

FATHERS, SONS, AND SPIRITS:
CONFRONTING THE VOID WITH
JAMES JOYCE, BRET EASTON ELLIS,
AND DENNIS COOPER

‘Beware of what you wish for in youth because you will get it in middle life.’ — Stephen Dedalus, from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*

A Rock and a Hard Place

Undeniably hungover, I’m driving with Jesse Bransford over the Pulaski Bridge to Queens. Sitting shotgun, he wheels the ipod. The Jam starts playing and Bransford intones... “Ah that’s better.”

“Figured out a way to hook up the whole father-son-death thing,” he continues. We park, grab a couple of egg sandwiches and coffee at a nearby deli and head over to his studio. Adam Putnam is there, and like us, is also trying to figure out how to stretch the *Frozen Tears 3* deadline.

“Just saw *Brokeback Mountain*...too many metaphors,” Putnam says. “You know Men...Herding Sheep...On a Mountain.” He leaves for his studio. I go to the roof and have a smoke, watch a group of birds wing by in a line on the same trajectory as a jet in the distance. They quickly outpace it.

Funny what one perceives sometimes when alone, if only for a minute.

Yes, *metaphors, shit*...Jesse and I start frantically brainstorming. We’ve planned on three days of nonstop work. A collaboration on death. Or more specifically: Fathers, Sons, and Death. *Ghosts* rather, for the third? (an unconscious trinity). I had mentioned getting mushrooms or

something for the task, which never happened. “I am not taking mushrooms and talking about death, Casey,” Jesse says. Good point. Jesse hands me his book on Agrippa, his favorite adept, and I start reading the introduction as he begins work on the first of several drawings.

Apparently as a young boy, Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), the basic founder of modern Western Occultism, demonstrated his precociousness by refusing to speak in any language but Latin – to his family and local townsfolk alike. *What a little Teutonic brat?*...But then biographies are biographies. The work is the work. Right?

I go have another smoke, and while gazing out on new river-front construction – two towering condo complexes – and the UN building across the water, I look for something as cool as those birds, thinking maybe we should just do a comic book on the life of Agrippa. But down again the winding stairs the talk turns to the Omphalos, the navel, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, beginning with episode 3. It’s the first real tricky part of the book, in which Stephen Dedalus attempts to prove George Berkeley’s theories of material perception by walking with eyes closed along Dublin’s Sandymount Strand. Playing peek-a-boo with himself, he tests his other senses to see if he really exists.

As he smells the “seawrack” and imagines tendrils of algae tossing against the waves of that mother of all eternal metaphors, the ocean, Dedalus thinks about his birth, having recently learned that the midwife who helped him “squealing into life” has died. He ponders conceptions of continuity. Possible *Beginnings* and *Ends*. “That is why mystic monks. Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos”... “Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one.” Omphalos. Navel. Eve without a navel – as many believe the source of humanity’s umbilical, that spiraling tether, like a telephone chord, raveling backwards and forwards in time, not far from

Plato's description of the underworld and its ancient mythical rivers flowing contrary to one another in various concentric paths, occasionally plunging downwards (by wormholes? waterfalls?) from level to level, like a Nintendo platform game, from the wide mouth of hell to the singularity of paradise.

"Hmm...That's Hebrew and Greek. ΑΑΟΟΙ. Or rather, just ΙΙΟΟΙ," Jesse says. "Isn't that a zip code here?" I ask, and keep reading aloud:

"From before the ages He willed me and now may not will me away or ever. A *lex eterna* stays about Him. Is that then the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial?" Dedalus continues in his head, scratching the surface of theological questions/doubts about the Trinity and the heretics who followed Neo-Platonic ideas of Oneness, challenging The Church as keeper of the blood of Christ, who is made material by the mystery of Communion, wherein, only then, the Trinity – father, son and spirit – becomes mixed, ready for digestion. Of course the rub is that the elixir is copyrighted by those linked by apostolic succession (the Church's umbilical chord) through the ages to the original keeper of the Grail, Peter, the first Pope. It's the reason that the English (and therefore Protestant) Henry Cardinal Newman made his controversial departure into Roman Catholicism. Which I guess makes sense technically for a Christian, but for the many buffoons that have held the Popely position, not to mention the schism of the Church between East and West. But what does a heathen like me know anyway? It seems a bit silly to Dedalus as well.

"Wait...Lex Eterna?" Jesse asks, "Law eternal? Not *Lux Eterna* (light eternal)? That's something I have been wrestling with through imagery. The Light and the Law. Or the New Testament and Old."

"How'd you come by that?"

He explains that it was something from a text covered in a class called "The Idea of Death," which he taught



at NYU this past semester. "It was from Levinas," Jesse says. "No, well actually Derrida, first. On the subject of Isaac and Abraham. That's why I am so interested in Gnosticism, because of its preeminence of the light over the law."

After a tad much noggin scratching over the Protean episode 3, the coffee kicks in and I remember that the meat of what I wanted to cover in *Ulysses*, for our pur-

poses, was actually episode 9, the section that refers to The Odyssey's Scylla and Charybdis scene. It's really the fulcrum of the book, and a continuation of the end of *A Portrait of The Artist As a Young Man*, where a younger Dedalus mapped out his dogmatic Aristotelian theories of Aesthetics in a Socratic dialogue with his schoolmates. If it wasn't clear that Dedalus' ideas were meant then to come across hyperbolic and naive (if not simultaneously compelling and earnest), upon the delivery of Ulysses, it is almost certain.

At 2 p.m. of the day long novel, in Dublin's National Library, Stephen meets with some friends and is cajoled into defining (performing?) a theory he has been forming about Shakespeare's Hamlet, an attempt at proving that the Danish prince represents Shakespeare himself and his anxiety of being the cuckold of Ann Hathaway unsuccessfully cordoned off in Stratford-Upon-Avon. He gets into another Socratic debate with chums and foils John Engleton and Buck Mulligan, and George Russell (the Irish mystical Platonic poet known as AE). In a waning fashion of debate amongst the theosophically minded intelligentsia of Dublin, 1904, Aristotle is set against Plato (philosophical son to father...or Prince Hamlet to the murdered King), and Stephen of course is still sticking up for Aristotle. Russell, annoyed by Stephen's tack, with an early salvo says:

"All these questions are purely academic (...) whether Hamlet is Shakespeare or James I or Essex. Clergymen's discussions of the historicity of Jesus. Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. (...) The deepest poetry of Shelly, the words of Hamlet bring our minds into contact with eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas. All the rest is the speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys."

Stephen replies "politely" that "The schoolmen were schoolboys first."

"And" Aristotle "has remained so, one should hope,"

John Engleton volleys back.

"That model schoolboy, Stephen said, would find Hamlet's musings about the afterlife of his princely soul, the improbable, insignificant and undramatic monologue, as shallow as Plato's." He adds, "Which of the two would have banished me from his commonwealth?"

In the midst of the continued debate, Leopold Bloom, the middle aged Jewish advertising salesman who takes over as Joyce's protagonist (his Odysseus if you will to Stephen as Telemachus) shows up to the library to check on some files he is canvassing for the Dublin paper *The Freeman*. It is one of a few occasions that Bloom and Dedalus cross paths before finally confronting one another directly later in the book. By addressing the subject of *Hamlet*, it is clear that Stephen is concerned with questions of paternity. He is seen earlier in the book, guilt-ridden over his failure to pray at his mother's deathbed, her last request. Haunted by his inability to appease her for excess of intellectual hubris, he has now turned his attention to the other parental pole, and is in effect looking for a surrogate father – which becomes his own odyssey, one that could be loosely interpreted as a quest for God, which in *A Portrait* was defined as a "shout in the street."

Bloom, who is portrayed as a cretin by the rather anti-Semitic group Stephen is up against, is yet given complexity through his internal dialogues. On the surface, he's just a guy who buys sausages, plays with his cat, eats too much smelly cheese and pays the price with excessive flatulence, stares at the asses of naked statues in museums, and masturbates behind a dune while watching girls frolic near the ocean. But internally, like Hamlet and his father, he constantly worries about betrayal and infidelity. And in his own way, comes up with equally plausible conceptions of the universe without want for the canonical backing of philosophy, art or religion. He is literally the Aristotle of practice and theater versus the abstract form meditations of Plato.

Stephen at this point in his life, is in crisis, and without finding synthesis through the father role that Bloom will afford will only end up contradicting himself. I think of him like Christopher Hitchens, one of the most brilliant journalists of our times, but one who has let dogma and his own uncanny ability of sophistic performance overshadow reason (as a former socialist, Hitchens has taken Orwell's idea of fighting fascism at every instance to the absurd degree in his support of the war on Iraq... while obfuscating the fascism that has developed here at home under to Bush administration's "watch"...that's just my opinion).

As in the *Odyssey's* metaphor, the truth (or at least the safe bet) always lies somewhere in the middle of extremes. Scylla and Charybdis. It's a tricky voyage between a rock guarded by a six-headed hydra and a whirlpool of certain death. As the group exits the library after the debate, Bloom inadvertently walks between Dedalus and Mulligan, symbolizing that middle path, the narrow one between the broad extremes.

Straight is the gait unto light?

Nightmares on Elm Street

What I find compelling in Joyce's novel is a theme similar to those that crop up in two of my favorite novels of 2005 – Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* and Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* – the original subjects I wished to cover in this essay. I've wanted to write about both in tandem since this summer, but was waylaid by my own near death/mundane epiphanic experience – getting run over by a motorcycle while crossing the street. *A shout in the street*, ha-ha. More like the 1200CC rumble of a crotch rocket.

As authors of such controversial novels as *Frisk* and *American Psycho*, Cooper and Ellis respectively have been both praised critically and sometimes dismissed as shal-

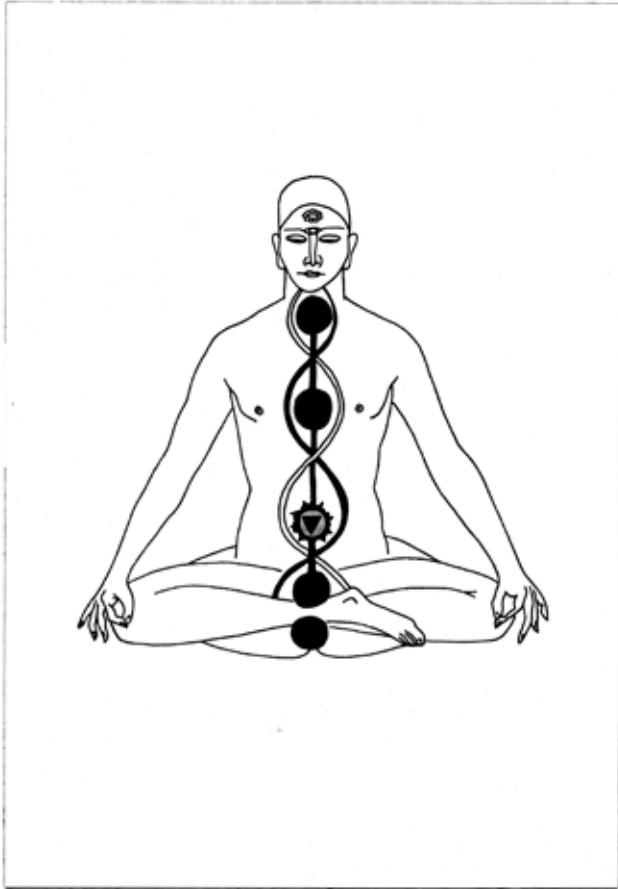
low, or for having disturbing, perhaps unhealthy fascinations with violence, particularly violence during sex – de Sadian characters and their hapless victims.

While I won't bother defending Cooper's previous work (which is much different, amazing, and if you don't get it, you probably never will), I can say that I have known the author for years and can affirm that whatever negative connotations less than thoughtful critics glean from his work, the man himself is one of the more kind and giving people I have come across. He himself has played the surrogate father for so many rising artists that it would be pointless to try and name them all here. *Biography and work consubstantial?* Well that would most likely be illegal.

I have also interviewed the affable Ellis before for a zine that I produced in 2000 called Mall Punk. We conducted the interview on the day that he had set for himself to begin *Lunar Park*. When I asked what the book was going to be about, he said that he was going to finally write an autobiographical novel, joking that thus far, everyone thought that his novels were autobiographical anyway, so why not?

"Yeah I think they think I am either a model or a terrorist or a vampire, soooo...I don't know," Ellis joked.

He was ambivalent about what this "autobiography" was going to be about exactly, but when asked if he was ever influenced by DeLillo, Ellis said that he was, "but now I am more influenced by Eminem." Which should have been a clue (yet I was clueless). He seemed to be hinting that he was going to finally officially out himself as being gay, which he basically does at the end of *Lunar Park*, even though by the finale we are far from autobiography, at least as hard facts are concerned. The Eminem quip suggested a brazen confrontation with parents. For Ellis this meant his father, an abusive, megalomaniacal, hack real estate mogul who haunted the writer his entire life.



The first chapter of *Lunar Park* starts off relatively plausible as true autobiography. Certainly it's over the top, but not *really* as far as the media's perception of Ellis as the leader of that slim handful of young 80s writers once deemed "The Brat Pack," which included Ellis, Jay McInerney...and well...who else? Trying to define this brat pack in *Lunar Park*, Ellis gives each character he ran with a Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, and Peter

Lawford role, and fills in the blanks with their editors. "We even had our own Shirley MacLaine in the guise of Tama Janowitz..." Tama Janowitz? Who remembers her? Anyway, the introduction gives the reader every possible gossipy morsel of insight (sex, drugs, *rock and roll*?) into the "mind" of this supposed deranged and shallow soul, one thrust onto late Warholian New York too young to be taken seriously.

But following this red herring first chapter the plot becomes increasingly elusive, supernatural and out of control. It's supposed to be a recollection of real events, a novel within a memoir. Trying to find solace from his reckless tendencies – especially the coke and heroin binges during the *Glamorama* tour – Ellis returns to a life with his estranged fictional (though not described as such) wife, the actress Jayne Dennis, moves to suburbia and tries to live a normal existence as a writing professor in a small New England College (*wait isn't this the plot of every New Yorker story by default?*). He has inherited two kids too in the deal, one of which may actually be his, though he still tries to convince himself that it is the love child of Jayne and Keanu Reeves (Ellis is, as most critics haven't noticed yet, the best American satirist of the last two decades).

Continuing as he has throughout his novels, characters from past works creep back in. At a Halloween party for his kids, which Ellis' character uses as an opportunity to slip up on coke and have a tryst with a student in the bathroom, someone dressed as Patrick Bateman, the serial killer from *American Psycho*, shows up. Ellis is too messed up to confront the person, and thus begins a cat and mouse game that follows the rest of the book. Sometimes the figure is Bateman, sometimes it is Clay from *Less Than Zero*. Sometimes it seems that it is a young Ellis himself shadowing the writer, and sometimes (like Joyce with his Bloom and Dedalus) it is as if this figure is a combination of Ellis, his father, and his son.

While in suburban exile, Ellis is writing a lurid cash cow novel called *Teenage Pussy* while the author's previous works begin mirroring events occurring around him. There are news reports of the disappearances of young boys and vicious murders like those in *American Psycho* (the real Ellis, it should be noted, was haunted by an *American Psycho* copycat killer after the book's publication). And if those facts aren't stranger than fiction, a toy bird that he has bought for his kids also takes on a mind of its own and begins terrorizing the family with its razor sharp claws. *Hmmm...a mechanical bird, didn't the Dedalus of Greek mythology build one of those to navigate the labyrinth of the Minotaur...one stolen by his son Icarus for his famous flight that brought him too near to the Sun...well...that's a much too convenient symbolic stretch.*

It becomes increasingly unclear as to whether the Ellis character is responsible for what's happening around him, or whether the stories in the background are the fabrications of his own drug-addled paranoia. And while he is caught up trying to make his way out of his own labyrinth, confronting issues with his father, he is ignoring his son Robby (just as Ellis' father ignored him). At the book's conclusion, it is revealed that the kids are actually responsible for their own disappearances. Through Internet chat discussions they planned for their own escapes, one by one. Unable to deal with the world of their dysfunctional parents and of the larger terror in the adult world around them (post 9/11 terrorist attacks and the fear of a military draft play out in the background), they escape into a virtual Peter Pan reality. The computer password to the peer kept secret website chronicling the movements of each disappeared boy? "Neverneverland."

Ellis, at the beginning of his new family life, is nothing more than a kid himself. Sure he has a job, but he can't stand his students. He's just trying to fuck one of them, and he also develops a brief crush on Clayton (the Bateman impersonator), the mysterious younger version



of himself, who presents the author/professor with an unfinished manuscript called *Minus Numbers*, which he later learns is an exact copy of Ellis' first draft of *Less Than Zero*. Ellis makes attempts at responsibility by seeing a therapist to appease his wife (but really to get more Xanax...the therapist is a strict Freudian who makes him bring in accounts of dreams...since he doesn't dream anymore, he makes them up). And he actually does try

connecting with his son as time goes on. But he is haunted by certain demons from his past, the ghost of his father, and a creature that he created as a kid in a short story called “The Tomb” which he comes to realize also represents his tyrannical father. And *American Psycho* itself, we learn from the intro, was actually the author’s best shot at describing the material insanity that cloaked his father and the Reagan era heyday of financial speculation in general.

But while still very much a kid, suffering from alcohol and drug psychosis, he manages to be the most capable hero of the story. No one, from therapists, to cops, to his wife and friends believes an inkling of what he is experiencing. Yet, as the author, he is open to the chaos, and therefore he can see it and confront it. And as spoiled as he seems, he is going through a serious inner battle. Even though he can’t remember dreams, signs make their way through to him. Absurd pop culture references take on germane significance. The movie *1941* is continually playing on cable (the year his father was born). He gets a continuous stream of emails from the Bank of America in Sherman Oaks, California where his father’s ashes have been abandoned in a safety deposit box that only arrive at 2:40 am (the hour that his father died). There’s also the bit with actor Harrison Ford (read the book).

The saddest thing about the novel, one which I have to say is one of the saddest I have ever read, is that that it exposes most deftly the pains felt by an artist (it is *A Portrait of the Artist As An Older Man* if you will). Ellis doesn’t gloss, and makes himself out to be a true asshole, but for anyone who has ever attempted such a life, it marks the isolation like none I have ever read or witnessed. In order to define/exorcise the monsters that haunt, he has to become one himself.

And as a gay man trying to come to grips with the pains of family, he is left to invent a virtual one for himself to work through it all. As a failed character in therapy, he

succeeds wholly in his novelization. And for someone who has been so stereotyped as a “transgressive,” here Ellis makes his escape. He does literally “disappear here,” to quote a billboard and metaphor from *Less Than Zero*. Now he can write the (what could be an alarmingly tepid) middle-aged sequel to *The Rules of Attraction* that he has threatened for some time now. But only perhaps because he has written something as philosophically challenging as – though perhaps more fun than – Joyce’s *Ulysess*.

And like Joyce, he is attempting to write himself into a book that both characterizes himself as a young man (a son) and an older figure (a father). As Buck Mulligan put it in *Ulysses*’ first episode, describing Dedalus’ theories: “He proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father.”

In other words, the consequential comeuppance of: “careful what you wish for in youth because you will get it in middle life.” *This isn’t making any damn sense (remember I got run over by a motorcycle)*.

There is one telling episode though that does tie into that Joycean image especially. Ellis hires a demonologist to come by the house and perform an exorcism. In a scene that seems taken straight from Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist*, a ghost begins descending the stairs. The phantom’s visage flickers between two images – that of his father and that of Clayton. “It was the face of the father being replaced by the face of the son.” Clayton, as the son, is also Bret. And Robby, as Ellis’ son and the namesake of Ellis’ father Robert Ellis, is also both father and son.

This blank protean canvass of a face reminds me of the Jorge Borges poem about Shakespeare titled “Everything and Nothing.” Borges writes: “There was no one in him; behind his face (which even in the poor paintings of the period is unlike any other) and his words, which were copious, imaginative, and emotional, there was nothing but a little chill, a dream not dreamed by anyone.” Like

Ellis' family project: "Later he thought in the exercise of an elemental human rite he might well find what he sought and let himself be initiated by Anne Hathaway one long June afternoon." The poem goes on to describe how this shadow created an entire world within his plays (something Joyce attempted to outdo with *Ulysses*). While in London he visits the bawdy houses and taverns, yet is in his mind he is Julius Caesar, Macbeth, "Juliet, detesting the lark." Like the suburbanized Ellis, Shakespeare comes late in his career to a life caught up in the normalcy of "loans, lawsuits, petty usury." After "he died he found himself before God and said: 'I who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man: myself.'" The voice of God replied from the whirlwind: "Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons – and none."

Shakespeare, Joyce's main focus of literary competition, had in practical terms spelled out in his sonnets what he believed were the only two ways for a man to overcome death. He could either marry and have babies and live on through his progeny, or he could make art and be remembered forever if he is good enough.

By fusing Dedalus (son) with Bloom (father), Joyce showed maturity as an artist, demonstrating that the most philosophical insights could be gleaned from (or if not tempered by) the most quotidian of events. While for Joyce, this was probably more of an abstract exercise, for Ellis it serves an actual personal purpose. At *Lunar Park's* conclusion (after his divorce from Jayne Dennis), Ellis too embraces the quotidian, but instead of suburban lawns and SUV's, it is the simplicity of life as the quiet urban writer with his sculptor lover, buying Kiehl's shampoo for him, and curling up with him "on the mornings when summer lightning would awake me from my nightmares..." Over the course of *Lunar Park* Ellis learns what is necessary for him to do – return to the bank in

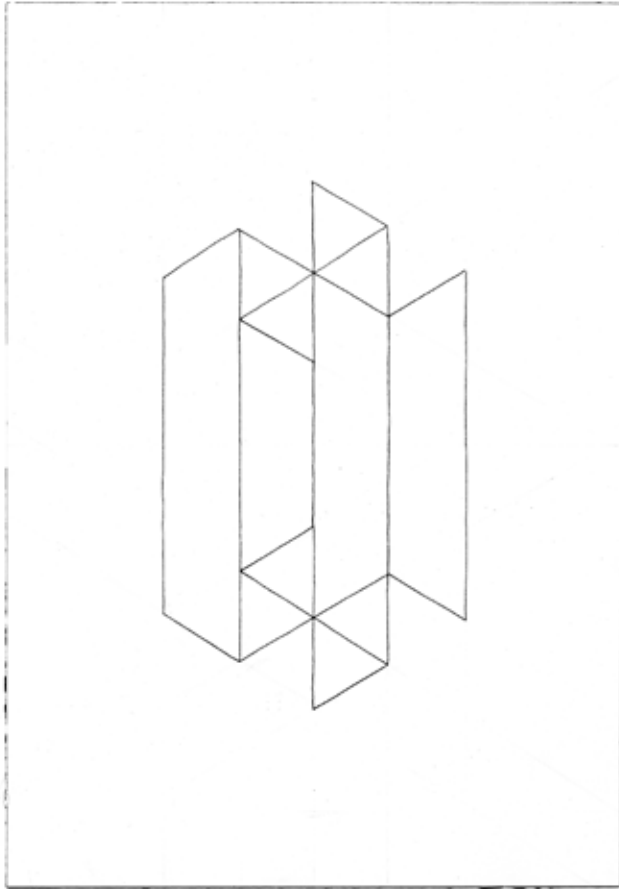
Sherman Oaks, retrieve his father's ashes and properly dispense of them at sea.

Through this entire process Ellis not only exorcizes his own demons, but also hands a nice slap to the faces of all of critics that had misunderstood the meaning of his earlier works, *American Psycho* in particular.

The Locked Door

Another sea change occurred last year for that other of America's most notorious writers when Dennis Cooper published *God Jr.* (almost exactly around the same time *Lunar Park* was released). Now, I've always been wary of the straight man trying to hypothesize about gay literature. After reading about Jean Genet's reaction to Jean Paul Sartre's self-serving *Saint Genet*, it's safe to say this is probably never a good idea. Still, as someone who loves the best in literature, I have always been naturally drawn to gay writers (starting typically as a teen with William Burroughs and then Oscar Wilde to Genet to James Purdy and on down). Personally it's not about the sex, but the perspective.

Dennis Cooper is unique among artists, in that, more than any other (even De Sade his hero), he has consistently described the taboo side of sex in the most unflinching, minute, and often horrific detail, yet has always maintained a broad following of admirers, many of whom are straight and are artists or musicians themselves (famous and otherwise). And while he has never been one to compromise any vision or scene in his prose by toning down, *God Jr.* serves to prove perhaps what his straight fans have known all along, that there is something he is mining for that is much deeper than skin, gender, or age. While the more queasy might feel relieved that in *God Jr.*, Cooper leaves the sex out, having scripted literally a *straight* tale from the suburbs, this very brief



book still manages to further and contain all of concerns of his oeuvre to date, the so-called George Miles cycle and beyond.

Like Ellis, there is one thing that has nagged and driven Cooper's work from the beginning. As stated, for Ellis, it was his relationship with his father, who he escaped initially by planting himself in a school as geographically far away from him as possible. At Bennington College

in Vermont (Camden in his novels) Ellis crafted *Less Than Zero*, a novel that was so successful it granted the wunderkind his independence. He returned to this subject in *American Psycho*, but the serial killing protagonist Patrick Bateman was still an unacknowledged allusion to the demonic figure Ellis saw in his father. Then, the year after the book's publication, 1992, Ellis' father dies. *Glamorama* is published years later, and is perhaps a diversion (though a raucously humorous one), but with *Lunar Park* he is compelled to return to his prime subject, and (clichés aside) becomes a man, forgives this figure who he recognizes as a vital part of who he is. It's basically a ghost story, but much more.

Cooper, likewise has always been haunted by one dead figure from his past, a tormented and beautiful friend from his youth named George Miles, who disappeared before Cooper penned his first ode to him, *Closer*. Four books later, Cooper learned that Miles had killed himself many years ago, and so wrote the concluding fifth and final novel to the cycle, *Period*, in which the ghost of George Miles is conjured to life through Satanic rituals and makes appearances in the internet chat rooms of certain Goth kids – fans of a writer not unlike Cooper named Walker Crane, who wrote a book also called *Period*. In Crane's novel, an artist named Bob is obsessed with a character named George Miles who killed himself in a house in "some sketchily rural locale." Bob recreates the house in detail, thinking that his efforts may magically bring the character back to life (houses play a significant symbolic role in both *Lunar Park* and *Period*). After the novel comes out, Crane learns that the "real" George Miles who he based his book on shot himself just as he described. The narrator of Cooper's *Period* explains Crane's fate: "Walker spent his life trying to recreate 'George' in his art. He finally succeeded, with the support of an evil, omniscient strain in his environment. When he realized the 'George' he'd made was

deformed by his weak imagination, he had to kill himself, in order to satisfy the book's mirrorlike structure. In the real world, things weren't that simple deep down and complex on the surface. It was more like the opposite, meaning Walker and everyone else that George touched, in whatever form, could do nothing but wonder about him and suffer the consequences."

The implied consequences are that the fans of the novel, who built up an almost religious mythology surrounding the story in their website, begin acting out Walker Crane's rather morbid notions about fate. People die in their experiments. Crane had once wondered if his "ickily heart tugging quest" that was his novel for George was successful because it was "an example of love co-opting form, as some would have it, or the complete opposite." For Crane's fans (many pedophiles and admirers of the likes of John Wayne Gacy), it's all about form, the body as a vehicle for the limits of the imagination. (They, like Dr. Frankenstein, are also looking for ways around the trinity of father, mother, and child, by creating zombified somnambulists for their own pleasure).

God Jr. continues the concept of the artist creating a monument for the dead in an attempt at resurrection, but here it is love that triumphs over form. It's the story of a father who accidentally kills his son in a car accident, and his attempt at reconciliation. Pained with guilt, the father tries everything to reconnect with his dead son. He finds drawings in his son's room of a giant statue, and learns by playing his son's favorite video game that this statue was a mysterious concern for his son in a lower level of a Nintendo landscape (if the game were a path through Hades, this would only be perhaps a third of the way down). The father, like his son, is convinced that the statue's door must have a way of opening (as a connecting point between the living and dead?), and so instead of progressing through the game, he just sits in Zen-like fashion outside the door contemplating ways of getting



in, while the characters around him are confounded that he doesn't want to kill them. He smokes pot while playing (like Ellis perpetually trying to numb himself), and the characters begin talking back to him, become convinced that he is a god because of his strange peaceful way of playing the game. All the while, the father begins constructing this same huge Watts Tower-like monument in his backyard, to the consternation of his neighbors

and his wife. It's a continuation of the guilt experienced by *Period's* "Bob" character (and perhaps Cooper's own guilt of writing about George Miles in *Closer*, then losing track of him for so long). But here there is a sense of hope. As Ellis wrote in *Lunar Park*, "A family if you allow it gives you hope, which in turn gives you joy." But there is also disappointment. *God Jr.'s* father learns after he is well into the construction that the pictures weren't even drawn by his son, but by his girlfriend.

Still, in the end it doesn't matter. As he gets more into the game, he synesthetically becomes the bear that he is playing. He gets into philosophical discussions with a polar bear cub who is bored with his fascination with death, because in his reality, characters are resurrected each time the game is restarted. But for Al the father, as he tells the cub: "where I live, death's the end. It's erasure. It's so heavy we decide the dead are just invisible and mute. Death's so bad we'd rather go insane than know that one of us is nonexistent." In video game land, Cooper's vivid fantasies about murder are the norm. But Al, if he represents Cooper, has somewhat softened – shifted focus. He even gets dissed by the cute cub for his lack of bloodlust: "hit me with everything you got. You can do it, loser. Just pretend that I'm your son." The cub's yawning over his passivity provokes in him reflection over his own youth.

"When I was young I used to fantasize a lot. Like father like son, I suppose (...) I also thought the world was kind of tedious. Like every kid, I drew a lot of pictures then beamed myself into them like the characters on *Star Trek*. Like every kid, I thought the world needed a face lift, except the parts where Disney got there first." But then, the father begins to take a personal stand. He relates how his son liked Space Mountain, but he himself as a "wuss" (artist?) needed more. *Pirates of the Caribbean* was more to his liking, with the drunken pirates whizzing bullets at everyone without a care in the world. Everything was

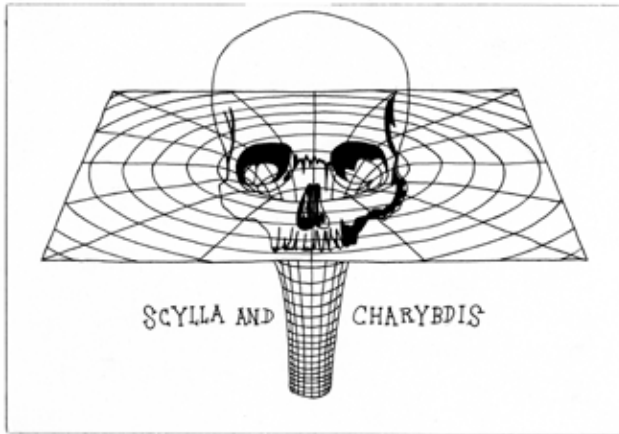
bliss with the ride until one time when his boat got stuck in there for four hours, which after some consternation, concluded was fine. And compared to that this "looping, violent game seems like a hell I would have loved."

Like Ellis in *Lunar Park*, through the construction of art, in an attempt at forgiveness from the dead, he realizes his own gift, and begins to nurture it. Cooper began one novel in the Miles cycle with a quote by Arthur Rimbaud: "So what if a piece of wood discovers it's a violin." Here, that quip is reversed. The father discovers that the lofty idealization of his son is maybe nothing but a projection of his own creative imagination. The violin is just a piece of wood.

"...Tommy's dead. I loved Tommy. I think that's safe to assume. But he's gone and that puzzle is still there. Whatever's in it meant a lot to him. Or didn't. Probably it didn't. He was probably stoned and bored and had nothing else to do. I am probably just stoned and hiding out in the game because my life is more unsolvable than you. Imagine if every puzzle here, including you, was too difficult. Then imagine the boring bear you'd have to live with. My wife, my job my family...you name it. Everything and everyone I know is either broken or locked so tight I can't break in. It's my fault. I accidentally killed my son, and I am too scared or egotistical to face it. But you want to talk about a puzzle? Try making up a world where having killed someone you love isn't important."

Tying In

Stephen Dedalus felt he killed his mother by refusing to pray at her deathbed, and in turn, the author Joyce substitutes the construction of a father/son odyssey on the altar of that guilt. Ellis' could not rest till he disposed of his father's ashes. Cooper's guilt burdened Al finds solace



and rediscovers his own artistry through his vain quest for meaning after the death of his son.

Since the time of Abraham, symbolically, the idea of fatherhood has been about a relationship with the eternal, God. As Dedalus says, "Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical state, an apostolic succession, from only begotten to only begotten" (...) Yet: "Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son?" (...)

Dedalus continues: "They are sundered by a bodily shame so steadfast that the criminal annals of the world, stained with all other incests and bestialities, hardly record its breach. Sons with mothers, sires with daughters, lesbian sisters, loves that dare not speak their name, nephews with grandmothers, jailbirds with keyholes, queens with prized bulls. The son unborn mars beauty: born, he brings pain, divides affection, increases care. He is a new male: his growth his father's decline, his youth his father's envy, his friend his father's enemy."

The impotence of Hamlet's father's ghost. The ancient Semitic ritual of anointing with semen on the forehead. Oedipus, the usurper. Yes, what is this fatherhood all about? And is the work of Cooper or Ellis any more strange

than literature has ever been? Of course not. And in fact, more than most, it drives at the very heart of the most holy of questions. The act of being a father, or a son for that matter, for humans it seems, is a choice. And whether or not it plays out in reality, is not really the issue.

Wrapping Up

I finally return again to the pictures Jesse drew when I began this essay. It has now been a couple of months that I have struggled (mostly just dreaded and procrastinated) to make sense of my original thoughts, the connections seen in these works. I feel like I have failed, and since I hold writers like Cooper and Ellis in such high esteem, it is as if I am looking for recognition in my own symbolic fathers – Cooper especially, since I have known him and he has nurtured my creativity since I was a young man. The fear of becoming that piece of wood is a real concern. But confrontation, I've learned from all of these works, is necessary to development.

Looking at Jesse's watercolors, I realize that there are other mystical connections between men, that of brotherhood. That of seeing someone's ideas develop from the days of punk youth – the 4 am Waffle House musings over coffee and cigarettes (when we probably would have taken those mushrooms and dared to talk about death) to our present positions of responsibility and reflection through art. Bransford's work is steeped in archaic symbolism, and it is also about communion with the dead. In his vision of reality, time is permeable and in a state of flux. There are wormholes through which Templar knights, Bodhisattvas and alchemists exchange eternal knowledge. He drafts patterns of the Chakras becoming the staff of Hippocrates, which in turn becomes the twisted knot of DNA, or the transubstantiated blood of Christ flowing from grail to upturned grail. All of this is borne

from a deep rooted fascination from youth with science fiction and the promise of something out there that transcends the frail cognitive limitations of base humanity.

In a sense that what was what Ellis' *Lunar Park* son Robby dreamed of too, with his drawings and computer screensavers of the moon, his escape plan to Lunar Park or Neverneverland. It may have been what Tommy was looking for as well, by trying to get into that tower, a mission his father took over after his son's death. It was Joyce's overreaching concern trying to form an infinite space within the nutshell day of *Ulysses*. And it is this searching and crafting and communicating that any of us ever have as a weapon against the void.