

**CANONS OF TRANSGRESSION: SHOCK, SCANDAL, AND SUBVERSION  
FROM MATTHEW LEWIS' *THE MONK* TO BRET EASTON ELLIS'  
*AMERICAN PSYCHO***

By

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the relationship between transgressive texts—traditionally defined as those that aim to challenge and possibly subvert the artistic, social, or political traditions of a culture—and their acceptance within literary canons. First tracing the evolution of the processes of canon-formation, this study develops a framework for transgressive texts to reach canonical status, using John Guillory’s framework of “cultural capital” to address the issue of canonicity and Georges Bataille’s theories on transgression. While the taboo-breaking properties of transgressive texts might seem directly to exclude them from meeting canonical criteria—traditionally strongly based on ideas of social righteousness—this study proposes, however, that it is specifically because of their ground-breaking perspectives that, as their stock as cultural capital increases, texts such as Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* are capable of shaping and/or altering accepted perceptions of socio-cultural standards and criteria.

## RESUMEN

Esta tesis examina la relación entre textos transgresivos—tradicionalmente definidos como textos que intentan retar y posiblemente subvertir las tradiciones artísticas, sociales o políticas de una determinada cultura—y su aprobación dentro del canon literario. Inicialmente trazando la evolución del proceso de la formación canónica, esta investigación desarrolla un marco para que los textos transgresivos lleguen al estatus canónico, usando el concepto de “capital cultural” de John Guillory para tratar el debate sobre el canon y las teorías de Georges Bataille sobre la transgresión. Mientras que las propiedades transgresivas de romper tabúes que se encuentran en estos textos hacen parecer excluirles de los criterios canónicos—tradicionalmente basados firmemente en ideas de rectitud social—esta investigación propone, sin embargo, que es precisamente por sus perspectivas innovadoras que, al crecer sus capitales cultural, textos como *The Monk* de Matthew Lewis y *American Psycho* de Bret Easton Ellis son capaces de dar forma a y/o alterar las percepciones aceptadas de los estándares y criterios socio-culturales.

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## INTRODUCTION

If one looks at the moments in history when literary works toppled the taboos of the ruling morals or offered the reader new solutions for the moral casuistry of his lived praxis, which thereafter could be sanctioned by the consensus of all readers in the society then a still-little-studied area of research opens itself up to the literary historian.

Hans Robert Jauss, *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*

Literary works that question ruling conventions by shocking their audiences and arousing controversy are frequently dubbed “transgressive.” They are often regarded as potentially subversive by institutional authorities because they transgress social and/or cultural taboos and prohibitions. More specifically, it appears that these prohibitions—and the inclination to violate them—are commonly related to the natural drives of sex and aggression, and transgressive works typically depict these instincts in gruesome and abhorrent ways.

In the two texts chosen for this study, Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, both widely considered transgressive, these drives are graphically literalized in explicit accounts of sex and violence. By depicting these social taboos, both Lewis and Ellis not only challenged the social guidelines that govern these moral prohibitions, their publication has also spurred major controversy, which contributed to positioning them in the annals of literary history next to other scandalous

works by the likes of the Marquis de Sade, Charles Baudelaire, James Joyce, and Vladimir Nabokov.

While for twentieth-century theorists such as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault transgressions offer both an “immediacy of being” and “limitless possibilities” by producing a “liberating” effect—an issue that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two—an overview of literary history will demonstrate that texts of transgression have played a primordial role in shaping the historical, political, and cultural traditions of the Occident. As a matter of fact, the elements of shock and subversion linked to accounts of sex and violence have figured in literary works that date back to Antiquity. Widely regarded as the first literary text of the Western tradition, Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad* is a dramatic, sometimes shocking, account of an incident that occurred during the final year of the Achaean attack on Troy. But while critical discussion since its dissemination has mainly focused on the historical and aesthetical properties of the work as well as its celebration of the heroic values embodied by its main characters (Knox 23-27), few have elaborated on the explicitly violent nature of some sections of the text. The scenes that relate Achilles’ rampage in Book 20 of *The Iliad* are particularly grizzly, as this excerpt exemplifies:

...Achilles lunged  
at Demoleon, son of Antenor, a tough defensive fighter—  
he stabbed his temple and cleft his helmet’s cheekpiece.  
None of the bronze plate could hold it—boring through  
the metal and skull the bronze spearpoint pounded,  
Demoleon’s brains splattered all inside his casque ... (516)

A few lines later, Achilles delivers a deadly blow to Tros, as he is begging to be spared:

...Achilles slit open his liver,  
the liver spurted loose, gushing with dark blood,  
drenched his lap and the night swirled down his eyes  
as his life breath slipped away. (518)

The exact purpose of relating these scenes in such vivid detail may remain unclear, yet there is little doubt as to what type of affective response they trigger in the reader; amongst other passages of an equally gruesome nature, these descriptions are capable of shocking and discomforting even the most desensitized of readers. Some may claim that representations of ultra-violence at all levels of cultural production is reaching an all-time high in post-modern society, yet this passage from *The Iliad* demonstrates that quite on the contrary, explicit scenes of gore and violence have always formed part of the western literary landscape.

Likewise, explicit representations of sexual behavior and conduct, i.e. so-called “pornography,” sometimes bordering on what some may consider “obscenity,” also date back to antiquity. Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* is an extensive and detailed guide on the art of seduction and intrigue. Building on a literary tradition of love poetry, Ovid's poems are more playful than obscene—at least by more modern definitions of pornography. Nevertheless, his licentious message was perceived as subversive to the official program of moral reforms then being promoted by the emperor Augustus for it promoted a type of sexual libertinage that the monarch was attempting to suppress. Consequently, in an attempt to defuse the danger his text posed to guides of moral conduct and social behavior, Ovid was banned from Rome and condemned to live the remainder of his life in exile.

While the rationale for de-emphasizing the shock-value of *The Iliad's* most gruesome passages and the subversive potential of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* might never be fully uncovered, what the previous discussion highlights is that amidst various efforts to overlook or repress them, the elements of shock and subversion have formed an inherent part of Western literary canons since their early beginnings. The question that remains, however, is the nature of the response of the literary establishment and popular opinion when these elements are over-emphasized in works that purposely "transgress" established norms of morality and society by toppling social and cultural taboos. Following Hans Robert Jauss' suggestion, this is specifically what the following study will attempt to assess. How are so-called "transgressive" texts dealt with and possibly assimilated within canonical discourses of the Western literary tradition throughout specific periods in history? In exploring this subject, this study will also investigate how these works affect their respective audiences and how, in turn, they are affected by critical responses determining their literary potential and prospective influence. In addition, what perspectives—or "solutions," to adopt Jauss' terminology—do they offer regarding the moral, social, and artistic guidelines they transgress?

The first chapter, "Canonicity and Canon-formation: A Brief Historical Overview," reviews various theories pertaining to canon-formation. Beginning from the etymological significance of the word *kanon* in Greek; it examines why Plato—perhaps the first-ever "canonizer"—determines which books should be taught in the academic institutions of his beloved Republic. The chapter next moves to the Middle Ages to explain the criteria of selection for the Biblical canon, before exploring the various shifts of paradigms outlined by Trevor Ross and Jonathan Krammick that have occurred in

following centuries due to the changes in the social, economical, and political contexts. The discussion outlines the ways in which the eighteenth century was a determining period in canon-formation discourses, where the vast dissemination of cultural production, the divisions between high and low culture—which distinguish between literary and popular texts—and the consecration of Shakespeare’s greatness all played major roles in establishing new criteria of selection. In assessing the twentieth century, this section considers the ways in which the various advances in science and technology, the radical changes in the geo-political contexts, spurred by a series of particularly devastating armed conflicts, as well as the significant advances in civil rights for ethnic and gender minorities in the late 1960s, set a crowded stage for the canon debates that ensued after the second world war. As a result, canon-formation in the latter half of the twentieth century is fraught with “culture wars” and “identity politics,” as well as the polarization of the debate between what John Guillory calls “traditionalists” and “challengers,” proponents and opponents of what theorists such as Harold Bloom, Terry Eagleton, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Edward Said have identified as the “Traditional Western Canon”. Finally, in reading *Cultural Capital* by John Guillory and “The Politics of Knowledge” by Edward Said, it appears that there cannot be any set criteria for deciding who or what belongs to the canon; rather, the canon is “cultural capital,” a dynamic entity which is determined not only by the *literati*, reviewers, critics, and academicians, but predominantly through the various institutions of higher learning where canonical works and their authors are read, interpreted, and re-distributed.

The concept of transgression in literary discourse is deconstructed in Chapter Two, “Shock, Scandal, and Subversion: A Deconstructive Analysis of Transgression,” where transgressive literature is considered as a potential indicator and/or instrument of underlying changes in art, culture, and society. Commencing with a standard definition of transgression as that which breaks established norms and conventions, the chapter will examine what happens when, as a result of shifting conditions, these conceptions are de-centered. In parallel, since transgression as a theoretical concept has been marshaled by theorists such as Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault, a reworking of the standard definition will prove necessary before establishing a framework under which transgressive works can be discussed and analyzed. Following the work of these critics as well as the contributions of Stephen Greenblatt and Anthony Julius, this chapter will conclude by investigating the corollaries between the poetics and politics of transgression, how the literary characteristic of transgression suggests that works of art can act subversively in order to contribute to paradigm shifts both in academia and society.

The third chapter, titled “Worlds Collide: A Historical Approach to Canon Formation in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*,” will explore under which evolving conditions the cultural capital of a work deemed to be transgressive, both on the grounds of genre and moral content, is reappraised. By reviewing various secondary sources, the chapter will begin with a brief description of the genre of the Gothic novel, before moving to a review of the reception of Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* in the late eighteenth century. Drawing from various sources such as Michael Gamer and James Watt, this section will demonstrate that although immediately popular, Lewis’ novel was not reviewed

favorably by its contemporaries on two grounds: first, the Gothic genre was not an accepted form of “serious” literature, and second, *The Monk* was labeled as morally objectionable for the acts of human depravity it depicted. In that regard, Anna M. Wittmann has argued that because the Gothic typically blended components of high and low literature and relied extensively on the poetics of shock and horror, its acceptance as serious literature was precluded. The next section will deal exclusively with the transgressive characteristics of the novel, and how, through a series of cultural “negotiations” and “exchanges” in regard to evolving literary conventions and criticism, its value as cultural capital has been reevaluated.

“Pornography and Violence: The Dialectics of Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*,” the fourth and final chapter, deals exclusively with the reception, interpretation, and dissemination of Ellis’ 1991 highly publicized and highly controversial novel about a Wall Street serial-killer. The chapter analyzes various controversial passages and considers the ways in which various literary devices have been meticulously assembled to craft a satire of consumer capitalism. Next, a review of the uproar caused by the novel’s release will reveal that there is a polarized debate concerning *American Psycho*’s literary claims. Some, such as Roger Rosenblatt and Alberto Manguel, believe the novel to be worthless and despicable, while others like Elizabeth Young and Alan Murphet consider it to be an important novel, partly on the very same grounds the former find it contemptible. This chapter will consider to what extent the controversial content of *American Psycho* transgresses the accepted boundaries of contemporary society, a society that seems consistently to “push the envelope” in its representations of sex and violence. While taking into consideration the subversive

power of art as articulated in the second chapter, this section will conclude by asking what consequences the social critique contained in the novel might have for the coming era.

## REVIEW OF SECONDARY SOURCES

This investigation originated in 1998 when I discovered Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Because of its transgressive nature, the novel had a deep and profound impact, not only on a visceral level, but also on my burgeoning intellect, for it embodied what I believed "great" literature was about: a form of cultural production which was both radical and rebellious, challenging and dangerous, a text intended to shock and stir the reader out of his or her complacency into a state of reflection and introspection, while at the same time challenging traditional hierarchies of thought, taste, and value. The text had already been chosen yet I had to decide on a suitable theoretical framework under which its potential could be fully investigated. On the one hand, the concept of literary canons would let to discuss the ways in which texts are awarded prominence in a given cultural context and labeled as "great" and/or "a classic." On the other, an exploration of the notion of transgression would permit to determine the ways in which a text that is considered to cross boundaries and challenge traditional artistic and social conventions are capable of entering literary canons that have historically been heavily reliant upon criteria that stress moral righteousness and social conformity. Once the theoretical framework was determined it was decided that adding another text would better illustrate my thesis and I finally settled on Matthew Lewis' 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk*. This text would prove to be particularly well-suited to illustrate the intersections between transgression and literary canons, for it would not only provide a historical perspective on the process of canon-formation but also explore the interactive dynamics between canonicity and transgression as critical perceptions of taste and value vary over time and corresponding literary periods.

The notion of literary canons has been perhaps one of the most debated issues in academia over the past 20 years, and there is a vast array of secondary sources from which to choose. Apart from a number of essays from prominent authors and literary critics—so-called “canonizers”—over the ages, I decided to focus mainly on 4 books, two of which retrace the evolution of the English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. Trevor Ross’ *The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* provides for a comprehensive historical account of the various paradigm shifts that have determined canonical criteria for the last five centuries. While it turns out that in the period covered by this book, criteria were set according to a belief in absolute aesthetical and historical values, Ross succeeds in outlining some of the major issues surrounding contemporary debates such as the various socio-cultural factors prompting canonical revisions; hierarchal ideas of literary value; the relationship between authors, literary critics, and the marketplace; the idea of fixed interpretations and meanings literary works, and ideas of set and contingent evaluative means. In *Making the English Canon: Print Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770*, Jonathan Krammick focuses on what he considers to be an important period in the establishment of the English literary canon. While Krammick claims that the idea of a canon of literature came into existence in the middle of the eighteenth century, he refers specifically to the literary canon in terms of a set of classic, acclaimed texts; he is not discussing the evolution of the canon in schools. He argues that it is particularly the issue of “print capitalism” and the commercial concern for the distribution of literary goods which precipitated the canonization of books and their authors.

Whereas these historical accounts are essential to understand the modern debate, most of the crucial theoretical implications pertaining to the idea of literary canons as they stand today are summed in John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* and David H. Richter *Falling Into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. While the latter offers a comprehensible collection of essays representing the varying perspectives on canon-formation and criteria that determine literary value from renowned critics and scholars (such as Edward Said, Harold Bloom, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Guillory challenges both the "traditionalists" and the "populists" factions of the debate by resituating the problem of canon-formation in a new theoretical framework drawn from a term first coined by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>. For Guillory, canons are "cultural capital" and the current debate should not be focused on so-called "representative" and/or "aesthetic" values but on the various forces which regulate the distribution and consumption of literary works. Guillory divides his book into three main sections: "Critique" which discusses the issues surrounding the current canonical debate; "Case Studies," divided into three chapters, which explains 1) how the inclusion of Gray and Wordsworth in the vernacular canon displays the connection between the "articulation of the school's institutional agendas with social struggles in the society at large" (x); 2) how the rise of New Criticism resulted in the canonization of the moderns and the revaluing of the metaphysical poets; and 3) how literary theory has become the authority in the attribution of stock value to literary works by regulating the distribution of cultural capital within the institutional curriculum. For the purposes of this study and

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<sup>1</sup> In "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu develops the notion of capital beyond its strict economic conception to include "immaterial" and "non-economic" forms of capital, specifically cultural and symbolic capital, as they become subjected to various forms of exchanges and transactions.

in order to build a didactic foundation on which the cultural capital of transgressive texts could be appraised, I complemented Guillory's framework with Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "cultural negotiations and exchanges" from *Shakespearean Negotiations*, which argues that cultural productions such as literary works are given prominence through the multiple transactions (reviews, representations, critical appraisals, etc.) to which they are subjected throughout ensuing periods in history, from the date of their publication to the present.

The concept of Transgression remains a rather uncharted territory in the realm of critical theory, especially as it pertains to literary works. Nevertheless a comprehensive introduction to the subject in the visual arts is Anthony Julius' *Transgression: The Offences of Art*. He demonstrates that three kinds of transgressive art exist: (1) an art that challenges established artistic conventions; (2) an art that defiles the beliefs and sentiments of its audience by breaking social taboos; and (3) an art that challenges and disobeys the rules of the state. While these categories rely mostly on a standardized definition of transgression which might remain useful, perhaps the most compelling and ground-breaking study and analysis of transgression as a theoretical concept was undergone by Georges Bataille in *Visions of Excess* and *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Drawing from Sigmund Freud's conception of taboo in *Totem and Taboo* and his reading of the Marquis de Sade, Bataille claims that new, liberating, and transcending states can be achieved by toppling taboos. Once again, drawing from Freud, this time from the notion of the unconscious, Bataille is especially concerned with "excess," mostly the experiences of sex and death, which he believes hold "endless possibilities." Michel Foucault's reading of Bataille in "A Preface to Transgression" will help establish

a framework under which transgressive works can be discussed and analyzed, as well as investigate the corollaries between the poetics and politics of transgression and more specifically, the ways in which the literary characteristic of transgression suggests that works of art can act subversively in order to contribute to paradigm shifts both in academia and in society.

Due to the advent of new critical approaches and interpretive techniques in the second half of the twentieth century, the Gothic has experienced some type of “revival,” and the number of secondary sources published on the subject is extensive. Nevertheless, I attempted to focus on the most relevant sources to discuss the particular concepts that I most concerned with. Walter Allen, in *The English Novel: A Short Critical History*, and Ernest A. Baker, in *The History of The English Novel*, were first consulted in order to provide a historical background of the Gothic. Nevertheless, James Watt’s *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre, and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* and Michael Gamer’s *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon-Formation* provide for the most comprehensive contemporary analysis of the Gothic, especially as it pertains to the patterns of reception of the genre in the burgeoning literary market of the late eighteenth century. Both authors observe that the cultural ideologies of the period established a hierarchy of genre and stigmatized the Gothic as a “low”—and thus, non-canonical—form of cultural production. In addition, Gamer investigates how the Gothic contributed to the then-emerging “romantic ideology” which canonized authors such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Several books and collections of essays explore the interpretative possibilities of the Gothic provided by psychoanalytical criticism—and especially Freud’s theories as articulated in “the Uncanny,” which

explores the various unsettling effects the uncanny might produce on the reader. In that respect, Elizabeth Napier's *The Failure of Gothic* and Michelle A. Massé *In the Name of Love* are noteworthy because they serve as platforms for discussion of various psychoanalytical considerations and dichotomies as they pertain particularly to the Gothic, such as repression and regression, scopophilia/exhibitionism and sadism/masochism.

For the discussion of Ellis' *American Psycho* postmodern aesthetics of transgression, I draw from a number of essays and critiques that explore the various forms of pastiche and borrowed dialogism of the novel. While Julian Murphet's *Reader's Guide* offers a comprehensive overview of Ellis' literary tropes, Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* and Mary Harron's film adaptation were especially helpful in determining the transgressive nature enclosed in Ellis' satire of consumer capitalism.

## Chapter 1

### CANON-FORMATION, TRANSGRESSION AND CULTURAL CAPITAL: A BRIEF

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Those radicals for whom high culture is *ipso facto* reactionary forget that much of it is well to the left [for it] would be hard to argue that the values of canonical literature as a whole support the political establishment.

Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*

The issues pertaining to canons of literature, and to the process by which works of literature are included in what are widely perceived as authoritative lists of works and authors, are among the most debated topics in the field of contemporary literary studies. Canonical texts and their authors are recognized as “great” and/or labeled “classics,” and are widely thought to contain certain properties that mark them as more significant than other, more easily dismissible works of “lesser” value. Most noteworthy, however, is that works and their authors are not deemed canonical for the same reasons—or, based on the same criteria—various considerations of genre, literary traditions, scholarship, as well as critical and popular acclaim come into play to assess their potential and value. Literary texts often become canonized because they are considered particularly representative of an artistic and/or movement, genre, culture, or a specific place and/or period in history. As a matter of illustration, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* has been included in canonical lists for embodying the tenets of modernism, while the critical praise for Emily Dickinson’s *Poems* by legions of poets and critics alike casts very little

doubt as to her standing in the canon. The work of Edgar Allan Poe is granted canonical recognition for establishing the genre of the American Gothic while Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* would stand out as a representative work of class and race struggle. The same can be said for more ancient and/or historical works, which in themselves mark the beginning of various traditions and their respective canons. While *Beowulf* is widely recognized as the first literary work of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, *The Iliad* stands as the first text of the Western Tradition.

The evaluative process which assesses the difference between canonical and non-canonical texts brings to mind the polarity between "High" and "Low" culture as it occurs at various level of production, distribution, and consumption. High/Low discourses represent a tradition of socio-cultural distinction which first appeared in the early middle ages, peaked at the dawn of the twentieth century, and gradually eroded as a result of what John Guillory and Terry Eagleton call the "Culture Wars," a period which closely paralleled the most recent revisions of the academic canon in the late twentieth century. In *European Literature and the Middle Ages* Ernst Robert Curtius notes that the idea of "the Classic author" stemmed from the Roman Empire where citizens belonging to a higher tax bracket were called "*Classici*" (Curtius in Stallybras et al. 1) Subsequently, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out, this categorization led to classifying authors and their works: "[this system of hierarchy] separated out a distinct elite set (the *classici*) from the commonality (the *proletarius*) and used this model for literary discriminations" (1). The ramifications of separating authors and works according to a High/Low distinction by labeling them either "classics" and "popular" remained throughout the ages and while the classist overtone was dropped, there is a strong belief

amongst so-called “minorities” that the Western literary canon typically reflected writers whose ideals mirrored those of the established ruling class.

High/Low categorizations not only designate the level of production, distribution, and consumption of respective works, but also indicate a distinct style and genre as the social ideas and moral values these texts promote, whereas High texts, i.e. the “classics,” typically aspire to depict “the best that is thought and known in the world” as Matthew Arnold points out. Critics and writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, and Harold Bloom believe that the canon should only endorse works from the High end of cultural production, and are therefore considered to be “elitists” by those challenging this position. For this reason, this latter group, at times called “populists,” consider that the process of selection for including texts in the canon closely mirrors the ideologies of the dominant social classes, i.e. white western European males (Guillory “The Canon” 233), and in the midst of the political upheaval and social reforms of the post-war era, they advocated a complete revision of the academic canon to include works from all levels of cultural production, regardless of class, race, and gender. Even though Guillory emphasizes the fact that canon-formation is a historical process of selection rather than an ideological process of exclusion (*Cultural Capital* 16), the presence of a certain subversive socio-ideological element is inevitable even within the historical process Guillory privileges. Regardless, if one considers the state of the canon as it is represented in academic curricula, it appears that the canon has been revised, or more accurately, fragmented. Much to the lament of the likes of Allan Bloom (232), in lieu of presenting one unified tradition, the university is now offering reading lists representing several diverse cultural traditions. In other words, *the* canon has divided itself into *multiple*

canons representing the various identities of race, class, and gender and their respective traditions. While some may revere the multicultural emphasis of newer university curricula, others lament and criticize these changes on the grounds of being “separatist,” of reinforcing “difference” rather than “equality,” and claim that the humanistic emphasis of a unified canon cannot be effectively implemented in multiple, yet fragmentary, canons.

Somewhere along the lines of the sharp polarity that characterizes High/Low discourses of “universality” and “representation” between so-called “elitists” and “populists,” there are a number of works that deliberately threaten established hierarchies, regardless of predominant socio-cultural ideologies, for their purpose is specifically to transgress such narrow boundaries. In this sense, so-called “transgressive” texts are not merely counter-ideological but rather, “non-ideological,” for their subversive temperament does not specifically aim to overturn established High/Low hierarchies. To adopt current critical terminology, James Gardner considers transgressive texts to represent a “radical otherness,” while according to Anthony Julius, their purpose is precisely to shock and discomfort; sometimes to subvert established rules and conventions (44-6), sometimes for pedagogical reasons (33), or even, as Georges Bataille would put it, to achieve internal freedom by violating the taboos imposed by a society dominated by concerns about productivity and order (qtd. in Julius 21-2).

Interestingly enough, what has become the canon includes works that were at first shunned specifically because of their very transgressive nature. Regardless of whether they were produced from either High or Low levels of production and, similarly aimed for High/Low levels of consumption—or of which side of canonical debates they

belonged to—these works were at once banned or put to trial, or more subtly, ignored, or even ghetto-ized. Both the literary establishment and popular opinion have effective ways of dealing with material they regard to threaten their respective ideologies and break their prescribed guidelines of moral conduct and social behavior. The case of the Marquis de Sade is perhaps the most infamous, but more recently, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* were put to trial for obscenity, while the (homo-) sexually explicit novels of Dennis Cooper and the writings of Kathy Acker with their perpetual mix-match of genres, discourses, and cross-references are ignored and under-exposed regardless of their "literary" merit and "value." Yet the fact is that in the case of now classic works like *Ulysses* and *Lolita*, these texts have found a cherished place in the newer curricula of universities while Acker and Cooper remain in the margins. This prompts the following question: what are the underlying processes of academic canon-formation as it pertains to transgression if some texts happen to be gradually assimilated while others are continuously disregarded? More particularly, what then is to be done of works that clearly transgress the boundaries of the permissible within the norms of society, especially, when one is drawn to the fact that there is an entire tradition of canonical works that were at one point in time considered to be equally shocking and subversive?

This brief discussion outlines some of the major aspects of transgression and canon-formation, as well as their possible interconnections. Nevertheless, to come to an accurate assessment of how High/Low categorizations and ideological discourses have shaped the processes of canonization up to twenty-first century academia, it is necessary to review briefly the ways in which such processes were established as well as their

evolution through the first three millennia of curricular decisions and canon-revising debates.

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The word “canon” finds its origin in the Greek word *kanon* which means “reed” or “rod,” used as an instrument of measure. In turn, it seems particularly fitting that the first “canonizer” would be one of the most prominent figures in western culture. In ancient Greece, Plato ventured to select from a list of texts those he thought most worthy of being read and distributed to the citizens of his beloved Republic: “So our first job, apparently, is to oversee the work of the story-writers, and accept any good story they write, and reject all the others” (50). Plato proposed a set of rigid criteria for he believed that literature should serve educational purposes, inspire and enlighten, as well as portray the moral and social ideals of a utopian society. Thus, he condemned literature that he considered untruthful, immoral, blasphemous, irreverent to the gods, or subversive in any way (51-52). He even suggested banning, censoring, or altering texts that did not fit the social agenda of creating an ethical and upright citizenry: “... a very great deal of importance should be placed upon ensuring that the first stories they hear are best adapted for their moral improvement” (51). Even though Plato considered Homer to belong to the “grandest” ilk of story-writers (50), he deplored the fact that the actions of the gods were not always portrayed so idealistically as they should have been:

...we shouldn't connive at Homer or any other poet making the stupid mistake of saying about the gods, “Two jars sit on Zeus' threshold: one is full of good destinies, but the other is full of wretched destinies”, and that if Zeus mixes the two up together and doles them out to someone, that person “sometimes meets with the bad, sometimes with the good”, whereas if he doesn't mix them up, but allots the pernicious ones to someone to an unadulterated form,

that person “is driven over the glorious earth by the evil of poverty”. Nor will we connive at them claiming that “Zeus is the dispenser of both good and evil.” (52)

Hence, with regard to what he considered to be the transgressive elements of Homer’s *The Iliad*, Plato promoted the idea of altering the texts to downplay their subversive element. To many, this perspective may seem rather conservative, if not extremely narrow-minded, yet it certainly sets the stage for the processes of canon-formation in the ensuing ages, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, from determining which texts would be included in the Bible and establishing monastic dogma, to the still on-going revision of the academic canon in order to accommodate a wider variety of texts that reflect the ideals of a pluralistic and representative society.

As a forefather of the western tradition, it would not seem surprising that Plato’s method of selection has had a significant influence on the processes of canonization. Although chronologically far removed from contemporary discourses regarding academic canons, his process outlines a number of pertinent characteristics of canon-formation as it has unfolded historically. First, there seems to be an implied awareness on the part of various canonizers that because of their potential depth of meaning, beauty of language, and cultural pertinence, literary texts can serve educational purposes by the influences they exert on their readers. From the outset, it seems that canon-formation practices were intimately related to pedagogy and the role of educational institutions in creating an ethical citizenry. Second, it suggests that canon-making is a process of selection, i.e., of hand-picking a select group of texts from the vast array of available writings. Third; in order to downplay the subversive element contained in prominent texts, canonizers feel the need to take a specific course of action that will ultimately neutralize the potential

threat posed by the work. For *The Iliad*, Plato chooses to alter or censor certain parts of the text. As the following discussion will demonstrate, this response would be repeated in ensuing periods of canonization. Fourth, selection is based on specific criteria, a set of standards according to which texts are approved or dismissed. As the etymology of the word “canon” suggests, proscriptive criticism places conventions at the center of the selection process, and it is those texts thought to best articulate these conventions which have greatness thrust upon them. Plato’s selection process also demonstrates that these criteria are determined by prevailing ideologies, ideologies supported and defended by their respective canonizers. Furthermore, what is particularly remarkable is that Plato’s reliance on a strict moral code to institute guidelines for civic behavior and conduct has shaped criteria for canonization throughout the ensuing course of western civilization.

A case in point that is pertinent to the continuity of historical perspectives in canon-formation dates back to the second century, where monastic authorities observed a similar procedure to decide which books should be included in what was constituted as Bible. Once again the ramifications implied by the etymological significance of *kanon* are determinant; the criteria of selection was how texts would “measure up” to the standards and the “rule” set by their community; the early canonizers of the Bible “were concerned above all else with distinguishing the orthodox from the heretical” (Guillory “The Canon” 233). Further delving into the etymological meaning of “rule” and the discourse surrounding scripture-selection, David Richter points out:

In a further figure, the canon became the list of texts containing the rules—the group of books with full religious authority. The establishment of the canon of the Hebrew Bible was the job of a conference of rabbis at Yavneh early in the second century A.D.; the patristic fathers established the canon of the New Testament in

the third century. At Yavneh the scrolls of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs were accepted, after some controversy, into the canon, while the prophecies of Baruch ben Sirach and the chronicles of the Maccabees were relegated to apocryphal status. Similarly, the gospels according to Matthew and Luke were given canonical authority, while the gospel of Nicodemus was discarded. In a third and far more recent figural use, the word *canon* has been applied to those literary texts that are thought to embody the highest standard of literary culture. (122 1n)

Richter's observation not only reinforces the characteristics of selection, evaluation, and standards mentioned earlier, but also demonstrates that a) the inclusion of certain texts in the canon can arouse controversy, and that b) texts have different levels of importance or "status" conferred upon them, depending on how well they fit the standards established by the community of canonizers. Finally, apart from highlighting the notion that a canonical text "embodies" certain "standards," the last remark hints at the applicability of the processes of canon-formation in a variety of discourse communities: the religious, the cultural, and the literary.

Through the centuries, literary production and its various audiences gradually moved away from the narrow confines of the clergy and began to spread through different classes of society, thus blurring the formerly clear-cut distinctions between the literate and the illiterate, and initializing the High/Low distinction in regard to cultural capital. In other words, while the higher—literate and educated—classes were the sole market for literary production, distribution, and consumption, there was no need to distinguish between High and Low; it was only when this exclusivity gradually dissipated that such a distinction made itself apparent. With the emergence of an increasing production in literature and a changing social, political, and cultural landscape, criteria evolved to echo the change in general thought patterns of the corresponding periods

while English progressively emerged as the vernacular and slowly evolved into its modern standardized form. In sixteenth-century England, the overall process of canonization aimed to establish English as a literary language comparable to Greek and Latin as well as other pan-European languages such as French—which English eventually replaced as the primary language of literary production. To that effect, John Dryden stated that the overall objective of canonization was “to vindicate the honor of our English writers from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them,” and it is within this context that John Gower and Chaucer were recognized as the first canonized English authors according to Sir Philip Sidney (327). Yet amidst the political implications of nationalistic ideologies, critics and writers still preserved the Platonic notion that literature should serve educational purposes. In defining Poetry, Sidney echoes the ancient dictum that its objective is “to teach and delight,” a paradigm first codified by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*—“the man who combines pleasure with usefulness wins every suffrage, delighting the reader and also giving him advice...(1.344)”—and echoed by legions of critics after him, such as John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, and Matthew Arnold.

According to Trevor Ross, Ben Jonson’s *Workes* became “the first self-consciously canonical edition of an author’s works in English literature (108),” which marked a shift in thought by valuing individual authors and their work, not the overall genre (109), and thus the idea of valuing a work on intrinsic value appeared (114). In light of such conflicting views of literary value, some authors and critics supported the idea of valuing literature based on popularity with readers (Ross 118), a notion that did not fail to spark intense scrutiny among neoclassical critics in the ensuing ages and

especially at the dawn of the twentieth century where distinctions between “popularity” and “art” were repetitively reinforced before being effectively challenged.

During the Renaissance, the influence of the socio-political context over cultural production was inevitable, as Stephen Greenblatt suggests (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 2-5), for both were deeply interrelated and involved in a series of “structured negotiations and exchanges” (6). Yet institutions of higher learning remained the privileged domain for decisions pertaining to canon-formation and cultural dissemination though other venues like the theater and the mass production of popular literature had begun to challenge their hegemony. The theater, more particularly, was perceived as a popular, i.e. “low,” form of cultural production before the Renaissance. Jonathan Crewe points out that “[f]or centuries in England, the primary theatrical tradition was nonprofessional” and that other than plays enacting religious drama or integrated in school curricula, “professional theater, in contrast, existed on the margins of society” (ix). The rise of the genre into higher levels of “exchanges” occurred more specifically through the second half of the sixteenth century, when Queen Elizabeth and other nobility, fond of drama, started to take acting companies under their protection and became their patrons. It is during this period that playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe gained tremendous prominence both on the popular front and within higher circles. The view of the theater as an established stage for high cultural dissemination continued to be a debate in the ensuing centuries. Crewe points out that “[t]he decision to print the works of a popular playwright in folio is an indication of how far up on the social scale the theatrical profession had come during Shakespeare’s lifetime” (xxiv). On the other hand, institutions of moral and social righteousness such as the puritans,

perceived theatrical venues to be the setting for both transgressive—immoral, lewd, and profane—impulses and subversive behavior, and repetitively campaigned for either their censure or their closure (Crewe xv, Stallybrass et al. 92). Nevertheless, to the likes of Stephen Greenblatt, the Renaissance represented a “totalizing society” which promoted the proliferation of tremendously prominent and inalienable work of arts and contributed to the establishment of such acclaimed and revered authors as Shakespeare (*Shakespearean 2*).

In tracing the evolution of the English literary canon from the Middle Ages to the late Eighteenth Century Trevor Ross observes that in 1595 a Cambridge don by the name of William Covell argued that English universities should canonize their authors in order to raise England’s status at home and abroad as a “symbol of literary eminence” (87) and concludes that “canon-making [in the sixteenth] was primarily to enhance the value of literature in the vernacular and to help foster the English literary system” (91). In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden praises the works of Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher as best embodying the standards of the English canon, while he unconditionally situates William Shakespeare as superior to all other writers, “Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets” (383). Interestingly enough, while Dryden’s criticism marks the beginning of a tradition which regards Shakespeare as the greatest writer in English literature he also condemns the playwright for privileging what Dryden believed to be a genre stigmatized by predominantly popular, i.e. “low,” levels of consumption and more specifically, for the transgressive character of some of his plays. As Ben Jonson did before him, Dryden repeatedly attempted to discern between high/low audiences, particularly pertaining to the crowds of

theater-goers (Stallybras et al. 84-91) and in parallel, he states that Shakespeare “is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast” (381). More particularly, Dryden appears torn between the imperative of establishing Shakespeare as a leading literary figure and the necessity to valorize the classical criteria he cherished the most. In his *Preface to Troilus and Cressida* Dryden argues that the plots of Shakespeare are to be imitated “so far only as they have copied the excellencies of those who invented and brought to perfection of Dramatic Poetry” and laments the fact that in certain plays a hero may contain some of the traditional traits of a villain (383-4). Seldom staged before the twentieth century, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* not only subverts the classical representation of the Trojan War and its principal figures as depicted in *The Iliad* and in Chaucer’s epic but also trespasses—or even “transgresses”—the boundaries of style and genre. The portrayal of Achilles in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, as an egomaniacal, untrustworthy, and cowardly figure is a far cry from both the original Homeric representation and the concept of hero according to Dryden. Crewe observes that Shakespeare not only “questions the heroic legend of the Trojan War and strips its leading characters ... of their legendary charisma, revealing an often shameful although humanly recognizable underlying reality” but he also “parodies the gorgeous yet grandiose, polysyllabic, circumlocutory language of English epic-in-translation in the prologue and many of the speeches in *Troilus and Cressida*” (xxviii-xxix). *Troilus and Cressida* also escapes any major generic categorization by shifting from what first appears to be epic romance to comedy and satire, a genre for which both Ben Jonson and John Dryden expressed sharp contempt (Stallybras et al. 67-72). Hence, when Dryden confronted the prospect that Shakespeare,

the “Homer of the English tradition,” had produced a travesty of a play which so outwardly mocked a legacy left by the most prominent forefathers of the Western literary tradition, Homer and Chaucer, he resolved to neutralize Shakespeare’s transgressions by reworking the play of *Troilus and Cressida* for it to fit adequately within his conception of tradition.

Ross notes that in the Renaissance, discourse was aimed to promote works by contemporary groups of writers, while at the same time establishing a “tradition” by acknowledging the value and authority of literature of the past, and more specifically the classical period (90). Thus, modern authors set out to achieve “classical standards” that, they believed, represented absolute standards by which literature could be valued (96). As a result, criteria were largely dictated by ancient examples, and thus medieval genres of writing, such as the chivalric romance, lost value. Nevertheless, Ross suggests that an ongoing tension remained between admiring the classical canons of value and opening the existing canon to modern authors and genres (102). This view is concurrent with Jonathan Krammick’s observation that before the mid-eighteenth century, literature was evaluated by modern standards—that “great” works were chosen for their modernity (15)—a view of canonization that is still valid today. Yet the conflict between the “old” and the “new,” the “classic” and the modern,” prevailed throughout the ensuing periods, especially in the late eighteenth century, where the expansion of the literary market prompted William Wordsworth to lament the public’s disregard for established canonical works: “[t]he invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (130). Concurrently, due to the

emergence of new genres in literature, there was a conscious effort to privilege poetry over other forms of writing, thus institutionalizing a hierarchy of genres whose highest echelon was occupied by poetry. Guillory points out that this hegemony prevailed from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century (123, 131) and was championed by generations of writers and critics such as Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth, and T.S. Eliot.

As mentioned earlier in the analysis of the selection process executed by Plato and the first canonizers of the Bible, the question of literary value has played an important primordial role in the discourses surrounding canon-formation. Several paradoxical notions of value battled throughout the Restoration. Whereas some critics privileged knowledge over pleasure, others proposed that value be based on social conditions (Ross 155). As a result, there was a push for objective values and with time, some turned to valuing authors and works as a means of determining cultural value, thus conferring superior authority to certain texts and authors for establishing cultural standards. The concept that “instead of circulating value, literature contains it” (Ross 156-7) marked the birth of aestheticism, which maintained that value is based on eloquence and style and thus, style became valued as an author’s expression of his/her individualism. While historicist arguments were used to defend a more pluralist, relative view of a given context (170), both Dryden and Johnson concurred in determining that greatness was perceived in the ability of an author to address “permanent verities of nature and human experience” (Dryden in Ross 166) and appeal to the “universal” rather than the “particular. As Johnson points out, “Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness” (*Lives* 482). Consequently, Johnson believed that these properties would

guarantee the longevity of an author's work; the test of time being decisive in establishing prominence and canonical status: "what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood" (468) or as Alexander Pope put it, "What oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest" (v. 298). Ross aptly points out that the conflict between absolute standards and relative value would continue perpetually, for a consensus would only be reached if all tastes in all people in all ages would eventually be identical (172). In fact, it is precisely this divergence of opinion that spurred the canonical debates of the second half of the twentieth century, where the values of "aestheticism" and "universality" considered to be "absolute" by its defenders were opposed to the values of "relativity" and "representation" advocated by revisionists.

With the advent of print capitalism and an emerging literary market in the eighteenth century, a clear distinction was drawn between popular literature and "art," thus sparking the idea that art was inversely proportional to popularity. Critics started to consider modern texts as "popular" and ancient texts as "art," a distinction which closely echoes the more ancient distinction between the "High" and the "Low" in cultural discourse as outlined earlier. Yet it is the appearance of a new reading public that brought in the notions of "popular" and "art," as Guillory observes:

What is new here is the distinction between serious and popular *literature*—a distinction between two bodies of writing which are alike in respect of being equally "fictional" or "imaginative" equally distinguishable from philosophy or history, but *unlike in value*. (*Cultural Capital* 131)

Whereas "serious" literature—i.e. "art"—contained canonical potential by aspiring to what was then regarded as the highest considerations of ideas, style, and genre, "popular" writings, such as the novels of Ann Radcliffe for example, were typically considered to

have been produced to please the majority of the populace, marketed for the masses and hence aimed at lower levels of distribution and consumption. Concurrently, in view of the attention devoted to texts which originated before the emergence of a full-fledged commercial literature, ancient perspectives regarding aesthetical value were reinstated as criteria to evaluate literary greatness. Hence, the critical emphasis on aestheticism and historicism in the middle of the eighteenth century set the stage for canonization and established the literary critic as a figure of authority (Krammick 104).

Amidst this multitude of paradigm shifts and ensuing tensions—modernity, popularity, style, universality, relativity, longevity, classic vs. modern, popular vs. art, aesthetical vs. historical, relative vs. universal—and amidst “corrections,” “remodelings,” and expurgation by Dryden and Pope, such as the rewriting of *Troilus and Cressida* mentioned above, Shakespeare was—and still is—repeatedly consecrated as “the greatest” writer who ever lived, for he embodied all criteria, past and present, and his writing admirably represented what Samuel Johnson determined to be the ability to speak to many people in many locations, to speak generally and not individually and thus to last through time as Krammick observes (198-99). In his dedicatory verses in 1623, Ben Jonson had previously stated a similar view: “[Shakespeare] was not of an age, but for all time.” In other words, Shakespeare not only mastered style and addressed a multitude of social, political, and historical issues, but his work also contained a universal and lasting quality—all characteristics still used today in evaluating literature.

As the above discussion suggests, the eighteenth century was both pivotal and definitive in the history of the formation of the English canon, its underlying processes, and its means of distribution and consumption. There was a conscious effort to establish

the literary canon, and critics and teachers were recognized as authorities whose role determined what should be read and how, as well as defending the importance of the canon itself. Still, the forum for all levels of canonical discourse and readership remained chiefly that of the academic institution. As Ross suggests, canonical literature became a sign of “good breeding,” which made the instructed consumption of literature as important as its production:

This deepening of the social significance of the reading activity altered the nature of critical discourse, whose varied functions shifted from aiding the production to regulating the transmission of canonical works, from prescribing how works ought to be composed to supervising how they ought to be read and judged, and from promoting the general symbolic value of writing to ensuring the legitimacy of an autonomous cultural field. (210)

There is a now common view amongst critics that literary texts contain “social power,” or “social energy,” which is unleashed and disseminated by the continuous readings and interpretations of critics and scholars through a series of cultural negotiations and exchanges (Greenblatt *Shakespearean* 1-7, Ross 213). According to Ross, an example of the role played by critics is Addison's annotated version of Milton's *Paradise Lost* published in *The Spectator*, which presupposes that the text—and its “social energy”—can only be explained by a critic (218) and soon, it became necessary to have one canon for consumption and a different one to serve as a model of production (221). Literary criticism becomes an indispensable tool for the reading and interpretation of works of literature, as well as conducting scholarly research, thus instituting the perpetual relationship--and/or collaboration--between trends in criticism and literary movements.

Literature remained a favored means for instruction in academic institutions, yet the recent developments at the forefront of the literary scene prompted a shift in pedagogy, particularly in the way texts were to be presented to students. Ross explains that literature in schools began to be considered as something to be didactically taught and not merely presented, claiming that Addison's notes on *Paradise Lost* probably inspired Greenwood's *The Virgin Muse* (1717), which provides the first example of an anthology intended to teach poetry (221). In 1751, Benjamin Franklin suggested that schools teach the great authors, while in 1743 James Barclay emphasized the importance of students' reading and understanding texts (Ross 222). Ross argues that "such statements are of notable historical significance, for they suggest how pedagogical practice was being redefined in radical ways during the period," and he describes how eventually, schools (particularly universities) became the canon-makers (223-24). In addition, teaching literature "was turned into an object to study, to be valued less as a mode of symbolic exchange than as a type of moral technology that could enrich students by virtue of the labor required to understand and appreciate it" (Ross 226-27)—an attitude that echoes Plato's statements in *The Republic*. By the 1770s, both Adam Smith and Hugh Blair revived the Platonic idea that literature serves an educational purpose and saw it as a means of improving students' "style and conduct" (Ross 227). The latter claimed literature could "embellish his [the student's] mind and supply him with entertainment" and help the student "arrive at a much more desirable state of self-knowledge," which could become his moral foundation (Ross 228). As literature became something to be studied, the commercially profitable contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare were popular, but lost "cultural legitimacy," as Shakespeare came to be seen

as a canonical author whose work should be studied and interpreted rather than simply enjoyed (Ross 246).

The first academic program in English literature was established at the University of London in 1828, observes Ross (246), which marks the official birth of an “academic” canon of English literature, whose texts could consequently appear in textbooks and anthologies. In addition, Guillory explains that the polarization of works into distinct classes and genres following a High/Low paradigm had some considerable effect on which texts were to be presented to the students:

The division of literary production into “literature” and the genres which are by definition subliterary or nonliterary does eventually produce a corresponding linguistic distinction when genres are distributed by the curricula of the educational institution in order to separate them out according to the *levels* of the system. Already in the early nineteenth century certain “popular” works are relegated to the lower levels of the system, other “serious” works to the higher, and this sorting out across the vertical structure of the educational system, initially very modest, is gradually more marked over the succeeding century and a half. (*Cultural Capital* 133)

The above statement hints at how, progressively, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the High/Low polarities which had been firmly implanted in the processes of canon-formation and dissemination since their earlier inceptions would be consecutively and repetitively re-assessed, questioned, toppled, and re-asserted.

The importance of criticism was cemented by Matthew Arnold in essays such as “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” and in various of his prefaces to works of poetry, where he not only reasserted the pertinence of criticism in reading and understanding literature, but argued that both criticism and literature had serious pragmatic implications: “[Poetry] is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a

poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, - to the question: How to live" (*Essays* 302). Arnold's definition of criticism as the "disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" (*Norton* 824) as well as his low esteem of "modern" (i.e. Romantic) poetry for what Arnold perceives as its "prematureness" and its lack of "unity and profoundness of moral impression" clearly illustrates how he privileges the high canonical works of the classical period (809-810). Moreover, Arnold claims that these works represent an "infallible touchstone" to which other works can be compared in order to evaluate their quality:

There can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry.  
(*NAEL* 1421)

Arnold aligns himself with the likes of Samuel Johnson amongst others by sharing the Horatian belief that canonical texts should "instruct delightfully" and therefore attempt to display and promote attitudes, behaviors, and values of the highest moral order. Consequently, he was quickly categorized as an "elitist" and/or a "traditionalist" in the ensuing canonical debates of the twentieth century because he specifically expressed a preference for these "dead, white males" while at the same time relying on "timeless truths," and advocating what he believed were "universal" values. Guillory points out that "the Arnoldian representation of literary culture could itself be constructed as an "ideology," not least because the literary sensibility was always reappropriated in the schools as a means of enforcing the cultural distinction of the bourgeoisie" (136).

Like Arnold, T.S. Eliot envisioned high literary works to be "timeless" and fit within a specific "tradition" whose most prominent quality was to be "universal":

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation and bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (1093)

Within this tradition he also refers to the concept of an “order,” where writers would be evaluated on how they “fit” in terms of their traceable influences both past and present (1093). Not so surprisingly so, Eliot’s landmark poem *The Waste Land* precisely embodies these theoretical criteria. Intrinsically indebted to the Western literary tradition for its innumerable references to past canonical works, it also established what would become the most influential poem of the Modernist tradition.

The nineteenth century also saw the defamation of literature’s most ancient precept: the idea advocated by generations of writers and critics, from Horace to Arnold, that literature should please as well as serve educational purposes by aspiring to the highest standards of moral and social behavior. Friedrich Nietzsche particularly despised the religious imperative that perceived the highest truth to be attainable solely in a state of highest morality—which he called “*la niaiserie religieuse par excellence*” [“the utmost religious foolishness” (translation mine)] (36)—claiming that “morality in Europe at present is a herding-animal morality” (68). The phrase “art for art’s sake” was coined by Walter Pater to conceptualize the tenets of aestheticism as first articulated by Théophile Gautier in his Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Championed by successive legions of artists such as Charles Baudelaire in France and Oscar Wilde in England, aestheticism offered an alternative slant on the use value of art. More

specifically, it rebelled against the “Don Quixotes of morality [who] set themselves up as the policemen of literature, and [who] apprehend and cudgel, in the name of virtue, every idea which strolls through a book with its mob-cap a little askew or its skirt pulled up a little too high” (Gautier 755). According to Wilde, “All art is quite useless” and cannot be promoted as a means to educate or improve society by advocating morality and virtue. Quite to the contrary, “the arts are immoral” and their aim is “simply to create a mood” argues Wilde (912). By rejecting the emphasis placed on moral content and traditional bourgeois values, the aesthetic movement placed an emphasis on the formal properties of literature and promoted a rebellious temperament which would later become the staple of the avant-garde. A concept of art that is detached from any type of moral and/or educational consideration seems rather well-fitted to promote the diffusion of transgressive works, a tendency which would later be regarded as a distinct characteristic of the early Modernist period according to Anthony Julius (53). Some of the tenets of aestheticism, especially those that aimed to reject previously established paradigms, were echoed in the Modernist movement and in the work of critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Georges Bataille. Modernism in art rebelled against the rigid aesthetic formulas and excessive moralism of previous periods and experimented with genres and styles. In addition, New Critic Cleanth Brooks questioned the notion of “use value”—that poetry has some “value” which would justify its “use”—before concluding, “[u]ses for poetry are always to be found, and doubtless will continue to be found” (“The Well Wrought Urn” 1362) and in discussing the fundamental value of the word *useful* with regard to human activity, Georges Bataille argues that “given the more or less divergent collection

of present ideas, there is nothing that permits one to define what is useful to man” (*Visions of Excess* 116).

The case of Edgar Allan Poe provides an apt illustration of the way in which the moral and aesthetic concerns that characterized nineteenth-century cultural discourses could conflict with and in turn affect the appraisal and status of an author’s work. Poe, whose fame situates him as one of America’s most celebrated writers, seems to align himself with the aesthetical principles of Baudelaire, Gautier, and Wilde. He believed that although such elements as truth and passion could be integrated within literary texts, Beauty should be privileged as a universal guiding criteria which would provide a specific poetic “*effect*”: “[t]hat pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating,, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful” (744). Poe’s form is one of precise exactitude whose meticulous attention to detail reflects the ideal of “*le mot juste*” as advanced by Gustave Flaubert, while the content of his texts frequently displays characters in a disturbing state of psychosis with a total disregard for righteousness, respectability, and moral values. Often characterized by gruesome tales of crime and murder, Poe’s fiction is filled with elements of dread and terror, which, interestingly enough contributed greatly to the author’s notoriety. Unfortunately for Poe, he was unable to breach into the contemporary literary scene for the value of his texts was only recognized posthumously through an elongated series of cross-cultural critical negotiations. Within the perspective of Johnson and Arnold, who believed that literary greatness situated itself in its concern for moral instruction and the “unity and profoundness of moral impression,” Poe’s most popular texts are readily excluded for transgressing these conventions and for representing lives that would be,

according to Johnson, “discolored by passion, or deformed by wickedness” and for not “teach[ing] the means of avoiding snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence...” (“Rambler” 464). In addition, his contemporaries considered much of his writing, and particularly his short fiction, as primitive, vulgar, and subliterate. Consequently, his work was widely marginalized and he was deeply disliked by many of fellow countrymen such as T.S. Eliot, who considered his intellect to be that of “a highly gifted young man before puberty” (qtd. in Carlson 212). On the other hand, Victorian writers such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and Robert Louis Stevenson claimed they were eternally indebted to him while French writers and critics such as Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé revered his theories of composition and his visionary style, aspects of Poe’s writing that some of their American counterparts apparently either deeply rejected or never fully understood. Why the work—and life—of the American *poète maudit* has seduced so many French critics and writers may remain obscure to some, yet the praise Baudelaire reserved for Poe should not come as a surprise if one acknowledges that the former not only considered the latter to be like him a victim of bourgeois ideals but also that Poe’s work embodied some of Baudelaire’s central aesthetic concepts—not surprisingly so, Baudelaire’s collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du mal*, was put to trial for being immoral and sexually offensive. More precisely, the French symbolist believed that the texts of the American writer adequately illustrated the aesthetic notion of “Art as artifice” and that Beauty was the product of Art, not nature or moral values—elements which were singularly absent from his work. Consequently, this absence of morality repelled the majority of Poe’s puritan compatriots and contemporaries. In sum, it is in particular Poe’s “transgressive” tendency of privileging the poetic “effect,” the aesthetic

and the beautiful over the moral and the true that the French symbolist found most remarkable. As a result, much of Poe's now recognized value as cultural capital is due to the work of criticism undertaken by authors who, although living at great distances from him, shared a similar aesthetic vision. This discussion not only reinforces the importance that criticism plays in the consumption and redistribution of cultural capital but also reveals that dissonances amongst different set of canonizers exist, where critical interpretation plays a primordial role. While one specific group of authorities may perceive that breaking artistic norms and conventions of morality is an automatic act of self-exclusion, others may regard these transgressions as valuable assets, for they allow art to evolve and establish its own criteria by breaking taboos and exploring new aesthetic principles.

As an interpretative tool for the works of the metaphysical and the modern poets, the objective of New Critical thought as championed by T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks and F.R. Leavis ultimately aimed to reassess the pertinence of these texts within the literary tradition. In this sense, the New Critical endeavor can be interpreted as an act of *revision* of the canon, thus initializing the trend for ensuing adjustments. In essays such as "The Metaphysical Poets," T.S. Eliot scrutinizes what he calls the "Johnsonian canons of taste" and sets out to assert the prominent legacy left by the metaphysical poets such as John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and their contemporaries. More specifically, through extensive criticism, he raises their positioning in the canonical order while lowering that of then-celebrated poets such as Dryden and Milton, whom he blames for, amongst other things, "the dissociation of sensibility" ("Metaphysical" 1103). Eliot's influential admirer, F.R. Leavis, also praised the work of the Metaphysical poets in his 1936 book *Revaluations*,

while at the same time, establishing the reputation of Eliot as well as Ezra Pound and Gerard Manley Hopkins. He particularly admired the fact that by representing “the most conscious point of the race in his time” (*New Bearings* 16) modern poets overthrow the tenets of nineteenth-century poetry, which he perceived to be temporarily dissociated and over-emphasizing the sensuous and the expressive rather than “wit, play of intellect, stress of cerebral muscle” (14). But perhaps Leavis’ most influential work as it pertains to the idea of a “Canon” in literature is *The Great Tradition*, in which he argues that “the few really great—the major novelists ... not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life” (10). Yet it appears that like Arnold, he believes that “great” literature is inseparable from moral consciousness; his selection names but five novelists —Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and D.H. Lawrence—who are “all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity” (18). Interestingly so, the revisions prompted by Eliot and Leavis would not only influence subsequent orderings within the so-called “tradition” but would also advance the concept of “minority” literature which would act subversively to topple established hierarchies; as Guillory argues, “[t]he status of Eliot’s ‘canon’ (if it can be called that) corresponds exactly to the status of a minority *within* literary culture ... [poets and writers] who are at the time of Eliot’s essays are written still relatively marginal to literary culture” (147-8). Yet, as Guillory points out, this endeavor is clearly not “disinterested” and is heavily tainted with ideological purposes that would ultimately be revealed as conservative. Not only do the metaphysical poets championed by Eliot fit adequately within the network of influences

he outlines in his concept of tradition but “the same quality that Eliot found primarily or only in minor poetry are now found in the works of the established literary canon” (*Cultural Capital* 157). Regardless, New Critical thought was tremendously influential and penetrated deeply into the institutional core of universities and course syllabi. Guillory notes that this was probably what simultaneously guaranteed the reaffirmation of the interconnection between literature, criticism, and pedagogy on the one hand and the success of the subsequent canonical revision on the other: “[f]or the New Critics, the reaffirmation of major authors coincided with the moment of their institutional success, when a practice of *interpretation* came to define literary pedagogy” (141).

While New Critical approaches to literature focus on a text’s formal properties by uncovering its “tensions” and “ambiguities” as posed by its “paradoxes,” it appears that New Criticism in itself is paradoxical. Its overall disregard for contextual interpretations and its focus on the “work itself” (Brooks, “Formalist” 1367) should theoretically render the practice of New Criticism pedagogically accessible to everyone, especially those who do not possess cultural background knowledge, and may let believe that it endeavors to *democratize* the instruction of literature. Yet, as Guillory points out, this is clearly not the case:

...the programmatic attempt to demonstrate the continuity of every canonical English writer with the metaphysicals on one hand, and the modern on the other, was the strategic imperative of a more narrowly institutional campaign, a campaign for hegemony within the university. (167)

Apart from striving to establish a clear hierarchy within university syllabi, it also reflected an ideology which echoed that of the higher end cultural discourses:

There is no reason to assume that the basic principles of New Critical pedagogy were not formulated in a context highly sympathetic to elitist notions of High Culture. The version of formalism espoused by the New Critics never assumed that the readers of literature should be other than very well educated... (168)

Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*, which contains the gist of New Critical thought reasserts that the language of poetry in particular, and literature in general, is intrinsically difficult: "some of [modern] poetry is admittedly difficult—a great deal of it is bound to *appear* to the difficult to the reader of conventional reading habits" (67). This is easily verifiable if one considers that indeed, *The Waste Land* illustrates a most complex use of language and poetic diction. Considering literature as intrinsically difficult not only aims at marking a distinction between literature and popular culture as Brooks points out by comparing Donne's "The Canonization" with Tin Pan Alley's "Let the Rest of the World go By" ("Understanding" 137). It creates at the same time a clear separation between mass culture and the culture of the school by making "literary works more difficult to consume outside of the school" (Guillory *Cultural Capital* 174), which further privileges the school as the exclusive context for the distribution and consumption of canonical works. However, as Guillory aptly argues, "we may fairly describe the effect of New Critical pedagogy as 'paradoxical,' since its most strenuous effort to impose a divorce between literary culture and mass culture produced in the end a curious kind of rapprochement" (174); a rapprochement which would subsequently lead to increasing tensions in the various polarities and corresponding ideologies contiguous to canon-formation discourses.

To illustrate the interactions between transgression, criticism, literary culture, and mass culture, the case of James Joyce's *Ulysses* offers an interesting example. In 1933, Joyce's novel was banned from circulation in the United States on the grounds that it was obscene and transgressed the rules and regulations set by the state regarding the publication of such material. A trial ensued in which the publishing company motioned to dismiss the libel of obscenity and be given the right to distribute the novel. At the court ruling, the ban on the novel was removed; in the delivery of his sentence, Judge Woosley offered an interpretation of the text based on literary criticism and theory:

“Ulysses” is not an easy book to read or to understand. But there has been much written about it, and in order properly to approach the consideration of it it is advisable to read a number of other books which have now become its satellites. (viii)

In the tradition of post-modern criticism, Judge Woosley asserts that Joyce relies on the “stream of consciousness” technique by divulging the inner-workings of its main characters. He argues that as a serious novelist, Joyce used this literary trope effectively and efficiently:

It is because Joyce has been loyal to this technique and has not funk'd its necessary implications, but has honestly attempted to tell fully what his characters think about, that he has been subject of so many attacks and that his purpose has been so often misunderstood and misrepresented. For his attempt sincerely and honestly to realize his objective has required him incidentally to use certain words which are generally considered dirty words and has let at times to what many think is a too poignant preoccupation with sex in the thoughts of his characters. (ix-x)

Judge Woosley decrees that even if certain passages of *Ulysses* could be interpreted as obscene for certain factions of the public at large, it should be noted that it was far from being the main argument of the book (viii-ix). Even though this does not constitute an

isolated case in the reception of literary works, this affair explicitly demonstrates that progressively, in the twentieth century, distinctions of audiences and readership according to classical notions of high and low, literary and mass culture, are blurred, and that criticism serves as a defense of the transgressive. The censors' decision to ban Joyce's novel based on the belief that it transgressed the norms and conventions of society illustrates the way public institutions can take action to neutralize the subversive threat a literary text supposedly poses for the public at large regardless of specific audiences. Moreover, the fact that another public, i.e. "non-literary," authority primarily relied on literary theory and criticism to pronounce his verdict is also exemplary of the multilayered interconnections between literary and cultural discourses. Yet most remarkable is when Judge Woosley argues that while the novel may speak explicitly of certain taboos, it is not a display of "dirt for dirt's sake" (x). Quite to the contrary, he claims, *Ulysses* is a fine piece of literature which aims to define new literary techniques: "[the novel] is a sincere and serious attempt to devise a new literary method for the observation and description of mankind" (xii). This last statement implies that in some instances what is perceived as a transgression of law and morality is actually a genuine attempt to go beyond conventional artistic restrictions by breaking its boundaries and explore new uncharted territory. Hence, as will be fully investigated in the next chapter, transgression—and in particular, transgression of a sexual nature that reveals repressed material stored in the unconscious—becomes a tool for artistic exploration and innovation. Last but not least, literary criticism—and more specifically, its value as an interpretative tool—is an instrument of defense and serves as a means to enlighten a text whose transgressions might appear purposeless to the undiscerning public.

In the late twentieth century, with the drastic changes occurring in society and the coming of age of the civil rights movement, various groups have criticized the academic canon as consecutively erected by the likes of Johnson, Arnold, Eliot, and Brooks, for being biased and only containing writers representative of the dominating and affluent faction of society, namely “white, western-European men” (Guillory “The Canon” 233). Hence, many feminist and ethnic minority groups believed that certain writers were thought to have been deliberately “excluded” in regard to a discriminatory ideology that aimed to suppress the diffusion of these authors’ thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. The revision that aimed to include many women and ethnic minority writers in the “Canon” was correlated with two consecutive events, the democratization of higher education that occurred after World War II, and the increasing enrollment of minorities and women as a direct consequence of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. As a result, it was decreed that the canon—which, by then, was the authoritative list of books taught in academic institutions, positioning the university as the exclusive setting for the diffusion and distribution of such cultural capital—should reflect the current trends of a pluralistic society and thus, be representative of the multicultural population attending schools nationwide. As a result of the ensuing “culture wars” chronicled by the likes of John Guillory and Terry Eagleton between “traditionalists,” defenders of the academic literary canon, and “challengers,” between “high” art and “low” popular culture, each advocating their own sets of standards, the canon has been officially “opened” and includes work by women and ethnic minority authors. The debate still rages, however, and certain issues have yet to be resolved.

During the period of revision of the late twentieth century, defenders of the traditional canon had come under attack for advocating the characteristics of “universality,” “timelessness,” and “aesthetical value” contained in canonical works: criteria that were considered to be culturally biased. Challengers to the traditional canon claimed that the longevity of certain authors and their works was only guaranteed because they represented the ideology and cultural values of the dominant classes of society, to which the various institutions that shaped the canon typically belonged: as one female commentator observes, “the texts that survive will tend to be those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies” (Smith 151). In addition, there could be no such thing as a “universal” appeal—whether ideological or aesthetical—for the realities and traditions of minorities and women are in no way equivalent to that of the ruling classes. This is essentially the point made by critics such as Paul Lauter (153) and Henry Louis Gates Jr., who emphasize the “differences” among the various ethnic groups that make up Western society:

[w]e must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes towards racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us *and* about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. (Gates 176)

Furthermore, it is in particular the notion of aesthetic value that is regarded as an overstatement. In a response to the Kantian notion that aesthetic judgments are universal and disinterested, both Richard Ohmann and Barbara Herrnstein Smith argue that judgments of value are “contingencies,” determined by institutions and communities of readers at a specific time and place (1880, 150). More specifically, Ohmann insists that the choice of a certain set of values reflects the underlying ideologies of specific groups

of people: “since not everyone’s values are the same, the negotiating of such concepts is, among other things, a struggle for dominance—whether between adults and the young, professors and their students, one class and another, or men and women” (1880).

Recently, it has been the criteria of “representation” and “equality”—the arguments that by being included in the Canon ethnic minorities will be given a voice and would eventually help shape a more equal society—as well as the challengers’ position that minorities and women were deliberately “excluded” from the canon that have been the object of intense scrutiny. The idea of “wordliness” was recently offered by Edward Said to advance the political agenda of a global village based on the idea that the world as it is configured today is interconnected:

What I am talking about therefore is the opposite of separatism, and also the reverse of exclusivism. It is only through the scrutiny of these works as literature, as style, as pleasure, and illumination, that they can be brought in, so to speak, and kept in. Otherwise they will be regarded only as informative ethnographic specimens, suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists. *Worldliness* is therefore the restoration to such works and interpretations of their place in the global setting, a restoration that can only be accomplished by an appreciation not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world, but of the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole. (196)

Said maintains that separatist trends not only plague academia but the world at large as well, as can be witnessed in the recent surges of genocide that the “politics of difference” has caused in various parts of the world. In a rather surprising shift of position, Said claims that it is not whether the author of a work is a male or a female, a representative of the ruling class or the oppressed, but rather a matter of “*how* a work is written and *how* it is read” (198). He denounces the self-centered and uncompromising position of the defenders of “identity politics” and “difference” so valuable to minority critics such as

Henry Louis Gates Jr. It is only by attempting to transcend these boundaries of race, class, and gender that peoples of the world will learn to live harmoniously and thus reach genuine “equality”: “Marginality and homelessness are not, in my opinion, to be gloried in; they are to be brought to an end, so that more, and not fewer, people can enjoy the benefits of what has for centuries been denied the victims of race, class, or gender (198).” Nevertheless, one needs to be careful in employing Said’s criterion, for his approach never vouches for the inclusion of one text over the exclusion of another, but rather, “[it] was always a matter of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, a part of it... (195).” Hence, it appears that the true question of Canon-formation revolves around the issue of critical reading and interpretation—of *how* we read—and takes root precisely in the underlying multiplicity of meanings enclosed in the literary text.

John Guillory insists that the omission of minority and women writers from the canon was not a deliberate act of *exclusion*—quite on the contrary he emphasizes the process of *selection* in canon-formation, as outlined in the example of Plato above—and a reflection of sexist and racist ideologies but rather, they were not included because of historical and social reasons; these groups did not have access to literacy and thus, wrote proportionally less than their white male counterparts: “the social conditions governing access to literacy before the emergence of the middle-class educational system determined that the greater number of writers, *canonical or non-canonical*, were men (*Cultural Capital* 16).” In addition, Guillory rejects the arguments set forth by the challengers on two grounds. For one, it is impossible for one author or literary work actually to “stand for” an entire minority, for all it could actually “represent” in a work of

fiction is a mere “image” of that minority (7). Moreover, he condemns the “deluded assumption” that the school is a reflection of national culture and thus that “equal representation” in the canon of the school would eventually lead to social equality in the nation as a whole:

What is transmitted by the school is, to be sure, a kind of culture; but is the *culture of the school*. School culture does not unify the nation culturally so much as it projects out of a curriculum of artifact-based knowledge an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the culture of the nation-state. (38)

Quite to the contrary, he emphasizes that, if anything, contemporary discourse on canon-formation can only influence academic circles, for the school—and especially, the university—remains the primary if not the sole audience for canon debates. While it could be argued that Guillory seems rather eager to dismiss the possible influence of school culture on society—his observation could easily be refuted by pointing to the May 68 events in France for example—his comment regarding the exclusivity of the school as a forum for canonical discussion is most accurate.

The previous discussion demonstrates that, like most contemporary disputes in academia, the debate about the literary canon remains partly unresolved for both parties fail to reach a consensus on what the past meant or what the future should valorize. Nevertheless, Said’s point about shifting the emphasis from *what* is read to *how* merits discussion because it has been simultaneously advocated and rejected by both parties and remains at the forefront of Canon debate. The processes embedded in literary production and canon-formation have always been interrelated with a major trend in literary criticism (*e.g.* Neo-classicism and the Renaissance or New Criticism and Modernism), yet texts

that remain canonical throughout the ages are invariable to sudden shifts or trends. On one hand, within the paradigm of historical, moral, and aesthetical values, challengers have always accused theory of reflecting the ideologies of the dominant social classes and contributing to the marginalization of literature by women and minorities according to Lauter (141). On the other, as Lillian S. Robinson aptly points out, without the advent of Marxist and Feminist criticism, many of today's women and minority authors would have probably never been included in the canon and forever remained marginalized and ghetto-ized (157).

Recognizing that literary criticism is a primary influence in the processes involved in canon-formation signifies various things. First, it further emphasizes the school as the exclusive setting for canonical readership and dissemination because the school is exclusively the domain of literary theory. Second, a work that is discussed in the university classroom, anthologized, cited or recited—whether directly or indirectly, as an influence or as mere subject—is constantly “relived” and is thus given the opportunity to be read by a wider audience, which increases its chances of being canonized, observes Smith (148-9). Finally, a text that can endure a wide array of critical approaches and withstand the test of time is deemed to be indisputably multilayered, and thus, it contains an intrinsic property to all great works of literature; as Jane Thompkins points out, “the hallmark of the classic work is precisely that it rewards the scrutiny of successive generation of readers, speaking with equal power to people of various persuasions (144)” by successfully passing what Harold Bloom would call “the pragmatic test for the canonical” (226).

To reconcile the emphasis placed on criticism and interpretation with the concept of an academic canon, an economic parable could be introduced by integrating Guillory's concept of "cultural capital" and Greenblatt's notion of "cultural negotiations/exchanges," where the "exchange value" of literary texts rises or decreases in accordance with their consumption at various levels of academic discourse. In other words, the canon is "cultural capital," whose texts not only act as "stock"—or currency—whose value varies through time, but are continuously and perpetually exchanged and negotiated, i.e. received, consumed, and re-distributed, by the various members of academic institutions in the forms of anthologies, university course syllabi, classroom discussions, and scholarly research.

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Within the broader context of society, whether conservative or liberal, the university has always been considered as a privileged environment, a location where the free exchange of thoughts and ideas is encouraged, regardless of political affiliation. While some would argue that as a consequence of the culture wars academic institutions have become increasingly politicized and fragmented, others might answer that this has always been the case. As pointed out earlier, because of the disparity of opinions pertaining canonical discourses, ensuing revisions, and the current state of academic curricula, some would advance the view that in lieu of a specific, single "canon," there are multiple canons, one corresponding to each "cultural" tradition. The notion that all types of cultural capital circulate unrestrictedly is one that is recognized and cherished by a majority of its members. In other words, even though elitists and populists might disagree on many matters, both are able to treat their subject matter within the context of

academia, and thus participate actively in contributing to exchanges of cultural capital. Hence, this constant opposition guarantees a certain balance, or equilibrium, between the various political agendas presented by advocacy groups.

Yet there is one particular category of text whose status and position across these series of polarizing forces remains ambiguous, for its purpose, some would argue, is specifically to provoke, shock, and discomfort. In other words, these texts transgress the boundaries of what is acceptable or permissible, even within the supposedly permissive culture of the university. Books that seek this distinction of “radical otherness” are usually ghettoized by the literary establishment, within the western tradition, however, there seems to be a genuine legacy of works that have been labeled as transgressive at various time periods. From *Justine* to the *The Flowers of Evil*, *Ulysses* to *The Naked Lunch*, or even *Native Son*, all stirred major public upheavals during their respective publications only to be canonized later, once the threat of their taboo-breaking properties had been assimilated through a series of negotiations regarding their cultural capital. The common denominator among most transgressive literature is that it stirs major public upheaval when first published and as a consequence is either condemned, banned, put to trial, simply ignored, and/or ghettoized by the establishment as an effective way of neutralizing its threat. Perhaps not surprisingly so, as the establishment changes—or, as Jacques Derrida would put it, as the center is decentered—so does the perception of these works, and consequently, as they are interpreted, and distributed, their exchange value as cultural capital is reappraised.

Traditionally, following in the footsteps of Plato’s strict moral code of social righteousness, the institutional core of social, moral, and artistic mores was dictated for

the most part by white European males, but within the new hierarchies established by the multitude of cultural exchanges outlined above, this hegemony has progressively dissipated. Thus, there is a notion that transgressive art and more particularly, transgressive literature not only aims to challenge a specific establishment, but rather threatens all conventions, regardless of political or artistic affiliation. In doing so, a transgressive text engages in “free play” along the borders between high and low culture, the literary and the popular, the permissible and the prohibited, the respected and the disregarded.

## Chapter 2

### SHOCK, SCANDAL, AND SUBVERSION: A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF TRANSGRESSION

*Le récit qui révèle les possibilités de la vie n'appelle pas forcément, mais il appelle un moment de rage, sans lequel son auteur serait aveugle à ces possibilités excessives. Je le crois : seul l'épreuve suffocante, impossible donne à l'auteur le moyen d'atteindre la vision lointaine attendue par un lecteur las des proches limites imposées par les conventions.<sup>2</sup>*

George Bataille, *Le Bleu du ciel*

*Un soir, j'ai assis la Beauté sur me genoux. – Et je L'ai trouvée amère. –Et je l'ai injuriée.<sup>3</sup>*  
Arthur Rimbaud, *Une Saison en enfer*

The previous chapter outlined the ways in which canonical debates at the dawn of the twenty-first century revolve around a series of polarized discussions about ideological values and how transgressive works are evaluated within such theoretical and critical discourses. Progressively, as these polarizing forces are reevaluated alongside paradigm shifts in academic and mainstream thought, so is the status of transgressive texts. In other words, through a series of cultural exchanges and critical negotiations, the cultural capital of these taboo-breaking texts is reappraised. A quick glimpse at the lists of typical university curricula will bear witness to the fact that texts that were once perceived to

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<sup>2</sup> The text which reveals the possibilities of existence is not necessarily compelling, but it calls in a moment of rage without which the author would be blinded to the possibilities of *excess*. I believe it: only the experience which is suffocating, impossible, gives the author the means to reach the distant vision expected by a reader who is fed up with the limits imposed by convention (Translation mine).

<sup>3</sup> One evening I sat Beauty on my lap.—and I found her bitter.—and I insulted her (Translation mine).

transgress the norms and conventions of specific orders and institutions now form part of literary traditions. While the elements of shock and subversion have always been contained in literature (as mentioned in Chapter One), works such as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Poe's fiction, or Joyce's *Ulysses*, which were perceived to transgress the norms and conventions of either art, morality and/or society, were at specific times denied canonical status by either being censored, altered, marginalized, or put to trial. Before coming to a comprehensive and detailed illustration of how transgressive works are processed and appraised through the various levels of social and academic discourses, it is necessary to articulate a working definition of transgression as it pertains to the literary text. A deconstructive approach to the concept of transgression as well as an analysis of its possible effects on the reader, society, and artistic canons will help establish a practical framework to understand how the element of shock contained in these texts can create controversy and become subversive, thereby promoting, announcing, or reflecting shifts and changes at the cultural, social, and political levels.

The standard definition of a text of transgression is one that exceeds what is accepted and/or permissible within the established norms and conventions of art, culture, and society. In that broad sense, there seems to be an exhaustive list of works that would fall into this category. Yet both the definition of "transgression" and its theoretical conceptualization have undergone intense scrutiny and in order to come to a practical framework for this study, it is necessary to review some of the most pertinent versions of the concept as elaborated by various generations of literary and cultural critics.

As is the case with canonical discourses, the roots of strictures to identify, isolate, and punish transgression can be traced back to Judaism, the early church, and the Bible. Anthony Julius points out that for theologians, “transgression” meant an offence against God. Within a historical perspective, Julius explains the various shifts in the meaning of the word “transgression” since it entered the English language in the sixteenth century:

The word was soon secularized to describe disobedience of the law. It was then enlarged, first to include the violating of any rule or principle and then to embrace any departure from correct behaviour ... And in this broadening of meaning, expanding from questions of theology to those of mere good manners, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century ‘transgressions’ came to include digressions: deviations from the rule of one’s discourse. ... Parallel to this expansion lie two additional developments in meaning. ‘to transgress’ acquires in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (though then later loses) a transitive sense: the transgressor ‘transgresses against’ a person, offending in some very serious manner. ‘Transgression’ here detaches itself from rule-breaking and becomes instead a kind of assault, although not necessarily a physical one—an insult perhaps, or a provocation. It is not the rule that is violated but the person. It acquires this meaning: an act of aggression that causes injury. This act of aggression can also be against a discourse or a style: disrupting it with low, excluded material (a shout, the breaking of wind, a belch, a profane interjection) or by exposing its internal contradictions (drawing out inherent antinomies, introducing exception, identifying impurities) ... ‘Transgression’ is also used to refer to any exceeding of boundaries. This is closest to its etymological sense: to trans-gress, pass beyond, go over. This relates the word to ‘trespass’—the illicit crossing of a boundary. To subvert a hierarchy, placing the subordinate above the elevated, or to mix distinct concepts or substances, upsetting demarcations that have some institutional or tacit sanction, could be transgressive in this sense. (17-18)

This comprehensive overview outlines a multilayered definition of transgression that is still pertinent in today’s theoretical discourses. The first development reveals the insubordinate nature of transgression as law-breaking, as a departure from accepted rules and conventions; the second implies that transgressions are purposely offensive or

injurious actions directed towards a specific target; and the third explains how transgressions typically aim to cross established boundaries; while the final conceptualization alludes more directly to the “carnavalesque” nature of transgression as it seeks to invert established hierarchies, implying that typically, it originates from what are considered to be “low” forms of cultural expression and are directed towards “high” culture. In brief, Julius concludes that “Four essential meanings emerge, then: the denying of doctrinal truths; rule-breaking, including the violation of principles, conventions, pieties or taboos; the giving of serious offense; and the exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries” (19)—or, in other words, violations of dogma, custom, person and/or practice.

While Julius’s study focuses on the visual arts, post-structuralist Michel Foucault is mostly concerned with transgression as it specifically pertains to the written word. Shifting slightly from the time-frame that Julius considers to be the “transgressive period” in the visual arts, Foucault retraces in *The Order of Things* the transgressive period in literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century in considering authors that are in rupture with the tradition of language inherited from the Renaissance:

[A]t the beginning of the nineteenth century, at a time when language was burying itself within its own density as an object and allowing itself to be traversed, through and through, by knowledge, it was also reconstituting itself elsewhere, in an independent form, difficult of access, folded back upon the enigma of its own origin and existing wholly in reference to the pure act of writing. Literature becomes progressively more differentiated from the discourse of ideas, and encloses itself within a radical intransitivity; it becomes detached from all the values of which were able to keep it in general circulation during the Classical age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth), and creates within its own space everything that will ensure a ludic denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible). (300)

Although in this excerpt Foucault's emphasis is on language, at a time in the nineteenth century when writing and literature detached themselves from other cultural endeavors, his view is not so different from Julius's, for he also proposes transgression as something "radical" and "detached": a "denial," a departure from established norms and conventions that typically engages in the "free play" of everything offensive. In an extended sense, this and the idea of a rupture in language appear to echo Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia"—the production of meaning through the interplay between the multitude of utterances, voices, languages, and contexts—which, as an integral component of the emerging novel genre in the nineteenth century, "was being historically shaped by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces [and] was ... consciously opposed to [the accepted] literary language" (273).

Foucault's theory of transgression may also seem to echo the concept of "trespassing" articulated by Julius, for in "A Preface to Transgression," he clearly underlines the involvement of transgression with "the limit" (i.e. the established boundaries imposed by norms and conventions). Yet, as transgression deviates from conventional discourses, Foucault's definition of transgression progressively departs from that of Julius's precisely because it not only crosses the limit, it engages in "free play" with that limit:

The play of limits and transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. (34)

Later, Foucault argues that transgression is not related to the limit as an oppositional binary but rather, projects it into a void to come progressively to what could be defined as

“pure” transgression, a concept implicitly detached from the properties of shock and subversion:

Since [the] existence of [pure transgression] is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive ... (35)

Foucault eventually conceptualizes pure transgression as being “limitless” (35), a property he identifies in the writings of Georges Bataille (47-52) whose oeuvre focuses on attempting to reveal the possibilities of transgression as detached from any system of meaning: a “truth which exceeds the possibility of thought” (*Eroticism* 268). In both his critical and creative work, he demonstrates how such possibilities can be unraveled through transgression and excess, and more particularly, through the extreme experiences of pleasure and pain, which are to be found in what he defines as “Eroticism.” For Bataille, Eroticism is the “problem of problems ... It is the most mysterious, the most general, and the least straightforward” (273). He argues that although philosophy and eroticism coincide, philosophy is confined within its own language, for language sets limits. In that sense, philosophy “sets itself against transgression” and, he maintains, “if transgression became the foundation-stone of philosophy (this is how my thinking goes), silent contemplation would have to be substituted for language” (275). Bataille values experience over language, which is driven by excess to reach a point of rupture, where this rupture becomes what Roland Barthes would call *jouissance* or “bliss”: the expression of the inexpressible. Language sets its own limits; as a system of meaning, it is confined, whereas experience is not. In order to breach these confinements, to reach the eternities of possibilities, one needs to strive for the horizon where experience

replaces language, where language becomes experience. For Bataille, this horizon is situated in “Eroticism,” at the point of fusion between pleasure and pain. By borrowing a parallel image from the “most violent of poets,” Arthur Rimbaud,<sup>4</sup> he argues that these limitless possibilities, which are attainable only through eroticism, are also reachable through literature:

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death and continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea. (*Erotism* 25)

This notion of fusion between two opposing forces—the sun and the sea, or more specifically in the writings of Bataille, death and sexuality—echoes the notion of transgression as blurring traditionally accepted distinctions between the high and the low, the denotative and connotative modes of language, object and subject, and the signifier and signified, whose final aim is the rapprochement between a philosophy of life and the act of writing as experienced through creation and Eroticism.

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, transgressions of various sorts have always formed part of the western tradition: from antiquity (in the plays of Aristophanes and Ovidius) through biblical stories, medieval romances, and Renaissance Theater, to the increasing inclusion of “pornography” in high art in the eighteenth century and various forms of implicit exploitative sexuality and explicit graphic violence in contemporary novels, yet one may wonder what motivates transgression and how it has influenced the arts. When Julius quotes St. Paul in Romans 4:15, “where no law is, there is no transgression,” he implies that transgressions of the law-breaking variety are an

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<sup>4</sup> Elle est retrouvée/Quoi? L’eternité./C’est la mer allée/Avec le soleil (qtd. in Bataille *Erotism* 25).

automatic reaction to the law (17). This observation is also what prompts Foucault to point out that transgression and the boundaries it so purposely violates are in fact, interdependent:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. (34)

Perhaps this is also what prompts Julius to link transgression with instinctual desire: “[t]he transgressive is a cultural instinct, the desire to subvert what culture itself has given us” (98). While Julius’s terminology might seem contradictory—a “cultural instinct” seems an oxymoron especially when, ever since Freud, instinct has been repeatedly defined in opposition to culture—this instinct (or impulse), this “desire to subvert,” seems closely related to the Oedipal complex and the “natural” predisposition of humanity for breaking what Jacques Lacan would call “the law of the father” as imposed by culture. More specifically, Julius cites both Picasso and Apollinaire to explain the necessary aggression of the transgressive towards the law and the father: “[t]he transgressive is about the violence of the artist towards his forebears (recall Picasso’s motto, ‘In art one must kill one’s father’), and it is also about the commitment of art itself to the ‘perpetual immoral subversion of the existing order’ (Apollinaire’s project)” (99). Transgression is first and foremost a disobedient, even rebellious, offspring of art, one that specifically aims to displace and destroy authority, to break taboos and to subvert established norms and conventions, an act that is typically perceived to be shocking and/or even disturbing. Furthermore, there is a shared belief amongst writers and critics such as Georges Bataille, James Gardner, and Anthony Julius

that one distinguishable characteristic amongst transgressive works is that of shock and scandal: “[a]s Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks,” declares Terry Eagleton, “there is no slander in an allowed fool” (*Walter Benjamin* 148).

Transgressions of all types ordinarily occur at low levels of discourse such as in popular entertainment where such transgressions are expected and are rather conventional, which is precisely Eagleton’s point above: transgression effectively produces shock only when unexpected. Moreover, transgression is more shocking and capable of arousing controversy when it occurs in high culture such as canonical art or “serious” literature. Yet not all that shocks stirs controversy nor is all that rouses scandal particularly subversive though the popular media’s response demonstrates that they are endlessly able to confuse the two. Some passages of *The Iliad* for example, might seem shocking because the violence is particularly grizzly, but Homer’s epic was never considered to be subversive for that reason, and hence, it does not belong under the category of transgression. On the other hand, transgressive works rely more distinctly on the value of shock from their subversive properties, and consequently, are more likely to be received by a scandalous uproar, which will prompt institutional authorities to take some type of punitive action against the work or the artist. In other words, it is specifically when the seditious elements of a work are thought intentionally to offend its audience that they are labeled “transgressive” for these elements are considered to pose a potential threat to established artistic, social, and cultural conventions by harming the sensitivity of the community, corrupting civic and moral precepts, challenging conventional artistic norms, and/or subverting accepted forms of institutional power.

For instance, *Madame Bovary* was put to trial on a charge of immorality, for the authorities feared that the reader would be influenced by the main character's incestuous and destructive behavior. Although there had been precedents, such as the wave of suicides that accompanied the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which could have justified the course of action taken by the authorities, for most readers, it seems rather perplexing that the authorities would actually fear that someone would be influenced by a heroine who was so apparently foolish and who ended up putting an end to her days in ghastly circumstances. Yet what the officials saw in the novel at the time was that the character was never actually condemned throughout the story, that the narrator, and the author, sympathized with the heroine by making her the object of detailed and elaborate descriptions without once flatly saying that she was wrong and deserved the end she administered to herself. What the authorities of the Second Empire saw in the absence of moral voice in the narrative was a truthfulness that some may find offensive, a "tell it like it is" approach that they believed was uncanny and could be unsettling for those who would not be prepared for it. Ironically, as Mario Vargas Llosa points out, "the sinister Puritanism imposed by men of the cloth in the Second Empire brought before the bar of justice the two great books of that era: *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*" (22). What Baudelaire and Flaubert also have in common is that they were later considered to be the precursors of the Modernist sensibility in French literature: ensuing generations of critics believed that their aesthetic approaches, the very transgressions for which they were put to trial (their respective "obscenity" and "immorality" regarding their treatment of sex taboos), were actually a rejection of the prevailing aesthetics of Romanticism and the moral codes inherited from the

Enlightenment period. In the case of *Madame Bovary* the impeccable flair for purity of form, the implementation of free indirect discourse, and the aesthetic doctrine of *le mot juste* would eventually earn Flaubert the title of “Creator of the modern novel” as granted by the likes of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Nathalie Sarraute.<sup>5</sup>

To determine how the mechanics of transgression operate within society, Julius draws from a variety of transgressive works from different media from the end of the twentieth century and makes some similar observations regarding their perceived immorality:

The works were taken to adopt immoral, injurious perspectives on aspects of sexual violence: the murder and abuse of children, assaults on women, the eroticizing of physical injury. Immoral, because they did not condemn the vices that they represented or to which they alluded; injurious because this failure to condemn was thought to encourage imitative harm to others. (7)

In this statement, he illustrates how the element of shock is processed, noting that scandal appears to be the unifying factor between these works that were considered to be both immoral and injurious. In addition, Julius makes a number of interesting observations that will prove instrumental in designing a conceptual framework of transgression for this study. He observes that the preferred subject of transgression is sexual violence or more generally, the psychological link between the two instinctual drives of sex and violence; a point, as will be investigated below, that has been specifically stressed by critics such as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault following Freud’s classic treatment of this nexus in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In addition, failure to punish or condemn such conduct is itself considered to transgress moral boundaries. By not adhering to the accepted

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sarraute’s essay “Flaubert le précurseur” in the February 1965 edition of *Preuves*.

framework of crime and punishment, transgressive works appear to glorify and promote immoral or illegal behavior. The previous chapter noted how aestheticism rejected the moral principle in art and how Nietzsche despised the “herding-animal morality” that characterized society, yet the above observations bear witness that in the appraisal of the transgressive, a high sense of righteousness and morality still prevails. To that effect, Julius remarks that the fierce opposition towards transgressive texts is for the most part misguided:

These criticisms, it was rejoined, mostly missed their mark, because they confused wicked acts with their depiction, and moral rules with sentimental pieties. They derived, so it was suggested, from incoherent notions concerning both ‘art’ and ‘audience’. (7)

In other words, to decipher the value of these works, moral judgment is not sufficient: one needs to understand both how transgression surges from within the artistic tradition, how it affects prospective audiences, and why it may promote, announce, or mirror changes at the geo-political level. By considering the examples of Poe’s fiction and Joyce’s *Ulysses* as was illustrated in Chapter One, one can see how public opinion and critical judgment can affect the perception of a transgressive work—the former was marginalized because it was considered to be written by the mind of an “adolescent,” while the other was banned for it was perceived as “obscene”—and how these disparaging remarks greatly hindered their value as cultural capital. However, criticism, whose aim according to Arnold is to “learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world,” not only explained how the texts should be approached by prospective audiences, but also acted as a “defense” by clarifying the texts’ usage of transgressive devices and techniques. Similarly, Julius draws from various examples of

transgressive artworks and their respective criticism to come to an elaboration of three specific defenses to justify their production and value as cultural capital, and to separate them from being so readily categorized as “trash” by the artistic, legal, and social institutions: the Estrangement Defence, the Canonic Defence, and the Formalist Defence. The Estrangement Defence maintains “that it is the job of art to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about the world, or about art itself” and that “Art undermines pieties, challenges torpid institutions, and is always fresh and disturbing.” The Canonic Defence, an appeal to tradition, insists that “such disturbing, new artworks are successors to familiar, established artworks and must be judged by reference to them.” And the Formalist Defence, another version of the appeal to the Aesthetic discourses above, claims “that it is the form of the work that matters, anxiety about its content is misplaced; that art has its own, distinct mode of existence” (26-7).

Julius specifies that even as an emerging practice there can be no general categorization, but that, characteristically, there are three kinds of transgressive art: an art that violates social taboos, an art that rejects established artistic conventions, and an art that challenges and disobeys the rules of the state. He points out that on the one hand, one does not exclude the other, and that a work of art can belong to more than one category at the same time (102). On the other hand, these three forms of transgressions are not systematically perceived to be equivalent. In addition, different loci of power are brought to bear on repressing different types of transgression. Nevertheless, these categorizations are particularly well-suited to discuss the multilayered dimensions of transgression as it can potentially influence cultural, social, and political discourses.

While the first category pertains more particularly to the shock that the transgressive is capable of producing, formal innovation and the art of protest reveal the subversive potential of transgression with regard to both the canons of art (i.e. culture) as well as social politics. When taboos are broken, an underlying truth is unveiled, a truth which is usually repressed by the moral and civic guidelines that dictate social conduct, and thus, setting loose what Freud would call the “unconscious,” repressed instinctual drives and desires that can be both revolutionary and cataclysmic—or, an effect that Bataille and Nietzsche consider to be exhilarating, elevating, and liberating. The second type of transgression refers to how, as a dynamic entity, art evolves, and such evolution relies on works that purposely aim to stretch established artistic conventions and boundaries. Whereas “subversion” has often in recent years been attributed almost exclusively to ‘minority’ literatures that aimed to challenge the ruling orthodoxies of race, class, and gender, the element of subversion in transgressive literature proposes a different perspective. According to Lucy Sargisson, “it is internally subversive” (qtd. in *Julius* 238), it aims to cross all boundaries, especially those which delimit established oppositional binaries. As discussed earlier, Foucault already considered this perspective and specifically points out that transgression engages in “free play” with these traditional limits. Moreover, in the writings of Julia Kristeva regarding the “abject” in contemporary literature, the subversive potential of transgression is portrayed as remarkably more aggressive towards the concepts of morality and the law:

... [Contemporary literature] seems to be written out of the untenable aspects of perverse or superego positions. It acknowledges the impossibility of Religion, Morality, and the Law—their power play, their necessary and absurd seeming. Like perversion, it takes advantage of them, gets round them, and makes

sport of them. Nevertheless, it maintains a distance where the abject is concerned. The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality. (16)

Kristeva not only supports the idea that transgression “plays” with norms and conventions, but that at the same time, by “perverting” language, by creating its own system of value, and by “crossing over” traditional binaries of opposition, it defines its own system of meaning, and/or being as well. With regard to the writings of Bataille, in texts such as *Madame Edwarda* or *Le Bleu du ciel*, Bataille transgresses the traditional boundaries between philosophy and language, religion and sexuality, poetry and prose, and in the process, he articulates the concepts of a philosophy based on excess and transgression by focusing on the experiences of “extreme pleasure and extreme pain” mentioned earlier. In his discussion of Bataille's emphasis on excess in his theory of Eroticism, James Annesley points out that “[t]he result is a system that exceeds all boundaries by generating extreme, superfluous experiences. The challenge to order posed by excess is thus seen to destabilize regulating forces and, in particular, to challenge ordered systems of exchange” (54). According to Roland Barthes, the texts of Bataille are “texts of Bliss,” for they correspond to his definition: “[the text of bliss] imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (14).

These considerations of the texts of Bataille—as they transgress all orders of exchange, as they produce bliss and they define themselves from within their own system—are essential to illustrate the notion of “pure” transgression mentioned earlier. Whereas the definitions of Foucault, Kristeva, and Bataille regarding the nature of transgression are sure to provide for a detailed understanding of its taboo-breaking properties, the concept of pure transgression is ill-fitted to exclusively serve the purpose of this study. Pure transgression presupposes a total dissociation from the limit it transgresses, a separation from any system of meaning such as cultural or political discourses, and for that reason, it does not consider the inter-exchanges between the cultural processes of canon-formation and transgression. In order to come to an understanding of how transgression is assimilated and assessed with regard to cultural capital and canonical processes—which are deeply embedded in cultural ideologies—it is necessary to consider transgression precisely in relation to those norms and conventions (i.e. limits) it transgresses. In contrast, the framework proposed earlier, which considers the properties of shock, scandal, and subversion—as transgressive works successively or simultaneously break taboos, challenge artistic conventions, and threaten established ideologies—offers a more didactic approach for understanding the discursive exchanges between transgression, the processes of popular and critical reception, and canon-formation.

Transgressions that are taboo-breaking are perhaps the most common for they are specifically directed towards the widest possible audience and closely mirror the accepted characterization of the transgressive as that which exceeds established boundaries of the permissible and the tolerable within society. The standard definition of “taboo” is that of

a practice or belief, or a set thereof, which is prohibited and/or condemned because it is perceived as potentially offensive, embarrassing, or harmful according to moral and social guidelines. The exposure of certain taboos is more likely to produce shock and arouse controversy because it directly involves the audience's sensitivity and tolerance for such violations.

In *Totem and Taboo*, pointing out that the word taboo is of Polynesian origin, Freud claims that “for us the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us, sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean” (821). Having clearly identified the origins of taboo in the pre-religious age he points out that, ironically “[taboo] prohibitions concerned actions for which there existed a strong desire” (831), and that as a result of social and cultural norms, these desires undergo repression. In this process, repressed desires—instinctual drives of sex and violence traditionally linked with prohibitions of incest and murder—are screened, or “filtered,” by the Conscious as dictated by societal morality, and are then safeguarded in the Unconscious. More precisely, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts that repressed wishes dwell in the unconscious and that the conscious system opposes their fulfillment by suppressing them. He insists, however, that the process of repression does not destroy such wishes: “[t]he doctrine of *repression* ... asserts that such wishes still exist, but simultaneously with an inhibition which weighs them down. Language has hit upon the truth when it speaks of the “‘suppression’ (sub-pression, or pushing under) of such impulses” (288). Freud also points out that humans entertain an ambivalent relationship with taboos, which is maintained by our unconscious desires and the conscious processes that prohibit their

fulfillment. This relationship can be characterized as one which alternates between revulsion and fascination; whereas the former is provoked by a fear of castigation or guilt, the latter is triggered by instinctual drives and, to another extent, by what Conrad called “the fascination of the abomination”—both inherent human impulses. Freud concludes that when unconscious wishes are fulfilled, they are expressed as a discomfort. In dreams, they may appear in what he calls “anxiety-dreams” and in literature they may manifest themselves in the “uncanny.” Freud alludes to Friedrich von Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (*Infantile Neurosis* 241) and he creates a link with psychoanalysis by relating the uncanny in literature to being the discomforting manifestations of repressed desires. The potential of such material to produce shock is attributed to the fact that for Freud, the uncanny provokes a feeling of “unfamiliarity” and “uneasiness,” which the reader might find disturbing and unsettling. Freud argues that by using such devices, an author is able to exert greater directive power over the reader’s emotions and stir him/her in different directions: “by the means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions” (251).

While Freud elaborates on the compelling power of transgressions that are taboo-breaking as they appear in literature, Kristeva refers to this property as the “abject”: “the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal*” (12). Although Freud appeared to be much more accepting of a return to primal urges in his earlier writings, he seemed gradually to distance himself from his former views in his later work. Nevertheless, according to the likes of Nietzsche, Bataille and Foucault, transgressions that break social taboos by exposing

repressed instinctual drives stored in the Unconscious may carry implications—some beneficial—that reach beyond that of simply producing shock.

With regard to taboo prohibitions, both Nietzsche and Bataille reject the over-emphasis on morality and its prejudices, arguing that there is some tangible value in exposing (and sometimes indulging in) repressed wishes. As mentioned in the first chapter, Nietzsche scorns the establishment of boundaries on intellectual freedom by an institution of morality and reminds us that “truth” is not solely to be found within the narrow confines of the permissible. Quite on the contrary, he believes that elevation of spirit can also inhere in the “radical other” of transgression: “severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter’s art and devilry of every kind,—that everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human species as its opposite” (31). In “The Use Value of D.A.F. De Sade,” Bataille speaks of how society, through material progress, “leads [humanity] to a disagreeable and terminal stagnation” (92) and preaches “revolt” as a means to bring this to an end. Furthermore, by explaining how the limits imposed on the Unconscious need to be broken, Bataille also alludes to the Nietzschean concept of a “herding-animal morality”:

The *participation* in everything that, among men, is horrible and allegedly sacred can take place in a limited and unconscious form, but this limitation and this unconsciousness obviously have only a provisional value, and nothing can stop the movement that leads human beings toward an ever more shameless awareness of the erotic bond that links them to death, to cadavers, and to horrible physical pain. It is high time that human nature cease being subjected to the autocrat’s vile repression and to the morality that authorizes exploitation. Since it is true that one of a man’s attributes is the derivation of pleasure from the suffering of others, and the erotic pleasure is not only the negation of an agony that

takes place at the same instant, but also a lubricious participation in that agony, it is time to choose between the conduct of cowards afraid of their own joyful excesses, and the conduct of those who judge that any given man need not cower like a hunted animal, but instead can see all the moralistic buffoons as so many dogs. (*Visions of Excess* 101)

In other words, Bataille argues that the value of abiding moral guidelines is significantly restrictive and necessarily temporary, that humanity needs to (and eventually will) free itself from this dog-like condition. As mentioned earlier, he emphasizes that the privileged subject of taboo is the link between death and sexuality, erotic desire and pain, sex and violence: “[i]f a taboo exists, it is a taboo on some elemental violence, to my thinking. This violence belongs to the flesh, the flesh responsible for the urges of the organs of reproduction” (*Eroticism* 93). Bataille focuses almost exclusively on exploring the complex, multilayered, and ambivalent intersections between the experiences of sex and death, not so much as to attempt to create a rapprochement, but rather as simultaneous experiences, whereas one is inevitably linked to the other. Bataille quotes Sade in saying, “There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image,” and he argues, “Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives. Without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?” (*Eroticism* 24).

In “A Preface to Transgression” Foucault contends that sexuality, in particular, seems to represent the pinnacle of all taboos even within a so-called “liberated” society:

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos... (30)

Within the perspective enunciated above that transgression is a rupture in language, Foucault aligns himself with the Nietzschean imperative regarding the death of God. Like Bataille, he traces the origin of his argument to the works of the Marquis de Sade:

From the moment that Sade delivered his first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression. (31)

This elevation into the “night,” of which he speaks is no other than the “limitless” realm into which the transgressive propels its audience and sets its own limits. In advocating the power of language, and more specifically, the appearance of sexuality in language, Foucault argues that eroticism leads to a questioning of language as a system of meaning (50). In other words, he reasserts the argument that transgression is a disinterested endeavor that is not preoccupied with established boundaries and or the line between binary oppositions.

For Bataille, eroticism plays an essential role in transgression: these transgressions not only break taboos, they call for an upheaval against arbitrary systems of meaning by blurring conventional borders and by defining their own philosophical language. In other words, transgressions of a sexual nature are not only taboo-breaking, they challenge norms and conventions and establish new paradigms. Furthermore, what is potentially more threatening regarding the import of the erotic within social, cultural and political discourses, is the incorporation of pornography for it specifically blurs the established boundaries between high and low culture. Briefly stated, the difference between sexual content and pornography is that the latter typically aims to provide

physical pleasure, some type of instant gratification, which is superficial and contains no underlying, redemptive artistic or moral figuration. Hence, its goal is different from the traditional goal of art, which aims to provide pleasure through intellectual contemplation. Traditionally, pornographic material has been excluded from high canonical works and confined to popular culture, yet it is specifically when pornography is incorporated into high cultural productions that it reveals its subversive potential; pornography is potentially transgressive, but like any type of transgression it does not act subversively when its appearance is expected or predictable. Arguing that “Art is defined against pornography, while also partaking of it (62),” Julius maintains Manet’s *Olympia* is the perfect illustration of the incorporation of the pornographic into high art, of the transgressive exchanges between high and low culture, and that, by doing so, Manet’s painting both shocked its audience and subverted art’s established practices: “*Olympia* was an affront both to the art canon and to the aesthetic sensibilities of its Paris audiences.” He also notes that Bataille observed that “it was the first masterpiece ... before which the crowd fairly lost control of itself” and that “[t]his response gave it the impact of a radical break in art history” (59). Hence, *Olympia* is also an appropriate example to demonstrate the interrelationship between shock and subversion; how the element of shock produced by an artwork can act subversively to shape artistic canons by defining a new aesthetic.

In the case of western literature, a number of prominent works have incorporated elements of pornography throughout the ages—from Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* to Chaucer’s *Tales*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—but perhaps none have transgressed the boundaries between pornography

and high culture as did the Marquis de Sade<sup>6</sup>. The trials of his life and work are well-known<sup>7</sup>; the perverse and obscene character of his works subjected him to a series of prosecutions. Yet thanks to critical discourse examining his literary contributions in the ensuing centuries,<sup>8</sup> his *oeuvre* has benefited from a remarkable increase in its cultural capital and he is now not only recognized as one of the forefathers of transgression and *erotica*, but is also integrated in university curricula and anthologies. In the licentious texts of *Justine* and *Les 120 Jours de Sodome* for example, he describes scenes of sexual activity in vivid detail, incorporating such taboos as homosexual and anal intercourse, sadism, and scatology with a style so intricate and sophisticated it seems he is writing the most noble and purest visualizations and thoughts; as Barthes puts it, “pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models” (6). As mentioned above, critics such as Bataille and Foucault argue that by exploiting the language of pornography, Sade stretched the limits of traditional literary language and by doing so, he instated a new self-defined realm of literature. Interestingly enough, the irony is that, on a formal level, the author adhered to the style of canonical works while in content, he incorporated material that had traditionally been shunned. Taken in context, however, what makes Sade particularly noteworthy is that he not only challenged established artistic practices, but he is also considered to have promoted the ideas that set in motion the French revolution and reflected the inherent conflicts of class and culture, as well as the exchanges of institutionalized power that characterized it. Hence, Sade is

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<sup>6</sup> This could be due to the fact that these boundaries only become firmly drawn for the first time in the age in which he writes.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, *The Marquis de Sade: A Life*, by Neil Schaffer. Knopf, New York: 1999.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal essay: “Must We Burn Sade?” or the collection of essays regarding the Marquis’ *oeuvre* in the book published by Humanity Books which bears the same title.

not only a prime example regarding the subversive use of pornography for breaking taboos, establishing new artistic paradigms, and challenging the state, he also illustrates how, as a result of critical discourses and due to the multilayered properties that were attributed to his works, an author and his work can subsequently and/or simultaneously incorporate the various possibilities of the transgressive (taboo-breaking, canon-augmenting, and politically resistant).

In contrast to transgressions that violate taboos, transgressions that violate artistic principles do not specifically aim to attack the audience's sensitivity—which is relative for it might vary widely amongst different subjects—but Art itself; the medium and its established canons and conventions. In discussing this second strand of transgression, that which transgresses artistic conventions, Julius quotes Pablo Picasso: “Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon” and distinguishes between works that are “canon violating” and those that are “canon augmenting,” whereas transgressive works can belong to either category or both at the same time. He also aptly argues that any new movement in art always transgresses the previous movement's rules: “As one style succeeds another, the laws of the former style are violated” (102-4). This last observation is particularly accurate if one considers that at the turn of the nineteenth century—as an offspring of the aestheticism preached by Gautier and Wilde—the modernist movement reacted against the restrictive aesthetic formulas and suffocating morality of the Victorian period by experimenting with traditional genres, styles, and subject matter. Within this conceptualization, Julius makes a distinction between “innovators,” those who attempt to enlarge art boundaries by exploring them (or, as Barthes would say, by engaging in “free play”), and

“interrogators,” those who subvert the rules of art by violating them. He believes that in conjunction, they “entail, in the artist’s self-understanding, a trumping of one rule with a notionally higher rule or ‘law,’ thereby justifying the disregard for the rule by reference to its inferiority to the other rule or law” (106-7). In sum, a work of art that transgresses art’s established practices, whether by exploration or violation, innovation or interrogation of perceived boundaries, serves to promote fresh, i.e. “new” styles, genres, and techniques, and to contribute to the dynamic evolution of artistic expression. In twentieth-century literature, a particularly good case in point is James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Joyce’s effective use of the innovative stream-of-consciousness technique not only paved the way for ensuing generations of writers as mentioned in the first chapter, but it also contributed to the definition of what would later be categorized as the postmodern novel.

Beyond the canon-augmenting potential of certain works, there is an accepted view shared by many literary critics that literature has the power to subvert established hierarchies not only in the canonical discourses of academia but also in socio-political discourses. For example, Paul Lauter argues that “it would not be too much to say that canonical criticism constitutes a part of a broader effort to reconstruct our society” (144-5). Another common conception is that certain literary texts have promoted social and political changes by influencing public opinion during specific periods in history:

In the 1960s and 1970s, the movements for social change challenged artists to discover how they might themselves be agents of change rather than, at best, chroniclers of it. Writers have addressed that challenge in many ways: Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Adrienne Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language* are among other things, quite different approaches to the problem of creating texts that are actors for change. (Lauter 61)

Hence, according to Lauter, literatures of social minorities typically aim to subvert the established social order of race, class, and gender, and when these texts become cultural capital by their inclusion in the academic canon, they expose new generations of readers to their once subversive now canonical ideas through increased circulation, negotiations, and exchanges. Consequently, through the potential impact it can have on various individuals, this repeated exposure promoted by changes at the cultural and/or institutional level will also help propel changes at the social and political level. Yet it is not only minority literature in particular that is empowering, all literature and all art can be empowering. While Alice Walker emphasizes that “the power of the written word [is] to reach, to teach, to empower and encourage—to change and save lives” (Walker in Lauter 64), Lauter argues that “[a]rt cannot stand outside [the] struggle [for survival, for space and hope]; on the contrary, it must play an important role in it ...” (65).

As explained in Chapter One, the concept that changes at the institutional level will promote social equality has been put in doubt by the likes of John Guillory, because the culture of the school is in many ways a closed system. In contrast, political subversion as it pertains to the literature of transgression is slightly more ambiguous and intricate. The rationale behind artworks that aim to challenge state rule is that if the artist is capable of making a sensation, of provoking shock or arousing controversy, he is capable of awakening his audience to political issues to which they would have otherwise remained indifferent. In other words, by relying on shock tactics, transgressive works perpetrate acts of “artistic terrorism” in the event that they will purposely draw attention to their “cause”—the subversive ideologies they are displaying and promoting. “Politically resistant art both puts into question the legitimacy of state actions

(sometimes, of the state itself),” argues Julius, “and is responsive to the contingencies of political life” (113). Observing that these works of art are confrontational, reflexive, disinterested, and public, and that they are consciously or purposely offensive, he notes that they are typically directed towards two types of audiences: the opposition, those they intend to offend, and those they intend to bring to an uprising.

In an 1857 essay entitled “New Tendencies in Art,” Théophile Thoré observed that the modern era, which he welcomed, opened up traditional barriers between cultures and societies, and created a new “universal” society (379). He perceived that this breaking of boundaries had also occurred in art with the rise of Modernism, where fresh ideas, new perspectives, and radical concepts redefined previous conceptualizations of art by charting unexplored territory with regard to form and content, and expanding the horizons of what was possible. The relationship between art and institutional power are complex and ambiguous, for there are a number of alternatives of how the former can affect the latter: art can either precipitate, reflect or serve as an aid to understanding social and/or political changes. Contrary to the opinions of the critics above, Julius believes that over the last century, the category of transgressive works that aim to challenge the state has been ineffectual and stigmatized by failure. “The political challenges [of Art] ... have been muted,” argues Julius (186) and in contrast to the use value of taboo-breaking art, he readily discards the subversive potential of the transgressive with regard to political discourses. He partly bases this conclusion on Theodor Adorno whom he quotes: “every work of Art is an uncommitted crime” (222). Art is a “crime” for its motive may be ideologically driven and aim to challenge existing political conditions, yet it remains “uncommitted” because by definition, Art is

“ontologically subversive,” apolitical and anarchical: it may stretch the confines of the representative and the imaginative, but its properties and successes as Art also mark its political failure (168, 228-9). Hence, it is ‘uncommitted’ in both senses of the word; that is, the author stays out of jail and stays out of a prolonged and devoted commitment to a cause.

In contrast, Julius’s dubiousness regarding the validity of the politically transgressive seems paradoxical. To begin with, his overview of works of the twentieth century that contain political aspirations prompts him to state the following:

The failure of a transgressive political art to flourish has led to the making of artworks that sentimentalise suffering, or falsely universalise suffering, or are misread as political because of the political affiliations of their maker. (112)

Interestingly enough, his comments seemed to be specifically directed towards some of the works of the ‘minority’ writers mentioned above, such as Alice Walker. It would be easy to discard his argument by considering that he is no exception to the rule, and that by discarding “others” and their ideologies, he is indeed promoting his own. Furthermore, the *ineffectiveness* of the politically transgressive is not situated in the failure of the work *itself* to create political *tension*; quite on the contrary, it is the state that takes *effective* action against the existence of potential threats, a fact that Julius does not deny: “[m]any artworks give political offence by chance, some set out to cause it. State institutions will often respond, censoring the work, punishing the artist” (112). If the state feels compelled to react in such a way, does that not specifically bear witness to the threat or potential threat of the politically-challenging transgressive artwork? Indeed, the state *validates* or *reinforces* the subversive capability of transgression precisely by

taking action. In other words, by banning the artist or censoring the artwork, the state officially recognizes—or institutionalizes—the political value of transgression. To adopt previous terminology, the cultural capital of the politically transgressive artwork is established through a series of exchanges and negotiations between the state and the work, the authorities and the artist.

Stallybrass et al. have tried to demonstrate how exchanges between established polarized hierarchies such as the high and the low (the integration of pornography in high art, for example) “carry political charge through aesthetic and moral polarities” (3-4). Hence, shock and subversion, as they affect both the audience and the artistic canon, can also have an impact on political discourses. After extensively discussing Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque” as that transgression which purposely subverts the established hierarchies of the high and the low as well as the Bataille-Foucauldian perspective of the potentially liberating effects of transgression, Stallybrass et al. align themselves with Jonathan Dollimore in arguing that “[i]t would be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness” (201). Rather, they perceive the carnival—and the transgressions associated with it—as a set of “symbolic practices” which only creates the illusion of revolt, for the carnival always implies a “return” to established hierarchies and in doing so, it systematically reinforces the hegemonic social order and affirms itself as an ideological tool of control and dominion (13, 201). It is precisely the point that Umberto Eco makes in *Carnival!* by arguing that the carnival is not a “pressure cooker” but rather, it is a “safety valve,” where the accumulated anxieties of society’s conflicting forces are safely released through the activities of the carnival.

By violating taboos, transgressive art purposely shocks its audience by expanding horizons and exposing underlying truths that have been previously suppressed by various forces of institutional power. By doing so, it may act subversively either to promote, announce, or echo changes both in the canon and society through critical discourses and successive series of cultural exchanges between the artist, his work, academia, culture, and the state. There are numerous examples to demonstrate that transgression is indeed an effective tool for canonical revisions. One only has to think of the rise of Poe in the academic canon, the revisions prompted by modernism, or the popularity and influence of “minority” artists to illustrate this point. Furthermore, the fact that historically, the state has repeatedly taken action against transgressive art through censorship proves that transgression in art can act as a catalyst for political rebellion. Certainly, the authorities perceived some potential threat in the material figuring in the works of Ovid, Sade, Flaubert, and Joyce to ban them, censor them, and/or indict them, forcing them to edit or withdraw their texts.

Yet the potential of transgressive artworks to shock and subvert is dubious at best. Julius and Stallybrass et al. both believe that the properties of shock and subversion, as well as the transgressive itself are merely temporary and are dissipated by the same processes through which the transgressive arouses controversy and promotes change. Julius aptly argues that “it is at the moment at which an artwork can safely be exhibited is also the moment at which it ceases to be transgressive. Its arrival in the gallery marks its retirement from subversion. Politically transgressive art is not made to last” (172). In other words, when a transgressive work is officially recognized as art, or more specifically as canonical art, it is incorporated within high and low discourses and

consequently, loses its transgressive essence for it cannot be longer characterized as breaching boundaries or as being “limitless”: it becomes confined by finding its place within cultural and political discourse, and ultimately within canonical and social institutions represented in academia. The same authors also argue that once transgressive works are processed and accepted as cultural capital they are no longer perceived as transgressive; they either become the norm or reinstate the norm. This is why perhaps Foucault relies mostly on a “pure” definition of transgression, one which is neither scandalous nor subversive and is detached from any cultural, social, or political discourses.

Perhaps transgression has indeed become the norm and, as a result, its potential to subvert has greatly been impoverished. But have transgressions ceased to exist, and are all transgressions created equal or treated equally? Considering that all subsequent negotiations of transgression—such as its power to subvert both the rules of art and the rule of the state—relies on the element of shock, transgression relies primarily on public reaction. How, specifically, does a transgressive text create shock and arouse controversy? And what are its possible immediate and/or far-reaching consequences on the literary canon and society in general? The next two chapters will attempt to answer these questions by taking a detailed look at two exemplary transgressive texts: Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Through its history of distribution and consumption, *The Monk*’s value as cultural capital has gradually increased in academia. An analysis of its reception with regard to canonical and socio-political discourses will allow me to trace the operation of such exchanges since the date of its publication in 1796. The subsequent discussion of *American Psycho* will

demonstrate how similar processes have operated on a significantly more recent novel under evolving cultural, social, and political conditions.

### Chapter 3

#### WORLDS COLLIDE: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND TRANSGRESSION IN MATTHEW

#### LEWIS' *THE MONK*

*An Author, whether good or bad, or between both, is an Animal whom every body is privileged to attack; For though All are not able to write books, all conceive themselves able to judge them.*

Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*

*A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence.*

Hans Robert Jauss, *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*

Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* seems particularly well-suited to illustrate the various intersections between transgression and canon-formation. The date of its publication coincides with a particularly sensitive period in history when major paradigm shifts were taking place at the social, cultural, economic, and political levels throughout Europe. As mentioned in Chapter One, the advances in publishing technologies contributed to the spread of literacy and promoted the expansion of a wide literary market, making books accessible to segments of society whose contact with written texts had previously been scarce and creating a considerable impact on cultural economies. Concurrently, the middle class was growing at a remarkable rate and rapidly asserted itself as a powerful force at all levels of discursive practices, greatly influencing previously established hierarchies and high/low polarities. And finally, the French Revolution of 1789 spread a

wave of fear across governments and continents that initiated many debates not only confined to national politics, but to aspects of contemporary culture as well. As the major thinkers and policy makers of the time contemplated the consequences of changes in society, cultural economy, and the revolution, they engaged in a frenzy of cross-disciplinary exchanges and negotiations which greatly affected accepted conventions and traditionally held hierarchies of thought, taste, and value. It is within this climate of great change and turmoil that Lewis' novel established itself as a quintessential work of transgression by breaking taboos, challenging accepted artistic standards, and being politically and morally subversive. In doing so, *The Monk* paved the way for legions of canonical texts after it by engaging and defying established norms and conventions.

Published in 1796, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* tells the story of Ambrosio, a monk who is torn between keeping his monastic vows and carrying out his personal ambitions. As the plot unfolds, the monk succumbs to temptation, which leads him on the path to sin and vice, incest, rape, and murder. Although immensely popular, Lewis' novel aroused a considerable amount of controversy, culminating in a trial whose outcome resulted in the author's having to alter and edit certain passages of the text that were considered to be "lewd," "blasphemous," and "immoral" (McEvoy viii-ix). Critical reception of *The Monk* was for the most part unfavorable on the grounds that the immorality of its content—particularly the explicit accounts of sex and violence—failed to heed the prevailing Horatian dictum that literature should serve moral and social functions: "[literature] had not only to please, but also to instruct, and it should instruct in the ways of virtue rather than vice" (McEvoy vii). Another reason for its condemnation was due to the fact that it was a novel—and more precisely, a *Gothic* novel—an emerging

sub-genre of literature that was considered subversive because it rejected accepted traditions and was neither respected nor valued by the *literati* operating under the canons of classicism, Reason, and early Romanticism. In addition, *The Monk* was perceived to be politically subversive, a view that was influenced by the novel's social criticism and Lewis' political affiliations. Hence, Lewis' novel simultaneously operates in the three divisions of transgression outlined in Chapter Two: it is taboo-breaking because by depicting scenes of incest and murder it transgresses the accepted conventions of societal morality; it challenges the reigning artistic practices; and it is politically subversive because it seems to debase the forms of institutional power. It also complies with the framework of shock, scandal and subversion, whereas the elements that produce shock arouse controversy, and are also capable of subverting traditionally accepted norms and conventions. These characteristics prevented Lewis from belonging to the exclusive list of canonical authors of the late eighteenth century. However, two centuries and several paradigm shifts later, the critical estimation of Lewis' novel has drastically changed,<sup>9</sup> as the extensive list of scholarly articles pertaining to the novel, the distinguished position it occupies within the traditions of both the Gothic and Romanticism, and its edition in the series of the *Oxford World's Classics* may testify. The recognized value of Lewis' novel as cultural capital has not only increased, it is constantly being reappraised.

As outlined in Chapter One, the late eighteenth century was marked by a frenzied series of cultural exchanges triggered by shifts operating at all levels of discursive practices. More particularly, the prevailing cultural climate at the time of *The Monk's*

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, as it was the case with the work of Edgar Allan Poe, the French were the first to consider that *The Monk* was indeed an outstanding work of literature. See for example Antonin Artaud's "Avertissement" in his adaptation of Lewis' novel.

publication was regulated by the dominant ideology of a literary élite who responded radically to what they perceived as the commercialization of literature and what they considered the vulgarization of taste in an expanding reading public. The economic parable of cultural capital and exchange articulated in the first chapter lends itself particularly well to the ensuing discussion of *The Monk's* critical reception and its initial exclusion from canonical consideration. In a contemporary assessment of canons, John Guillory argues that processes of canonization do not relate solely to arguments of aesthetic and representative value. Rather, a more comprehensive and accurate picture of these processes can be obtained by examining the specific historical contexts in which they are embedded (“Canon” 234-238). Consequently, a Canon is not a set and/or definite entity; it is a dynamic, “cultural capital” as Guillory points out, and its stocks rise or fall with changes in the specific cultural contexts under which they are produced, read, interpreted, and distributed. Hence, canon formation involves several factors, including the appraisal of critics and writers—the value (or “currency” to adopt Guillory’s terminology)—attributed to the work within the general community, and the inclusion of the author and/or his or her work in various institutional contexts.

Similarly, in determining how literary texts are given eminence, Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes the prominent role played by cultural transactions within specific contexts throughout history (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 4). Works of art are given the ability to “confer pleasure or excite interest or generate anxiety” (5) through an intricate web of cultural “negotiations” and “exchanges” (6) according to Greenblatt. The diverse circumstances through which literature is produced, received and circulated within specific contexts are greatly influenced by the dominant ideologies of institutions. In the

case of the late eighteenth century, these institutions were no other than the literati as well as prominent writers and critics such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were marshaling the cultural ideals of taste and value, while the immediate context for the reception of *The Monk* was one of intense literary production and commercialization occurring at a particularly frenzied era in Europe, where the fear of a Jacobin revolution in England was spurred by the recent events in neighboring France. Nevertheless, as society and culture change, so do the critical paradigms through which literary works are read, distributed and reappraised by subsequent generations of readers, critics, and scholars. Hence, through a series of major paradigms shifts in thought, taste and value, the cultural capital of texts such as *The Monk* has been continuously reevaluated. As Hans Robert Jauss puts it:

The relationship of literature and reader has aesthetic as well as historical implications. The aesthetic implication lies in the fact that the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with works already read. The obvious historical implication of this is that the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of reception from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident. (1551-2)

This chapter proposes to review the canonization processes and cultural exchanges that affected Lewis' novel dating from its publication to the present, and the ways in which, through a subsequent series of similar negotiations it affected them in return. It first addresses the reception of the Gothic novel as a genre before situating *The Monk* as a landmark text within this tradition. More precisely, this study demonstrates that Lewis made particular use of some characteristic transgressive elements to contrast them with other works of the Gothic genre and particularly the texts of Ann Radcliffe. Next, by

considering the novel as a social critique, it exhibits how the transgressive properties of *The Monk* can offer a reflection of both the processes of canonization and other pervasive ideologies. Finally, the chapter will explore the way in which the value as cultural capital of the novel has been subsequently reappraised through the paradigm shifts of the ensuing centuries.

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Beyond the contextual influences brought forth by the geo-political changes occurring during that time, the eighteenth century was also pivotal in the history of canonization where the spread of literacy sparked by the vast dissemination of cultural production, the rise of the novel as a genre, and the commercialization of literature shaped a series of polarized debates regarding issues of gender and class of readership, taste and value. As described in detail in Chapter One, the eighteenth century represented the first period during which there was a continuous and widespread effort to establish an English literary canon. More noteworthy however, is the fact that this period also witnessed the advent of print capitalism and an emerging literary market. Elizabeth Napier makes an astute observation regarding the rise of the Gothic novel when economic factors contributed to the remarkable increase in potential readers:

The prominence of the Gothic coincided, significantly, with a rapid expansion of the reading public in England. The consequences of the decision in 1774 to enforce the Copyright Act of 1709 had been immense: cheap editions of British Classics, no longer under perpetual copyright, suddenly became available, and Lackington's second-hand bookshops, book clubs, and the circulating libraries—which had grown steadily in popularity since the 1740s—contributed to swell and 'democratize' a previously élite reading public. Access to books was, moreover, coupled by increased leisure in which to read them, in particular among women of the middle class. (viii-ix)

As a reaction to this “democratization,” which cultural authorities perceived as an unregulated expansion of undisciplined readers, literary criticism became a figure of authority in the process of establishing taste and setting value, and determined the boundaries between high and low culture, between what was considered popular writing and “serious” literature. This sparked the view that great Art was inversely proportional to popularity by incorporating the particular issues of audience and readership—and specifically as they relate to gender and class—within the cultural discourses of critical reception and canon-formation. As Guillory points out, this trend also triggered a clear tendency to establish hierarchies amongst genres as championed by Wordsworth and Coleridge; poetry, for example, was given “unquestioned generic superiority” (*Cultural Capital* 131). In sum, institutional authorities, such as critics and teachers, played an essential role in reviewing and criticizing literature. In doing so, they were determining which works should be read and how, as well as arguing for the importance of having a literary canon.

Two interrelated conceptualizations dominated canon-formation practices up to the late eighteenth century: the Platonic ideal that literature should serve moral and social functions and Horace’s notion that literature should “instruct and delight.” Chapter One outlined how Plato carefully selected which texts would teach the citizens of the republic the best examples of civil and moral conduct. The same criteria were used when the process of canonization involved the decision of which books should be included in the Bible by reflecting the standards of moral conduct and social behavior that the ecclesiastic authorities had set in the community. Through the ensuing periods, Plato’s ideology was coupled with the Horatian paradigm in the critical works of authors such as

Boccaccio, Sidney, Dryden, and Johnson who vouched for the inclusion of works that could be said to align themselves with such standards. The fundamental notions that literature should be both pleasing and foster virtuous behavior remained prevalent even though other criteria evolved to echo changes in literary production. For the Age of Reason, morality and decency operated as major determining factors for the acceptance of works into the vernacular Canon.

Using Greenblatt's and Guillory's terminology, these cultural negotiations between author, text, audience and institutional authorities establish a historical framework to understand the processes of canonization as it occurred in the late eighteenth century and the way in which the "stock" of literary works as cultural capital fluctuates through time. This view also coincides with Jaus's perspective of literary history as "a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity" (1553). In considering the case of early Gothic works such as *The Monk*, it is important to take into account the particular characteristics of the genre. "The Gothic," Watt points out, "is a hybrid genre, its diverse affiliations best understood by way of detailed case studies of authors, works, and publishing events, and via a focus on the kinds of classification made by contemporary critics and reviewers" (130). Thus, a review of the critical reception of Lewis' novel should address the reception of the *Gothic* novel as a sub-genre of both a minor, i.e. "low" genre, the novel, as well as a major, i.e. "high" literary movement, Romanticism.

To a certain extent, the Gothic is an alteration of the sentimental novel, which was pioneered by Samuel Richardson. Many believe that the Gothic novel originated in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and at the dawn of the nineteenth century owed its immense popularity to the novels of Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*) (Baker 179, Wittman 65-66). It is important to note, however, that as a genre the Gothic escapes any clear categorization, for it does not follow any definite norms or conventions. Michael Gamer reflects on Robert Miles' conceptualization of the Gothic as a "discursive site," a "carnavalesque mode" which crosses genres (3) and argues that this perspective "recalls the open characterization of Jeffrey Cox and Marshall Brown; for both, the Gothic is concerned primarily with "limits" and "excesses" and therefore defined by assumptions that vary across a culture and that change with history" (9). It could be considered that by crossing established generic boundaries, by inverting high/low polarities, and by addressing the limits it exceeds, the Gothic seems to fit the standard definition of "transgression." M. M. Bakhtin observes, however, that as an "uncompleted" (i.e. a "young" and "developing") genre, there is no "single definitive, stable characteristic of the novel" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 8). Hence, the Russian formalist suggests that the novel in general eludes generic categorizations. This lack of stable characteristics of the novel in general and the Gothic in particular could possibly indicate why the generic denomination of "Gothic" was only coined a number of decades later to describe the particular strand of novels made popular by Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis<sup>10</sup>. Although the Gothic may escape traditional conventions as a genre, the term itself is originally associated with a particular

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis' novel, for example, was subtitled *A Romance*.

style of medieval architecture, particularly from the cathedrals of northern Europe. Interestingly enough, the genre of the Gothic in literature shares some similarities with its counterpart, for Gothic architecture provided the setting and atmosphere of numerous Gothic novels (Baker 175). These novels feature accounts of horrifying experiences in castles and monasteries, where elements of the supernatural intermingled with vicious deeds of lust, incest, and murder, not only captivating the reader's curiosity but also providing a source of excitement and enthrallment as well (Richter 114). As the *Companion to the Norton Anthology* points out, "by extension, [the Gothic] came to designate the macabre, mysterious, fantastic, supernatural, and, again, the terrifying, especially the *pleasurably* terrifying, in literature more generally." Even though it remains difficult to refer to the "Gothic" as a specific genre, it is nevertheless used to describe and identify works that typically employ the specific settings and literary tropes mentioned above.

The reception of the Gothic is characterized by a polarization between popular acclaim and critical disdain, at a time when readership seemed divided between consumers of High Art and popular literature, and when assessors of canonical texts were especially critical of popular culture and its audience. Reflecting Guillory's notion of genre hierarchies outlined earlier, Joyner Marjorie Tompkins points out that "the novel has been approached rather as a popular amusement than a literary form" (v). In a context shaped by various cultural exchanges of economic interest, where the competition for readers occupied center stage, *The Monk* was received by a particularly hostile crowd of critics and reviewers who considered that the novel exemplified all the despicable characteristics of popular literature.

To understand the controversy surrounding the release of Lewis' novel, it is important first to take into consideration various implications regarding genre and its respective facets of authorship and readership. As an offspring of a more generalized genre of prose fiction—the romance—the Gothic novel was subjected to the same attacks as its predecessor. Since the late seventeenth century, romance was perceived to be an inferior genre, for it did not fulfill the criteria of great literature; it served as a distraction and was considered to be void of any didactic purpose. Gamer cites various contemporaneous periodicals<sup>11</sup> in concluding that the novel as a form of literature was not considered to be “serious,” but rather, merely provided for the entertainment of a specific “lower” class of readers:

[these periodicals] deploy arguments that share common assumptions about class and about reading for pleasure, arguing implicitly that “romances and the like” do not belong in a serious publication because men of “learning” cannot be interested in them, that unlearned men and “Ladies” by definition read with desire, and that to read with desire is to corrupt one’s mind if one happens to be uneducated. (52)

Similarly, in *Rambler, No 4*, Samuel Johnson quotes Horace’s dictum (*utile et dulci*) as an epigraph; he suggests that fiction should not evade this paradigm and argues that in contrast to poetry, “these books [i.e. romances] are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions to life” (463). In the eighteenth century, the potential negative influences of romance on its assumed lower class—mostly female—audience became an explosive issue. On the one hand, drawing from his reading of Johnson and other sources, Gamer suggests that the major objection to reading novels was that “romance presents a ‘danger’ to readers to the

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<sup>11</sup> Such as *Works of the Learned*, *Gentleman’s Journal*, and *Athenian Mercury*.

degree that it encourages socially decadent trends by causing readers to mistake fiction for reality, and to associate pleasure with irrational, immoral, or improbable characters and narratives” (54). On the other hand, by echoing Sidney’s argument regarding the historic value of literature in *An Apology of Poetry*, Clara Reeve argues that romance can be beneficial to its audience by depicting a more “purified” account of history: “History represents human nature as it is in real life ... Romance displays only the amiable side of the picture; it shews the pleasing features, and throws a veil over the blemishes” (*The Old English Baron*, 3). Gamer suggests that her defense “represents an attempt to rescue romance from its stigma as a pernicious genre by prescribing to it the masculinity of antiquarian history and the same strictures of socially acceptable femininity—temperance, sense, and social duty—that constrain women writers in the period” (58). Similarly, in what could be correlated with New Historicism’s argument that history is in fact story-telling, Maria Edgeworth has argued that history was just another kind of romance and that romances, through the pleasure they confer, encourage readers who are not particularly well-read or inclined to read, to read more (vii). As will be explained below, the historical contributions of the genre—and the gender implications it carries—will also play a significant role in the reception of the Gothic novel. But most importantly, it is only through the recognition of the validity of the novel as historical account that in the following century, historical novels by the likes of Sir Walter Scott would triumph as an accepted genre of high cultural production.

With the appearance of the Gothic, however, the critics’ condescending stance towards romance was amplified as a result of both its increasing popularity and its use of the supernatural as a source of sensationalism. First, the defense of romance based on its

historical value was intensively scrutinized for it was considered potentially to have pernicious effects on its reading public and society at large:

Taking up already-established arguments against romance reading that existed for over a century, reviewers began to single out historical romances as particularly mischievous because of their combination of supernaturalism and historicity, condemning them as threatening civil society either by eroding the standards of truthfulness necessary to maintain it, or by infantilizing its members and rendering them less enlightened and more susceptible to tyranny. (Gamer 60)

Gamer draws from another article on fiction in the *Monthly Review* (2nd series, 10 (1793), 293) to observe that, according to the reviewer, “a piece of fiction can only claim success and therefore a legitimate reason for existing, if it can demonstrate extensive and *productive* knowledge of human nature” and that “such knowledge resides typically in a mature, experienced, and, in most cases, masculine mind much like the reviewer’s” (36). Even though Bataille’s ideas regarding the enslaving properties of productivity and order as explained in Chapter One would make for an effective counter-argument to the first observation from the *Monthly Review* cited by Gamer above, the most striking is that this type of sexist review was not an isolated case, there was a clearly voiced antagonism against fiction and especially, Gothic fiction because both its authorship and readership were believed to be typically female and/or immature. Gamer notes that this “gendering” of Gothic authors and readers was at times pushed to the extreme by referring to a review where the anonymous female critic assumed the position of a male reviewer and compared a male author of Gothic fiction (James Thomson) to “female writers” (36-7).

The Gothic is particularly susceptible to the initial attacks made on the novel’s potential “danger” to uneducated readers because of the emerging genre’s lack of “truth”

and moral function. As mentioned in the first chapter, Johnson aligns himself with other critics in advocating that literature should seek to endorse a perspective that exemplifies the highest order of moral and virtuous conduct, not a life “discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness” (464). Likewise, an essay entitled “Terrorist Novel Writing” in *The Spirit of the Public Journals* specifically points out the same criteria in determining the novel’s usefulness while at the same time condemning the Gothic’s induction of seditious elements:

A novel, if at all useful, ought to be a representation of human life and manners, with a view directing the conduct in the important duties of life, and to correct its follies. But what instruction is to be reaped from the distorted ideas of lunatics, I am at loss to conceive ... (i:229)

With the absence of a critical framework to understand what type of instruction can be derived from “the distorted ideas of lunatics”—such as the concepts of Nietzsche and Bataille and the theories of Freud mentioned in the previous chapter—certain contemporary critics could not fully comprehend the value enclosed in depicting “wickedness” and the typical uncanny events figuring in much of Gothic writing. It is only considerably later, with the advent of modernism and psychoanalysis, that critics started to reconsider the “usefulness” of the Gothic.

According to Gamer, critics in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, assumed that Gothic readers were “young, female, naïve, and easily manipulated” (38), based on previous assumptions regarding romance’s audiences. Yet by drawing on Paul Kaufmann’s compilation of borrowing records of British libraries, Gamer argues that this assumption is erroneous and that the dialogues between writers, readers, and reviewers of the Gothic is lacking a “dialogical” dimension; he maintains that there is no actual

“dialogue,” rather a unilateral discourse based on assumptions that relied mostly on stereotypes of gender (65).

This stigmatization of the Gothic audience contains a strong ideological bias that aimed to regulate the production of literature by establishing distinct hierarchies. David Richter uses Jauss’ theory of reader response to argue that the appearance of the Gothic novel marked a shift in the pattern of reader response to literature:

The Gothic novel sits astride a major shift ... a shift from *catharsis* to *aesthesis*, or in basic English, a shift from reading for information, and for the sake of entry into a verisimilar world otherwise inaccessible to the reader, toward reading as an escape from the world one inhabits into an inner site of fantasy. (112-113)

As briefly mentioned above, this shift in readership runs parallel to the division of the literate faction of society into two separate castes: one, typically male and upper class, reading for moral and/or social enlightenment and another, typically female, reading for entertainment. The former caste included those institutional forces that subversively regulated the circulation of novels through the function of criticism, it is easy to understand why they typically rejected the novel as a canonical form of literature. Gamer claims that the “stubbornness” of the reviewers against the Gothic was ideologically biased and that their ultimate goal was to dismiss it as a valid form of high cultural production in order to retain dominion on the cultural front:

As guardians of taste in a culture that privileges male over female writers, poetry over prose, and learned and didactic over popular literature, reviewers dismiss Gothic writing almost by definition, since to countenance it is to undermine the very positions of privilege from which they derive their authority. (42)

This observation echoes the observations made in the first chapter when Plato’s selection process was deconstructed: critical discourses surrounding the processes of canon-

formation are typically marshaled by the ideologies of the respective groups of canonizers. In the 1790s and 1800s, the most pervasive ideology was that which was operating under the tenets of early Romanticism. In his analysis of how the processes of reception of the Gothic shape the production of Romantic texts, Gamer shows the ways in which “[the] popular/critical dualism [of Romantic ideology] can operate in a culture where individuals often occupy both halves of it simultaneously by reading, reviewing, and writing Gothic texts” (25).

Another wave of ideological criticism was spurred by the traceable influence of the German *Shauer-Romantik* (horror-Romantic) tradition in Lewis’ *The Monk* and other novels that were inspired by Lewis’ example. As a matter of fact, Watt points out that the term “‘German’ was much more current than ‘Gothic’ in the 1790s” (70). The import of Germanic elements into national literature as pioneered by Lewis was regarded as an “invasion” which degraded “the English Genius” (Watt 68). Although many Romantics revered earlier German works,<sup>12</sup> Gothic works that were influenced by the *Shauer-Romantik* emerged at a time of political upheaval and social uncertainty, where anything foreign was dubbed suspicious. Watt refers to the Illuminati controversy of the end of the century to point out that “a mythical Germany became associated with a deluded revolutionary idealism, almost to the same extent as France, and ‘German’ fiction became almost universally associated with a potentially dangerous excess” (68). In sum, the ideological resistance to the Gothic was spurred not only by the fact that it prompted certain shifts in the traditional literary conventions of purpose, audience, and reader-response patterns, but also by its affiliations with more generally perceived threats

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<sup>12</sup> Coleridge, for example, praised the work of Schiller

regarding cultural and political ideologies while allowing the Gothic to take on the alluring color of the exotic and the dangerous.

In his book, Gamer explores the ways in which writers that belong to the tradition of Romanticism “exploited the vogues for Gothic fiction and drama in vexed and complex ways.” On the one hand, as will be explained later, Gamer refers to how the Romantics borrowed extensively from the Gothic in their own writing, and on the other, he argues that the two are interconnected in ways where they defined each other either contributively or antagonistically:

the reception of Gothic writing—its institutional and commercial recognition as a kind of literature—played a fundamental role in shaping many of the ideological assumptions about high culture that we have come to associate with romanticism. (2)

With regard to high cultural discourses, the Gothic was quickly superseded as it was marginalized by the leaders of the literary scene of the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, who aligned themselves with the “romantic ideology,” which represents, according to Gamer, “a set of writerly decisions about literary value, usually politically derived and articulated either formally or generically” (6). Gamer perceives this ideology as a “response” to Gothic writing, which pinpointed the Gothic as a “low” genre “against which romantic writers could oppose themselves” (7) by arguing that the sensationalism and the immense commercial popularity of the Gothic were characteristics of its contemptible and low nature.

As the champions of the nascent “romantic ideology” with regard to taste and cultural value, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge played a major role in the critical discourses surrounding the reception of the Gothic. In the 1800 Preface to

*Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth criticizes works of the Gothic for their superficial sensationalism, which teased the reader and did not serve any serious moral or philosophical purposes, lamenting that the popularity of the Gothic had contributed to creating a reduced interest in what he considers to be the English literary tradition: “[T]he invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (652). By concurring with Johnson’s view, Wordsworth’s critique of the genre seems rooted in the ancient—i.e. Horatian—ideal that literature should instruct and delight at the same time. Even though the Gothic novel might satisfy the latter premise for a certain type of—typically female—audience, it fell short of fulfilling the former because of the prevailing opinion that the sole purpose of uncanny, supernatural, and seditious elements was to offer cheap thrills to the reader. In other words, Wordsworth’s chief complaint about the Gothic novel—and especially those which contain Germanic influences—is that it provided a source of fantasy and pleasure for an unsuspecting, uneducated audience, and that its mass production superseded the great literary works of the past and contributed to the general vulgarization of taste of the reading public. Although Coleridge might have once embraced the German “genius,” he not only aligns himself with his friend’s view regarding the negative influences of German literature on English taste (*British Critic* 10, 551), he also denounces the incapability for romances to exemplify a “moral truth.” Likewise, two contemporary critics, T.J. Mathias and William Preston, were equally vocal against importations from Germany: while the former argued that “No German nonsense swayed my English heart,/Unus’d at ghosts and rattling bones to start” (245),

Watt argues that the latter considered German works to be “corrosive of national virtue” and that “German writers pandered to false taste by responding to demands of the marketplace” (79). With regard to this last point of contention Gamer observes that “consequently, we see Gothic writing in both periodical review and literary essay blamed for various changes in literary production and consumption: originality to mass-production; and the text-as-work to the text-as-commodity” (67). In retrospect, critical reception of the Gothic provides for the first explicit representation of a conflict between an “elite” and a “popular” view of literature as it pertains to critical discourses surrounding canon-formation. The political changes and the social upheaval of the late eighteenth century contributed to a dissolution of a sharply hierarchized society, while the spread of literacy and the market conditions set the stage for a commercialization of literature that some considered to have contributed to the vulgarization of taste of the reading public, as well as the fragmentation of established class boundaries.

This overview underlines how the Gothic novel was perceived as a low and possibly subversive genre of literary production that threatened socio-cultural perceptions of order during the late eighteenth century, a particularly sensitive period in history. Reception to the early Gothic represents a paradox in which the text, its readership, and the institutional forces that regulate its diffusion in a volatile geo-political context intermingle in a convulsed series of cultural exchanges. The exchanges between Romanticism and the Gothic are exemplary of high/low discourses, and more particularly of how one is defined antagonistically with regard to the other. Based on his analysis of both the Preface to and the poems of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, Gamer argues that they “illustrate the extent to which his preference for ‘high’ literary forms and

aesthetics—here, elegy, Horatian ode, lyric, and the sublime--depend upon rejecting other, ‘lower’ aesthetic forms” (15). The popularity of the Gothic was set back by the constant rejection of its literary merit based on criteria that not only valorized depictions of moral and virtuous social conduct in literature but included issues of cultural and economical hegemony, literacy and readership. Having reviewed the conditions surrounding the reception of the Gothic novel, this next section will focus more specifically on *The Monk* and its transgressions, as it created controversy and subverted not only the conventions of the romantic ideology but also the sub-genre to which it was affiliated by incorporating at the heart of the narrative unsettling accounts of the supernatural on one hand, and shocking depictions of sexuality and violence on the other.

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As described above, the Gothic novel was not held in high regard by the critics of its age because they believed that its lack of “seriousness” pandered to a female audience, and that supposedly, male readers were not compelled by the overwhelming presence of fantasy. With the first anonymous publication of *The Monk*, however, these accepted perspectives were about to change. Arguing against the notion of “female readership,” Watt points out that the novel was not entirely without praise, and mentions that some critics admired Lewis' attempt to define himself as an innovator set "against a feminized notion of romance" which was mostly embodied by Ann Radcliffe (91). Watt refers to Lewis' bold approach and argues that his work defied the assumptions of authorship and readership: “*The Monk* exceeded other contemporary fictions—and simultaneously appealed to educated, leisured readers” (89). Nevertheless, according to both Watt and Gamer, a shift in reviews occurred when the work started to gain tremendous popularity

and the name of its author was revealed (Watt 93, Gamer 74). This initial praise of *The Monk* was short-lived and was superseded by a series of considerably more negative reviews that were triggered partly by the increasing anxieties regarding the ever-growing popularity of the Gothic and German-influenced romances amongst an undisciplined reading public and partly by its perceived obscenity and lack of moral framework.

Being a “romance,” as its subtitle declares, *The Monk* was categorically excluded from “serious” critical consideration and possible canonization; it was considered to belong to a brand of escapist fiction, which was categorized as a “low,” popular, contemptible, and an unimportant—or, in a word, vulgar—form of cultural production. Because of its affiliation with the romance genre, it was thought to contribute to the commercialization of literature by capitalizing on the demands of an uneducated audience, but, as Watt points out, “what was largely at stake in the negative reviews of *The Monk*, especially, was the regulation of cultural production itself” (84). Nevertheless, Lewis’ novel was not only deemed to embody the most commonly voiced objections regarding the publication and distribution of Gothic-type romances but also collected considerable negative reactions because the “boldness,” for which it was originally praised, was later perceived as being immoral and seditious. The unadulterated accounts of rape, incest, violence, and murder were perceived to break social taboos, and the novel was labeled as obscene and immoral, capable of corrupting the minds of an immature and unsuspecting audience. In addition, *The Monk*’s strong Germanic influences—and more specifically, the “horror” aesthetic of the *Shauer-Romantik*—were considered to contribute to both the vulgarization of taste and the promotion of subversive “revolutionary” ideas. In other words, Lewis’ novel contains a number of

distinct transgressions: the author crossed established conventions by defining his work against the prevailing paradigms of genre and content. On the one hand, the use of German-influenced “horror” and other Gothic literary devices clearly sets the work against the aesthetics of its Lake School contemporaries, while on the other, the explicit depiction of acts of sexual and violent behavior made it vulnerable to attacks spawned by conventional morality. As mentioned earlier, *The Monk* illustrates rather well the three categories of transgression: it simultaneously breaks taboos, rejects accepted artistic practices, and challenges political economies by producing shock, creating controversy, and being potentially subversive.

As briefly suggested above, within the specifics of the Gothic, *The Monk* stands out particularly in contrast to the more popular novels of Ann Radcliffe. To this effect, James Watt contends that as a genre, Gothic fiction is “constituted or structured by the often antagonistic relations between different writers and works” (6). It is widely recognized that there are two stages in the development of the Gothic: one established by Radcliffe, who molded it to popular favor, was either labeled “terror-Gothic” and/or “loyalist,” considered “feminine,” and drew its inspiration from French sensationalism and Elizabethan Dramatists and the second, embodied by Lewis, who was influenced by German stories, which was labeled “horror-Gothic” and was first praised for its “masculinity” and “vigor,” before finally being considered as immoral and scandalous, obscene and perfidious, seditious and revolutionary.

The contrast between the two writers is obvious in their approach to the Gothic, and more particularly, in the explicitness of content and in their usage of certain Gothic conventions. There is also a notable difference in their perspectives regarding the

contextualization of their work and its socio-political implications. In an extensive praise of Radcliffe, whom Mathias describes as “the Shakespeare of Romance-writers” and “the first poetess of Romance fiction” (qtd. in Tompkins 248), Tompkins argues that the author was very conscientious about the way she crafted her novels in order that they “could be enjoyed by statesmen and head-masters without embarrassment” (249). She also belongs to that first wave of Gothic writers that the likes of Watt identify as “loyalist” for their nostalgia for the historical heyday of England’s feudal medieval past (68). To downplay the element of shock and horror, which were sure to arouse controversy, the supernatural is always given a rational explanation, and a strong sense of virtue and morality systematically prevailed in Radcliffe. Napier observes that she is “careful to provide rational explanations for most of her mysteries and often engages in self-conscious disclaimers about the nature of any supernatural or overly romantic events she describes” (66). Having witnessed the adverse critical reception of the genre, she was aware that the inclusion of certain Gothic devices had drawn rebuke from the critics. “She did not contemplate violence with pleasure,” Tompkins notes, “even though she was aware that [it could] ... deepen and enrich a romantic setting” (253). Rather, it is the absence of the grotesque that seemed to provide Radcliffe’s prose with a sense of dignity, a self-consciousness which was the result of cultural exchanges with the arbitrators of literary merit and her prospective audience. As Watt points out, “Conservative critics and reviewers generally found Radcliffe to be a highly readable author, who stood out from her contemporaries in terms of both the skill and the morality that her work displayed” (110). By carefully considering the potential reception of her work on the contemporary literary scene, Radcliffe was cautious to select material that would not

come under attack from the institutions of cultural power—writers and critics—which, in turn, would ensure the popularity of her work and secure its exchange value as cultural capital. In referring to the various critics who reviewed Radcliffe’s work, Watt suggests that they viewed her as loyalist and conservative, a “political innocent” whose romances were not considered subversive and were a form of entertainment that allowed one to transcend the anxieties of the particularly unstable socio-political context of the period: “Radcliffe’s exceptional reputation in the 1790s and 1800s was at least partly dependent upon the fact that her work was seen to provide a legitimate form of diversion or recreation at a time of obvious national crisis” (128). While Radcliffe’s strand of Gothic fiction pleased many reviewers and critics, the reputation of her work did not withstand the criticism of ensuing ages regarding its lack of commitment and its failure to innovate. In his biographical essay, “Life and Writings of Mrs. Radcliffe,” Thomas Talfourd complains about her admiration for “every species of authority,” and her conservative perception that “some established canon of romance obliged her to reject real supernatural agency” (qtd. in Watt 124). Similarly, Walter Scott argued that her deliberate choices to please her audience confined her to write in a low genre and considers that her achievement was limited even according to her own standards (*Lives* 229). What Scott suggests is that while she strove for the sublime by using the conventions of “terror,” her insistence on framing the supernatural was a failure to appeal to the imagination. Nevertheless, as will be explained later and as Watt suggests in his assessment of Radcliffe as a “proto-feminist writer of the ‘female Gothic’ ” (107), she remains an important figure in consideration of feminist approaches to literature, in particular as she illustrates the typically “restrained” female writer who only gained

critical acclaim by following the prevailing ideological hierarchies of class and gender. With regard to this last point, Michelle A. Massé, in her book titled *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, points out that for many female writers and readers, the Gothic represents the reproduction of a culturally induced trauma: “[Women’s] social contract tenders their passivity and disavowal of public power in exchange for the love that will let them reign in the interpersonal domestic sphere” (18). Hence women were able to affirm their cultural identity by abiding to a set of strict socio-cultural conventions that the Gothic plot faithfully reenacted. Drawing from a variety of novels where the heroine is relentlessly persecuted, Massé argues that this identity is at times reliant upon what appears to be a masochistic drive, which could be representative of attributes which are valued the most socially in a woman: “self-sacrifice and self-abnegation” (42). Radcliffe, then, embodies the archetypical persecuted female of the late eighteenth century, whose writing further reinforced the conventions of the patriarchal social order.

In contrast to Radcliffe, Lewis is considerably more daring and strives to break established boundaries of content and form, as well as the conventions of morality and accepted political ideologies. By making unprecedented use of transgressive elements, his strategy is one of unconcealed, unadulterated shock and horror. Watt dubs him an “*enfant terrible*” (5) who strove clearly to distinguish himself from other writers of the genre, and he quotes Jacqueline Howard’s argument that Lewis attempted to represent “an ideal of the author as unconventional, eccentric, extreme—a risk-taker prepared to shock the complacency of respectable elders in order to gain a reputation for genius” (qtd. in Watt 87). This concept of the artist as “risk-taker” who is willing to “shock” the establishment echoes certain notions of transgression articulated in the previous chapter

and in particular the concept of “innovation” as postulated by Julius. Watt argues that “Lewis accentuated the sensationalism of his source materials, and supplied a cynical commentary of his own, thereby making *The Monk* a licentious yet also innovative work by the standards of contemporary criticism” (84). Nevertheless, twentieth-century critics were not the first ones to acknowledge the novel’s innovations. At the time of *The Monk*’s publication, the Marquis de Sade, the poster boy for transgression, praised Lewis’ work, claiming that in an age when “everything seems to have been written,” in order “to compose works of interest” it was necessary to “call upon the aid of hell itself” and, in that respect, Sade argued that *The Monk* “was superior in all respects to the strange flights of Mrs. Radcliffe’s brilliant imagination” (114, 109). Anna M. Wittmann shares a similar view by arguing that *The Monk* is a particularly remarkable novel in the Gothic genre:

M.G. Lewis’s *The Monk* marks a major turning point in the history of the English Gothic novel. Here for the very first time a truly nightmarish vision emerges. Demons and specters take on the form of human beings; at the same time, they are no more dangerous and destructive than the demonic within man .... Unnatural disturbances in the natural order are, in the earlier English Gothic novels, signals of human transgressions that must be righted. They not only create the characteristic thrills of Gothic horror, but also forward the eventual victory of good over evil. The network of evil is far more complex in *The Monk*, where it invades the very foundation of moral order. Concurrently, the supernatural no longer serves to warn and champion the good and to destroy the evil. (67)

It is precisely *The Monk*’s transgressions regarding the “foundation of moral order” that triggered the outpouring of outraged reviews. Like others such as Ernest Baker, Tompkins shares Wittmann’s view, however, she also aligns herself with Lewis’ contemporaries in describing the novel as “scandalous” (278) and by stating that the novel marks a transition from the “delicacy,” “dignity,” and “moral dignity” of

Radcliffe's novels (245), a transition characterized by "heavy-handed grotesqueness" and the absence of a "discernible moral framework" (277). Unlike Radcliffe, Lewis does not tone down the transgressive elements of his text by providing either an explanation for the supernatural or a subtle suggestion of horror. As briefly suggested earlier, Lewis' text is truly uncanny in the Freudian sense; Tompkins argues that the author works by "sudden shocks" (245), while Baker suggests that "the daring and frankness" that Lewis uses in his grizzly depictions make all other authors seem shy (209) and that he leaves the accumulation of horrifying accounts to be digested by the "sensitive minds" of his readers. Probably the most distressing aspects for the critics and reviewers were the various horrifying accounts of gore and the explicit scenes of violence and aggression, such as the description of Agnes' awakening in her cell (403), the birth and death of her baby (411-3), and the gruesome killing of the Prioress of St. Clare by a mob of angry rioters:

At length a Flint, aimed by some well-directing hand, struck her full upon the temple. She sank upon the ground bathed in blood, and in a few minutes terminated her miserable existence. Yet though she no longer felt their insults, the Rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting. (356)

In an extended way, these depictions echo Bakhtin's conceptualization of the "grotesque body," especially in what he considers to be the dying body's "comic presentations—hanging tongue, expressionless popping eyes, suffocation, death rattle" (*Rabelais* 353). Equally disturbing is the disclosure of Ambrosio's sexuality as he fantasizes about Matilda and the Madonna (67) and renounces his vows by satiating his lustful desire with Matilda:

Ambrosio was in full vigour of his Manhood. He saw before him a young and beautiful woman ... He sat upon her bed; His hand rested upon her bosom; Her head reclined voluptuously upon his breast. Who then can wonder, if He yielded to the temptation? Drunk with desire, He pressed his lips to those which sought them: His kisses vied with Matilda's in warmth and passion. He clasped her rapturously in his arms; He forgot his vows, his sanctity, and his fame: He remembered nothing but the pleasure and opportunity.

'Ambrosio! Oh! my Ambrosio!' sighed Matilda. (90)

While these episodes are capable of producing shock because they can be considered as transgressions of sexuality in the religious order, they are not nearly so disconcerting as when the monk rapes Antonia:

... the Ravisher threw himself by her side: He clasped her to his bosom almost lifeless with terror, and faint with struggling. He stifled her cries with kisses, treated her with the rudeness of an unprincipled barbarian, proceeded from freedom to freedom, and in the violence of his lustful delirium, wounded and bruised her tender limbs. Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, He gradually made himself Master of her person, and desisted not from his prey, till He had accomplished his crime and the dishonour of Antonia. (383-4)

While Ambrosio's rape and subsequent murder of the young girl (391) aptly displays the taboo-breaking properties of transgression by literalizing the interconnection between sex and aggression, what can be substantially more shocking is that since Antonia is later revealed to be no other than Ambrosio's sister (439), the rape is also incestuous.

On another level, the lack of a "discernible moral framework" could be attributed to the fact that although Ambrosio is captured by the authorities of the Inquisition, his death is not the result of a due-process of justice carried out by the corresponding institutions, but by the Devil. While the figure is itself rather troubling, the entire episode could be considered to be subversive for it puts into question the plausibility and the

efficiency of the legal system. As Watt suggests, “*The Monk* literalizes the figure of Satan ... and consequently severs the connection foregrounded by *The Castle of Otranto* and the Loyalist Gothic romance between supernatural phenomena and the workings of providence or justice” (89).

Interestingly enough, Radcliffe was so horrified by *The Monk* that she wrote *The Italian* as a response to Lewis’ novel. Watt also notes that “in *The Italian* ... Radcliffe clearly took account of the criticism leveled at contemporaries such as Lewis, and sought to reinstate some of the more innocent properties of the romance genre (9). Radcliffe mostly concentrated on reworking Lewis’ subplot of Raymond and Agnes, with the monk playing the role of the Baroness’ advisor. Apart from the serious alteration of the plot, she tacitly removed some of the most scandalous aspects of the novel. On one level, she totally neutered *The Monk*’s obscene and immoral aspects by removing the disturbing accounts of Ambrosio’s sexuality. For example, she substituted Lewis’ incest episode of Ambrosio’s rape and murder of Antonia by having Schedoni spare Ellena when he realizes that she might be his daughter. The contrast between the two texts can be seen in these next excerpts. The first one is taken from *The Monk*, when Ambrosio enters the chamber in which he will later assault Antonia.

Gradually He felt the bosom which rested against his, glow with returning warmth. Her heart throbbd again; Her blood flowed swifter, and her lips moved. At length She opened her eyes, but still opprest and bewildered by the effects of the strong opiate, She closed them immediately. Ambrosio watched her narrowly, nor permitted a movement to escape him. Perceiving that She was fully restored to existence, He caught her in rapture to his bosom, and closely pressed his lips to hers. (Lewis 380)

The second excerpt is from Radcliffe's novel: having kidnapped Ellena to keep her away from the Baroness' son, Schedoni is about to kill her in order to carry out the mischievous plan he and the Baroness had conceived:

... vengeance nerved his arm, and drawing aside the lawn from her bosom, he once more raised it to strike; when, after gazing for an instant, some new cause of horror seemed to seize all his frame, and he for some moments, aghast and motionless like a statue ... When he recovered, he stooped to examine again the miniature, which had occasioned his revolution, and which had lain concealed beneath the lawn that he withdrew. The terrible certainty was almost confirmed... he called loudly 'Awake! awake! say, what is your name? Speak! speak quickly!' (Radcliffe 271-2)

Both scenes share a number of similarities, notably the characters (Antonia and Ellena correspond to Ambrosio and Schedoni respectively, who are both mischievous monks) and the *mise en scène*. Yet while Lewis' Ambrosio shows no sign of restraint in yielding to temptation, Radcliffe's Schedoni is suddenly held back by the realization that Ellena might be his daughter.

At another level, Radcliffe diminishes the sensationalism of Lewis' story by eliminating all the references to Satan and other "irrational" supernatural elements. As Watt argues, "*The Italian* assumes the readability of the superficial and reasserts the transparency of good and evil" (118). In addition, whereas *The Monk* can be read as a work of social criticism as will be explained later, by writing *The Italian*, Radcliffe completely diffuses the threat posed by Lewis' novel:

Radcliffe's qualified defence of the Inquisition, along with her presentation of the familial society at the Convent of Santa della Pieta, arguably constituted *The Italian*'s most overt response to the liberal, and suspiciously 'jacobin' politics of *The Monk*'s anti-Catholicism. Any hint of direct engagement with political

controversy is finally dispelled, though, by the ‘general gaiety’ of the festive romance ending... (Watt 118-9)

Not so surprisingly, the critical reception of these two texts differed considerably, and an interesting overview of their respective evaluation can be drawn from taking a look at Coleridge’s reviews of the two novels. While at first Coleridge announces that *The Monk* is “the offspring of no common genius” and celebrates the originality of the tales of the Bleeding Nun and the Wandering Jew, as well as the character of Matilda, the tone of his review changes quickly when he announces that “the errors and defects are more numerous, and (we are sorry to add) of greater importance.” He claims that *The Monk* conferred no pleasure and that Lewis had displayed an “ignorance of the human heart” and had committed “mistakes in judgment” and “taste.” These claims were based on his view that on the one hand, the supernatural was sensationalist in the extreme, and that on the other, the text was gratuitously horrific, immoral, obscene, and blasphemous. Voicing the defects of the novel allowed Coleridge further to discredit the value of *The Monk*. He adds that “[T]ales of enchantments and witchcraft can be ‘useful’: our author has made them “pernicious,” by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition.” This last statement implies, however, that his objections are more ideological than aesthetical, a point he clearly makes in the following remark: “We have been induced to pay particular attention to this work, from the unusual success which it has experienced.” Yet Coleridge’s view seems to be not only situated in the concern of the literary elite to regulate cultural production and distribution, but in attempting to reaffirm the boundaries between high and low culture that appeared to be dissolving: “[N]or must it be forgotten

that the author is a man of rank and fortune. Yes! The author of *The Monk* signs himself a LEGISLATOR! We stare and tremble.” Indeed, what alarmed Coleridge the most was the prospect that England’s upper classes were participating in the production and distribution of works that had been perceived to be unsuitable for an educated audience and to contribute to the vulgarization of English taste. Moreover, Coleridge’s review of *The Monk* pointed to its transgressive character by claiming that Lewis exceeded the “nice boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions.” As mentioned earlier, in writing *The Italian* as a response, Radcliffe sought to defend and reassert the role of these boundaries, and in his review, Coleridge concludes, “*The Italian* may justly be considered as an ingenious performance; and many persons will read it with great pleasure and satisfaction.” Nevertheless, Coleridge’s evaluation of Radcliffe’s novel was not entirely positive, for he lamented her lack of originality within the larger framework that it announced the decline of her favored genre, the romance. Indeed, Coleridge’s review appears at a moment in Radcliffe’s career (1798) when the perception of Radcliffe as a successful writer of romances was being superseded by other more negative perspectives regarding her craft—mostly, according to Watt, because she was writing in what was considered an unimportant and minor genre and lacked originality, systematically employing identical literary devices over and over (125). On the other hand, Lewis’ boldness had a more enduring quality: his “daring” originality was constantly celebrated and *The Monk* set precedence for further works of so-called “horror Gothic.” According to Watt, Lewis’ text established an unparalleled standard of boldness which would later influence the likes of Scott and Maturin (92).

The distinction between Radcliffe's and Lewis' approaches to the Gothic can be considered with regard to the distinction between "terror" and "horror" Gothic, and that between the non-transgressive to the transgressive respectively. This distinction has been reaffirmed by critics such as Robert Hume, even though it was first conceptualized by Radcliffe herself in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry":

Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?

By referring to figures of the great literary tradition, Radcliffe makes a case regarding the justified use of terror as a literary device by outlining its didactic purposes. For her, the "obscurity" and "uncertainty" of terror allow the reader to explore the elevating possibilities offered by Burke's conception of the "sublime." In contrast, she discards horror for its "annihilating" capacities; according to her, the reaction it provokes does not propel the reader into a shock of imaginative contemplation. Her distinction between terror and horror contains interesting correlations. First, it parallels the distinction between sexual content and pornography as explained in the previous chapters; and secondly, it echoes the Aristotelian belief regarding off-stage and on-stage representations of violence, an argument succinctly articulated by Percy Shelley in his Preface to *The Cenci*, in which he claimed that on-stage violence deformed the moral purpose of "the human heart" (239-40). In addition, it is interesting to note that Radcliff resorts to the earlier figures of the great tradition, as well as theory and criticism, to

confer on her work an authoritative and traditional (and hence, canonical) status and dissociate it from the scandalous work of Lewis and his followers. However, her argument regarding the “annihilating” properties of horror are misconstrued, partly because of her own vested interests in distinguishing her own strand of the Gothic and partly because of the same close-mindedness that characterizes the moral imperatives of contemporary canonizers regarding the content of works of horror in general and Lewis in particular. Radcliffe is correct in assessing that Terror and Horror differ drastically in the type of reading experience they trigger. Horror does precisely what Terror does not; it literally “shocks” the reader, it provokes a visceral response to some type of “uncanny” or “unsettling” account. As briefly explained in the previous chapter, Freud considered the uncanny as a fundamental aspect of aesthetics theory dissociated from theories of the beautiful and the sublime, and he perceives some distinct merit in the disclosure of uncanny events and the emotions they trigger in the reader. Furthermore, in contrast to terror, horror does not relegate the reader’s experience to some type of intellectual contemplation but rather, it directly confronts the reader with the content: it narrows the distance between the text and the reader; creating a rapprochement between reading as an intellectual activity and reading as a physical experience. It is precisely this type of rapprochement—triggered by a visceral response—that strives for the horizon to which Bataille refers in his preface to *Erotism*; a property which he relates to transgression as explained in the previous chapter. In other words, horror blurs the boundaries between signifier and signified, between language and experience, and becomes a focal point where both become intertwined.

Even though *The Monk* was immensely popular at the time of its publication, it did not attain critical acclaim—and was barred from the accepted list of canonical works of the period—because it transgressed the predominant ideologies of contemporary canonizers and their concerns for maintaining certain criteria of taste and value. In part, Lewis' novel was stigmatized by the perceived shortcomings of a low, unimportant, and possibly subversive genre, the Gothic. In the period's unofficial hierarchies of genre, the Gothic was not only considered inferior to a major movement, Romanticism, but also a sub-genre of another disreputable genre: the novel, which did not correspond to the critics' standards regarding the *use value* of literature as a legitimate source of instruction and pleasure. While *The Monk* did not reap general critical commendation because of its transgressions, it nevertheless influenced the canon of the Gothic in more major ways than did the novels of Radcliffe. Concurring with Watt on precisely this point, Gamer makes the following observation:

Lewis's reception and the reputation it created significantly shaped Gothic's status and identity. James Watt notes that even the published defenses of *The Monk* did not hesitate to acknowledge its "outrage[s] against decency and propriety," but instead used its perceived transgressiveness as a foundation on which to construct *The Monk* as a "distinctly daring" work of "genius". (88)

Lewis' audacity in exceeding the genre's accepted conventions regarding the treatment of the supernatural, the use of Terror vs. Horror, and assertions of good and evil, set an example for ensuing generations of writers who revered the tradition of "horror-Gothic" which he instigated. These "innovations," however, were also the source of many critics' contempt for the novel. *The Monk's* horrifying accounts of human transgressions contained the potential to shock its prospective audiences by offering an unprecedented

look into the darkest confines of human behavior. Its content was considered to be simultaneously immoral and blasphemous and was perceived to transgress the moral boundaries of society, which, coupled with the accepted conventions of authorship and readership, created a considerable amount of controversy. In an atmosphere of great turmoil and cultural change, the novel was considered subversive, for some thought that it would entice individuals to act similarly and to question established codes of civic behavior and certain forms of institutional power.

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In his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, Greenblatt advances a view of literary text that sees in it “the power to subvert” (“Introduction” 2252), a perspective he shares with the likes of Paul Lauter, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari (61-65, 170), as has been explained in the previous chapters. The notion that literature contains the potential to influence people’s thoughts and behavior, even to prompt them to take social action, was also common at the dawn of the nineteenth century, when various sources identified that the French revolution had been heralded and/or echoed in works of social criticism. As mentioned earlier, contemporary authorities viewed the activity of reading novels solely for the purpose of entertainment as threatening for two reasons. For one, the patriarchy felt that it offered women—a class that was enjoying a wider access to literacy—a way to escape domestic rule (Richter 115); and secondly, it raised the obvious moral objection that it would influence young people to mimic the conduct depicted in the novels (116). In a time of growing *fin de siècle* anxieties, there was growing fear that the Gothic’s elevation of individual desires over social conventions, and private ambition over public duties, would inspire a

rejection of inherited dogma. This is a point that was explicitly made by Coleridge in his review of *The Monk*: “The most painful impression which the work left on our minds was that of great acquirements and splendid genius employed to furnish a ‘mormo’ for children, a poison for youth, and a provocative for the debauchee.”

Previously, it was noted that *The Monk* was categorized as both “obscene” and “blasphemous” because the content transgressed the accepted rules and conventions regarding the depiction of lewd conduct and the expression of an anti-religious sentiment. According to Gamer, T.J. Mathias was particularly voluble about the necessity that Lewis be prosecuted for obscenity and blasphemy (84). It is obvious that the accusation of obscenity referred to the depictions regarding Ambrosio’s fulfillment of his lustful desires, such as the rape of Antonia discussed above. With regard to blasphemy, *The European Magazine’s* review of Lewis’ novel condemned the satirical treatment of religious institutions and the depiction of Ambrosio and Matilda’s lewd conduct as an “*oblique attack upon venerable establishments*” (qtd. in Watt 92), an attack which is literalized in the novel by the rioting mob’s attack on the convent of St. Clare. Furthermore, the portrayal of religious power as hypocritical and vile as well as the narrator’s overall cynical tone regarding the church-goers’ cross-purposes at the novel’s onset were sure to provoke the indignation of conservatives. While the setting and the various clerical characters mentioned in the text suggest that it is the Catholic religion that comes under fire in Lewis’ text, *The Monk* cannot be considered as a supporter of Anglicanism or Protestantism or any other institution of political authority. On the one hand, Clara Tuite comments that the novel was perceived as blasphemous and irreverent because the clerical order depicted in *The Monk* could be clearly distinguished from

Nominal Anglicanism or Protestantism. She partly draws her observations from Coleridge's review of the novel, arguing that "Coleridge's reading suggests a form of nominal Anglicanism haunted by a paranoid fear that it cannot separate itself from its diabolical other." She notes that in the aftermath of the French revolution, which sent institutions of power such as the clergy trembling in fear, "Lewis' text offers ... an uncomfortable blend of Protestant anti-Catholicism with French revolutionary anti-Catholicism." On the other hand, there is very little evidence in the text that Lewis wanted to single out the Catholic religion and condemn it specifically<sup>13</sup>. What Lewis is doing it seems—and this would justify the indignation of the critics and reviewers—is that in aligning himself with the beliefs of the French revolution, as suggested above, he is rebelling against clerical authority, whether Protestant or Catholic, because it represents a despotic and totalitarian form of institutional power.

But it was particularly with regard to obscenity that Lewis' novel was put on trial because it was considered to have breached the law. As Gamer points out, "*The Monk's* supposed celebration of [obscenity] produced the bulk of the legal threats that swirled around Lewis between 1796 and 1803" (79). To that regard, he also notes that "any publication judged by British legal authorities after 1727 to be obscene and to display a tendency to corrupt the morals and manners of the general population could be suppressed and prosecuted for obscene libel" (80). In an observation that closely resembles previous discussions regarding the incorporation of obscene material in literature and the difference between "sexual content" and "pornography," Gamer argues

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<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, the word "Catholic" only appears once in the entire novel, when Theodore, wanting to uncover what has become of Agnes for the sake of Don Raymond, is admitted into the convent of St. Clare as a beggar. As he is eating, the nuns take a liking to him and observe that "he would be a worthy pillar of the Catholic church (284).

that with regard to such material and the law “the legal category of obscene libel ... criminalizes the production of any text as “obscene” that appears likely to produce [undesirable] readerly effects” (80). In other words, if, like pornography, a text is potentially capable of sexually arousing the reader, it could be prosecuted for obscene libel.

Yet an earlier discussion regarding the circulation of cultural capital as it pertains to authorship and readership had suggested that the efforts to prosecute *The Monk* were ideologically biased and were not aimed at the novel, but more specifically at its author. Some commentators, such as Watt and Gamer, observe that it was in light of Lewis’ political status that institutional authorities sought to censor his novel (Watt 92-3, Gamer 82). It was particularly contemptuous for a Member of Parliament to write of these matters with no moral restraint; add to that the context of “political paranoia” which characterized the end of the eighteenth century, and the text was considered to hold an element of sedition, an incitement to rebellion that was immediately transferred to the author. Kelly refers to Lewis’ ties with many of the Jacobins and outlines the different levels of social criticism contained in the novel:

Lewis’ depiction of society is also very close to that of the more liberal novelists of the time, including ... the English Jacobins ... [c]ertain social practices and institutions are clearly shown to be hostile to rich selfhood, whether virtuous or vicious ... But just as clear is the way excessive institutionalized power and order, as in a monastery or in an autocratic state, pervert individual natures, enforce outward conformism but inward rebellion, or destroy virtuous and authentic individuality. (58)

This statement makes it clear that it is Lewis’ liberal views of society that are the subject of the attacks against the novel. In addition, Kelly’s outline of the novel’s social

criticism also shows how the transgressive side is reinforced through the text's "revolutionary," or rather "rebellious," stance against established social practices and institutions as well as autocratic forms of institutionalized power.

On another level, both Tompkins and Baker note the strong influence of Germanic texts in Lewis' work (243, 206), and it is partially the free use of transgressive strategies reminiscent of Teutonic romance that triggered its criticism. Wordsworth's critical disparagement of "stupid German tragedies" was cited earlier while Gamer perceives that in a conscious effort to reinforce both the feelings of national pride and the vernacular, there was a persistent "urge to deport Gothicism to Germany" (78). Watt cites William Preston's objection to German works not only because they were considered both "absurd" and "immoral," but because he perceived them to be socially subversive: "[German works tend] to make men dissatisfied with the existing order of things, the restraints of law, the coercion of civil governments, the distinction of ranks in society, the unequal distribution of property, and with the dispensations of Providence itself" (qtd. in Watt 78). Beneath this overt cultural rejection, however, there are ideological motivations of a more pervasive socio-political context. Echoing the view of Watt mentioned above, Wittman points out, "the German *Ritterroman* [i.e. German works like *The Monk*] ... is often susceptible of political meaning" (244), and in a growing atmosphere of instability spurred by the French revolution, there was an increased suspiciousness of anything categorized as "not British" (Kelly 60). Or as Watt puts it, any works that contained Germanic influences became "guilty by association" (Watt 75-6). Through this multitude of voiced concern regarding the subversive potential of *The Monk*, it appears evident why the cultural elite and the institutional authorities

they represented wanted to diffuse the perceived threat posed by the novel. They succeeded. Finally, as a result of these numerous threats of legal action, Lewis resolved to auto-censor the fourth edition of *The Monk* in 1798. In “A Note on the Variant Readings,” Louis F. Peck lists the alterations of the various editions of *The Monk*. A close review reveals that for the fourth and fifth editions, Lewis elected to eliminate some sexually charged words such as “Lust” and “Lustful” and alter passages that depicted sexual activity. For example, the entire rape scene (379-384) was reduced to the single paragraph below:

Antonia! Wretched Antonia! Too soon were the villain’s words verified. Heaven. For purposes no doubt wise in themselves, but whose aim the sight of mortals is too weak to discern, interposed not in the unhappy girl’s behalf. Animation was only restored to make her sensible that the monk was a villain, and herself undone!

Since *The Monk* was considered to contain elements of sedition, it is quite clear why certain *loci* of institutional power felt the need to limit its distribution by trashing it in the press and prosecuting it in the courts in an attempt to downplay its popular appeal. Ironically enough, however, this process was ineffective in suppressing the novel’s immense popularity. As the lines between popular culture and high culture would eventually grow more blurred in the following centuries, popular culture became another form of institutionalized power and would gradually play a major role in canon-formation discourses. As Richter points out, “important books help to mold and shape the audience just as much as the audience shapes the literary Canon” (109). This view concurs with Jauss’ perspective for he argues that “in the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reaction, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its

addressees” (*Norton* 1551). Nevertheless, the case of *The Monk* illustrates a number of important points regarding the discursive exchanges between transgression and the critical processes of canon-formation. First, it is a telling preview of what was described in the first chapter as the “culture wars” that occurred in the late twentieth century, describing the conflict between high and low forms of cultural production as they struggle for critical recognition and acceptance. More specifically, the pattern of reception of the Gothic exemplifies how forms of “low”—popular and/or minority literatures—are typically marginalized by institutional authorities for they do not correspond to their criteria of taste and value. Second, it also illustrates how works considered to be transgressive, such as *The Monk*, are processed through the mechanisms of critical reception and how their perceived threat is diffused through the very same processes—criticism and literary reviews—that discredit their value as cultural capital. Third, the discussion regarding *The Monk* effectively demonstrates how a literary text can be perceived to be transgressive for various reasons and how it can simultaneously belong to the three categories of transgression outlined in Chapter Two. Fourth, Lewis’ novel exemplifies rather well the patterns of reception of a transgressive work and its impact on audiences, producing shock and arousing controversy, before consequently being perceived as subversive. And fifth, by breaking the taboos of incest and murder, *The Monk* aptly reveals the subversive potential of transgression as it challenges artistic conventions as well as social, cultural, and political hegemonies.

In the following centuries, subsequent processes of canonization and cultural negotiations would ultimately trigger a major adjustment in the novel’s exchange value as cultural capital. It is precisely with regard to the changing perceptions of a work by

different generations of readers that Jauss' epigraph would seem particularly to the point. This idea closely echoes the notion of Harold Bloom's "pragmatic test for the canonical" (226) as explained in the first chapter; the idea which considers that a work only reveals its full potential if it transcends the specific contextualization of its date of publication.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the more general term of "romance" was applied to describe the novels that are now considered Gothic. This affiliation contributed to the negative appraisal of these works, for it was assumed that they shared the same faults and defects traditionally attributed to romance. In contrast, the fact that, as Watt points out, "Gothic Romance as a descriptive category is the product of twentieth century literary criticism" implies how literary studies have reshaped the perception of the Gothic and its most prominent writers. As a matter of fact, the discipline has affected the evaluation of the Gothic—and, in particular Lewis' novel—on two levels. On the one hand, the Gothic tradition as a whole has undergone a historical reconstruction that has given way to a critical reappraisal of its place and status in literary history. On the other, the advent of new critical approaches and textual negotiations have considerably "opened up" novels such as *The Monk*, and have conferred and explored new meanings and applications that have been previously overlooked.

The multiple paradigm shifts of the twentieth century have fostered the creation of a multitude of critical theories and approaches for the analysis of literary texts. Concurrently, critics and theorists from these various schools have reappraised the literary values and historical contributions of the Gothic. Gamer points out that in the twentieth century, critical work has argued for the Gothic "as container of multiple meanings or as mediator between high art and mass culture" and that it is no longer

described exclusively “as a genre ... [but] as an aesthetic (Miles), as a great repressed of romanticism (Bruhm and William Patrick Day), as a poetics (Williams), as a narrative technique (Hallberstam and Punter), or as an expression of changing or “extreme” psychological or socio-political consciousness (Bruhm, Cox, Halberstam, Monleon, Paulson, Richter, Williams)” (28). Perhaps the most compelling notions are the considerations that the Gothic has influenced Romanticism in major ways and has served as a bridge between different traditions. In considering that the rise of the Gothic occurred when the neo-classical period was gradually being effaced, Napier suggests that “the genre could offer a clue to the emergence of a romantic view” (xi) and refers to various critics<sup>14</sup> who have considered how the Gothic influenced Romanticism: “Since the 1960s, critics have tended to adhere to the notion that Gothic fiction provides a link between a classical age and a Romantic one through its exploration of human emotions and dreads” (xii). But perhaps the most compelling observations regarding the influence of the Gothic are those pointed out by Gamer in his book *Romanticism and The Gothic*. In parallel with an earlier observation, he argues that the division between Gothic and Romantic is due primarily to “economic and ideological processes that have insured their lasting separation,” by referring to the work of twentieth-century critics such as Anne Williams who point out the similarities between the Gothic and Romantic traditions and by referring to several Romantic works that were either heavily influenced by the Gothic and/or borrowed extensively from it<sup>15</sup> (10-11). To illustrate this point, he draws from Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*—and especially the poems that contain “supernatural”

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<sup>14</sup> Such as Masao Miyoshi, Elizabeth MacAndrew, and Judith Wilt.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Coleridge’s “Christabel,” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Baillie’s *De Monfort* Wordsworth’s “Fragment of a Gothic Tale.”

elements—and its Preface, where the author justifies his use of what was perceived as “low” and contemptible devices. Of “Hart-Leap Well” for example, Gamer observes that “in many ways, the poem is almost duplicitous in the way it allows both Wordsworth and his readers first to indulge in the supernatural speculation of low and rustic characters and then to ally themselves with a more philosophical and chastened interpretation of the same events” (14). To some extent, this calls in the same notions of distinction between terror and horror that was pointed out earlier in the comparison between Lewis and Radcliffe; whereas, in the case of the *Lyrical Ballads* the “supernatural” is used to produce the same type of “intellectual speculation” that Radcliffe assumed terror to produce.

On a different level, critical theories such as psychoanalysis, reader-response, and feminism have considerably influenced the ways in which Gothic texts are approached. Perhaps most notably, psychoanalysis has provided the most insightful ways of reading the Gothic to unleash its discursive possibilities. For example, by using the theories of psychoanalysis, the reader can unveil certain patterns of social, political, and cultural repression as they may situate themselves in the narrator and/or his/her characters. On the other hand, one cannot stress enough the considerable contributions of Freud’s theory of the “Uncanny,” which examines the properties of a text that provoke a feeling of unfamiliarity and uneasiness, which is possibly disturbing, unsettling, and uncomfortable, as it successively reveals certain patterns of repression and exerts directive power of the reader by strongly affecting his/her response. In *The Monk*, the uncanny manifests itself on various levels: in the disclosure of horrific events, such as the description of putrefied bodies and sanguinary beatings cited above; second, in the premise that the supernatural

is depicted as a tangible possibility; and third in the exposure of the psychological processes operating in the character of Ambrosio as he undergoes first repression then elation. Considering Jauss' theories of reader-response, one could easily make the case that the disclosure of uncanny events constantly changes the reader's "horizons of expectations," whose direct consequence is to reinforce the compelling power of the narrative. Similarly, by referring to the "horizons of expectations," Jauss retraces the contemporary critic's rejection of the Gothic as a new form of cultural production through the notion of "Aesthetic Distance":

If one characterizes aesthetic distance the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a "change of horizons" through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness, then this aesthetic distance can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgment (spontaneous success, rejection of shock, scattered approval, gradual and belated understanding). (1556)

What is particularly interesting in Jauss' statement is his argument that a "change of horizons" prompted by a new work—such as *The Monk*—could trigger "newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness," a notion that seems to echo that of Bataille regarding transgression and that of "innovator" as articulated by Julius.

The Gothic novel has also been intensively scrutinized by Feminist critics, who examined the perceptions of gender during the period that coincided with the appearance of the genre. Napier refers to several feminist critics who "have claimed its pertinence in delineating the distinctively feminine problems of constricted social, sexual, and authorial roles in the period" (xi). In reference to the earlier observation regarding Radcliffe's "conservativeness" and her standing as a "proto-feminist," critics have striven to explain

the unfavorable conditions under which female authors were producing texts and how they had to “limit” themselves in order for their work to be “accepted” by the institutional authorities which were predominantly male. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain that certain female authors carefully disguised elements of sedition in their work as to avoid persecution. In addition, the treatment of female characters in various novels may indicate how the sexes related to each other and in particular how women are portrayed and to which were the roles they were ascribed. One could argue, for example, that female characters are portrayed more sympathetically in Radcliffean romances than in *The Monk*, which, by considering the role of Matilda as temptress and the quiet resignation of other female characters, can be perceived as both misogynistic and sadistic.

In *The Failure of the Gothic*, Napier attempts to reject the subsequent claims that have been conferred on the Gothic by these various critical approaches. In alluding to the psychoanalytic approaches to the genre for example, she argues on the one hand that “the Gothic has simply been subjected to overreading, an activity that derives from a recurrent desire to find in the Gothic a transitional form that links, through greater emphasis on the human psyche, the classical and the romantic periods” (4). While she dismisses the psychological value conferred on Gothic works, she acknowledges the Romantics’ indebtedness to the genre with regard to the devices of fragmentation and disjunction (7). What seems rather surprising, however, is that by supposedly unveiling the “failures of the Gothic” as her title suggests, she is only reinforcing its stature as a form of cultural expression by engaging in yet another series of critical exchanges with the genre, which

only adds to its value as cultural capital. On the other hand, her analysis of *The Monk* offers some insightful counterpoints that are worth considering.

Napier claims that *The Monk* fails to deliver the “openness” it promises in its beginning because both the social criticism and the premise of psychological depth are designed primarily to feed on the reader’s voyeuristic impulses (115). But rather than dismissing the value of *The Monk* based on this view, I would argue that it is specifically that which makes it an interesting illustration of Bataille’s conceptualization of Eroticism and transgression as explored in Chapter 2. Her analysis of various scenes, such as the repeated sexual allusions regarding Antonia’s physique, prompts Napier to draw the following conclusion:

The deliberate and repeated sensual orientation of *The Monk* (whether Lewis is describing scenes of sexuality or of punishment), combined with incidents in which physical beauty is associated with a form of excited or confused withdrawal, puts the reader in the novel’s most crucial moments in the position of a voyeur, watching curiously ... from afar. (117)

In another instance, she draws from the scene where the Monk is watching Antonia taking a bath through Matilda’s mirror (271) to argue that the narrator does not allow the reader “to formulate a moral judgment—either about Lewis or perhaps about himself for his reaction to the event” and that the reader “is encouraged to share [Ambrosio’s] physiological (non-moral) reaction: her ‘contours’ are called ‘voluptuous’ and the linnet’s harbour between her breasts adjudged ‘delightful’” (118). Hence, Napier claims that *The Monk* draws the reader into a scopophilic contemplation of some of the female characters. In doing so, she seems to suggest that there is a rapprochement between reader and narrator, which at times, provokes the reader into assuming Ambrosio’s point of view. In

addition, following Michelle A. Massé's argument that much as voyeurism is predominantly considered a masculine drive, exhibitionism is a feminine one (58-9), it could be argued that such descriptions can appeal to both male and female readers, to masculine voyeurism and repressed feminine exhibitionism. Taking a closer look at the aforementioned scene, the ways in which male readers are capable of adopting Ambrosio's point of view, while female readers might assume the position of Antonia become apparent:

The scene was a small closet belonging to [Antonia's] apartment. She was undressing to bathe herself. The long tresses of her hair were already bound up. The amorous monk had full opportunity to observe the voluptuous contours and admirable symmetry of her person. She threw off her last garment, and advancing to the Bath prepared for her, She put her foot into the water. It struck cold, and She drew it back again. Though unconscious of being observed, an in-bred sense of modesty induced her to veil her charms; and She stood hesitating upon the brink, in the attitude of the Venus de Medici. At this moment a tame Linnet flew towards her, nestled its head between her breasts, and nibbled them in wanton play. The smiling Antonia strove in vain to shake off the Bird, and at length raised her hands to drive it from its delightful harbour. (271)

What is striking here is how the narrative gradually takes on Ambrosio's point of view and the seemingly modest—yet playful—attitude adopted by Antonia. She is unconsciously aware of being observed, which prompts her to become narcissistic and engage in a poise of simultaneous veiling and unveiling, bearing witnesses to the repressed exhibitionist drive pointed out by Massé. What is most noteworthy about the above observations regarding the scopophilia/exhibitionist dyad is that this enjoyment is not at a "distance," the distance is annihilated by the process of rapprochement and identification mentioned above. Once again, this rapprochement between text and reader

recalls Bataille's emphasis on creating a text that blurs the boundaries between language and experience, where the experience of language (reading) becomes itself a physical experience. Moreover, what Napier calls "a deflection of sympathy" is the absence of a "happy ending"—a remark that had earlier been voiced by one of the contemporary critics of the novel. She bases this observation on both her belief that "Lewis seems reluctant even to restore Agnes to perfect tranquility: her return to happiness is expressed as a transition she must 'bear with fortitude'" (123) and the fact that "Ambrosio is refused his author's mercy" (124). In contrast to Napier, I would argue that these brief clarifications do not diminish *The Monk's* tenure as an innovative work of both the Gothic and the transgressive, nor do they affect its stock as cultural capital.

On another level, Napier's in-depth analysis of the character of Ambrosio—who she seems to believe, is a reflection of the author—appears to weaken her thesis regarding the failure of the Gothic and the "overreading" of the psychoanalyst critics, for it perfectly illustrates the concepts and patterns of sexual repression, specifically as they lead to violence and aggression. She claims that "the novel's most important and interesting patterns of imagery (especially sexual ones) are predicated on transference and indirection, suggesting not only Lewis's initial conservativeness in depicting sexual activity but mirroring (and again, confusing, imitating) Ambrosio's strongly repressed sexual side" (126). She refers to several passages of the novel where the repressed nature of the main character is clearly depicted, such as his describing his need to resist temptation when acting as the confessor of the "noblest Dames of Madrid" (40) or the passage which implies that his upbringing in the convent triggered the mechanisms of his repression (237-9). She continues by arguing that "Ambrosio's repeated attempts to

suppress his passionate nature result not in its annihilation but its deflection into other avenues of thoughts or expression” (128), expressions that almost inescapably turn to acts of violence and aggression. In reference to the scene where Ambrosio kills Elvira as a result of his being unable to fulfill his lust for Antonia (300), Napier observes that “this scene of sexual arousal results not in possession but in murder (Ambrosio’s suffocation of Elvira) is the ultimate expression of the link between sex and death, and one that has been present from the novel’s earliest pages” (131). Hence, Napier reads *The Monk* as a text which explicitly and continuously makes connections between sex and death, both in its content, such as in the scenes that either implicitly or explicitly link the two acts (e.g. the scene described above), and in its form, such as the succession between the scenes dealing with sex and the ones describing acts of physical violence (the carnage of St. Clare’s and the monk’s rape and murder of Antonia). Napier claims that “this pattern of sexual repression and release or displacement suggests Lewis’s disturbing view of sex as linked to violence, and the practice of love (or sex) as related to sadism” (130) before coming to the following conclusion:

Lewis’s writing in *The Monk*, in parts controlled and moralistic, in others undermining and calling into question that control by strange accesses of passion that link him to his protagonist Ambrosio, reflects the turbulence of a novelist doubting, defying, or perhaps insufficiently intrigued by his own moralistic messages of truth, candour, and mercy. (132)

This observation appropriately ends her psychoanalytic approach to the novel. Apart from contradicting her earlier remarks regarding the overemphasis of such approaches to the Gothic, this conclusion contains important implications regarding the perception of the text as one which belongs to the canon of transgression. In a deflected way, Napier

seems to align herself with earlier criticism of *The Monk* which perceived Lewis' novel as obscene and as lacking a moral framework based on a rather facile conflation of author and character, for she argues on the one hand that the author's views are "disturbing" and that on the other, he fails to be clear about his convictions. But what if this is precisely the intended purpose of Lewis? Instead of providing a moral framework, as Radcliffe so carefully does, Lewis relegates the burden of decision to the reader, forces him/her to question his/her own conceptualization of morality and to confront them with titillating transgressions of the established norms imposed by society. Keeping in mind the larger picture of the framework of transgression established in the previous chapter, the novel's representation of the paradigm regarding the link between sex and violence, which is simultaneously shocking and either fascinating or disturbing, fully exploits the transgressive role of the erotic. By exploring the possibilities between sex and violence in both the structure and the content of the narrative, Lewis unleashes the potential of Eroticism suggested by Bataille, for it not only breaks taboos, it also questions the system of meaning in which it originates. In other words, the language of sexuality becomes the language of political subversion. In *The Monk*, the suppression of Ambrosio's lustful desires, as orchestrated by the mechanics of institutional power, imposes a pattern of repression that is destructive to both the repressed individual and those who surround him. Thus, *The Monk's* perceived "failures" (its lack of moral framework, its "obscenity," the explicit combination of sex and violence, etc.) do not diminish the novel's standing as an important work of both the Gothic and transgression. Quite on the contrary, as these specific aspects become more intensely scrutinized by various generations of critics, both *The Monk's* value as cultural capital gradually increases and

its tenure as a work of transgression is reappraised. Not only is its subversive potential fully revealed—as it denounces both the mechanisms of repression imposed by various forms of institutional power and the inherent hypocrisy of the very same institutions that preach social morality—but it also explores the Batailleian push towards the “limitless possibilities of being.” As Antonin Artaud would put it, “I cannot remember in any other text seeing images ... that, in their aspect as images, haul after them a veritable current of promising life *comme dans les rêves*, of new existences and infinite actions” (translation mine<sup>16</sup>) (12).

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<sup>16</sup> *je ne me souviens dans aucune autre lecture vu arriver sur moi des images ... qui, dans leur aspect d'images, traînent après elles un véritable courant de vie prometteur comme dans les rêves, de nouvelles existences et d'actions à l'infini.*

## Chapter 4

### PORNOGRAPHY AND VIOLENCE: THE DIALECTICS OF TRANSGRESSION IN BRET

#### EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO*

*THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.*

Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*

*It is known that civilized man is characterized  
by an often inexplicable acuity of horror.*

Georges Bataille, "Eye"

While the previous case study of *The Monk* offered a historical perspective on the processes of reception and evaluation of a transgressive text, this chapter takes a look at the discursive interconnections between transgression and canon-formation in the contemporary United States by considering the case of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Two centuries separate the publication dates of *The Monk* and *American Psycho*. Amidst important geo-political changes, shifting ideologies, and the succession of various literary movements, these two works share a number of similarities<sup>17</sup>, the most notable of which is that both works were received by an uproar of controversy for broadly the same reasons. Contingents of readers and reviewers were appalled by their content—the rather explicit depictions of sex and violence and the apparent lack of moral framework—and concerned that these texts would affect their respective audiences. In addition, each work suffered gross misprisions, stemming predominantly from their detractors' ideologies and a facile conflation of author and protagonist.

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<sup>17</sup> For a complete comparison of *American Psycho* with the Gothic tradition, see Ruth Helyer's "Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.3 (2000) 725-746.

In recent history, no book has been received with the level of outrage that characterized the release of Ellis' 1991 novel about a Wall Street serial killer. Reviews deplored its extremely graphic content which jovially and dispassionately offered up scenes of sex, mutilation, and murder to punctuate the toneless blather of the Yuppie lifestyle. Various groups and individuals campaigned for a national boycott of the novel because of the acts of pornographic violence it portrays, while in other countries authorities attempted to ban *American Psycho*<sup>18</sup>. The protest against the novel closely resembles that regarding the potentially harmful effects of displays of sex and violence in the media. However, the general public is largely unperturbed by such concerns, and rather than being appalled, people are either totally indifferent and desensitized or have fully embraced the various representations of sex and violence as they appear in movies, magazines, videogames, and television, regarding them as valid—and highly stylized—forms of entertainment. Hence, at a time when audiences are fascinated by the images of gore and pornography offered by popular media and the entertainment industry, it seems surprising that a work of contemporary fiction could have generated such outrage.

The scandal that characterized the release of Ellis' novel sheds light on the patterns of reception of literature in a cultural context that is in constant mutation due to the fast-paced nature of the digital age and globalization. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, technology has redefined all aspects of human existence. While lacking a clear definition, postmodernism has drawn a highly intricate web of cross-cultural negotiations that have allowed for a radical degree of experimentation across genres and mediums. In

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<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, *American Psycho* was banned in Queensland while in the rest of Australia it was sealed in plastic and restricted to those 18 and over. See "X-Rated? Outdated" at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/09/19/1063625202157.html?oneclick=true>

the aftermath of the “culture wars” that branded the second half of the twentieth century, a multitude of disciplines and cultural traditions are being revived. Established boundaries are constantly being pushed, and while society as a whole is polarized to the extremes, conceptualizations of the high and the low are continuously being challenged. In academia, particularly with regard to canon-formation discourses, the advent of multiculturalism has created a heavily fragmented environment where a multitude of distinct ideologies and perceptions of culture collapse and collide. It is precisely within this context of perpetual change and transition, shifting ideologies, and generalized mystification and anxiety that *American Psycho* needs to be considered.

By investigating how and why a text such as *American Psycho* produces shock, arouses controversy, and questions established norms and conventions, this chapter will argue that, contrary to Anthony Julius’ view, transgression has not become the norm, by exploring the ways in which Ellis’ text might possibly impact artistic canons and/or society as a whole. The discussion will start out by providing an analysis of the novel followed by a synopsis of the mixed reviews that characterized its reception. The next section outlines the possible similarities between *American Psycho* and *The Monk* and draws some parallels between the ways in which their content was processed through the cultural channels of reception and distribution. The discussion will then address the ways in which the explicit accounts of sex and violence contained in *American Psycho* relate to the key concepts of transgression articulated in Chapter Two, before showing how Ellis’ text acts as a social critique and might possibly challenge the prevailing cultural ideology of consumer capitalism.

\* \* \*

Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* is a fictional novel set in New York City in the late 1980s. Patrick Bateman, its protagonist and narrator, is a Wall Street Golden Boy who is also a brutal psychopath and gruesome murderer. The totally uninflected first-person narrative unfolds in a precise, detailed, and seemingly objective fashion. All traces of affect and any references to feeling are stripped away from his voice, a voice which seems to indicate that in Bateman's mind, the line between consciousness and unconsciousness seems to be blurred. This is amplified by the ambivalent relationship between reality and fiction that characterizes *American Psycho*, an ambiguity which becomes particularly prominent—and rather mystifying—at various moments throughout the novel. Consequently, Bateman's interior monologue could be described as stream of both consciousness and unconsciousness. What is particularly remarkable, and perhaps even shocking or disturbing, is that while the text clearly represents what Michael Bakhtin calls a heteroglossia of speeches, Bateman displays the same matter-of-fact affective filter to describe in detail music albums, waking up and exercise routines, clothing, and restaurant scenes, as well as his barbarous acts of mutilation and murder.

Because of its matter-of-fact descriptions of graphic violence, *American Psycho* was surrounded by much controversy even before its release in 1991 by Vintage Contemporaries. Upon receiving the manuscript Simon & Schuster, the publisher of Ellis' previous books, withdrew from its engagement (and forfeited a \$300,000 advance) to publish and distribute *American Psycho*, fearing a national uproar over the novel's overtly explicit scenes of sexual violence. The novel's meticulous and uninflected prose was construed by a considerable contingent of readers and reviewers as reflecting a total lack of decency and morality. Some of the most controversial excerpts of the book had

been leaked from the publishing company and reached the mainstream media, and the book was quickly labeled as “sadistic,” “pornographic,” misogynistic” and “loathsome” (Murphet 65-9, Young 86), creating a stir equivalent to the release of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* almost half a century earlier (Murphet 15).

Throughout this study, I have often referred to works that depict scenes of sexual behavior, from Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* to Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*, Lewis’ *The Monk*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, reinforcing the fact that there is an entire legacy of literary works where accounts of sexual acts are described in varying degrees of explicitness. As I outlined in chapter 2, the fundamental difference between pornography and sexual content is based on the assumption that while the latter presents the sexual act in a manner that promotes intellectual contemplation and discussion, the former typically aims merely to provide some type of physical or sensual pleasure. Works that were perceived to be too explicit—or “pornographic”—according to contextual conventions, were legally persecuted under the label of “obscenity”<sup>19</sup> and/or “immorality” by the regulating authorities. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the boundaries that distinguish pornography and sexually explicit material are constantly redefined as society changes and supposedly becomes more permissive. While many may recall the infamous case of *The People vs. Larry Flint* where one of the Supreme Court judges argued, “I know pornography when I see it,” *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* notes that ultimately, “judgment [on what constitutes pornography] must

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<sup>19</sup> Note that since “pornography” is a relatively new word, “obscene” was a more common categorization until the late twentieth century.

depend on the individual, on his or her moral and aesthetic conscience” and that accordingly, pornography may appear in both popular literature as well as serious literature (686).

Assuming that Ellis’ *American Psycho* belongs to the latter category, the task at hand, then, is to determine whether the scenes depicting sexual acts are pornographic with regard to the framework enunciated above. In his essay, “Extremes and Radicalism in the Postmodern and the Popular: A Study of Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*,” Ben Walker considers similar criteria for distinguishing between pornography and sexually explicit material in literature:

[A] criteria for differentiating between these two categories may be found in the tendency of the latter to highlight the problematics of the sexual act, the mechanical imperfections of the human body, by including deflating techniques, humour, all emphasizing the human emotion involved. In contrast pornography is used to obtain climax, it strives for a perfection, a seriousness, an absolute. Here, *American Psycho* would seem to fit the latter description, everything is ‘perfected’ in Patrick Bateman’s male pornographic gaze.

Thus, according to Walker, the novel contains material that the reader would most probably consider pornographic, as is illustrated in the following passage, where Bateman is having intercourse in his apartment with two prostitutes to whom he assigns the names “Christie” and “Sabrina” respectively:

I pull my cock out of Christie’s ass and force Sabrina to suck on it before I push it back into Christie’s ass and after a couple of minutes of fucking it I start coming and at the same time Sabrina lifts her mouth off my balls and just before I explode into Christie’s cunt, she spreads my ass cheeks open and forces her tongue up into my asshole which spasms around it and because of this my orgasm prolongs itself and then Sabrina removes her tongue and starts moaning that she’s coming too because after

Christie finishes coming she resumes eating Sabrina's cunt and I watch, hunched over Christie, panting, as Sabrina lifts her hips repeatedly into Christie's face and then I have to lie back, spent but still hard, my cock, glistening, still aching from the force of my ejaculation, and I close my eyes, my knees weak and shaking. (176)

This next description, an episode where Bateman has hired the same prostitute, 'Christie,' to participate in another threesome with Elizabeth, a "hardbody" he met at the gym, can also be perceived as pornographic:

I make Christie pull the dildo out of Elizabeth's cunt and have Elizabeth lie on her back while Christie fucks her in the missionary position. Elizabeth is fingering her clit while madly French-kissing Christie until, involuntarily, she brings her head back, legs wrapped around Christie's pumping hips, her face tense, her mouth open, her lipstick smeared by Christie's cunt juice, and she yells, "oh god I'm coming I'm coming fuck me I'm coming"... (289)

It is also noteworthy that these episodes happen repetitively and are scattered throughout the novel, adding to the uncanny qualities of the narrative as it alternates between its various discursive modes.

These excerpts conform to Walker's definition of pornography which emphasizes the lack of emotions and a vision of "perfection" that is prevalent in pornographic material. This "perfection" is precisely achieved through a lack of distancing that characterizes the novel's narrative, as will be explained below, and the insistence in relating these events in meticulously explicit and meticulous detail while assuming a purely descriptive tone, an approach which is consistent throughout the novel. As was the case in previous examples, it is partly this inclusion of pornography—a form of cultural production which is largely characterized as "low" and "immoral"—into seemingly "established" or "serious" literature that constitutes one of the novel's

transgressions. Ironically, even though society has supposedly become more “permissive” so as to consider this type of interchange between the high and the low as characteristic of postmodernism, this inclusion has undoubtedly caused the ire of the many reviewers of the novel such as Alberto Manguel and Roger Rosenblatt, who urged potential readers to “Snuff this Book.”

As a pastiche of consumerism, *American Psycho* mimics the speech of pornography in order to criticize how consumer culture objectifies human sexuality and how the public at large embraces this practice by indulging in its various representations, from suggestive displays of sexual behavior to hardcore porn. Underlining the absence of emotional content in *American Psycho*, Murphet observes that the women are paid and suggests that sex is merely another consumer good in the novel, another product of capitalist society for which Bateman is the perfect poster-boy. It is to this particular equation that the entire billion-dollar porn industry owes its success, an industry whose print media typically enclose accounts of sexual acts that closely resemble those of Ellis’ novel. The Adult Entertainment Industry capitalizes on sexual curiosity and a voyeuristic tendency called *scopophilia*, “a sexual drive that manifests itself in a detached, inquiring gaze (Mulvey 18),” which is a pleasure typically experienced by men through the “male gaze” by turning women into sexual objects. Although Mulvey’s term was originally directed towards mainstream cinema it is obviously even more applicable in the case of pornography. In addition, while pornography is typically marketed to a predominantly male public, it does not exclude female viewers, who might also be capable of deriving

pleasure from displays of suggestive or explicit sexuality<sup>20</sup>. It is undeniable that both males and females are active participants in the materialist society of which Bateman constitutes the poster boy: a model of success to which males aspire and females desire.

In the novel, the concept that pornographic descriptions supersede any other type of narrative mode when depicting heterosexual intercourse suggests that both sexes are only capable of *using* each other by relating on a superficial, non-intimate level that is both selfish and impersonal. In addition, the fact that both pornography—and to some extent, prostitution—is a product, a marketable consumer good, implies that it is only through a marketable “transaction” that humans are able to communicate. In one episode, Bateman is in bed with Courtney, the girlfriend of one of his colleagues, stylistically the description of the scene starts out like the excerpts above:

“I want you to fuck *me*,” Courtney moans, pulling her legs back, spreading her vagina even wider, fingering herself, making me suck her fingers, the nails on her hand long and red, and the juice from her cunt, glistening in the light coming from the streetlamps through the Stuart Hall venetian blinds, tastes pink and sweet and she rubs it over my mouth and lips and tongue before it cools.

“Yeah,” I say, moving on top of her, sliding my dick gracefully into her cunt, kissing her on the mouth hard, pushing into her with long fast strokes, my cock, my hips crazed, moving on their own desirous momentum, already my orgasm builds from the base of my balls, my asshole, coming up through my cock so stiff that it aches... (101-2)

Bateman is unable to reach satisfying coitus, however, because on the one hand, he gets distracted while he fumbles to find “the water soluble spermicidal lubricant” and on the other, Courtney becomes concerned about the condom’s “receptacle tip” (Ellis 102-105).

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<sup>20</sup> One only has to consider the target market of advertisements where parts of the male anatomy are being used to create marketable appeal, from bath products and aftershave lotion to underwear and denim.

While this episode can be perceived as particularly funny, Julian Murphet points out nevertheless that tangible, “real,” sexual relations between female and male characters in *American Psycho* are non-existent or doomed to fail, for “men and women in this textual world exist on parallel, untouching planes of reality; each sex satisfies for the other only preconceived and fixed expectations ... (31).” In other words, there exists no possibility of actual intimate—whether physical or emotional—contact between male and female characters. This is illustrated on numerous occasions, such as in the romantic-turned-parody vacation he spends with Evelyn in East Hampton (278-282), or his inability to have a relationship with Jean, his secretary.

To respond to Alberto Manguel claims that specific frameworks and contextual notions “that allow us to read depictions of horrific acts as illustrations of aesthetic or philosophical theories are absent in Ellis’s book (104).” However, one needs to consider the possible implications of Ellis’ distinctive approach. Why did the author adopt a style and an aesthetic that belong in the pages of *Hustler* magazine? If the purpose of pornography is to confer physical pleasure or sexual arousal, it can be said that Ellis’ purpose of including pornographic passages in the novel was to elicit a similar response from the reader. This echoes a previously articulated notion of the act of reading becoming a physical experience. While an identical argument could be drawn to justify the production of mass pornography, in this case, it carries some deeper ramifications. As noted above, the source of this pleasure is *scopophilic*, and thus an act of voyeurism, of enjoyment at a “distance,” but the absence of emotions prevalent in all pornographic writing initiates a process of identification in the reader: there is no distance between the

“I” in the text and the personal “I.” Moreover, as Laura Tanner suggests, the reader “imaginatively becomes the violator,” and is possibly compelled to project him/herself into the action (qtd. in Walker). It is predominantly because of Ellis’ narrative style (first person, present tense, stream of (un)consciousness) that the reader is coerced to adopt Bateman’s point of view. Even though Ellis’ has purposely portrayed Bateman as a despicable character—he is thoroughly arrogant, insincere, sexist, racist, vain, and shallow—the narrative is so carefully crafted that the reader follows along, and begins to adopt some of the protagonist’s concerns. For example, alongside Bateman, the reader wonders how to get rid of Bethany’s body (249), or even, contemplates ways of torturing female victims with the rat he just captured (309). Eventually, the reader becomes an active *participant* in the various scenes of the novel, which implicates him or her in the various objectifying processes of consumer society as well as in the various acts of gruesome violence, as will be detailed later. It is through this process of participation that an aspect of the novel’s social *critique* reveals itself: these first-hand experiences can eventually prompt the reader to question the nature of such incidents and can draw him or her into a state of self-reflection about the violent narcissism inherent in capitalist consumption. If *American Psycho* lacks a discernible moral framework, as many of the novel’s detractors lamented, it is because, rather than abiding by any broad concept of social morality and preaching for a higher order, Ellis’s text compels the reader to decide the moral nature of these acts for him or herself. Depending on his or her reaction, which could range from utter disgust, total indifference, to perverse fascination, the reader is forced to confront his or her feelings and/or possibly question the values of a society which condones such representations; a society of which he/she is not only a part, but in

which he/she participates as well. Perhaps some would argue that there are other ways to make this point than by appealing to humanity's basest instincts. However, as my second chapter argued, sexual urges—and the language of sexuality in particular—hold a privileged space in discourses of transgression specifically for their visceral nature and their link to violence and aggression.

As noted above, by objectifying the human body and turning it into a consumer good, pornography is widely considered to appeal primarily to the male gaze, which, according to feminist critics such as Laura Mulvey, is a product of the patriarchal thought that Bateman personifies. In addition, many feminists, such as Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin consider pornography to be degrading to women and to represent an act of violence against the female body. The root of this analogy lies in the fact that the male gaze not only considers women as sexual objects but also sees the female body as fragmented, as separate and detachable pieces of anatomy—a breast, a leg, a foot, a mouth, a vagina—as if each could easily be severed from the unified entity of the body in its entirety, as a “whole,” a three-dimensional subject. It could be argued, however, that the type of pornography depicted in the novel is predominantly targeted at a male audience and that a part from a minority of cases, female readers will respond differently. Yet female readers are also capable of becoming implicated in the spectacle by completing the scopophilic/exhibitionist dyad as explained in Chapter 3. By consenting to have sex with Bateman—and in some cases accepting money in exchange—the female characters of the novel enter the process of objectification imposed by pornography in accepting the terms of the “transaction.” Moreover, one of the direct effects of such processes of objectification—as it is imposed by the prevailing condition of consumer

capitalism present throughout the entire novel—is to erase individual subjectivity. When subjects have turned into objects, they have stopped existing and hence, murder appears to be the next logical step, for once humans have become mere objects, their tri-dimensional subjectivity has already been effaced, they have stopped existing as subjects and consequently, their existence is considered to hold little or no value. This concept is perfectly exemplified in *American Psycho* where, as Murphet notes, “the most disturbing thing about Bateman’s sexuality ... is that it segues into the most excruciating violence of the book’s most notorious passages (39).”

While certain scenes in *American Psycho* are of a particularly gruesome nature, it is certainly not the first explicitly violent novel. The annals of literary history are filled with a tradition that endorses overt depictions of violence and gore. From *The Iliad*, to *Beowulf*, *Titus Andronicus*, or even Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to cite a more recent example, all contain explicit accounts of violence to varying degrees. Along the lines of the distinction made above to categorize pornographic material, a similar line can be drawn with violence in terms of “explicitness” and “affectivity” with regard to aesthetic choices. The grizzly excerpts from *The Iliad* cited in Chapter 1 are likely to provoke a strong reaction in the reader. In *Native Son*, there is also a clear emphasis on the visceral to incite a similar response of shock and awe:

[Bigger] ... gritted his teeth and cut harder ... but the bone made it difficult ... Then blood crept in widening circles of pink on the newspapers, spreading quickly now. He whacked the bone with the knife. The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off ... He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle and ... sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all of the strength of his body. The head rolled off. (90-91)

In *American Psycho*, Ellis makes similar choices to describe Bateman's excesses of violence. For example, in the following scene unfolds after Bateman exchanges a couple of words with "an old queer" and his dog on a side-street while taking a walk:

In one swift movement I pick the dog up quickly by the neck and hold it with my left arm ... I've got such a tight grip on its throat it can't bark and I can actually *hear* my hand crush its trachea. I push the serrated blade into its stomach and quickly slice open its hairless belly in a squirt of brown blood, its legs kicking and clawing at me, the blue and red intestines bulge out and I drop the dog onto the sidewalk ... I whirl around on its owner [an old queer] and I push him back, hard, with a bloodied glove and start randomly stabbing him in the face and head, finally slashing his throat open in two brief motions; an arc of red-brown blood splatters the white BMW 320i parked at the curb, setting off its car alarm, four fountainlike bursts coming from below its chin. The spraylike sound of the blood. He falls to the sidewalk, shaking like mad, blood still pumping ... (167)

The majority of violent passages give the same attention to grizzly detail as in this next excerpt. After going out to dinner with Paul Owen, a fellow stockbroker who not only handles a very profitable account envied by many but who also mistakes Bateman for somebody else, the narrator invites him to his apartment to kill him:

The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up ... There's no blood at first, no sound either except from the newspapers under Paul's kicking feet, rustling, tearing. Blood starts to slowly pour out of the sides of his mouth shortly after the first chop, and when I pull the ax out ... and strike him again in the face, splitting it open, his arms flailing at nothing, blood sprays out in twin brownish geysers, staining my raincoat ... (217)

As the novel evolves, the protagonist is increasingly portrayed as a cold-blooded and brutal murderer who kills indiscriminately and on impulse. In the span of the novel, his list of victims include a vagrant or "bum" (131), a dog and its "queer" owner (167), a stockbroker (217), a number of different female "pick-ups" and prostitutes (245, 289-90,

304-5, 328); a child (298), and a street musician (347). However, it is important to note that apart from the stockbroker (and perhaps the child), all of these victims constitute social “others”: what liberal capitalism and patriarchal society consider “inferior” beings leading pointless existences. At one point, Bateman goes so far as to call a vagrant “a member of the genetic underclass” (266). Interestingly enough, as women accept becoming consumer products, as explained earlier, so do the homeless. After Bateman gouges out one vagrant’s eyes (131-2), the latter realizes he can exploit the situation by claiming he lost his sight through war injuries (385)—a satire of conditioned victimization.

Although most killings are markedly graphic, the most telling passages of the novel turn out to be the ones that involve acts of sexual violence. During the pornographic description of the threesome quoted above among Bateman, Christie and Elizabeth, the passage jump cuts to the following scene, where after apparently being tortured by Bateman, Elizabeth has unsuccessfully attempted to escape:

After I’ve stabbed her five or six times—the blood’s spurting out in jets; I’m leaning over to inhale her perfume—her muscles stiffen, become rigid, and she goes into her death throes; her throat becomes flooded with dark-red blood and she thrashes around as if tied up, but she isn’t and I have to hold her down. Her mouth fills with blood that cascades over the sides of her cheeks, over her chin. Her body, shaking spasmodically, resembles what I imagine an epileptic goes through in a fit and I hold down her head, rubbing my dick, stiff, covered with blood, across her choking face, until she’s motionless. (290)

Even though this passage and others like it come late in the novel, and form only a minor part of the novel, they have prompted critics such as James Gardner to deem them “excessive.” In more senses than one, they are. While these scenes of sexual aggression

are responsible for provoking the most vehement responses to *American Psycho*, they are not the perverse projections of a deranged author, nor are they designed solely to fuel the misogynistic fantasies of a small contingent of male readers. They are the result of careful crafting and within the framework of transgression they serve a precise and specific aim. By remaining in step with the overall narrative style of the novel, these scenes project the reader to the forefront of the action and intend to provoke a sensation of horror. As I established in the previous chapter, it is by feeling this visceral type of response that the act of reading becomes an experience in itself.

A parallel can be established relating the dichotomies of Terror vs. Horror and serious sexual content vs. Pornography. Like Horror, the aim of Pornography is also to create some type of physical reaction on the part of the reader, which contributes in creating that rapprochement between language and experience which Bataille considers an intrinsic property of transgression. As argued previously, the major difference between Terror and Horror is that, while the former aims for intellectual speculation (as Radcliffe argued), the latter elicits some type of visceral response, a physical reaction. Similarly, the difference between serious Sexual Content and Pornography is that while the former elicits some type of intellectual contemplation, the latter aims, more specifically, to arouse its audience. Pornography aims to fascinate the reader by triggering a sensation of physical excitement and/or pleasure, which can be scopophilic. And while in contrast to Horror this reaction is by no means repulsive, it is nonetheless a physical response. In other words, although the reactions elicited by Horror and Pornography contrast in the sense that while the reaction elicited by the former is visceral and repulsive and the response to the latter is non-visceral and fascinating, both are

physical reactions, which stand in sharp contrast to the merely speculative properties of Terror and serious Sexual Content with regard to reader response.

By literalizing the symbiosis between sex and violence through the dialogism of Pornography and Horror, *American Psycho* not only illustrates the properties of transgression and taboo but also reveals the novel's potential as a text of social criticism. Yet it could be argued that if Ellis' point was to illustrate metaphorically the misogynistic violence of the male gaze in particular and patriarchal society in general on the one hand, and the perverted *collective* violence—direct or indirect—of consumer capitalism on the other, he would have come across the first time, and the repetition of such scenes remains unjustified. This argument is flawed, however, for it again fails to take into account the overall premise of *American Psycho's* being a satire, a work of social criticism<sup>21</sup>. This “excess” is by no means gratuitous, for as mentioned above, the objects of the novel's attacks are mass consumerism and the tenets of Western Society, and thus this excess in violence illustrates the excesses that form an integral part of liberal capitalism. This prompts David Price to observe that “in Patrick Bateman's world, there is no contradiction between being a Wall Street hotshot and a serial killer because the ideology of the culture obscures such a contradiction (327).” This parallel between the individual violence of the main protagonist and the collective violence of capitalistic culture is displayed when asked by someone at a party what his line of work is, Bateman answers, “murders and executions” his answer is assumed to be “mergers and acquisitions” (Ellis 206).

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<sup>21</sup> A point that was equally emphasized by the likes of Carla Freccero, Julian Murphet, David Price, Elizabeth Young, and Ben Walker.

Even so, as outlined earlier, the grizzliest passages are the ones that combine sex and violence, particularly where, as the novel progresses, one inevitably leads into the other. The relationship between sex and death—or Eros and Thanatos—is a recurring motif in literature, and has been articulated by the use of the term “*la petite mort*,” a metaphor that attempts to symbolize the state of non-being, of losing oneself, that immediately follows the orgasmic experience. In Ellis’ novel, this concept is taken to its literal extreme. As noted earlier, what is particularly remarkable is that some of the most graphic and gruesome passages immediately follow the sexual encounters cited above, thus, establishing a direct relationship between sex and death, pornography and violence. The next excerpt is taken from one of the two chapters titled “Girls”—another level of structural repetition—where Bateman hires two escort girls and takes them to Paul Owen’s apartment. He fails to be aroused by the sex, so he decides to find an alternate way to reach an orgasm:

... finally I saw the entire head off—torrents of blood splash against the walls, even the ceilings—and holding the head up, like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri’s head to my lap I push it into her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come, exploding into it. (304)

Some indefinite number of days later, he meets a girl, who “remains nameless,” at “M.K.” and takes her back to his apartment. Once again failing to get aroused through fellatio, Bateman starts getting rough with her, but she decides to stop and as she is gathering her belongings to leave, he knocks her out. He ties her to the floor and starts performing various acts of torture, before finally dismembering her:

I use a chain saw and in a matter of seconds cut the girl in two with it. The whirring teeth go through skin and muscle and sinew and

bone so fast that she stays alive long enough to watch me pull her legs away from her body—her actual *thighs*, what's left of her mutilated vagina—and hold them up in front of me, spouting blood, like trophies almost. Her eyes stay open for a minute, desperate and unfocused, then close, then finally she dies ... She has only half a mouth left and I fuck it once, then twice, three times in all. (329)

It can be seen within these particularly ghastly excerpts that Bateman's capacity to reach arousal is closely correlated with the acts of mutilation and torture he carries out on his victims, and thus, in noticing that there is a gradual increase of these acts both in incidence and intensity, the reader sees that violence becomes progressively the only way in which Bateman is able to fulfill his sexual drive. This brings us to the conclusion that first, the psychotic, schizophrenic, and sadistic traits of both the main protagonist and the narrative are increasingly reinforced not only through the repetition of acts of viciousness and murder, but through their increasing intensity as well. Second, violence in *American Psycho* serves not only to illustrate the violence and savageness of capitalism—which is also epitomized by Bateman's being both a relentless and successful Wall Street stockbroker and an equally successful and relentless murderer, but the misogynistic aggression of the 'male pornographic gaze' as well. And third, the concept that sex and violence are intertwined is also reinforced through the same processes of increasing explicitness and repetition.

The discussion of *The Monk* in Chapter Three illustrated how accounts of sex and violence can either alternate or overlap each other both structurally or textually as the story unfolds. However, in the absence of plot, these elements—and in particular the accounts of sexual violence—gradually become the focal point of *American Psycho*. Paradoxically, while these accounts may be particularly appalling for the reader, they also

become inescapably appealing. The stylistic devices employed by Ellis compel the reader to long for the scenes of sexual violence as they become the sole plausible point of interest. In order to clarify the ways in which *American Psycho* is able to play with the reader's feelings of revulsion and fascination, this next section will take an in-depth look at how the novel affects the response of the reader both emotionally and psychologically. To discuss the latter, some of Freud's theory of the "Uncanny" seems particularly well-suited, while an analysis of the former will address what has been called Ellis' "politics/aesthetics of boredom" by critics.<sup>22</sup> Bateman's point of view is the sole narrative voice of *American Psycho*, as pointed out earlier; it does not allow the reader to distance him/herself, and coerces him/her to assume the role of a participant. Adopting the victim's point of view is equally if not more unpleasant—"this is not an exit" the novel reminds us—and Bateman's point of view quickly reasserts itself.

In *American Psycho*, the Uncanny manifests itself on two levels. For one, as a narrator, Bateman does not possess an affective filter and uses either a purely formal syntax and/or a quasi-uninflected speech to describe all events, whether taking a shower, having sexual intercourse, or brutally mutilating his victims. What is particularly *unheimlich* is that the murder scenes are of such an explicitly gruesome nature that some readers may find themselves virtually unable to continue reading, while others may find these passages truly enthralling—a duality which closely echoes society's relationship with the taboo as pointed out in Chapter Two. What unravels in this process of revulsion/fascination is that Bateman appears to be the perfect case study for psychoanalytical study. Freud insists that most repressed feelings contained in the

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<sup>22</sup> Such as Elizabeth Young, Marco Abel, and Julian Murphet

unconscious are of a sexual or violent nature, and the protagonist of *American Psycho* enacts both, profusely. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether these murders actually take place, or whether they are merely the verbal expression of the protagonist's unconscious, a possibility worth exploring, for critics such as David Price emphasize the “cartoon-ish” quality or the grotesqueness of the violence depicted, which renders it entirely or partly *invraisemblable* and thus perhaps merely a product of the unconscious. This leaves the reader in a situation where he or she needs either to consider Bateman as a character for whom the borders between the conscious and the unconscious are completely blurred—who has lost the social filter of culture with regard to nature—or as a persona who allows his unconscious freely to project his most intimate repressed desires without ever actually carrying them out, as we see in the narrator's description of a conversation with his buddies at “Harry's”:

Questions are routinely thrown my way ... I am, of course thinking about other things, asking myself my own questions: Am I a fitness junkie? Man vs. Conformity? Can I get a date with Cindy Crawford? Does being a Libra signify anything and if so, can you prove it? Today I was obsessed with the idea of faxing Sarah's blood I drained from her vagina over to her office in the mergers division at Chase Manhattan, and I didn't work out this morning because I'd made a necklace from the bones of some girl's vertebrae and wanted to stay home and wear it around my neck while I masturbated in the white marble tub in my bathroom, grunting and moaning like some animal. Then I watched a movie about five lesbians and ten vibrators. Favorite group: Talking Heads. Drink: J&B or Absolut on the rocks. TV show: *Late Night with David Letterman*. Soda: Diet Pepsi. Water: Evian. Sport: Baseball. (395)

Bateman remains the voice of the collective unconscious—a voice that is uncontainable and refuses to remain muffled—and as a result it is either laid bare and becomes

overwhelming, or, in more extreme cases, it materializes itself and assumes total control over its subject.

The ambiguity between narrative and textual reality persists throughout the novel and constantly sends the reader questioning not only the authenticity of the events described but the extent of the protagonist's schizophrenic neurosis. Within the theory of the Uncanny, Freud claims that by maintaining this kind of ambivalence, an author is able to control the reader and stir him into different directions: "by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions" (951). Likewise, Elizabeth Young aptly argues:

From the first line, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here", to the last, "This is not an exit", we are *signed*, we are entered in to what is really a *circle* of hell. Once we have given ourselves up to the text, made the choice to "abandon hope", we have no way out. It is a closed system. These imprisoning, claustrophobic qualities are deftly manipulated in order, not only to force us to live as close to Patrick as possible in a fictional sense, but to imprint the reader with such force that we cannot ever get out. This is an act of great aggression and confidence on the part of the author revealing a controlling ego which asserts its rights over both characters and readers. (3)

This control is further implemented through what critics define as Ellis' "aesthetics of boredom," in reference to the 'boring' passages of *American Psycho*: the endless name-dropping, label-listing, descriptions of household items, cataloguing of grooming and exercise routines (24-9, 69), dining guide blurbs, the typical *Rolling Stone* or *Billboard* pop music reviews (252-6), and the empty, senseless dialogues (108-9) between characters that are so superficial and so seemingly alike that their identities are

constantly being mistaken<sup>23</sup>. Yet, as proposed above, these “boring” passages, which clearly represent the majority of the text, work as “a carefully considered foil to the violence,” (Murphet 24). While Manguel identifies these boring passages as a sign of Ellis’ lack of “style” which confirms the book’s sub-literary status, he ignores the fact that, quite to the contrary, Ellis has structured *American Psycho* meticulously, and that the purposes of the novel are in part executed by his stylistic choices. As Marco Abel argues, “[the novel] is marked by the extent boredom is deployed as a major stylistic strategy” (143); a point to which Murphet concurs: “If Ellis wants to bore us, he must have a reason (24).”

Murphet argues that the violent incidents are “so confronting and disturbing partly because they have been so long in coming ... and partly because what had remained latent behind the surface banality is here given such swift and explicit expression that we are simply unprepared for it (40).” He also contends that stylistically the scenes of sexual violence situate themselves on a different level than the remainder of the text, which accentuates their dialectic antagonism and their consequent effect on the reading process:

[t]he violence is not simply a matter of content; it is very much a matter of form and style. Form, because we have to wait so long for any signs of literary distinction (the text otherwise being an object lesson on “bad” writing), that when they finally arrive we feed on them hungrily, even though they occur in scenes of abomination; and style, because it is here that the oppressive paratactic narrative finally ‘lets rip’ and tips over from weightless indistinction into driven, compulsive syntactical constructions. (45)

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, when Owen mistakes Bateman for Halberstam (215), or when Carnes, Bateman’s lawyer thinks he is Davis, not Bateman, and that the person he claims having killed could not be Owen because Carnes recently saw him in London (387-8).

Although Murphet's appraisal of the way the majority of the text's prose affects the reader is accurate, especially as it plays with the reader's expectations for violence before finally fulfilling them, his assessment of the syntactical difference between the "boredom" and the "violence" should be scrutinized. How does the passage where Bateman murders Owen quoted above (167) differ from the following excerpt where Bateman describes his attire?

The suit I wear today is from Alan Flusser. It's an eighties drape suit, which is an updated version of the thirties style. The favored version has extended natural shoulders, a full chest and a bladed back. The soft-rolled lapels should be about four inches wide with the peak finishing three quarters of the way across the shoulders. Properly used on double-breasted suits, peaked lapels are considered more elegant than notched ones. Low-slung pockets have a flapped double-besom design—above the flap there's a slit trimmed on either side with a flat narrow strip of cloth. Four buttons form a low-slung square; above it, about where the lapels cross, there are two more buttons. (29)

It is not clear how Murphet can regard these selections to be syntactically different. Both depictions are constructed in similar ways following a "simplistic" yet detailed descriptive style. I would argue that it is precisely their formal similarities that increase the potential shocking effect of the novel's shifts in *content* between the "boredom" and the "violence." The style is "fashion speak"; it compels the reader to want to be this meticulous, this knowledgeable, and so do the descriptions of murder and mutilation. This is precisely the point that Abel makes when he asserts that "Ellis insists that boredom works as boredom only when disrupted by violence (146)." Thus, the two are interdependent in a way that they each perpetually accentuate the other, and this dialogism works to create an effect on the reader. Following Jauss' reader-response theory, it can be said that the reader's "horizon of expectations" is constantly shifting,

and that in the face of the extensive boring passages enumerated above, the reader starts longing for “something to happen” namely the sex and the violence, thus calling in a sense of curiosity, a curiosity that is not only scopophilic, but also becomes the reader’s main desire for reading the novel. This type of curiosity fully manifested itself during the scandal surrounding the novel’s release and it also contributed to creating its main appeal. The knowledge that the novel contained gruesome depictions of sexual aggression did not intimidate readers. Quite on the contrary, readers—and possibly some who would have never bought the book if they had been unaware of its contents—were compelled by their sense of curiosity to acquire the novel and fulfill their expectations by experiencing for themselves its blatant depiction of pornographic horror. Ironically, the mechanics of controversy works rather well with the overall premise of *American Psycho*, for it is partly this type of sick and perverted curiosity that the novel denounces, further implicating the reader within the cycle of voyeuristic consumption. This particular form of voyeurism is well exemplified in the novel with the repeated descriptions of scenes from horror movies (Ellis 69) and pornographic videotapes (97-98), as well as the use of the camera by Bateman to film acts of violence (304).

As argued earlier, the reader is compellingly drawn into the narrative. What is to be made, then, of Leigh Brock’s claim that “Ellis creates a character that distances himself from his crimes and victims, and while doing so, the author sets up distance between reader and text (6)”? Comparing Bateman to Ted Bundy and pointing out the fact that both could “mask the fact that they were relentless psychopaths,” she argues that “in addition to Bateman’s sociopathic removal and depersonalization,” Ellis’ unique style [i.e. his ‘aesthetics of boredom’] “insulates the reader’s sensibilities (7).” However, as

argued above, the latter produces quite the opposite effect; it is because of Ellis' detailed and uninflected prose and the difference in content between the boredom and the violence that the reader's sensibilities are heightened and he/she is unable to distance himself from the text. Responding to Brock's comparison of Bateman with Ted Bundy, Carla Freccero notes:

*American Psycho* is narrated for the most part in the first-person voice of a serial killer. The serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the nonrationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the "seriality" of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal. Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate the violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or in the social order. (48)

Observing that the fictive individual image of the serial killer is a "consoling fantasy" and acts as a "condensation of the violence of American historicity into a singular subject who performs discrete, singular injurious acts (49)," she concludes, "*American Psycho* does not offer its readers the serial killer as consoling fantasy (51)." In her view, it is because of Ellis' minimalist style as well as the absence of a psychological portrait and a pathological background that Bateman escapes all categorization as a "serial killer" in the vein of Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter or Norman Bates of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (51).

In sum, far from receiving any escape route, the reader consequently gets absorbed into the narrative. The irony of Ellis' minimalist prose style and Bateman's

unaffected voice is that they relegate the responsibility for feelings and emotions to the reader. In other words, the reader is able to feel what Bateman does not—namely, feelings of disgust and repulsion for the acts of sexual violence, even while the style suggests no such revulsion is necessary. It is the absence of affect in Bateman—what Brocke calls “distancing”—that creates the intimacy between the reader and the protagonist. Without a primary filter of characterization and personality, the reader subconsciously becomes Bateman. Moreover, it is also Bateman’s lack of personality—which is highlighted by the fact that he is constantly being mistaken for someone else—that not only plunges the reader into filling this blank by becoming Bateman but also makes him or her long for the violence as the only antidote to the boredom which plagues the never-ending descriptive passages of the novel.

Chapter Two explained in detail that both sex and violence are instinctual drives, physical needs that form an integral part of human existence, and whose representations have increased with growing intensity. In “civilized” society, individuals are forced to deal with their sexual and aggressive desires either by suppressing them or funneling them into some other physical outlet. Society has attempted—and succeeded in most cases—either to transpose or replace these needs and to restrain the individual from physical aggression. Yet these instincts resurface randomly and the individual unconsciously feels a longing for them, or rather, for their ‘representations’: along with everything else, we have attempted to either domesticate or sublimate our instincts. But as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno aptly point out, “the culture industry does not sublimate; it represses” (*Norton* 1230), and when these repressed wishes resurface, they rematerialize in a more unsettling way, which sends us back to Bataille’s epigraph:

“civilized” man is indeed no stranger to carrying out acts of horror, a fact that Ellis explicitly demonstrates.

In *American Psycho*, Ellis draws a metaphor for the passive, almost vegetative state that characterizes white-collar life in the twentieth century and its lack of ‘physicality,’ where the need to fulfill one’s instinctual drives has been replaced by a gregarious appetite for a variety of consumer products: clothes, cars, home electronics, music, and movies. A superficial lifestyle plagued with ennui prompts one to yearn for excitement, to indulge in the ‘thrill’ that the modern entertainment industry offers its viewers by constantly pushing the envelope with regard to representations of gore and violence. A paradigm that Ellis meticulously portrays in *American Psycho*, where the main protagonist’s only relief from an existence defined by “surface, surface, surface ... all that anyone found meaning in” (375), is found by indulging in violence—whether fictional or not.

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As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it would seem surprising that a work of written fiction would get so much attention in this day and age—especially when one considers that the public at large is constantly bombarded with explicitly violent and suggestively obscene images from the national news media and the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, certain self-righteous groups and individuals were so distraught by what they had read or heard that they campaigned for a national boycott of the book, going so far as to issue death threats to the author. In a review for *The New York Times*, Roger Rosenblatt called for the public to “Snuff this book!”, while Tammy Bruce of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) urged the public to

boycott the novel based on her perception that Ellis' book acted as a misogynistic manual of sexual torture and mutilation. Moreover, in what appears to be a misconception of the properties of art and authorship—a gross failure to distinguish between text, narrator and author, as well as fiction and reality—Tara Baxter, amongst others, assumed that the novel was a reflection of Ellis' own perverse fantasies and misogynistic views. In a public protest she voiced the following opinion:

There are better ways of taking care of Bret Easton Ellis than just censoring him. I would much prefer to see him skinned alive, a rat put up his rectum, and his genitals cut off and fried in a frying pan, in front of—not only a live audience—but a video camera as well. These videos can be sold as "art" and "free expression" and could be available at every video outlet, library, liquor, and convenience store in the world. We can profit off of Ellis' terror and pain, just as he and bookstores are profiting off of the rape, torture, and mutilation of women.<sup>24</sup>

By referring to certain passages of the novel, she clearly demonstrates her assumption that the acts of sexual violence perpetrated by Bateman are indeed a projection of the author's own vicious desires. What is most distressing, however, is that by misreading and misinterpreting *American Psycho* these protesters seemingly overlooked the novel's satirical nature and totally missed the fact that Ellis' book actually criticizes the very same acts they assumed it glorified. Within the context of contemporary popular culture, one is entitled to question whether the novel's reception would have been the same if the subjects of Bateman's gruesome murders had strictly been males, or if either the author and/or the protagonist had been a black female, and the victims white heterosexual

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<sup>24</sup> Tara Baxter's article can be read in its entirety at <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/Ellis1.html>

males<sup>25</sup>. Such interrogations only underline the many cultural biases and the excesses of political correctness that are now prevalent in American culture amidst all the programs of social revision and reform. What is ironic, however, is that these critics and advocate groups succeeded in doing exactly the opposite of what they had set out to achieve. As in any contemporary case of boycott and censorship, the protests and scandal only contributed to creating more interest in the novel. Nevertheless the damage to the book's status and respectability had been done, and while some may still perceive Ellis' novel as indisputably vile and despicable, a worthless piece of sub-literary 'junk' (Murphet 69), others considered it to be a satirical, postmodern masterpiece.

For instance, Alberto Manguel contemptuously argues that *American Psycho* is not a novel of literary claims. His view is partly based on the fact that even if the text had been meant to be read as a social satire, Ellis' minimalist prose style and the novel's grotesqueness pre-empt the possibility of its being seriously considered as such. In addition, he aligns himself with other critics in arguing that what is alarming about *American Psycho* is that "Ellis's prose does nothing except copy the model it is supposed to denounce" (101), though it could be argued that this is precisely the style of much postmodern pastiche. He also draws a parallel with Radcliffe's distinction between Horror and Terror as explained in the previous chapter, and argues that the novel is one of "pornographic horror" (102), claiming that it literally made him feel sick (99). In other words, according to Manguel, *American Psycho* does not offer any form of distancing from its subject, a distance that would allow for a type of intellectual reflection

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<sup>25</sup> For example, why has Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*, an autobiography which relates real, actual accounts of both racial and sexual violence, not been received with equal indignation as Ellis' novel?

and contrary to other transgressive works of the previous centuries, the novel eludes theoretical implications because it lacks a discernible framework to do so. While he may be correct in assessing that Ellis' novel contains passages of "pornographic horror" that are capable of producing a strong visceral response, many of Manguel's conclusions, however, are either misconstrued or seriously flawed. It seems bewildering that Manguel claims *American Psycho* cannot be read as a social satire, for it rather faithfully corresponds to Bakhtin's description of Menippean satire:

The familiarizing role of laughter is here considerably more powerful, sharper, and coarser. The liberty to crudely degrade, to turn inside out the lofty aspects of the world and world views, might sometimes seem shocking. But to this exclusive and comic familiarity must be added an intense spirit of inquiry and a utopian fantasy ... the entire world and everything sacred in it is offered to us without any distancing at all, in a zone of crude contact ... In Menippean satire the unfettered and fantastic plots and situations all serve one goal—to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologies. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 26)

Ellis' novel appropriately belongs to this category of satire. As explained in detail, Ellis' text is gruesomely crude and at times extremely shocking—a point with which Manguel does not disagree—because the various literary strategies deployed in the book reduce the distance between reader and narrator, creating that "zone of crude contact" of which Bakhtin speaks. In addition, *American Psycho* shares the same purpose of the Menippean satire, which is, as Bakhtin points out, "to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologies." In *American Psycho*, it is the perverse and violent ideologies and ideologies of consumer capitalism that are put to the test.

In contrast to Manguel's reading, David Price aptly argues that in the nature of Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" *American Psycho* is a gross parody of mass consumerism and

liberal capitalism, two trends that were not only true during the Reagan Era but remain prevalent today in Western society. Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and the "carnavalesque"<sup>26</sup> refer to a novel's multiple use of borrowed discourses—rather than a single, unified voice—and its overt emphasis on the "grotesque body" by focusing on "sexual intercourse [and] death throes (in their comic presentation—hanging tongue, expressionless popping eyes, suffocation, death rattle)..." (Rabelais 353). In Ellis, the former feature manifests itself in the interweaving of multiple discourses; from the inner projections of the main character to the extensive descriptions of consumer goods as quotations from instruction manuals and magazines. The characteristic of the "grotesque body" figures predominantly in the explicit depictions of sex and violence spread throughout the novel and at another level, Bateman's body is also grotesque in an especially modern way; so fetishized ("transformed" or "modeled" by body-building, grooming, and label-wearing) as to become grotesque (Ellis 24-30). In fact, the strength and veracity of *American Psycho*'s social critique lie specifically in the descriptive scenes and cleverly structured series of fictional events. The novel relentlessly ridicules and criticizes everything it addresses, from brand names and label fetishes, "I count ... one Versace silk-satin woven tie ... one silk Kenzo ... The fragrances of Xeryus and Tuscany and Armani and Obsession and Polo and Grey Flannel and even Antaeus mingle..." (Ellis 110), to image-conscious status-driven social politics (199). While the novel criticizes consumer society and liberal capitalism at large, it addresses several aspects in particular. For one, it denounces the fetishization of material goods, as well as the overwhelming importance conferred upon monetary wealth and physical appearance as

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<sup>26</sup> A term he coined in his analysis of Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*

measures of success, where identity becomes the sum of product labels with which the body is adorned. Secondly, it condemns the de facto violence of the dominant social class for carrying out acts of violence—both directly and indirectly. On one occasion, McDermott, one of Bateman’s friends, teases a homeless woman with a one-dollar bill which he then ignites (210), or more obviously, when Bateman gouges out the eyes of another vagrant (131). And most flagrantly, the novel deplores society’s objectification of human existence, its twisted ethics of consumption as people indulge in a wide array of voyeuristic goods which are linked to a perverse fascination with gore and pornography.

Apart from being a satire in both the classical and the medieval senses as defined by Bakhtin, *American Psycho* also belongs to the tradition of postmodernism. The heteroglossia of discourses that characterizes the novel—and in particular as will be detailed below, the blurriness between the projections of the conscious and the unconscious and the integration of so-called “pornography”—illustrate one of Frederic Jameson’s features of postmodernism, which is “the effacement in it of some key boundaries and separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (*Norton* 1961). In addition, the focus of its social satire corresponds to Jameson’s conceptualization of the postmodern as it “expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism” (*Norton* 1935). By considering Jameson’s distinction between pastiche and parody<sup>27</sup>, it could be argued that Ellis’ novel is more pastiche than parody, even though certain passages are so ridiculously gruesome, the narrative could lead to some type of uneasy laughter, the same

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<sup>27</sup> “Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (*Norton* 1963).

type of laughter that would lead horror-movie audiences to laugh at someone's head being chopped off.

*American Psycho* is a complex and multifaceted work of literature, capable of leading to a wide array of meanings and interpretations. For example, a Marxist-Feminist critical approach to the novel would highlight the constant and cruel oppression by the economically-privileged white male of women and social 'others,' as well as denouncing the excesses of individuality within a capitalistic society. A feminist reading might be particularly drawn to the complicity between sex and violence, and how this combination metaphorically represents the exerted authority of modern patriarchal society over women. At another level, the novel's main protagonist is a perfect text-book case for psychoanalytic study. The blurred lines between conscious reality and unconscious projections of sexual violence are an accurate illustration of a continuous internal discourse between the expressed and the repressed. In one of the numerous passages where Bateman describes his work-out routine at the gym, for instance, the internal monologue abruptly jumps-cuts to his thoughts about masturbating while watching a scene where a woman is tortured to death in a movie before going out on a date:

Finally, for the triceps I do three sets and twenty reps of cable pushdowns and close-grip bench presses. After more stretching exercises to cool down I take a quick hot shower and then head to the video store where I return the tapes I rented on Monday, *She-Male Reformatory* and *Body Double*, but I reread *Body Double* because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won't have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill since I have a date with Courtney at seven-thirty at Café Luxembourg. (69)

Bateman's socially accepted but fake expressions of conformity are repeatedly juxtaposed against his unacceptable but real desires, a juxtaposition that becomes

representative of thought vs. instinct, culture vs. nature, and humanity vs. animality. On one occasion, while having dinner with some acquaintances, he thinks about how he would have brutally murdered two of them if they had insisted on his ordering a specific entrée:

Scott and Anne insisted that we all order some kind of blackened medium-rare redfish ... if they nevertheless insisted on my ordering it, the odds were pretty good that after dinner tonight I would have broken into Scott and Anne's studio at around two this morning—after Late Night with David Letterman—and with an ax chopped them to pieces, first making Anne watch Scott bleed to death from gaping Chest wounds ... (95)

The novel's satire is also intrusive, for its perspective is that there is no "culture" or "humanity" which would set boundaries or define Bateman's actions as evil; what he does is so free of censure that it is not seen, not heard, and in a sense, does not happen at all. A careful reading of the novel would highlight how the absence of a superego, the total lack of "consciousness"—affectivity and introspection—and the unreliability of the narrator put in doubt Bateman's actual commission of all these gruesome acts of senseless violence. In the text, the reader (along with the narrator) is forced to consider this possibility when Carnes, Bateman's lawyer, tells Bateman that he could not possibly have murdered Paul Owen because Carnes just recently had dinner with him (388), though this too is compromised because the reader does not know whether Carnes in fact had dinner with Bateman thinking he was Owen!

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In discussing the satire of Ellis' novel it is interesting to consider Mary Harron's film adaptation of *American Psycho*, in which the violent excesses of the text were drastically reduced in order to highlight its social critique. In contrast to the scandalous

outburst that characterized the release of the novel, the critical reception of the film was mostly favorable. In the *New York Times* for example, while Roger Rosenblatt expressly condemned Ellis' text, Stephen Holden praised Harron's directorial decision of "removing its excess fat in a kind of cinematic liposuction." Perhaps it was the filmmakers' female/lesbian status that gave her a degree of immunity from the attacks that Ellis received. In "Judgment is not an Exit: Toward an Affective Criticism of Violence with *American Psycho*," Marco Abel compares both versions and he appropriately points out that in emphasizing the satirical edge of the novel (the point missed by the likes of Manguel and Rosenblatt), Harron clearly unveils the book's vein of social criticism and injects a strong sense of irony and comedy. Yet Abel also argues that with this shift in emphasis, the director transforms the text into a "traditional" satire by pre-empting the possibility of the audience's responding affectively to the violence (138). This difference in appraisal regarding the two versions of *American Psycho* prompts the following questions: why was it necessary for the violence to be downplayed for the reviewers to notice the text's satirical edge? Is the violence of the novel so disturbing that it nullifies its satirical aspects? Or are some reviewers and critics so appalled by the inhumanity and gruesomeness of the society of which they are part that *in lieu* of attempting to face their demons they decide to dismiss the novel altogether<sup>28</sup>?

While the second question will be addressed below by discussing the subversive potential of *American Psycho*, the answer to the first question was detailed above: in no way does the violence overshadow the satire for in actuality, it only adds to the

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<sup>28</sup> As a matter of fact, Abel contemplates whether this dismissal stems from an inability to rationalize violence and address the ways it can affect us. This is in part what he proposes to examine in his article (138).

dimension of criticism in reflecting the violence and the excesses of the system it criticizes. On another level, Abel argues that Harron's film clearly portrays Bateman as a "monster" and that consequently "the audience can feel superior and thus is likely to remain uninterested in identifying with him" (142). Hence, the film offers the audience an "exit," which is precisely what the novel does not by reducing the distance between reader and narrator and a forced process of identification, as explained above. Consequently, I would also argue that by removing the scenes of violence, Harron is diminishing its standing as a transgressive work, because the film's audience does not respond on the same visceral level as the reader of the book. The elements of "shock" are clearly absent from the film, because for the most part, the few violent scenes are predictable and undisturbing.<sup>29</sup> Hence, in contrast to Ellis' text, violence in the movie is not deployed as a "stylistic strategy" as detailed above, which reduces the visceral level of response from the audience. Abel claims that by privileging satire over violence, the film stresses the "representational" qualities of *American Psycho*, and in doing so it reflects a "tendency to judge a work of art in terms of its truth value" (138) but diminishes the text's potential in exploring the possibilities of writing at the "frontier" represented by violence (147). Although Abel derives this last observation from Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, it is clear that he is referring to a framework similar to transgression as it explores and questions the limits of creation and existence. Yet, in some skewed way, Harron is reflecting Ellis' choice of including pornographic violence in a genre of cultural production ("serious" literature) where it is both unexpected and condemned (and hence, "transgressive"): since such displays are typical of visual media,

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<sup>29</sup> Abel goes so far as calling them "comical" (146).

she chooses to be atypical by censoring it. Nevertheless, Abel also makes the astute observation that Harron's version is both a "response" and the product of critical discourses that characterized the reception of the novel since its release (141). As Holden comments, "[Harron's film] salvages a novel widely loathed for its putative misogyny and gruesome torture scenes." This comment adequately echoes an observation made previously on how criticism may affect a novel's reputation and how critical responses can "defend" (or as Holden puts it, "salvage") a work. Interestingly enough, Abel considers that, by making judgments, certain responses such as Harron's film actually "attack" a work by emphasizing certain aspects while undermining others (139). In sum, in order to avoid a negative response and get what the director perceived to be the point of the novel across (its "meaning"), Harron decided to emphasize the satire and diminish the transgressive aspect. Yet this could easily be interpreted as a lack of commitment on the part of the director and her refusal to accept the level of responsibility that a transgressive work like *American Psycho* requires. Hence, one could wonder whether Harron's satire contributes to the *status quo* or whether it also aims to subvert ideologies and topple hierarchies? As Ellis argued in an interview for *MetroWeekly*:

I just thought it didn't really capture the sensibility of the novel. It was too chilly, too elegant. I thought the novel itself was a lot wilder and crazier. Director Mary Harron placed the movie within a feminist context and put quotation marks around it and I don't think the movie needed that.

In a way, Harron's *American Psycho* corresponds to Radcliffe's rewriting of *The Monk*, for both "adaptations" can be considered a diffusion of the transgressions of Lewis' and Ellis' respective texts

In her essay on Ellis' hyperrealist aesthetics Frances Fortier asks the reader "*Où est l'insupportable? Dans la violence même ou dans le récit qui le banalise?*" ["Wherein lies the unacceptable? Within the violence itself or within the narrative that banalizes it?" (translation mine)] (98). As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, society has grown largely desensitized and the thresholds of tolerance for depictions of obscenity and gore through the media and the entertainment industry have been destabilized. The public at large overwhelmingly embraces this practice. What needs to be underscored is that these depictions remain for the most part representations of a more or less "artistic" nature. Thus, if one considers that the majority of society is less exposed to first-hand violence—which remains debatable—it still yearns to indulge in representations of violence to fulfill a repressed desire, an instinctual drive for violence. While some could claim that these representations are cathartic, others object on the grounds that they actually produce violence. If so, one could question the applicability of this paradigm to representations of sexual acts as well. One would think that our society has considerably evolved in this regard and become more permissive and tolerant, but how then can one explain the success of the porn industry and its billion-dollar annual revenue as well as the increasingly soft-porn turn of the mainstream film industry? One could argue that this success stems largely, perhaps directly, from the fact that individuals are still unable to fulfill their instinctual drive for sex and thus resort to consuming its various representations. What occurs, then, is that through various consumer products of a visual nature, society has promoted a scopophilic type of voyeurism as an acceptable way to fulfill these instinctual drives by turning human nature into an object of curiosity and

consumption, no matter how perverted the practice might appear to be. Charles Baudelaire addressed the preface of *Les Fleurs du Mal* to an *hypocrite lecteur*, a hypocritical reader, someone who would not want to accept the self-image the poems depict. For Ellis, we are all hypocrites, we all indulge in a voyeuristic lifestyle of consumption, a lifestyle that sees no boundaries in objectifying humanity and turning it into a product of consumption.

Through the blatant yet methodical display of sexual violence, Ellis' novel was considered to exceed the boundary of what is acceptable within the norms of society. Within this simple distinction, *American Psycho* can be categorized as transgressive; in this case, the characterization conforms to a standard definition of transgression—one which implies that of “trespassing”—not the more elaborate conceptualizations from Chapter Two. In reviewing the novel, James Gardner traces the history of transgressive literature all the way from Euripides, through Webster, Sade and Celine and defines it in opposition to what he calls “humanistic” and “nice” literature:

Despite the primacy of this kind of “nice” literature, there is another kind of literature that increasingly exhibits, and sometimes even advocates, very different values. Such fiction is often termed “transgressive” and there are correlative developments in film and the visual arts. Like the humanistic literature of Amy Tan, it is seen as being somehow liberal or leftist because it seeks the distinction of radical “otherness” and because it aspires to threaten the status quo that writers like Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee seek only to correct. The two strains converge from different angles of assault on a center allegedly dominated by a white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, right-handed patriarchy.

By addressing the notion of a “center” being attacked by this transgressive fiction, James Gardner still relies on the standard definition of transgression—one which is closer to subversion than to transgression—but fails to provide a theoretical framework necessary

to determine the exact transgressive nature of *American Psycho* in accordance with the frameworks elaborated previously. In other words, and in light of the controversial content of the novel, one would be drawn to consider particularly to what category the “radical” otherness of the novel belongs.

With that goal in mind, Walker also considers the writings of Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault in his analysis of transgression in *American Psycho*. In agreement with what was said in the second chapter, Walker argues that material is not deemed to be transgressive in genres where “extreme” or “shocking” content can be expected, and he rightly notes that “the uproar caused by *American Psycho* was due to Ellis’ status as a ‘serious novelist.’” His reading of Bataille prompts him to argue the following:

[Excess is defined] as that which challenges a closed economy (predicated on utility, production and rational consumption) and foregrounds the experience of the ‘unassimilable waste products’ of the body, society and thought--excrement, madness, poetry, automutilation, obscenity. It views all unities as delusive and calls for the individual to reach lower, more ‘essential’ human drives.

In considering both sex and violence as “more ‘essential’ human drives” and by positioning them in opposition to “production and rational consumption” as clearly defined above, it seems that Ellis’ novel fits this definition of transgression rather well. In addition, Walker proposes that *American Psycho* is also an accurate exemplification of Foucault’s theories:

Certainly Foucault’s description of transgression as the ‘appetite,’ ‘drive for profit’ of the already materially-satisfied describes the postmodern condition of late capitalism, the age of excess. Patrick Bateman, Ellis’ protagonist in *American Psycho* is the embodiment of the postmodern condition of superfluity; money is not used for

basic material satisfaction but for perpetual excess and inhuman ends.

Thus, according to Walker's initial reading of Bataille and Foucault, it would seem that Ellis' novel is indeed "transgressive" at both ends. However, in an exact reflection of the discussion in Chapter Two, Walker fittingly argues that Foucault's conceptualization of "transgression" is detached from anything that is "scandalous" or "subversive" and that it does not offer any form of social commentary in the way that Ellis' novel does. In other words, *American Psycho* is not transgressive in the Foucauldian sense because it is a satire of consumer society and that consequently, it is aware of the "limit" it transgresses.

Interestingly, this observation prompts Walker to draw a parallel between the Bataille-Foucault paradigm of 'pure' transgression and the Barthesian distinction between the "text of pleasure" and "text of bliss," or the subsequent categorical binaries of "readerly texts" and "writerly texts." While it is true that *a priori* Ellis' novel resembles Roland Barthes' definition of a text of Bliss because it "discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom)," it does not, on the other hand, "unsettle the reader's historical, cultural [and] psychological assumptions" (*Pleasure of the Text* 14), for it is too deeply involved with the ideology of the culture it addresses. Young also suggests that even though *American Psycho* resembles a "writerly text" it is intrinsically linked with the culture that produced it; no matter how critical it may be, "it lacks the 'shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss'" (120). Young's implication is that because Ellis' novel is so precisely situated, it does not contain the qualities enunciated above. Yet she bases her argument on her belief that "Ellis' vision is conformist and conventional... He is denunciatory, a supporter of the status quo," a

point that Freccero, Murphet, and Price strongly contend. While Freccero and Price merely argue that *American Psycho* is purely symptomatic and that it offers no solutions, no alternatives, i.e. no guidelines, Murphet is more vehement, arguing that “[t]here is scant evidence ... that Ellis is a ‘supporter of the status quo’ (22).” According to Murphet, Ellis is “apolitical,” and possibly an anarchist: “most of the values Ellis actually embraces in his fiction inhered ... in the period known as the punk movement, defined above all by a nihilistic contempt for established middle-class conformity, sartorial menace, and loud metallic noise; a concerned *épater le bourgeois* by urban youth (21).”

These conflicting opinions on Ellis’ political ramifications seem to reflect Walker’s skepticism about the definition of “pure” transgression advanced by Bataille and Foucault:

However, the Bataille-Foucault paradigm is not without problematical assumptions. Theirs is a ‘pure’ non-dialectical conception, transgression is purely ‘for the sake of it’, it has no purpose as such. It is against all ‘use’ because if one were to exist it can no longer be truly *transgressive*. It is questionable whether this is possible since these ‘energies’ are inescapably ‘directed’, committed. Such a genuine conception of transgression needs to be maintained but *within dialectics, within political progression*. In its valiant attempt to resist any political implication, the non-dialectical conception leads to *ineffectualness* and *marginalisation* as Stoekl has said of Bataille: “a simple death or wandering” or at worst to “extremely sinister political configurations (regimes of the right are only too happy to make use of previously unharnessed violence). The latter point illustrates how independence from any appropriation, implication is impossible, and to pretend otherwise is potentially dangerous.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, “pure” transgression pretends to be limitless and dissociated from any system of meanings. Nevertheless, for it to be effective and given an identifiable purpose, as Walker suggests, it cannot exist in a vacuum, a void; it needs

to be “committed.” The question remains, how can a novel be transgressive if it operates independently of a normative set of standards? What could it possibly transgress? Perhaps, in the minds of Bataille and Foucault this is not the point, and as explained previously, within the objective of this study, *American Psycho* cannot be considered within their paradigm because it is inadequate for examining the transactions between canon-formation and transgression.

On another level, the connection between sex and violence as illustrated in *American Psycho*, while either appalling or enthralling, leads to some important implications within the frameworks articulated in Chapter Two. Regarding taboo and transgression, it is precisely on such extreme experiences of pleasure and pain that Bataille establishes the foundation of his philosophy of excess and transgression. For him the interest lies in perceiving sex and death not only as interrelated but as simultaneous experiences, a concept which is accurately represented in the most gruesome passages of *American Psycho*. As discussed earlier, Ellis purposely engineered *American Psycho* for it to have a profoundly discomforting impact on the reader, which Alberto Manguel describes as “a revulsion ... of the gut” (102). This observation echoes the remarks made earlier regarding the profoundly unsettling effect of “horror,” a device which aims to trigger a visceral type of response from the reader, and how it is related to Bataille’s emphasis on conceptualizing a literature that gives way to experience in order to produce an “immediacy of being.” The elicited reaction to the passages of sexual violence is most likely to be that of shock and awe, possibly disgust, revulsion, or sickness—as it was the case for Manguel. For Bataille, however, it is in these visceral experiences that the transgressive reveals its full potential: “Without doing

violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?" (*Erotism* 24).

In light of the controversy surrounding the publication of *American Psycho*, the protagonist's misogynistic, pornographic, and sadistic narrative clearly transgressed the accepted conventions of decency and the morality of polite society. Yet as mentioned numerous times, it belongs to a well-established tradition of literary works that were also condemned for breaking social taboos, and in the context of postmodern society it seems surprising to witness a work of written fiction arousing so much controversy when images of violent and sexual behavior form an integral part of the socio-cultural landscape. Can *American Psycho* be considered to challenge artistic conventions? Perhaps not in the same way that Sade, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Joyce, and possibly Lewis did. Why not? On the one hand, the novel borrows extensively from the American literary canon of the twentieth century<sup>30</sup> and, on the other, it is deeply embedded in the tradition of Postmodernism, which is partly characterized by the continuous interchanges between high and low forms of cultural production (such as, in Ellis' case, the heteroglossia of speeches ranging from music reviews, instructions manuals, mail-order catalogues, and pornography). Nevertheless, it *does* stand out in comparison to other contemporary works, partly because he pushes pastiche to radical extremes, and partly because this type of extremist literature does not usually belong to the *New York Times* bestseller list. In similar ways to what Lewis did to the late eighteenth century romance, by almost exclusively structuring *American Psycho* around the speeches of popular culture, Ellis explodes the boundaries of sanctioned exchanges between "popular" and

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<sup>30</sup> Murphet for example, cites Ernest Hemingway and Joan Didion as notable influences (12).

“serious” literature as prescribed in American literary culture. Without a doubt this was the opinion of Rosenblatt and Manguel when they so vehemently trashed Ellis’ novel in their reviews and essays. Yet the discussion above highlights how Ellis’ stylistic and dialectic choices are contingent to his overall purpose to satirize Western contemporary culture. In a way, Ellis responds to Adorno’s observation regarding the hypocritical duality of the culture industry:

Works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. Love is downgraded to romance. And, after the descent, much is permitted; even license as a marketable specialty has its quota bearing the trade description “daring.” The mass production of the sexual automatically achieves its repression. (1231)

While it could be argued that *American Psycho* precisely corresponds to what the Frankfurt school critic describes as a “marketable specialty,” it is quite the opposite. On the one hand, the novel was never labeled to be “daring”—at the most it was considered to be so because of the controversy surrounding its publication—and on the other, Ellis’ agenda echoes that of Adorno’s, for it is also the purpose of the novel to condemn the ideology of the culture industry, as it brainwashes its subjects by coercing them in a cycle of mindless consumption.

What is to be made, then, of the likes of Rosenblatt who are of the opinion that Ellis’ novel is pure trash (i.e. transgression for transgression’s sake), which implies that they have overlooked and/or rejected its satirical edge and social criticism? Obviously, for these individuals, the novel has clearly transgressed *their* norms, *their* views of what is deemed acceptable to be distributed and circulated, *their* cultural ideologies. “*American Psycho* was a dangerous book,” declared Young (89), yet it was and remains

threatening only to those who see in the novel a mirror-image of themselves and deny it; those who are in favor of a hegemonic social order, of consumer culture and liberal capitalism: right-wing conservatives, wealthy and ruthless C.E.O.s and stock brokers, puritans, and other *beaux-penseurs* of the bourgeoisie. Echoing the reception patterns of the transgressive work, Young also notes that in an effort to suppress their subversive elements books that contain such disturbing material are usually ghettoized by the literary establishment (90). Yet as demonstrated previously, within the western tradition there seems to be a genuine legacy of works that have been labeled as “transgressive” at various time periods. From *Justine* to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Madame Bovary*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to *Ulysses*, *Beloved* to *The Native Son*, all have stirred major controversy during their respective times only to be canonized later, once the very “transgressiveness”—obscenity, license, immorality, or violence—that characterized them and marginalized them was deemed to contain a distinguishable literary quality and redeemable social value. What is even more remarkable is that some of these works are now considered to be the absolute pillars of certain literary trends and pivotal to promoting new critical concepts and social ideas. While popular reception for *American Psycho* was mostly characterized by outrage and indignation due to a gross misinterpretation of the novel’s content, critical and academic circles have been more indulgent and welcoming, perceiving that it contained material that ought to be examined in more depth. Approximately ten years from its date of publication, *American Psycho* has already been the subject of various scholarly articles and has also figured in various class discussions and curricula.

As a satire, *American Psycho* does not escape—in fact it perfectly abides by—the limitations of its genre. Bakhtin observes that the role of the Menippean satire is to be symptomatic, to reveal the defects of the subject it addresses without attempting to correct them (*The Dialogic Imagination* 26), a point that was precisely made by Young earlier regarding Ellis' novel. “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,” the novel concludes, because, quite simply, there is no way out. The novel's cutting brand of criticism has not affected the prevailing ideology of mainstream culture because it is unfeasible. The ideology of consumerism is so deeply engrained in daily life that it is impossible for the public to renounce to it. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, consumer capitalism represents such a totalizing society that *American Psycho* is unlikely to carry deeper consequences than it already has.

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