



**PARODIED TO DEATH: THE
POSTMODERN GOTHIC OF
*AMERICAN PSYCHO***

Ruth Helyer

The Gothic Heritage

The Gothic genre is a unique combination of the repulsive and the compulsive. Its ability to provoke both fear and fascination ensures that it generates media and scholarly attention and considerable wealth for the commercial worlds of publishing and entertainment. Seventeen centuries ago the word "Gothic" was used to describe tribes living in Northern Europe whose behavior caused their name to become associated with anything deemed brutish, offensive, or repulsive. By the fifteenth century, Renaissance critics felt justified in using the word to describe the vast gloominess typical of the architecture of the time. Consequently, the term developed connotations of medieval gloom, decaying properties (with ramshackle fixtures and fittings), and untamed landscapes. As any description necessitates some "other" against which a comparison may be drawn—Gothic's "other" was always the aesthetically more pleasing; that which was capable of satisfying (rather than offending) the widely accepted social norms relating to common sense and ethics. The infer-

ence is clear that classical styles are considered to be safer and therefore more acceptable. Appearances and activities diversifying from this accepted course are suspect, and potentially dangerous; they should always be viewed and handled with a high degree of caution. According to Fred Botting, "Gothic novels frequently adopt this cautionary strategy, warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form [. . .] tortuous tales of vice, corruption and depravity are sensational examples of what happens when the rules of social behaviour are neglected" (7). Classic examples of Gothic literature deal with characters' fears of the forbidden and their repression of unauthorized urges. They warn against extremes of pleasure and stimulation, which are seen to dull the capacity to reason, and encourage the transgression of social proprieties and moral laws. Archetypes of "civilized" society are used in the narrative to justify the condemnation of unacceptable acts, and likewise to feed into our conception of reality. Literature termed as "Gothic" began to appear in the late eighteenth century, such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). These were followed by countless others, including stories by Edgar Allan Poe and the Brontë sisters. The darkness of the mental realities presented within these founding texts is usually metaphorically illustrated by the physical location of the action, which tends to be remote and deserted (or semi-ruined), and takes place in castles, churches, and mansions. It is not only the dim and eerie interiors of such buildings that unsettle the reader, but the secret passages, cellars, and attics. The narratives frequently linger over bleak industrial cityscapes, complete with dark back alleys and swirling smog, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (1886). Doors creak and staircases wind out of sight, creating an air of mystery around what the surface aesthetics of setting and characters are hiding, and more crucially, what can be construed about their inner capacities.

The creepy surroundings, paradoxically unknown, yet familiar from what the genre represents, provide the backdrop for the narrative's transgressive characters. Typically, they are dark, brooding, and silent aristocrats, with guilty secrets and unpleasant habits. These mad or evil people, occasionally the monstrous undead, present us with "doubles," the other side to the traits respectable society has chosen to uphold. Instead of development, honesty, and credibility they represent regression, deceit,

and untrustworthiness. The Gothic genre offers a narrative form in opposition to the inflexible modern middle classes. On a more personal level this translates as an iconography capable of giving expression to the repressed desires of the unconscious.

Histrionic Excess or Psychological Astuteness? From the Stately Ruins of the Eighteenth Century to Contemporary Manhattan

Many theorists of Gothic conventions, such as Allan Lloyd Smith, have commented on the "[s]triking parallels between the features identified in discourses concerning postmodernism and those which are focused on in the Gothic tradition" (6). Both have certainly thrived amid "industrialisation, urbanisation, shifts in sexual and domestic organisation, and scientific discovery" (Botting 3). Furthermore, as both discourses are vague and difficult to define, they encourage the use of the imagination, and become associated with an incoherence that, because it is at the whim of individual interpretation, is sometimes shunned by intellectual schools of thought. However, the very nature of Gothic narratives relies on an emotional response rather than an intellectual one.

The emotionalism in the parallel between texts in the Gothic tradition and postmodern texts is evident in Botting's citation of a critical review of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). The eighteenth-century critic could be describing the feelings aroused by Brett Easton Ellis's 1991 novel, *American Psycho*: "Lust, Murder, incest, and every atrocity that can disgrace human nature, brought together, without the apology of probability, or even possibility for their very introduction [...]. We are sorry to observe that good talents have been misapplied in the production of this monster" (qtd. in Botting 21).

Like *The Monk*, *American Psycho* is well written and undeniably entertaining, yet Patrick Bateman's behavior, his submission to bestial urges, is viewed as abhorrent, the exact model of what is to be avoided. However, the very acknowledgement that he has apparently succumbed to these urges, not invented them, makes the unpleasant suggestion that they are lying dormant in all of us, and the only difference between us and Patrick is that he has indulged them. As the above review implies, some things are best ignored in the hope that they will disappear. This

exploration of our own psyche is a reflection of the Gothic genre's gradual, but discernible, move away from clichés such as ghosts and its increasingly sophisticated targeting of internalized fears. In a fragmented postmodern world of isolated individuals beset by guilt, anxiety, and despair, internalizing fear produces narratives which center on psychological disturbance, narratives which are "dominated by fantasy, hallucination and madness" (Botting 11). This destabilizing of the "boundaries between psyche and reality" (12) has an incisive effect on the audience, as it exacerbates unease about boundaries generally, and uncertainties about "difference." Classic Gothic fiction is claimed to act as a catalyst for the reader's "unconscious desires [...] repressed energies and anti-social fantasies" (Botting 18-19). This use of psychoanalytical language places Patrick Bateman, psychotic serial killer, within a well-established literary tradition.

Gothic characters are typically highly stereotyped and Patrick is no exception, teetering precariously between categories the reader can easily recognize. He is a psychotic serial killer, but also a rich and eligible young man whose family is said to own "half of Wall Street." He does not need to work and represents perfectly the rich, yet troubled aristocrat of the eighteenth-century Gothic novels. Patrick is bored, heartless, and fabulously wealthy; he can idle his life away spending his inherited money, being pampered, and being seen in the "right" places. He is, physically, every inch the romantic hero: handsome, with a fit, toned body and impeccable taste. The predictable nature of his appearance is underlined by the frequent questions of others as to whether he is a model or actor. Such stock characters as the "tall, dark, and handsome" leading man are lifted directly from traditional writing, along with the stereotypical homosexual whom Patrick attacks: "[An] old queer wearing a cashmere turtleneck, a paisley wool ascot and felt hat [...] pudgy, with obscenely healthy-looking pink skin, no wrinkles, all this topped off with a ridiculous mustache that accentuates his feminine features" (164) and members of ethnic groups, like the Chinese dry cleaners who fail to remove all the bloodstains from his clothes (82). He describes them as "flat faced" and "wild-eyed" (81), their voices "jabbering" and "yipping" (84). In a racist attempt to make them understand him he begins to add "-ee" to the end of words: "bleach-ee" and "bitch-ee." His ignorant and violent attitude towards the Chinese, combined with his insulting descrip-

tions, succeeds in reducing them to one-dimensional "types" rather than real people. The use of such typical "types," in both older and more modern Gothic texts, underlines the tension between old fashioned and modern societal values and definitions, for example, the dividing line between what is barbaric and what is civilized. Although Patrick is portrayed as very much a barbarian in a civilized society, the further the plot unfolds the more questionable the moral standards of the so-called civilized society become. This moral ambivalence is characteristic of Gothic texts. When Patrick goes back to Paul Owen's apartment, a venue he has used to slaughter two prostitutes (having previously disposed of Owen), he finds the real estate agent there, intent on covering up the carnage, for the sake of reletting the property. In contemporary society, fast-moving and acquisitive, monetary loss is held above loss of life. Patrick feels no remorse when he revisits the scene of his crime. Pathetically jealous of Paul Owen's business acumen when he was alive, he is now intrigued by how much his dead colleague's apartment is worth. The real estate agent makes it clear that she is suspicious about his identity, but makes no attempt to bring him to justice, contenting herself with the bland instructions: "Don't make any trouble [. . .]. Don't come back" (370). The revelation that others too are corrupted by their own agenda unnerves Patrick: "All frontiers, if there had ever been any, seem suddenly detachable and have been removed, a feeling that others are creating my fate will not leave me for the rest of the day. This...is...not...a...game, I want to shout, but I can't catch my breath. [. . .] I turn my face away. I need a rest. I don't know what to say" (370). Patrick is disconcerted by the capacity of the "other" to be as cold, ruthless, and determined as he. If he cannot identify himself against the likes of the real estate agent, then his boundaries become detached and free-floating, leaving him to imitate the self he wants to perpetuate. He comes away from Owen's flat knowing that he must increasingly imitate himself. Such self-parody is symptomatic of boundary fluctuation and a direct link to the re-appropriation of the Gothic medium, with its reliance on the emotions aroused by the threat of the unknown, the alien, the unfamiliar, causing the reader to look back and attempt to "know" (and hence defuse) these threats through association. Although a Gothic *déjà vu*, this collaboration of the past, present, and future, in a never-ending circle of reciprocal imitation, is also characteristically postmodern.

This circularity continues between subject matter and genre. *American Psycho* may be viewed as a cutting indictment on our materialistic contemporary lifestyle, yet it is also *part* of this consumer frenzy, as a hugely popular book (and now film). The Gothic genre itself is a massive financial institution, with books like Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) still being published in new editions. While the darkness of *Northanger Abbey* is largely "tongue in cheek," it provides, much like *American Psycho*, a sharp social commentary on consumer-driven priorities. The urges to devour, consume, use up, and own are ever willing to assert themselves. In Patrick's world, for example, the weapons have designer labels: "I would lie around, fantasizing about killing someone with an Allsop Racer ski pole" (281). Due to the recognizable nature of the Gothic, it was inevitable that the commercial world would adopt its characteristics for further profit. A sub-culture calling itself the "Goths" began to attract media attention during the 1970s. This group of people were easily identifiable as they dressed in black clothes, wore heavy white face make-up, dyed their hair black, and listened to musical bands with a "dark" persona, such as Bauhaus and The Cure. The Goths still exist and have a yearly festival week in Whitby, North Yorkshire, a favorite location of theirs due to it being immortalized by Bram Stoker in his Gothic tale *Dracula*. The cult also comprises an easy niche market. For example, the famous Whitby "Lucky Ducks," available all year in various multitudinous colors, are only produced in black during Goth week. If a movement is consumer orientated, no matter how bizarre, we seem capable of embracing it. The Goths, like the Gothic genre in general, are easily mimicked due to their strong distinguishing features. Therefore, it doesn't take a great deal for them to slip over into the comical, enforcing the ambiguous nature of the Gothic, simultaneously amusing and frightening, attractive and repellent.

Gothic's treading of the fine line between horror and humor directly connects it to the postmodern terror of *American Psycho*. Although it is hard to resist Patrick Batman's razor-sharp wit, we are still stomach-churningly appalled by his penchant for carving people up. He is articulate and clever, with a talent for summarizing a situation, or a character, in an amusing and apt manner, and in much the same way as the traditional Gothic tales, his frightening side is so excessive it can border on the comical. He seems to "act up" to his psychotic tag at

every opportunity. At one point, having just finished murdering a passerby and eviscerating his dog, he lets out his ecstatic "high" by streaming through the streets in his \$4000 black leather designer trench coat, thinking, "I'm running [...] screaming like a banshee, my coat open, flying out behind me like some kind of cape" (166). He is self-consciously frightening, and feels incredibly powerful, even invincible, due to his ability to distance himself from the action, yet still enjoy partaking of it, as a result of parodying himself. His larger-than-life capacities are emphasized again when he attacks Bethany: "[E]ffortlessly I'm leaping in front of her, blocking her escape, knocking her unconscious with four blows to the head from the nail gun" (245). When he describes how evil and dangerous he is feeling, his blatant honesty is taken by the conditioned reader as melodrama: "I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage. This was the bone season for me and I needed a vacation" (279).

He disrupts our "correct" response even further by suggesting that perhaps a holiday in the up-market resort "The Hamptons" will cure him, when it seems blatantly clear to us that nothing short of intensive psychiatric care can help him. He connects his geographic location, the city, with his state of mind. However, his flippant presumption that his murderous behavior is not a problem, and the priority is to make *himself* feel a little better, is wryly typical of the self-centered attitude of our wealthy society. The grotesque comedy becomes reminiscent of burlesque as he tries to tempt a rat out of his toilet with pizza, brie, and a side salad, and later feeds his girlfriend a used urinal cake covered in cheap chocolate sauce but masquerading as a tempting delicacy in a *Godiva* box:

[S]he looks like a big black ant—a big black ant in an original Christian Lacroix—eating a urinal cake and I almost start laughing, but I also want to keep her at her ease. I don't want her to get second thoughts about finishing the urinal cake. But she can't eat any more and with only two bites taken, pretending to be full, she pushes the tainted plate away, and at that moment I start feeling strange. Even though I marveled at her eating the thing, it also makes me sad and suddenly I'm

reminded that no matter how satisfying it was to see Evelyn eating something that I, and countless others, had pissed on, in the end the displeasure it caused her was at my expense—it's an anticlimax, a futile excuse to put up with her for three hours. (337)

Our rapidly changing world requires that the heroines of postmodern Gothic are exposed to new experiences. Although we flinch, the absurdity of the situation provokes laughter, and Patrick himself comments on the strangely mixed and contradictory feelings the prank causes him. He is similarly caught between horror and hysteria when he tries to force his way into the exclusive and maddeningly elusive restaurant, Dorsia, for dinner with his secretary, Jean. Never able to obtain a reservation, he turns up frustrated, yet determined, and desperately claims to be the first name he can see on the reservations list, Mr. Schrawtz. Inevitably the farce ends in him being asked to leave, but while this is a major humiliation for Patrick, Jean thinks the whole episode hilarious, and claims his sense of humor wonderfully "spontaneous" (261-62).

It is among similar confusion, when Luis Carruthers mistakes Patrick's murderous grip for a sexual advance, that the comedy manifests itself once more, making the scene in a restaurant washroom resemble theatrical farce¹:

"I've seen you looking at me," he says panting. "I've noticed your"—he gulps—"hot body." He tries to kiss me on the lips but I back away, into the stall door, accidentally closing it. I drop my hands from Luis's neck and he takes them and immediately places them back. I drop them once again and stand there contemplating my next move, but I'm immobile. "Don't be...shy," he says. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, count to ten, open them and make a helpless attempt to lift my arms back up to strangle Luis, but they feel weighed down and lifting them becomes an impossible task. (159)

The comedy nears slapstick standards when the maitre d' in Pastels keeps sending over more free drinks, and replacements for those they have rejected. "The maitre d' [...] notices we don't have our complimentary Bellinis, and runs off before any of us can stop him" (43). The humor

is strangely visual, in keeping with the brutally graphic scenes of torture, and eventual death, where the killing is reduced to images.

The extremely explicit nature of Patrick's narrative removes many unknown elements and defuses much of the mystery of violent death. We are capable of becoming accustomed to anything if it can be described, and hence imagined, in recognizable terms. Patrick replaces the Gothic dark passages and castle rooms with female internal organs and genitalia, "the psychological" is meeting "the actual" in a situation rapidly approaching overload. What Smith describes as "[t]he culture of the spectacle, whipping on a culture of 'waning' affect, produces close parallels to the sensationalism of the Gothic" (15).

Due to the increasingly technological nature of our society and the consequences this has on modern media techniques, it is all too easy to achieve a state of saturation with regard to what will offend. The close attention of television news to wars and carnage inevitably hardens the viewers to blood and gore. Therefore, although it seems that we need an increasingly large dose of horror to shock and offend us, a glut of images can create apathy. Early Gothic could be seen as an attempt to resolve an imbalance, to find a state of calm between excess and apathy. As part of this method Gothic tales resist "telling all," and although very revelatory of blood and gore, *American Psycho* does follow this pattern by remaining silent about Patrick's history and his true motivations. The nearest he comes to explaining his actions is claiming that an irresistible urge has come over him, usually triggered by something as banal as an owl in the zoo appearing to look at him, or the sight of a woman breast-feeding her child (297). Although such incidents are obviously open to interpretation, and are inevitably added to what little knowledge we garner of his background, they are still vague enough for us to feel we are dealing with an unknown entity. This "unknowing," when combined with the Technicolor versions of his attacks that the audience are subjected to, creates an atmosphere of discomfort that is not easy to dispel. The reasoning behind the action is similarly hidden in Ellis's 1998 novel, *Glamorama*, where the most spectacular pain is displayed, but even the correct order of the book's chapters remains a mystery. When such disturbing physical displays are laid before us, without the benefit of a cognitive explanation, we become frightened and begin to ask questions. This issue here is how long we are willing to "go with the flow" of the

violence before we question it. Greatly increased technological ability also presents us with the opportunity to reproduce, alter, or even conceal altogether representations that should immediately provoke our response. Yet how will we be sure when the emergency is real and immediate action is needed, if our idea of entertainment encourages us to doubt and manipulate what we see? Sophisticated technology is sometimes used simply to fulfill urges, enabling humans to act out their inner fantasies, no matter how dark. Patrick's grim fascination with the human body and its internal organs leads him to fantasize about using medical technology to fulfill his urges. He longs to "wear a big yellow smiley-face mask and then put on the cd version of Bobby McFerrin's 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' and then take a girl and a dog—a collie, a chow, a sharpei, it doesn't really matter—and then hook up this transfusion pump, this IV set, and switch their blood, you know, pump the dog's blood into the hardbody and vice versa" (116).

The effect that modern technological capabilities have on our fantasies illustrates that, rather than abating as time passes, the Gothic intensifies. Computer-aided graphics, as chillingly shown in *Glamorama*, are now used to invent and re-invent images: "He enhances colours, adjusts tones, sharpens or softens images. Lips are digitally thickened, freckles removed, an ax is placed in someone's outstretched hand, a BMW becomes a Jaguar which becomes a Mercedes which becomes a broom [. . .] he's adding graininess, he's erasing people, he's inventing a new world, seamlessly" (357). The new world being "invented" is capable of altering the past and the future, providing evidence for the present of events that haven't actually taken place. Patrick watches the same videos dozens of times, allowing the past to revisit the present, and tapes and collects scores of television programs (he is particularly addicted to *The Patty Winters Show*, which seems a combination of fiction and truth, and the Brian De Palma film *Body Double*²), and masturbates to Calvin Klein advertisements. Such behavior helps him effectively blur the boundaries between fiction, fantasy, and reality. Patrick uses the latest video camera to record himself raping and torturing his victims. "With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5mm film, has a 15mm f/3.5 lens, an exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter and sits on a tripod" (304). Although he claims to film the girls in order to understand them better, he is able to participate even

more fully as the "Gothic double" by watching himself perform, over and over again, almost as if through a mirror.

Patrick's reliance on mirrors extends to his insistence that his mother's hospital room must be fitted with one. He continues to admire and identify himself while visiting her: "I've spent the last hour studying my hair in the mirror I've insisted the hospital keep in my mother's room" (365). His appearance is far more important to him than his mother's quality of life. She is a permanent resident in a psychiatric hospital for reasons that are left unexplained. Heavily sedated, she wears sunglasses at all times, expensive sunglasses bought for her by Patrick in his firm belief that money can resolve anything. The secrecy surrounding his family is classically Gothic as are his mother's mysterious infirmities. Her permanently shaded eyes symbolically represent her failure to see what her son is doing (by choice or disability). Interestingly enough, the hospital room also provides us with our only information regarding Patrick's father, and he too is said to have malfunctioning eyes: "[H]e's wearing a six-button double-breasted black sport coat, a white spread-collar cotton shirt, a tie, pocket square, shoes all by Brooks Brothers. He's standing next to one of the topiary animals a long time ago on his father's estate in Connecticut and there's something the matter with his eyes" (366).

Patrick only seems capable of identifying people in terms of their surface appearance and their preferred designer labels. The description of his father, when combined with the fact that it is a photographic image in close proximity to a mirror and another person with defective eyes, suggests a lack of any authentic view.

Patrick is obsessed by his personal appearance. He dresses impeccably in extortionately priced designer clothing and routinely exercises; he performs cosmetic rituals on his face and body in his exquisitely furnished luxury apartment. As first person narrator Patrick tells the reader of the minutiae of his home, clothes, diet, shopping, and, indeed, of his killings:

I change into Ralph Lauren monogrammed boxer shorts and a Fair Isle sweater and slide into polka-dot Enrico Hidolin slippers I tie a plastic ice-pack around my face and commence with the morning's stretching exercises [...] Then I inspect my

hands and use a nail-brush. I take the ice-pack off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then a herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails. Then I use the Probright tooth polisher, and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this in addition to my toothbrush). (26)

This description continues, for a further three pages, revealing that the over-ornamentation so characteristic of earlier Gothic writing is being revisited by Patrick's obsessive attention to detail. Several points are raised by this: first, it is only Patrick's financial security that allows him the time and equipment to embark on such an elaborate, and time-consuming, "beauty" routine, and second, it seems an incredibly "feminine" pastime, especially as we learn of the multiple creams and potions he uses. Even his shampoo is chosen for its purported ability to make him look younger.³ His fear of aging is all encompassing to the point of delirium, where he simply uses every new product that is launched, and styles his hair three different ways before simply slicking it straight back. He is confused, rather than liberated, by modern technology. Commodity culture's pressure to stay in shape physically has become entwined in his feelings of tension regarding his sexuality and urge to kill. Nothing ever seems extreme enough, his excesses simply grow: "I worked out heavily at the gym after leaving the office today but the tension has returned, so I do ninety abdominal crunches, a hundred and fifty push-ups, and then I run in place for twenty minutes whilst listening to the new Huey Lewis and the News CD. I take a hot shower and afterwards use a new facial scrub" (76).

Each time Patrick describes his exercising, the number of repetitions increases. The growing repetitions, just like his obsessive replaying of the same record on his jukebox and the same videotape, can be viewed as an attempt to retain control. Routines and rituals, like many aspects of the formulaic Gothic genre, are indicative of a human urge to keep within certain bounds. Patrick wants it all ways, determined to behave exactly as he pleases by ignoring accepted societal constructs or any suggestion of justification, yet he is equally determined that those following these constructs should immediately be able to discern his superiority. As his feelings of dissatisfaction become more and more difficult to "subdue," as he puts it, so his visits to the gym become more intense:

My arm muscles burn, my stomach is as taut as possible, my chest steel, pectorals granite hard, my eyes white as ice. In my locker in the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I've attacked in the past week. Two are washed off, one isn't. There's a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermes tied around my favorite. (370)

The Gothic suggestion to fear what is hidden behind locked doors is more apparent than ever in this scene, and the ever-present proximity of such threats is emphasized by the ignorance of those holding adjoining lockers, the ease with which he decapitates Evelyn's neighbor, and the casual way he can come upon Tom Cruise in an elevator. The message seems to be—nobody is safe.

Patrick's obsession with his appearance extends to the aesthetics of his immediate surroundings. Rather than the traditional Gothic settings of ruined castles and Abbeys, modern-day villain Patrick "works" in the city, in a magnificent office crammed with every conceivable convenience and entertainment gadget. His office environment far outstrips the majority of the population's living quarters. When not dabbling in the world of high finance he haunts fashionable restaurants, where he orders (but doesn't necessarily eat) over-garnished, over-priced food. His personal apartment sets the standard that others must follow:

Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, [. . .] framed in black aluminium steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set [...]. A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white venetian blinds cover all eight floor to ceiling windows. A glass topped coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke. Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. (24-25).

The understated luxury (a sort of minimalist decadence, aptly reflecting the characteristic ambivalence of the Gothic) doesn't stop there but mounts to an almost nauseating level. Patrick's possessions are chosen for their rarity, their price tag, and their "hip"-ness. He never claims to like any of the valuable items he surrounds himself with; in fact, they put an unbearable pressure on him. This is due to the circularity of the need these items create—the more he acquires, the more he depends upon, material goods—and the more difficult it becomes to break away from the allure of surface veneer. Traditionally Gothic styles move away from classical lines, favoring embellishment to the point of distortion. Bearing this in mind, a surface examination of Patrick's deceptively simple and elegant apartment would distance it from the genre. However, the rampant excess of his psychosis must erupt somewhere, and before it manifests itself, with such devastating effects, on the flesh of others, it erupts in his painful one-upmanship. He insists on establishing himself as being not only the owner of tasteful and expensive items, but also the ultimate purchaser of state-of-the-art designer goods and collectors items, be they hi-fi's, rugs, or first editions. He valorizes scarcity and originality, and has little time or patience for anything ordinary or easily obtainable.

In stark contrast to the interior of Patrick's exclusive apartment, New York is represented as a desolate and dirty urban backdrop, inhabited by penniless beggars, showing the other side of the obscene wealth of the yuppie traders. The streets seem alienating and full of menace, yet ironically it is Patrick who is a threat, not the street dwellers. He delights in taunting the homeless and never gives them any money. His wealthy companions share his values and priorities, commenting facetiously that one beggar badly needs a facial. While they think nothing of spending \$500 on a meal, they would never give a beggar a single dollar. In a world of Gothic doubles the poor and dirty must be kept in their place. If they were helped back into mainstream society then not only would ownership of property come under scrutiny, but Patrick would be denied the extremes that he is so keen to identify himself against. He wants to feel they are securely rooted on the far side of a gaping abyss and has no intention of doing anything that may draw him any closer to the dividing boundary. He has no humanitarian feelings, but instead judges others by his warped frame of reference, sure that if the beggars thrive—then he will not.

Patrick's fear of otherness is a psychological fear. He is not afraid of the physicality of the streets; indeed, he takes to them regularly when he wants to kill or maim somebody, and harmless beggars, street performers, and food deliverers number among his victims. Along with his luxury home he also has a utility apartment in Hell's Kitchen, a base he uses to get rid of male corpses in a bath of lime. This is a desperate bid to keep the male and female bodies separate, again underlining his determination to maintain boundaries. Along with his fear of poverty and dirt, he is horrified by the threat of feminization. The men he kills are almost incidental. Paul Owen's business acumen irritates him, but he merely eliminates this irritation; he doesn't torture or eviscerate Owen. However, the multiple female victims die horrendously, amid a nightmare of blood and body parts, in an impossible attempt to satisfy his hunger for knowledge about their internal organs and striving for originality in his mutilation of their bodies. He admits that he is running out of ideas for mutilations; nothing is excessive enough, and as soon as it's done, it's a disappointment: "I can already tell that it's going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror" (329). Whatever diversity the carnage takes, it almost always begins with sex:

[A]ll I can think about is blood and what their blood will look like and though Torri knows what to do [...] it doesn't subdue me [...] She starts squealing, trying to pull away, and finally she screams as my teeth rip into her flesh. Torri thinks Tiffany is coming and grinds her own cunt harder onto Tiffany's mouth, smothering her screams, but when I look up at Torri, blood covering my face, meat and pubic hair hanging from my mouth, blood pumping from Tiffany's torn cunt onto the comforter, I can feel her sudden rush of horror. I use mace to blind both of them momentarily and then knock them unconscious with the butt of the nail gun (303-04).

Yet while Patrick complains about running out of ideas for how to kill his victims, he paradoxically enjoys the security and predictability of watching the killings on video over and over, using them as part of his effort to establish a definitive version, origins on which he can rely, like his extensive repetitions in the gym. However, as his enormous personal spending on designer originals suggests, the over-abundance of his frenzied

imagination encourages him to believe in his potential to keep inventing and pushing back boundaries, despite his fear of what he might find. While he vainly hopes that expensive "originals" will help to establish his pedigree, he increasingly faces the fact that the actuality of life is much more diverse and fragmentary than "origins" would allow.

This realization of the fractured and delicate nature of his own identity makes Patrick feel intensely threatened by anybody displaying any difference: beggars, the homeless, women, and those with less, be it less money, worse taste, or fewer connections. Yet we see him plunging, both physically and metaphorically, into dirt, dark, and disorder. He faces the ultimate threats to his boundaries by becoming covered in other people's blood, inserting his penis into every conceivable orifice (of those alive and dead), and actually eating the flesh of other human beings, both raw and cooked. He challenges the unknown in an attempt to render it harmless. If blood is the supreme contaminator, then the urge is to keep it locked in veins—contained. It seems contradictory that everybody has blood, until we symbolically compare it to Patrick's violent urges and the unpleasant truth that perhaps everybody is equally capable of them, but as with their blood, containment is necessary.

Although Patrick is afraid of difference, his own doubling is apparent. Classic Gothic doubles, such as Jekyll and Hyde, the side of the vampire that comes out at night, the monster that the brilliant, but "odd," scientist creates, continue in the postmodern Gothic, showing Patrick to be, at the same time, both wealthy executive *and* brutal killer, seemingly "charming" date *and* sexual partner from Hell, one of the boys *and* rampant homophobic. But perhaps most interestingly, he is a frequently misrecognized person. Repeatedly throughout the narrative he is called by incorrect names, to which he usually calmly responds as if he were that person. This results in an unnerving, multifaceted identity. He turns the misrecognitions to his advantage for the purpose of gaining alibis, finding out information, and confusing investigators. The failure of others to recognize him for what he is, despite his frequent confessions, assists him in creating his own version of reality, an apocalyptic reality that validates *his* priorities and perspective, one that questions the generally accepted version of "normal":

I'm coming back from Central Park where, near the children's zoo, close to the spot I murdered the McCaffrey boy, I fed

portions of Ursula's brain to passing dogs. Walking down Fifth Avenue around four o'clock in the afternoon, everyone on the street looks sad, the air is full of decay, bodies lie on the cold pavement, miles of it, some are moving, most are not. History is sinking and only a few seem dimly aware that things are getting bad. (384)

Patrick's statement that he has his own reality, along with the narrative's suggestion that humans have many sides, points towards a definition of the Gothic genre as a hybrid, a self-conscious and parodic mixing of multiple genres and strands. Patrick's favorite television program, *The Patty Winter's Show*, seems to be the perfect example of this, offering a mixture of genres guaranteed to indulge our worst instincts by creating the opportunity to be consecutively voyeuristic and judgmental. At its best the viewing would be termed human interest/chat show and at its worst, freak show.

American Psycho similarly leaks into differing categories, demonstrating characteristics of comedy, autobiography, spoof horror, bleak social commentary, conventional horror, and pornography. When Patrick carelessly shoots a street musician, the action accelerates into a "cops and robbers" type chase, complete with tires screeching, bullets ricocheting, and innocent people dying. Patrick's self-parody is complete as he finally begins to discuss his brutal actions in the third person, referring to himself as "Patrick," "Bateman," and "he," when throughout the previous narrative he has been "I." The potential for characters within modern Gothic narratives to parody not only the genre, but themselves suggests that the title is no longer a convenient genre "label," evoking affected eighteenth-century novels, but a new and modern representation, or rather a fissure *between* representations, through which we can look back, to multiple scenes. Patrick encourages this by constantly filming everything, including himself.

Quentin Tarantino's film *From Dusk Till Dawn* shows a similar irreverent mixing of seemingly established genres, suggesting that their "established" status is under threat. This text alludes to the western, the thriller, the black comedy, romance, the horror/vampire movie, the road movie, the buddy movie, and other film genres. Like *American Psycho*, Tarantino's film attempts to portray the violent excesses of criminality and its ruthless and perverted desires. Actor George Clooney, despite

his matinee idol looks and his fame as a star in a hugely popular television show, makes a parody of his role as "hero" by robbing banks and killing people. The quality of camera shots of his breathtakingly handsome face are at times quite stunning, again undercutting our ability, or inclination, to view him critically. The glorious use of color and clarity remind us of Patrick's insistence on graphic, visual description. Within the narrative the brother of Clooney's character refuses to die, and in keeping with the postmodern Gothic demonstrates a "coming back," a "re-visiting." Like *American Psycho*, *From Dusk Till Dawn* exposes contemporary culture as a mix of violence and "apparent" reality. Patrick's vision of this society, which he frequently identifies as "my reality," encompasses a desolate world with a bleak future increasingly mediated by technologically altered images:

[B]lood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their assholes, embryos frozen or scrambled (which is it?), nuclear warheads, billions of dollars, the total destruction of the world, someone gets beaten up, someone else dies, sometimes bloodlessly, more often mostly by rifle shot, assassinations, comas, played out as a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera. It's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. (343).

Patrick refers to isolation wards (a setting in which we have met his deeply disturbed mother) in relation to death, injuries, and sickness. Hospitals, illness, and threatening figures, such as scientists, psychopaths, and aliens, are prevalent in Gothic fiction. Earlier in the novel one of Patrick's colleagues sets the scene for the narrative's focus on the fear of diseases, their contagion real or perceived: "there's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can also catch *anything*, whether it's a virus per se or not—Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from *pussy*" (5).

The significance of sex, with its penetrative qualities, and females, with their threatening difference, is made clear; breaching of boundaries and contact with darkness can only result in disaster, potentially death.

Yet, for Patrick at least, the thrill of pushing out these boundaries justifies the risk. He feels hugely powerful, beyond infinity and comprehension, to a sublime level, and like the sublime his experiences are linked to excessive emotion. The more Patrick gives "free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desires beyond the prescriptions of law or familial duty" (Botting 4), the more often he reports to the reader of his irrationally sad or hyperactive moments. He weeps for no reason and complains of panic attacks and migraines, becoming more and more reliant on large quantities of drugs and alcohol: "Some kind of existential chasm opens up before me while I'm browsing in Bloomingdale's and causes me to first locate a phone and check my messages, then, near to tears, after taking three Halcion (since my body has mutated and adapted to the drug it no longer causes sleep—it just seems to ward off total madness)" (179). What Patrick's idea of "total madness" would be is unclear. His insinuation that there is a "total madness" posits a set of criteria that can be followed to reach an original blueprint for a "grand narrative" of sanity.⁴ He knows what the vast majority of people think "madness" is, and that he cannot forever sustain the rigid boundaries this requires if he is to retain his public "front":

My appearances at the office the last month or so have been sporadic to say the least. All I seem to want to do now is work out, lifting weights, mostly and secure reservations at new restaurants, I've already been to, then cancel them. My apartment reeks of rotten fruit, though actually the smell is caused by what I scooped out of Christie's head and poured into a Marco glass bowl that sits on the counter near the entranceway. The Head itself lies covered with brain pulp, hollow and eyeless, in the corner of the living room beneath the piano and I plan to use it as a jack-o'-lantern on Halloween. (300-01)

Christie, the girl whose brains he is keeping in a designer bowl, was a young, blonde prostitute he had picked up several times from the meat-packing district. From the beginning she has doubts about Patrick, only getting in his limousine for large amounts of money. When he first takes her home he bathes her in expensive products, dresses her in designer clothes, and feeds her exclusive chocolates and wine in a travesty of the

Pygmalion fantasy (one might point to *Pretty Woman* as a recent example of such fantasy) that a rich, handsome, and kind man will come along and save a young, pretty prostitute from the streets. Patrick has spent months cruising this sleazy area in rented limousines, looking for a young, blonde, trashy girl, who must be slim with white skin: "Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned warehouse, is the word MEAT and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me and above the building like a backdrop is a moonless sky" (168). The word "backdrop" gives the scene a theatrical feel, which adds to this feeling of Patrick making his own re-make of a film. It seems false and created, perpetuating the inference that he can do whatever he wants to, it's only acting. This raises questions about the difference between "acting" badly and actually "being" bad, and similarly, the difference between murdering someone and just watching or reading about it. It would seem that one perpetuates the other. Patrick endlessly reads books about famous serial killers, enjoying, hence validating what they have done. He quotes them to his friends to demonstrate his admiration for their thoughts and actions: "When I see a pretty girl walk down the street I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her and be real nice and sweet and treat her right [while the other part wonders] what her head would look like on a stick" (92).

It would seem all humans are torn between what they *ought* to do, and what they *want* to do.

Conclusion

The Gothic novel celebrates unacceptable behavior, the violent, the self-promoting, and those who indulge their cravings. In *American Psycho* Patrick demonstrates all of these traits in a jarring kaleidoscopic montage. The narrative slips from murder and mutilation to the most mundane discussion of middle-of-the-road pop music with little transition. Yet, good depends upon evil, light upon dark, reason upon irrationality, in order that we may define limits. Both Gothic and postmodern narratives demonstrate the impossibility of being one or the other and try to present characters who ambivalently demonstrate both binary oppositions. The difference with postmodern narratives is their propensity to display the blood and havoc previously only hinted at.

As Patrick reads the story of Ted Bundy, so we read the story of Patrick Bateman, both dark and Gothic tales of horrendous slaughter, captured in that most postmodern of all vehicles—the book. As an author writes he predicts his audience and has therefore experienced that particular future, in anticipation. Teleology is challenged in that the future is pulled into the past, as a perceived audience affects something that is in the making. Gothic and postmodern narratives alike demonstrate that a single genre alone is as restrictive as the grand narratives of the Enlightenment. Life cannot be easily contained, nor explained, and attempting as much will result in a "bursting out." Patrick gives us a daunting example of this as he bursts out of the restrictions of his class, his sexuality, and his society's moral codes.

Notes

1. Patrick's reaction to Louis's advances is just one example of his all-encompassing horror of homosexuality. Such rampant homophobia seems to suggest some discrepancy around his own sexual orientation. Fear of sexuality in general, and fear of childbirth (he has been the cause of five abortions), are frequently hidden agendas within Gothic texts.
2. As the film centers on mistaken identity, voyeurism, uninhibited sex, and brutal murder, it seems particularly appropriate viewing for Patrick. He has rented the video 37 times.
3. Patrick's handsome appearance, selfish behavior and mirror obsession are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), as are Dorian's vampire-like overtones redolent of Patrick's blood-letting. Instead of a portrait of himself Patrick has numerous video tapes.
4. I am using the term "grand narrative" in keeping with Jean-Francois Lyotard's suggestion that the postmodern condition demonstrates the unfeasibility of large stories, dogmas, or versions that attempt to apply to all cases. Lyotard suggests that such narratives have become "scarcely credible" (40), summarizing them as "the grand narrative of legitimation which characterise modernity in the West" (44).

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