneness, Alison misunderstands and distorts the “Method.” She is too much caught up in the here and now of her life and incapable of establishing the necessary professional distance to herself. In summary, then, one may say the author takes particular trouble to show up the shortcomings in the protagonist-narrator’s attempts at integrating her observations into a coherent and consistent view of self. In this way, he makes Alison’s unfinished process of self-recognition a central theme of the novel.

In several ways, the author makes clear that Alison’s sense of maturity—which rests on the idea that she can overcome her self-alienation by regressing to childhood—is ill-founded and fateful. The whole plot is designed to show up the inadequacy of the protagonist’s approach. The backbone of the plot consists of three major financial crises that Alison has to master because of her own or somebody else’s infantile search for instant gratification of all impulses (tuition fee; rent; cost of abortion). Significantly, in solving each of these financial problems she simultaneously violates an important principle or relinquishes a central goal. While she is superficially aware of her self-contradictory behavior—she is uneasy about lying to Skip (13), becomes nauseous when selling her grandmother’s pearls (173), and notices the irony of using the tuition money to pay for her abortion (178)—, she does not really grasp the full meaning of her actions. In the first instance, she betrays her principle of honesty; on the second occasion, Alison betrays her ideal of the nuclear family; and in the third case, she gives up her chosen way out of her self-alienation. By abandoning these ideals and goals, the protagonist unwittingly jettisons her sources of power and the means whereby she hopes to emancipate

\[\text{261}\] For instance, in her fellow-students she registers the acting trainer’s criticism of naive identification with the enacted role (e.g. 48, 130), but she does not realize that this equally applies to herself. This may be seen in her eager and simplifying cooption of various theatre plays or movies as mere confirmations of her own views (e.g. 33, 61, 88, 97).
herself from her present life. In this way, the author shows that her makeshift solutions only raise new problems, thus perpetuating the “vicious circle” she feels caught in. He demonstrates that the protagonist’s infantile self-concept is the reason why she is dependent and vulnerable and loses control of her life. Her childish self-concept mistakes complete gratification of all desires for self-determination. She needs to learn that deferral and negation of desire are integral to a mature notion of self-determination, which is prerequisite to coping with adult life.

Yet despite overwhelming evidence, Alison never concludes that the innocence, authenticity and satisfaction of all desires that she associates with life as a child are irretrievably gone and that a view of self that propagates the ideal of an infantile state of oneness is inadequate in adult life. The author draws special attention to her failure to arrive at this conclusion in the final chapter. Through the reference to the folk song “Good Night Ladies” in the title of this chapter, the author already signals that Alison ultimately fails to learn this important lesson and remains set on a self-destroying course of carefree enjoyment, unwilling to let possible danger spoil her fun. In this concluding chapter, the abortion scene and the birthday party form a thematic unit. During the abortion, Alison tries to take her mind off the pain: “So I try to remember that rhyme we used to say in school—Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack all dressed in black black black, but I draw a blank on the rest...” (181). Within the context of Alison’s story, her rejection of motherhood must be seen as a refusal to enter into adult life with its responsibilities. This interpretation is corroborated by her attempt to recollect a nursery rhyme during the

262 This is visible in her sense-memory assignments during class, which are basically re-enactments of her strongest recent experiences (e.g. 46, 94) and sometimes even leave her out of control (14).

263 Similarly, Alison casually disposes of the minor financial problems by borrowing (e.g. 36), by counting on her friends’ generous payment of restaurant and phone bills (54, 124, 133), and by petty thefts (132). All these strategies have in common that Alison makes herself dependent on her environment.

264 The first stanza of this folk song reads: “Good night, ladies; good night, ladies; / Good night, ladies, we’re going to leave you now. / Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along. / Merrily we roll along o’er the deep blue sea.”
The Self in Trouble: abortion procedure. Evidently, the protagonist is trying to connect to her childhood self at a time when she confronts the problems of an adult person. The fact that her efforts remain futile clearly shows that the innocence and wholeness of her childhood cannot be restored. In this way, the author once again makes his point that the protagonist’s strategy of regressing to childhood in order to overcome her self-alienation is inadequate in adult life and a sign of her immaturity. The abortion of her child in connection with the protagonist’s nostalgic longing for the innocence of her childhood self is an involuntarily ironic negation of her claims to maturity and a clear proof that her initiation into adulthood has failed. The climax of Alison’s crisis provides the final evidence for this conclusion. The party for her twenty-first birthday—at which an acquaintance portentously announces, “today . . . Alison is an adult” (184)—culminates in chaos and collapse: this “rite of passage” into adulthood turns into a travesty.

McInerney enriches his parodic exposure of the protagonist’s immature self-concept by creating an ambitious connection to a famous and controversial character in English literature, who has inspired readers at all times. It is enlightening to view the breathless account of the streetwise, spoiled brat that McInerney’s Alison basically is as a contemporary adaptation of the confessions of her medieval namesake, the Wife of Bath in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The parallels go far beyond the identical names of the women as a closer look at the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* proves. After surviving five husbands, Alison, the Wife of Bath, is undertaking her fifth major pilgrimage, not so much in search of penance and religious edification but of another husband. In the General Prologue, the Wife of Bath offers her personal history. Like McInerney’s protagonist-narrator, De Caro’s interpretation of the use of the nursery rhyme as an instance of folklore confirms observations made above: “[H]er failure to remember suggests a dangerous fragmentation, an inability to connect, to put things together in a meaningful way and mirrors the disconnected and immature world of which she is very much a part” (de Caro 1991: 243). Of course, the direct reference is to the “party girl” in Elvis Costello’s song “Alison,” which has become something of an inside joke among Alison and her friends (12).
she reveals the most intimate details about her love-life in a powerful and authoritative tone, choosing plain, often ribald words. After rejecting the contemporary church doctrine that virginity and celibacy are superior to marriage, Chaucer’s Alison expounds her views on marriage and love with disarming frankness:

In wifehood I will use my instrument
As freely as my Maker has it sent.
If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!
My husband he shall have it, eve and morrow,
When he’s pleased to come forth and pay his debt.
I’ll not delay, a husband I will get
Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall
And have his tribulations therewithal
Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.
I have the power during all my life
Over his own good body, and not he. 267

The similarities between the views of the medieval Alison and her late-twentieth century counterpart are conspicuous and substantial. Like McInerney’s Alison, Chaucer’s character regards a relationship as a power struggle. The Wife of Bath seeks sexual satisfaction, freedom and "sovereignty" in a relationship, too. In the account of her marriages she makes unmistakably clear that she is ready to employ all her “instrument”—a term that McInerney’s heroine is fond of, too—to achieve her goals, including her own temporary commodification as a sexual good. Disregarding love as a negligible sentiment, 268 Chaucer’s Alison sees marriage essentially as a contract and intercourse as a business transaction aiming at satisfaction of her desires. In every important aspect, then, the Wife of Bath’s entirely unsentimental and economic understanding of marriage corresponds to the ideas held by her modern mirror-image. 269

267 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales: The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*. Online modern translation at Virginia Tech (no longer accessible). Prologue and Tale from two separate files. Hypertext version prepared by Dr. Joanne E. Gates. Lines have been numbered to conform to Norton Anthology text. LL. 155-165.
268 Cf. General Prologue, ll. 213-220.
269 McInerney makes further, more or less direct references to the Wife of Bath and the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. For example, the protagonist-narrator of *Story of My Life* also uses the term “instrument” (e.g. 46) but applies it to the whole of her abilities and skills as an actress. The sapphire brooch, which Alison fears to lose and eventually uses as a weapon to
By virtue of the extremeness of her language and her views, the Wife of Bath is a caricature of male notions of female evil and lechery prevalent in the Middle Ages. The obvious exaggeration of this character\(^{270}\) makes her an excellent tool for criticizing the double standards in church doctrine regarding sexuality and marriage. Yet Chaucer’s Alison is too complex to serve as a simple parodic device. In fact, quite in contrast to her cynical self-portrayal in the General Prologue, in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” she also offers the hopeful vision of an ideal relationship between wife and husband characterized by love, equality and mutual respect. Here is, of course, a significant difference to McInerney’s Alison. It is a sign of the latter’s immaturity that she is overwhelmed by her disheartening experiences. She is unable to assume a self-critically distanced vantage point and incapable of integrating her views into a consistent, coherent and sustainable self-image that is complex enough to embrace her ambivalent views.

In their entirety, then, the numerous submerged references to the Wife of Bath and *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole establish a referential context whereby McInerney enriches and deepens his critique of the infantile self-concept underlying Alison’s views. McInerney makes clear that the protagonist’s sense of maturity results from her mistaken belief that she can overcome her sense of self-alienation and develop a sustainable lifestyle by living according to a minimalist ethics that rests on the ideal of the innocent childhood self. He argues that this strategy of striving for a harmony of desire and behavior via a regress to childhood is not successful in adult life. As the protagonist grudgingly accepts her failure but does not

\(^{270}\) Chaucer further signals this through her luxurious and provocative clothes, the sharp spurs on her feet, and the fact that she is wide-hipped and gap-toothed. In medieval iconography, these physical features suggest fertility and lewdness.
understand the underlying reasons and mechanisms, her transition into adulthood remains incomplete in the end.

It becomes clear that in Alison the author examines the impact of her minimalist and infantile ethic on the individual. In order to explore the consequences of this ethic on society, McInerney incorporates Truth-or-Dare—an extreme version of a children’s game—into the novel. As is typical of any game, through the rules of Truth-or-Dare the conventions of conduct regulating normal social life are suspended and a temporary, alternative social sphere is installed. The world of this game differs from Alison’s perception of the real world in central aspects:

Didi explains the rules. You’ve got to be into it, she says. Everybody has to swear at the beginning to tell the truth, because otherwise there’s no point. When it’s your turn you say either Truth-or-Dare. If you say truth, you have to answer whatever question you’re asked. And if you say dare, then you have to do whatever somebody dares you to do. [. . .] No physical violence and no sexual contact, but anything else (65).

Basically unrealized by Alison, Truth-or-Dare evolves into a model of a society that functions according to her “personal code” (53), because it invites the players to act out their private impulses and demands that the harsh, uncompromised truth be told. The rules of the game create a social environment in which consideration for oneself and not for the other participants is the primary concern. While the rules of conduct governing real social life are intended to stabilize the social order by protecting personal integrity, the rules of Truth-or-Dare promote socially disruptive tendencies by allowing and, in a way, even asking the participants to attack each other. De Caro underscores this point:

The Truth-or-Dare game sessions . . . suggest the immaturity of Alison’s world; the children’s game has been upgraded to an adult form, yet this merely amplifies its potential for playing with disruptive actions, retaining in essence the childish fascination for daring others and coercing others to say what they would otherwise not” (de Caro 1991: 246-247).


272 For instance, when Alison wants to hug Dean during the game because she has caused him some discomfort, Didi screams, “stop it, no mushy stuff, not playing the game” (67), and later adds, “Diplomacy is strictly against the rules” (70).
McInerney offers the alternative social sphere of the game as a model of a society that solely rests on the maxims of an innocent child, namely, the pursuit of instant gratification of personal desires and on honesty. In this way the author shows the shortcomings of such a society and offers a scenario of its development. The tension among the “members” of this society inevitably rises because they hurt each other. Furthermore, this tension cannot be resolved since communication is only allowed on a very rudimentary level. Through this model of a society based on a child’s concept of the self, the author makes clear that such a society must inadvertently break apart on account of its inherent disruptive tendencies.\(^{273}\)

As in *Bright Lights, Big City*, then, McInerney relies on a combination of traditional means to achieve a sense of closure at the work level that is at odds with the protagonist-narrator’s perception of a disorderly world inhabited by cartoon characters and marked by excess and repetition. This sense of closure is a hallmark of traditional realist literature.

\(^{273}\) This conclusion is also suggested by the motto which the author has selected for the novel. It has been lifted from Philip Velacott’s introduction to Aeschylus’ *Oresteian Trilogy*:

The age of Cronos was in general characterised as the age of anarchy, the time before the institution of property, the establishment of cities, or the framing of laws. We may fairly infer that it was not gods, but humans, who first became dissatisfied with the blessings of anarchy.

In *Story of My Life*, McInerney draws a parallel between a permissive oversaturated urban consumer society in contemporary America and the Golden Age in Ancient Greek mythology. By citing Velacott’s deliberate misinterpretation of the Ancient Greek myth of creation—of course, it was the generation of the Olympians led by Zeus who overthrew Cronos—, the author suggests that such a society is unstable and in need of a mature ethic that answers to the inevitable dialectics of social life: the fact that the irresolvable tension between the gratification and the negation of desires, between self-realization and self-alienation, is immanent to life in any society.
9 A Pioneer, a Puritan, and a Renegade: *Brightness Falls*

With his overtly ambitious *Brightness Falls* (1992) Jay McInerney brings his study of life in the fast lane of the urban consumer society of the 1980s, which he began with *Bright Lights, Big City* and continued in *Story of My Life*, to a resounding conclusion. In this novel the author abandons the purposefully hip and subjective pose of his earlier works and strives at creating a mature, balanced—in a word, a fairly traditionally realist—portrayal of the customs and manners of that particular segment of American life in that decade.

In *Brightness Falls* Jay McInerney traces the dominant themes in the urban consumer society of the 1980s to their roots in history and national consciousness. He places his presentation of the excesses of Manhattan highlife in the 1980s and, specifically, of the upheavals of the financial markets in that period squarely against the backdrop of the history of American colonization and settlement. The storyline of *Brightness Falls* is constructed around the three friends: the editor Russell, his wife Corrine, who is a stockbroker, and the writer Jeff. As personifications of American archetypes, they each embody a central force in the urban consumer society of the 1980s. McInerney suggests that the decisive social powers in the 1980s are the same that have always shaped American society throughout its history and that have become basic traits in the American national character. In his historical interpretation of the social mores in Manhattan in the 1980s, Russell embodies the rugged individualism of the pioneer or frontiersman, Corrine represents the New England Puritan line, and Jeff is the romantic renegade and loner, who is both lured and sicknessed by the attractions of this society and finally despairs of it.

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274 Of course, McInerney continues to be interested in this subject as his most recent longer work of fiction, the novel *Model Behavior* (1998), attests. 275 McInerney also marshals a host of minor characters basically for the purpose of further emphasizing and contextualizing the themes developed around the three protagonists. These other, less prominent characters introduce and transport further eminent social themes, such as problems of equality among the sexes and among the races.
The action of the novel is principally located in Manhattan and stretches from February 1987 to March 1988. When Russell attempts to buy out his own employer, the young couple get more and more deeply involved in the glamorous Manhattan highlife and the hysteria at the financial markets. In the general turmoil, tensions arise and grow between the spouses and they become increasingly estranged from each other. Corrine is unintentionally pregnant but loses her child. As she convalesces from the miscarriage, she makes up her mind to quit her job. When she finds out that Russell is having an affair, she splits up with him but, shortly after, must confess that she herself had an affair with Jeff in the past. Meanwhile Russell’s grandiose plans of taking over his own employer founder in the general storm that breaks loose in the wake of the stock market crash of October 19, 1987. Separated from his wife, without a job and heavily in debt, Russell half-heartedly accepts an offer to start over in the Hollywood film industry.

Their friend Jeff Pierce, who has been living in a sort of limbo ever since the publication of his debut collection of stories two years before, is following a lonely path of self-destruction through a life of drugs and dissipation. He grows more and more distant from Russell and Corrine. Despite a detoxification treatment, he never fully recovers and his condition drastically deteriorates. In March 1988 he dies of AIDS alone in a clinic—his friends did not know about his infection. The news of Jeff’s death terminate Russell’s uninspired stay in Hollywood and he returns to Corrine. As a result of these serious personal and economic blows, Russell and Corrine eventually reconsider and restructure their lives and their relationship.
9.1 Russell: A Pioneer

9.1.1 A “Perpetual Adolescent”

9.1.1.1 The Remains of an Adolescent Self

A number of Russell’s personal qualities and central ideas must be considered as the residue of an earlier immature personality. These remains of his adolescent self determine his perception of the world around him and are the principal cause of his desire to shape this environment actively. In the course of his increasingly intense involvement, these adolescent elements of his personality are put to the test of a life with growing challenges, obligations and responsibilities.

One of these leftovers from adolescence is Russell’s self-absorption. This tendency of his often makes him unmindful of his immediate surroundings if they do not directly relate to what happens to be on his mind at the moment. In general, Russell is only very rarely aware that the present “boomtown” economy of New York provokes massive social clashes (see 8); more frequently, his “willful obliviousness” (125) to his environment leaves him ignorant of the visible downsides and his optimism undaunted.277

This enthusiasm is a further trait of his character commonly found in an adolescent personality. In addition to his self-absorption, it is another reason why he often fails to heed warnings and “throw[s] himself into new pursuits with a convert’s ardor” (9) with “little capacity for reticence or restraint” (ibid.). Significantly, Russell’s enthusiasm is not qualified by previous experience. To each new endeavor he brings the same energy, apparently no matter whether this may contradict what he thought or experienced before. This is particularly obvious in the case of his risky financial speculations and the takeover plan. Though a layman himself, he

276 The term has been borrowed from Ann Swidler (1980: 127).
277 For example, he fails to notice the homeless black man at Corrine’s birthday party (29). Similarly, he is delighted that “hip retail and restaurants” (27) have moved into his area and improved the restaurant situation, but he only barely registers that a number of established firms have been forced out of business as a consequence.
energetically pursues these ideas, lightheartedly dismissing all warnings however substantial (e.g. 24, 33, 77, 255).

Closely related to Russell’s enthusiasm is what one may call the “pretense of immortality” which he purposely entertains. Russell voices this idea most explicitly on their return from a skiing weekend in Vermont in late February. For the second time on this trip, Russell is booked for speeding. This prompts Corrine to ask:

“Russell, why are you always in such a hurry?”
“Because at my rear I always hear time’s fuel-injected, turbo-charged hearse hurrying near.”
“You do not. You don’t even believe in your own mortality. You act like you’re going to live forever.” He’d been skiing like that all weekend, flat-out, crashing spectacularly once—splayed across a mogul, the snow he’d churned up settling like a cloud of smoke over his colorful corpse. . . .
“You have to fool yourself into believing you’re not going to die. Otherwise you’d be miserable.”
“If you don’t realize it could end at any minute you won’t value it properly. Sometimes I worry that you don’t feel things very deeply.”
“Division of labor. You do it for me” (102).

Corrine is not to be silenced with his casual quip on the transience of life. Russell’s daring skiing style and the speeding tickets to boot are all the evidence she needs that he is in fact convinced of his own immortality. In her mind, the image of the churned up snow, “settling like a cloud of smoke over his colorful corpse”—an image smacking of those familiar cartoon scenes in which the character suffers a spectacular but ultimately inconsequential disaster—, ridicules the very idea of his mortality. On the contrary, by virtue of its resemblance to a scene lifted from a cartoon, the image emphasizes Russell’s feeling of being invulnerable, of being immune to death and defeat. Russell intentionally deceives himself, making sure that the thought of his own death never enters his mind. To him Corrine’s Renaissance-style exhortation to “remember that you must die” and to “seize the day” rings false. Behind Russell’s clever retort there is the unvoiced belief that it is never too late, that there is always another chance. At this early stage Russell’s “pretense of immortality” implies that the concepts of final loss, defeat and failure are simply not options that occur to him. In fact this conviction carries Russell all through the stressful summer:
Russell had no sense of the fragility of life, of the boundaries that might be crossed if you reached too far. Growing up for Russell had been as smooth as a series of promotions, and his mother’s death ten years before had seemed to him a cruel exception to the general bounty of nature (275).

Another vestige from adolescence central to Russell’s present view of himself is the “illusion of a center,” his desire to belong to the establishment, to be among the leaders of society. Eager to leave behind the middle-class background of “his unmourned Midwest” (389), Russell has set his sight on New York City, on what is to him the manifestation of the center of culture and power in American society. The powerful hold which this vision has always had over him is still palpable at the end when, upon arriving in Hollywood in late November, he is tempted to look back in nostalgia:

Years before, he’d moved to New York believing himself to be penetrating to the center of the world, and all of the time he lived there the illusion of a center had held: the sense of there always being a door behind which further mysteries were available, a ballroom at the top of the sky from which the irresistible music wafted, a secret power source from which the mad energy of the metropolis emanated (389).

Even now at the nadir of his life, his marriage and his career in a shambles largely due to his own personal faults, failures and mistakes, Russell’s romantically distorted view of New York has remained intact. The city stimulates and lures, attracts and enchants him; to Russell New York is the reified antithesis of exhaustion, stagnation, decline and loss. Quite the opposite is true. In Russell’s eyes, New York is the materialization of growth and abundance, of progress and rise, of profit and pleasure. Russell has so much internalized this “illusion of a center” that the afore-mentioned negative concepts are entirely incompatible with his self-image. Ultimately, this illusion of a center and the willful pretense of immortality enable Russell to entertain a self-image which is unblemished by the experience of loss.

Taken together and considered in context, these characteristics and attitudes of Russell’s assemble to form the picture of a man who has remained a youth at heart. Russell’s great capacity for enthusiasm, the measure of inattention to his environment, his intentional self-deception that he is immortal and the illusion of a center must be understood as the marks of a personality that has retained adolescent
qualities. Central to Russell’s partially adolescent self-understanding is the complete absence and indeed the ignorance of the concept of loss. He is innocent in the literal sense of the word.

9.1.1.2 The Promise of Effortless Gain

Russell senses that the general economic climate is characterized by the devious promise of effortless gain. Believing that this idea in great part reflects “narcissism, blind ambition and greed” (101) rather than sound economic reasoning, he considers it a violation of the fundamental principle that, as the familiar adage goes, there is no such thing as a “free lunch” (24). Russell is aware that the currently dominant economic logic is a foolish attempt to revoke a “law of nature” (79) since it ignores the basic truth that one cannot raise a profit without making an investment or taking a risk of one kind or another.

However, despite his reservations against this logic and occasional misgivings about its social repercussions (8), Russell is quite susceptible to the promise of prosperity at no cost and finally falls victim to this illusion. Russell’s interest has been aroused because, within his social milieu, he perceives numerous instances of this logic at work that seem to attest its validity.\(^\text{278}\) In the end, he does not fundamentally question it and even allows himself to be infected by the general

\(^{278}\) For example, Russell is still amazed that his friend Jeff received much more for his first work and later on as an advance on the yet to be written second book than he could expect (230). In the privacy of his own mind, Russell even compares his friend Jeff to Victor Propp (229), the writer-celebrity who has “outperformed every literary salesman in the business” (74). Russell clearly realizes that for twenty years Propp has been making a legend of himself on the slender strength of a favorably received first novel plus some scattered publications of excerpts of an alleged work in progress (73ff). In fact Propp has been so successful at promoting his own name that he has been able to make a comfortable living on the advances paid for a second novel, without having delivered it so far (74). Evidently, for the publishing industry the mere promise of a sizeable future return on the investment alone is security enough. Russell knows that this system of advances reverses and, in extreme cases, dissolves the original cause-effect relation between a writer’s work and his or her subsequent pecuniary reward. Now the writer can raise a substantial profit before and, in the final consequence, even without submitting his work. Thus, Jeff’s and Propp’s success despite their failure to deliver their respective second books—ironically, Jeff “delivers” his second book after his death—suggests to Russell that it is indeed possible to defy the fundamental principle that “there is no such thing as a free lunch.”
hysteria over a booming economy. His personal change of heart is evident in his growing interest in the mechanisms of the stock exchange:

He liked the idiom of the financial world, the evocative techno-poetry of the arcane slang. Sophisticated instruments. Mezzanine financing. Takeover vehicles . . . Lately it seemed almost as interesting as the more familiar dialect of lit crit. In college he scorned the econ majors who lined up for the bank recruiters senior year, and only a few years before now he had been horrified to learn that two-thirds of a graduating Yale class had interviewed for a slot at one of the big investment banks. He had cited this statistic over a dozen dinner tables to illustrate vague theses about the zeitgeist and had commissioned a book called The New Gilded Age, an anthology of jeremiads by economists and sociologists decrying the greed and selfishness of the eighties. At that time he began to read the financial publications. And then, rather like a research chemist experimentally injecting himself with the virus he has isolated, he began investing small amounts. . . . His new hobby had gradually become more and more interesting. It seemed so easy. He was winning on paper . . . (24).

The novel opens at a point when he is more attracted by the opportunities that such developments seem to open to himself than intimidated by their risks or troubled by their ethical implications. At this point these perils appear to him all but negligible. In fact, he is happy enough to be turning a profit without, as it seems to him now, really having to do anything to warrant the return. And so, when his broker Duane offers him a particularly sophisticated form of investment and goads him, “So whatever happens, you win” (24), this makes Russell pause only momentarily: “Is that possible? Russell wondered. Duane’s explanation sounded too good to be true; it sounded, in fact, like a free lunch. But he didn’t have the ante to play this particular game” (24). Russell’s last weak rational objection to what his heart has really already decided upon finally evaporates only a few weeks later in February when, quite incomprehensibly to Russell, a credit card company offers him an extended credit line (95). He does not need long to be convinced and accepts.

It is a measure of his self-assurance as well as of his immense capacity for self-deception that he is mostly unsuspecting of his own self-contradictoriness. However great Russell’s reservations may be at times against a system that seems to be based on the promise of effortless gain, for the most part he wholeheartedly embraces it. By April Russell’s identification with the objectives and principles of this economy is so complete that he shrugs off Corrine’s harsh criticism (172). And
by June she hears him glibly expound on “the gospel of the LBO” (245). The extent of his identification with the idea that one can profit without having to take any risk becomes outwardly manifest in the grand lifestyle Russell begins to cultivate. In anticipation of their future wealth, he decides they should take a summer home in the Hamptons: “Russell didn’t question his new social position, and he became annoyed with Corrine if she referred to the sudden change in circumstances” (261). Russell’s exasperation shows that he is not at all concerned with finding out if his actual achievements, the investments he makes, or the risks he takes really warrant the sudden improvement of his position. Quite the contrary is true, at this point in his career Russell takes pride in being a figure-head of a society that believes in wealth and success for their own sake without enquiring into their origins. Clearly, his latent suspicions that this society has been erected on the crumbling and flimsy foundations of the promise of effortless gain do not really weigh him down as his star is so evidently and irresistibly on the rise.

9.1.1.3 The Male Struggle for Supremacy

The foundation of Russell’s image of himself and his environment is a deeply rooted and only partially and superficially reflected understanding of manhood. Russell’s views reflect the values of an extremely patriarchal social order in which it was the male’s right and task to struggle for self-expression and domination. This idea of manhood is Russell’s main source of motivation and power just as it is the starting point of both his achievements and his failures.

Russell sees himself living in a world which is largely structured by the male fight for supremacy. He is inclined to believe that this is merely a modern reenactment of a pattern that has been a shaping force throughout all of history (276). Success in this struggle chiefly finds expression in the form of a rewarding and high-
powered job. Irrespective of the particular field of action, the competitors’ chances of success are basically a function of their virility, which is defined in traditional terms. Firstly, it is manifest in a man’s readiness to engage with other men in a fight for leadership and in his urge to seek self-expression by making a great and lasting public achievement. Secondly, the competitor’s virility in great part depends on his physical fitness, particularly, his sportsmanship, his tolerance to alcohol and his sexual performance. And finally, a “masculine stoicism” is an essential element of this traditional concept of virility. Russell shares these ideas, that is, he subscribes to the same views as the men with whom he engages in this power struggle.

Russell’s belief in this ideal of the virile, dominant man is plainly visible in various areas. For instance, his possessive attitude towards Corrine is an expression of his self-image as a successful competitor. The exchange between the spouses at Corrine’s birthday party which opens the action proper of the novel shows Russell in the role of the male as the proud winner of the woman, who is the coveted prize. He “approves of the idea of being married to this elegant creature” (5) and at the end of the scene he not so very subtly stakes his claim on her by “grabbing her left buttock” (7).

The great significance of the ideal of the man competing in a struggle for leadership and the importance of physical prowess as a sign of his competitiveness are also clearly visible in the writers’ and artists’ softball game annually played in the Hamptons where the Calloways summer for the first time. It is a measure of

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279 This is why Russell is embarrassed when other men such as the movie producer Zac Solomon speculate about his modest income (97).
280 This possessive attitude towards her was there from the beginnings of their relationship in college. Russell recalls that his courtship of Corrine was synonymous with his efforts for social recognition and leadership within the campus community (63). It is an indication of Russell’s patriarchal notion of manhood that he saw these efforts quite literally as a fight between Corrine’s then-lover and himself, in which physical fitness, fighting spirit and rebelliousness would prevail. The victorious competitor would receive a two-fold prize. Firstly, he would receive the coveted woman—a distinction which would further emphasize the winner’s masculinity since the female was “an erotic totem figure” in her own right (7). And secondly, the winner would establish himself in the aspired position of the social leader.
Russell’s increased public recognition that he is asked to join “in spite of intense competition from many of the local elite” (262):

While Corrine and several hundred vacationers watched, Russell hit two doubles and a triple, caught three flies and tagged two runners, his workaday awkwardness banished. He was actually an athlete, Corrine recalled proudly, watching him, almost graceful when he narrowed his concentration to the physical realm. [ . . . ] Superstitiously, Russell took his own game to bode well for the future (262).

To the “local elite” the game is not only the field in which they test each other’s physical fitness. Since, according to their shared ideal of the dominant, masculine man, good sportsmanship and a powerful physique are necessary in a leader, the game is also a symbolic test of each other’s qualities of leadership. In inviting the ambitious but as yet unproven parvenu that Russell still is at this point to join in the game, the “elite” are conferring a distinction on him: Russell’s new peers acknowledge his aspirations to become a leader and accept him both as a worthy competitor and as a candidate to join their elect group. Thus, the game simultaneously amounts to a rite of initiation into manhood and decides about admission into the establishment. Russell’s acceptance of the invitation is an implicit agreement to this symbolic test of his manhood and leadership qualities.  

Likewise, when he interprets his successful performance in the softball game as a good sign for his future public life, this is eloquent testimony that he shares the ideal of the dominant, masculine man and believes that the male power struggle is a decisive force in the development of civilization.

As Russell’s preparations for the buyout deal take shape, he realizes that he, too, subscribes to the ideal of the dominant, powerful male who wants to assert his supremacy and leave his mark upon the world. This is apparent, for instance, during his first meeting with the tycoon Bernie Melman at “‘21,’ the world’s most expensive

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In this view the man competes for the woman, who is both the prize as well as the vehicle whereby the male gains social power.

Essentially, it does not make a difference to Russell what kind of problem he is faced with as long as it promises to be an exciting challenge. No matter whether it is a takeover deal, a game of sports, or an attempt to rescue a beached whale (267)—all these actions present tests of his manhood.
former speakeasy” (173), which ever since his father told him about it as a boy has been a part of his dreams of the glamorous city (175):

Russell’s critical features were somewhat dulled in this shrine to the masculine romance of old New York, where sacramental cocktails with names like Manhattan and Sidecar were still served by uniformed old men who had never attended an acting class, and cigar smoke rose like incense on the altar of power and money (174f).

Russell’s religious transfiguration of the restaurant is evidence of the powerful hold that the ideal of the man struggling for power and dominance has over him. However, not until July, with the preparations for the buyout well under way, Russell is able to finally admit to himself that he himself is fully engaged in this fight for supremacy. Registering that his intense involvement in the negotiations have created a distance to Corrine, he feels the need to justify himself: “He didn’t suppose he blamed her, but she shouldn’t blame him. He would settle down again soon enough, but at the moment he wanted to stake a claim on the attention of the larger world, beyond the private realm of his family and friends” (256). And again a little later, “At home, with Corrine, he felt he had to hide his enthusiasm, pretend he had not become one of those people whose actions have consequences in the world beyond their apartment walls, pretend to be interested in curtains” (296).

Clearly, Russell by now fully identifies with the view of the man who strives for success in the public, whose achievements must have a visible impact on the world.

To conclude this analysis of Russell’s lingering adolescent traits and views, one can say that from Russell’s perspective his environment is principally shaped by masculine forces. In the final consequence, every effort, every goal of the men in his world, is principally motivated by their desire to be successful, to gain power and dominate each other. Yet curiously and significantly, in Russell’s eyes this male power struggle is taking place in almost “paradisiacal” surroundings of virtually inexhaustible resources. He has the impression that within such a bountiful

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282 What makes his business associate Trina Cox so much more desirable to Russell than Corrine in this phase is exactly her “masculinity.” In Trina Russell perceives what he believes to be the male competitiveness and drive to power (e.g. 257, 273).
environment the improbable promise of effortless gain, the illusion of wealth and success to everyone at no cost, has become a palpable reality. Ironically, this apparently limitless abundance should strip the power struggle of a main objective—namely, the competition for scarce resources—and thus should make it look a slightly absurd relic of a less fortunate past.

9.1.2 The Costs of Participation in the Power Struggle

Within the public sphere, Russell’s patriarchal notions of the role of the male in society first promote his comet-like rise and then bring about his downfall. Within the private sphere it leads to a growing estrangement from Jeff and seriously threatens his marriage to Corrine. In essence, the dramatic turn of events triggered by his archaic ideas on manhood fails to make Russell fundamentally reconsider and revise these views. To the end, these views remain the basis of his self-image.

9.1.2.1 Apprentice and Usurper

Russell’s perception of his relationship to his boss reflects his self-image as a man who is growing up to take part in the male struggle for leadership. In his view the relationship to editor in chief Harold Stone has been following an archetypal pattern. Essentially, this is the story of the student who grows up under the tutelage of his admired mentor, then struggles to throw off his mentor’s guidelines, and at last openly rebels against his mentor, seeking to usurp his leading position. Russell sees all three phases of this growing-up process—apprenticeship, uneasy coexistence, and rebellion—in his career at Corbin, Dern. His awareness of this process is central to his self-understanding.

Russell has effectively finished the first phase, his apprenticeship, before the action proper of the novel. He recalls how much as a student at university he admired Harold Stone (34) and how happy and lucky he was when Harold “took him under his prickly, owlish wing” at Corbin, Dern (34). Russell is fully conscious of Harold’s
great help in getting his career under way, particularly in the case of the publication of Jeff’s book, which later turned out to be the beginning of Jeff’s as well as Russell’s own success (33). In retrospect Russell understands that this apprenticeship under Harold’s guidance ended some time ago when, over a bottle of Armagnac, the mentor confided in his apprentice about his fears and regrets (31f). Significantly, this end of Russell’s apprenticeship is reached at the point of greatest closeness and intimacy between the two men when the hitherto clear separation between student and mentor and the distribution of power immanent in this relationship begin to dissolve. In the aftermath of that intimate conversation, Harold’s uptightness is an implicit admission that he is unhappy about having so easily and needlessly surrendered his superior position and having made himself vulnerable. Russell feels that he and Harold have entered into a fragile state of uneasy coexistence. Without the closeness and the sense of naturalness that previously arose from the clear distribution of roles in their student-mentor relationship, a mutual awkwardness and distance have crept into their relationship. On his way to Harold’s office one day, Russell muses,

For three years he had been right next door to his mentor in a narrow cubicle. But when he had finally been promoted and a bigger office had become available a few months back, Russell had moved a hundred feet away. It was something like leaving home for college. Suddenly he felt awkward when he encountered Harold in the men’s room; he would clear his throat, hold his dick and stare at the eye-level tiles. He wasn’t sure how this had come about, whether he only imagined a change. But today he realized he hadn’t spoken to Harold in almost a week (30).

Russell recognizes that his promotion and the assignment of proper office space are outer signs of both the end of his apprenticeship and the end of his closeness to his mentor. Nevertheless, he grudgingly admits to himself that he still needs Harold’s support and has not yet completely left behind the role of the apprentice.
Russell senses that Harold is just as uneasy about their new standing as he himself is.\textsuperscript{283} The uneasy coexistence of the former master and his former apprentice in all its fragility becomes clear in the following short exchange. Harold tells Russell to order his secretary to stop wearing buttons with anti-establishment slogans:

\begin{quote}
“Why?”
“Don’t be cute. You’re a big boy now, Russell.”
\end{quote}

Walking back to his office, Russell thought about sending the editor in chief a copy of a widely anthologized essay about the Berkeley free speech movement written by a fiery young polemicist named Harold Stone. Being a big boy presumably meant stifling that kind of impulse (33).

Harold’s troubled, undecided emotions regarding Russell are manifest in the way he rebukes Russell just like a child but simultaneously acknowledges the end of Russell’s apprenticeship. On the other hand, his former apprentice is already thinking of rebellion but cannot yet summon up the courage to speak his mind.

The delicate stability of this state of uneasy coexistence between Russell and Harold rapidly vanishes after Russell blunders into his boss’s office only to find him in a compromising situation with his secretary. In the aftermath, Russell increasingly gets the feeling that he has lost his boss’s and mentor’s support and keenly senses that his formerly promising position in the company as “heir apparent” has radically deteriorated (65). Russell gets more and more uncomfortable with his subordinate role even as he realizes that his own powers are still far inferior to those of his former mentor and that he is not yet recognized as a leading figure.\textsuperscript{284} As the pressure on Russell increases—Harold torpedoes the Nicaragua book as well as another of Russell’s book projects (111, 129) and lays off his radical-minded secretary (126)\textsuperscript{285}—he knows that he is about to lose the power struggle with his former mentor.

\textsuperscript{283} For example, in Harold’s apparently ambivalent feelings toward Jeff’s book, which Russell published with Harold’s support, Russell sees an indication that his former mentor is loath to accept that the apprenticeship is actually over (33).

\textsuperscript{284} For instance, he is embarrassed about having to ask someone from senior management to help him reserve a table at a prestigious restaurant because he has “not yet made enough of a name” for himself (73).

\textsuperscript{285} Russell’s championship for his “rebellious” secretary Donna (97), who sports buttons inscribed with what are in his opinion somewhat dated but still piercing leftist slogans (e.g. 23), and his support of the “subversive” documentary on Nicaragua (20f) are efforts to
and has to seize the initiative. In March Russell tells Corrine of his idea to buy out the publishing company at which he is employed, this is the beginning of the third phase in his relationship to his boss. After the apprenticeship and a subsequent, temporary period of awkward coexistence, this is now the stage of rebellion. The conflict between the grown-up student and his former mentor escalates in May, on the day the takeover plans are made public. Russell encounters Harold at a social function:

Russell could smell his breath, his eyes as they focused on Russell’s like talons sinking into flesh, filling the younger man with fear and shame. If the contest between them had been an ancient dispute over leadership of the clan, Russell might have lost it in that moment, facing the older chieftain. He would have turned and fled into the woods beyond the circle of firelight (221).

Significantly, the imagery transposes the duel of the two men into a pre-civilization era. This suggests that Russell perceives his situation as an enactment of an anthropologically invariant pattern. In his view his growing-up process—with its time of apprenticeship, the interim period of self-conscious attempts at emancipation on the one side confronting desperate efforts to prolong the dependence on the other, and finally the phase of open opposition—is a recapitulation of what he conceives of as the ancient male fight for power and leadership in the group.

Russell’s early premonition of failure in the face of such a formidable foe never really leaves him. As he becomes more and more intensely involved in the preparations of the takeover, he begins to have second thoughts about his own fitness to engage in this struggle for power. Even as he continues to fight for a superior position, Russell begins to see that he lacks the necessary fighting spirit, the “predatory, competitive edge” (256). Curiously, it is at the height of his success as a guest of the renowned publisher Hoffman at the Frankfurt book fair, that Russell

maintain a critical position towards the cultural establishment even as he attempts to become a member of that segment of society.

He acutely senses that Hoffman’s attention towards him is an introduction to the center of power in the literary world, for “Brecht and Mann and Hemingway were among his friends” (340). Russell is awed by the prospect of being allowed into the Olymp of publishing: “[T]he cab passed through the gates and ascended the steep, winding drive, the Gothic...
has the most painful moment of insight into his own shortcomings. It is a piece of shameful irony which does not escape Russell that Harold happens on Russell and Trina as they are fervently kissing in the men’s room:

[H]arold’s expression of contempt seemed so unpleasantly real. . . . But Russell felt caught out and diminished under that gaze, however brief. He saw himself as foolish and weak, easily led by others, far too secure in his belief in his own decency. He feared, suddenly, that he was not serious, that while he shared their weakness, he lacked the gravitas of men such as Harold Stone and Hoffman. He didn’t belong at the big table; he never would. Back in the bar, it took another drink to blur this perception (341).

Russell’s shame is all the more intense because of the obvious irony of the incident. In February Russell embarrassed Harold when he accidentally found his boss sexually engaged with the secretary. That incident incited the power struggle between Russell and Harold, which culminated in the takeover attempt. Now, eight months on, the situation has been reversed: Russell, the new editor in chief at Corbin, Dern after the buyout, is exposed in his failings by his former boss and mentor, the person whose authority he discredited and whose position he stole. At this moment of awareness, the recognition of his own inadequacies hits Russell with a vengeance. Russell realizes that, despite his authoritative bearing, he is ill-equipped to partake in the male power struggle, still a student or apprentice at heart, and dependent on the approval of his former mentor and master.

9.1.2.2 Intimacy and Competition

Russell recognizes that what he considers as the ancient male struggle for dominance has a fundamental significance for his friendship to Jeff. In its clumsy awkwardness, their “ambiguous bear hug” at Corrine’s birthday party at the beginning of the novel (17) is an early suggestion of the complex mixture of intense and controversial emotions which characterizes their friendship. Russell knows that the two friends’ desire for intimacy is at odds with their subconscious attempts to dominate each
other. In the course of the events he learns that their subliminal fight for leadership severely affects their relationship and all but destroys it.

In Russell’s opinion, he and Jeff have so far been able to keep their power struggle in check and thus preserve their friendship because they observe a strict behavioral code. A central element of this code is a strong reservation to sharing one’s feelings, which is coupled with an equally great respect for the friend’s privacy. At Corrine’s birthday party Russell admits to his wife, who is worried about Jeff, that he and Jeff do not normally converse on intimate terms. With a laugh he dismisses her concerns:

“I think you should talk to him.”
“I talk to him every day.”
“I mean really talk.”
“You mean leak.”
“Talking’s not leaking. I hate it when you say that.”

Evidently, Russell does not expect Jeff to share his moods with him or possibly seek help, nor does he want to entreat upon his friend (e.g. 112). Russell’s sarcasm reveals that at the heart of his emotional reticence there is an ideal of manhood which rules out the exchange of intimacies. For, as his use of the word “leak” implies, revealing one’s emotional shape signals an unintentional and unwanted loss of self-control, which may then lead to a disadvantage in the male struggle for dominance. Russell is saying that in effect protecting one’s own privacy and autonomy and respecting those of the friend are necessary prerequisites to his relationship with Jeff. Only in this way the delicate balance of power between the friends and competitors can be maintained.

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Russell recalls that the competition between himself and Jeff has been there from the beginning. Even before they became friends in college, “he and Jeff, who hated each other at first glance, took turns trying to dominate the class and each other” (64). This fight for leadership is fueled by Russell’s envy of Jeff’s distinguished family background (229, 282) and dissipated, self-indulgent lifestyle (110, 329).
After the birthday party, the first opportunity for an extended private talk occurs in February during a lunch meeting. To Russell the ensuing conversation disclose the strengths as well as the weaknesses of this self-styled code of masculine communicational behavior:

“So how’s it going,” Russell asked, casting a large net, the holes of which were big enough to let anything unpleasant slip through. . . . Russell was afraid that Jeff wasn’t writing, but he couldn’t come out and ask. . . . Between them there was a delicate etiquette of masculine stoicism which was suspended only under extreme emotional duress or drunkenness, two conditions that were often coincident. Russell did what he could, which was to observe the forms of the ritual that insulated them from extremes of emotion” (106).

The playful banter between Russell and Jeff is an indication of the power struggle that is going on underneath the surface. As both friends adhere to this tacitly agreed upon code of behavior, the scene demonstrates the advantages of this communicational strategy but also exposes its deficits. Mutual observance of this “etiquette of masculine stoicism” ensures that no one needs feel urged to expose his weak spots. Therefore, neither friend must fear that the other will get a crucial advantage in their power struggle. Thus, offering protection to both sides, the “ritual” prescribed by this code of behavior helps to maintain a balance of power and thus contain the power struggle.

Even as Russell readily accepts the advantages afforded by their “etiquette of masculine stoicism,” he is beginning to become wary of the insidious dangers which it harbors. He uneasily registers the threat it poses to their friendship because under normal circumstances he feels it is impossible to voice his irritation, utter his concerns, or admit his mistakes and failures. However, at this point Russell is not yet able fully to understand the risks inherent in this code. He does not yet see that, as misunderstandings pile and fears accumulate, tensions may grow until they become unbearable and cannot be controlled anymore within the bounds of this code. It is a

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288 Incidentally, this communicational behavior is also in evidence between Russell and Washington. On his birthday in October Russell learns from Jeff about his affair with Corrine in the past. Deeply preoccupied, Russell seeks Washington’s support but does not
sign of the weakness of this “etiquette of masculine stoicism” that only temporary suspension of this very code—usually with shame and pain dulled by alcohol—offers the chance to tackle the problems.

However, by summer Russell’s dormant distrust in their shared code of behavior has been awakened further. As he feels the problems between himself and Jeff—particularly, his anger over the story Jeff published and his concern about Jeff’s drug habit—mounting so much that they have become a burden to their friendship, he increasingly senses that with their self-styled stoicism they are ill-equipped to deal with their problems. This is the reason why he at last makes up his mind to urge his friend to have a serious talk. To his dismay Russell must discover that Jeff harbors his own complaint against him. Jeff feels offended that Russell failed to discuss the takeover plans with him, especially since, as a writer, he will be involved: “Time was, you would’ve told me the moment you thought of it. You would have asked me what I thought before you decided what to do” (228). Both friends lament the other’s lack of openness and trust and realize that as a result their relationship is in a crisis. Russell feels that their stoicism is at the heart of these communicational problems. Even as he persists in following this ideal, he becomes more and more aware of its drawbacks. When Russell eventually musters up the strength to address Jeff’s drug problem, he is painfully aware that their shared stoic code of behavior has made him all but incapable of openly dealing with their difficulties and has led to an escalation and confusion of various issues, which could have been prevented had they but been addressed earlier:

“What’s your great plan: Shoot smack, die young, stay pretty?” Russell knew that he should pursue this line . . . but he was afraid of pushing Jeff out of reach, and uncertain of his rights. He didn’t know how to weigh Jeff’s transgression of the rules of health and clean living against his own betrayal of the adolescent verities of Romantic poetry and rock-and-roll. And . . . he recognized the validity of Jeff’s complaint. He should have told his best friend. But he’d been faced with two conflicting imperatives, and honoring one trust seemed to entail violating another. What did Kant have to say about a situation like that? (228).

know how to broach the subject for “it was not their habit to talk about things that mattered most” (369).
After months of avoiding them, the questions have become all muddled, and Russell finds himself in a double dilemma. Firstly, as a businessman he must treat the takeover plans confidentially but as a friend he feels bound to be open and honest about them to Jeff. Secondly, as has been demonstrated above, Russell’s and Jeff’s concept of friendship implies that one shows uncompromising respect for the friend’s privacy and autonomy. But now Russell has to confront the perverse situation that, even though the path Jeff has chosen is so evidently self-destructive, he cannot very well approach the subject of Jeff’s drug habit because this would compromise his friend’s privacy and autonomy. Russell’s self-torturous deliberations indicate that the code of stoicism, which the two friends have practiced for so long, has left Russell profoundly insecure with regard to personal matters.

It is, therefore, no surprise that in the above scene Russell chooses not to press the point of Jeff’s drug habit and drops the subject. Russell is clearly relieved to find that this takes out the tension from their conversation. As the recurrent images of war and strife in the following quotes suggest, he is conscious of the struggle for dominance that is going on underneath the surface. Russell also realizes that once again their behavioral code of male stoicism has ensured the delicate balance of power between them. “Groping for articles of truce” (229), both friends acknowledge the reality of their rivalry and yet again confirm their heavy reliance on their shared “etiquette of masculine stoicism” to keep this competition under control. However, as “they both puffed, pacifically, on their cigarettes” (229), Russell must also recognize once again that it is this very code of behavior which is at the roots of their communicational difficulties. He comprehends that in effect it leads to a build-up of their problems and thwarts all chances of openly and fruitfully discussing them. Faced with this predicament, the friends turn their attention to matters of less disruptive potential: “Switching to casual acquaintances and celebrity scandals, they ordered two more beers, abandoning their duel without further comment, on the
understanding that old friendships require mutual undeclared acts of amnesty and a certain stoic willingness to bear wounds” (229).

As argued above, the ideal of the dominant, masculine man and the idea of stoicism associated with this role model have such a powerful hold over Russell that he is actually pained by the thought that he has to violate their “etiquette of masculine stoicism” in order to help Jeff. For the most part, Russell manages to escape the inner conflict—between wanting to honor Jeff’s right of autonomy and simultaneously trying to help Jeff—by simply denying the existence of Jeff’s drug habit to Corrine and even to himself. With regard to Jeff and Corrine he holds the “indefensible notion that in his silence he was protecting both of the people he loved best” (242). Finally, however, in the face of overwhelming evidence that Jeff is in serious trouble, Russell decides to tackle the problem. Significantly, even Russell’s attempt at dealing with the crisis unwittingly manifests the great power that the ideal of the stoic male has. In effect he leaves the initiative to help—and, implicitly, also the responsibility—to Corrine, who efficiently rounds up a motley crew of friends and family to make Jeff go into rehabilitation. This unintentional trick allows Russell to help his friend without having to actively breach their code of behavior. For now Russell can picture himself as a victim of circumstances, who does not act entirely of his own accord. As he opens Jeff’s apartment with the key that is still in his possession, “Russell was not entirely happy to find that his key still fit the front door lock. It just seemed brutal to corner a man in his lair this way, at this hour of the morning” (284). It is significant that Russell appears to be more deeply troubled by reflections on ideals of manhood and loyalty than by the wish to help. This imbalance is strong proof of the destructive effect of Russell’s and Jeff’s extreme male idealism.

The equilibrium between intimacy and competition which characterizes Russell’s friendship to Jeff is finally destroyed on Russell’s birthday in mid October when Jeff tells him of the brief affair he had with Corrine before their marriage.
Shock and anger mingle with Russell’s sense that Jeff severely violated their friendship and is now an open competitor. Thereafter, what little basis of communication there was still left between them is gone. Russell stoic determination to bear his pain alone and his feeling that the friend betrayed him virtually rule out intimacy and openness. And so, when Jeff visits him in Hollywood in February after months of silence, Russell is still reluctant to talk at first (404) yet soon warms to Jeff’s offer of friendship:

Before Jeff had even started this speech Russell discovered he wasn’t angry anymore. Unimaginable things happen and we are forced to comprehend them. Before your best friend sleeps with your wife, you would say that it is the unforgivable crime, but only when you’re faced with it do you learn what you can live with. . . .

Russell extended his hand and Jeff clasped it: Later he would wish that he had hugged him, for it was his move to make, but it seemed then that there would be time, and at that moment on the beach his sense of holding back was overshadowed by a vast surge of relief, which accompanied the realization of how much trying to hate Jeff had taken out of him (407).

Having for so long refrained from really sharing their thoughts and problems, the friends now find it hard to do so. Even at this point—their friendship all but destroyed as a result of their incapability of communicating with each other seriously—, Russell still cannot give up his ideal of the powerful male who keeps his emotions in check behind a mask of stoicism.

To sum up, Russell is aware that the male struggle for power also powerfully shapes his relationship to Jeff. In line with their ideal of the dominant, masculine male, they have fashioned a code of stoicism which helps them control their undeclared fight for dominance. However, Russell also registers that this code of behavior threatens to obliterate all closeness between them and makes it virtually impossible to help each other. Ultimately, Russell must realize that their observation of this etiquette of stoicism all but destroys their friendship.

9.1.2.3 Ethical Restraints and Animal Desires

In his relationships to Corrine and to other women, Russell is guided by archaic expectations of the man’s role. Russell sees himself caught up in the dilemma of
conflicting male role models. In his eyes, the social demands placed upon the man run counter to his natural urges for self-realization and dominance. Specifically, the male roles of being a loyal partner and the head of the family are at odds with his view of himself as a self-indulgent sexual being who seeks complete self-expression. Abstractly speaking, Russell experiences the inner conflict of the ethical and animal dimensions of the male self.

One role expectation which Russell has of himself is that of the male who is always sexually ready and willing. Evidently, this aspect of Russell’s understanding of the male role closely ties up with the afore-mentioned theme of the proud winner of the female. He gradually attains a certain critical insight into his ancient role expectation as a sexually active man and in part distances himself from it. He explicitly admits to himself the relevance of such a role expectation during a museum visit with Corrine a few weeks after her birthday party. When another female visitor spectator prompts a sexual fantasy in him, he quickly chastises himself for his politically incorrect thoughts, “You shouldn’t entertain such thoughts, being ostensibly enlightened, liberal, and married besides. Treating women like objects.” (61, original italicized). Moments later he is flattered by the sexual offer this woman ostensibly is making him but dutifully declines. Russell’s understanding of his sexual rights as a man and his social obligations as a husband becomes clear in the scene that concludes this day. In the evening Russell and Corrine have sex. Afterwards Russell smugly reflects:

This morning his fidelity had been untested of late, while tonight he was a man who had turned down an invitation to see another woman’s etchings. . . . The narrowness of his escape, the degree to which he had been aroused by the idea had rebounded to Corrine’s advantage, the nearness of his infidelity having erotically charged his cells; he’d watched Corrine all through dinner, couldn’t wait to get her home, and the happiness he found in this vision of himself as an upright husband had increased his appreciation of the wife for whom he performed this heroic feat of self-abnegation (69).

Russell is so self-assured in this situation because he has been able to defuse the conflict between the ancient role expectation as a sexually active male and the modern role expectation of the loyal husband. He has accomplished this feat by
redirecting his sexual arousal to his wife. In this way he believes he has cleverly utilized his sexual drive, which before threatened to disrupt their marriage, in order to stabilize and strengthen their union. For the time being, then, Russell has successfully dealt with the problem. However, this occurrence turns out to be merely a first outward symptom of a profound conflict that has been subliminal so far but that now increasingly asserts itself: In essence, Russell is experiencing the clash between the “ethical dimension” (256) and the animal dimension of sexual relationships.  

Russell’s dilemma—the conflict of his role expectations of being a loyal partner yet simultaneously seeking sexual satisfaction wherever possible—has a focal point when Trina Cox enters the stage, the development of their affair being the outward symptom of his inner drama. In Trina Russell’s sexual fantasies find an object to center on. In his eyes she is the temptress who dares him prove his masculinity. Already at their very first meeting in March, Russell feels the urge “to make some declaration of love” (149). He registers that the initial business association soon develops sexual undertones, which, however, he is unwilling to admit to himself and his wife (178, 181). As Russell becomes more deeply involved with Trina, he is getting afraid that he may be losing control of the powers he has unleashed. By midsummer he almost has sex with Trina but manages to stop himself short, the scene ending in some sort of embarrassment for him:

“Don’t tell me you’ve been faithful to Corrine all these years,” she asked, as he was leaving.

Incidentally, on one occasion Russell’s inner fight between the ethical dimension and the animal dimension of his sexuality even crystallizes in Corrine herself. On the evening of Valentine’s Day, seductively disguised and made up, “she ran to the bed, threw herself across it, and struck an indecent odalisque pose. Emerging naked from the bathroom, Russell was startled to find a strange woman in his bed. But she could see, quite explicitly, that it didn’t take him long at all to get the idea” (58). Evidently, in the role of the woman as temptress Corrine appeals to his ancient understanding of himself as a virile conqueror and is capable of arousing sexual desire in him. Yet in the role of the wife Corrine mainly initiates a sense of guilt in Russell (e.g. 66, 121, 178, 181, 185, 258, 307, 309, 356). Russell’s obliviousness to the irony inherent in this situation is proof of the powerful hold that the concept of the virile man has over him at this point and evidence of his as yet insufficiently developed capacity for introspection.
Actually, he had, but this confession would sound unbelievable, and slightly shameful, so he merely winked as he waved good-bye. [. . .] In the elevator, plummeting downward, he felt a flutter of guilt. But once he was out of the building in the warm night air, he decided that the salient and final point was that he hadn’t done anything, and he strode briskly along the avenue toward home” (258).

Russell’s response in this situation, where he is piqued by a “temptress,” shows how much he is torn between the animal forces driving him and the ethical considerations restraining him: his archaic ideal of the man whose manhood is measured by the number of women he has sexually conquered is violently at odds with his vision of himself as the loyal and faithful partner to his wife.

While Russell’s relationship to Trina is becoming more intimate, he is losing interest in his wife. However, September has arrived by the time he reluctantly begins to face up to this development in their marriage. It is an indication of his considerable capacity of self-deception as well as his ideal of stoicism, which keeps him from sharing his worries with Corrine, that she has to broach the subject:

They didn’t make love as much anymore and he was angry that he had lost some of his desire, a thing he never could have imagined ten years before. He was angry because she had come near a truth he could not bear to admit even to himself, which was that passion cannot be sustained forever, though other compensations might replace it. The tragedy of monogamy. To acknowledge this seemed disloyal. It also seemed to him a failure of manhood; having for a long time wanted his wife as often as he could get her, he feared that his own vitality was waning now that this was no longer true (324).

This is the first time that Russell directly addresses the central conflict of his sex life if only in the privacy of his own mind. However, he is not yet ready to examine the condition of their relationship with sufficient self-critical detachment. This is why he does not see that, with desire mostly gone from their marriage, their union mainly exists in the ethical dimension, a sense of guilt having displaced love and longing as the prevalent emotion. Neither does he comprehend at this point that he is held captive by his own ancient ideal of masculinity, unable to escape its powerful hold.

A few weeks later Russell’s inner conflict reaches a climax and finally becomes openly visible. He must realize that control is slipping from him when he finds Trina in his Frankfurt hotel room, working out:

But the animal scent of her body permeated the air in such a way as to make the outcome of the evening seem, for Russell, almost a foregone conclusion. . . . For
months he’d imagined and rehearsed this encounter; now he drew back and looked for a reprieve from his desire at the very moment that its consummation had become inevitable. . . . Men were not supposed to admit, it seemed to Russell, that there were ever any circumstances under which they did not necessarily wish to get laid” (338).

Again Russell feels that his free will is restricted by the role expectation made of him. Still, in his hesitant surrender to the situation, he registers the shadow of a doubt about his ideal of the male as the ever ready and willing sexual being. As yet, however, this suspicion is too weak and later that evening, with Trina by his side at a dinner given by a famous publisher for his illustrious guests, Russell has all but forgotten his earlier qualms:

“It’s an extremely complex business,” Russell said, out loud, “balancing the need for social organization against the anarchic demands of the heart.” [. . .] Pouring another glass of claret, he said, “I mean that I love my wife, but I sometimes wonder if it’s . . . ungenerous not to love other women” (340).

This full-mouthed, boisterous assertion of his archaic view of the male role suggests that at this point he has effectively lost control in his struggle between the ethical considerations that restrain him and the animal forces that propel him. And so it is not surprising that he ends up having sex with Trina that night, nor is it unexpected that he wakes up feeling guilty afterwards (342).

The fact that Corrine finds out and threatens to divorce him adds to Russell’s dismay so that in the aftermath of this one-night stand he becomes more conscious and critical of his predicament (358). Predictably, under the impact of the disastrous consequences of his act of infidelity, Russell’s view of his relationship to Corrine, indeed, his image of himself as a man is beginning to change. Suddenly monogamy has become desirable again and the idea of casual sex has turned stale. Thus, only when this conflict between the animal dimension and the ethical dimension of his sexuality leads to the near-end of his marriage, he begins to reconsider his archaic male ideals.

Russell’s inner conflict—the apparent irreconcilability of the ethical and the animal dimensions of his self—also affects the question of whether or not to start a
family, which is always subliminally present and contributes to the growing estrangement between the spouses (356). Specifically, in Russell’s mind this question brings two of his male role expectations into conflict: he feels forced to balance his ideal of the man as a responsible partner and head of a family against the vision of himself as an independent individual who pursues his personal goals.

From the beginning this topic is a source of tension in the marriage. After Corrine’s birthday party in January, Russell gruffly rebuffs Corrine when she suggests unprotected sex without contraception (19). His brusque denial is a sign of his insecurity and unwillingness. For one thing, he is ostensibly afraid that a child would add a burden to their precarious finances (e.g. 276, 304, 308). More significant in the present context, however, is his reluctance to have a family just yet. This hesitation is in great part due to his apprehension that fatherly duties and responsibilities would drastically curb his individual freedom to seek self-realization outside the family. Accordingly, shock and fear are among Russell’s first emotions when he learns in September that Corrine is pregnant. Yet these initial feelings soon compete with pride and joy:

Russell waited for the first glimmer of doubt to qualify his happiness; he imagined it would come, and if so it should come and go immediately in order that he could continue to feel this way, as if he were the first man in history to have conceived a baby with his wife. A muscled patriarch, holding a club in the light of a huge fire, standing guard over the woman and child within the cave. At first he’d been shocked. But the next thing was a huge wave of excitement, which brought in its wake an overwhelming desire to make love to Corrine, to bring himself into contact with this mystery (303).

The image of the muscled patriarch, with its atmosphere of a pre-civilization age, suggests another theme that is also an integral part of Russell’s ancient self-image: In his mind, a child confirms him in the role of the male as the procreator. First and foremost, he regards a child as the living proof of his manhood, as his legacy to the world. A child also allows him to give shelter and protection to his family, thus providing him with the opportunity to prove to himself and to the world that he is a strong, dominant man capable of being the head of a family. Within this patriarchal understanding of gender roles, the woman is accorded a strictly depending, serving
and supporting role “within the cave,” while the man is active and fighting in the cruel world outside.

Russell’s mixed responses to Corrine’s announcement of her pregnancy (307) and, shortly after, to her miscarriage (309) are clear symptoms of his inner drama: he cannot align his self-image as the responsible protector of a family with the equally strong vision of himself as an independent male seeking self-realization and gratification of desires. Russell’s ambivalence is another manifestation of his inability to reconcile the ethical and the animal dimensions of his archaic self-concept. Basically, Russell cannot resolve what he considers to be the central conflict between ethics and desires, between the ethical and animal dimensions of the male self. Instead he indulges in smug, self-pitying meditations on his predicament:

He had great faith in his own abilities, but he did not have the power to exercise them. Sometimes he wondered if he had blunted his ambition in marrying so early. Corrine accepted and loved him as he was. By not demanding more of him, perhaps she’d held him back. He had never developed that predatory, competitive edge. Sexual appetite suddenly seemed like a corollary of the will to power and creation; he pictured himself as a house-broken creature, lulled into slippered complacency (256).

9.1.3 Growing Up and the Experience of Loss

As argued above, Russell has retained a number of adolescent ideas and qualities which form the core of his present self-image. His self-confidence and optimism, his innocent egocentricity and enthusiasm, the willful pretense of immortality and his illusion of a center are to be understood as the remnants of a youthful personality. Altogether, Russell’s self-image at the beginning is marked by the complete absence of a sense of loss. At this point the idea that he might lose, fail or suffer defeat is inconceivable to him, it is simply incompatible with his understanding of himself.

These lingering juvenile beliefs and qualities make him prone to the “boomtown” optimism that pervades in his environment. As Russell becomes more and more intensely involved in the power play that shapes his environs, these lingering traces of adolescence are put to the test of the adult world. Russell is conscious of this test and its significance and quickly finds out that he has “to discard
some of his more extravagant youthful conceits” (110-111). This is apparent, for example, when he reprimands his buddies Jeff and Washington—with whom he used to spend many a day chasing after youthful dreams and follies—for their apparent refusal to renounce these goals and grow up (228 and 293, respectively).

The preceding analysis has further demonstrated that Russell finally concludes that the vestiges of his youthful self prove inadequate in making sense of his new experiences. For a long time, though, he is able to brush aside moments of self-doubt (e.g. 135, 179, 292) because of his overwhelming self-confidence and optimism. Yet the trials and tribulations he passes through eventually force him to reconsider each of his ideals and beliefs. As private defeats, failures, and losses accumulate in the tumultuous course of that year—Corrine’s miscarriage; the near-breakup of his marriage; the deaths of his close friend Jeff and the admired literary icon Victor Propp; Russell’s loss of employment and his abortive attempt to buy out his own company; and, lastly, the heavy financial losses suffered as a result of his speculations and the stock market crash—, he gradually comes to acknowledge that his self-image has been stripped of its innocent foundations. As the following analysis will make clear, Russell comes to understand that these remains of his adolescent self, which until now have still been the core of his picture of himself, have finally lost their validity.

Firstly, at the end Russell has lost faith in the “promise of effortless gain.” After taking heavy personal losses, Russell’s view of the “free lunch”-spirit has become more detached and critical. The promise rings hollow and empty to him now, even as the material circumstances appear as inviting as ever. In late November he finds himself trying to start over in the film industry in Hollywood, finally giving in to a business associate’s repeated offer of a high-salaried job. Hollywood offers more of the “illusion of limitless plenty” in an intensified, potentiated form. Like the highlife scene of Manhattan that Russell leaves behind, Hollywood is also a world that is set off and oblivious of the world outside. As he is being escorted from LAX
airport to Hollywood, Russell is conscious of the sharp contrast between Hollywood and its barren environment and realizes that this illusion of abundance and never-ending plenty is not grounded in reality:

Parched and sharp against the sprawling, populous flats—like the backbone of a starving hound—this long ridge did not look particularly hospitable, but up along the switchbacks the world below disappeared; brilliant gardens and blue-green pools flourished in the rock crevices. (388).

Russell is struck by the carefree, willful neglect of the jarring incompatibility of this fantasy world with its environment, of the obvious insubstantiality of this illusion of plenty.

Despite the enticing lures of life in Hollywood, which to all appearances are so much greater than those he left behind in New York, Russell has become reluctant to continue to believe in this illusion of plenty (390). Disillusioned, Russell is now content to take advantage of a system based on the insubstantial promise of effortless gain (403). Russell finally rediscovers the law that “there is no such thing as a free lunch”, that profit and loss always balance each other, and he rejects the promise of effortless gain, which has inspired him for so long.

Secondly, Russell finds it increasingly difficult to maintain the adolescent pretense of immortality and invincibility which is a central element in his psychological make up at the beginning. It has been shown in detail that this pretense rests on the assumption that loss and defeat are never final, that it is always possible to make good on earlier decisions, that there is always another chance to persevere and profit in the end. As early as February, however, he begins to register his doubts about this central notion of his self-image. In conversation with Jeff, Russell admits to some of his unrealized dreams and indicates that he is less convinced of his powers to achieve these goals than he used to be:

“God, I hate you,” Russell said admiringly. “Could I borrow your life for a while?” . . . “I’m not enough of a gambler. Plus we got married. . . . Sometimes I wish I’d waited a little longer, taken a chance.” Russell felt that Jeff would understand he was conflating several yearnings—the notion of the writer’s vocation being tied up with a certain attitude of going for broke, a categorical refusal to admit or accept the
conventions. Whenever he thought of the road not taken he imagined himself as Dylan Thomas or Scott Fitzgerald or Hunter Thompson, never as a college professor with car payments, though the latter was the more likely form of a contemporary American literary career (110).

Russell laments that he abandoned his artistic aspirations for a middle-class existence, which appears somewhat dull and disappointing to him now. In his eyes his present life is characterized by the necessity of meeting one’s obligations and by the search of security, stability and social recognition, as a result of which one readily accepts the restrictions of social convention. By contrast, the appeal of the artist’s life lies precisely in the fact that Russell sees it as the exact antithesis of his present existence. For the figure of the artist embodies to Russell the qualities that he sorely misses in his own life: autonomy, intensity, and recklessness. He appears to concede, however, that he lacks the necessary courage and determination. Russell is aware that he is not like the speaker in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” who insists on going his own solitary way and taking the road “less traveled by.”

At this point it is beginning to dawn on Russell that his decision against a career as an artist and in favor of a middle-class existence is irreversible. However, he cannot yet reconcile himself to this recognition since his idealistic vision of himself as an artist is still too powerful. And though he becomes a little more critical of Jeff’s way of pursuing his artistic vocation in the course of the events, he remains deeply intrigued by his friend’s lifestyle until the end. In fact, during their very last meeting, a few weeks before Jeff dies without his friend’s knowledge, Russell still confesses, “You know, I was jealous of you and your nasty, freewheeling

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290 This reading is supported by a hardly flattering thought which enters Russell’s mind a moment later: “And he dimly suspected that Jeff performed a vital role in his own ecosystem, following the road Russell hadn’t taken and thereby saving his best friend the trip” (111).

291 It takes Russell half a year to develop a small measure of critical distance towards this idealized notion of an artist’s life. Faced with the question of whether he has the right or even the duty to help Jeff, whose drug habit has clearly become self-destructive, Russell begins to wonder whether his view of an artist’s life is not in fact romantically distorted: “He kept putting himself in Jeff’s shoes, imagining how he would feel. He could picture the signs and the forks in the road that had led Jeff to the bathroom at Minky’s. Russell had read the same books, listened to the same music. If he hadn’t married Corrine he might have been the one
life. All the way, right up to the hospital door, part of me wanted to go along for the ride” (408).

By September, Russell is ready to accept albeit grudgingly that an artist’s life is not available to him anymore. When Corrine, half in jest, proposes that he “retire and write poetry” (323) once the deal has gone through, Russell replies gloomily,

“It’s a little late for that, Corrine. . . . “I’m not ignorant enough to start over from scratch. When you’re twenty you don’t know how hard it is to be a poet or whatever and if you can fool yourself long enough and work hard enough you may have a shot at becoming what you were pretending to be. It’s not just a question of time and money. It’s a question of being able to fool yourself. . . . Maybe I used up my capacity for faking myself out. Anyway, it’s easier buying a company than writing a significant poem” (323).

Russell frankly acknowledges that there will be no other chance for him to become an artist anymore. He can no longer ignore the fact that this option, which he failed to choose in the past, this “road not taken” when he was young is simply not there anymore. The young person, he argues, can invent a vision of him- or herself that may serve as a blueprint to be acted out. If this person is innocent and determined enough and has an enormous capacity for self-deception, he or she may succeed against overwhelming odds in turning that vision of him- or herself into reality. Russell believes that he does not possess these qualities anymore. This is why he feels that he must jettison this idea of himself as an artist because otherwise it may turn from an inspiring vision into a self-deluding specter. In this bleak moment of self-doubt, Russell also clearly sees that his attempt at taking over the company at which he is employed is but a sorry surrogate for his failure to become an artist. He realizes that as a businessman he is now trying to do what he did not achieve as an artist, which is staking “a claim on the attention of the larger world” (256).

In the end, then, Russell learns in the tumultuous course of events of this year that his lighthearted pretense of immortality and invincibility has become absurd. As important decisions turn out to be irreversible and some failures and losses prove to who made a laboratory of himself, mixing all the chemicals together. Opening doors marked DO NOT ENTER. But Christ, he thought, you weren’t supposed to take it so literally” (281).
be final, he can no longer maintain the adolescent conviction that he will always have another chance. Finally, this remnant of his adolescent self, is not tenable anymore.

Thirdly, Russell’s romantic belief in a never-ending love to Corrine does not fare any better. The analysis has shown that Russell’s increasingly deep involvement in the male power struggle greatly affects his feelings for his wife. In a moment of great clarity, Russell recognizes that losing his adolescent notions and ideals effectively amounts to a loss of his innocence. A week after Russell learns of the affair that Jeff and Corrine had before she got married to Russell, Russell talks to Corrine on the phone:

He wanted to say he couldn’t live without her, but he was afraid that somewhere along the line he might have lost the romantic fanaticism of innocence which allowed him to host such absolute beliefs. Suddenly that loss seemed almost as large as the other. By the time she hung up he felt dull and heavy, uncertain of anything except, perhaps, that his heart would never be as simple again (374).

As elaborated above, Russell’s participation in the big-time power struggle not only ends with his defeat and leaves him uncertain of his formerly firm beliefs. The vestiges of his adolescent self have been destroyed by the overwhelming experience of loss. In the end he loses his enthusiasm, the pretense of immortality appears absurd, the promise of effortless gain has lost its attraction, and the idea of romantic love seems naïve.

In the end, Russell recognizes and learns to accept this experience of loss as a theme that will become increasingly significant in his self-image and will gradually destroy and displace the original theme of “gain and success.” Now he finds himself confronted with the formidable task of having to integrate the new experience of loss into a self-image that until now did not know it and which has been stripped of its most fundamental tenets. As Russell arrives in L.A. two days after Thanksgiving, he realizes that he is at a watershed:

Though lost, Russell was not unwilling to learn, to admit that the old principles had failed him, to try to suspend judgment until he could exercise it again—the sun and the apparent formlessness of life here at the edgeless edge of the continent reminding
him of lines from Stevens: “You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it” (389).

In his now more mature self-image, the ideals of plenty and success recede in importance, vastly outweighed by the experience of loss. Only at the very end does he admit to himself that the experience of loss will become ever more important in their lives:

Feeling his wife’s head nesting in the pillow below his shoulder, he is almost certain that they will find ways to manage. They’ve been learning to get by with less, and they’ll keep learning. It seems to him as if they’re taking a course in loss lately. And as he feels himself falling asleep he has an insight he believes is important, which he hopes he will remember in the morning, although it is one of those thoughts that seldom survive translation to the language of daylight hours: knowing that whatever plenty befalls them together or separately in the future, they will become more and more intimate with loss as the years accumulate, friends dying or slipping away undramatically into the crowded past, memory itself finally flickering and growing treacherous toward the end; knowing that even the children who may be in their future will eventually school them in the pain of growth and separation, as their own parents and mentors die off and leave them alone in the world, shivering at the dark threshold (416).

In the end Russell comes to understand that self-knowledge and growing-up are inextricably bound up with the experience of loss. So, with Coleridge one may want to say: “A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn.”

9.1.4 The Heritage of the Frontier

Significantly, McInerney carefully selects and presents Russell’s biographical data in such a way as to connect him to the immigrant experience of the American nation and to establish him as a representative specimen of the middle class. Russell “is of Hibernian extraction himself, a fourth-generation County Cork Calloway by way of Boston and Detroit” (6), who is conscious of his family history (259). Likewise, in the initial sketch of Russell’s family and personality, the author makes a conspicuous effort at showing that Russell is deeply rooted in and typifies the social class he belongs to: “Russell’s grandfather, an Irish immigrant, had been an autoworker, his father a GM executive of middle rank; Russell possessed the open posture and direct manners of the enthusiastically striving middle class” (9).
Russell thus unambiguously installed as a typical middle-class American, his traits of character—his self-absorption and enthusiasm, his openness to anything new, the illusions of immortality and of being capable of penetrating to the top of the social hierarchy, and, lastly, the complete absence of a sense of loss in his make-up—, which have been described as the remains of an adolescent self, and the way he thinks about himself and his environment are to be understood as representative of that social class. McInerney then subjects his prototypical American—and, by implication, the basic tenets at the core of his identity—to severe trials and tribulations, demonstrating his options and his limits.

Other characters recognize that Russell evinces the values and outlook typical of the American middle class (e.g. Jeff, 3; Corrine, 102, 196). From the reader’s perspective this further manifests Russell’s narrative function as a representative of his class. The most elaborate and erudite comment on Russell’s “innocence, his representative nature as one of the best and brightest of a barbaric native culture” (72) comes from the writer Victor Propp. His observations are significant because they explicitly point toward the historical line that leads to the present-day middle-class notions as maintained by Russell:

Was it invariably true—a natural law, like the conservation of matter—that there was no free lunch? [. . .]

No free lunch. Who said it first? he wondered. It had the pithy quality of a Ben Franklinism. But wasn’t that really what it meant to be an American, to believe above all in the free lunch? Dialectically opposed to the Puritan ethic and every bit as firmly fixed in the national psyche was the bedrock belief in something for nothing, the idea that five would get you ten. The free lunch was Marx’s Surplus, the bonus of labor that capital claimed for itself. It was the gratuitous vein of gold, the oil gusher, the grabbed land, the stock market killing, the windfall profit, the movie sale. Europeans believed in the zero sum game, that one man’s feast was his neighbor’s fast. But here the whole continent had been free, almost, for the taking. Or so it seemed to Victor Propp, American novelist. [. . .]

Americans were still radical materialists. More innocent than Kalahari bushmen, who were adepts at reading signs and symbols, Americans took everything at face value—words, signs, rhetoric, faces—as if reality itself were so much legal tender. [. . .]

In a small notebook, Victor wrote Free Lunch . . . Manifest Destiny . . . American Mind. [. . .]

Propp was intrigued by Calloway’s mind precisely because it was so American. . . . Calloway reminded Victor of those cartoon characters who were able to walk on the air so long as they didn’t know there was an abyss underneath them. Naive, in a word—but an interesting, almost exemplary naïveté, having to do with youth and an
Of course, Propp’s argument, which establishes a causal link between what he identifies as the American belief in limitless opportunities and the possibility of effortless gain on the one hand and the formative experience of the frontier on the other hand, is not original. In fact, Propp is greatly indebted to such historians as Frederick Jackson Turner. Significantly, in virtually every aspect Russell’s personality matches the national character that, according to Turner, developed in response to the frontier experience. The belief in “effortless gain” that Russell and his peers maintain is clearly a reformulation of the notion of the “promised free land” in contemporary lingo. Thus, in *Brightness Falls*, McInerney suggests that in the neoliberal urban environment of the Reagan-era, the spirit of the frontier as decried by Turner is as strong as ever.

In the novel the essential elements of the spirit of the frontier that Turner extolled often surface as an obsession with masculinity. McInerney sketches an environment in which traditional masculine values and drives are extremely important as a motivating force in business, public life, and private life. As has been pointed out in detail, in the world of *Brightness Falls* the man has the privilege and the task to seek self-expression in the public and to engage in a struggle for domination; in this struggle the man’s competitiveness is largely a function of his virility. The present is a continuation of history insofar as the male struggle for

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292 Russell’s view of traditional masculine values has been examined in detail. It has been said that Russell’s views are quite exemplary of the general attitude, and the text abounds with manifestations of these traditional notions of masculinity. As any selection of examples for the purpose of illustration must appear insufficient and random, perhaps three comments by female characters yield a better, more critical picture of the great social significance that traditional notions of masculinity have in this segment of the consumer society of the 1980s. In particular see the comments by Corrine’s mother (377), Trina (386), and by Corrine (276, 411).
dominance that Russell observes among the tycoons of the financial world roots in the historical experience of the frontier.\(^\text{293}\)

The novel confronts the question of what happens if this frontier individualism is exercised in the contemporary urban environment. McInerney leaves no doubt about the dangers of transferring the spirit of the frontier into the urban consumer society of the 1980s. These arise from the fact that the environmental conditions have fundamentally changed since the time of Turner’s writing. McInerney makes clear that this is exactly what has occurred in the urban consumer society of the 1980s. This is why the “frontiersman”-mentality which Russell and his peers display is terribly out of place. There is no free land anymore, or, in the diction of the novel, “there is no such thing as a free lunch;” resources have become scarce, and while profit is still a possibility, loss is also a very palpable reality. In McInerney’s interpretation, the New York of the 1980s is reminiscent of the frontier towns during the gold rushes, with all their promise of wealth and their reality of poverty:

After nearly collapsing in bankruptcy during the seventies, their adoptive city had experienced a gold rush of sorts; prospecting with computers and telephones, financial miners had discovered fat veins of money coursing beneath the cliffs and canyons of the southern tip of Manhattan. As geologic and meteorological forces conspire to deposit diamonds at the tip of one continent and to expose gold at the edge of another, so a variety of manmade conditions intersected more or less at the beginning of the new decade to create a newly rich class based in New York, with a radical new scale of financial well-being. The electronic buzz of fast money hummed beneath the wired streets, affecting all the inhabitants, making some of them crazy with lust and ambition, others angrily impoverished, and making the comfortable majority feel poorer. (8).

\(^{293}\) Imagery of war, competition, and struggle features prominently in Russell’s view of himself and his environment, emphasizing the masculine, competitive element. Other male characters hold similar views. Melman, for instance, presents himself as a latter-day Ché Guevara of Wall Street. Incidentally, Melman echoes the character Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* (1987), who argues that by taking over companies he liberates them from bad management: “But everybody wins, right? Capital flows where it’s needed. I rationalize the process and everything works better. Overthrow the oppressive old regimes. What I really am, I’m a corporate revolutionary, I’m the Che Guevara of the boardroom” (176). A little later Russell strikes the same note. Corrine realizes that Russell believes that masculine forces structure and propel society: “With his usual enthusiasm Russell was happy to summarize and even embellish recent events in the drama, making it sound like a cross between High Noon and Paradise Lost. . . .” (245). And she notices that he talks about the mechanism of his takeover deal “as though he were reciting the Declaration of Independence” (ibid.).
If frontiersman-qualities were needed on the frontier, they are counterproductive in an environment where one cannot simply move on but where, in Corrine’s view, one is part of a complex web of interdependence and shares with one another an environment of limited resources. The prevailing speculator mentality, however, creates an exceedingly unstable environment, what Jeff experiences as “the roller-coaster spirit of the age/state of the nation” (312). The author demonstrates that, while the ideals and traits—ruggedness, selfishness, extreme individualism, materialism—which evolved in life on the frontier remain powerful, they are without existing experiential basis in the lives of the city dwellers at the end of the twentieth century. For instance, the social year of the high society in Manhattan does not coincide with the calendar year: “[F]or Russell and Corrine and their tribe the New York seasons were somewhat abstract, having more to do with the cycle of holidays, fiscal year and fashion than with nature” (115). At times this detachment from the environment makes for comic scenes—such as when Russell insists on driving with the top down in October, refusing to be "tyrannized by the calendar” (328). In stark contrast to the frontiersman whose inheritance they believe to enter upon, Russell and his peers are out of touch with their natural environment. As the “frontier individualism” was fueled by the intimate relationship to nature and the sense of an unlimited land, the self-appointed urban inheritors of the pioneer are without the original source of energy.

McInerney also emphasizes that the contemporary urban consumer society has literally been erected on the darker realities of the frontier, beyond the idealizing rhetoric of politicians and historians. Often the characters in the book, as Corrine Calloway in the following scene, are oblivious to this historical foundation:

294 For example, Russell notices that, “buildings disappeared overnight in the city” (225). Later Washington, completely in tune with his cynical self, shows himself unfazed if a little surprised at the disappearance of the club “Heaven”: “[T]he owners turned down an offer of three mill’ right after it opened. Feature that, I mean, where did that three million disappear to” (363f).
Wall Street . . . marked the northern frontier of New Amsterdam and was named for the seventeenth-century log wall that had protected the Dutch settlers from the Indians and the British. Corrine clicked along on calf pumps just outside the limits of the invisible ancient wall, high-stepping over buried ceramic pipe bowls and wine jugs, bent nails, broken glass and brick fragments, partially fossilized pig, chicken and sheep bones, and other detritus that had been regularly tossed over the wall three centuries before, her route so familiar that she was as oblivious to it as she was to what was underneath the pavement, not really seeing the towering temples to Mammon as she walked toward the one in which she toiled, reading her paper in the available light that found its way to the canyon floor (41).

In the Manhattan of the late twentieth century, materialism has evolved into a surrogate religion. Especially at the beginning, Corrine is not always aware that she too is a cog in this materialistic system. In this scene Corrine is shown to be an unwitting servant of the capitalist system, a part of the financial world of the 1980s. Quite literally, she is too close to the office buildings to recognize them as the overtowering manifestations of this surrogate religion. She is also unaware that the financial world of the 1980s has been literally and spiritually erected on the foundations of the seventeenth-century colony.

In practical as well as in symbolic terms, the log wall separated the colony from the world outside. It expresses the colonist’s sense of living in an adverse environment and their wish to stay among themselves. The waste disposed of just beyond the wall shows that the colonists were quite content to live in their own little world and did not particularly bother about the world outside. Because of that incredibly vast expanse beyond the frontier, the colonists did not need to conceive of themselves as connected to the world outside and did not have to keep in mind that their actions would eventually rebound on themselves. In other words, the illusion of a limitless country that lay beyond the wall there for the taking depended on the sense of security afforded by the existence of the wall.

New Amsterdam was able to maintain this pretension of being self-sufficient, this illusion of living in a prosperous, safe world. In ecological terms, the colony was a system that was sustainable because energy was invested into protection against adversary groups and waste was ignored, which is to say, it was thrown outside, beyond the wall. Clearly, the early colony was not built along the principles of
sustainable development, to use the fashionable ecological concept. McInerney suggests that in the 1980s this dangerous neglect of the world outside for the sake of keeping up a fantasy of security and prosperity is the same as in the past:

[T]he homeless proliferated that summer like tropical greenery pressing up through the cracks in the sidewalk, while immigrants camped till long after nightfall on tenement stoops outside purgatorial rooms, playing dominoes and percussive dance music from home on new portable stereos. The only sound that emanated from inside the insulated towers of money was the constant, ubiquitous hum and drip of air conditioning. The wealthy stayed walled inside thermal fortresses, or they went to the beach (259).

The passage suggests that, like New Amsterdam, Manhattan’s financial district is a world artificially and precariously shut off from the world outside. The financial universe of the late twentieth century, with Manhattan as the capital of capitalism, has literally and in spirit been erected on the foundations of the old colony. New York shows the same rugged and careless frontier-town mentality that characterized New Amsterdam, with its deliberate ignorance of the world outside.

9.2 Corrine: A Puritan

9.2.1 A Holistic View of the Self and Society

Corrine’s great interest in and dedication to the life around her evinces an integral part of her self-understanding. She conceives of herself and of the people in her environment primarily as mutually dependent social beings within a limited environment of scarce resources. Starting out from what may be called her holistic view, she concludes that gain and loss are merely two sides of the same coin, the results of redistribution, not of absolute gain. In her view self-realization is fundamentally a social process. It can only be attained in meaningful communion with one’s social environment; without such interchange of thought or emotion the self remains incomplete. Accordingly, she is convinced that such self-realization is only possible in social responsibility. Corrine’s holistic understanding of herself and

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295 The risk inherent in such an artificial world is illustrated by the collapses of the empires of the financial speculators Melman (415) and Haddad (414) (See note 326).
her environment is troubled by a profound sense of loss and perception of social disintegration. This recognition plus a strong feeling of guilt strengthen her social commitment.

9.2.1.1 A Lack of Self-Reliance

Corrine’s great interest in people’s inner lives and in their relations to each other singles her out from her peers. A self-professed “student of life” (15), Corrine always seeks to penetrate the surface of visible social behavior in order to understand the powers underneath. This enormous curiosity in life around her, which is one of her most prominent traits and is an expression of her holistic view of herself and society, is fueled by an ever-present “sense that she might be abandoned at any moment” (195), which has its roots in traumatic childhood experiences. As a result, Corrine has but a poorly developed feeling of self-reliance now and suffers in a very physical way from a fear of abandonment (e.g. 248). Corrine’s feeble sense of independence turns the abstract possibility of divorce into a very concrete menace. In fact, it has been a constant threat to Corrine ever since the day Russell proposed to her (65) and was reinforced when her parents finally separated “after years of violent misalliance” (9). Her “sense of the fragility of familial love” (9) has never really left her and her fear of a breakup of their marriage often makes her sick with jealousy and oppresses her again and again (e.g. 111, 124, 276). It is also the main reason why she supports Russell’s plans of taking over the publishing company, despite her serious reservations:

She wanted to lighten up; she really did. She had decided to try to be enthusiastic about the Corbin, Dern takeover, and the summer house and everything else, if only on the principle that if her husband was marching over a cliff she didn’t particularly want to be left standing alone on a smug precipice (249).

Clearly, Corrine has learnt an important lesson from her own “history of fission in the nuclear family” (9). She is convinced that open communication is the elementary precondition to a working relationship and a necessary safeguard against disruptive
forces. This is why she always insists that Russell share his feelings and thoughts with her (e.g. 324). In short, she needs Russell because without such communion she feels incomplete and not fully alive (e.g. 9).

9.2.1.2 Interconnectedness, Isolation, and a Sense of Doom

Corrine is struck by the recognition that public life is deeply inauthentic and characterized by a lack of social cohesion. In her view this is both tragic and ironic. Corrine’s childhood experiences also crucially shape her perception of her social environment. Setting out to work one morning shortly after her birthday in January, she joins the ranks of business people on the subway platform:

After buying the Journal outside the subway entrance, she plunged underground into the briefcase-toting army of the employed and stood jam-packed with a thousand other New Yorkers on the platform, thinking that although they looked featureless together, their inner lives seethed beneath the worsted wool—scores of them cheating on their spouses and their taxes, dreaming of murder and flight. If she were to ask she would find herself connected through friends and acquaintances with many of them; if a catastrophe were to strike they would find themselves linked and bonded, but now they stood silent and remote. The phrase FIND THE CURE stenciled on the post beside her. How many people on the platform had it? What was that old poem Russell had written about at Oxford? “Journal in Time of Plague”? Something about light falling from air. . . (41).

Corrine’s musings reflect her view of the urban consumer society. Her fellow passengers blend into a uniform workforce, whose sole purpose is serving the system. Yet Corrine is certain that this surface of conformity disguises individually different inner lives. She suspects that in many cases the public selves merely mask their inner selves. Corrine believes that many of her fellow urbanites’ lives are full of disruptive thought and action, which are incommunicable in this environment where the pressure to conform and assimilate is too great.

Viewed from Corrine’s holistic perspective, this is doubly sad as she considers herself a part of a social web. In this web everyone is ultimately connected to everyone else and mutually dependent on each other. Corrine is aware that in the city this connectedness does not translate into a community, and people remain remote and isolated. The fact that these humans are imprisoned in themselves, unable
to communicate, distanced and isolated is ironically emphasized by their unwanted physical proximity on the platform. In sum, one may say that Corrine perceives a compulsion to conform, which is at variance with the non-conformist dreams and actions of people’s real selves. This clash of the public self and the private self, this inauthenticity obliterates the possibility of true communion. As a result the inhabitants lead isolated lives and are not a community. It is an indication of Corrine’s pessimistic perspective that she thinks of a deadly communicable disease as a main link between the inhabitants of the city. AIDS becomes, in Corrine’s eyes, a metaphor of an ailing society: AIDS is a symbol of connectedness through fear and a symbol of fear through connectedness. In the end the virtual impossibility of communication rules out the chance of a community. In short, this society is ill, its death and disintegration are foredoomed.

A few weeks later, from the safe distance of their holiday resort in the West Indies, Corrine again marvels at the complexity of metropolitan life and their own part in it:

"Do you think our being gone from New York has a tangible effect? . . . I mean, I was just thinking that the city’s a huge system of infinitely complex relationships, even if it’s too complex for us to figure out. Our not being there is part of the equation of what happens. For instance, if I were in New York right now, and if I happened to be standing on a sidewalk on my way to lunch, waiting for the light to change, and if a car happened to jump the curb, I might be struck dead. By not being there, I may have freed that space on the sidewalk for someone else who might be standing there and get run over. And in that event you might say that I’m partially responsible for that death. In a weak sense I’d be responsible at the end of a long causal chain. We’re all linked by these causal chains to everyone around us. But specifically in the city.” She tried to visualize tangled skeins of fate and conspiracy raveling together and diverging like the network of pipes and tunnels and wires under the city, invisible yet linking them all.

“Pretty soon,” Russell said, “we’ll all be linked by AIDS.”

“No us,” Corrine said quickly, feeling fortunate to be insulated inside the walls of marriage at the same time that she felt guilty for feeling safe while the plague raged outside. But maybe she wasn’t safe at all; suddenly she wondered what had been behind Russell’s remark. “Will we?” (119-120)

Again Corrine is filled with awe at the complexity of city life, and the apprehension palpable in the passage discussed above is also present here. In the previous passage this fear stems from the fact that socially disruptive forces are imperfectly contained by the pressure to conformity. AIDS is the visible sign that these forces can break
loose at any moment. Now, in conversation with Russell, Corrine develops the idea of connectedness further. In her view people are linked by causal relationships, which entail a mutual responsibility for one another. Yet, as her example illustrates, she is aware that this web of relationships is so complex that one’s actions have unpredictable consequences. The profound sense of insecurity evident in this passage derives from the fact that urban life is so complex as to be incomprehensible and beyond one’s control. Instead of envisioning herself as the mistress and agent of her own life, she sees herself as powerless, at the mercy of more powerful and unfathomable forces. Against such an incomprehensibly complex and potentially adverse environment, marriage appears to offer effective protection. Corrine believes that the simplicity of the arrangement, the absoluteness of their love, and the perfection of their communion make them “immune”—to use the same imagery—to the infectious dangers of city life. In the “hygienic welfare state” (8) of their marriage “the laws of which didn’t necessarily apply outside the realm” (ibid.), Corrine feels protected against an HIV-infection, which is an image of the destructive, undermining, eroding forces of urban life to her. In the end, however, Russell’s remark shatters this dream, too, robbing her of her last hope of security.

Corrine’s self-understanding as being connected to and responsible for the lives around her is in conflict with her perception of a society whose members appear to be too afraid or to preoccupied with themselves to engage in deeper relationships with each other. This causes Corrine to question her own place and role in this society:

Like the city around her, Corrine was wide awake. Turning off the VCR, she heard a siren on Second, car horns, voices and music. She went to the window and looked out at the lights, like stars, each one a different world. If, down the avenue, someone in that big new tower were looking north and saw this light, what would they think? They wouldn’t think anything. She felt a slow ooze of panic, uncertain whether she had a place in this frozen galaxy, whether she even existed at this moment. . . . She felt foolish now, but a moment before, she had felt that she was about to disappear.296 (114).

296 This is an early forewarning that Corrine is losing control of her life and withdrawing from this life.
Corrine’s meditation confirms her earlier thoughts among the waiting crowd on the subway platform. Again she is conscious of the diversity and richness of life in Manhattan, yet there is also the nagging doubt that she is alone in this perception and that no-one shares her feeling of connectedness and social responsibility. She is afraid that, beyond the superficial intercourse of their public selves, people are too much caught up in their own worlds to engage in more meaningful relationships. As a result the private lives of the inhabitants of the city remain isolated, and the society they form is curiously lifeless despite its outward signs of pulsating vitality. In a society whose members do not communicate and do not conceive of themselves as connected to and responsible for each other, Corrine feels out of place. Thus, her fear of disappearing must be understood as an early sign of her withdrawal from the life she has been leading so far.

Her observations fill Corrine with a sense of doom and she foresees the imminent end of this society. One Sunday afternoon in February, after quarreling with Russell in the Museum of Modern Art, Corrine finds herself looking at the lavish displays in the windows of an upscale department store:

Dioramas of late-twentieth-century Manhattan chieftains and their women, the windows at Bergdorf’s displayed extravagantly costumed mannequins in the postures of revel and feasting. Having swindled the original inhabitants out of the land and then exterminated them, this tribe flourished until shortly before the millennium. . . . Pausing in her commentary, Corrine, as anthropologist of the future, tried to decide what form of doom had befallen—would befall—her own. For lately it seemed to her that the horsemen of apocalypse were saddling up, that something was coming to rip huge holes in the gaudy stage sets of Ronald McDonald Reaganland (66).

In the passages previously analyzed, her eye is trained at the present only. Now Corrine widens her perspective, considering the present in the historical dimension. The development of her own society merely confirms a pattern of repetition. In this pattern, conquest, rise and prosperity, and finally downfall unfailingly follow one another.297

297 Such visions of prosperity as harbingers of social decline recur in Corrine’s view of society. For example, when a reporter asks her to comment on the phenomenal development
By July, at the height of Russell’s success and the point of their closest involvement in this highlife, her apprehension has grown and she has the clearest and most potent vision of doom. During Melman’s big party at his beach house in the Hamptons, which is “the centerpiece of this season” (263), a whale is sighted:

The creature was thrashing in the shallows, half out of the water, a man-sized fin standing almost upright on its exposed flank, dwarfing the humans submerged to their waists in the surf. Churning the foam and sand, it was trying to swim onto the shore, as if it had given up on its watery life and hoped to emulate the remote ancestor it shared with these puny, agitated terrestrials. A powerful stench filled the air—something ancient, retrieved from the bottom of the ocean. “Go back,” Corrine whispered. Looking into the huge black eye, above the gray furrows of the belly flesh, she felt herself drawn into an abyss of sadness (267).

From Corrine’s holistic perspective the tragedy of the whale, which unwittingly and with enormous power and vehemence pursues its own destruction, symbolically foreshadows the doom of the urban society of which she is a member. In her mind this society is blindly heading towards its own downfall. The futile and absurd attempt at helping the whale is evidence in her eyes of how little the people around her are able to take a distanced look at their own lives and foresee the destructive consequences of their actions.

9.2.1.3 Self-Realization in Social Responsibility

Corrine’s holistic view of herself and society implies that self-realization—understood as the development of one’s individual potentials—is fundamentally and necessarily a social process and can only be fully achieved in meaningful communion with one’s environment. She believes that without the intimate interchange of one’s thoughts and emotions one cannot hope to attain self-realization. Her sense that her life is intricately and inseparably connected to the lives of her fellow city dwellers of the stock market, Corrine replies, “I don’t know. I think basically the emperor’s got no clothes. But at the moment he has a pretty good body” (46). She sees that the system is out of balance and cannot last much longer. Her insight that the present atmosphere of exhilaration is a forewarning of imminent and inevitable disaster is strengthened when she notices a graffito of a “martini glass with a slash through it” (85).
further dictates that such self-realization be attempted in social responsibility. In Corrine’s mind this social responsibility goes beyond merely recognizing and respecting one’s neighbors’ rights; it encompasses the active commitment and even dedication to their well-being.

It is this concept of being “part of the equation” (119, discussed above) that prompts Corrine’s great social engagement. When her boss at the mission where Corrine helps out after a working day on Wall Street mocks her inexperience and overly great impulse to ease the plight of their needy patrons, Corrine takes this criticism calmly:

Maybe she was wet, but Corrine believed her compassion had a logical foundation. Living in the city, she felt bound up in a delicate, complex web of interdependence and she was determined to play her part. The misery as well as the vitality of the metropolis seeped into her psyche. After all these years in the city she had yet to develop a nonporous shell (83).

These thoughts once again confirm Corrine’s holistic concept of the self and society. If she is filled with apprehension at the awesome complexity of urban life and afraid of the potentially adverse conditions under which she lives, her response to her boss’s remark shows that she is also quite courageous. Convinced that she has been assigned a role in this society and determined to stand her ground, Corrine regards her charity work as a contribution towards the sense of community she finds so sorely missing in this society. She believes that this commitment must start within the private sphere as opposed to the public sphere. Hers is a practical, unobtrusive kind of commitment to the people in her life. She is not competitive and shuns great gestures because she does not crave power or yearn for public recognition but works towards the perfect communion of herself with her immediate environment. And

298 A plethora of evidence emphasizes the personal significance of Corrine’s attempt to pursue her self-realization in social responsibility. Her awareness of the plight of others and her desire to relieve it were already there during her time in college when she worked as a Red Cross volunteer in Mexico (64). The experience of living in New York has sharpened these social instincts and made them more decisive for her self-understanding. For a year now she has been volunteering in a mission, where she serves food to the homeless patrons (e.g. 82ff, 300). Corrine’s charity work proves that, in her strong sense of social responsibility, she is ready to cross social boundaries and expose herself in order to help those left on the outside.
even though her effort may be small and its effect smaller still, Corrine takes heart from the recognition that her work will nonetheless enter into the equation on the right side as it were and thus contribute to the stability of this society.

Corrine’s active social commitment cannot be fully accounted for by her idealism and altruism. Her social conscience is also pricked by a double sense of guilt. On the one hand she is acutely aware of her privileged social position and of the undeniable fact that, despite her strong reservations, she often freely indulges in the lavish lifestyle it makes possible. Corrine feels in the wrong for enjoying the advantages of her position while so many of her fellow urbanites just barely manage to eke out a miserable existence. And on the other hand Corrine blames herself for her job on Wall Street, which, in the final consequence, contributes to the widening social chasm within society between the rich and the poor. This self-chastising way of thinking is a main motive for her charity work. Corrine is not at all embarrassed when she accidentally encounters Jeff in the neighborhood of the soup kitchen. Jeff tries to tease her:

She even goes so far as to offer one of the clients at the mission to help with the cleanup after her birthday party. That she is not in the least perturbed when this man tries to steal her VCR further illustrates her great determination to help others. Much later her commitment to the homeless even culminates in her participation in the fight of the homeless against their forceful eviction from a squatter camp, which escalates into a riot. Corrine’s attitude, which Russell—apparently without insight into Corrine’s holistic perspective—belittles as her “Mother Teresa complex” or “Mother Teresa syndrome” is also manifest in her relationship to Mrs Ablomsky, a widow whom Corrine inadvertently reminds of her grief while “cold-calling” potential customers and then befriends. In addition, Corrine repeatedly notices people who are in need in the streets and invariably rushes to help. The fact that she is not deterred when an “ancient man” whom she has just witnessed being mugged gruffly rejects her offer of help is evidence of her great determination. The sheer multitude of instances attests to the greatness of Corrine’s compassion and to her view that she can only achieve self-realization in social responsibility by actively dedicating herself to her community.

Corrine’s ambivalence towards this life of carefree pleasure and excitement is plain in her response to Russell’s plan of going shopping. At the exclusive department store Bergdorf Goodman, Russell suggests she buy a black dress: “[O]nce she tried it on she liked it, and as she walked around she began to love it even though it was racier and more fashiony than she usually preferred, which was probably what made it exciting, like the Tina Turner wig, like a costume that turned her into a different person, someone sexier than Corrine Calloway.” In the dressing room Corrine then almost gratefully surrenders to Russell’s advances and they have sex. As her reference to the scene with the wig indicates, her sense of guilt is so strong that she has to pretend to be someone else in...
“What, this is your day to expiate?”
“Yup, I’ve brought my teaspoon down to bail the ocean of human misery (85).”

Corrine’s frank reply is an acknowledgement of her feeling of guilt about participating in a lavish lifestyle and about contributing to the widening social gap through her job as a stockbroker. As these and other passages (e.g. 107, 120 discussed above, 299) show, Corrine’s strong sense of social responsibility, her powerful wish to help is clearly not entirely altruistic and unselfish; it is also in great part a confession of her sense of guilt and an attempt to relieve it by atoning for it. Thus, the opening of the novel finds Corrine at odds with herself: she is attracted to and engaged in a life which runs counter to the principal tenets of her holistic concept of self and society.

9.2.1.4 Patriarchal Ideals of Self-Realization as the Main Cause of Social Strife

Corrine knows that her belief in absolute love, in a relationship in complete harmony of thought and feeling, is an ideal that her marriage to Russell cannot fully come up to. Evidence early in the novel indicates that Corrine reads minor instances of marital discord as signs that their communion is less than perfect. Above all, however, finds herself increasingly unwilling to put up with the busy schedule of Russell’s social life. A few days after her birthday, she complains that he seems to prefer socializing to spending quality time with her at home (40). When Russell returns late at night that same day, she starts to realize that their problem is of a more fundamental nature:

She wanted to let him know she was awake, wanted to hear about his evening, but she wasn’t quite sure how she was feeling about Russell: she had a right to be angry, although somehow she was too distant to be really upset.
And then he started to snore.

order to be able to fully enjoy these “outlaw” pleasures and give herself to the exhilaration of the moment.
Corrine: A Puritan

The Self in Trouble:

Nobody ever tells you things, she thought groggily, like about dating, how you are treated as a prize, something rare and special, and that it ends with marriage. Why don’t they tell you things like that (47)?

Corrine understands that they are beginning to lead separate lives. A fissure has occurred in their relationship and now threatens to grow into a real rupture. She thinks that this development has its cause in Russell’s self-understanding as a man. She suspects that in Russell’s notion of masculinity the woman is merely the reward accorded to the winner in the male competition for power and dominance. The woman loses much of her attraction as an object of male desire once the winner has been declared and the prize awarded. In the following weeks this fearful thought recurs and grows, gradually becoming a fixed idea in Corrine’s view of their relationship (e.g. 68, 119, 196). Moreover, in Corrine’s mind, Russell’s great interest in socializing, particularly with celebrities and influential people, instances the longing for public recognition that she regards as so characteristic of the men in her life.300

As Russell becomes increasingly involved professionally, she notices that the distance between them is growing. In her mind this is due to their differing and incompatible ideas of self-realization. Waking up alone one morning in May, Corrine has a clear image of the jarring dissonance of their views, which bodes ill for their future:

She lay in the warm cocoon beneath the quilt staring at the thin slice of dusty sunlight that entered the room where the curtains joined, heavy chintz drapes she had brought when the English-country look took over Manhattan a few years back. Russell thought they were girlish but he conceded the bedroom to her, and she had made it into a nest lined with white wicker and floral fabrics, while the living and dining rooms had a dark, masculine feeling of leather couches and sturdy chairs. Lying in bed she noticed the peeling paint on the ceiling. The whole place needed painting (196).

The fact that she feels lying in a “warm cocoon” and her way of decorating the

300 During their holiday break on St. Maarten in March, for example, she registers with dismay how much they differ in their concepts of themselves:

“This place is getting a little to fashionable for me,” Corrine observed . . . , after they’d been seated next to a very loud Neo-Expressionist painter and his entourage. But Russell failed to acknowledge her complaint. Proximity of the glamorous, it seemed to Corrine, confirmed in Russell some sense of his own entitlement (123).
bedroom reflect her need for safety and security and rootedness. These are qualities she associates with the kind of home she never had and which are particularly at risk in the busy lives they lead in Manhattan. Evidently, Corrine is all-too conscious of the two worlds in their apartment. She knows that their different styles of decoration reflect their different characters and she takes the peeling paint as a symbolic forewarning that these contrasts between Russell and herself may eventually become irreconcilable. While she envies Russell’s carefree enthusiasm and undaunted optimism (e.g. 262), the self-understanding from which these emanate is totally alien to her and she vigorously opposes it. Corrine is quick to pick up the air of condescension with which Russell leaves the decoration of the bedroom to her. In her view his condescension, just like his style, demonstrates the masculine drive to power and domination which she discerns in Russell.

From the beginning, Corrine is doubtful about this tendency to seek power and public recognition. She objects to this male ideal of self-realization since she regards it as directly opposed to her own ideal of striving towards complete communion with her environment as the ultimate goal of self-realization. Russell and the men in her environment invariably pursue their egocentric and high-flying dreams of self-realization in the public space (e.g. 245) and seek to dominate their competitors. By September, at the height of Russell’s success, she no longer has the strength and will to tolerate the communicational problems in their marriage:

Was it just them, or were men and women on such different schedules? Had Russell’s ardor slackened as hers grew inexorably more acute? She pictured a nocturnal future in which she was propped sleepless on fluffed pillows cradling a dull hardcover under a book light, while Russell’s back rose like a cliff from the middle of the bed (301).

For Corrine this male aspiration to power and dominance clearly does not only threaten private relationships but also has a destructive impact on society at large. During the heated argument with Russell about the respective artistic merits of Hemingway and Cézanne in the Museum of Modern Art in February, which has been
referred to earlier, a first, as yet unclear idea begins to take shape in Corrine. When she objects to Cézanne’s alleged coldness, Russell flies into a rage:

“The whole twentieth century couldn’t have happened without him,” Russell insisted.
“Well, maybe that would’ve been a good thing” (62).

In her opinion, the self-centeredness she discerns in Hemingway (61-62) and the coldness of a Cézanne are typically masculine qualities. Nettled by Russell’s pompous challenge, she ventures the provocative statement that these aspects of male self-realization have brought about more suffering than good.

So far Corrine’s vague notion about the societal significance of the masculine element is ill-conceived and vague. At this point it is essentially an expression of her apprehension about the future of a society of self-centered and isolated individuals. However, as Russell’s involvement in the male power play deepens over the following months, Corrine’s idea develops and gains strength. By late July, as they are tensely awaiting the decision on the takeover bid, Corrine is convinced that Russell has lost all sense of proportion in his quest for power:

Just because something could be done didn’t require that you do it. Russell had no sense of the fragility of life, of the boundaries that might be crossed if you reached too far. […] For several days Corrine tried to talk some sense into him. “This is just some dumb male thing between you and Harold. Why don’t you guys just go to the men’s room tomorrow and measure each other, declare a winner.” “So maybe all of history is some dumb male thing.” “Russell, listen to yourself. Stop while you still have a sense of humor.” “Since when is ambition a crime?” “When it’s excessive” (275-276).

Corrine observes that Russell’s view of himself and society is in stark contrast to her holistic outlook. In Russell’s profoundly individualistic self-image connectedness and interdependence essentially do not signify. This is why he is able to maintain the illusion of living in an environment of unlimited resources. In line with this illusion, Russell basically believes that self-realization is a direct translation of one’s goals into reality, restricted only by one’s own capacities. Russell considers himself first and foremost as an individual who is the agent and principle authority of his self-realization. It also follows from this illusion of boundless plenty that social
responsibility need not be a concern since there is enough for everybody.

In Corrine’s mind, this individualistic self-image of Russell’s ties up with what she considers to be the male drive to power and domination. This is what makes it so dangerous at the level of society. Russell does not take the holistic perspective and, therefore, does not see that his ambition can lead to destruction and disintegration. Corrine makes the clearest statement of her criticism against the masculine element during the funereal service for Jeff:

Listening to all of the fulsome eulogizing, Corrine became more and more annoyed at this secular consolation, this idea that leaving behind a stack of pages or a pile of stones with your name on it redeemed the life that no longer was being lived. Russell had almost left their marriage behind in his quest to build some kind of monument. Piling up stones, he had forgotten all about mortar. Concerned with everything except the most important thing, like the man in the joke who lost his arm and mourned his Rolex.

When they talked about what had gone wrong during the past year, Russell and Corrine were always telling two different stories. In his history of their world, the battle for control of a publishing company and the stock market crash of 1987 would feature prominently, stirringly; in hers these were footnotes in tiny print. These public events—like the death of a loved one from a communicable disease, like a financial collapse—revealed like a lightning flash, for a split second, how connected and interdependent each of them was at all times, their well-being intimately bound up with the fat of those around them.

She didn’t think she could remotely explain what she was thinking to Russell, and for a moment she almost despised him again. But she loved him in spite of this, and that was the whole point. She once dreamed of a perfect communion between souls, believed she had achieved it with Russell. Now she was willing to fight for something less (412).

Corrine concludes that the connection of an individualistic self-image to the male ambition for power and domination leads to social disintegration.

At the end Corrine has a more mature, more realistic and a less idealizing and absolute expectation of her relationship to Russell. She seeks comfort in his strength and is willing to fight for the relationship even though perfect communion is unattainable. This insight may be considered as the outcome of Corrine’s growing-up.

9.2.2 Inner Emigration

Although Corrine readily admits that she is susceptible to the lures of the glamor of
Manhattan’s high society, she is also an acute observer and sharp critic of this social
environment. Attraction and detachment vie in her, making her a profoundly
ambivalent participant in this world. However, as Russell embraces the goals and
social ways of high society ever more readily, Corrine distances herself from it more
and more, first in the privacy of her own mind and at last openly. Her withdrawal is
all-encompassing, taking place in all areas of her life: her working life, her public
social life, and her private life. Finally, Corrine has completely renounced this world
and tentatively begins to reorient her life.

9.2.2.1 Turning Her Back on the Financial World

The fact that she is a stockbroker on Wall Street constantly fills Corrine with unease.
From the beginning, it is clear that she dislikes her occupation (10). She cannot
identify with it because she feels it is alien to what she considers to be her true
vocation, which is that of “a lover and a student of life” (15). Yet, rather than despise
herself for the apparent inauthenticity of her behavior, she is willing to regard it as an
ambivalence that marks her life at this stage (18).

In the first scene at her workplace Corrine spells out her criticism. While the
supervisor is spurring his staff on to seize the opportunity of the buoyant market and
make an extra effort at acquiring new affluent customers, Corrine is having second
thoughts about the market at large and about her work in particular:

It was all too much. The Dow Jones would probably hit two grand, today, but Corrine
thought it was crazy. The economy was in dreary shape, inventories high, GNP slow,
but the DOW kept shooting up. It was a kind of mass hypnosis. Castles in the air.

She had to be careful what she said around the office. Wall Street was pumped
up. It was like a cocaine jag. Everyone grinning fiendishly, talking too fast, not quite
focusing on anything. The clients, too. Especially the clients. Corrine tried to
moderate their greed, urging them to look for real value. Though she wasn’t above
listening to her superstitions, her basic resource was simple math. If an established
company was selling ten times earnings, it was probably a better bet than an upstart
going for fifty times earnings. But everybody wanted instant gratification. They
wanted to be junior arbitrageurs. They wanted risk without downside. Big beta factors
guaranteed return. They wanted to get in on a takeover prospect right before it
went into play and double their money in three days. They wanted whatever was in
the headlines that week, preferably on margin. They wanted to be able to tell their
dinner guests they sold short on a turkey. They wanted sex and drugs and rock-and-
roll (42).
In face of a stagnant economy, Corrine is suspicious of the “current flighty market” (43) and her own undeniable role in the general hysteria. Specifically, Corrine deeply distrusts the seemingly self-fulfilling prophecy of success that everybody appears to believe in and which propels the market to inordinate heights. In her view the fatal flaw in the system is that the exchange value of company stock is completely dissociated from what she calls the real value of a company. Instead exchange value entirely depends on market forces, on the interplay of supply and demand, with everyone wanting to secure what they believe to be their share of the successful market. Corrine sees that this hysterical demand—whose vehemence is emphatically underlined by the fact that the verb “to want” recurs seven times in the above passage—is powered by a dangerous mixture of greed, group dynamics and the craving for recognition. At the same time, considerations of risk, possible failure and loss simply do not enter into the equation. Indeed, if a loss has to be taken, it is quickly shrugged off with an almost martial sense of careless bravado, in the full conviction of one’s overall triumph.\(^{301}\) She senses that these driving forces are so invigorating and mind-numbing that people lose touch to reality in pursuit of what she suspects are mere “castles in the air.” As a result, analyses are superficial and the interpretations of financial data tend to be overly optimistic. Corrine finds that the indiscriminate and downright compulsive enthusiasm that reigns on Wall Street kills all rational objections, and people end up deluding themselves. In essence, Corrine here elaborates and simultaneously distances herself from the “illusion of effortless gain,” which Russell also finds but then falls victim to. Basically, Corrine cannot identify with her job because she recognizes that she is contributing to an illusion she considers devious and seriously flawed.

\(^{301}\) Corrine overhears her colleague Duane, pacifying a customer on the phone. His use of war imagery is revealing: “I’m predicting this stock could double before the end of the year. . . . No, forget that. Biotech you don’t want to know from. Thank your lucky stars I got you out of that in time. That was a Dunkirk. Bodies all over the beach” (102).
The Self in Trouble:

Corrine’s uneasiness over being a part of a machinery whose product she detests steadily grows. More and more, her participation appears to her not as a sign of an inherent ambivalence of adult life but as an inconsistency of behavior that undermines her integrity (89). For the first time Corrine voices a vague idea of withdrawal and escape when she suggests to Jeff, “Maybe we should all move” (89). Even though her remark is only a tentative test of what the idea of escape feels like when openly expressed, this instance may be understood as the beginning of her inner emigration from the system and, indeed, from her life until now.

Corrine realizes that, as Russell becomes increasingly absorbed in the preparations of the takeover deal in the course of the summer, her own commitment to her job is weakening fast (288). Clearly, they are out of sync, developing in opposite directions. At this stage of her mounting crisis it becomes increasingly difficult to her to accommodate her work as a stockbroker to her self-image. For the first time she is able to admit to herself that she despises her work as dishonorable (245). Disgustedly, Corrine accuses herself of supporting, however inadvertently, a system that takes advantage of the greed and gullibility of its customers. When her colleague Duane congratulates her on Russell’s success, it is this awareness of having allowed herself to become a clog in a machine designed to exploit people—together with a note of self-pity about her husband’s lack of time—that prompts Corrine to respond: “I’m buying the very best in sackcloth and ashes . . . in token of my new widowhood” (299). Her remark also suggests that Corrine feels obliged to make amends for their involvement in this system and also reflects her sense of social responsibility.

Finally, at the end of September, Corrine cannot cope with the contradictions in her behavior any longer. As she is recovering from a miscarriage, she uses the time to reconsider her life and reorient herself. After a week of self-introspection, she announces her decision to quit her job (309). Shortly after, in early October, during a marital row Corrine vents all her frustration:
I never wanted to be a stupid stockbroker anyway. You made me do it. . . . You let me know in your own none too subtle way that we needed to bring in more money. I wanted to get my certificate and teach. I hate my job. I hate the people I work with. I feel like a con artist. I hate the whole—. . . You didn’t mind turning your wife into a capitalist, sending her out into the marketplace. Whoring her out to the yuppies (326).

In sum one can say that Corrine’s feelings about her job are ambivalent at the beginning. At first, her occupation appears to her as one of the compromises one has to accept in adult life. Soon, however, she is beginning to find it impossible to integrate her work as a stockbroker in her view of herself. As a consequence she goes into a kind of inner emigration. Finally, the pressure having become unbearable, she seeks the open conflict with Russell and actually withdraws from the system.

9.2.2.2 Renouncing Highlife

Parties and other social functions are important elements in the lives of the Calloways and their social circle. Though Corrine and Russell frequently entertain guests (7, 261) and are avid partygoers themselves, it is clear early on that Corrine only derives limited pleasure from these festivities. Her discomfort steadily increases though she continues to function socially for some time. At the same time she recognizes that Russell is immersing himself ever more deeply in Manhattan highlife. As a result, problems of communication between the spouses develop and seriously threaten their relationship. When Corrine detects Russell’s affair with Trina, their crisis has reached its climax. This experience also prompts Corrine to abandon this world and renounce its lifestyle.

Corrine’s reflections about her own birthday party at the beginning of the novel demonstrate that she is not given to enjoying herself lightly without afterthoughts. Her initial attitude towards this substantial part of their social life is in fact profoundly ambivalent:

The evening broke up into smaller pieces, a mosaic of shiny and oddly shaped fragments grouted with alcohol. Or so it seemed to Corrine the next day. A party is like a marriage, she decided: making itself up while seeming to follow precedent,
The Self in Trouble:

running on steel rails into uncharted wilderness while the promises shiver and wobble on the armrests like crystal stemware (16).

The heavy and convoluted symbolism of this passage indicates how important and far-reaching these meditations are to her view of herself. The image of the “mosaic” is powerful, comprising various and controversial concepts. On the one hand it emphasizes the beauty and attraction of a party. The image suggests that in Corrine’s view a party is a social entity whose beautiful identity is so much more than the mere sum of the identities of its individual components. On the other hand the metaphor also expresses her doubts. Below their superficial diversity, the guests are all the same in their desire to “shine,” to look good and attractive. The dark symbol of the “fragment” also indicates that Corrine discerns a feeling of brokenness and isolation in the guests, which is in stark contrast to the fetching image they are so desperate to project. Thus, a party just seems to connect solitary individuals into a community. Yet, to Corrine’s critical eye, this sense of community is fake and deceptive. For just as the adjoining pieces in a mosaic are not actually brought into contact with each other but merely held in place by grout, so alcohol consumption only creates the false impression of a connection and communion between the guests. In short, Corrine conceives of a party as an enticing simulacrum of a community.

The metaphor of the train expresses another of Corrine’s misgivings about the parties that she and her husband so frequently attend. Corrine has the feeling that the guests, in their determination to have fun, which they seek with a sense of purpose and direction, do not realize that a party is by its very nature a self-organizing event. She believes somewhat pessimistically that this renders the outcome of the party unpredictable and all promises futile. Thus, as the party is moving powerfully and of its own accord towards its as yet unknown conclusion, the guests may unexpectedly find themselves brought up against a potentially adverse environment. Though the party guests, to continue Corrine’s metaphor, may think
themselves safe in their train car, their celebratory mood may be thoroughly spoiled and their good intentions confounded.

It may be understood as a sign of Corrine’s preoccupation with the state of her relationship to Russell and as an indication of her constant sense of foreboding that, in the passage cited above, she also draws a comparison between a party and a marriage, finding fundamental and deeply unsettling similarities. And so, upon awakening from a disturbing dream the morning after her birthday party, Corrine accuses Russell, “Where were you? . . . I was lost in this big crowd, a big party, and I kept calling you and you weren’t there. It was so real. It started out this wonderful party, all our friends and all these interesting new people, and then we lost our friends and I lost you and the party became ugly and sad” (19). These gloomy contemplations, prompted by her birthday party, are emblematic of Corrine’s dominant outlook and set the tone for her subsequent observations about her lifestyle and marriage. These thoughts capture her conviction that a considerable part of their public life is no more than superficial socializing, designed to cover up the void and isolation underneath. They also convey her apprehension that she and her husband may be involved in something which may eventually turn out to be beyond their ken and control.

Corrine finds her premonitions confirmed time and again. Shortly after her birthday, as she is getting ready for another working day, Corrine admits to herself how little she enjoys this constant partying:

Corrine was getting so tired of parties: dinner parties, birthday parties, publication parties, housewarming parties; holiday and theme parties; opening-night parties, closing-night parties; gallery openings; junior committee benefits for the American Ballet Theater and the Public Library; benefits for the Democratic candidate, the Society for the Facialy Disfigured, the Coalition for the Homeless, the American Medical Foundation for AIDS Research; at nightclubs, at the Plaza and the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; in honor of someone named Alonzo, this being his entire name, who is a professional fund-raiser and party-giver . . . a party for Pandy Birdsall, who was moving to L.A. because she’d slept with everybody in New York. “Partying is such sweet sorrow,” Jeff said that night (36).

The seemingly endless succession and mind-numbing variety of parties in Corrine’s list disguise the fact that a party is first and foremost an end in itself: Corrine sees
that it is neither the occasion ostensibly celebrated nor the cause purportedly supported that are finally of any significance; on the contrary it is the sheer search for pleasure and the desire to be publicly recognized, to be part of the center of society prompt the people in this glamorous world to attend parties so enthusiastically. The passage suggests that Corrine is not only appalled at the emptiness and superficiality of these motives. Corrine is also sickened by the cynicism with which her social circles—and, by implication, Russell and herself, too— abuse the misfortunes of less privileged social groups as mere pretexts for their own diversion. This insight that parties really only serve their own purposes, namely that of entertainment and of their own self-perpetuation, is absurdly accentuated in the party given for the benefit of a professional party-giver. For Corrine, Jeff’s aphorism at the end of the passage cited above adequately communicates her own ambivalent emotions. She is tempted by the promises that a party implies and saddened at the same time, knowing that these promises will not and cannot be kept.

She understands that alcohol causes a celebratory, euphoric mood and makes people self-importantly converse about trivialities. At some party, the host of which, Corrine is certain, does not know them, “Corrine realized that everyone else around her was in some stage of intoxication and that it wasn’t really fun...”

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302 Later at Melman’s great party at the beach house, Corrine finds her views corroborated again. When a whale is beached, everybody frantically wonders what to do. The sad comedy of the ensuing scene illustrates Corrine’s gloomy thought that in their pursuit of mindless pleasure the inhabitants of this social world have lost touch to reality:

The party had achieved an acute focus; all of the guests were veterans of the charity fund-raising circuit, and now a crisis had been laid right at their feet. No one knew what to do. A man from First Boston was already taking up a collection to save the whale, walking along the beach with a silver champagne bucket. The man taking up the collection, red-faced and glassy-eyed under his Mets cap, thrust the champagne bucket under her nose.

“Say the whale, say the whale.”
“How?”
“How?”
“What are you planning to do with the money?”

His jaw slowly worked loose from the rest of his face and hung slack. The question, evidently, had not occurred to him before (267-268).

303 These mixed feelings are evident again on the same day when she joins her fellow stockbrokers in a spontaneous celebration of the new Dow Jones peak at a bar. Infected by all
looking in from the outside. She had a small revelation, on the order of realizing that
the weather was getting warmer every day: The social world of Manhattan was a
machine lubricated with alcohol. And one felt very squeaky and cranky without it”
(185). In short, alcohol makes people fool themselves about reality. This allows her
to take a more distanced and critical look at their social life (185). Her resolution is
tantamount to a renunciation of her present lifestyle and a first step towards a
withdrawal from this self-centered world of appearance and self-delusion and
mindless pleasure.

Even so, as Russell’s star is rising in the course of the summer, she finds that,
not altogether against her will, she is becoming swept up in the glamor of their new
life in the high society of Manhattan (263). The peak of their social life is reached at
Melman’s great party at his beach house in the Hamptons on Long Island at the end
of the summer. At the same time this party marks the turning point for Corrine, at
which her qualms about this lifestyle and its underlying moral ideas finally win out
over her susceptibility to its lures. During the party Corrine is standing on the back
porch, gazing down onto the lawn at the other guests. The host approaches her:

“Having a good time?”
She nodded.
“How can you tell?”
Corrine shrugged helplessly.
“You should get out there and mingle, meet your second husband,” he said,
smiling impishly. “Some of the richest men in America are out on that lawn in their
Bermuda shorts, and at least three of them have already asked about you. I said you
were married, but these guys, they think when they see something they like they can
have it. They wanna open charge accounts for you at Bulgari and Bendel’s, you name
it. Personally, I can’t vouch for any of these mutts,” he said, seeing she was just
barely amused. “In fact, if you want I’ll have them hauled off the premises
immediately. Just say the word. One word, Whoosh. Into the fucking ocean, right? . . .
Or anybody you want. Like that little number down there hitting on your husband.
Boom! She’s outta here.” [. . .]
Or him, maybe,” Melman added, winking (265-266).

Melman is lording over the party, evidently relishing his power. While his
unfavorable physique and ridiculous attire (265) plus the fact that he depends on a

the euphoria around her, Corrine manages to ignore her doubts and suppress her discomfort for
the time being and takes part in “the great celebration in which she didn’t quite believe” (46).
bodyguard for his personal protection (266) render him somewhat ridiculous in Corrine’s eyes, she is fully aware of his very real dangerousness. The presumptuous tycoon delights in his role as the devil who tempts Corrine’s moral steadfastness for his own pleasure. Melman spreads out before her a world in which humans may be used for the gratification of one’s own personal desires and discarded when not needed anymore. Corrine is disgusted at his way of using people and relationships. This scene demonstrates to Corrine how little she can relate to the moral and ethical foundation of this social environment, into which she has allowed herself to be drawn.

When she tells Russell about the conversation with Melman on the following day, she is shocked to find that he does not share her indignation at all but dismisses it lightly. “It wasn’t until that moment that Corrine admitted to herself what she really wanted was for him to give it all up—renounce his dealings with Melman, forget about buying the company. They were in over their heads. That’s what she’d been feeling at the party” (270). The feeling of losing control over their lives, which has never really left her since her birthday party at the beginning of the year, is mounting and forces itself upon her consciousness. Two months later, in October Corrine’s apprehensions have turned into reality: Russell’s high-flying dreams have burst in the wake of the stock market crash and their marriage is in ruins. At the end of a long phone conversation full of accusations, confessions and attempts at consolation, Russell reminds Corrine to pick up her fur coat which has been returned from summer storage. Corrine declines: “I don’t want it. It suddenly seems like a ridiculous thing to have. . . . I just mean almost everything about my life has been so frivolous and stupid. A mink coat, Jesus. I don’t know, it’s like, what were we

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304 The question of alcohol consumption also exposes the widening communicational gap between the spouses (99-100).
305 The thought also enters her mind in the form of a dream (297) and again one night in September as she is lying in bed beside her husband: “She reached over and stroked the furrows in his forehead, which reminded her suddenly of her blubbery striations on the
Corrine’s refusal to accept the fur coat is a clear rejection of her glamorous lifestyle and a withdrawal from the social world she and Russell have belonged to until now.

Even before she consciously renounces this social world, Corrine has embarked upon a parallel but largely subconscious course of inner emigration. Her wish to have a child, which she unexpectedly realizes at her birthday party (17), is at least in part motivated by her tiredness of her social obligations. Corrine does not try to hide her envy of her friend Casey’s pregnancy. “I think it would be a relief to not have to be glamorous,” she tells Casey. “You have this dispensation. I’m so tired of picking an outfit in the morning. I’m tired of dressing. I think I just want to be barefoot and pregnant” (197). Her longing for a child is an expression of her quest for an anchor and a sense of purpose in her life, which she hopes to find in a family of her own. This search is motivated by her own “history of fission in the nuclear family, her parents having divorced after years of violent misalliance” (9) as much as by her strong sense of insecurity and emptiness in her present life. Accordingly, she is deeply disappointed about Russell’s stern refusal to father a child. While he professes to be concerned about the financial burden (19, 123, 276, 302), she suspects he is too much preoccupied with the realization of his gross ambitions “to rule the world” (276). And so, when she is unexpectedly pregnant in September, she is full of both apprehension and excitement, feeling her life is about to turn. However, this chance of escaping from her present life appears lost when she miscarries. Yet her determination to give her life a new direction has grown and is firm now. A week after her miscarriage she announces her intention to leave her job. “I want to do something useful with my life” (309), she justifies her resolution, indicating that this decision is a step away from her life until now.

beached whale at Bernie Melman’s summerhouse. That was the day she’d known that everything would go wrong” (323).

She anticipates this loss in a dream (307).
The Self in Trouble:

A similarly subconscious attempt at abandoning her present life may be seen in the eating disorder she develops. It is almost as if she seeks to chastise herself for what she regards as the moral depravity of her life. What starts out as a quirky fixation with her figure (47, 171), slowly grows into a regular pathological eating disorder (e.g. 196, 261, 277), a problem she has had on and off since adolescence. In an intensely dramatic scene at the end of September, her problems become the subject of a major marital row, during which he strips her of her nightgown in front of the mirror:

“What do you see, goddamnit!”
“A monster,” she said, facing her own reflection at last, seeing in Russell’s grasp an anonymous form that resembled a supermarket turkey, plump and white and plucked.
“There’s hardly anything to see,” he said.
“An unlovable monster.” [. . .] “One of us has to get smaller,” she whispered.
“You take up more and more room in the house, so much space. I feel like there’s none left for me” (325).

At last, Corrine musters up the strength and courage to speak her mind. She suggests that her fear of being rejected and abandoned by Russell and her sense of being crushed by his overwhelming ego are the causes for her psychic and physical problems. Later she comes to understand that, paradoxically enough, her eating disorder is her only way of exercising control and restoring a modicum of order in a life that becomes increasingly unmanageable (411). Through the eating disorder, she realizes, her body is in fact already withdrawing from this social world, urging her to make an open decisive step towards reorienting her life.

9.2.3 The Puritan’s Sense of Community and Damnation

McInerney takes pains to link Corrine’s biography to New England. Corrine’s family

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307 After her withdrawal from the world she has been living in until now, Corrine revisits her mother at home in an effort to return to her roots and rediscover herself. While she must accept that she is not close enough with her mother to find consolation, she does find the peace of mind she longed for in rereading “Franny and Zooey” for about the seventeenth time” (378). Corrine’s affection for Franny reflects her own deep-set mistrust of her present life. Salinger’s youthful protagonist breaks with the phony life at college and her self-important boyfriend and embarks on a quest for a holistic understanding of the world, which she hopes to find in the religious literature her elder brothers introduced her to.
hails from New England, where her mother still lives (375). Her maiden name Makepeace identifies her as a descendant of English settlers, possibly from the first waves of immigration. This family history has shaped her character to a degree that “socially acute observers could read in Corrine’s manner the secret code of American pedigree” (8-9). Corrine’s geographical origin and her suggested family history connect to her holistic view of the self and society, and to her withdrawal from a social environment that, in her eyes, is dominated by selfishness, undue ambition, and a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. In their entirety, these elements mark Corrine out as a character who is deeply rooted in the principles that comprise the ethical heritage of the Puritan settlers in New England.

Whereas Corrine does not share her ancient ancestor’s deep religiosity and, consequently, does not rely on God as the ultimate point of reference, her basic beliefs—especially, the profound sense of interdependence and the moral duty she feels of seeking self-realization in social responsibility—are firmly planted within the Puritans’ moral tenets. Likewise, Corrine’s pragmatic, utilitarian understanding of the use of wealth—she consistently shuns highly speculative deals and instead looks for “real value,” intent on getting her customers “a decent return on their investment”—and her gradual withdrawal from the gratuitous pleasures of the high society of Manhattan are also deeply rooted in the Puritan ethic.

If Corrine embodies or represents the Puritan heritage, her withdrawal from the financial markets and Manhattan high life may be understood as a signal of the author’s that, in his view, this historical moral legacy has lost its fundamental significance in the neoliberal, urban consumer society of the 1980s. McInerney

308 While there is no further evidence to specify this link to the early English settlers, it is tempting and in accordance with Corrine’s biography and character to speculate that, when choosing this name, the author may have been thinking of the Makepeaces found in George Washington’s ancestral line.

309 Incidentally, her wealthy, class-conscious friend Casey approvingly acknowledges that this name belongs to an old family of high repute. Corrine is “a Makepeace, after all” (394), Casey states authoritatively.
further underscores this point with a scathing satire of Winthrop’s vision of “a city upon the hill” in the form of an illegal squatter’s camp called “The New Jerusalem:”

Shanties of plywood and sheet metal had risen among the tepees, and other settlers had squatted the abandoned tenement next door. A huge mural painted on the exposed, windowless side of the building portrayed an idealized, Edenic version of the community under the title THE NEW JERUSALEM, but most people called it Reagantown. Altogether several hundred citizens had taken refuge here, among them families with children and pets; many more, such as Ace, passed through, looking for food, parties and shelter. A giant Vietnam veteran named Rostenkowski informally ruled the community, doling out the donated food, selling lean-to space for a buck a night and overseeing the drug trade (87).

Perversely, the colonists’ original hopeful dream has turned into a nightmarish reality. To the Puritan colonists with their indomitable sense of mission “America was as their Promised Land, and they were of course God’s Chosen People who would build the New Jerusalem” (Cook 1999). Perversely, in the Manhattan of the late 1980s an illegal squatter’s camp governed by a dictator bears this noble and ambitious title. Clearly, the sense of community and social responsibility propagated by the Puritans has ceased to exist as a social present,\footnote{Elsewhere, McInerney reiterates his argument that, in the urban consumer society of the 1980s, the legacy of New England Puritanism no longer has any practical relevance as a moral guideline. It is not the fertile ground anymore which sustained the early colonists; metaphorically speaking, the soil of Massachusetts is “largely depleted” (14). What is left is the bleak reverse side of the visionary, missionary zeal of the Puritans. “Winter in New England,” Corrine muses upon visiting her mother in October, “a season of confinement, darkness and incest” (375).} and the shantytown may indeed be regarded as a projection into a bleak social future. Even so, the fact that the pictorial attempt at idealizing this shantytown largely draws on biblical terms indicates that the Puritan vision still persists as a reference frame somewhere in the subconscious of the nation as it were.

9.3  Jeff: A Renegade and Tragic Hero

In essence, Jeff is a rebel against the conventions and norms of the consumer society. Much of Jeff’s protest was spent before the action of the book commences, especially, through the channel of his book, which he used to come to terms with his family history at the outset of the book, which is a thinly disguised reckoning with
his family. His protest has given way to resignation hidden behind a wall of cynicism. Gradually, his energy wanes and he withdraws from his environment, seeking solace and satisfaction in drugs. Then he loses control. In therapy, especially as he witnesses a suicidal fellow patient’s suffering, he is able to break down the hard wall of cynicism. Finally, he has gained an access to his feelings and can express them. Yet it is too late as he is terminally ill.

9.3.1 Protest

9.3.1.1 Emancipation from His Upper-Middle-Class Family Background

Jeff, “the late spawn of a dusty Yankee family whose capital, like the soil of his native Massachusetts, was largely depleted” (14), vigorously abhors his parents’ decadent upper-middle-class lifestyle, their complacency and pretentiousness, which solely rest on the accomplishments of their forebears and have no basis in their own achievements (282). When Jeff left “tired old Massachusetts” for college (52), he sported a supercilious and irreverent attitude toward his family that, in Russell’s eyes, far exceeded any usual measure of youthful rebellion, indicating a more deeply set dissatisfaction. His parents’ pretentious laziness (e.g. 229) is diametrically opposed to their son’s ideals, who “liked to imply in interviews that he’d been born on the streets and raised by mad dogs” (282). As the image of the “mad dog” suggests, he romanticizes the role of the social outcast. Living outside society and rejecting its norms and conventions, this social pariah is left to his own devices and perseveres by sole virtue of his own strength and power in an anarchical environment. His bottled-up condescension and disdain of his parents’ way of life found an outlet in his first and only book to date (10). Consequently, the fact that, as Corrine sees it, Jeff “unwound” when the book was finished (88) may at least in part be due to his having battled and finally defeated his “enemy”. His iconoclastic
mission completed, Jeff’s rebellion has lost its principal motive and objective. He is done with his family and he has emancipated himself from his family background.

9.3.1.2 Russell and Corrine as the Role Models of the Perfect Consumers

Jeff’s struggle to emancipate himself from his parents is part of his general rebellion against middle-class clichés and values. In his lifestyle and politics, he is a bohemian libertine and latter-day beatnik. As the story unfolds, his vituperation against the negative outgrowths of the consumer society increasingly comes to focus on Russell and, to a lesser extent, on Corrine. His disapproval grows and his criticism intensifies as his friends become more and more deeply involved with the glamorous world of big-time finance. In Jeff’s view, the Calloways are quickly jettisoning the idealistic and subversive beliefs all three of them once held and are embracing the values and ways of the consumer society.

The very opening scene of the novel—Corrine’s birthday party in January—shows Jeff a troublesome guest, a nagging critic of what he regards as his friends’ unbecoming stooping to the values and lures of the consumer society. In a number of ways he manifests a certain disregard of social convention and even openly expresses his disapproval, often hurting Corrine and her guests. In the course of the following months, Jeff observes that, the more deeply Russell gets involved in the preparations of the takeover deal and the social and business obligations they entail, the more he develops into a prototypical member of the urban consumer society. Therefore, in criticizing Russell, Jeff is formulating his objections against this society. His major

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311 That Jeff is through with his parents is evident in his disgust when he finds them part of an unlikely rescue squad who have come to make him go into rehab (285).

312 By contrast, his fictional work appears to be traditional, conventional realism, to judge from the few, scattered references and scarce evidence.

313 For instance, Jeff taunts Corrine with cynical asides about her unloved job on Wall Street (10). Jeff then proceeds to offend a guest from Hollywood, with rude remarks about Californians and the film industry (10-11). He immediately follows up with a jibe about the shallowness, consumerism, and status-thinking he sees among his friends and elsewhere (11).
criticism is that the need to belong and the longing for safety are so great as to virtually obliterate any other, possibly conflicting ambitions, such as that of pursuing a writing career (111). Jeff is disgusted because he feels that Russell, in his wish to be accepted into the glamorous circles of Manhattan, has abandoned all the critical and subversive ideas and is abnegating the appetites they once shared. His disappointment is evident in an awkward situation at a big party in April. Russell finds Jeff pushing heroin in the bathroom. Jeff is not in the least embarrassed:

“You used to do drugs in bathrooms with me,” Jeff said, a note of reproach in his voice.

"Not . . . like this."

"No, it was all just good, clean recreation.” Jeff tilted his head back and closed his eyes, exhaling a sigh of animal contentment. He mumbled, “Day tripper.” Eventually he lowered his head and opened his eyes, as if performing a languid perceptual experiment. He seemed mildly surprised to see Russell. “Would you, uh, believe me if I said I was a diabetic? Not enough sweetness in my life, a dearth and deficiency of sweetness. Or is it too much? And you? What’s your excuse? What are you? Let’s see—how about dilettante” (187)?

Jeff feels forsaken by his friend. He accuses Russell of having jettisoned what once was their shared ideal of seeking gratification of their desires. Jeff maintains that Russell abandoned these anarchic impulses because they are incompatible with his desire for safety and with the values and conventions of the social set into which he is trying to be accepted.

This is a basic and recurrent criticism of Jeff’s against his friend. By June a great strain has come to lie on the relationship of the friends. When they actually manage to spend some time together doing the things they used to do in the past, a dispute develops virtually inevitably. Jeff is offended because Russell didn’t tell him about takeover plans. Once again, he accuses Russell for abandoning his ideals and ambitions and endangering their friendship in exchange for safety and social recognition (228). A few months later, during a therapy session with his psychiatrist in the hospital, Jeff returns to the subject. He recalls:

"Right, we’d say we had to feed the dog, which meant getting high, getting drunk, getting laid—all the lower appetites. When we first came to the city we used to think we could do anything, we used to stay up all night feeding the dog.”

“...You used cocaine?”

"Of course. The fun was never going to stop. Even Corrine had her own feisty little dog, sort of a schnauzer. I think it died. Russell had a big one, we had the big
old hounds that used to run and hunt together. Russell’s has gotten fat and happy, I
guess, sprawled on the rug in front of the fireplace whacking its tail on the floor once
in a while when Corrine calls its name or rubs its head.” (351)

This time Jeff very clearly formulates his criticism that Russell has been disloyal
towards his friend as well as towards himself because he has opted for convention,
security and stability, and in doing so has renounced the ideals and desires that used
to be an integral and binding element of their friendship. Jeff’s accusation against
Corrine is analogous. She has made up her mind to negate those desires which may
be hard to gratify without endangering the stability of her social position. Jeff
perceives an irreconcilable conflict between the need for safety and stability on the
one hand and the longing for the satisfaction of one’s desires on the other. To Jeff,
Corrine’s response confirms that both his best friends have clearly decided to play it
safely rather than take their chances. As a result of their decision an unbridgeable and
widening gap has occurred between the friends, with Jeff being all by himself on one
side.

When Russell and Corrine arrive at the clinic for their visit in early October,
Jeff finds further proof of his view that his friends have completely abandoned those
ideals and abnegated those needs which once were the foundation of their friendship
in college. Instead he sees them as a couple who are the very role models of the
perfect consumers:

[H]e watched them pull up in their Jeep, Delia sitting beside him. . . . Russell had the
top down and Corrine was riding with her hand on top of her head as if to keep her
hair from flying away. After he parked, Russell loped around the front of the Jeep and
offered his arm to Corrine, who bounced out of her seat and shook out her wind-
tossed hair like a golden retriever emerging from water. Jeff didn’t know if he was
ready to face their frisky cheer. America’s fun couple visits the funny farm. He had
yet to forgive them for landing him in this place, and it didn’t necessarily make him
feel any better that they looked so good. “Here’s the Prince and Princess in the six-
horse carriage,” Delia said (328).

Jeff perceives those details of Russell’s and Corrine’s appearances and gestures

314 When Corrine phones him in the hospital in September to announce their visit, he
consciously polarizes. Only half in jest, Jeff suggests:
“Divorce him and marry me.”
“You’re a real safe bet.”
which mark them out as role models for their segment of society; they are “America’s fun couple,” “America’s sweethearts” (320f). The public self-images they seek to project suggest success and competitiveness coupled with casualness and an almost naive-looking naturalness. Above all, they create an impression of happiness, health and a sheer indomitable belief in their own unlimited possibilities. This powerful self-representation does not fail to achieve its desired effect as Jeff’s touch of envy attests. Significantly, however, Jeff and his companion plainly see through the image, recognizing that it is an assemblage of the standard elements of the clichéd version of the American dream in the consumer society. At this point Jeff perceives his friends entirely in their typicalness, their representativeness of this American dream of self-realization in the consumer society. In Jeff’s opinion they have abandoned themselves and fallen for the lures of the consumer society. At this moment in early October, he believes that they have so completely assumed and embodied the values and attitudes of this society that, in effect, they have become the very role models for the urban consumer society and ceased to be individuals.

At a more fundamental level, Jeff also criticizes that Russell—and to some extent Corrine, too—does not seem to comprehend that they are mistaking what are merely clichés of the consumer society for their own authentic needs and aims. To Jeff, Russell and, to a lesser extent, Corrine are primary examples of the effect of the insidious workings of the ideology of consumer capitalism. In his opinion, the case of his friends illustrates that in the urban consumer society the search for personal success and self-fulfillment is mostly expressed in conventional terms sanctioned by society. Foremost among these goals are the pursuit of a high-powered career, which involves powerful decisions as well as the accumulation and ostentatious display of material prosperity. These goals assure power, recognition and security within the society. Jeff sees that for most people these goals and the need to belong are much

"That’s just the point.” He tried to sound chipper. “Would you rather be safe, or
greater than the will to find out about and then pursue one’s own, specific, authentic wishes. Jeff contends that this is a devious way of seeking self-realization as it effectively amounts to self-betrayal and inevitably leads to dissatisfaction in the end. This abnegation of authentic impulses is doubly dangerous as it is not consciously realized. He maintains that the subtle and dangerous mechanism of the ideology of the consumer society has the effect that self-realization always occurs within socially accepted boundaries. In the end, the individual forgets what the original, authentic impulses were and mistakes his or her pursuit of conventional goals for authentic self-fulfillment, for an act of individualism and self-realization.

9.3.1.3 Ambivalence vis-à-vis the Consumer Society

Even though Jeff believes that one must seek to realize one’s own impulses and ideals outside the conventional forms and ways and even in conscious opposition to what society prescribes, he knows that he himself cannot fully live up to this ideal. He is aware of the powers of ideology on himself even as he sees through them. He realizes that his own position concerning the glamorous attractions of the consumer society is awkward. As a consequence, he uncertainly wavers between harsh criticism and self-conscious participation in this world. He knows that he is compromising his own critique of this segment of society. This renders his stance uncertain and creates an extreme tension.

Jeff is conscious of his ambivalent behavior. For instance, when Russell asks him if he is going to Los Angeles to earn money in the film industry, Jeff dodges the implied criticism and replies, “Call me Faust” (106). Jeff’s curt reply can barely conceal the uneasiness he feels about his engagement in Hollywood, which does not fit into his self-image as a writer (15). With Goethe’s Faust, Jeff might cry out, happy?” (320)
“Alas, two hearts are beating in my chest!” He is torn in the struggle between his natural self and his spiritual self. Evidently, Jeff is aware that he is both repelled by the negative aspects and attracted by the lures of the consumer society, particularly as manifest in the glamor of Manhattan high life.

Almost every aspect of Jeff’s life reflects his effort to come to terms with his attraction to and repulsion from the values of consumer capitalism. Jeff holds the conventions of middle-class life in contempt. His rejection of the conventions is a form of protest against the values of this segment of society. For instance, Jeff’s clothing is deliberately negligent, his clothes are dilapidated to the point of being defunct. Significantly, this seems to be particularly true when he appears at formal or semi-formal social functions. Frequently on such occasions, his attire is in open defiance of the requirements of the situation (e.g. 10). Yet for all the disrespect for the social norms of established society which his attire evinces, Jeff shows that he has swallowed and incorporated these values and cannot simply deny them. Often his appearance is calculated at piquing the people around him. Simultaneously, however, he appears to acknowledge the common ground on which they are standing. There is usually an element in his dress which attests to his knowledge and, in part also, to his acceptance of these norms and values (e.g. 104, 265). Such references betray his own self-consciousness: he is aware of the conventions involved and aware that he is violating them. Within the context of his overall negligent attire, these references stand out, directing attention to the conventions themselves. Jeff’s style of dress is a conscious choice, intended as a critical comment on the formality of these situations. It becomes plain, too, that Jeff’s protest is less self-assured than his rebellious posture suggests. In the demonstration of his dislike and contempt of the social

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315 Jeff repeatedly makes oblique references to this dual nature of his personality, these diametrically opposed yearnings, each of which tries to get the upper hand. Jeff uses the romantic motif of the “double” (85) or the “doppelgänger” (406) to stress this.
convention of the American middle class, Jeff is self-conscious as he registers his own rootedness in and attraction to its values.

In the course of this year, however, Jeff increasingly distances himself from this world. Whenever he tries to enjoy the pleasures this environment offers, he usually gives up and withdraws because they only afford inadequate, vicarious satisfactions. In the end, Jeff admits to himself that he has been betrayed by his own “gross expectations,” which cannot be fulfilled within the urban consumer society (317ff).

Jeff’s consciousness of his precarious position vis-à-vis the urban consumer society is also manifest in his difficulties with his role as an artist celebrity. He keenly senses his implication in the entertainment industries’ production of inauthentic, fake copy. Jeff’s tacit acquiescence to the demands of the system is instanced by the photo session he unwillingly subjects himself to in February (56ff). The perception of his uneasy situation is painful to Jeff: “All in all he would rather go to the dentist than have his picture taken. Give me lollipops, novocaine, gas—whatever you’ve got, please. But Russell said this was important, some big-deal magazine article” (54). The thought of having to play along in this sham fills him with apprehension and makes him long for something to numb his senses. He also realizes that by being implicated in the system, he is losing some of the critical distance, independence and self-sufficiency essential to his art. In short, he knows that the foundation of his art is being undermined by the very system that nurtures him.

As the photographer and her staff set about their work, Jeff must see his dreads turn into reality:

One of the assistants seated Jeff in an old wooden school chair, while another wheeled up an antique Remington on a rickety typewriter stand. The retro writer look. From behind, somebody rubbed mousse into his hair. If there was one thing Jeff hated, it was mousse, except when it was for dessert and chocolate. But Jeff gradually disappeared. He had long since learned that his actual presence was not required at these sessions. At one time his face would clench with the self-consciousness of the
unwilling photo subject, but gradually he had worked toward a state of Oriental indifference accelerated in this instance by the vodka. Each time his image was reproduced he looked less and less like himself, the flash bulbs progressively bleaching the map of his soul out of his face. With enough exposure he would look like someone else entirely—the perfect disguise of a writer (56-57).

The events fully confirm Jeff’s worst fears. Without any control whatsoever over the proceedings, without any means of influencing the outcome, he is an object who is being manipulated by others to suit their ends and their purposes. Quickly, he becomes an exchangeable model employed to convey the romantic cliché of an artist who is guided by a deep sense of tradition and who shuns modern equipment and luxuries as inessential and detrimental to his art.

The passage vividly captures the process whereby Jeff’s portrait is being turned into a simulacrum. He already knows what the nameless young man in Bright Lights, Big City has to learn painfully: Such a public image of the self is a purposeful creation that does not represent an actually existent person. Indeed, Jeff is acutely aware that the “retro writer look” may be understood as a sarcastic comment on the impossibility of artistic independence within the culture industrial system. This is why he feels that his behavior is inauthentic because it runs counter to his self-understanding as an artist. By way of protesting against this unwilling exploitation, Jeff emotionally, mentally and physically withdraws from the present, intentionally hiding his “real self” behind a mask and retreating into the inner emigration of “a state of Oriental indifference.”

9.3.1.4 The Hospital as a Cultural Gatekeeper

Jeff contends that the rehabilitation program in the Connecticut hospital does not focus on the patient’s needs but only serves the requirements of society. Indeed he believes that the clinic is an institution that has primarily been designed to stabilize and protect society. In his view, the clinic works towards stabilizing society by making patients accept and fulfill the standards of “normal” life.
Jeff is not in the clinic of his own accord. He feels the victim of a conspiracy of friends and family (286). This feeling of having been all but incapacitated by a self-appointed rescue squad governs his view of his situation throughout his whole stay in the clinic (312, 320f, 328, 348) and also remains with him after his release. Even when he visits Russell in Hollywood in February, Jeff is still indignant and injured: “I was furious with you for sticking me in that place. Among other things. Actually I’m still mad, even though you thought you were saving my life. Maybe I didn’t want my life saved. It’s my fucking life, right” (407)? He vehemently disputes the legitimacy of their attempt at rescuing him. First, he insists that his personal liberty must not be infringed upon and that, in the ultimate consequence, his freedom also encompasses the right to destroy himself. Secondly, he protests against what he believes to be the implicit premise of their intervention: Jeff objects to the equation of normalcy and health and the implication that any other mode of behavior is deviant and, consequently, ill. Under this premise, treatment aims at making the patient accept and observe the standards regarded as normal and healthy.

During his stay in the hospital, Jeff sees his reservations confirmed. He finds himself incapable of agreeing with and reconciling himself to what is considered to be normal, acceptable behavior. In September, during his first month in the hospital, Jeff has a hard time settling into the daily routine:

Always the same old shit, he thought. Every morning breakfast. Then it’s time for lunch. Then dinner. It all tasted like cardboard and cigarettes, and it didn’t satisfy, because it wasn’t what you really wanted. You wanted something else and you thought about it all the time, and these other, approved channels of desire and fulfillment seemed hopelessly second-rate. At night, every night, he dreamed of white powder deliquescent in a spoon, turning milky clear above an ice-blue flame. Going downtown in his dreams. This, apparently, was the way it was going to be for the rest of his life, the fucking diurnal shuffle (310-311).

Jeff registers an immense pressure toward conformity. He is dissatisfied with the fact that self-realization should be possible only within strict confines. Jeff is loath to submit to the uniform and compulsory repetition of unattractive activities and offers which constitute a regular day in the hospital. His illicit desires, intensified as they are by the very boredom and compulsion of life in the clinic, seek an outlet in that
reclusive area where night meets dream. Here, at the furthest remove from the routine of the hospital day, secure from the touch of the inexorable censors of normalcy, he can satisfy his longings—if only in his imagination.

Jeff believes that in this institution recovery or cure does not mean that he is made capable of pursuing his individual idea of happiness. Rather, the “pursuit of happiness” is only possible within the strict terms sanctioned by the clinic and can only be attained via the “approved channels of desire and fulfillment.” Jeff resents the fact that the patients’ freedom of satisfying their desires is severely restricted in the hospital. The remaining available options of gratification are profoundly dissatisfying and so limited as to make it virtually impossible to assert one’s individuality:

> It was like prison or the army, where you had so little control over your own destiny that you seized every opportunity to mark time in your own manner, to gratify yourself independently of the people who controlled the keys and the passes and the med cabinet (315).

Jeff refuses to cooperate in therapy. He annoys the therapist and fellow patients in group therapy with his arrogant reluctance to participate (e.g. 316). In single therapy, Jeff counters his psychiatrist’s cautiously probing questions with evasive sarcasm (e.g. 317f, 346). Jeff is similarly resistant, if less hostile, to his “buddy,” another patient and former drug addict who has been assigned to Jeff as his coach (e.g. 319f). On the whole, rather than cooperating in therapy, Jeff prefers being together with his “misfit toy friends” (312), a group of patients who share a deep distrust of the institution.

From Jeff’s perspective, then, the hospital is anything but an institution that focuses on the patient’s needs and desires. Quite the contrary is true in his opinion, the clinic primarily functions as an outpost of bourgeois society. It defends society against particular and possibly disruptive individual tendencies. Through redirection of such deviant forces into “approved channels of desire, the fantasy of individuality
and self-realization is created. In other words, treatment does not aim at enabling the patient to pursue his or her individual happiness. Instead its first goal is to make the patient reconcile himself or herself to the purposes and values of the dominant group in society; if treatment should fail at this goal, the clinic can still protect society by confining those patients who are a threat to society. Jeff sees that this socially protecting and stabilizing function of the clinic is clearly in the foreground.\textsuperscript{317}

Jeff’s interpretation of the true, socially stabilizing aim, indeed, the literally exorcizing function of treatment is evident in the metaphors he derives from church history. He uses them to characterize what he considers as the presumptuousness of the hospital, its all-encompassing claim to authority and correctness. In the aftermath of detoxification, Jeff is still exhausted and shaken but already his old cynicism is making itself noticeable again: "Warily passing Carlyle House, from which he had recently graduated—the setting of his hellish withdrawal. . . . Abandon dope, all ye who enter here. Jeff dubbed it the Wildlife Refuge" (311). The clinic puts Jeff in mind of the Inferno in \textit{The Divine Comedy}. He parodies the inscription above the gate of the Vestibule to Hell, whose modern version the hospital thus becomes by implication:

\begin{quote}
THROUGH me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me among the people lost for aye.
Justice the founder of my fabric mov'd:
To rear me was the task of power divine,
Supremest wisdom, and primeval love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I endure.
All hope abandon ye who enter here ("Inferno," Canto III, lines 1-9).
\end{quote}

When Jeff sarcastically substitutes the word “dope” for the original “hope,” he demonstrates the great extent of his resignation. Life in the hospital is pure hell to

\textsuperscript{316} For instance, his mail and presents are checked for alcohol, narcotics and sharp instruments (318, 330).
\textsuperscript{317} To Jeff it is a matter of sad but appropriate irony that Russell, who in Jeff’s view has turned from the ambitious, critical student into the very epitome of the consumer society, should capture and “save” a patient, who leaves his position on the baseball field and runs off in headlong flight: Another save for Calloway,” said Jeff. “One more and we can put him up for canonization” (332).
Jeff. Deprived of his chosen drug, he has the impression that the last faint possibility of an endurable existence in a hostile environment otherwise without any redeeming features has been taken away from him. "The city of woe" Jeff feels he has entered only holds "eternal pain" in store for him and he is "lost for aye."

Jeff’s facetious allusion to the Inferno is unambiguous evidence of his contention that the clinic is not really concerned with treating patients in order to cure and rehabilitate them: in his view the stay in the clinic is above all a form of punishment and confinement. Moreover, by alluding to these lines from *The Divine Comedy*, Jeff also implicitly refers to the claim to the "justice" of the confinement in hell. The justice of the verdict is beyond doubt as it is guaranteed by God as the ultimate authority. Through his equation of hospital and hell, Jeff suggests that the hospital is making a similar but presumptuous, unfounded and, therefore, illegitimate claim to the correctness of the patient’s commitment. In essence, Jeff argues here that the hospital acts as a prison, aiming at containing any deviant tendencies in the patients. For example, Jeff shows his room to Corrine and Russell during their visit in early October. "Neither bars on the windows, nor straps on the bed," . . . knowing that Corrine was relieved not to find any hint of the clinical, semipenal nature of the institution reflected in the interior decor. ‘They had both at Carlyle House, where I detoxed’” (330). A moment later he points out the latter department to his visitors, "‘That’s Carlyle House,’ he said. . . . ‘Scene of fiendish tortures supervised by Medical Inquisitors and Latter-Day Puritan Clerics disguised as nurses’ (331). From Jeff’s cynical point of view, the hospital fulfills the same function that Inquisitors and Puritan Clerics had in their respective societies. Both, the Inquisition and the Puritans were concerned with the purity of church doctrine, with fighting the enemy inside the church. Jeff discovers the same kind of indomitable conviction in the doctors and nurses at the hospital, the same visionary belief in the correctness of their views and actions that was characteristic of the Inquisition and Puritanism. Jeff suggests that the medical staff, just like those religious zealots in the past, have such
strong faith in the justice of their cause that they even find the use of violence justified. In his view, the hospital breathes the fanaticism, the self-righteousness, the bigotry and the violent intolerance that one associates with the Inquisition and with Puritanism, in particular, with that of the New England variety.

Jeff’s comparison of the hospital to the Inquisition and the Puritans suggests that, in his opinion, the hospital is an institution representing the dominant culture and has been established as a safeguard to defuse nonconformist, possibly subversive tendencies or elements. He believes that the patient’s individual needs and desires are neglected in the agenda of the clinic. The main goal of treatment in the hospital, Jeff implies, is the protection of society against impending dangers from within. Carlyle House—Dante’s Vestibule to Hell,” the first stop on the patients’ route through the hospital, where they undergo the first measures of treatment—functions as a gate toward normalcy. On the one hand, this gate holds back and gives shelter to those regarded as unfit or even disruptive to “normal” life outside. To these patients Carlyle House is a “Wildlife Refuge” of sorts. On the other hand, Carlyle House is also a gate that permits return into bourgeois society to those who are judged fit to lead “normal” lives again. Without the mollifying and numbing effect of his chosen drug, however, that “normal” life is scarcely bearable to Jeff. Without drugs New York is an extension of Dante’s “city of woe” in Jeff’s eyes. Jeff’s conclusion is radical and simple and describes the fundamental dilemma of urban life: Life with drugs promises beauty and excitement albeit at the price of self-destruction; survival is bought at the expense of blandness and boredom in a life without drugs.

Another indication of Jeff’s discontent with the presumptuous claim to correctness and authority in the hospital is his sarcastic interpretation of his “drugs withdrawal program” as a course in self-recognition. Again Dante’s voyage through hell, which is a quest for self-recognition with Virgil as Dante’s guide and mentor at his side, provides a model. Jeff’s view is evident in the terminology he uses to describe the steps in his treatment. For instance, he self-ironically says that he
“graduated” (311) from Carlyle House and that his treatment is following a “curriculum” (311). A little later he uses the same terminology when he notes that “upon graduating from detox, he’d enrolled in group” (319). By the time of Russell’s and Corrine’s visit in early October, “Jeff had moved to the main house at the top of the hill—progress of a sort. The administration presumably wanted inmates to know that it was all uphill” (328). Jeff’s choice of words demonstrates his argument that the hospital defines the process of recovery in social rather than in individual terms. The patient has to master a succession of grades. The hospital decides if a patient can be promoted to the next grade and, finally, can be approved for return into “normal life.” These decisions are made on the authority granted to the hospital by the “normal,” i.e. bourgeois society. Jeff is fully conscious of the tragedy and self-irony of his situation: he is sad to be making progress on the way to “normality”—the way he never wanted to take!  

McInerney’s presentation of the rehabilitation clinic as a “cultural gatekeeper” or a fortress of normality and of Jeff’s difficulties to adjust call to mind the conflict of Nurse Ratched and the patient McMurphy in Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Similar to Kesey, McInerney constructs an opposition between the institution as a defender of societal structures and standards on the one hand and the maladjusted patient on the other. 

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318 McInerney’s usage of Dante’s vision of hell—like Ellis’s in American Psycho—puts the book in a long tradition: Leslie Fiedler shows how fertilizing Dante’s vision of hell has been as an image for the city throughout the centuries: The single Christian poem which continues to shape our deep fantasies . . . [uses] the City as the model or prototype of Hell: a symbol of absolute alienation rather than total fulfillment, of shared misery rather than communal bliss. In Dante’s Divine Comedy, Heaven is compared to the boundless ocean and at its heart to a great white rose, while Purgatory is portrayed as a lofty mountain on a lonely island—all three images derived from the world or pre-urban, if not pre-human, nature. But Hell is figured further as a walled city, much like the poet’s own Florence, which had exiled him forever but continued to obsess him to the end of his days. “Per me si va nella
9.3.2 Withdrawal and Loss of Control

Significantly, much of Jeff’s power of protest has already gone when the action proper of the book commences. By this time, he has become a hardened and resigned cynic who increasingly withdraws from society. With growing despair he searches for gratification of those desires which the consumer society stirred but left unfulfilled. Heroin offers him temporary solace and satisfaction but he knows that he is gradually and inexorably losing control of his life and facing his destruction.

9.3.2.1 Withdrawal

Jeff’s gestures of protest against the deindividualizing forces of the consumer society appear strangely lifeless and ineffectual. As has been argued in detail, this is partly because Jeff himself is not at all immune to the lures of this society, however obvious and shallow they seem to him. Yet the more salient reason for the curious powerlessness of his acts of dissent is that most of his energy of opposition went into the writing of his first book and was spent by the time of its publication two years ago. The vigor and vehemence of his protest has given way to mere cynicism, which barely disguises the resignation underneath. This resignation increasingly manifests itself in his withdrawal from the society he so sharply criticizes. During their meeting in February Corrine tries to pry into what she suspects is merely a hard shell of cynicism which Jeff has grown to protect himself against pain:

“You know I know you just pretend to be cynic.”
“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”
“—Vonnegut” (89-90).

Jeff does not only seek refuge behind a protective wall of cynicism. His emotional withdrawal is paralleled and extended by his physical withdrawal from this social environment and their lifestyle. In the course of the year, Jeff consciously
socializes less and less frequently with Russell and Corrine. This effort at distancing himself from them reflects his growing impression that they are turning into the protagonists of the consumer culture he abhors. Again and again, Jeff declines their invitations and stubbornly persists even when, on Valentine’s Day, Corrine anonymously sends him a poem from W. B. Yeats, reminding him of his “old friends” (90). In June, Jeff stands them up and does not appear at a dinner party. While they are summering in the Hamptons, he refuses their repeated invitations to visit (e.g. 260). Then, at Melman’s great party at his summer house in the Hamptons in July, Corrine is surprised to find Jeff. But he is not among the other guests, preferring to stay with some seedy artist friend in a closed and darkened room, listening to the Cure singing, “If you ask me why I hate you, I’ll try to explain. . .” (265):

You didn’t tell us you were coming out,” she said to Jeff. […]
She stood on her toes and threw her arms around his neck. “Don’t push us away.”
“I’ll try,” he said (265).

Clearly the contact between the friends is not close anymore. Again Jeff is evasive about the invitation. When pressed by Corrine, he admits that he is indeed trying to withdraw from them. However, their relationship is not intimate enough anymore for him to disclose the reasons of his reticence and self-inflicted isolation. Later in October, when Corrine phones him in the hospital, Jeff repudiates his friends again but still does not tell them why.

"We were thinking of coming up this weekend.”
"Neato.”
"Try to feign some enthusiasm.”
He couldn’t imagine being enthusiastic about anything, much less a Sunday brunch with America’s sweethearts. Somewhere in some sealed-off compartment of his heart was the knowledge that he loved these people, but he couldn’t actually feel it. Mostly what he felt was angry. They were out there in the world, and here he was, stuck in the fucking nuthouse (320-321).

Jeff’s intensely ambivalent feelings toward Russell and Corrine are evident. He is torn between the love for the people he once knew and the revulsion of his friends’ mournful city (Fiedler 1981b: 115).
complete and seemingly innocent surrender to the lures of the consumer society and adoption of its values and ideals. Seeing that Russell and Corrine have become the very role models of the consumer society, Jeff is uncertain whether there is still enough of a basis to continue their friendship.

9.3.2.2 Seeking Gratification of Insatiable Desire

Jeff is fighting a seemingly insurmountable sense of dissatisfaction and frustration. This unhappiness is in great part due to his unfulfilled love life. Ever since his former girlfriend Caitlin ended what he cynically calls their “marriage of inconvenience,” in which they made themselves “expert on each other’s weaknesses” (89), his love life has been in disarray. As he is well aware, the failure of their relationship was in some measure caused by his feelings for Corrine (406). His unfulfilled longing for Corrine is still a constant source of pain to him and he repeatedly signals his readiness to her (15, 90, 320, 395).

The more decisive reason why the relationship to Caitlin did not work out, however, was Jeff’s inability to commit himself fully. Only in September, during single therapy in the clinic, Jeff is beginning to address the problem directly. When the psychiatrist asks why he thinks Caitlin left him, Jeff puts up his defense as if by reflex but then ventures a tentative answer:

“Because I couldn’t commit?” This answer had an experimental, interrogative rise.
“That sounds like something she would say.”
“It’s true. I wanted everybody in the world to love me, and her ambitions for me were narrower. She just wanted me to love her.”
“And did you?”
“Yes. But it didn’t seem like enough. Ideally she would’ve been a blonde, brunette redhead who was whippet-thin and also voluptuous, tall and petite, nurturing and independent, fiery and complacent, whorish and motherly.”
“You expected a lot from her.”
“I suffer from gross expectations. This may be the only sense in which I’m a somewhat representative figure” (317-318).

At this point he hesitatingly permits himself to put into words what he has been

319 Corrine cites W. B. Yeats’ “The Poet pleads with his Friend for old Friends.”
feeling all the time. Jeff admits that his ambitions were directed at the public world, while Caitlin focused on the private world. He begins to see that public recognition and success were more important to him than the intimate communion of a private love relationship. His self-esteem did not rest on a solid sense of his own achievement nor did it rely safely on his partner’s support; instead, his perception of his own “worth” too much depended on the brief and fleeting recognition of an anonymous public. He also comprehends that, because of the public recognition he enjoyed and the success bestowed upon him, he began to entertain ever more extreme desires and hopes. By their excessiveness and mutual exclusiveness, these expectations were destined to be disappointed and remain unfulfilled. Jeff gradually comes to acknowledge that his pursuit of ever-new and greater thrills has failed him and only increased his yearning for the stability and grounding he has lost in the process of pursuing his desires. He accepts that, despite his strong view of himself as an outsider and his powerful sense of opposition, he allowed himself to be implicated in the machinery of the consumer society and in this way lost sight of the woman who offered him her love and understanding.

Jeff has tried to satisfy the resultant, growing yearning by increasingly extreme stimuli. Drugs, particularly heroin, appear to offer a way out of his predicament. It is a significant finding that at parties Jeff withdraws to take heroin (187, 395). This is more than merely an indication of the power of his habit; above all it is a signal that the pleasure and excitement offered in these environments leave him stimulated but ultimately frustrated and even fill him with revulsion. This is why he resorts to heroin. In therapy session with Dr. Taylor, Jeff arrives at a new level of self-understanding:

“You try to fill the big empty. You find a name for your yearning—call it God or money or Corrine. You call it literature. Call it heroin—or junk, smack, downtown, scag. Heroin most of all, because it swallows all the others. You don’t hurt, you don’t even feel. It simplifies and incarnates your need, and it becomes everything. You fall into the arms of Venus de Milo” (351).

Now he is able to see that, having led a life of dissipation and excess, he is still not
content. He also has to face up to the fact that his life of self-indulgence has brought him loss and disaster: it has destroyed his love relationship, he has lost his friends who opted out for the relative security of a middle-class existence, and it has sapped his literary powers and compromised his integrity as an artist. Thus, with his youthful enthusiasm gone, his sense of expectation has given way to the awareness of an infinite emotional void. He tries to overcome this sense of emptiness by seeking ever more intense forms of satisfaction. Heroin is the final stage in this quest, which he reached when nothing else could fill the void. It is Jeff’s anesthetic of choice, the only thing that sufficiently numbs him to the emptiness in his life. Through its powerful addictive effect, heroin displaces all other longings, creating an overpowering craving itself. His heroin habit allows Jeff to focus on a concrete craving and thereby to avoid analyzing his true dissatisfactions, his “yearning, restlessness, insatiable, undiagnosable desire” (318, discussed above). In this way Jeff’s substance dependence is an escape from self-critique. This is an insight that Jeff develops only very late. Talking to Russell in Hollywood in December, Jeff admits that drugs are an excuse to him: “It’s this big relief to say you’ve been helpless against alcohol and drugs, to have an excuse for all the rotten things you’ve done” (405).

9.3.2.3 Loss of Control
Jeff’s transition from rebellion via withdrawal towards loss of control is manifest in his deteriorating physique—wasted on drugs, he tends to miss (55, 240) or fall asleep (18, 57, 280) during social events—and in his dilapidated living conditions. In June Russell visits Jeff, finding his apartment in an alarming condition (224). By September, it has deteriorated still, confirming Russell’s “notion of a junkie’s apartment” (284). Increasingly, Jeff is losing control in his tightrope act between “ambivalent participation” in and withdrawal from the consumer society. Jeff knows no viable way of self-realization and gratification of his yearnings. His response to
this predicament is profoundly ambivalent: With his motto “save me from what I
want,” casually dropped in conversation (56-57) and inscribed on his baseball cap
(104), he acknowledges that his longings are self-destructive even as he persists.

9.3.3 The Rebirth of the Social Self

As has been shown in detail, Jeff’s outlook on the consumer society passes through a
succession of phases. This change in attitude is closely connected to his dwindling
capacity for giving shape and direction to his life. First he is a rebel; then he
withdraws to a position of cynical detachment and disdain; finally, he increasingly
isolates himself and subsequently loses control over his life. This development hits
an absolute low when Jeff relinquishes control to the self-appointed rescue group of
friends and family and allows them to commit him to a hospital. He looks so helpless
that Russell has the impression that Jeff is “almost relieved finally to surrender his
fate to others” (287).

At the clinic in Connecticut—that is, at a spatial and social distance from
New York, the place which, for Jeff, has been the very epitome of the urban
consumer society—a gradual process of recovery sets in. With the help of his
therapist and, particularly, through the accidental agency of his fellow patient Delia,
Jeff is at last able to break down the hard wall of cynicism. Step by step, he manages
to recuperate his social self. Specifically, he regains access to those emotions that
enable him to emerge from his self-inflicted isolation and to participate positively in
his community.

In the hospital Jeff needs some time until he manages to lower the protective
shield of cynicism. The change is initiated through the suicidal fellow patient Delia,
who, “even in this sanctuary for the twisted and the broken, . . . was considered
deeply weird” (314). Jeff is particularly touched by her tentative gestures of trust
(e.g. 345, 347) because he knows that she is even more of a recluse than he himself is
and does not normally “share” with her fellow patients. Jeff’s tender concern for Delia is a first faint indication that he is in the process of regaining the capacity to feel empathy for the people around him. When Delia entrusts him with a shard of glass, which she asks him to keep for and from her (353), he realizes that she is directly appealing to his sense of responsibility and desperately pleading for his help:

Jeff held the shard in his hand, looking at it without at first comprehending what it was. He stroked his right index finger across the sharp crescent, then lifted a tiny flap of white skin from the neat incision, which slowly filled with blood. He looked up at Delia, tears welling in his eyes. He could not identify the source of the sadness he felt rising within him and overflowing. Imagining Delia’s grief, he inadvertently tapped his own.

He began to sob. It seemed impossible that he could have contained this sadness for so long without bursting, without even recognizing the pressure of it for what it was. All the sealed-off cells of pain and remorse were suddenly exposed; he felt the cumulative pain of all his hurts, all of the slights, indignities, embarrassments, insults and rejections he had ever suffered, which he thought he had forgotten—none of which could yet begin to account for this sorrow he was feeling, which was far too vast to be merely his own, but which connected him with the bottomless reservoir of human suffering, most of all with the people he had hurt in his short, reckless life. All the harm he’d visited on others came back to him; he felt the shame of a hundred cruel, arrogant, careless things he had thought or said or written. Every word he’d written was false, puffed with conceit and elegant malice. And he could hardly bear to think of Caitlin, her long, failed struggle to love him, her grief at their parting. He thought of poor Russell, and he looked up through cloudy eyes at Delia, who felt so terrible she thought of killing herself. Sobbing violently, he wondered how the race had survived so much grief (353).

Evidently, Jeff has reached a turning point in his crisis. After a long time of hardening himself to the concerns and fears and hurts of the people he loved, he is now moved to tears over somebody else’s suffering. Jeff shows more than simple sympathy in this scene. His intensely emotional response to Delia’s gesture of trust proves that he is fully conscious of the deep personal significance that her request has for him. He clearly realizes that she symbolically relinquishes self-control and asks Jeff to take responsibility for her life. Jeff sees that, by asking him to take the shard of glass for her, Delia admits to herself and to him that she has self-destructive desires and simultaneously makes clear that she wants to be protected from them. Thus her symbolical gesture of giving up control over herself is in fact a final manifestation of that self-control. Jeff’s tears, then, are also a reaction to the startling realization that their lives so closely resemble each other and to the bittersweet irony of the situation. For, of course, Jeff’s motto “Save me from what I want” was an
appeal for help to his friends, too. However, in contrast to Delia’s simple and honest question, Jeff’s motto was always presented tongue-in-cheek as part of the role of the cynic which he had cut out for himself. Unlike Delia, he did not manage to control his self-destructive desires nor did he ever evince the will-power and self-control that Delia showed in laying her life in his hands. Rather, as has been argued above, Jeff used up all his energy in protest and self-indulgence and then simply lost control over his life. Jeff is painfully aware of the irony of the situation which consists in the fact that he, who never succeeded in restraining his own self-destructive desires and who showed no trace of responsibility for his own life, should be entrusted with such great responsibilities for somebody else’s life.

Delia’s simple wish triggers a moment of awareness in Jeff in which he also recognizes that his responsibility does not merely extend into the future but also encompasses his readiness to accept the blame for his mistakes in the past. Yet, Jeff’s sense of guilt and blame is slow to develop. For instance, in Mid-October on Russell’s birthday, Jeff’s first effort at apologizing to Russell for the affair he had with Corrine in the past is insincere and shows little remorse. Instead Jeff’s half-hearted apology turns out to be merely hurtful to Russell (365-366). By December, however, Jeff has learned to accept responsibility and blame. Jeff visits Russell in Los Angeles to own up to him:

“Look, my list of regrets is longer than my first book. But I’ve nearly made a vocation of hating myself. For hurting you most of all. And for compounding it with my ham-handed apology. [. . .] I pretended even to myself I was asking your forgiveness, but what I was actually saying was, Fuck you, Crash, because I was furious with you for sticking me in that place. Among other things. Actually I’m still mad, even though you thought you were saving my life. Maybe I didn’t want my life saved. It’s my fucking life, right?”

Jeff scooped up a rock and heaved it toward the surf, then lit another cigarette.

“And I was angry with you for slowly abandoning me before that, letting friendship slip away while you were taking care of business.”

Russell nodded. “I know.”

“I was even mad at you for being married to Corrine. I could tell you that what happened with Corrine and me was addictive behavior or something. It’s this big relief to say you’ve been helpless against alcohol and drugs, to have an excuse for all the rotten things you’ve done. [. . .] I’ve been in love with Corrine since the beginning. I could hardly help that” (405-406).

Jeff knows that he has come a long way from the arrogant cynic. He connects his
apology with an attempt at explaining his behavior. In part, this explanation is an accusation against Russell for violating Jeff’s right to self-determination and for abandoning him as a friend in a time of need. Jeff concedes that the third accusation is irrational. He recognizes that he used to cast himself in the role of a man who is the victim to his desires and impulses because this enabled him to shirk his responsibilities to himself and his friends. In acknowledging this strategy and consciously denouncing it, Jeff now fully assumes this responsibility and unconditionally accepts the blame for his behavior in the past.

Jeff delivers the most powerful proof of his regained capacity for empathy and his recuperated sense of social responsibility in his second book, which he manages to finish before he dies of AIDS. Russell finds the manuscript on the desk of his deceased friend and tells Corrine, “It’s sort of about all of us” (411). An excerpt from this book precedes the novel proper as a kind of prologue. It is Jeff’s account of Russell’s and Corrine’s arrival on the day of their visit at the clinic in early October. In this two-page extract, Jeff adopts a retrospective, reflective angle on the events. By contrast, in the novel proper, the same scene is presented as filtered through his experiencing, spontaneously responding conscience. Jeff’s choice of perspective is significant as it allows him to show the empathy and social responsibility, which he regained not in the least because he now knows about the hard times that lay ahead of his friends.

When they arrived at the hospital that Indian-summer day, I was sitting on the grass above the visitors’ parking lot sucking a Marlboro, imagining how I might mince and dice them in their Cuisinart, because they were partly responsible for putting me in that white clapboard Bedlam, and because it was easy to disdain them as types—like a couple in a magazine ad, so patently members of their generation and class. Corrine’s yellow hair and Russell’s yellow tie flying like pennons of bright promise. Begin with an individual and you’ll find you’ve got nothing but ambiguity and compassion; if you intend violence, stick with the type. [...] They sprang lankily from their faux combat vehicle, in uniform faded jeans and blue blazers, and the normally mute Delia, said, without irony, “Here’s the Prince and Princess in their six-horse carriage.” Sitting next to Delia on the hospital lawn at that moment, I decided it was almost a viable illusion. . . (3-4, original italicized).

Jeff concedes that, at that particular point in his crisis, he regarded his friends as pure embodiments of the role model of the upper middle class in the urban consumer
society. His insistence on the trademark trivia of Russell’s and Corrine’s glamorous lifestyle shows his own ambivalence toward this role model: it reflects his contempt and attests to his susceptibility to the aura of optimism they radiate. As has been argued above, this perception of Corrine and Russell as mere “types” was the main reason why Jeff distanced himself from them. The excerpt from his book is the final and strongest evidence that Jeff is now capable of confronting his friends with empathy and even pity. At last he can acknowledge that he must see his friends in their individuality in order to do them justice.

Jeff seeks to emphasize the universal validity of his recognition by anchoring it deeply within the heart of American literature. For this purpose he indirectly refers to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s story “The Rich Boy” (1926). The narrator of “The Rich Boy” opens his account of his friend Anson Hunter’s life with these memorable words:

Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing. That is because we are all queer fish, queerer behind our faces and voices than we want anyone to know or than we know ourselves. [. . .] There are no types, no plurals” (Fitzgerald 1986: 110).

The narrator of Fitzgerald’s story is extremely conscious of the tension between individuality and conventionality. He makes a passionate plea for the individuality of all human beings, emphatically insisting that this individuality is far more important than those things one has in common with others.

Jeff’s usage of the Fitzgerald story demonstrates that he has arrived at a much more comprehensive, profound, and, consequently, fairer view of his friends. In this new, more encompassing view he sees them as individuals with normal needs, desires, expectations, fears, hopes, who are trying to deal with the uncertain and excessive world into which they have been “thrown.” Thus, at the end of his life Jeff realizes that Russell and Corrine are not simply shallow types but individuals who have to grapple with the same issues as he has.
McInerney makes clear that this central insight of Jeff’s is to be seen as a step toward a more mature, more complex concept of himself and his environment. In its didacticism, McInerney’s treatment of Jeff’s progress towards self-recognition as a process parallel to the progress of his terminal disease is reminiscent of the lecture that J. D. Salinger gives through his mouthpiece Mr. Antolini in *The Catcher in the Rye*. In fact, Jeff’s development and fate make him a perfect case study of the “falling” man, who, as Antolini explains, is forever looking for something that will still his desire and forever dissatisfied with what he finds. Like Salinger, McInerney suggests that his character’s insatiable longing is a vestige of his adolescent self. The Wilhelm Stekel quote that Salinger includes in his novel to clarify his point perfectly expresses what must also be considered McInerney’s message: “The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (*Catcher*, 195). Only when Jeff eventually abandons his heroic but misguided idealism, which only destroyed and socially isolated him and drained him of his creative powers, he is ready to assume responsibility and return into the community of his loved ones. Unlike Salinger, however, McInerney resorts to high drama to drive his message home: In the end, Jeff’s untimely death prevents his return.

### 9.3.4 A Renegade and Tragic Hero

Among the three friends, Jeff occupies a crucial position. Essentially, he possesses the same self-destructive qualities inherent in Russell and Corrine. Jeff embodies these qualities in a purer, more extreme, unmitigated form and lacks any means of check and balance. In contrast to his friends, he does not have the powers of survival

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320 Another example of Jeff’s more mature view at the end is his altered attitude toward marriage. In contrast to his earlier, drastically expressed reservations against this institutionalization of a partnership (89-90), he now signals his readiness to enter into a marriage (352). This desire for the stability and sense of belonging that a conventional middle-class life promises has never lost its appeal for Jeff.
needed to counter these tendencies toward self-destruction. As has been elaborated in full, this is why Jeff is a victim to his own needs and desires. Subconsciously aware that he depends on others to help him, he sports the motto “Save me from what I want.” As younger men, Jeff and Russell indulged in a reckless pursuit of pleasures of all kinds and dreamed of literary fame. While Russell has since abandoned these vices, buried his literary ambitions, and has instead become an established middle-class employee, Jeff has become an artist and continues to search for gratification in ever more extreme ways, which ultimately bring about his untimely death.

Analogously, Jeff shares Corrine’s weltenschmerz and her tendency to hurt herself. Corrine muses:

[They recognized that sense of loss in each other. But Jeff’s adolescent unhappiness, more acute than her own, seemed to her to have some grand, universal component. Life was insupportably sad, and gazing at Jessie’s scotch glass sweating on the windowsill she could almost understand Jeff’s search for oblivion, if that’s what it was (377).]

Yet, unlike Jeff, Corrine eventually evinces a strong will to survive. This will entails a pragmatic readiness to abandon some of her ideals and instead “to fight for something less” (412). By contrast, Jeff must admit that he is hopelessly idealistic: “Utility be damned. I’ve never exactly been the practical type” (396).

Corrine and Russell realize that Jeff or, more specifically, the life he has chosen, is important for their own emotional states. When Corrine asks Jeff if he does not think of settling down, Jeff replies, ”That’s your job. Someone’s got to drink these drinks and fuck these sleazy girls so you can live a normal life” (90). In the same vein he tells Russell during their final encounter in December:

“I sometimes think of everything I’ve done since college as an inverse image of your life. Parallel lives. You settled down with Corrine, became the editor. So I did the other thing. All the other things. [. . .] I felt entitled to take anything I wanted, do anything I wanted. I was a writer, right? The rules didn’t apply” (406-407).

Jeff’s statements are instructive because he claims that he fulfills an important role in society. If one pursues Jeff’s suggestion, then the “normality” of an orderly life is only possible because “excess and deviance” also exist as its direct antitheses. Obviously, under the living conditions in the contemporary urban consumer society,
many drives and desires—particularly, socially disruptive ones—are abnegated, which inevitably causes and promotes tension and frustration. Jeff indicates that, having somebody who acts out those impulses and then perishes in the process, gives the “normal,” that is, the socially well-adjusted spectators a sense of satisfaction and appeases their frustrations. Aristotle calls this effect *catharsis*. Russell appears to recognize that Jeff plays such a part in his own life. Russell “dimly suspected that Jeff performed a vital role in his own ecosystem, following the road Russell hadn’t taken and thereby saving his best friend the trip” (111). Corrine, too, makes a comment that may be understood in this way. “Some of us had to become regular people so you could have readers” (15), she says.

In conclusion, then, one may say that, for Russell and Corrine and, by implication for the reader, Jeff is a tragic hero. What can be said for the protagonist of the classical Greek tragedy, also holds true for Jeff: M. H. Abrams summarizes Aristotle’s well-known argument from the *Poetics*: “The tragic hero . . . moves us to pity because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves” (Abrams 1984: 202). Accordingly, when Russell and Corrine bury Jeff, they do not only take leave from their close friend; they also symbolically abandon or at least learn to cope with those tendencies in their own characters that caused their own misfortune and finally killed their tragically heroic friend.

As has been suggested above, within the historical design of the novel, Jeff represents the rebellion of the beat and hippie generations against the establishment. Jeff’s fate and his role within the threesome friendship with Russell and Corrine suggests that McInerney sees that the projects of the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s have essentially failed. Quite clearly, in the urban consumer society of New York in the late 1980s, *The Greening of America* is no more than the title of a book no longer read. Nonetheless, McInerney insists that the critical impetus of these anti-
establishment movements—though it has lost much of its erstwhile force—continues to be an important corrective.

9.6 A Growing-Up Novel about a Nation Coming of Age

9.6.1 An Ailing Society

After experimenting with illness as a metaphor in *Story of My Life*—Alison’s communicable venereal disease is a symbol of her communicational problems—, Jay McInerney firmly establishes it as the central source of imagery in *Brightness Falls*. Because of the sheer omnipresence of literal signs of and figurative references to disease or degeneration—particularly, since these occur in juxtaposition to the general preoccupation with never-ending youth and permanent beauty—, one may say that illness is the main metaphor in the novel, connecting everything through a common theme of degeneration and disintegration and, ultimately, of death.

Quite literally, several characters in the novel have to grapple with their varying ailments. Illness is also frequently employed as a metaphor to express concern about the contemporary urban consumer society. Clearly, the “plague”-motif—which is already evoked in the title of the novel, a quote from “A Litany in Time of Plague” by the Elizabethan poet Thomas Nashe (1667-1601)—recurs most persistently in the novel. The plague-motif features most prominently in Corrine’s[

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321 For instance, the inflammations on Jeff’s skin—repeatedly alluded to—turn out to be AIDS-related and forbode his untimely death. The tycoon Melman keeps complaining about his back pain. The homeless man Ace is reported to have died of “the AIDS” (400).

322 For example, Jeff believes “final softball game between the addicts and depressives” in the clinic (3, original italicized) is an appropriate image for the state of the society. In particular, “Jeff admired the manic-depressives, believing that they were most closely attuned to the roller-coaster spirit of the age/state of the nation” (312). Russell, on the other hand, compares his first efforts at speculating with stocks to the courageous engagement of a scientist: “[I]f a research chemist experimentally injecting himself with the virus he has isolated, he began investing small amounts” (24). And, in a rare moment of doubt, Russell pities himself and seeks consolation from Corrine: “Have you ever heard that thing somebody, some critic said—Not only does the emperor have no clothes, he has bad skin. Well, that’s how I’ve been feeling lately. Like a naked eczema case” (135). Incidentally,
consciousness. She often associates it with the AIDS epidemic. In February, that is long before the events that rock her life to its core, a reference to AIDS in a subway station vaguely reminds her of Nashe’s poem (41, discussed above). This sets the tone for her whole story. Tragically, when Jeff dies of AIDS, Nashe’s poem is recited at his funereal service and the circle thus closed:

Rich men, trust not in wealth,  
Gold cannot buy you health;  
Physic himself must fade,  
All things to end are made.  
The plague full swift goes by. . . .

Russell had read her the poem years before, when he still read poetry aloud to her.  
Beauty is but a flower  
Which wrinkles will devour;  
Brightness Falls from the air;  
Queens have died young and fair;  
Dust hath closed Helen’s eye.  
I am sick, I must die.  
Lord, have mercy on us!

She had asked Russell what the line “Brightness Falls from the air” actually meant. [...] And now, suddenly, she could picture it clearly: brightness and beauty and youth falling like snow out of the sky all around them, gold dust falling to the streets and washing away in the rain outside the church, down the gutters into the sea (412-413)

Nashe’s traditionally Elizabethan lament on the transience of life and beauty and, closely linked to this, his exposure of the vanity of mankind’s endeavors in the face of such transience captures Corrine’s sense of the extravaganza, the preposterousness and the futility of life in her own time and place.

That death should be brought on by a plague—whether this is by pestilence as in Nashe’s poem or by AIDS as in the Manhattan of 1987—only serves to emphasize, in Corrine’s eyes, the terrifying aspects of her central theme of connectedness. After Jeff has died of AIDS, Corrine meditates on the tumultuous events of the year: “These public events—like the death of a loved one from a communicable disease, like a financial collapse—revealed like a lightning flash, for a split second, how connected and interdependent each of them was at all times, their

Corrine has earlier used the metaphor of the naked emperor in an interview to characterize the situation at the stock exchange (46).

Corrine is extremely preoccupied with the idea of a plague. In her perception even the trees around her family home are falling victim to a plague: “The last of the elm trees by
well-being intimately bound up with the fate of those around them” (412). As has been observed above, AIDS is a symbol of an ailing society in Corrine’s eyes. Accordingly, she is anxious to find a cure to what may legitimately be called a “social” disease in the double sense of the word. Her understanding of AIDS as a symptom of an ailing society and her desire to help ease the suffering are manifest on two occasions when she hears the punk rock band “The Cure” playing. Both times Corrine asks, “Cure for what?” (100, 265).

In Brightness Falls McInerney draws up a portrayal of the values and morals in a time of extreme disparities, when preposterous profits and indulgences sit side by side with equally great poverty and misery. In order to emphasize the aspect of degeneration and disintegration he resorts to the imagery of illness, specifically, of the plague. Through this traditional device, the author places his novel amid recognized works of world literature, seeking to give his own work substance and authority. Apart from Thomas Nashe’s “A Litany in Time of Plague,” which McInerney’s book repeatedly and directly refers to, the reader may think, for example, of Boccachio’s Decameron, Daniel Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year, or E. A. Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” The latter text in particular is

the front door gate looked sick, having finally succumbed to the plague that had wiped out its family” (375).

In Boccachio’s book a group of young noble women and men flee to the country to escape the plague in Florence and tell each other stories to while away the time. Boccachio prefaces these lighthearted stories with an account of the horrendous decay of morals and manners in Florence under the influence of the pestilence. This depiction of the plague in Florence is full of horrid episodes of people indulging in excesses in the face of their looming death.

The book describes the social disintegration occurring in the course of a pestilence epidemic. The narrator of Defoe’s fictitious journal concludes his report:

Doubtless the visitation itself is a stroke from Heaven upon a city, or country, or nation where it falls; a messenger of His vengeance, and a loud call to that nation or country or city to humiliation and repentance, according to that of the prophet Jeremiah (xviii. 7, 8): “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.” Now to prompt due impressions of the awe of God on the minds of men on such occasions, and not to lessen them, it is that I have left those minutes upon record. (Journal, chapter 9).

While McInerney’s novel is not religiously motivated, as the fictitious report in Defoe’s book purportedly is, it certainly cannot deny a similar moralizing intent.
suggestive with regard to McInerney’s novel. In Poe’s story, the appropriately named
Prince Prospero invites a great number of guests to stay in his castle, while the
plague is raging outside, and to join him in an endless, outrageous masquerade.
Eventually, however, death enters anyway and snatches the revelers away. Brightness
Falls contains some significant structural parallels to Poe’s narrative. For example, at
a social function in April, Russell notices, “It was a curiously self-referential affair.
People kept asking each other their opinion of the party, comparing it with past
events, querying each other on future invitations” (186). As in Poe’s story, this world
of parties and entertainments appears to be self-sufficient and to exist outside a larger
social context. Nobody needs to bother about what is happening in the “normal”
world. Brightness Falls contains numerous manifestations that such an illusion of a
false reality, of living in a world of one’s own which is without connection to the
world outside cannot be maintained and is fatal. 326

All three authors, then,—Boccacio, Defoe, and Poe—establish the plague as
a sign of moral depravity and excess and haughtiness. McInerney’s own use of the
imagery of illness and, more specifically, his employment of the “plague”-metaphor
is purposely reminiscent of these eminent forebears. This is a strategic narrative
decision of the author’s. It helps him underscore the timelessness and significance of
his observations on a culture whose very fleetingness and shallowness he so
relentlessly exposes. For all the author’s deft handling of this device, his use of AIDS
and the “plague” as his central image of societal degeneration and self-incurred self-

326 The case of the stock market speculator J. P. Haddad, a rival of the tycoon Bernie
Melman, illustrates this central statement for the world of high finance. Haddad is said to
conduct all his business from aboard his yacht, which he never leaves (117-118). At the end,
his empire disintegrates in the aftermath of the stock market crash. His yacht is on the floor of
the sea, bottom up, and Haddad is never seen again (414).

Corrine herself inadvertently gives a proof that this statement also holds for the
private sphere. She feels “fortunate to be insulated inside the walls of marriage at the same
time that she felt guilty for feeling safe while the plague raged outside” (120). Yet, with the
advantage of hindsight, Jeff can correct, “[M]arriage is a form of asylum, too. When I shacked
up myself, I always heard the wild call of the world outside the door. And eventually it seeped
under their door, too” (4). Incidentally, McInerney here uses the image of the house, with its
destruction must be considered as rather conventional at best. In her perceptive and erudite essay “AIDS and Its Metaphor,” Susan Sontag points out that “‘Plague’ is the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood. […] Plague … has long been used metaphorically as the highest standard of collective calamity, evil, scourge…” (Sontag 1990: 132). At worst, the way McInerney employs this image is very questionable, perhaps even bigoted. Susan Sontag takes up issue with such reinscription of age-old myths and prejudices because it turns victims into offenders and perverts. She observes, “The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means—especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity” (Sontag 1990: 114).

9.6.2 A Maturing Nation Looks into a Cautiously Promising Future

Clearly, *Brightness Falls* is a tale about loss in a time of seemingly limitless abundance and may indeed be regarded as something like a modern variation on *Paradise Lost*. Significantly, like Milton’s epic poem, McInerney’s novel ends on a note of hope and confidence. Reunited by the death of their friend Jeff in March, McInerney’s latter-day Adam and Eve attempt to start over. One night, as they are lying in bed, Russell contemplates the experiences they made in the past year and concludes that in the end they will be “alone in the world, shivering at the dark threshold” (416). Through these very last words of the novel—a reference to “hell’s dark threshold” in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Book X, line 594)—McInerney explicitly connects his cautionary tale about the excesses of the urban consumer society in the 1980s to the biblical beginnings of humanity, thereby further stressing deceptive and deathly promise of protection against infection from outside, in much the same way that Poe employs the castle in his story.

327 McInerney indicates as much at the very beginning of the novel through the inscription, which he has selected from Robert Hass’s “Meditation at Lagunitas:” “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking.”
the archetypal relevance of his narrative. The situation of Russell and Corrine, the exemplary representatives of this society, is compared to that of Adam and Eve, who—having forfeited their privilege to live in paradise—are banished from this place of simplicity, plenty and innocent pleasure. Adam and Eve now find themselves confronting a complex, even a chaotic world in which they have to provide for themselves and in which death and damnation are palpable realities. *Paradise Lost* ends on a note of subdued optimism, which thematically anticipates the conclusion to *Brightness Falls*:

In either hand the hast’ning Angel caught  
Our ling’ring parents, and to th’ eastern gate  
Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast  
To the subjected plain; then disappeared.  
They, looking back, all th’ eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms.  
Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They hand in hand, with wand’ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way (Book XII, lines 637-649).

This is Russell’s “anagnorisis”: He discovers that they do not live in Paradise, that is, in a world of limitless plenty. They live in a “post-Paradisiacal” state where there is an overall balance of give and take, of profit and loss. Like Milton’s Adam, McInerney’s new “American Adam” has lost his innocence and has found out that growing up is inseparably tied up with loss and failure. He has lost his “American Dream” of never-ending growth and abundance, what may be called the quintessentially American belief in the perennial second chance. In the face of this overwhelming sense of loss, it is a sign of Russell’s emotional strength that he is able to entertain a cautious optimism.

It is a significant choice of the author’s to have Russell formulate what may be considered as the central insight offered by the novel. As Russell has been

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328 McInerney’s reference to Milton makes it intriguing to employ R. W. B. Lewis’s term here, though its usage in this context is, of course, problematic. Pioneer in spirit that he
installed as a typical representative of the American middle class his recognitions have a special importance. Russell’s development is supposed to epitomize the increasing self-awareness and the loss of innocence of a maturing American nation. In the course of the events, Russell had to learn that his rugged “frontier individualism” proved destructive. Similarly, the stubbornly adolescent idealism and self-indulgence of his friend Jeff turned out to be fatal. In the end Corrine’s “Puritan” pragmatism and her sense of community and social responsibility are indispensable. Nonetheless, Russell’s enthusiastic energy is not simply dismissed as out of place. It is a meaningful detail that Corrine seeks comfort and protection with Russell in the concluding scene to the novel. In the end it will be Russell’s strength and optimism, enhanced by Corrine’s circumspection and social responsibility, that will carry them through.\footnote{329} McInerney suggests in \textit{Brightness Falls} that frontier individualism and Puritan ethic are both complementary and constitutive to the American psyche. They must not be separated from one another but must enrich and check each other. Together, they permit a cautiously optimistic vision of the future of the American nation at the threshold to the twenty-first century. In the final interpretation, the excesses of the urban consumer culture of the 1980s are interpreted as the youthful antics of a nation coming of age. The adolescent belief in simplicity and the illusion of limitless plenty must be abandoned and must give way to a mature view of the complexity of life in a world of limited, scarce resources.

The present study of \textit{Brightness Falls} suggests the conclusion that McInerney’s analysis and interpretation of the morals and manners of the American urban consumer society in the 1980s and his vision of the nation’s future is characterized by a considerable conservatism. McInerney argues that the Americans is, Russell shares the innocence, optimism, and lack of a sense of history that Lewis discerned in the “American Adams” of the nineteenth century.\footnote{329} Incidentally, Jeff and Corrine, despite their criticism of the more naive side of Russell’s personality, acknowledge their vital dependence on his vigor and indomitable optimism. For instance, Jeff tries to see the affair Corrine and he had years ago while Russell was abroad as an attempt of being together with him \cite{406}.
today, by returning to and critically reassessing their historical roots in the frontier experience and the Puritan ethic, can furnish a basis for a more hopeful future.

McInerney’s “historical” approach in *Brightness Falls*—and in *The Last of the Savages*—links him to the great voices in American realism. The historical awareness McInerney displays here connects him, for instance, to John Dos Passos. During the turmoil of World War Two, Dos Passos wrote,

> In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men’s reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking (Dos Passos 1970: 3).

*Brightness Falls* shows McInerney an attentive reader of Dos Passos. With its panoptic scope of Manhattan society at the end of the 1980s, which exposes the plight of those fallen victim to their dreams of success and swept up by an economy that barely recognizes them as figures, McInerney’s book is in parts reminiscent of Dos Passos. Like *Manhattan Transfer*, McInerney’s third New York novel is also concerned with the city’s powerful gravitational pull towards “the center of things” and with the losses incurred in pursuit of this dream.

Yet in his almost moralistic message, the author comes dangerously close to the “anthology of jeremiads” that his hero commissioned because it promised to sell well. One may even venture to speculate that, with *Brightness Falls*, McInerney wanted to jump on the bandwagon and profit from the same anti-yuppie sentiment that his hero wanted to exploit. In this context, it is telling to point out that *Brightness Falls* had a bestselling forerunner in Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Like Wolfe, McInerney relies on an arsenal of traditional realist devices to drive home his moralistic message. The way the author develops his characters here, even providing them with a full family background and ancestry line, is also indebted to

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330 Incidentally, McInerney has written an introduction to a new edition of *Manhattan Transfer* (McInerney 1986).
the panoramic, social-critical novels of a Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo. Likewise, the whole complex structure of the novel, in which several plotlines, thematic strands, and metaphorical lines are artfully interweaved, is pointed at that one moralistic conclusion, is commonly found in such older literature. Gone is the self-conscious playing with voice and structure as shown in Bright Lights, Big City, which showed the author well-versed in the metafictional vocabulary but also deeply rooted in realism. Gone is the snotty and witty irreverence of the streetwise punk narrator of Story of My Life, which made McInerney’s moralism stomachable.

By and large, however, McInerney’s sensibilities are more akin to Fitzgerald’s than to Dos Passos’s, and his urban fiction is much closer to Fitzgerald’s ambivalent portrayal of the American dream as it became manifest in the urban consumer society of the “Roaring Twenties.” In fact, McInerney’s own agenda is adequately expressed by his description of what he believes to have been Fitzgerald’s: “Fitzgerald … was able to unveil the illusion of Gatsby’s version of the American dream even as he lyrically celebrated the power of the dream, illustrating his own notion that it is the mark of a first-rate mind to hold two contrary ideas at once” (McInerney 1986: 7). In an oblique, indirect way, then, McInerney’s relentless exposure of his artistically minded protagonists’ delusions of literary grandeur—which are often based on shopworn anecdotes of literary icons from Fitzgerald to Hemingway and Faulkner—may be understood as an attempt to acknowledge and to deal with his own dreams.332

Most notably in Brightness Falls, McInerney places his picture of the excesses of Manhattan high life in the 1980s against the backdrop of the “Roaring Twenties.” McInerney’s image of the Dionysian atmosphere in which Russell revels,

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331 In particular, note the scenes at the mission and at the squatters camp involving the homeless man Ace.
332 McInerney’s game is dangerous for all its self-consciousness. For instance, Fitzgerald’s 1939 story “The Lost Decade” presents just such a protagonist, develops the same themes, and strikes the same tone.
his depiction of the social life of the upper middle class as cut off from the social reality of the majority of the city population, and the crash of the stock market in which many of the inflated bubbles burst have their precedents in Fitzgerald’s work. Witness, for instance, Fitzgerald’s rendition of New York in November through the eyes of Anthony Patch, hero of *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922): “Crispness folded down upon New York a month later, bringing November and the three big football games and a great fluttering of furs along Fifth Avenue. It brought, also, a sense of tension to the city, and suppressed excitement” (*Beautiful*, 26). Virtually showered with invitations to parties, Anthony finds that the sense of exhilaration and “contagious air of entré” (ibid.) are not confined to his own upper-class circles but are all-encompassing, reaching down to the poorest among the inhabitants of the city. Fitzgerald’s hero is overwhelmed at seeing that everyone and everything is suffused by an irresistible spirit of renewal. A long enumeration of festivities and instances of innovations culminates in the emphatic statement, “The city was coming out” (27)! Even four years into their marriage—by which time Anthony’s and Gloria’s fortunes have taken a decisive turn for the worse—, Anthony remains enthused with the city: “New York, he supposed, was home—the city of luxury and mystery, of preposterous hopes and exotic dreams” (*Beautiful*, 230). His passion for the city is rather increased than smothered by his impression that the city is unreal, “a transparent, artificial sort of spectacle” (*Beautiful*, 111), “a performance” staged just for him (*Beautiful*, 230).

McInerney’s Russell Calloway shares these sentiments: “Outside, autumn had arrived on the city streets. The noxious gases of the summer had dissipated and the chilly morning air carried an olfactory hint of new leather. This was Russell’s favorite season, the season of beginnings in New York, social springtime on the metropolitan calendar” (288). As with Anthony in Fitzgerald’s novel, Russell’s illusion of a center, reified as New York City, remains essentially intact after Russell’s luck has waned and he has lost virtually everything he had (389).
Furthermore, like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1926), who comes to the city convinced that “anything can happen now … anything at all” (*Gatsby*, 75), Russell is eager to leave behind his home in the Midwest. He even denounces his roots in an effort to start afresh in New York, pursuing his clichéd pipe-dreams of success. The male heroes of *Bright Lights, Big City* and of *Brightness Falls* share the sense of entitlement and expectation as well as a certain simplicity of adolescence that Fitzgerald endowed his fictional heroes with. Yet, McInerney leads his male protagonists to the recognition that they pursued clichéd dreams and makes them renounce them. Thus, they attain a measure of maturity that Fitzgerald does not grant all of his heroes.
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-centric, 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
The Self in Trouble: 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.333 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

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.
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1973-1982 Heinrich-Heine-Gymnasium in Oberhausen

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