A COMPANION TO
*A*MERICAN
GOTHIC

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Creation Anxiety in Gothic Metafiction: *The Dark Half* and *Lunar Park*

Sherry R. Truffin

To survey horror or science fiction is to imagine the creative process as fraught with apprehension, confusion, and terror and to wonder if creative human activity has ever produced an unproblematically joyful maker or grateful creature, whether robotic or human. For James Rovira, the trope of creation anxiety most famously dramatized in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the "myth that our creations might attain an independent consciousness and then turn upon us in an apocalyptic rage" (2010: 1), is illuminated by an examination of Blake and Kierkegaard, whose work suggests that the "fea[r] of what we may *create*" reveals "Romantic anxieties about what we have *become* because of the Enlightenment" (1–2). Engaging the cultural and historical issues of their times (tensions between monarchy and democracy, science and religion, and nature and artifice), Blake in particular portrays Enlightenment figures such as Newton and Locke as "unintentionally recreat[ing] themselves" while "thinking that they were merely describing nature" (143). Creations in post-Enlightenment narratives such as *Frankenstein* are thus "recreations" (2) that "externaliz[e] a misrelation in the self" which subordinated imagination to reason and feeling to thought (143) and suggested an uncanny "mechanization of the human" (140).

If, as Leslie Fiedler has argued, Enlightenment ideals are "the substance of our deepest sense of ourselves and our destiny" as Americans (1966: 37), it should not be surprising that post-Enlightenment creation anxiety narratives persist in the American imagination and in the narratives that circulate through our fiction, film, television, and other media. As the Romantics embedded fears about modern humanity into their creation anxiety narratives, contemporary writers embed fears about *post-*

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modern subjectivity in general and authorial subjectivity in particular into theirs. Postmodern thought, intertwined with poststructuralist theory, recasts the individual self as the subject, as a construct composed of shifting roles and functions. The authorial self is either dead (Barthes 1968) or playing dead (Foucault 1979); he is stripped of authority, privilege, and creativity and accorded the same status as his characters (Barthes 1971: 161). He is a "scriptor" and a "ready-formed dictionary" in Barthes's view (1968: 146), and in Foucault's, a legal construct, a method for classifying texts, and a multiplicity of subject positions within and across discourses (1979). Meanwhile, the author's "work" becomes a "text," not a product of genius or imagination but a process "experienced only in the activity of production," a network of signifiers whose signified is infinitely deferred (Barthes 1971: 157). As a consequence, the writer is "born simultaneously with the text; is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes 1968: 145). The author is a social construct both created and erased in writing.

A corollary to such notions is found in self-conscious, metafictional postmodern works that examine the discourses by which subjectivity is constructed. The Gothic metafiction of Stephen King and Bret Easton Ellis, found in works like *The Dark Half* (1989) and *Lunar Park* (2005), focuses on author-protagonists who fear what they create because their creations are re-creations, projections of their creator's anxieties, some conventionally Gothic (the multiple or split self) and others specific to postmodern conceptions of subjectivity in general and authorship in particular. The social construction and subjection of the popular or celebrity author in the work of King and Ellis has received some critical attention (Dowling 2011; Annesley 2011), as have the ways in which Ellis's novel evokes Baudrillard's concept of the "hyperreal" (Beville 2009) and Derrida's writings on "testimony" (Karnicky 2011), but there has been less focus on the implicit engagement of these novels with the postmodern focus on process or production over product. Considered in light of that focus, *The Dark Half* and *Lunar Park* suggest that the writing life is a Gothic trap: if the author is identified with his text, if he exists only in writing, then writer's block is the threat of annihilation. At the same time, so is the successful completion of the text. The writer, trapped in the process of writing, must prolong the act of creation without regard to its product and mull the narcissistic or solipsistic nature of his activity. Meanwhile, his neglected product or creation becomes a miscreation who, like Frankenstein's monster, comes back to haunt and menace him.

Stephen King's *The Dark Half*, dedicated to the writer's pseudonym, Richard Bachman, tells the tale of Thad Beaumont, a critically acclaimed but struggling writer harassed by a blackmailer who threatens to expose Thad's best-selling, crime-writing pseudonym, George Stark, creator of the violent Alexis Machine. Beaumont simultaneously gets ahead of the news story and frees himself from an unpleasant alter ego by announcing Stark's "death" in a macabre *People Magazine* article featuring photographs of the fake author's gravestone. Stark comes to life to take murderous revenge on those responsible for his "death" (blackmailer, publisher, reporter, and photographer) and to kidnap Beaumont's wife and twin toddlers in an effort to force Beaumont

to keep him alive by collaborating on a new book. Part of Beaumont "lust[s]" after the novel (King 1989: 447), but he senses that allowing Stark to use his mind and body to write it means inviting the pen name to take over for good, essentially killing and replacing him. Before encountering his alter ego in person, Thad discovers that a childhood brain tumor that developed when he began writing had actually been the partial physical remains of a twin and that its surgical removal had been accompanied by a mysterious and destructive gathering of sparrows, identified in folklore as "psychopomps" or "harbingers of the dead" (314). Beaumont realizes that he can supernaturally summon the sparrows, which are invisible to Stark, and the two meet at the family's country house and begin to draft a new Alexis Machine novel. Thousands of sparrows descend on the house, consume Stark, and lift him into the sky. Before the sparrows disappear, one savagely bites Beaumont in the face, reminding him that he must pay a price for manipulating supernatural forces.

Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*, inspired by King's ghost stories (Beville 2009: 196), is the story of Bret Easton Ellis, whose early life and career coincide with those of his authorial namesake. Raised in a wealthy California suburb by divorced parents, including an angry, violent father, Ellis attains celebrity after penning the shocking *Less Than Zero*, is tagged as part of the so-called literary "Brat Pack," then goes on to write, among other works, the infamously violent *American Psycho* and face a public struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. From there, the story of Ellis the character diverges from that of Ellis the (actual) author. In a bid to avoid destroying himself with drugs, the protagonist marries a famous actress who, some years prior, had refused to get an abortion after becoming pregnant with Ellis's child. He moves to a suburb where boys are mysteriously disappearing, assumes his role as husband and father of two (his own son Robby plus his wife's daughter Sarah), and continues to write, teach creative writing, and struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. His life becomes increasingly surreal as he finds himself haunted by his dead father and by characters from his books. Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* crashes his Halloween party, and Clayton from *Less Than Zero* appears in his university office; a detective tells him of recent murders apparently copied from *American Psycho*; Ellis's father's old Mercedes (his own first car) lurks around town; his step-daughter's bird doll seems to come to monstrous life; his house physically transforms into a replica of his childhood home; he receives mysterious emails with video attachments of his father's death; and so on. Eventually, Ellis hires a paranormal specialist to cleanse his house of spirits and, in defiance of the internal voice he calls "the writer," pens a story in which Bateman dies, at which point the *American Psycho* murders cease, and the so-called detective, revealed as sharing a name and (fake) occupation with another character in that novel, is arrested as the perpetrator. Ellis retrieves his father's ashes, imprinted with a word not named in the text, and disperses them on the ocean according to his father's wishes, imagining them floating and settling over everything. Meanwhile, he comes to suspect that the disappearing neighborhood boys, eventually including his son, are not kidnapping victims but runaways in search of Neverneverland. He meets briefly with his son, who leaves a note with the same word that had been left in his father's ashes. At

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the conclusion, Ellis has lost his fragile family but has made a kind of peace with his father and son in and through the book he is writing, which becomes the place where he perpetually waits for his son.

Both novels present monstrous creations as part of their creators and, therefore, projections or re-creations. Stark may once have been Beaumont's twin, but, as Beaumont's childhood surgeon explains, a "stronger" fetus sometimes "absorbs the weaker" in the womb, an event described by the anesthesiologist as "*in utero* cannibalism" (10). Stark had, in short, been "there all along" (23), and Beaumont would eventually "have to wrestle [him] for control of the one soul they shared" (297). Beaumont tells *People Magazine* that creating a pen name was like "reinventing" himself (24), and Beaumont's act is doubled within the story by Stark's re-creation of himself in the character Alexis Machine. In some ways, Stark and Machine are twins as well: Beaumont "had always visualized Stark and Alexis Machine as looking alike (and why not, since in a very real sense both had been born at the same time, with *Machine's Way?*)" (135). The straight-razor that Stark uses on his victims matches the weapon preferred by Machine, and Stark's menace comes from methodical, cold, mechanical methods of killing. Beaumont's acknowledged inspiration for Stark had been a writer whose pseudonym created a character resembling a "killer robot" (26), and Beaumont tells his wife Liz that "what we need is for someone to turn [Stark] off" (238). At one point, Liz asks whether Stark or Machine is committing the murders, and he simply says, "I don't think there's any difference" (163). As Stark works through his list of victims, Beaumont fearfully wonders if there is a "different version of Thad Beaumont inside each [writing instrument], like evil genies lurking inside a bunch of bottles" (315).

The protagonist of *Lunar Park* need not ponder that question, since he has already re-created himself multiple times in his works. When Clay comes to Ellis's office to ask him to sign a copy of *Less Than Zero* (whose protagonist is named Clay), he wears a sweater that Ellis owned as a college student, and Ellis is sure that Clay had dressed up as Patrick Bateman for the Halloween party, despite Clay's denials. Aimee Light, a student with whom Ellis is pursuing a dalliance, arrives at the office and says that Clay resembles both Christian Bale (the actor who played Bateman in the film version of *American Psycho*) and Ellis himself. Later, Ellis sees Aimee in a car with Clay, and the coincidences and resemblances continue throughout the book, until Ellis eventually realizes that "Clayton and I were always the same person" (295). Here, creation is re-creation, reproduction, and the monstrous products of the imagination always reveal the monster within.

The terror of confronting the split, multiple, and monstrous self in one's creation is familiar Gothic terrain, but there are traces of a specifically poststructuralist subjectivity in the work of King and Ellis. Their novels, like much metafiction, explicitly engage the poststructuralist view of the authorial self as a type or subject of discourse in general and narrative in particular. Beaumont has a habit of subjecting himself to or turning himself into discourse in journals that unsettle his wife because they are "strangely passionless, almost as if a part of him was standing aside and reporting on his life with its own divorced and almost disinterested eye" (82). These journals are

sometimes in question/answer format and thus feature Beaumont as both interviewer and interviewee. In addition to treating himself as sociological or psychological subject, Beaumont appears to accept that he is, as Barthes puts it, "inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged" (1971: 161). For Beaumont, a pseudonym represents "a higher form of fictional character" (165), and creating one was a way not only to reinvent himself but also to liberate himself from the pressure to maintain critical acclaim (24). But Beaumont is as much a character as Stark is: he admits to "the almost unconscious act of fictionalizing [his] own life" (271), concludes that he is "the only *real* character over whom he had any control at all" (157), and follows Stark's instructions to ditch police protection (and thus protect his family) by imagining himself in a "harmless fiction" (355). Soon after, however, he comes to suspect that "the real horror" is that "what he wanted did not matter" and that "the idea of control was a joke" (280). Beaumont may relish his "paranormal talent" (280) but eventually finds himself subjected to its power.

Lunar Park's protagonist experiences a sense of subjection and powerlessness that is even more profound than Beaumont's. Ellis estranges himself in a manner similar to Beaumont's journals by shifting occasionally from first- to third-person pronouns, and he describes himself not only as his father's creation (7) but also as a "media-made package" (8) and "a mystery, an enigma" that "sold books" (19). In addition to being a consumer brand or commodity, Ellis feels subjected to a range of forces, supernatural, psychological, social, and literary: he claims that "someone — *something* — took over" during the composition of *American Psycho* (13), which "forced itself to be written" (13); feels like "an unreliable narrator" despite the certainty that he is not (122); romanticizes himself as a stereotypically alienated artist, "the loner, the outsider, the one whose solitude seemed endless" (132); and resigns himself to bizarre and humiliating events because they are "all part of a narrative" (139). His writer-self assures him that "when you give up life for fiction you become a character," and he is both "comforted" by his "disembodied" feeling and "dazzled" by his own "dissolution" (190), though he does not give up his quest for agency. Both protagonists, in short, explicitly acknowledge their subjection to forces beyond their control, some conventionally Gothic, some implicitly or explicitly postmodern. They are their own alter egos, strangers to themselves, characters helplessly playing parts, celebrities, or public personas trapped in the media images created of and for them.

Being a construct rather than a creator and a character rather than an author is disorienting to each protagonist but is, however, less terrifying than the annihilation known as writer's block. In both of these novels, lack of creative productivity is experienced as a terrifying annulment of self. Beaumont unwittingly creates the monstrous Stark during a dark period in which he struggles to write a follow-up to his first novel (a critical success but commercial failure), and his wife miscarries a pair of twins. He drinks heavily, feels useless, and is desperate to become productive until Liz suggests using a pseudonym so as to "write any damn thing [he] pleased without *The New York Times Book Review* looking over [his] shoulder the whole time" (23). The idea of creating an autonomous identity becomes a way both to write and to live (26). Stark, who

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is a "paper man" (29) in multiple senses, comes alive and creates mayhem for a time, but then begins to disintegrate physically, to "los[e] cohesion" (287, 310) as a text might. Stark attributes his disintegration to writer's block (340), thus literalizing the authorial terror that created him to begin with: the disappearance of self that accompanies the failure to write in a postmodern world where, as we have seen, the author "is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes 1968: 145). Beaumont empathizes with Stark, recognizing the fear that comes when "the words on the page don't get any darker," while the "white space sure does get whiter" (444). The blank page becomes for King's author-protagonists as existential a terror as Melville's white whale.

For King, the annulment of self that is writer's block is not, however, simply depersonalizing or dehumanizing; it is also emasculating. Steven Bruhm has examined King's metafiction through a Lacanian lens, arguing that through author-protagonists "on the threshold of some crisis with the world of language" (1998: 76) such as the inability to produce speech or text, King "employs the anxieties over language as articulated by Lacan to discuss a postmodern condition" and to dramatize "a crisis of male self-definition that throws into question the very category of male heterosexuality" (77). For Bruhm, the terrifying Gothic double in such texts as *The Shining*, *Salem's Lot*, and *The Dark Half* is "not a projection of repressed desire so much as a discourse, the discourse of the other that is, for Lacan, the language that proceeds from the castrating split that plagues every human subject" (81). As evidence, Bruhm notes Beaumont's ambivalence towards the anxious intimacy that he shares, and even craves, with Stark when collaborating on the Machine novels, as well as the recurring phallic imagery associated with shared writing instruments. King's novel suggests, in any case, that the writer who cannot produce is neither a man nor a self. The protagonist of *Lunar Park* is an androgynous figure prone to sexual experimentation and resigned to his chic status as an "enigma" of gender and sexuality (19), and writer's block creates in him neither castration anxiety nor homosexual panic. Nevertheless, Ellis does connect depression and substance abuse with writer's block (13) and with painfully, passively "waiting for the tawdry end of [his] incendiary career" (23). In addition, he describes the elation he feels as he works on his (purposely ridiculous) new novel, *Teenage Pussy*, after a difficult and debilitating bout of writer's block (68). Finally, the novel as a whole suggests that the writer must *create* in order to have a place in which he can *live* or *be* and dramatizes the horror of failing to do so.

If white space portends the loss of self, the writer composes stories to create, and perpetually re-create, himself. He exists as long as he writes, and only as long as he writes. His attention must be on the process of writing, the production of text, which becomes existence and reality. At one point in *The Dark Half*, Beaumont witnesses one of Stark's murders in his mind, which then "talk[s] to itself in images and crude bright symbols" (153) as he mentally identifies and resolves to warn Stark's next victim. The experience mirrors his mind at work while writing, but he notes that this is "the first time he could remember ever being this way in real life," asks himself if writing is "real life," then assures himself that it is "more like intermission" (153).

Nevertheless, subsequent events challenge – if not destroy – this conviction, which is further complicated by Beaumont's view that in some ways, both the writing of fiction and the world of fiction are superior to real life. He does distinguish between popular and literary fiction: he is grateful that he does not have to "deal with a Saul Bellow person here" (162) and longs to be as focused, confident, and resolute as characters in Stark's novels who "always manage to keep their thoughts on track as they move smoothly from one chapter to the next" (157). Given such distinctions, however, Beaumont sees the writing of fiction of any type as "a bulwark against confusion, maybe even insanity" and "a desperate imposition of order" (129). The question of whether or not writing *is* life resonates, of course, with the poststructuralist view of world as text and author as discourse, and it is no accident that Beaumont is jealous of his pseudonym, not just because Stark's books are more popular than his own, but also because writing comes much more easily to him (16). To some extent, ease of writing corresponds to ease of or comfort in *existing*, a point manifested physically in Stark's strength and grace compared to Beaumont's clumsiness. If Beaumont and Stark alike are constructs, Beaumont is not entirely confident that he is the superior of the two.

Lunar Park offers less explicit description and discussion of the scene of writing than *The Dark Half*, but the novel is presented as a place where its author perpetually resides and includes ongoing dialogue and debate between the protagonist and his writer-self, suggesting that the novel is about its own process, its own composition. Further, Ellis claims that a writer's "physical life of stasis" must be countered by "an opposite world and another self," both of which "have to be constructed daily" (147). Ellis's attitude towards fiction and fictionalizing is, however, the opposite of Beaumont's: where Beaumont sees order, Ellis sees its absence. Ellis the protagonist wants to take control, establish and maintain a sense of sanity, protect his family, and prevent his characters from doing violence; Ellis the writer, however, wants "drama," "pain," "defeat" (147), "chaos," "mystery," and "death" (211). Fictionalizing is making *sense* to Beaumont and making *mayhem* to Ellis, but existence to both.

It is, however, a strangely spectral existence. At one point in *The Dark Half*, a mysterious voice inside Beaumont's head asks, "Who are you when you write, Thad?" (129), a question to which he has no sure reply. Beaumont is both disturbed and attracted by this erasure of identity: invisibility had, after all, been the appeal of the pseudonym (24). In *Lunar Park*, Ellis presents himself as a ghost, first mockingly (he wakes up the morning after his Halloween party naked with a hangover, drapes a white sheet over himself, and walks into the kitchen looking like a ghost) (52), then seriously, as he realizes that he scares and haunts Robby just as his father scared and haunted him (298). He acknowledges a desire to "erase" himself (23) with drugs, and his writer-self joins Clayton in telling him to "disappear here" (295), presumably the novel itself, which ends with a promise that Robby can always find his father "right here, [his] arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*" (307). Such descriptions resonate with Barthes's contention that writing is "neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (1968: 142).

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To conceptualize the author as a "body writing" and the writing process as both self-creation and self-nullification suggests a Gothic trap by which final, complete creation is as much a threat of erasure as writer's block even as it evokes the age-old equivalence of sex and death. The need to prolong or extend the process of writing seems a plausible, if partial, explanation of Beaumont's writing dilemma. Writing is painful, harrowing work for him, but not for Stark, who composed the first sixteen pages of his first novel "without a single scratch-out" (28). When the twins finally meet, Stark focuses solely on "the words, the words, the words" (447) and expresses total confidence in his ability to keep producing them: Stark does *not* appear to be out of ideas, Beaumont's public statements to the contrary notwithstanding. The part of Beaumont that his wife senses is "crazy" (44) *wants* to be replaced by Stark, perpetually able to write without performance anxiety, to display both productivity and virility. The protagonist of *Lunar Park* lingers in writing, preferring a book in process over a completed product. Ellis works on his "pornographic thriller" *Teenage Pussy* "daily, even though it [is] still only in the outline stage" (68), and spends more time composing imaginary book reviews than writing the novel. When his agent reminds him that his deadline is two months away and that the publisher will be "displeased by extensions" (71), Ellis accuses her of "sounding coy" and confesses that he "like[s] it" (71). His fear of personal commitment appears to have its corollary in his writing process, and both suggest a view of closure as death. The connections are further illuminated by an image from another work of Gothic metafiction by Stephen King, *Misery*, which compares writing to masturbation (1987: 144), pleasurable activity with no end beyond itself.

The overarching view that the author writes for himself – whether to defeat the annihilating white space; stave off insanity; relieve sexual tension; unleash repressed perversion; or create, re-create, or nullify himself – accounts to some extent for the guilt and shame associated with writing in each novel. When police arrive at Beaumont's house to question him about Stark's first murder, he feels "sure" of his guilt before ascertaining the purpose of the visit (84). In fact, he thinks that he had "done *everything* . . . and would be powerless not to confess" (84). He jokes that he has "never killed anyone . . ." – "except in books" (95), but throughout the novel, he feels "responsible for *everything*" (214). The repeated emphasis on the word *everything* suggests not only that he regrets unleashing a monster on the world but also that he feels that there is something essentially shameful about his entire writing life. Part of that shame comes from the ancient notion that poets are liars: when Beaumont reads the *People Magazine* article, he notes several of his own fabrications and misrepresentations but grimly reminds himself that he is "paid to tell lies" (30). More shame comes from another view of writing with a long history: that of author as "medium" for supernatural or spiritual forces, one who "invite[s] ghosts" (379). Beyond that, Beaumont feels like a plagiarist for reaping financial rewards from Stark's labors. In fact, the *least* problematic description of writing in *The Dark Half* is trying to scratch "that one place on your back you can't quite reach" (250). All in all, there is a sense of shame for accepting money for an activity that is reflexive, self-serving, deceptive, or dangerous.

Lunar Park repeats the notion that a successful writer is a vocational liar (146), adding that Ellis has been "inordinately rewarded for participating in [the] process" of embracing "drama and pain" (147), but is more explicit in its portrayal of writing as a narcissistic activity. Ellis reports having been diagnosed with a condition comically termed "acquired situational narcissism" (24), and his thoughts and actions throughout the novel reveal a man obsessively self-absorbed. He believes that a "dream" is "what a novel should be" (283), and most of the time, regardless of what he may be pretending to do, he is "dreaming about [him]self" (10). He admits to writing *American Psycho* for vaguely therapeutic reasons (Patrick Bateman was his father, reimagined) (13), and during a dinner with Hollywood agents, he describes *Lunar Park* as "the pitch" he is "making in order to save [him]self" (276). As his surroundings become more surreal and frightening, his writer-self speaks more and more often, functioning like the devil on his shoulder or Poe's imp of the perverse. Ellis regretfully admits dreaming up terrible scenarios of torture for *American Psycho* at "a time when physical pain and real suffering held no meaning for [him]" (122), but his writer-self exults at the possibility of Bateman's return (212) and gleefully reminds Ellis that he had once asked to "see the worst" (251). At one point, Ellis flatly states that "all of what the writer wanted fill[s] [him] with remorse" (212). Towards the end, as Ellis begins seeing and understanding his son Robby, he is shocked to consider that Robby is "the focal point of the haunting" (271), not him, and that he is the "ghost" (298) and not the victim. The writer tells him, "not everything is about you, even though you would like to think so" (271). To one degree or another, the author-protagonists imagined by King and Ellis regard the writing life as solipsistic and are unable to free themselves from this uneasy recognition or its attendant shame.

The view of writing as an essentially and profoundly selfish process (creation, reinvention, perpetuation of self) suggests that the creation or product has been displaced or replaced as a primary object of concern. In *The Dark Half* and *Lunar Park*, such a situation does not appear to sit well with creatures who feel betrayed by their makers. Beaumont explicitly compares Stark to Frankenstein's monster (27), and Stark is enraged to find himself discarded by a creator who brought him to life in an effort to save his own sanity, career, and sense of self, then decided to "drive a stake through his heart" in order to "write [his] own books again" (29). To add to the indignity, Beaumont tells the reporter interviewing him that Stark had "died of natural causes" (23) and had been "running out of things to say" (29), an idea that Beaumont acknowledges as "utterly full of shit" (30). The creature serves the psychological, professional, economic, and even ontological needs of the creator only to be forsaken, misrepresented, and destroyed. In return, Stark menaces Beaumont, first in nightmares (33–39), and then materially, violently. Beaumont's need is to write for *himself*, not to create anything lasting or meaningful or valuable. It stands to reason that his creation might suffer under – and resist – such conditions.

The echoes of *Frankenstein* are equally clear in *Lunar Park* as Ellis is confronted by products of his imagination, creatures that refuse to disappear once they have served his needs, signifieds that refuse to be endlessly deferred. Ellis refuses to take respon-

sibility for a time only ing on hav- it" (13) eve to do with' ing serial k killings, a ence of *An* realized wi sighting th then arou fan, includ it turns ou *American P* lurk in the Aimee's m in which E detective i of "the na proclaimin implied, se story a fail as soon as something his view, b the bound that Clayt not provok composing of [his] be thing othe monsters s stage, the

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sibility for creating *American Psycho*, claiming that he would "black out for hours at a time only to realize that another ten pages had been scrawled out" (13), and insisting on having been "repulsed by this creation" and unwilling to "take . . . credit for it" (13) even though its publication brought him "more money than [he] knew what to do with" (12). Ellis reports that after its release, he gained notoriety for "introducing serial killer chic to the nation" (12) and became tormented by the fear of copycat killings, a fear that Jeffrey Dahmer, whom Ellis was sure had been "under the influence of *American Psycho*," appeared to realize (14). Eventually, however, the fear is realized within the novel as Bateman's appearance, first at the Halloween party (a sighting that produces in Ellis "a moment of pure, almost visceral despair") (48) and then around town, corresponds to grisly murders eventually attributed to a crazed fan, including the murder of Aimee Light, Ellis's young would-be paramour (and, it turns out, forgotten fictional creation, excised from the published manuscript of *American Psycho*). Unlike Stark, Bateman does not confront his maker, preferring to lurk in the shadows, asserting his existence despite having been disavowed. After Aimee's murder, Ellis, like Beaumont, resolves to destroy his creature and pens a story in which Bateman burns to death. Significantly, Ellis regards the discovery that the detective is both the copycat killer and another of his fictional creations as evidence of "the narrative saving itself" (281), and the story ends with Bateman ominously proclaiming that he is "everywhere" as he burns (283). Bateman persists, and, it is implied, so do his admirers. Equally significant is that Ellis the writer declares the story a failure even though the murderous pseudo-detective is apprehended by police as soon as Ellis finishes composing it: the story is "static and artificial and precise," something other than a "dream – which is what a novel should be" (283). It fails, in his view, because it is a "denial" (283). Clayton does confront his creator directly, but the boundary between Clayton and Bateman is not clear: after all, Ellis is convinced that Clayton *was* Bateman on Halloween. Clayton's source text, *Less Than Zero*, does not provoke the same revulsion in Ellis that *American Psycho* does, but he admits to composing this first novel "quickly in an eight-week crystal-meth binge on the floor of [his] bedroom in L.A." (5), suggesting a kind of authorship characterized by something other than full care, control, and craftsmanship. Considered together, Ellis's monsters suggest that when the compelling, obsessive need to create takes center stage, the creature is left neglected, misshapen, disavowed, and angry or defiant.

This last description is, of course, indistinguishable from the dynamic between creator and creature in Mary Shelley's original tale (Botting 1991), and it is as problematic to draw a clear line of demarcation between her "modern Prometheus" and the postmodern varieties imagined by King and Ellis as it is to pinpoint precise boundaries between and among the Romantic, the modern, the modernist, and the postmodern. Rovira has posited that "if German Romanticism is medievalism after the Enlightenment, Postmodernism is Romanticism after Modernism" (2010: 119), a formulation that insists on historical continuities and, therefore, helps to explain the persistence of tropes such as creation anxiety. Patricia Waugh regards metafiction as "a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels" (1984: 5), and of course the self-reflexive

attitude characteristic of metafiction hardly originated with the novel. The distinctiveness of metafiction is that it explicitly and often parodically exploits what Waugh terms the "creation/description paradox which defines the status of *all* fiction," the paradox by which describing and creating are one and the same (88). Since Gothic tropes (curses, traps, monsters) literalize psychological and social anxieties, it stands to reason that the "creation/description" paradox at the heart of metafiction might find a home in the Gothic, and Stephen King and Bret Easton Ellis are joined by writers such as Jennifer Egan and Jonathan Carroll in examining authorial subjectivity in works of Gothic metafiction. The creation anxiety narratives under consideration here suggest both the humor and the horror of replacing the author with the scriptor and subsuming him into the production of discourse that, in turn, makes monsters with words rather than with science or technology, grave-robbing or computer-generated graphics. In the process, these narratives suggest that the freedom of continually being in process and under construction comes at the cost of incessant authorial anxiety and the specter of a marginalized product. The postmodern writer continually creates and re-creates himself while both the critic and the creature issue a death sentence imposed by the writer himself. Small wonder that he is terrorized by the white space, the finished product, and everything in between.

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