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## The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis

It is the historical moment which is in the work of art constitutive: the most authentic works are those that give themselves over to their historical raw material without reservation and without pretense to floating above it somewhere. Works of art are in this sense unconsciously the historiography of their own epoch; history is not the least form of knowledge they mediate. That is precisely why they are incommensurable with historicism, which seeks to reduce them to a history external to them, rather than to pursue their genuine historical content.

—Theodor W. Adorno

It would be quite foolish to assume that one can lightheartedly move away from the constraint of referential meaning.

—Paul de Man

WHEN THE GEOGRAPHER NEIL SMITH TELLS THE story of Tompkins Square Park—a ten-acre patch of public park on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—he speaks mostly of police riots (*New Urban* 1–21). During 1988 and 1989, the NYPD repeatedly “evicted” homeless residents from the park, ostensibly to enforce city curfews. Clad in riot gear and mounted on horseback, in some stretches the police evicted hundreds of people per night, and by the summer of 1989 began to destroy the tents, shanties, and belongings of the residents of the park—most of whom were African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Caribbeans. Smith even recounts a few instances when helicopters were mobilized in the NYPD’s nightly efforts. On December 14, 1989, while Bret Easton Ellis was finishing *American Psycho*, the entire park population was forcibly evicted, their belongings hauled away by city sanitation trucks. That night also happened to be the coldest one of the winter, to which then parks commissioner

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Henry J. Stern cynically quipped, "It would be irresponsible to allow the homeless to sleep outdoors" (qtd. in Smith, *New Urban* 5).

Smith clearly understands these measures as a concerted attempt to domesticate the park and facilitate the already rampant gentrification on the Lower East Side. But Smith also insists that a different history be told, of the rich and militant anti-gentrification struggles that organized around Tompkins Square Park during late 1988 through June 1991. In fact, Smith's thesis—that gentrification is class war—comes from the banners that adorned the shanties and were held on the barricades erected as defense against the police. Finally on June 3, 1991, just a few weeks after the publication of *American Psycho*, around three hundred park dwellers were evicted at the behest of the Dinkins mayoral administration. Alleging that the park had been "stolen" by the homeless from the "community," the progressive Mayor Dinkins declared, "The park is a park. It is not a place to live" (ibid.). Subsequently \$2,300,000 were funneled into reconstructing a park that now consists of playgrounds and dog runs, though during re-construction was protected by an eight-foot high chain-link fence and plainclothes police officers guarding each of the entrances. Since no alternative housing was provided for the evicted residents of the park, shanties started popping up on lots to the east, though their signs and banners had changed somewhat: now they read "Dinkinsville."

In this essay I will demonstrate how the power of these struggles expresses itself in the work of Bret Easton Ellis, specifically in his 1998 novel *Glamorama*.<sup>1</sup> Put somewhat differently, I will argue Ellis's novels exemplify the counter-revolutionary transformations that characterize the gentrification and "urban renewal" of the Lower East Side of Manhattan during the 1980s and through the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Ellis's novels are certainly not *about* gentrification, homelessness or the war on the poor, and I do not mean to argue for the recovery of a lost or hidden social-allegorical dimension to Ellis's work. Rather, in order to register these seemingly absent yet powerful forces, we must pay some serious attention to the non- or pre-allegorical "literal meaning" of Ellis's texts. By "literal" I refer not to a meaning that has been obscured, but rather, as Walter Benn Michaels has written, "a meaning that has been, one might say, *read through*, as if it were transparent" (*Gold Standard* 176). In other words, that which is for so many assumed to be radically absent from the Ellisian world—namely, poverty—may not be so absent after

all, provided we are willing and able to *read* it there. Bret Easton Ellis is not a writer of the glittering fantasies of consumer society, nor is he a writer of excruciating violence or graphic sex: rather, he is first and foremost a writer of capitalism, which is to say, he is first and foremost a writer of poverty.

#### THE SENTENCES OF CAPITALISM

Ellis has long been a master practitioner of the run-on sentence. Rather than reproducing its more familiar usages—I am thinking of Woolf and Faulkner, or even Kerouac, for whom such sentences align with the modernist impulse to represent interiority and consciousness—Ellis's run-ons provide a form most adequate to a world that has been utterly and completely fragmented into recognizable and knowable signs. This Ellisian world is an historical one, of course, and though we might expect it to be more “realistically” captured by its dialectical opposite, the sentence fragment, for Ellis the run-on performs the task of verisimilitude.

Existing in a prototypical form in *American Psycho*, in *Glamorama* the run-on has been dizzyingly perfected:

At Natacha MTV's filming a party upstairs where the girls are all wasted and beautiful and the guys are upstairs looking their hunkiest and everyone's wearing sunglasses and waiting for assistants to light their cigarettes and there's another party downstairs where Lucien Pallat-Finet is hanging out with hat designer Christian Liagr  and Andre Walker shows up on the arm of Claudia Schiffer who's wearing a feathered jumpsuit and has a red pageboy and Galliano's wearing a little black trilby hat and Christian Louboutin plays “Je T'Aime” with Stephanie Marais by his side singing the Jane Birkin part and we're receiving fans at the table we're slouched at, people flocking around us, whispering things, the prerequisite number of oohs and aahs, caviar sitting untouched on silver plates in front of us and it's all very youthquakey and the mood is light until Ralph and Ricky Lauren show up and tonight's theme is the unbearable lightness of being and everything is ubiquitous, the smell of shit rising up faintly and floating all over the room. (359–60)

Perhaps Ellis's "and" demands something on the order of a grammatical neologism that would denote not simply conjunction and coordination but an unencumbered flexibility. In other words, Ellis writes a world in which it is possible to *literally* "slide down the surface of things"—but not, because Ellis is simply another "postmodern" writer preoccupied by surface. Though a general consensus regarding Ellis's work in specific and "blank fiction" in general, such a characterization hardly accounts for the form of Ellis sentences, which stretch and flex in order capture the glittering minutia of our own fallen social reality.

Implied by such slick accumulation is that other main component of the Ellisian sentence, the proper name, in our society the privileged language of the commodity: Ellis's sentences do not escape its sovereign rule. Rather, it is in them that we witness the proper name's all-out apotheosis, now thoroughly elevated to the level of form while still managing to impart the myth of a discreet content. The critics have not been slow to notice this. As James Annesley has argued, "[Ellis's work] does not just depict its own period, it speaks the commodified language of its own period" (7, emphasis added). Of course, Annesley is right; Ellis's characters drink Grey Goose, not vodka, and drive BMWs, not cars. However, one can't help but register the tension between the particular, proper name (i.e. *this particular bar*, Natacha, or *this particular celebrity*, Claudia Schiffer, etc.) with what can only be called the interference of so many general nouns and adjectives (party, girls, guys, upstairs, wasted, beautiful, etc.). It is these undeniably general terms, then, that also undercut—in a more dialectical fashion, "cancel"—any particularity of the proper name, and the specificity of Ellis's descriptions themselves, which, having disappeared like a mirage, now returns in a stunted flash of contradiction: "everything is ubiquitous." In Ellis's novels we are subject to an endless array of such passages, and, more importantly, these sentences dramatize at a syntactical level the dissipation of specificity and particularity into interchangeability and equivalence—a drama that otherwise goes by the name of capitalism. For it is not only that Ellis writes *about* capitalism, but that Ellis literally writes a world made of money, for his grammar and syntax are formed in its image; Ellis is truly a writer of capitalism because it is capitalism that his sentences exemplify.

This amalgam of capital and text registers also at the level of what it means to *read* Ellis. On the one hand, Ellis's sentences strain to impose a perverted version of what Frederic Jameson (following Claude Simon) has called "the discipline of the word by word" (146) in which the reader is forced to hang on the most minute and trivial distinctions—the difference between, say, Natacha and the Bowery Bar, dinner at Doppelganger instead of drinks at MasaMasa, between Leonardo DiCaprio and Emile Hirsh.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, these very words, as if by their own magical powers, release the reader from the exhausting task of having to read them in the first place. For reading Ellis also tends toward something like recognition; after all, as the language of commodity culture, it is language that has been always-already read. In this way the implications of Ellis's language have not been properly appreciated. The point here is not that the vernaculars of capitalism slither into Ellis's sentences like a "new snake in the cultural garden" (Annesley 7); rather, they are always-already there in the first place, accumulated from the residues of daily life in the society of the spectacle.<sup>4</sup>

For Jameson, the difficulties inherent in reading the French new novel offer us a glimpse of an unalienated labor that otherwise remains unimaginable; no longer possible as a promise of art, Jameson imagines the shadow of such a labor to be found in the difficult task of reading the *nouveau roman* itself (146). Reading Ellis, however, does not offer even a whiff of such utopian refuge. Instead of an escape from the experience of consumer society, reading Ellis tends to be an intensification of it, and rather than unalienated labor we have life at its most alienated, an experience of reading not simply degraded but one that has sunk to the level of what might be called occupation, closer to the mind-numbing particularity of those glossy entertainment weeklies whose pages one scans in the boredom of the airport than to the straining commitment to the "word by word" demanded by Simon or Robbe-Grillet. If when reading Ellis we, too, "slide down the surface of things," perhaps it is because reading has been replaced by a skimming operation in which the raw material of Ellis's text is perceived without the burden of any significance whatsoever—all because, of course, there are such seemingly unbounded waves of signification in the first place. In fact, the concept of surface may be more a problem of reading than of textuality.

Who, then, is Ellis's ideal reader? What kind of subjectivity could not simply absorb but *appreciate* such a commodity historicism for which no celebrity goes unnoticed and no brand name is lost to history? Perhaps we need to look no further than Victor Ward, an "actor-slash-model," budding entrepreneur, part-time lead singer, and pill-head, and sometime narrator of *Glamorama*. Victor's ability to soak up the minutia of the visible present is truly virtuosic. In fact, Victor is at his best—his fetish for the semiotic at its most frenzied, and his narrative unfolding in spiraling and expansive run-ons—when Ellis's readers are at their worst: rather than slowing down for the "word by word," the reader glides over the sing-song celebrity lists, repetitive party descriptions, and clichéd conversations. In this way, Victor provokes a mode of reading that denies the quality of literary language; readers are invited to mistake his representations of the world for unmediated perception.

But in a guerilla insurrection upon the sense of the sentence, from seemingly out of nowhere, a bathetic literariness unmistakably returns: "*the smell of shit* rising up and faintly floating over the room." The presence of this olfactory recrudescence hijacks Ellis's sentence, forcing it not only to an abrupt completion, but radically estranging its content, a seemingly random aleatory funk that signals the breakdown of Victor's semiotic panorama. Curiously, Ellis's work rarely references the smell of *anything*—when the olfactory is able to break through this almost exclusively visual universe, it does so only in its most socially abjectified manifestations, most notably the putrid stench of dead or dying bodies. But it is within this interference—between the visual and the olfactory, the foul and the fragrant, but also the semiotic and the material—that something like "literariness" is reinvigorated, and at least for the moment the reader must reckon with the difficult and at times arduous questions of an irreducibly literary problematic. As it turns out, the smell of shit becomes an insistent trope in *Glamorama*; at least eleven different times, Victor cannot help but notice the unmistakable smell of shit. Atmospheric and ubiquitous, yet ambiguous and thoroughly unattributed, everything in *Glamorama* smells like shit.

#### THE POVERTY OF BRET EASTON ELLIS

Ellis provides a descriptive tableau that rivals the Sadean dinner tables of Pasolini's infamous *Salò*. The following passage shows Ellis at the height of his powers:

Tonight everyone is packed into the first-floor Windsor Suite at the Ritz. Among the minglers: Kristen McMenamy, Sting and Trudie Styler, Kate Moss, Jennifer Saunders, Bryan Ferry, Tina Turner, Donatella Versace, Jon Bon Jovi, Susie Bick, Nadja Auerman in a bubble-laced cocktail dress, Marie-Sophie Wilson in Inca-pink, a handful of newly rich Russians, a famous producer just out of prison or rehab, does it matter? I have no idea what this party is about though it could be for the new fragrance Pandemonium. I feel pinned together, on the very verge of collapse, my mouth dry from too much Xanax . . . I'm distracted by the fly that keeps hovering over a giant silver bowl piled high with Beluga, by the faint but noticeable smell of shit filling the room—"Do you smell that?" I keep asking people; "Oh yes," they keep replying knowingly [. . .]. (375–76)

If for Alain Corbin "foul smelling miasma provokes panic" (21), for Ellis it merely produces a pricey by-product: Pandemonium. Victor's anxiety becomes an advertisement, and his attempts to come to terms with the smell of shit vanish into the noxious, perfume-laden air of commodity chatter. His anxiety is literally absorbed—or, in a more specifically Marxian idiom, subsumed—into the scripted exchanges of commercial banter with his "knowingly" flirtatious interlocutors.

A somewhat more formal Ellisian literary maneuver is the fly, buzzing and hovering over a "giant" pile of small, glossy pellets *as if* it were a dung heap. The perverse lesson of this fly seems to be at one with what Roman Jakobson identified as the function of literature: that is, to point out that the sign is not identical with its referent. Put somewhat differently, this fly becomes what Gérard Genette calls a "diegetic metaphor" (qtd. in de Man 60), which, buzzing between the "literal" and the "allegorical" without ever landing firmly on one or the other, holds the levels in suspension by means of its flight between the two.<sup>5</sup> With the ease of a comma and the notable absence of any conjunction, the smell of shit in this passage arrives as a translation, an additive rewriting of Victor's anxious visual hologram registering the dread that Xanax might temporarily cover over but can never quite be rid of, a nagging insistence that not only are "things not what they seem," but that something is rotten to the core.



These passages, then, constitute what Paul de Man would call an “allegory of reading,” with the caveat that the smell of shit turns out to be precisely the one thing that Victor *cannot* read. For while Victor notices again and again this strange and overpowering smell, it remains fundamentally meaningless. This is not to say that it does not affect him; on the contrary, the stench clearly amplifies Victor’s anxiety. However, even when Victor is physically overpowered—at one point he speaks of his “eyes watering, a black stench filling his nose” (366)—the smell of shit never rises to the status of an *object*. For Victor it remains without significance, its meaning continually closed off to him.

Put into a different intellectual idiom, the smell of shit is that which Victor *perceives* but with which he cannot ever *come to terms*. As if we were interpreting a dream, we should take care not to confuse the “latent-content” of this trope for its “secret.” For as Freud constantly reminds us, and as Slavoj Žižek has most concisely articulated, the “latent” content of the dream is always banal and easily expressible in everyday language—for our example, the latent content would be something like, “Victor is scared,” “things are not what they seem,” etc. The project for interpretation, on the other hand, is to understand the processes of condensation, displacement, and figuration, which is to say, to understand the mechanisms not of content but of language, of the work of signification itself (Žižek 18–19). In other words, how is it that the smell of shit manages to become disembodied, atmospheric, aleatory? Moreover, what is it about the particular signifiers “the smell of shit” qua signifiers? For if the smell of shit ends up to be something like the return of the real, this return is not the real itself, but rather the trace of a very specific figuring of reality. The smell of shit recurs in *Glamorama*, and it is a particularly potent trope in Ellis’s 1991 novel *American Psycho*—though in a radically different context, and to radically different ends. Inasmuch as *Glamorama* and *American Psycho* are very different novels written and set in different historical milieux, we may be able to learn something about both if we consider the way in which a common trope manifests itself in each.

Like a sadistic play on the stroll of the *flâneur*, *American Psycho*’s protagonist and serial killer Patrick Bateman decides to take an evening walk. “Feeling better with an even five hundred in my wallet” after hitting a nearby ATM,

I find myself walking through the antique district below Fourteenth Street. My watch has stopped so I'm not sure what time it is, but probably ten-thirty or so. Black guys pass by offering crack or hustling tickets to a party at the Palladium. I walk by a newsstand, a dry cleaners, a church, a diner. The streets are empty; the only noise breaking up the silence is the occasional taxi heading toward Union Square. A couple of skinny faggots walk by while I'm at a phone booth checking my messages, staring at my reflection in an antique store's window. One of them whistles at me, the other one laughs: a high, fey, horrible sound. A torn playbill from *Les Misérables* tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sidewalk. A streetlamp burns out. Someone in a Jean-Paul Gaultier topcoat takes a piss in an alleyway. Steam rises from the street, billowing up in tendrils, evaporating. Bags of frozen garbage line the curbs. The moon, pale and low, hangs just above the tip of the Chrysler Building. Somewhere over in the West Village the siren from an ambulance screams, the wind picks it up, it echoes then fades. (128)

Perhaps Ellis has been given too little credit as a naturalist.<sup>6</sup> Surrounded by the signs of urban decay, poverty, and squalor, here, as in classic naturalism, the decaying social fabric is rendered primarily as visual landscape: cracked, urine-stained sidewalks, burnt-out street lamps, garbage lining the curbs, steam rising from the streets, "billowing up in tendrils," all punctuated by the visual backdrop of the moon placed gothically above the "tip of the Chrysler Building"—by this time only nominally automotive having been hollowed-out and bought by Prudential Securities a few years before.

And though the "streets are empty" with only "occasional taxi" traffic, Bateman is certainly not alone: circulating through the streets are African American crack-dealers, ticket sellers, a "couple of skinny faggots," a drunk businessman—or perhaps *another* faggot?—"in a Jean-Paul Gaultier topcoat" pissing in an alleyway. In other words, to say that that the "streets are empty" smoothly contradicts what directly follows from it, a description that tells us much about how Bateman imagines himself vis-à-vis the others of this passage; to him, they are nothing, barely even objects in the background. In a different idiom, such a mixture of figures provides an urban allegory of class relations

in New York City. In this reading, these figures become something like “typifications” in the Lukácsian sense, standing in for the greater class identities to which they correspond. However, these figures need not stand in for greater or more collective identities in order to register historical and political forces, a point underscored by the tone or mood, a noxious blend of anxiety and resentment made with pioneer exuberance. Not only do Ellis’s descriptions use historical markers to express these affects, but this tonal blend is attributive of a particularly historical form of subjectivity. In other words, in 1986, at night, for a white, well-dressed yuppie who suddenly finds himself on the western border of the Lower East Side, these feelings are utterly “natural”—which is to say, historical.

The novel, published in 1991, is set in the years immediately preceding and roughly equivalent to when it was written, 1986–1988, and corresponds with a particularly turbulent period in history of New York City, of which Ellis is not the only historiographer. In *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Neil Smith argues that during this period the Lower East Side, for so long “abandoned to the working class amid postwar suburban expansion, relinquished to the poor and the unemployed as reservations for racial and ethnic minorities [. . .] is suddenly valuable again, perversely profitable” (6). The change of fortune that Smith describes, of course, is indistinguishable from the systematic war on the poor that, during this period in New York City, escalates by means of an especially violent structural concatenation of ideology, public policy, and influxes of capital. In fact, in these dynamics Smith understands the emergence of a new urbanism that usually goes by more benign names like “urban renewal,” “urban development,” or “gentrification.”

Gentrification produces a truly perverse “new society in the shell of the old” (“Preamble”). Our contemporary models of “*l’embellissement strategique*” (Benjamin 171) take shape primarily in intensive rather than extensive terms (or really, in a combination of both). Of course, abandoned warehouses, old factories, homeless encampments, and even whole city blocks continue to be razed, their land used for tacky “artist’s lofts” and condominiums, parking lots, and Starbucks locations, but more often than not, existing buildings are gutted and redeveloped from the inside, and old warehouses, factories, and storefronts become chic art spaces, dance clubs (of which Victor is opening several), high-end

restaurants, and even the occasional Whole Foods or Hard Rock Café. Preserving both outer “character” and the “integrity” of the neighborhood, privatized space has reclaimed what had been abandoned to the commons in the contemporary American city; here are the material effects of class warfare in the built environment.

For his part, Smith revives the notion of “revanchism,” a term constructed from the French for “revenge” and taken from a group of nineteenth-century reactionaries for whom the last straw was the Paris Commune.<sup>7</sup> A militarist and nationalist movement, the revanchists were vengeful right-wingers that built their ideology around family values and the re-taking of the city. The parallels with fin-de-siècle France should probably not be overdrawn, but Smith makes a compelling argument in terms of the toxic return of capitalist ideologies that at once produce the idea of the supposed “theft of the city” by the poor, and then react to it in the populist language of civic morality, family values, and neighborhood security.<sup>8</sup> When we return to Ellis’s exposition, what we see is not simply a *backdrop* but a *background*, an explicit yet highly aestheticized historical context, a straining attempt to produce via literary language not only the signs but the sensibility—not only the visible markers but the affects, the modes of being and the structures of feeling—that both constitute as well as are constituted by the insidious gentrification of Lower Manhattan.

Bateman continues his stroll downtown:

The bum, a black man, lies in the doorway of an abandoned antique store on Twelfth Street on top of an open grate, surrounded by bags of garbage and a shopping cart from Gristede’s loaded with what I suppose are his personal belongings: newspapers, bottles, aluminum cans. A handpainted cardboard sign attached to the front of the cart reads I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME [. . .] The stench of some kind of cheap alcohol mixed with excrement hangs here like a heavy, invisible cloud, and I have to hold my breath, before adjusting to the stench. (128–29).

The the novel’s temporal setting *also* plunges us mid-stream into a period of American history that produced a flood of homeless people from urban metropolitan centers—many of whom were evictees of

neighborhood “development” and its hand maiden, rising rents. The homeless respond by squatting in abandoned buildings, creating makeshift encampments in parks and vacant lots, or simply depositing themselves on the streets in which they become part of the urban landscape itself. Ellis’s prose summons this figure from the background revealing an existence thus far looked past, “read through,” or perhaps wholly confused for “bags of frozen garbage.” Ellis describes an explicitly racialized figure who carries the accompanying signs, handpainted or otherwise, of homeless destitution. He sprawls on a sewer grate for its free warmth, surrounded by a day’s labor of collecting recyclables—a tried and true method for making a little money out of the waste of commodity consumption—his nomadic circulation through the city slowed for the time being.

*The bum smells like shit:* “cheap alcohol mixed with excrement,” a “heavy, invisible cloud,” which, although both “really” and “literally” not visible, is rendered nonetheless in synaesthetic, visual terms. By mid-sentence, however, a nearly imperceptible shift occurs, the description of the cloud giving way not to more visual qualifiers but rather to the way in which Bateman is affected by the smell “before adjusting to the stench” (129). As it turns out, the weight of pungency finds its material expression not in the realm of the visual after all. The narrator is no longer able to describe this scene with the sovereignty of a reader of signs, and the distance between Bateman and the homeless man collapses in a corrosive chemical breakdown.

The stench of the poor is not simply offensive but rather a violent offender, as though Bateman is choked by the man himself. Now the victim, Bateman fights back, first with a barrage of patronizing and sadistic verbal abuse that provides a catalog of the arch-conservative attitudes and positions with which the rich have always resented the poor. After berating him for several pages—for not having a job, for not being able to get a job, for the unfair expectation of taking money from people who *do* have jobs, even for the homeless man’s *clothes being out of style*—Bateman’s verbal assault culminates in the following exchange:

“Do you know how bad you smell?” I whisper this soothingly, stroking his face. “The *stench*, my god . . .”

“I can’t . . .” he chokes, then swallows. “I can’t find a shelter.”

“You reek,” I tell him. “You *reek* of . . . *shit*.” [. . .] “Do you know that? Goddamnit, Al—look at me and stop crying like some kind of *faggot*,” I shout. My rage builds, subsides, I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to squeeze the bridge of my nose, then I sigh. “Al . . . I’m sorry. It’s just that . . . I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you.” (130–31)

If *American Psycho* is a book of manners—that is, if its world is organized by class and it deals in people and their relationships to money—here that genre manifests itself in its purest form.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the punctuating declaration of this passage, that Bateman and Al have nothing “in common,” might be read as a psychotically literal rendering of what Walter Benn Michaels has called the ontologization of politics, a kind of politics that “[has] nothing to do with the question of what is believed and everything to do with the question of what is” (“Empires of the Senseless” 173). Affronted by Al’s being-there and being-poor, Bateman attacks, mutilating and attempting murder. As he stabs Al, Bateman says:

The bum is too surprised to say anything . . . I yank his pants down and in the passing headlights of a taxi can make out his flabby black thighs, rashed because of his constantly urinating in his pantsuit. The stench of shit raises into my face and breathing through my mouth, down on my haunches, I start stabbing him in the stomach [. . .]. (131)

Though dehumanized, Al stubbornly remains all-too-human.<sup>10</sup> Once again nameless, both the modicum of dignity and the textual specificity Al is granted simply by having a name are stripped from him like his clothes, dispersing his identity back into the general noun and universalizing sign of “the bum” (the same words serve as the title of the chapter in which the scene appears). Not only exposed but also momentarily illuminated—the result of some passing taxi headlights transporting some yuppies to Union Square, perhaps?—Al’s body is revealed to be ravaged by the exact conditions that all the signs of his existence figure him out to be, his rashes indicating a bio-historical texture to his destitution, the acidity of urine and the grime of feces ground into his “flabby black thighs”: the harsh symptoms of repeatedly being denied

consistent access to lavatories or simply fresh water with which to wash, much less bathe.

The encounter finally ends with an excessively violent insult in which money literally becomes at once a weapon as well as the punctuation to a stridently racist, denunciating kiss-off: "Still kneeling, I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood [. . .]. Calmly, I whisper, 'There's a quarter. Go buy some *gum*, you crazy fucking *nigger*'" (131–32). In these wrenching sentences we have a powerful synthesis of class resentment, homophobia, racism, and the politics of the urban environment. However, in what comprises nearly countless pages of gruesome murders and graphic sex scenes of all stripes, there is no other mention of the smell of shit in the rest of Ellis's oeuvre until Victor's recurrent observations late in *Glamorama*. Moreover, in *American Psycho* the smell of shit is *unambiguously and absolutely attributed*.

Ellis goes to great lengths to connect this smell with a very particular social formation: the racialized homeless. Here, the smell of shit is directly associated not with a stench from nowhere, nor simply with a bodily function, but is a figure for poverty, squalor and destitution that capitalism produces everyday for hundreds of millions of people around the world. The smell of shit is not simply emanating from the body of the homeless man, but is associated with a *type of body*, a squalid and abject body that is part and parcel of the rampant, radical poverty and destitution that any form of capitalism cannot help but produce. What is more, that *type of body* is always already a *form of life* and a *way of being*, as the signs of poverty turn out to be the effects of those material practices that struggle to sustain a life under the precarious conditions of homelessness and destitution. If Al cannot find a shelter, is it so hard to imagine that he is simply one of the thousands of homeless New Yorkers for whom an open shelter bed is unavailable? Or that perhaps he has ended up in this spot because he has recently been evicted from nearby Tompkins Square Park?

Al smells like shit because he finds himself in a neighborhood with no public toilets. Writing at about the same time as the Ellis of *American Psycho*, Mike Davis argues in his *City of Quartz* that the dismantling of public restrooms has constituted a crucial tactic in the war on the poor (232–36). Metropolitan areas increasingly shift to private and "quasi-public" restrooms—toilets located in restaurants, art galleries, clubs, and office buildings—from which those who look poor are

disproportionately denied access. And as the few public bathrooms left in the city get locked after dark, the homeless are left with one of two options—risking prosecution for urinating or defecating in public, or, perhaps in Al's case, being forced to soil themselves. It's also possible that Al works for the city. During the Giuliani years, the Work Employment Program (WEP)—a form of workfare designed to displace the city's welfare system—often included sending thousands of workers without uniforms, gloves, face-masks or boots into vacant city lots to remove feces, animal carcasses, and other forms of diseased waste, all the while being denied access to toilets and drinking water (Barrett 319). Horror stories hit the papers of WEP workers, despite serious medical conditions, being forced to work extra-long shifts and, in a few cases, even dropping dead on the job in the blistering summer heat. According to Giuliani, it was just these types of “ennobling experiences”—in other words, the poor put directly to work in constructing the conditions of their own eradication, and at times even their own deaths—that made it possible to claim a victory not only over welfare, but by extension, over the poor themselves.

Perhaps nowhere in recent American fiction are we presented with such a ludicrously violent literalization of the “war on poverty.” In this brutal attack Ellis at once condenses, figures, and dramatizes the complexities of gentrification and “revanchist” city policy into a murderous urban allegory. Unable to represent these projects as the structurally sadistic processes that they are, Ellis responds by condensing these dynamics in order to wrest them into the realm of representation. But allegorical interpretation simply cannot address the fact that every year hundreds of homeless people are murdered in United States. Supposedly random acts of violence against the homeless are not the stuff of fiction; on the contrary, while Ellis was writing *American Psycho*, it was not uncommon to read such stories in the *New York Times*; consider the report of the death of Felix Najera, a Mexican immigrant and ex-ice factory worker who was lit on fire while he was sleeping at 103rd Street on the night of October 5, 2007 (Lueck A17).<sup>11</sup> He died four days later.

*American Psycho's* Al is by no means exceptional. Scattered throughout the novel, the homeless are a brute narrative fact; Ellis's yuppies are constantly being forced to step over and around the homeless, their circulation through the city consistently slowed by the efflu-



vicious and clamoring presence of the radically urban poor. In fact, one need look no further than Ellis's opening pages, in which the character Paul Owen lets loose a rant so wildly revanchist it could have been lifted directly from the pages of Neil Smith's book:

I hate to complain—I really do—about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city is and *you* know and I know that it is a *sty*. [. . .] But then, when you've just come to the point when your reaction to the times is one of total and sheer acceptance . . . when you reach the point when it clicks, we get come crazy fucking homeless nigger who *wants*—listen to me Bateman—*wants* to be out on the streets, this, *those* streets, see *those*”—he points—“and we have a mayor who won't listen to her, who won't the bitch have her way,—Holy Christ—*let* the fucking bitch *freeze* to death, *put* her out of her goddamn self-made misery, and look, you're back where you started, confused, fucked . . . Number twenty-four, nope, twenty-five . . . Who's going to be at Evelyn's? Wait, let me guess.” (4–6)

The numbers at the end of this passage are Owen's data for his violently reactionary analysis: over the course of his morning he has been *counting* the visibly homeless. However, by the time the opening chapter ends, his personal census only manages to take note of thirty of the over 100,000 homeless people who are living in New York City during this period.

Fast forward to *Glamorama*, New York City, 1996:

Zizagging toward Chemical Bank by the new Gap it's a Wednesday but outside feels Mondayish and the city looks vaguely unreal, there's a sky from like October 1973 or something hanging over it and right now at 5:30 this is Manhattan as Loud Place: jackhammers, horns, sirens, breaking glass, recycling trucks, whistles, booming bass from the new Ice Cube, unwanted sound trailing behind me as I wheel my Vespa into the bank, joining the line at the automated teller. [. . .] Cruising up Madison, stopping at a light in front of Barneys, and Bill Cunningham snaps my picture, yelling out, “Is that a Vespa?” and I give him a thumbs-up and he's standing next to Holly, a curvy blond who looks like Patsy Kensit, and when we smoked

heroin last week she told me she might be a lesbian, which in some circles is pretty good news, and she waves me over wearing velvet hot pants, red-and-white-striped platform boots, a silver peace symbol and she's ultra thin, on the cover of *Made-moiselle* this month, and after a day of doing shows at Bryant Park she's looking kind of frantic but in a cool way. (18, 20)

If this seems like an active and thriving Manhattan with very little relation to one in *American Psycho*, well, it should. In *Glamorama* we find ourselves in a world after ten full years of anti-poor and anti-homeless public policy, "urban renewal," and gentrification. For if it was scarcely possible for Bateman & Co. to move through Manhattan without being impeded by the homeless and the destitute, that simply is not a problem for Victor, who circulates freely—one is tempted to say, unconsciously—through a city-space that turns out to be the sick utopian fruition of *American Psycho*'s revanchist critiques. In fact, the only impediments seem to come from the labor of gentrification itself: the intermittent rumble of jackhammers, the shrieks of breaking glass, of Manhattan as "loud place" because it is *under construction* (though any actual workers remain conspicuously absent). Instead of abandoned buildings and low-rent antique dealers, Victor notes the "new Gap"; the vagrant and homeless have been replaced by his bourgeois socialite friends. Indeed, all of *Glamorama*'s first section obsessively details Victor and his friends breezing effortlessly through the city. For this to be possible in the Lower Manhattan of 1996—and keep in mind, the action in the passage above takes place near Union Square Park, not far from exactly where Bateman maims Al in *American Psycho*—there would have to have been a systematic expulsion of the poor and a wholesale redevelopment of this part of the metropolis between 1986 and 1996 in New York City.

Paul de Man once wrote that "there seems to be no limit to what tropes can get away with" (201), and though de Man never had the occasion to read *American Psycho* or *Glamorama*, the smell of shit in Bret Easton Ellis provides strong evidence for his claim. However, it is precisely the smell of shit that *limits* what *Glamorama* can camouflage or perfume; although the material excrement is gone, the smell, for some reason, has lingered. If that smell is the primary and dominant sensory trace of both the experience and the existence of poverty in *American*

*Psycho*, then in the world of *Glamorama* there must be no poor, homeless and destitute people! Of course, this statement is both completely correct and wholly misguided at the same time: in this way, we might think of *Glamorama* as a mythical tale of capitalism—a dystopian one, certainly—but a myth nonetheless.<sup>12</sup> *Glamorama* comprises just the kind of myth that capitalism likes to tell about itself—namely, that a society thoroughly ruled and permeated by exchange value produces not poverty, destitution, homelessness but the myriad, never-ending, and all-available pleasures of consumerism in all its glittery forms. Ellis's work does not resolve these contradictions, and more importantly, it does not thematize them either—it isn't *about* a world of capitalism without poverty, it is an example of its impossibility, an impossibility that is, as Adorno would say, the genuine historical content of Ellis's work.

#### POSTSCRIPT

On February 26, 1997, while Bret Easton Ellis was writing *Glamorama*, the NYPD razed the last remaining homeless encampment in Manhattan underneath West 66th Street (Kershaw B21). Though supposedly in the works for several years, the demolition finally took place in order to begin construction on a Donald Trump-boostered, eighteen-building development. Located in old Penn Central coal bins, at one time the encampment provided makeshift shelter for around forty-five people. Reports suggest that the enclave living there made up a close-knit community that had occupied the coal bins for over three years; their encampment had couches, a few television sets powered by generators, and even a two-basin sink. By the time the police arrived—the occupants had been officially threatened that their homes would be eventually destroyed—there were only a few of the city's then approximately 100,000 homeless left to rouse, which the NYPD did with axes, flashlights, and bulldozers just before 10 pm. It was drizzling.

As it turns out, semiotic fetishism is not exclusive to Victor Ward. "With regard to visibly poor people," says Mary Brosnahan, a former executive director for the Coalition of the Homeless, "Giuliani's singular policy has been to destroy any evidence of their existence" (qtd. in Kershaw B1). The "war on poverty," then, becomes a war on the *signs* of poverty, which, as we have seen, cannot be separated from the material

realities and daily struggles to maintain life itself. That making the city inhospitable for the poor was not simply an “obscured reality” but a literal and explicit part of Mayor Giuliani’s public policy is perhaps most evident in comments he made in 1995: “It would be a good thing for this city if the poor left,” Giuliani said, “That’s not an unspoken part of our strategy . . . that is our strategy” (qtd. in Smith, “Giuliani” 3). With the homeless “out of sight,” the bourgeoisie can imagine themselves to have always lived in there in the first place: Ellis’s first epigraph to *Glamorama* reads, “there was no time when you nor I nor these kings did not exist.” That the second epigraph—“you make a mistake if you see what we do as merely political”—is taken from Adolf Hitler seems more or less beside the point: here read as a theory of gentrification, the message, as is often the case, has far exceeded its sender.

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#### NOTES

I would like to thank Morgan Adamson and Cesare Casarino for reading and commenting upon early drafts of this essay. This essay is dedicated to Robert Hofmann.

1. *Glamorama* has received attention mainly for its treatment of terrorism, in which an all-too-visible cadre of models organizes and carries out wildly violent terrorist acts—all without any discernible or identifiable political thrust or orientation. However, to only pay attention—critical or otherwise—to its representations and concepts of terrorism seriously runs the risk of turning Ellis’s novel into merely an illustration or demonstration of the present: not a text to be read in any meaningful way.

2. Here, “counter-revolutionary” refers not simply a return to a previous state of affairs, but an innovation at the level of built environment that increases and attempts to ensure relations of domination.

3. The “discipline of the word by word” manifests itself at a narrative level; over the course of the first chapter, Victor and Chloe metonymically shift their plans a seemingly countless number of times. Here, Ellis provides the hilarious yet purely boring drama of consumers faced with the abyss of choices that make no difference.

4. For a different view, see Annesley 7–10.

5. I thank Thomas Pepper for calling my attention to the notion of “diegetic metaphor.”

6. For an exception to this rule, see Williams,

7. For Smith's fuller and subtler account, see *New Urban*, esp. 44–47, 211–30, as well as his “Giuliani Time.”

8. For Smith, twentieth-century revanchism “expresses the [. . .] terror felt by middle- and ruling class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, the decimation of social service, and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups [. . .] as powerful urban actors” (*New Urban* 211).

9. Michaels reinvigorates the generic distinction between a book of manners and a book of mores, the latter of which organizes people by their relationships to culture, while the former organizes people by their relationships to money (*Shape* 149–50).

10. In this case we are not far from what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called, in a very different context, “bare life.”

11. In fact, if anything these types of stories—from teenage “sport killings” and the incineration of the sleeping homeless to “Homeless Attacks,” a low-rent “reality show” in which homeless men are paid little more than booze-money to engage in on-the-spot, gladiator-style fights—seem to be proliferating in our current social reality.

12. As Barthes taught us in *Mythologies*, “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things” (142).

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