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**Men Without Limits:
Exploring the subversive potential of hypermasculinity in
transgressive fiction**

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Abstract

(Hyper)masculinity is a universal and ostensibly rewarding concept, but only when performed within cultural limits. If these limits are violated, hypermasculine performances cease to be rewarding and instead begin to subvert the norms they are designed to uphold. Such destabilising performances are found in transgressive fiction, a genre that seeks to contravene cultural norms and taboos via extremely violent or sexual performances. While transgressive fictions often incorporate various physical and sexual behaviours that code conventional representations of masculinity, they derive much of their narrative energy from the subversion of those very conventions.

Using Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) as examples, this thesis will argue that the conjunction of transgression and (hyper)masculinity has the potential to expose and satirise sociocultural structures of meaning. Firstly, this thesis will demonstrate how transgressive texts subvert language by challenging the signifying power of (hyper)masculine speech; secondly, it will discuss the purpose of rituals in affirming masculine norms, and show how transgressive fictions undermine this purpose by stripping ritualistic performances of their legitimising potential; thirdly, it will demonstrate how representations of transgressive hypermasculinity foreground heterosexual masculinity as mimesis while simultaneously exposing its futile suppression of homosocial or conventionally feminine drives. Finally, it will show how transgressive narratives prompt a reading of masculinity as inherently problematic by detaching (hyper)masculine performances from conventional rewards and resolutions.

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Introduction

To talk about masculinity is to talk about a construct, a component within a heteronormative matrix that is primarily expressed through performances and structures of meaning. The variability of this expression problematises any reading of masculinity as an ontological reality, for as Judith Butler asserts, although masculinity affects identification and subjection, it remains only one of the many possibilities that can be embodied by the “I.”¹ That the “I” relies on dramatization and reproduction suggests that masculinity is a social concept rather than an interior reality that exists prior to acts performed.

Masculinity, then, is suspended within a matrix of gendered relations that relies on external systems such as language, clothing, or behaviour to perpetuate norms that distinguish masculinity from femininity. These norms gain efficacy through appropriation and repetition, as masculinity functions as a subculture complete with its own “repertoire of models to which individuals must conform.”² These models are characterised in part by what Ronald Levant argues are observable masculine norms: avoidance of femininity; restricted emotions; sex disconnected from intimacy; pursuit of achievement and status; aggression; and homophobia.³

A number of cultural boundaries are required so that these norms can be used to promote a hegemonic model of masculinity, as opposed to potentially escalating into illegal or dangerous behaviours (homophobic violence or rape, for example). These boundaries take the form of laws and social taboos, and must be

¹ See Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 519-31 (p. 521).

² Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Culture’, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 225-32 (p. 226).

³ See Ronald F. Levant and Gini Kopecky, *Masculinity Reconstructed: Changing the Rules of Manhood—At Work, in Relationships and in Family Life* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 9.

enforced by social institutions. Western literature, Stephen Greenblatt suggests, is “one of the great institutions for the enforcement of cultural boundaries through praise and blame,”⁴ as it rewards conformity and vilifies or satirises individuals who operate outside normative limits. Literature’s regulatory potential is apparent in its conventional representations of masculinity, which encourage performances grounded in cultural and patriarchal norms: male protagonists are dominant and autonomous while their female counterparts are submissive and dependent. Just as satire distorts and exaggerates the characteristics of the individuals to whom they refer, many conventional texts aggrandise masculinity until it resembles “hypermasculinity,” a hyperbolic representation of masculine traits that borders on caricature. A more precise term would be (hyper)masculinity, since this acknowledges the commonality between (or in some cases, the interchangeability of) masculine and hypermasculine conventions, and sees hypermasculinity as existing at the extreme end of a performative spectrum.⁵ Prime examples of (hyper)masculine narratives are Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels and E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy: James Bond and Christian Grey are both aggressive, handsome, independent, and contrasted against docile women who exist to be conquered emotionally and sexually. While violence features in both narratives—James Bond shoots his antagonists and Christian Grey exacts sadistic sexual revenge on his “submissives”—this violence falls within acceptable limits and contributes to conventional plots that lead to rewarding resolutions. James Bond’s violence, after all, is required to save the world from megalomaniacal

⁴ ‘Culture’, p. 226.

⁵ Accordingly, *hypermasculine* will refer to overt or transgressive hypermasculine performances, while *(hyper)masculine* will simultaneously refer to conventionally hypermasculine performances and masculinity as a holistic concept.

villains, and Christian's sadism produces a journey of self-discovery that causes him to abandon his hypersexual lifestyle, marry Ana, and raise a child.

The "rewards" gained from these conventional plots create a necessary alibi for masculine aggression, as masculinity's social value is quickly compromised if its violence fails to bring about positive results. (Hyper)masculine performances, then, must adhere to normative models in order to reaffirm cultural values. But the security of this conservatism relies on (hyper)masculinity's position within clear and established limits, which allow for a gratifying cycle of hypermasculine conflict and eventual return to normativity. Outside these limits exists a provocative cycle of violation and redefinition, and this cycle forms the core of transgression.

In a postmodern secular world, transgression functions as the new sacrilege, or what Foucault regards as a "profanation without object."⁶ In the absence of God, who once operated as the definitive and unattainable limit within a widespread socio-religious culture, the new limit is to be found in human sexuality. Transgression, then, is profane because it challenges the boundaries that give shape to our existence as sexual beings and, by extending those boundaries beyond dialectical reasoning, seeks to redefine the limits of the self. These new limits will themselves eventually be transgressed, resulting in a paradox wherein transgression recomposes the "empty form"⁷ of the limitless limit. Such a problem highlights the interdependence of boundary and transgressive act: without limits, there would be nothing to transgress, and without transgression, new limits would never be discovered. Transgressive performances are not interested in this

⁶ Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Essential Works of Foucault*, ed. by James D. Faubion, 3 vols (New York: The New Press, 1999), ii: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, pp. 69-87 (p. 70).

⁷ 'A Preface to Transgression', p. 70.

theoretical recursivity so much as they are in transgression's relationship with systems of sexuality and social taboo. This is partly because the ostensibly inviolable norms of modern society find their roots in what Foucault labels the Christian model of the "fallen body,"⁸ and thus are antithetical to transgressive sexual performances. But if sexuality designates the limit within the human person, and transgression confirms and transcends this limit, then questioning the parallel of violation and sexuality is essential to any reading of transgression.

Returning to our examples of normative hypermasculinity, it is readily apparent how transgression affects conventionality. If James Bond murdered the women he slept with, or if Christian Grey held Ana against her will, these hypermasculine performances would no longer contribute to rewarding plots but instead would violate and subsequently seek to redefine cultural limits. Because of this, transgression cannot function within conventional narratives. It exists within its own genre, appropriately named "transgressive fiction" by Michael Silverblatt of *The Los Angeles Times*. Although it features "violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body,"⁹ the mere presence of violation is not as significant as its scope and purpose. Thus while Silverblatt's comparison of transgressive fiction with body-centered performance art or the anti-normative "chic underground" provides an important social context, his definition of "true" transgressive literature is far more compelling. "The false transgressor," he explains, "underlines the fantasy element of the experience. The real transgressor will not feed our yearning for fantasy and distance."¹⁰ Here, the

⁸ 'A Preface to Transgression', p. 69.

⁹ Michael Silverblatt, 'Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us? The New Fiction of Transgression', *Los Angeles Times* (August 1993), <http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-01/books/bk-21466_1_young-writers> [accessed 14 September 2015] (para. 20 of 25).

¹⁰ 'Shock Appeal', para. 20 of 25.

violation of transgressive fiction is twofold: protagonists commit acts that infringe upon societal norms, and the effects of these acts transgress the “limits” of conventionality and provoke the reader.

Many canonically transgressive texts express the convergence of masculinity and transgression, such as William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959) or Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). In these novels, violent or sexual deviance forms the stage on which masculinity is performed. Consider, for example, the stylization of Burgess’s characters, who wear jackets with large, exaggerated shoulders, and trousers with designs that both protect and emphasise the genitalia. These adornments are costumes intended for a theatrical performance of aberrant masculinity, a performance transmitted through speech that is both quasi-Shakespearean and virile: “Come and get one in the yarbles,” Alex taunts Billyboy and his gang, “if you have any yarbles, you eunuch jelly, thou.”¹¹ Conversely, while the sexual proclivities of *Naked Lunch*’s Mugwump transgress major taboos of pedophilia and child murder, their performance is also heavily stylised. Contextualised by Burroughs’s lavish narration, his behaviour is not so much a reestablishing of masculinity as it is a performance of transgressive theatre; this is reinforced by the presence of equally transgressive “guests” who observe and admire his profane sexual acts.¹²

While it would be unwise to dismiss *Naked Lunch* and *A Clockwork Orange* as “false” transgressive texts, they do not fit within the parameters of this thesis because their narratives are only tangentially concerned with the relationship between transgression and hypermasculinity. Male sexuality in *Naked Lunch* remains a trope overshadowed by issues of drug use, sadism, and

¹¹ Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 14.

¹² William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, ed. by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2001), p. 64.

pedophilia, while *A Clockwork Orange* stylises masculinity in the service of visually expressing delinquency and gang affiliation. Including these androcentric yet exaggerated transgressive texts in an exploration of the transgression/gender link is helpful but not sufficient. Only texts that push traditional masculinity to its extremes will provide an adequate foundation on which to address the exposure of gender norms and performances through transgressive acts.

Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) all showcase hypermasculine performance and its effects on men and women. Their male protagonists ruminate over personal identity, perpetually conscious of how society sees them as men. This results in a paradox intrinsic to transgressive literature: the protagonists secretly adhere to the violent and sexual characteristics of traditional masculinity while denouncing them in public.¹³ This double bind permeates texts that are almost completely devoid of female agency—texts in which women act as passive objects of male desire and control. Ironically, even as these female characters are commodified and degraded, they form an irreplaceable part of the male-female binary whereby men reclaim “traditional” masculinity by reifying the conceptual opposition between themselves and women (and feminised men).¹⁴ Here transgressive behavior is not the result of socionormative pressure; it is patriarchal hegemony writ large.

¹³ See Kevin Alexander Boon, ‘Men and Nostalgia for Violence: Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*’, *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 11 (2003)
<<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/222636836?accountid=17287>>
[accessed 7 September 2015] (para. 2 of 25).

¹⁴ See Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, ‘Sexual Difference’, in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009), pp. 179-187 (p. 179).

This hegemony is written most affrontingly via the ostensibly normative masculine language of *American Psycho*. Its protagonist, Patrick Bateman, functions as “an exemplar of traditionally male language systems”¹⁵ such as violence, pornography, and commerce, and is both constructed by and performer of a patriarchal fantasy in which women are molded into sexualised objects. Bateman refers to women as “hardbodies” and tells his secretary, Jean, to wear a dress and high heels¹⁶ so that she fits the feminine image promoted by his deeply ingrained hypermasculine ideals. These ideals insulate Bateman not only from the paranoia of possible nonexistence—a paranoia he projects onto women and minorities in order to counter his feelings of illusion and abstraction—but also from pervasive doubts about his own masculinity. No more than a fragile amalgam of hypermasculine elements, Patrick Bateman’s sense of identity articulates two important issues. Firstly, the empowerment of women and minorities threatens him with emasculation; secondly, although his grooming rituals and fixation on high fashion are performative components of a patriarchal system, their potential to be coded as feminine or homosexual exemplifies the fragility of his performance. Bateman turns to representations of traditional masculinity to counteract his destabilised psyche, and outwardly seeks to reify his masculinity through sex and violence.

The Wasp Factory also presents an ostensibly male protagonist beset by internal conflict. Even before Frank Cauldhame learns the truth behind his “little accident,”¹⁷ he often reflects upon his “half-man”¹⁸ status and compensates by

¹⁵ Mark Storey, “‘And as things fell apart’: The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47 (2005), 57-72 (p. 59).

¹⁶ See Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 66-7.

¹⁷ Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Macmillan, 1984; repr. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 20

engaging in various hypermasculine pursuits such as killing animals, staging warzones, and drinking. Like Patrick Bateman's twofold masculine performance, Frank's external behavior is matched by an internal misogyny that, at least in his own mind, further solidifies his status as a man. And just as Bateman seeks not only to *hurt* women but to completely annihilate them, Frank's combative view of the male/female binary leads him to celebrate the nonexistence of the text's few female characters: he recalls the death of Mary Cauldhame, Eric's mother; of his absent mother Agnes he remarks, "I hate her name, the idea of her";¹⁹ and he kills his cousin Esmerelda so as not to give "womankind something of a statistical favour."²⁰ But while Bateman's identity relies on clichéd patriarchal language, Frank's sense of purpose is dependent on ritualistic performance: his use of symbols and totems sustains a sphere of relevance within a society that fails to recognise who he really is. "I keep quiet about not officially existing,"²¹ he admits—a denial of self that both empowers him as an sovereign agent independent of conventional social systems, and disempowers him by reducing his public visibility and keeping him all but confined to the island. In this way, Alexis de Coning argues, Frank represents the abject "monster" lurking at the edges of conformist society.²²

Hidden monstrosity also pervades the unnamed narrator's psychological journey in *Fight Club*. He, a blue-collar product-recall specialist, is feminised by the unexceptional and powerless life he has constructed, a "lovely nest"²³ in

¹⁸ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 109; p. 118.

¹⁹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 66.

²⁰ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 87.

²¹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 51.

²² See Alexis de Coning, 'Sympathizing with a Monster: An Exploration of the Abject "Human Monster" in Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*', *Inter-disciplinary.net* <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/coningpaper.pdf>> [accessed 8 September 2015] (para. 8 of 12).

²³ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996; repr. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 44.

which he is essentially trapped. He attempts to alleviate feelings of emasculation by attending various support groups, one of which, appropriately named “Remaining Men Together,”²⁴ directly addresses the problem of masculine gender anxiety. Unlike Patrick Bateman’s experience in *American Psycho*, the presence of the disenfranchised is a salve, not an irritant, for *Fight Club*’s narrator, serving as a blank slate on which he can project and displace his own anxieties. But this unorthodox psychotherapy eventually calls to the narrator’s mind the decline of archetypal masculinity within a society that demands masculine values while vilifying the violent or oppressive side effects of those values, and this stimulates the conception of Tyler Durden: a “manifestation of idealised masculinity”²⁵ whose influence leads the narrator out of feminization and into patterns of overt hypermasculine performance. At Tyler’s insistence, fight club is initiated in a bar’s parking lot, and Project Mayhem soon follows. Given that Tyler and the narrator are the same person, it is unsurprising that the goal of Tyler’s project is to solve the narrator’s pre-Tyler problem, which is men’s powerlessness and mediocrity. By venting frustration towards corporate America through increasingly destructive attacks on restaurants and museums, Tyler aspires to empower men—especially feminised, passive subjects like the narrator—to “take control of the world”²⁶ and thereby reclaim those hypermasculine elements society has suppressed and maligned.

This masculine ideal is both reified and challenged by *Last Exit to Brooklyn*’s paralleling of bisexuality and hypermasculinity. In “The Queen Is

²⁴ *Fight Club*, p. 18.

²⁵ Kevin Alexander Boon, ‘Men and Nostalgia for Violence’, para.16 of 25.

²⁶ *Fight Club*, p. 122.

Dead,” for example, the homosexual transvestite Georgette²⁷ falls in love with Vinnie, a supposedly heterosexual gang member from lower-class Brooklyn. Vinnie and his gang, both attracted to and repulsed by transvestism, permit themselves to have sadistic sexual liaisons with Georgette’s friends as long as gender roles are strictly enforced: the transvestites giggle and play with their makeup as part of a deliberate performance of stereotypical femininity, while Vinnie’s friends retain their sense of masculinity by using the transvestites as sexual objects. These clichéd gender performances paradoxically reinforce and undermine patriarchal hegemony in a single encounter, since Vinnie and his friends are subjugators only at the expense of creating ostensibly male subjects. In order for them to fulfill their role as masculine penetrators, they must emasculate and penetrate other men, presenting as superficially heterosexual what is actually homosexual. Juxtaposed against this contradiction is the heteronormative position held by Georgette’s brother Arthur, who regards Georgette as a “filthy homosexual.”²⁸ Unlike Vinnie, who enacts a relatively ambivalent performance of masculinity within the homosocial sphere, Arthur stands as an uncompromising hypermasculine voice. Upon finding homosexual pornography in Georgette’s room, he says to her: “Look at these disgusting pictures [...] Men making love to each other [...] Filth. That’s what they are. FILTH!!! Why don’t you die, *Georgie!*”²⁹ Not only does Arthur desire the death of the woman—or in this case, the feminised man—but in using the diminutive masculine form of Georgette’s name, he also denies her the semantic mask necessary for her gender performance.

²⁷ Because Georgette identifies as a woman, for the purposes of this thesis I will refer to her using feminine pronouns.

²⁸ Hubert Selby Jr., *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 38.

²⁹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 40. For the purposes of this thesis, edited or truncated text will be indicated by ellipses within square brackets, whereas authorial ellipses will be presented as they appear in the text.

This is a defensive reaction against transvestism, for as Judith Butler argues, drag's overt performance exposes the imitative structure of hegemonic gender and subverts the normalizing and pathologizing structures of heterosexuality.³⁰

American Psycho, *Fight Club*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Wasp Factory* demonstrate hypermasculinity's extension beyond social limits and into a realm of paradox, revulsion, and satire. It is here that conflict occurs, since conventional (hyper)masculine performances are intended to reward the perpetuation of gender norms whereas the nature of transgression is to violate these norms. This prompts an important question: what does a consideration of transgressive fiction's subversive potential offer to an inquiry focusing on (hyper)masculinity as performance? This thesis will argue that as a destabilizing platform, transgressive fiction refashions hypermasculine performance into a satirical tool that subverts sociocultural structures of meaning such as language, ritual, gender, and narrative. The effect of its satire derives, in part, from a self-reflexivity that exposes hypermasculinity as imitation. This exposure denies the rewards afforded by conventional texts, and enables irreverent performances that challenge our acceptance of masculine norms.

These norms, long rooted in hegemonic patriarchy, sanction certain sexual standpoints which form part of what Jacques Lacan calls the "symbolic order,"³¹ a series of psychic parameters that give shape to the ego. Gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have challenged the legitimacy of these parameters, as they see gender as a fluid performance rather than a fixed label. Accordingly, this thesis will use theories from Butler and Sedgwick to help demonstrate the ways in which transgressive hypermasculinity destabilises

³⁰ See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 125.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the "Purloined Letter", in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 6-50 (p. 7).

hegemonic masculine behaviours such as homophobia and the commodification of women. As these performances are sustained through patriarchal discourse, Chapter 1 will draw from Ferdinand de Saussure's discussions of language and semiotics to explain how transgressive fiction connects hypermasculinity with an abusive language system that perpetuates masculine ideals, ritualises violence, and refashions our reading of the abject. By amalgamating Julia Kristeva's interpretations of the abject with Saussure's signifiers, this chapter will demonstrate how transgressive fiction exposes abjection as a socially propagated consequence of the transgressed limit, an experience "radically excluded"³² from the symbolic order. Institutions fashion our understanding of the abject in order to sustain meaning or cultural values, which is why normative representations of the abject articulate a *breakdown* of meaning between subject and object. On the contrary, transgressive fictions violate the limits of representation, throwing semantic ambiguity into relief in order to undermine normalizing and pathologizing systems.

Paradoxically, transgressive fiction borrows elements from ritual—perhaps one of the culturally omnipresent institutional practices—and uses it to establish a "sacred" value for hypermasculinity. Rite and ritual, whether present in Patrick Bateman's grooming routines, Frank Cauldhame's wasp factory, or in the rules to which the members of Fight Club must adhere, functions as a parody of the "control" effected by conventional institutions and their rituals. If language systems embody written and spoken forms of normalization, ritual is the physical equivalent. From the confessional to the washing of hands, rituals are a political technology of the body that reaffirms cultural values and perpetuates subjection.

³² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

Given this, Chapter 2 will discuss the ways in which (hyper)masculine performances are connected to disturbing or violent rituals, and how this connection undermines the validity of ritually-constructed masculinity.

Just as religio-cultural norms and values are transmitted through ritualistic performance, (hyper)masculinity is shaped and perpetuated by physical acts such as violence, athleticism, and sex. At first glance, aggression and sexuality would seem an obvious reality for hypermasculine protagonists, but these exaggerated performances become problematic when viewed in the light of Eve Kosofsky Segwick's theories surrounding homosocial desire, homosexual panic, and the transactional use of female bodies as intermediaries for male-male relations. That Patrick Bateman has manicures, or that the clandestine meetings in *Fight Club* require groups of half-dressed men to share physical contact, illustrates the ever-present threat of latent homosexuality and femininity within hypermasculine performance. Chapter 3 will explore how transgressive representations not only foreground (hyper)masculinity (and gender itself) as a mimetic performance, but problematise this performance through the insertion of homosocial or conventionally feminine behaviour.

This rejection of conventionality prompts a narratological inquiry, since the rewards gained from conventional fictions depend on our investment in various hegemonic and generic gender conventions—conventions transgressive fictions employ solely for the purpose of subversion. Readers must accept James Bond's hypermasculinity, for example, before they can accept the positive outcomes won by his performance. If he instead appeared as an ambiguous figure held together by a set of shallow and problematic gender tropes, his violent conquests would be disturbing and unsatisfying. This latter scenario is

encountered in many transgressive texts, as they challenge conventionality and offer no resolution to hypermasculine conflicts. Chapter 4 will discuss how transgressive plots encourage a reading of hypermasculinity as an ultimately unfulfilling construct wherein attempts to “wrap up” the plot into a conservative resolution ultimately fail.

Constructs such as narrative, language, ritual, and gender are indispensable in creating meaning and enforcing values. By exploring the ways in which transgressive fictions subvert these cultural tools, this thesis will attempt to illuminate the fragility and artificiality of the (hyper)masculine ideal, as well as its role within equally contrived sociocultural structures of meaning. While all of these structures incorporate some form of spoken or written language, ritual, gender, and narrative share a particular investment in normalising language as well as a specific set of gendering terms that maintain the masculine/feminine binary while subordinating women to men. Accordingly, this thesis will begin by discussing the role of language in affirming (hyper)masculine performances, and its susceptibility to transgressive subversion.

Chapter 1

Semantics Maketh Man: Language and Transgressive Hypermasculinity

It is impossible to interact—and therefore impossible to be assimilated into any normative society or culture—without employing some form of written or verbal communication, making language perhaps the most important tool for constructing and preserving meaning. Consequently, any inquiry which focuses on (hyper)masculinity as social performance must at some point address its dependence on language. Whether present in homophobic slurs, sexual innuendo, jocular colloquialisms, or advertising catchphrases, words have a central role in defining what normative masculinity *is*, and more importantly, what it is *not*.

While drunk and trying to talk to his friend Jamie, *The Wasp Factory*'s Frank Cauldhame contemplates the construction of spoken language: ““I thought very carefully about *words* and how you made them [...] I had to communicate.”¹ Despite his attempts to converse, his drunkenness creates a disjunction between what he believes he is saying and what is actually heard, drawing our attention to the advantages and limitations of language. Although language gives spoken form to ideas and contributes to the codification and normalisation of social structures, its potential for miscommunication or misinterpretation problematises its utility. Can we trust that our words are understood, or that we ourselves are accurately interpreting the many language systems that help construct our lives? Perhaps the quickest answer to these questions is not an answer at all, but rather the realization that, like Frank, we are caught in the verisimilitude of language.

When discussing language, it is helpful to first define what language means. For the purposes of this thesis, language will refer to Saussure's system of

¹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 81.

signs, which distinguishes items or concepts from one another and organises our understanding of the natural world. It will also refer to the communicative actions of speaking and writing that are made possible by this system of differences. This chapter will demonstrate that language is susceptible to exploitation, and as such, is used by institutions to perpetuate social norms. These norms not only uphold the man/woman dichotomy, but also stratify this dichotomy in favour of men. It is worth noting that although gendered language favours hegemonic masculinity, both males and females are subjected by the institutional use of language. Tommaso Milani highlights this subjection in the case of the newborn male who, having been declared a boy, is immediately corralled into the “linguistic pigeonhole of the pronoun ‘he’” and subjected to a set of gender norms that will be enforced by “authorities and institutions such as school, church, family, and the military.”² The designation of “man” or “woman” is born of social and institutional language systems, which demand particular modes of performance and reward conventional performances with further linguistic qualifiers. Men, for example, are considered “macho” if their gender performance exemplifies traditionally masculine qualities, while women are rewarded with terms such as “ladylike” for their conformist performances.

The term *hypermasculinity* is another good example of how language gives shape to our perception of gender performance, as the prefix *hyper* indicates the surpassing of norms into a realm of exaggeration. In this context, the prefix is ostensibly positive (as opposed to the negative connotations surrounding *hyperactive* or *hypersexual*, for instance) since it denotes a performance evocative of idealised masculinity. *Hyper*-masculinity is not synonymous with *excessive* so

² Tommaso Milani, ‘Theorizing Language and Masculinities’, in *Language and Masculinities: Performances, Intersections, Dislocations*, ed. by Tommaso Milani (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 8-33 (p. 10).

much as it is with *superlative*. To be an “ideal” man is to embody qualities that directly contrast the feminine: women are demure and homely, while men are dominant, successful, and virile. These terms reinforce the hegemonic position of men and the subjection of women, and in gaining normative value through cultural appropriation and performance, they establish a dichotomy whereby those who oppose male hegemony are punished, and those who validate it are rewarded with positions of power derived from its dichotomizing language. This is why, as James Messerschmidt suggests, masculine hegemony is not brought about by force, but rather by “discursive persuasion.”³

Transgressive fictions exploit the relationship between (hyper)masculinity and language in order to critique language’s cultural and institutional significance. Because the value of language depends on its capacity to reward gender performances that are socially acceptable while punishing those that are aberrant, transgressive fiction’s rejection of conventionality disconnects language systems from their intended purpose and draws our attention to the ways in which “discursive persuasion” is used (and abused) to create and maintain political subjects. One such convention is what Robin Lakoff terms “women’s language,” wherein words such as “fudge” or “oh dear” are associated with femininity while “fuck” and “oh shit” are perceived as masculine.⁴ That particular words are constituted as either feminine or masculine only furthers the subjection of individuals into traditional gender roles, and, in the case of women, restricts what words can be said in public. Contrarily, transgressive fictions exhibit female characters who speak “like a man”—many of Hubert Selby Jr.’s female

³ James W. Messerschmidt, ‘Engendering Gendered Knowledge: Assessing the Academic Appropriation of Hegemonic Masculinity’, *Men and Masculinities*, 15 (2011), 56-76 (p. 58).

⁴ See Robin Lakoff, ‘Language and Woman’s Place’, *Language in Society*, 2 (1973), 45-80 (p. 50).

characters, for example, use just as much profanity as their masculine counterparts.

As Saussure points out, the value of a sign is produced not by the sign itself but instead by its relationship with other terms in the language system. For example, the term *masculinity* only exists in relation to the terms surrounding it, such as *hypermasculinity* or *femininity*. As the quantity of gendered terms increases, so too does their specificity; *masculinity* would be a vague term, signifying a range of performances, if all other terms related to it were removed. This does not mean, however, that a myriad of gender signifiers produces fixed values. The value of an item in a language system is no more than an arbitrary denomination assigned to an external reality that can never be objectively measured, and as such it is constantly changing. This is why a “dandy” was considered to be a model of masculinity in the 19th century, but is now an effeminizing term.⁵ This indicates a connection between language and culture: as Stephen Greenblatt notes, the language used by any given culture forms part of its “technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform.”⁶

Given Saussure’s definition of value, it is worth noting the way institutions use contrasting terms to bestow positive value onto socially acceptable behaviours. At a basic level, structures of meaning rely on a distinction between *order* and *disorder*, two binary terms that depend on each other for their respective definitions (order is demarcated by what is *not* order). These terms encompass a variety of sociocultural morals and their equivalent deviancies.

⁵ See Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 1.

⁶ ‘Culture’, p. 226.

Within this system, the *abject* could be seen as anything opposed to the “I,”⁷ while the “I” itself is produced by institutional discourse: Julia Kristeva notes that antipathy towards the abject derives from the conditioning influences of “laws, connections, and even structures of meaning.”⁸ In other words, any movement away from the abject and towards identity-affirming structures is based on a Kristevan opposition between the *semiotic*—an instinctual, shapeless, pre-mirror stage—and the paternal *symbolic*, a realm of constructed cultural meaning.

While the symbolic order demands the abjection of those objects or behaviours that signify an undifferentiated state, transgressive fiction embraces the abject and reveals its institutional, pathologising function. Kristeva argues that the “Name of the Father” generates the subjected “I” and, in doing so, determines what is not “I.” The symbolic order encompasses normative, signified objects and behaviours while the abject designates a lack of signification. Just as transgression is both violator and limit-creator, the abjection causes its own paradox: it is “a ‘something’ I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness [...]”⁹ This meaninglessness, in the face of which our signified identities feel disgust and helplessness, is fundamental to transgression’s subversive potential.

Produced by outward signs of language and performance, (hyper)masculinity reflects a social constructivist epistemology: its “reality” derives from the efficacy of its representation and how it is perceived by others. To be (hyper)masculine, then, is to imitate a “set of repeated acts [...] which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of

⁷ See *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

⁸ *Powers of Horror*, p. 10.

⁹ *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

being.”¹⁰ The male subject styles himself so as to give an *appearance* of excessive masculinity, and language, as a part of this stylisation, allows him entrance into the patriarchal order. Conventionally hypermasculine language establishes masculinity by separating it from femininity, and in this way it fashions subjects and stratifies them in a single act—it reflects an institutional expectation for men to display “compulsory” qualities such as heterosexuality, which has “a key political function in maintaining the gender hierarchy that subordinates women to men.”¹¹ Transgressive fictions acknowledge this hierarchy by displaying ostensibly conservative characters who ultimately serve as agents of destabilisation. Their subversion of conventional performances (as they relate to conventional hypermasculinity) is accomplished via two seemingly contradictory violations: in the performance of atypical sexualities such as transvestism and homosexuality; and in pushing hypermasculine language beyond social limits into a pattern of violence intended to defend masculinity against the threat of emasculation. In both cases, the political weight of language is undermined.

Hypermasculine language permeates most interactions in *Fight Club*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *American Psycho*. This language firstly assists in establishing what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls homosocial interaction. In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman and his colleagues compare women’s bodies, arriving at the conclusion that the ideal woman is “a chick who has a little hardbody and who will satisfy all sexual demands [...]”¹² Likewise, Harry in Hubert Selby Jr.’s short story “Strike” likes to tell his work friends fabricated stories about having sex with multiple women, going so far as to tell them “Im

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

¹¹ Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, *Language and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 44-45.

¹² *American Psycho*, p. 91.

strickly a cunt man myself.”¹³ These two examples, along with *Fight Club*’s candid portrayal of sex detached from intimacy and Frank’s homosocial relationship with Jamie in *The Wasp Factory*, satirise what Scott F. Kiesling terms “fuck stories”: hypermasculine discourses shared between men in order to cement homosocial bonds endorse an androcentric hierarchy, and reproduce heterosexual norms.¹⁴

The power of such hypermasculine language derives from the connections it makes between these heterosexual norms and their resultant social rewards. Both *American Psycho* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* ostensibly endorse heteronormativity by using language systems that separate “men” from “faggots,” “queers,” or “fairies,” but this usage only signposts the potential consequences of gendered language. While (hyper)masculine terms signify power, acceptance, and influence—all of which are political rewards—homophobic terms signify emasculation, ostracism, and the threat of AIDS. In this way, language not only creates certain modes of performance but also permits them, reflecting Ferdinand de Saussure’s definition of *langue* as “a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.”¹⁵ Although Saussure argues that both signifiers and signifieds are inherently arbitrary, the strength of hypermasculine discourse derives from presenting heteronormative terms as dualistic and essential. This is so that masculinity can define itself through opposition, acting not as a spectrum but as an isolated sign outside of which lies the feminine.

¹³ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 156.

¹⁴ See Scott F. Kiesling, ‘Playing the Straight Man: Displaying and Maintaining Male Heterosexuality in Discourse’, in *Language & Gender: A Reader*, ed. by Jennifer Coates and Pia Pichler, 2nd edn (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 275-286 (p. 277).

¹⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 9.

Of all the signifiers in this isolated system, none is more dichotomising than the phallus: it not only signifies the “Name of the Father” but also represents the fundamental distinction between men and women, and between “real” men and their effeminate peers. Believing he has lost his penis, Frank Cauldhame refers to himself as a crippled “half-man,” and *Fight Club*’s Bob cries over his removed testicles; here, loss of the phallus is a loss of masculinity and what it signifies. This means that the male subject, banished from the realm of “real” masculinity, is open to those terms commonly used to degrade women: the castrated Bob has “bitch tits,”¹⁶ and Frank’s “unfortunate disability” forces him to urinate “like a bloody woman.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, Bateman and his co-workers make “rude jokes about the size of Tim’s dick,”¹⁸ using the phallus as a literal measurement of masculinity.

These transgressive fictions acknowledge, yet do not legitimise, the rewards that come from propagating hypermasculine language. Rather, they draw attention to the contradictions and dangers of language and connect hypermasculine language to intensely repellent acts by violating the limits of institutional discourse. These texts suggest that masculinising language—intended to unify “men” by pitting them against the feminine—invariably leads to rivalry and division. The yuppie vernacular that separates Bateman and his friends from women and the lower classes, for example, becomes a source of competition when they compare font styles on each other’s business cards.¹⁹ Likewise, the vulgar pub-talk in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* that focuses on “who laid this broad and who

¹⁶ *Fight Club*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 17.

¹⁸ *American Psycho*, p. 39.

¹⁹ See *American Psycho*, pp. 44-45.

laid that one,”²⁰ becomes a tiered pedestal on which individuals are ranked based on the strength of their hypermasculine performances.

In more extreme conjunctions of transgression and discourse, gendered language is connected to violent acts. The secret “codes and languages”²¹ invented by Frank and his brother Eric, for example, are a precursor to the ritualised killing Frank performs: he names his favourite catapult the “Black Destroyer,” and when it breaks during a rabbit hunt he designates the location of its ruination “Black Destroyer Hill.”²² Through the process of naming, Frank establishes himself as the patriarchal creator and determiner of his imagined warzone—his statements are, at least in his own mind, performative utterances that create new realities. Frank acknowledges this, saying that his ritualistic language “[gives] me power, [makes] me part of what I own and where I am.”²³ Reminiscent of Lacan’s Law of the Father and its capacity to label and differentiate, language in *The Wasp Factory* at first appears to encourage, or at least adhere to, male hegemonic practices. This is quickly subverted, however, when Frank’s ceremonial semantics reach a transgressive zenith in his titular Wasp Factory. The Factory connects language to sadistic violence in a way Frank’s war games do not—it is a quasi-mystical machine that symbolises the core of Frank’s transgressive masculinity.

The Factory itself is an old clock face retrofitted with traps that ensnare and kill wasps, all of which Frank ritualises through language: its twelve mechanisms are given proper nouns such as “Boiling Pool,” “Venus Cave,” or “Blade Corridor.”²⁴ While these designations permit some distance between the named object and the authority that names it, thereby allowing Frank to

²⁰ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 12.

²¹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 137.

²² *The Wasp Factory*, p. 36.

²³ *The Wasp Factory*, pp. 63-4.

²⁴ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 122.

participate as voyeur, their signification also implicates him. For example, the contraption he names “Gents” only works if he urinates into it, and in case of the “Fiery Lake” he admits: “it is me who has to press the rod which flicks the lighter which ignites the petrol.”²⁵ While conventional texts might portray language as an impersonal and abstract instrument, *The Wasp Factory*’s transgressive energy grounds language in a mire of intimate violations.

Similarly, Patrick Bateman’s violence towards women in *American Psycho* transgresses the limits imposed by conventional literature and undermines the institutional value of language. Unlike Frank’s in *The Wasp Factory*, however, Bateman’s actions articulate two separate offences: firstly, the obscene imposition of hypermasculine language onto women, and secondly, the destruction of body parts that signify speech. That he uses hypermasculine terms to define women is unsurprising given his total, almost desperate investment in commercial masculinity. His very identity is produced by a cacophony of masculine language systems such as pornography, commerce, and fashion, and his unthinking imitation of these systems means that he cannot choose a restaurant or even “offer an opinion on something without first having read a review of it.”²⁶ This devotion is not without its rewards, and although it would be reasonable to read Bateman’s financial and social successes as an endorsement of patriarchal discourse—on the surface, he appears to benefit from his position in what is clearly a male-dominated workplace—transgression denies such a conservative reading by connecting his hypermasculine language to an inescapable pattern of repulsive acts.

²⁵ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 122.

²⁶ ““And as things fell apart””, p. 61.

The link between language and transgressive violence is first observed in Bateman's fantasies. While in a video store renting his favourite pornographic film *Body Double*, he looks at the woman behind the counter and thinks: "The things I could do to this girl's body with a hammer, the words I could carve into her with an ice pick."²⁷ Two deliberate manipulations of language are at work here. Firstly, the title of his chosen film reflects the imitative nature of his hypermasculine performance—Bateman is no more than a replication, or body double, of the ideal man, and as such is conditioned to behave in a conventionally masculine way. This is reinforced by his admission that he reaches for *Body Double*, a voyeuristic erotic film, "almost by rote, as if I've been programmed."²⁸ Secondly, Ellis emphasises the way pornography, a masculine language system intended to objectify and commodify women, ends up reducing Bateman to an unthinking subject whose gender performance is nothing more than a regurgitation of hypermasculine speech.

Having exposed the so-called "rewards" of gendered discourse, Ellis further detaches (hyper)masculinity from its linguistic base by violating the limits of institutional language. While patriarchal speech is useful in subordinating women to men, it loses efficacy if it is made synonymous with socially abhorrent behaviours such as murder, rape, or torture—behaviours Bateman is compelled to repeat. His desire to carve words into a woman's body conveys perhaps the most detestable conflation of language and transgression, as it takes a primary function of hypermasculine language (ownership of women's bodies) and pushes it beyond conventional limits. Bateman's fantasy is later realised when he murders a young woman and uses her blood to "scrawl, in dripping red letters above the faux-

²⁷ *American Psycho*, p. 112.

²⁸ *American Psycho*, p. 112.

cowhide paneling in the living room, the words I AM BACK...”²⁹ Much like Frank’s act of naming in *The Wasp Factory*, this writing functions as a performative utterance. It describes Bateman’s reality while giving shape to it, affirming his masculinity through desecration of the female body: from “I AM BACK” comes “I AM,” a statement of identity born of transgression. Of course, this only subjects Bateman further by trapping him in a recursive cycle of dissatisfying violence.

While men use language and speech to advance in the symbolic order, the removal of speech (or more specifically the violation of symbolic signifiers for speech) is just as prevalent. For women, the denial of speech is a denial of agency; unsurprisingly, given the binary construction of gender positions, denial of men’s speech only heightens physical gender performance. *American Psycho* sees Bateman bite a woman’s lips off, cut the lips off another, and bake a woman’s jawbone in his oven.³⁰ These tortures literalise female disempowerment, while other texts such as *Last Exit to Brooklyn* tend to sexualise women’s mouths in order to achieve the same effect: oral sex (given by a woman or male transvestite) features prominently, and in “Strike,” Harry tells his wife Mary to “shut-thefuckup or hed raper in the mouth,” to which she responds with “words undefined...”³¹ Here Hubert Selby Jr. presents a linguistic problem, as he connects undefined language to masculinity (Harry’s forceful hypermasculine speech is written phonetically and without punctuation) while also connecting it to femininity (Harry’s wife is also inarticulate).

Denial of speech is the primary method of subjection in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, as its members are told never to reveal their violent

²⁹ *American Psycho*, p. 306.

³⁰ See *American Psycho*, p. 252; p. 304; p. 329.

³¹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 189.

activities to anyone in the outside world. This cardinal rule acts as an institutional limit, reducing the club's all-male members to "space monkeys" who "do the little [jobs they're] trained to do."³² As with *The Wasp Factory* and *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* at first appears to support patriarchal hegemony: Tyler Durden is the patriarch; his followers, instructed not to speak or question, are his political subjects. Under this conventional veneer, however, operates a destabilisation of institutional language wherein the rule of silence is violated by the very person who imposes it—the novel only exists because the narrator, a member of fight club, has decided to break his silence. This, together with the club's rapid growth in numbers (which would be impossible if the rule was actually obeyed), problematises a reading of *Fight Club* as a microcosm of institutional authority since it depicts patriarchal rules as hindrances that need to be sidestepped along the path to progress.

Unlike *American Psycho*, *The Wasp Factory*, or *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Fight Club*'s androcentrism relies very little on language. As its narrator admits, "What happens at fight club doesn't happen in words [...] Fight club isn't about words."³³ Because the novel's brand of hypermasculinity relies on physical violence rather than subordinating terms or other forms of "discursive persuasion,"³⁴ it promotes a contrast between bodily performed masculinity and masculinity constructed through gendered discourse. Institutions such as schools, businesses, or the government—all of which enforce gender roles and assist the perpetuation of traditional masculinity—are seen as subjugators, as a form of political emasculation that prevents men from exercising their violent, primal desires. Tyler Durden's vision has proto-masculinity at its core: it desires a

³² *Fight Club*, p. 12.

³³ *Fight Club*, p. 51.

³⁴ 'Engendering Gendered Knowledge', p. 58.

“prematurely induced dark age”³⁵ where men are liberated from social and financial oppression. Thus, *Fight Club* doesn’t invest in conventional language so much as it exposes the way language emasculates men.

Consider the names of the support groups the narrator attends. “Remaining Men Together” is a support group for survivors of testicular cancer, and as such its male members are physically (and literally) emasculated. Unlike the performative power of Patrick Bateman’s “I AM BACK” or Frank Cauldham’s “Black Destroyer Hill,” the phrase “Remaining Men” has little effect: it cannot produce conventional masculine subjects because it cannot restore phallic signification. Despite its ostensibly affirmative tenor, the phrase nonetheless connotes victimhood, serving as a continual reminder that something vital to masculinity has been lost (a preceding traumatic event is implied by the adjective *remaining*). This, along with the “vague upbeat names”³⁶ of the other support groups, points to the superficial value of language and its inability to produce genuine masculinity. Real men are born of physicality, not terminology, and the positions of corporate “power” (such as those in *American Psycho* or *Last Exit to Brooklyn*’s “Strike”) are depicted as useless and detrimental. The narrator summarises the division between institutional servitude and liberated hypermasculinity while watching a young man fight:

You saw the kid who works in a copy center, a month ago you saw this kid who can’t remember to three-hole-punch an order or put colored slip sheets between the copy packets, but this kid was a god for ten minutes

³⁵ *Fight Club*, p. 125.

³⁶ *Fight Club*, p. 18.

when you saw him kick the air out of an account representative twice his size [...]”³⁷

Fight Club transgresses language not by connecting it to horrific acts (as in the case of *American Psycho*), but by stripping it of its identifying power and making it irrelevant to the performance of hypermasculinity. “Man” is a title that must be earned—it cannot be bestowed, as classifying terms in *Fight Club* are vehemently rejected. As a member of fight club tells the narrator: “You’re not your job. You’re not your family, and you’re not who you tell yourself [...] you’re not your name.”³⁸

Similarly, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*’s lack of punctuation yields ambiguous terms that expose the abstraction of pathologising language. In “The Queen Is Dead,” for example, Georgette argues with her brother Arthur: “Dont touch me you fairy. Dont touch me. Look whos calling someone a fairy. Aint that a laugh. Ha! You freak.”³⁹ In this exchange, Georgette labels her conservative and vehemently heterosexual brother a “fairy,” but the subsequent lack of separated lines or quotation marks makes it unclear who is being termed a “freak.” This ambiguity blurs the lines between normal and abnormal, presenting neither position as inherently natural but rather exposing them as two (of many) possible viewpoints, the validity of which depends on pathologising terminology. Referring back to Saussure’s concept of value, it stands that *normality* cannot exist without *abnormality*: designating every gender position as “normal” would only encourage an institutional relativism in which the term “normal” loses its signifying power.

³⁷ *Fight Club*, pp. 48-9.

³⁸ *Fight Club*, p. 143.

³⁹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 36.

Stripping homophobic slurs and other derogatory terms of their power is *Last Exit to Brooklyn*'s goal. By breaking down language's pathologising effect, it makes homosexuals and heterosexuals equal and sanctions the performance of drag. If any gender position is vilified, it is conventional masculinity: actual and ostensible heterosexuals are portrayed as rapists, thugs, and bigots, whose transgressive crimes shift reader sympathy onto their homosexual male victims. Thus, rather ironically, it is through physical domination that hypermasculinity loses its institutional value. In "Tralala," for example, the titular heroine is tortured and gang-raped by a group of men who, in a moment of over-the-top violence, "'pissed on her jerkedoff on her jammed a broomstick up her snatch...'"⁴⁰ Repulsive transgressions such as these are the face of conventional masculinity in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and as such they depict hypermasculinity as an idea to be feared rather than an ideal to be practiced. This, in turn, challenges the "normalcy" of traditional gender roles insofar as it prompts a reconsideration of whether "normality" is a tangible reality or if it is no more than a term used to pathologise what is actually nonthreatening.

Here, it is worth considering how Saussure's theories apply to abjection. Just as signs are arbitrary concepts that hold no real connection to external reality, so too is the abject—after all, abjection is based on what we perceive, and as Julia Kristeva argues, it is rooted in the symbolic realm. This chapter does not intend to argue that abjection does not exist, but it does intend to address the flexibility of *the abject* as a signifier. Transgressive fictions take what is typically abjected—murder, dismemberment, monsters (including monstrous depictions of

⁴⁰ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 114.

femininity), and other forms of boundary violation—and associate them with identity-reifying performances instead of casting them off as antitheses to the self.

Like any ontological concept, abjection presupposes an “I” that defines itself through a twofold process of association and rejection. This process forms a necessary boundary between *self* and *not-self*, for as Kristeva argues, “how can ‘I’ be without border?”⁴¹ According to Kristeva, whose theories draw from Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, we first practice abjection when we separate from the “natural mansion”⁴² of the mother and enter the symbolic patriarchal realm. This realm, or law of the father, signifies us by providing a structure in which our egos take shape. Because of this, we are inclined to identify with objects and concepts that validate our existence while abjecting anything that signifies our preexistent state. Corpses are a good example of the latter, since they signify “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.”⁴³ A part of us relates to corpses because they were once living bodies, but we are also repulsed by them since they signify our inevitable nonexistence.

While abjection is theoretically reasonable, it is susceptible to institutional abuse because of its relationship with a patriarchal order that normalises and pathologises everything we experience. This is partly due to the function of language: before abjecting “the monster,” for instance, it must be made clear what “monster” signifies. Frankenstein’s creation is a monster because he symbolises “death infecting life,”⁴⁴ but the social consequences of that specific version of monstrosity—ostracism, fear, disgust, and reactionary violence—are also shared by individuals in other texts whose only offence is their position outside the

⁴¹ *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

⁴² *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.

⁴³ *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

symbolic order. *The Wasp Factory*'s Frank Cauldhame is similar to Frankenstein's monster in that he disturbs the natural order and is an aberrant product of his paternal "creator's" experiments.

However, Frank's gender problem⁴⁵ makes him quite different from Frankenstein's male, heterosexual creation: Frank is biologically female, but has been conditioned (through hormone treatments and his father's social experimentation) to believe he is male. Though Frankenstein's monster blurs the boundary between life and death, he is visibly monstrous; Frank's monstrosity, on the other hand, is subtle and consequently more subversive. He not only articulates monstrosity disguised as humanity, but also femininity disguised as masculinity—both of which challenge the symbolic order. Frank's gender fluidity is transgressive partly because it composes a crucial part of the "I" he performs. His sexual deformity drives a paranoid, compensatory performance that pushes him away from the public and out, quite literally, onto the fringes—he spends most of his days on a secluded stretch of beach, freed from social limitations. Language, hypermasculinity, and the abject all play a part in his dualistic existence. On the island, his "I" is constructed by ritualistic terms and excessive masculine violence, while in town he is at a loss for words and must resort to more conventionally masculine behaviours such as drinking at the local pub. Given that Frank is actually *Frances*, his hypermasculinity becomes a struggle to maintain the boundary between "real" men and "real" women, a boundary rooted in institutional language. Frank asserts that "women can give birth and men can kill [...] [men] strike out, push through, thrust and take,"⁴⁶ echoing a

⁴⁵ Part of this problem is deciding which gender pronoun to use when writing about Frank. Because Frank identifies as a man up until the last page of the book, for the purposes of this thesis Frank will be referred to in masculine pronouns.

⁴⁶ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 118.

dichotomising ideology that distinguishes assertive, phallic men from complacent, commodified women.

Frank compromises this very ideology by embodying both roles—as a biological woman he can give birth, and as an institutionally constructed man, he can kill. Thus he signifies the abject, not because of his crimes but because his identity fails to fit within the borders set out by the symbolic order. It is the primary agent of this order, his father, who catalyses Frank’s violent impulses: “to lick my own wound,” Frank says, “I cut them off, reciprocating in my angry innocence the emasculation I could not then fully appreciate [...]”⁴⁷ Here, the patriarchal practice of forced roles (and the language that accompanies them) appears to turn on itself, casting doubt on the validity of institutional terms such as *masculinity*, *femininity*, and *abject*. In this way the Law of the Father becomes the catalyst by which Frank performs a violent, hypermasculine ideal, which is as problematic as it is ironic: the symbolic order ostensibly tethers Frank to a conventional gender role, but this only heightens the presence of the abject as Frank resorts to murder.

If, as Kristeva claims, murder is inherently abject because it draws attention to the fragility of the law,⁴⁸ Patrick Bateman’s murders in *American Psycho* create a fascinating problem since they are a defence against what *he* considers to be abject. Women, homosexuals, and even his male rivals personify his most crushing anxieties about his own sexuality, and thus challenge the boundaries by which he sustains his sense of self. In this way, Bateman embraces the abject instead of expelling it, using socially abhorrent acts such as torture and dismemberment to construct his own perverse symbolic order. This order is

⁴⁷ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

founded on the difference between ambiguous femininity and his own distinct masculinity: he forces his female victims to respond to the invented names he gives them (such as “Christie” and “Tiffany”), and this depersonalisation culminates when he disassembles them into unidentifiable parts. The morning after he kills two prostitutes, he looks down at Tiffany’s body and admits, “I think it’s her even though I’m having a hard time telling the two apart [...]”⁴⁹

By disrupting both our perception of the abject and the conferring power of patriarchal discourse, transgressive fiction challenges our adherence to masculine norms. Institutional hypermasculinity focuses on the subordination of women, the exclusion of homosexuality, and an exaggerated performance of masculine ideals such as power, wealth, and violence. These socially-approved gender roles are indelibly connected to language, which is why the transgressions in *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and *The Wasp Factory* have semantic underpinnings. But while language in conventional texts produces conservative rewards such as the reification of gender identity, transgressive fictions expose the fragility of language as well as its capacity to subjugate individuals. Of course, language lends itself to a similarly political construct—that of ritual and the sacred—and accordingly the next chapter will demonstrate transgressive hypermasculinity’s satirical disruption of ceremonial language and practice.

⁴⁹ *American Psycho*, p. 306.

Chapter 2 Transgressive Ceremonies: Rite, Ritual, and the Sacred

The previous chapter discussed how language, as an institutional tool, is used to subjugate and indoctrinate political subjects. From words used in everyday speech to the terms by which gender and race are classified, all language is imbued with value, and as Ferdinand de Saussure theorises, any given value is produced and affected by surrounding values in the system. Transgressive fictions challenge adherence to these values by disconnecting language from the rewards it produces—instead of confirming conservative gender roles or positions of male hegemony, transgressive language engenders a kind of masculine proselytization that ultimately fails under the weight of its own violence. Most of the male characters in *The Wasp Factory*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are trapped, not liberated, by conventionally hypermasculine language, and these texts throw their entrapment into relief in order to showcase the fragility and danger of institutional language systems.

Perhaps the real danger lies not in the system itself but rather in the extent to which a society invests in the system and perpetuates its values. Institutional structures require followers, and these followers must (ideally) be equally invested. Michael Suk-Young Chwe refers to this as a “coordination problem”¹—not merely a problem of numbers, but also of a commonality that ensures obedience. Just as words are normalised through repetition, the subjecting potential of institutional systems increases only when everyone’s investment is consistent and repetitive. It is worth considering, then, those structures of meaning that require public and performative investment, namely rituals and other forms of

¹ Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 19.

political or social ceremony. The value systems rituals reflect and maintain are similar to Saussure's system insofar as they derive meaning through contrast and similarity: purity, for example, is understood primarily by its opposition to that which is impure.

This makes ritual an effective categorizing tool that articulates cultural values through what Stephen Greenblatt refers to as constraint and mobility.² Rituals are a physical reminder of the boundary between what is allowed and what is forbidden, indicating immediate limitations as well as a larger, intangible construct that legitimates these limitations. Take, for example, the dietary requirements outlined in Leviticus, which prohibit the touching or eating of certain animals. While the rationale behind these limitations is disputed, one might still argue that they codify a particular set of ethical values that rely on a distinction between cleanliness and defilement. As Mary Douglas notes, the concept of defilement acquires concrete meaning only within a "systematic ordering of ideas"³ that juxtaposes clean against unclean and establishes a system of punishment and reward wherein those who adhere to the limitations are rewarded by membership, and those who disobey are rendered unclean (ostracised). The power of this dichotomy is only possible because followers invest in it. As Suk-Young suggests, individuals are more likely to invest in a particular ritual system if they observe others doing the same, and when communal participation fails, so does the authority of the ritual.

This authority increases, however, when the physical performance of a ritual becomes inseparable from the law or rule it signifies. Weddings, coronations, and religious rites of induction, for example, involve performative

² See Greenblatt, 'Culture', p. 225.

³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 51.

utterances that directly alter social reality. Rituals and ritual utterances can thus be seen as instruments of legitimation—systems of signs and symbols that, as Lynn Hunt suggests, “reaffirm the legitimacy of governing.”⁴ Forms of institutional governance such as the media, politics, industry, or religion, rely on pervasive and often public ritual activities to propagate a tangible yet contrived sense of solidarity between members of a particular culture, which Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.”⁵ Television, newspapers, magazines, and social media, by their unceasing coverage and immediate availability, create the illusion of participation in an organic collective. This encourages and affirms ritualistic patterns of living (such as morning newspapers, evening news, weekly periodicals) intended to maintain subjection to a governing body—a body that acts as the symbolic head of a “community in anonymity.”⁶

Social patterning is necessary for ritual to be effective. As with language, rituals can only be assimilated into a given culture by being repeated over time, and they are most effective when merged with sociocultural indicators of identity such as gender, race, or class. Rituals pervade every facet of social interaction and have tremendous bearing on one’s identity, from simple customs like handshakes to solemn actions such as enforced penance or excommunication. In the case of the latter, publicity makes the ritual doubly effective: lynchings in the American South during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, for example, were unambiguous and violent ceremonies that reinforced class, gender, and racial distinctions and reminded those in attendance to follow white patriarchal

⁴ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 54.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn (London: Verso, 1983; repr. London: Verso, 1991), p. 36.

⁶ *Imagined Communities*, p. 36.

boundaries.⁷ This is a valid albeit extraordinary example, as most public rituals—especially those associated with gender—take the form of ostensibly benign social events. Masculinity-affirming rituals such as those performed in bars, on the sports field, during rites of passage, or in the workplace, reinforce social values and, like language, establish a subordinating dichotomy between “real” men and their feminine (or feminised male) counterparts. While such rituals code and uphold conventional masculine identity, this identity is extremely fragile: in light of Judith Butler’s assertion that “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations,”⁸ ritual’s normalizing structure might be seen as a guard against anomalous forms of masculine performance.

Male-dominated athletics, for example, are a form of public ritual that promotes conventional masculinity through the imposition of explicit binaries such as winner/loser, man/woman, and us/them. This is supported by smaller, yet no less legitimizing forms of ceremony such as pre-game rituals, or inspiring speeches in locker rooms. One “follows” a sports team just as one follows a religion, and just as religions have deities, sports teams have famous players whose athletic bodies are paraded as the masculine ideal. This establishes a (hyper)masculine mythos that is itself a boundary, an unequivocal line between conventional and unconventional gender performance. Unlike religious rituals that balance doctrine and action, masculine ritual is inherently orthopraxic, requiring constant public performance. This is because, as Judith Butler says, male

⁷ See Kris DuRocher, ‘Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings’, in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. by Craig Friend (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), pp. 46-64 (p. 47).

⁸ *Bodies That Matter*, p. 125.

heterosexuality is “beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome”⁹ and must ritually exclude those modes of sexuality that threaten it.

Masculine rituals are able to partially alleviate this anxiety because their performance is sacramental: it is through the actions themselves that a man legitimises his investment in conventional gender. The immediate effect of this investment is twofold. Firstly, it symbolically demarcates a sphere of gender normativity, and secondly it grants men a sense of collective identity similar to Anderson’s “imagined communities.” In both secular and religious contexts, rituals surrounding manhood ultimately tie elements of the “sacred” to masculine identity so that the repetition of normative masculine actions becomes not just accepted, but revered. Take, for example, the aforementioned mythos surrounding the locker room or sport field, or the ritualistic intrigue of the “man-cave” or smoking lounge: these spaces act as sanctuaries within which men perform identity-affirming rituals.

The nexus of masculine ritual, identity, and homosexual panic is a primary target for satire within transgressive fiction, and this chapter will argue that *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Fight Club* satirise and subvert ritualistic masculinity by disconnecting ritual acts from the conventional gender norms they represent and legitimise. By doing so, these transgressive texts expose masculine rituals as nothing more than a defensive response to those sexualities which threaten hegemonic male heterosexuality. Like language, gender rituals are only valuable to the construction of conventional masculinity when their effects are constant and obvious—in other words, their performance must affirm the same norms every time, and the reasons for the

⁹ *Bodies That Matter*, p. 125.

affirmation must be evident to those invested in the ritual. This is not the case in transgressive fiction, as its protagonists attempt to invest in masculine rituals only to find them unfulfilling and intensely problematic.

Patrick Bateman, for example, commits to forms of media ritual such as watching the *Patty Winters Show*, consulting his Zagat guide, or writing detailed reviews of new music releases. More importantly, he follows a repetitive cycle of lunches and dinners with his work colleagues which are marked by ritualistic patterns: homophobic slurs, as well as discussions about the Fisher account, women, or drugs, accompany nearly every meal; Patrick regularly orders a J&B on the rocks;¹⁰ and the bill is always split at the end. These micro-rituals play a part in a larger masculine ceremony, one that, by its repetition, validates the group's collective masculine identity by establishing a boundary between them and the underprivileged, female, or homosexual. That most of the social gatherings are only attended by Bateman and his male friends¹¹ suggests that these gatherings function, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might argue, as a form of homosocial interaction. Because the group's conventional masculinity discourages intimacy, they use restaurants and bars as sites of acceptable masculine bonding.

If *American Psycho* were a conservative text, Bateman's investment in social rituals would cultivate male friendships, encourage gender norms, and invariably lead to a conclusion that rewards his conventional masculine performance. The text's transgressive potential, however, places Bateman at odds with both his work colleagues and the social rituals they practice. While having lunch at the Yale Club, McDermott jovially slaps Bateman on the back, to which

¹⁰ See *American Psycho*, p. 9; p. 31; p. 56; p. 79; p. 92; p. 160; p. 202.

¹¹ See *American Psycho*, p. 317, where the group discusses whether or not to exclude women from their dinner plans, and Bateman says adamantly, "No women."

Bateman replies: “Keep touching me like this [...] and you’ll draw back a stump.”¹² He then reflects: “The two of them giggle like idiots [...] completely unaware that I’d cut his hands off, and much more, with pleasure.”¹³ These violent feelings Bateman has towards McDermott—a “friend” he meets for lunch and dinner almost every day—are first made apparent when Bateman and his colleagues enter a nightclub: “I have a knife with a serrated blade,” Bateman considers, “and I’m tempted to gut McDermott with it right here in the entranceway.”¹⁴ Although Bateman invests in the same social rituals as his peers, his self-awareness and transgressive compulsions expose these rituals as contrived masculine camaraderie that, while being publicly imitated, can be privately spurned. The distinction between public and private ritual is particularly relevant when reading transgressive fictions, as many transgressive protagonists publicly imitate normative modes of thinking, speaking, or acting while privately expressing socially deviant behaviors. Additionally, as Jeff Hearn suggests, the public domain is where the self is presented for others, while the private domain is where the self is presented for the self.¹⁵ While both are necessary, the private domain is arguably more central to one’s formation of identity. In *American Psycho*, Bateman’s private rituals are quite different from those he publicly endorses, and can be separated into two dissimilar yet equally problematic performances: firstly, the quasi-ritualistic murders he commits; secondly, his daily grooming and exercise routines.

¹² *American Psycho*, pp. 155-156.

¹³ *American Psycho*, p. 156.

¹⁴ *American Psycho*, p. 52.

¹⁵ See Jeff Hearn, *Men In The Public Eye: the Construction and Deconstruction of Public Men and Public Patriarchies*, ed. by Jeff Hearn, *Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities*, iv (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 85.

The ceremony surrounding Bateman's violent treatment of women articulates, in Bataille terms, an erotic ritual wherein the female body acts as the sacrifice and Bateman acts as the "blood-stained priest."¹⁶ Perhaps the best example of this is when Bateman first brings Christie back to his apartment: after having her clean herself, he takes her and another woman into the bedroom and adorns them with scarves and gloves before having sex. When they later attempt to leave, he holds up various instruments of torture and tells them, "We're not through yet."¹⁷ Bateman's investment in ritualistic hypermasculinity (just like his investment in language) is so highly exaggerated that heterosexual acts form only half of his ritual—in addition to sexual penetration, he requires further symbolic penetration expressed through phallic tools such as pipes, drills, dildos, and knives. Additional to this act are micro-rituals of bathing, dressing, and staging, all of which affirm his control and create a disparity between him, the "sacrificer," and his female victims, who function more like ritual objects than human beings.

As previously discussed, rituals are characterised by the boundaries they represent and enforce. Despite being vaguely ceremonial, Bateman's erotic violence transgresses conventional boundaries and thus challenges conservative ritualistic expressions of (hyper)masculinity. Just as transgression proposes the paradox of the limitless limit, Bateman's rituals simultaneously embody stable boundaries and arbitrary performances—the sex and murder he enjoys follow a recognizable pattern but the nuances of their performance are noticeably haphazard. The ways in which Bateman kills his victims, for example, may form part of a wider ceremony but are themselves purely impulsive. In contrast to his public dinner outings and business meetings that, due to their social value, form

¹⁶ George Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and Taboo* (New York: Walker, 1962), p. 90.

¹⁷ *American Psycho*, p. 176.

an effective “mask of sanity,”¹⁸ Bateman’s private transgressions articulate a slippage of that mask, casting doubt on the efficacy of conventionally masculine rituals as a whole.

Juxtaposing Bateman’s acts of savagery are his daily grooming rituals, which border on obsessive compulsion. While these rituals and the instruments needed to perform them reflect the narcissistic consumerism of 1980s yuppie culture (he brushes his teeth with a faux-tortoise-shell toothbrush),¹⁹ there are elements in his self-care regimen that reflect conventionally feminine habits: he schedules manicures, uses four different types of facial cleanser and five different hair treatments, and blow-dries his hair “to give it body and control [...]”²⁰ Whether Bateman’s grooming suggests a progressive insertion of masculinity into the feminine beauty market, or the assimilation of the feminine into masculine rituals, the effect is the same in that it blurs the boundary between feminine and masculine aesthetics.

If elements from both aesthetics—practical strength and a muscular physique for the masculine and cosmetic beauty for the feminine—are delineated by cultural boundaries, Bateman’s physical routines are a deliberate violation. The routine are conducted at a health club, a ritualistic space in which only heterosexual performances are permissible: he fears that, while stretching, “some faggot is behind me, probably checking out my back, ass, leg muscles,”²¹ and admits to abandoning his personal trainer when “he came on to me last fall.”²² The health club is a place where men can physically (and more importantly, *publicly*) confirm their masculinity by investing in a form of sexual

¹⁸ *American Psycho*, p. 279.

¹⁹ *American Psycho*, p. 26.

²⁰ *American Psycho*, p. 28.

²¹ *American Psycho*, p. 68.

²² *American Psycho*, p. 69.

categorization: according to Bateman's dialogue, in the club one is a man, a faggot, or a hardbody. Bateman's rituals subvert the boundaries these categories articulate, however, since his performance integrates feminine and masculine aesthetics: while he exercises in order to fulfill a masculine ideal, he also applies mousse to his hair and uses a "dab of Clinique Touch-Stick"²³ to treat a facial blemish in the health club bathroom.

The *Wasp Factory*'s Frank Cauldhame also invests in grooming rituals that blur the line between masculine and feminine, and this lack of distinction is accentuated by the physical ambiguity of his gender. His grooming, unlike Bateman's, is solemn rather than egotistical—he explicitly calls his showering a "ritual" and uses the hieratic term "ablutions" to describe the "definite and predetermined pattern"²⁴ of his daily washing. However, perhaps the most intriguing difference between his and Bateman's grooming is their ritualistic function. The purpose of Frank's ceremonial cleansings is made clear by the other rituals he creates, such as his Sacrifice Poles, Wasp Factory, or the sacrosanct weapons he christens with bodily fluids. These objects are not mere symbols of Frank's masculinity, but are a direct substitute for the phallic power he feels he has lost due to the mutilation of his genitalia. Unable to "thrust and take"²⁵ like his male peers, Frank turns to phallic tools and martial rituals in order to perform his own brand of conventional masculinity.

In light of Frank's paranoid obsession over the loss of his genitalia, the ceremony surrounding his daily cleansing takes on a different meaning. Its sequential actions provide the comfort of control and create a safe ritual space where his self-consciousness can be addressed and he can reveal those parts of his

²³ *American Psycho*, p. 68.

²⁴ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 44.

²⁵ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 118.

body that cause him shame: “The shower,” he says, “is the only time in any twenty-four-hour period I take my underpants right off.”²⁶ While this daily ritual is not as gender-affirming as drinking at the local pub or going hunting, it still focuses on stereotypically masculine actions such as shaving, which Frank performs with ceremonial care and with only the finest tools. Of course, the trappings of Frank’s ritual are hardly equal to his reality, and *The Wasp Factory* emphasises this in order to challenge the ostensibly sacramental value of gender rituals.

Frank’s gender performance articulates a tension between the physical and the symbolic, and despite the various hypermasculine instruments and actions it involves, the discovery that he is physically female negates the contrived gender norms he has worked to maintain. His transition from a misogynistic, violent “man” to a woman is unsatisfyingly simple and unquestioned—he accepts the change by saying, “Poor Eric came home to see his brother, only to find...he’s got a sister.”²⁷ While this “resolution” diminishes the text’s subversive potential by attempting to wrap up its transgressive plot in a conservative manner, it also points out the fragility of gender constructs and their capacity for sudden, inexplicable change. If Frank’s father represents the symbolic order, his attempt to manufacture Frank’s gender via hormone therapy reflects the institutional production of gender norms while Frank’s abandonment of masculine ritual exposes and repudiates the artificiality of this production.

Both Patrick Bateman and Frank Cauldhame appear to follow a pattern of public investment and private subversion, a pattern also found in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. A good example is Georgette’s transvestism in “The Queen Is Dead,”

²⁶ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 44.

²⁷ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 184.

since it embodies a sexual ambiguity that must be expelled in order for hegemonic heterosexuality to maintain its authority. But the subversive potential of Georgette's performance is subdued by its own secrecy: when she is stabbed in the leg, her mother and brother try and remove her trousers in order to treat the wound but Georgette struggles against them, not wanting them to see the "Red Spangled G String"²⁸ she is wearing. While her performance of drag is similar to the performance of heterosexual masculinity in that it depends on particular customs of dressing and acting, the secrecy it requires is a direct contrast to public expressions of (normative) gender. This binary of private subversion and overt performance is reversed when Georgette holds a drug-fuelled drag gathering at Goldie's house, and Vinnie and his ostensibly heterosexual friends intrude on the party. Here, Georgette's unguarded transvestism is rewarded by the title of "Queen,"²⁹ whereas Vinnie and his friends, no longer in the public eye, engage in transgressive sexual acts such as homosexual rape.

Like Frank's apparently disposable masculine habits, these mixed gender performances reveal the mutability of gender-affirming rituals and, consequently, their inauthenticity. For example, Vinnie maintains his investment in conventional norms—he refuses a drink from Georgette because "the code forbids drinking from the same glass as a fag"³⁰—but in order to have sex with Georgette's fellow transvestites, he and his friends must perform a fraudulent masculine ritual wherein the sexual act itself is hypermasculine, but both sexual partners are biologically male. Just as Bateman's combining of feminine and masculine aesthetics challenges the consistency of gender rituals, the transgressive sexual acts committed by Vinnie and his friends draw attention to the ways in which

²⁸ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 64.

³⁰ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 57.

rituals are contingent on appearance: Vinnie's friend Harry pulls Lee, a male transvestite, off the couch and says to her, "You wanna look like a broad ya gonna get fucked like one [...]"³¹ This suggests that masculine rituals are not sacramental in nature but rather are imitations of a superficial ideal, one that portrays an image of heterosexuality without producing any actual or measurable ontological effect.

Last Exit to Brooklyn's gender rituals are in a constant state of flux, moving between private/transgressive and public/normative forms of expression. Similar to Georgette and Vinnie's subversive performances, Harry's homosocial rituals in "Strike" negotiate the boundary between hetero- and homosexual performance and accentuate the tension between one's personal and public identity. At work Harry is a union official in charge of a company strike, projecting a conventionally masculine image; at home and at a gay bar called Mary's, he experiences a dissonance between his unshakeable homosexual impulses and the insincere masculine show he puts on for his heterosexual colleagues. His experience reflects the tension that exists among working men: a tension "constructed on one side by conflicting social demands and on the other by conflicting personal desires."³²

In order to conform to societal expectations and alleviate his own homosexual panic, Harry invests in the homosocial ritual of drinking beer with his fellow workers, which allows him the fleeting sensation of masculinity: at the bar he "[listens] to their jokes, their stories of dames fucked, following each story

³¹ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 71.

³² Richard L. Ochberg, 'The Male Career Code and the Ideology of Role', in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. by Harry Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 173-92 (p. 174).

with one of his own.”³³ But both his homophobic slurs and repeated assertions that he is a virile heterosexual (which are evocative of conventional gender’s desperate reiterations) signpost the fragility of his performance—a performance that turns to hypermasculine behaviours for support. Confronted by “the thrill and excitement”³⁴ he feels at seeing male transvestites in Mary’s, he counters with fantasies of dominance and phallic violence, imagining his wife “being split in two with a large cock that turned into an enormous barbed pole.”³⁵ This exaggerated imagery reduces his investment in masculine rituals to a phallic delusion, a symbolic yet empty show that provides no respite for his repressed sexual impulses and contests the authority that constructed them. This is perhaps why Hubert Selby Jr. begins every short story in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* with bible verses—they articulate a warning, a boundary set by institutional authority, one that will only be subverted and ultimately rejected by the end of each narrative.

The injection of the sacred into what would otherwise be secular cultural mores is an effective strategy—weddings and socio-religious traditions surrounding sex and purity are obvious examples—and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is certainly aware of this: some of the strongest boundaries around sex and identity are bolstered by the classification of behaviours as sacred or profane. The preface to “The Queen Is Dead,” from Genesis 1:27, asserts that “God created man in his own image [...] male and female created he them.”³⁶ Here gender takes on a sacred value, removed from pure ontology and placed into a theological construct that forbids any kind of profanation. Investment in this definition of human sexuality regards transvestism as sinful and injurious. But transgressive fictions,

³³ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 127.

³⁴ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 188.

³⁵ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 193.

³⁶ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 21.

inherently driven to violate and redefine those limits that construct our understanding, often satirise those rules and routines that construct “the sacred” in order to undermine institutional legitimacy.

Possibly the most overt example of such satire is Chuck Palahniuk’s treatment of ritualistic performance in *Flight Club*, as he weaves ceremonial elements into a narrative that is as iconoclastic as it is anticapitalist. Religion is associated with false identity, reflecting an almost Foucauldian critique of sexuality rendered through discourse: “Remaining Men Together,” for example, which takes place in the basement of Trinity Episcopal Church,³⁷ is a support group for survivors of testicular cancer that ostensibly preserves masculinity through collective discussion. At first the group’s ritualistic structure—which always ends in cathartic personal contact—appears to solve the narrator’s sleep disorder, giving him a newfound sense of purpose. This quickly dissipates into dissatisfaction and emptiness, and is later replaced by Tyler Durden’s own brand of physical therapy. By this process *Fight Club* reveals three spheres of ritualistic masculine performance: the aesthetic sphere of male bodybuilding, which Bob describes as a form of bleak and mechanical objectification; the institutional sphere articulated by support groups, careers, and the narrator’s bland consumerism, all of which represent a form of submissive, culturally appropriate masculinity; and the physical sphere of fight club, intended to “save” men from what Alex Tuss calls the “serene surface of masculine success.”³⁸

While the first two spheres embody nonviolent, socially acceptable modes of masculine performance, fight club aims to return to a hyperphysical and

³⁷ See *Fight Club*, p. 18.

³⁸ Alex Tuss, ‘Masculine Identity and Success: A Critical Analysis of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*’, *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 12 (2004), para. 2 of 17.

aggressive masculinity. It sees aesthetic and institutional forms of masculinity as ultimately feminizing—Bob’s bodybuilding leads to physical emasculation, while the narrator’s mundane job and attachment to material possessions makes him a “slave to [his] nesting instinct,”³⁹ surrounded by domesticated, feminised men “who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, [but] now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.”⁴⁰ Both spheres construct an illusion of manhood that only physical violence can dispel. In order to challenge those ingrained patterns of daily living that subject men to feminization, Tyler’s fight club forms its own set of rituals: not only does it have an initiation process whereby potential members are refused entry as a test of their resolve, but it also sets up a secular yet cultish system involving clandestine meetings, mandatory secrecy for its members, and orders that must be unequivocally obeyed.

Though fight club’s structure is but a satirical imitation of religious protocols, it asserts the potential for ontological change: as the narrator says, “who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world.”⁴¹ If the institutional sphere is filled with “men raised by women” and the aesthetic with “guys trying to look like men,”⁴² fight club is a place where feminised, superficially masculine men can regain their sense of manhood by divesting themselves of public performance. As with *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* explores the tension between public and private gender identity, ultimately rejecting public forms in favour of a private, notionally primordial hypermasculinity. While this appears to make fight club a site of masculine emancipation, its imitation of ritual presents a logical problem: if

³⁹ *Fight Club*, p. 43.

⁴⁰ *Fight Club*, p. 43.

⁴¹ *Fight Club*, p. 49.

⁴² *Fight Club*, p. 50.

members are not defined by institutional validators such as their job, their financial status, or their name, neither should they be defined by the club's ritualistic structure. This is why ultimately, and perhaps deliberately, fight club's cohesion falls apart under the weight of its own anarchistic humanism and forces the narrator to "kill" his hypermasculine alter ego.

By ending Tyler Durden's chaotic reign, the narrator enacts a return to order and illustrates the Foucauldian lesson "that there is no escaping from power, that it is always-already present, constituting that very thing which one attempts to counter it with."⁴³ Rituals (and their subjecting influence) cannot be overcome by an opposing set of rituals, and fight club's investment in ceremony—however lawless it appears—must inevitably return to those institutional forms that govern it and give it shape. Its shirtless fistfights seem cathartic and liberated at first glance, but when ceremony and hierarchy are introduced, fight club becomes just another structure in which, as Foucault argues, the body remains a site of regulation. The club's problematic relationship with anarchy and order is summarised at the end of the novel, when the narrator wakes up in a hospital bed surrounded by fight club members who "look forward"⁴⁴ to continuing Tyler's work. The members are working in the hospital as orderlies and janitors—enmeshed within institutional life even as they plot its downfall—while the narrator, having experienced firsthand the disastrous consequences of insurgence, is now a patient in a hospital, a prodigal son returned to institutional subjection. Just as Patrick Bateman performs transgressive sexual acts in order to escape the banality of conventional existence, only to find that such behaviour "is not an

⁴³ Michel Foucault, 'Objective', in *The History of Sexuality*, 1st American edn, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), i: *An Introduction*, pp. 81-91 (p. 82).

⁴⁴ *Fight Club*, p. 208.

exit,”⁴⁵ *Fight Club*’s narrator is caught in a reiterative pattern of rebellion and return that will never be able to emancipate him from political power relations.

For *Fight Club* and other transgressive texts, futile repetition is the only viable “conclusion” that can be reached, precisely because transgression is not a definitive act: if a limit is violated, that violation delineates a new limit that must also be transgressed. In this way, breaking free of gender norms and the rituals that construct them becomes a Sisyphean task. Patrick Bateman, for example, longs to be punished for the murders he commits, since such punishment would constitute an acknowledgment of his hypermasculine identity. On the contrary, his crimes are never recognised and his identity blurs into those of his colleagues, as he is constantly mistaken for Marcus Halberstam, “McCloy,” “Davis,”⁴⁶ and other nondescript Wall Street yuppies. Likewise, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*’s Georgette attempts to defy conventional gender norms by dressing like a woman, but her performance still embodies a certain ritualistic flair that, while flaunted in private, makes her paranoid and ashamed in public. In both cases there can be no resolution *except* for repetition, since Bateman’s and Georgette’s performances borrow elements from what is already a reiterative practice.

Although *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Fight Club* cannot release their protagonists from institutional authority, such rescue is extraneous to their subversive goal—what matters is the *violation* of ritual boundaries, not their obliteration. Furthermore, the destabilization of public rituals by the private domain is equally important, since the public domain is where gender norms, including those that define conventional masculinity, are perpetuated. While organizations and the rituals that accompany them “construct

⁴⁵ *American Psycho*, p. 399.

⁴⁶ See *American Psycho*, p. 89; p. 182; p. 387.

and are dominantly constructed by public men and public masculinities,”⁴⁷ transgressive fictions highlight private expressions of masculinity in order to critique the efficacy of public performance. As this chapter has endeavoured to show, public masculinity is subverted by private transgression: while the men in *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Fight Club* superficially adhere to socially acceptable forms of masculinity, their fascination with and inevitable performance of deviant sexualities suggests that the cycle of rebellion and return works both ways. Institutional rituals construct limits around gender and sexuality, but these limits are not immutable.

⁴⁷ *Men In The Public Eye*, p. 140.

Chapter 3

The Masculine Veneer: Subversive Gender and Homosexual Panic

Examining the capacity of rituals to fashion and maintain cultural structures of meaning is an appropriate precursor to a discussion of gender, since gender performances and ritual acts are comparable both in function and social ubiquity. Both are developed and legitimated within hegemonic institutions and are indelibly rooted in our daily interactions and our expressions of personal identity. More specifically, both involve a public element: just as rituals are doubly effective in public, so too do gender stereotypes reduce individuals to “types” and thus make “the invisible both plausible and public.”¹ If ritual and gender can be visualised as overlapping categories, the appropriation of boundaries is perhaps their most pertinent intersection.

While rituals themselves can be boundary enforcing, such as excommunication or cleansing rites, ritualistic institutions use boundaries to sustain dichotomous concepts such as pure/impure or sacred/profane, or to reinforce ecclesiastical (and often patriarchal) hierarchies. Likewise, constructing and perpetuating conventional gender codes demands a set of boundaries and social taboos that encourage normative performances while deterring nonconformity. While many gender norms are positive—a man is able to prove his masculinity by acting in culturally appropriate ways—these norms usually have a negative counterpart that prohibits certain performative actions. For example, while masculine stereotypes assert that a “real” man is emotionally strong, this assertion presumes a number of restrictions: a “real” man does *not* cry, is *not allowed* to be overly affectionate, is *never* weak.

¹ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 6.

These permissions and prohibitions endorse conventional masculinity as the ideal, and in doing so they maintain hegemonic masculinity's cultural dominance. The concept of *hegemony* is worth noting here. R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy,”² adding, “it is the successful claim to authority [...] that is the mark of hegemony.”³ Just as the governing power of religious institutions is produced and validated through ritual, patriarchal hegemony persists because of the performed relationship between male-dominated institutional powers (such as corporations or the government) and a specific set of gender ideals. These ideals lend themselves to the symbolic order by implying, among other things, that gender is fundamentally binary. Gender stereotypes—men are dominant and sports-oriented while women are submissive and wear dresses, for example—are so entrenched in our perception of gender performance that they often serve as social cues, but while they “might be reliable guides to a person's sex [...] they work purely by convention.”⁴ As Foucault might argue, these conventions assist a technology of control that is also a technology of *distinction*, a multiplicity of institutional powers that work to differentiate homo- and heterosexual performance.

This twofold practice of defining and enforcing gender norms preserves a masculine hierarchy: hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic not only because it defines what masculinity is and is not, but also because it promotes its definitions as normative and imposes them on society. Facets of this definition, such as

² R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 77.

³ *Masculinities*, p. 77.

⁴ Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell, *Men in Perspective: Power, Practice, and Identity* (London: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 15.

“obligatory heterosexuality”⁵ and the stereotype of the working man or “provider,” not only dichotomise gender but stratify it, propagating a prohibitive and unequal model of gender wherein women are subordinated to men economically, politically, and sexually. While the suppression of women is undeniable and remains a significant issue both socially and theoretically, this chapter is interested in the ways in which the hegemonic model denigrates and suppresses other men, particularly (and most commonly) homosexual men.

Many terms have been used to describe the spectrum of hostile responses towards homosexuality, including *homophobia*, *homosexual panic*, or what Eric Anderson terms *homohysteria*.⁶ While each term expresses a slightly different response—homophobia can be taken to imply a wide range of anti-gay behaviours or sentiments while homosexual panic is more acute and has been used as a legal defence—they all articulate a defensive reaction against what Ron Becker calls the “socially stigmatized specter of homosexuality.”⁷ This reaction is not against homosexual individuals themselves as much as it is against what homosexuality signifies, which is the violation of the boundaries that allow hegemonic masculinity to flourish: as Judith Butler explains, homosexuality, drag, and other unconventional sexual performances represent “that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to reproduce itself.”⁸ This exclusion takes the form of sexual mores and operates via the various cultural and institutional boundaries through which gender norms are imposed. Because homosexuality challenges these norms by blurring the line between what is

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Thirtieth Anniversary edn (1964; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 3.

⁶ See Eric Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 84.

⁷ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 17.

⁸ *Bodies That Matter*, p. 125.

considered “feminine” or “masculine,” it must be suppressed through homophobic acts. R.W. Connell argues that “gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is expelled from hegemonic masculinity,” adding that homophobic violence is, in part, “used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions.”⁹

The psychologist George Weinberg coined the term *homophobia* in 1967, defining it as an “irrational condemnation of homosexuals” resulting in “violence, deprivation, and separation.”¹⁰ Of the three results Weinberg describes, separation is perhaps the most significant since it articulates a process of eviction similar to abjection, which is also concerned with preserving the patriarchal symbolic order. Examining the history of homophobia is far easier than determining its origin, as attitudes towards sex and gender depend on a variety of cultural factors and transform not in distinct stages, but through various social drives (such as the American gay rights movement). For example, conventional masculinity in Greek and Roman cultures *included* homosexual behaviour, which was socially acceptable so long as it “conformed to current images of the ‘male’ (active) role in sex play.”¹¹ This is quite different from the current hegemonic gender model, which views homosexuality as a countertype to “true” masculinity. And although Alan Bray names two specific social occurrences around the time of the Restoration—the rise of a gay subculture and the gradual formation of a homophobic ideology—as having a profound effect on the way society engaged

⁹ *Masculinities*, p. 78; p. 83.

¹⁰ George Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. vii.

¹¹ David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 154.

with homosexuality and homosociality, these events express a gradual, not instantaneous, social shift.¹²

Alan Bray also suggests that while seventeenth-century English society condemned homosexuality through “anathematic theological terms,” these terms were “difficult for people to apply to acts they ordinarily performed and perceived.”¹³ It was the increased visibility of homosexuals and their performances, including their “clothes, gestures, language, particular buildings and particular public places,”¹⁴ that allowed people to direct their homophobia towards a specific subculture. This, in turn, provoked a number of violent pogroms against gay men and the molly houses they frequented. The choice of the pogrom as a homophobic *modus operandi* is rather interesting if not problematic, Bray notes, for although homosexuality was regarded as a pervasive and undesirable practice that needed to be expunged from society, the pogroms were selective and inefficient: they “restricted the spread of homosexuality at the same time as they secured its presence.”¹⁵ The relationship between gay culture and its homophobic oppressors could be described as a dissonant yet inevitable cohabitation, a cycle of suppression and growth that, ironically, only further solidified homosexuality both as a culture and as a movement.

This fear of the “visible” homosexual, which continued well on into the late nineteenth century,¹⁶ illustrates male hegemony’s manipulation of (and dependence on) forms of public performance. Sex and gender ambiguity, personified by the homosexual and the transvestite, threatened the hegemonic

¹² While the full chronological scope of this gradual shift is certainly worth discussing, the constraints of this thesis require a more condensed summary.

¹³ *Between Men*, p. 83.

¹⁴ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1982), p. 92.

¹⁵ *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, p. 102.

¹⁶ *The Image of Man*, p. 91.

model and thus elicited a reorienting of the body towards stereotypically masculine forms. Eric Anderson points out a fascinating relationship between American society's increasing awareness of homosexuality around the 1920s and a drastic change in the way men posed in sports photos. Because men were becoming increasingly conscious of homosexuality, they began to "pry intimacy away from fraternal bonding," afraid that they would be "falsely homosexualized by their behaviors."¹⁷ These internal fears translated into contrived public displays of conventional masculinity: sports photographs that once showed "athletes hugging [and] laying their heads in each other's laps"¹⁸ now displayed impassive rows of men, arms folded across their chests.

The pressure for men to *appear* masculine by exhibiting heteronormative behaviours says much about the mimetic nature of hegemonic masculinity, and transgressive fiction subverts this superficiality in order to challenge established social attitudes towards homosexuality and gender. *American Psycho*, *The Wasp Factory*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and *Fight Club* all involve (hyper)masculine protagonists whose exceedingly stereotypical gender expressions are destabilised by homosexual nuances. By drawing attention to the existence of homosexual desire within ostensibly heterosexual performance, these texts transgress (and thus make visible) the boundaries that constitute our perception and public expression of gender—boundaries which separate masculine from feminine and, more specifically, hegemonic masculine performances from what could be seen as an effeminate or "lesser" masculinity. Like transgression's redefining of the limitless limit, this violation of hegemonic boundaries forces a reconsideration of sex and gender and the forms they take. While hegemonic masculinity asserts that

¹⁷ *Inclusive Masculinity*, p. 82.

¹⁸ *Inclusive Masculinity*, p. 82.

homosexuality is both pervasive and contrary to normative sexual expression, these texts display (hyper)masculine performances as embodying a range of sexual possibilities, rejecting the hegemonic binary model in favour of a sex/gender spectrum.

Of the texts discussed, perhaps the best reflection of hegemonic authority and contrived gender is *The Wasp Factory*, as it places Frank Cauldhame in an emotionally and geographically suppressive environment ruled over by his father, the patriarch. Ian Banks's use of confined space—an island, a small town, and a house—for Frank's stomping grounds illustrates Frank's sense of being limited by his "disability," as well as reflecting a kind of "separate sphere" ideology similar to that which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹ Frank spends time in the loft, where his father cannot climb; his father has his study, which Frank is forbidden to enter. Thus while Frank is allowed to roam the island and go into town, he is still bound to his home and its subtle inflections of dominance and control: his father's study, which holds the truth about Frank's real sex, is always locked; Frank's father forces him to know the measurements of every item and structure in the house; his father withholds his personal information (even his age) from Frank, despite asserting intimate knowledge of Frank's bodily processes, telling him, "I always know how much [alcohol] you've [drunk] from your farts."²⁰ Frank comes to the conclusion that "these little bits of bogus power enable him to think he is in control of what he sees as the correct father-son relationship."²¹ Ironically, by saying this Frank has already bought into

¹⁹ Deborah L. Rotman, 'Separate Spheres? Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity', *Current Anthropology*, 47 (2006), 666-674 (p. 666).

²⁰ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 55.

²¹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 16.

the fabricated gender model his father has set for him, seeing himself as a “son” only because he has been told he is male.

Although it is possible to read Frank’s relationship with his father as a binary opposition between dominated subject and hegemonic oppressor, *The Wasp Factory*’s transgressive focus challenges this assumption by portraying Frank’s father as a clichéd patriarch who himself does not embody the masculine ideal, despite instilling traditional gender values in his child. He has a “delicate face, like a woman’s,”²² and performs conventionally maternal tasks such as serving Frank dinner and reminding him to wash his hands. Most importantly he is physically weak, requires a cane to walk, and spends most of his time at home. This rejects a strict patriarch/subject power binary since his sphere is much smaller than Frank’s—while his son is able to roam the island and go into town, he himself is all but resigned to domesticity.

While the text’s locus of hegemonic indoctrination is undoubtedly the Cauldhame household, Frank’s understanding of gender as binary also derives from external social sources. He asserts that women “cannot withstand really major things happening to them,” and claims he knows this from “watching hundreds—maybe thousands—of television programmes.”²³ Having “learned” from the media that emotional fragility partly constitutes femininity, he conceives aggression as its masculine counterpart: “Women can give birth and men can kill. We—I consider myself an honorary man—are the harder sex.”²⁴ To Frank, the most significant determinant of masculinity (and in fact the very thing that separates men from women) is having a penis. Believing he has been castrated, he no longer considers himself a man, and is only an “honorary man” by virtue of

²² *The Wasp Factory*, p. 10.

²³ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 147.

²⁴ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 118.

hypermasculine behaviours that embody the masculine ideal. His violent amusements are nothing more than a masculine veneer that smothers the truth of his womanhood, and though he admits that his “greatest enemies are Women and the Sea,”²⁵ behind his *suppression* of women is the *repression* of femininity itself. Women are an external problem while femininity threatens to erode the very identity he has worked so hard to fabricate, which is perhaps why Frank uses “the woman” to mean *feminine*, and the words *feminine* and *femininity* are never used in the text.

The Wasp Factory frequently indicates Frank’s dependence on an exaggerated gender binary. His assertion that Mrs. Clamp, the family cleaner, is “sexless the way the very old and the very young are” illustrates his support of a boundary that extends not only between sexual and not-sexual, but also between masculine and feminine. Instead of seeing this boundary as constructed and upheld by performative gender norms, Frank believes it to be the *constructor*, producing clichéd subjects such as the delicate, maternal woman and the violent, protective man. In his mind, the breakdown of the boundary is a breakdown of the self: of his insane brother Eric, he thinks, “Eric was the victim of a self with just a little too much of the woman in it [...] he thought too much like a woman.”²⁶ First-time readers of the text will not be able to appreciate the dramatic irony in Frank’s words—he is speaking them *as* a woman—but his vehement insistence that women and men exhibit completely separate modes of performance suggests that his own hypermasculine performance is not naturally produced, but imitated.

Also challenging Frank’s ostensibly masculine identity is the bond he shares with his best friend Jamie, who is a dwarf. When they both go dancing at

²⁵ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 43.

²⁶ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 148.

the Cauldhame Arms, Frank reveals, “I don’t mind dancing with girls *when it’s for Jamie*, though one time with one tall lassie he wanted us *both* to go outside so he could kiss her.”²⁷ Though Jamie uses Frank for his height (he climbs onto his shoulders), his idea that Frank should be a literal foundation for his romantic endeavours hints that their friendship may be more homosexual than platonic. Frank’s ambivalent sexuality—he is biologically female but acts like a man—certainly allows room to refute a purely homosexual reading of their friendship, but it is worth noting that throughout the text he only interacts with other women when he is with Jamie. When women *do* appear in the text, they act as intermediaries between Frank and Jamie, and while Frank describes Jamie as “the only person I’d call a friend,”²⁸ Frank despises the female body, refusing to help Jamie kiss the girl at the Cauldhame Arms because “the thought of her tits pressed up against my face nearly made me throw up.”²⁹

The Wasp Factory’s suggestion that a resolutely hegemonic individual might engage in a homosexual relationship is hardly unique, considering the numerous examples of social and literary homosociality Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides in *Between Men*. By linking hetero- and homosexual discourse via a social-sexual spectrum of male desire, she draws attention to the existence of homosociality within ostensibly heterosexual society and the way masculine hegemony forces male-male desire to set itself “firmly within a structure of institutionalized social relations that are carried out via women.”³⁰ Of the many ways homosocial desire is expressed, perhaps the most pertinent to transgressive fiction is erotic rivalry, as it focuses on what Sedgwick calls the “fantasy energies

²⁷ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 76 (emphasis added).

²⁸ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 15.

²⁹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 76.

³⁰ *Between Men*, p. 35.

of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence.”³¹ In an erotic triangle,³² two Lovers (most often male) contend for the affections of a Beloved, and the desire between all three is equivalent: as Sedgwick argues, “the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful.”³³

Fight Club offers a transgressive alternative to the traditional erotic triangle, or as the narrator plainly states, “We have sort of a triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me.”³⁴ At first glance the triangle appears problematic since Tyler doesn’t really exist, meaning that the narrator wants Tyler (in his mind) *and* Marla (in reality). But if Tyler Durden personifies the masculine ideal—a man liberated from feminizing consumerism and returned to primal physicality—he is an object of desire for *every* man, including the narrator. In this way, the narrator’s desire is more mimetic than homosocial: in Girardian terms, his envy of the masculine paragon literalises a “privileged relationship” between himself and his “desired *something*.”³⁵

Fight Club concentrates on this desire in order to draw attention to hegemonic masculinity’s structural problem: homosocial stratification of patriarchal institutions invariably creates social spheres that are solely occupied by men—spheres pervaded by mimetic and homosocial desires that must be violently suppressed. If the narrator’s desire for stereotypical manhood translates into a desire for Tyler, the fight club constructed out of their homosocial bond becomes a channel for physical contact, and the text’s transgressive energy targets

³¹ *Between Men*, p. 162.

³² Sedgwick’s concept of an erotic triangle borrows heavily from René Girard, though her understanding of power within the triangle relates more to the work of Jacques Lacan. Whereas Girard and Sigmund Freud see the triangle as symmetrical (unaffected by gender), Lacan and Sedgwick see an asymmetry of gender in the triangle, articulated by a connection between power and the phallus. See *Between Men*, pp. 23-4.

³³ *Between Men*, p. 21.

³⁴ *Fight Club*, p. 14.

³⁵ René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*, Carthage reprint edn (1991; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4 (original emphasis).

the homosexual nuances lying beneath the surface of this hypermasculine veneer. When the narrator tries to shut down fight club, for example, the other members appear to punish him with castration. “A hand slips between my legs and gropes for me,” he says. “A rough warm hand wraps around the base of you [...] An arm wraps around your chest. Therapeutic physical contact. Hug time.”³⁶ Here, the text traverses the boundary between patriarchal phallocentrism and homoerotic imagery, linking the phallus to one’s identity³⁷ while using it as a focal point for intimacy among men.

By drawing attention to these quasi-homosexual acts, *Fight Club* forces a reexamination of the hegemonic model and the cognitive dissonance it produces—men are encouraged to participate in male-dominated social spheres and activities, but must simultaneously suppress any homosexual desires that result from them. Because this suppression cannot outwardly prove one’s masculinity, violence and homophobia (and often a combination of both) become the means by which gender anxiety and fear of emasculation are expelled. Femininity and homosexuality, as well as the objects that signify them, must also be expelled, and this is seen throughout the text: the narrator vehemently states, “I’m not cross-dressing, and I’m not putting pills up my ass,”³⁸ he jokes about vibrating dildos in airport luggage, and homosexual men are associated with sick and dying children.

In what is perhaps the text’s most acute moment of homosexual panic, Tyler notices Marla’s dildo on the dresser and imagines it being injection-molded alongside Barbie dolls. He stares at it until Marla tells him, “Don’t be afraid. It’s

³⁶ *Fight Club*, pp. 190-1.

³⁷ The narrator often uses personal pronouns to designate the penis, such as when he describes Tyler urinating into a bowl of soup: “Tyler starts to take *himself* out and says, ‘Don’t look at me, or I can’t go.’” See *Fight Club*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Fight Club*, p. 182.

not a threat to you.”³⁹ To Tyler, the dildo signifies femininity as well as the possibility of masculine penetration, and if conventional sex is framed by phallogentric boundaries insofar as it allows men *to penetrate* but not to *be penetrated*, Tyler’s fear of the dildo is a fear of the boundary transgressed: of being sexually emasculated, robbed of his identity, and marked as a “lesser man.” The narrator articulates this fear through Tyler, reflecting conventional masculinity’s propensity to channel homosexual panic and gender anxiety through physicality and violence. *Fight Club* thus highlights the flaw of using imitation as defence: the club members imitate the narrator, who imitates Tyler, who imitates a masculine ideal, but this ideal can never fully alleviate the anxieties underpinning their hegemonic heterosexuality.

American Psycho also exposes masculinity as imitative—showcasing a yuppie protagonist whose replication of hegemonic ideals hints at the text’s satirical self-consciousness—but its signposting of homosocial desire, gender anxiety, and homosexual panic is far more blatant than that of *Fight Club*. This is due in part to the novel’s extravagant, sardonic plot, which focuses on an equally exaggerated figure who personifies the dangers of imitated masculinity and unrestrained consumerism. Patrick Bateman is the superlative 1980s masculine cliché: he works on Wall Street, has a cocaine addiction, is a slave to high fashion, and indulges in stylised orgies with various prostitutes. He is, Mark Storey argues, “a central identity created by external forces,”⁴⁰ a walking billboard for hegemonic masculinity whose hypermasculine acts evoke the overindulgent platitudes of pornographic films and celebrity tabloids.

³⁹ *Fight Club*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ ““And as things fell apart,”” p. 58.

Take, for example, the way Bateman describes his reaction while having dinner with his brother Sean: “[I squeeze] my hand into a fist so tightly that [...] the biceps of my left arm bulges then rips through the cloth of the Armani shirt I have on.”⁴¹ Here, Bateman conjures an image better suited to the cover of a Harlequin romance than to an evening meal, and Bret Easton Ellis accentuates this caricatured performance in order to critique the absurdity of 1980s masculine norms. And as with *The Wasp Factory* and *Fight Club*, Bateman’s (hyper)masculinity is a vehicle for satire *and* subversion—though it draws energy from the hegemonic ideals it strives to imitate, it eventually breaks down under the strain of its own self awareness: “Life remained a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera,”⁴² he admits; talking to his friend McDermott, he jokes, “I’m gripped by an existential panic.”⁴³

By admitting that he invests in his job—perhaps the text’s most prevalent (and satirised) hegemonic sphere—only so that he can fit in,⁴⁴ Bateman acknowledges the mimetic underpinnings of conventional masculinity and prompts an examination of the ways in which this mimesis is regulated and maintained. Ellis’s satirical story-world would have readers believe that the driving force behind masculine hegemony (and Wall Street, it seems) is social interaction: the lunches and dinners Bateman attends are characterised by sexist and homophobic banter that recapitulates his status as a man while actively suppressing fears of emasculation. At Harry’s, Price mentions that he saw Nigel Morrison “fuck Bateman up the ass in the men’s room at Morgan Stanley,” prompting a lurid response from Bateman: “Ask Meredith if I’m a homosexual.

⁴¹ *American Psycho*, p. 226.

⁴² *American Psycho*, p. 279.

⁴³ *American Psycho*, p. 321.

⁴⁴ *American Psycho*, p. 237.

That is, if she'll take the time to pull my dick out of her mouth."⁴⁵ By positioning this hypermasculine dialogue between conventionally feminine topics such as high fashion and tanning treatments, Ellis reveals it to be a defence against the suggestions of effeminacy and homosexual desire Bateman and his friends can never fully reject. Lending weight to a homosocial reading is the constant use of female bodies as mediators between him and his colleagues: Timothy Price, whom he describes as "the only interesting person I know,"⁴⁶ has an affair with his fiancé Evelyn; Bateman, in turn, cheats on Evelyn with Luis Carruthers's girlfriend Courtney.

Suggestion of feminine nuances and homosexual desires in *American Psycho* are so pervasive that they can only be refuted through violence, and the novel's conjunction of transgression and hypermasculinity draws attention to the way the fear of effeminacy plays out as an intensely repellent but fascinating brand of homophobia. Homosexuals directly personify Bateman's most crushing anxieties about his sexuality, and must be countered with derision and physical violence. The text highlights two moments of acute homosexual panic, the first being Bateman's encounter with Luis Carruthers in the bathroom of the Yale Club: Bateman is about to strangle Luis from behind when Luis turns around and, thinking Bateman is homosexual, tells him, "I *want* you [...] *too*."⁴⁷ In response, Bateman goes to the sink to wash his hands, adding, "my gloves are still on and I don't want to take them off."⁴⁸ Though he is initially glad to touch Luis because he sees the contact as part of a violent hypermasculine act, as soon as this physical

⁴⁵ *American Psycho*, pp. 36-7.

⁴⁶ *American Psycho*, p. 22.

⁴⁷ *American Psycho*, pp. 159-60 (original emphasis).

⁴⁸ *American Psycho*, p. 159.

contact is *perceived* as homosexual it becomes taboo, and must immediately be expunged.

Ellis's subversion is subtle yet deliberate, demonstrating that hegemonic masculinity is not so easily preserved. Bateman leaves the bathroom and returns to his table, and when Van Patten asks him how to properly wear a tie bar, his response mimics 1980s fashion-speak: "While a tie bar is by no means required businesswear, it adds to a clean, neat overall appearance. But the accessory shouldn't dominate the tie."⁴⁹ Bateman's dependence on "traditional male language systems"⁵⁰ to uphold his identity betrays the validity of his performance, and his exchange with Carruthers epitomises the reiterative constructions of hegemonic masculinity being confronted and destabilised by the "specter of homosexuality."⁵¹ Furthermore, Bateman's sense of fashion connects him to a conventionally feminine industry, forcing a divide between his consumerist fetishes and the hegemonic ideals he attempts to uphold.

This dichotomy resurfaces in the chapter brazenly titled "Confronted By Faggot."⁵² When Bateman sees Luis in a department store, he visualises a range of homophobic stereotypes: "I imagine Luis at some horrible party [...] fags clustered around a baby grand, show tunes, now he's holding a flower, now he has a feather boa draped around his neck."⁵³ If Luis represents the range of sexual possibilities that threatens Bateman's sexuality, Bateman himself represents the conventional man as well as the institutional practices that gives shape to this convention, using language reminiscent of Judith Butler's "normalizing

⁴⁹ *American Psycho*, p. 160.

⁵⁰ "And as things fell apart," p. 59.

⁵¹ *Gay TV and Straight America*, p. 17.

⁵² *American Psycho*, p. 291.

⁵³ *American Psycho*, p. 292.

sciences”⁵⁴ or the clinical discourse of Foucault’s *scientia sexualis*: “You have reached...an inaccurate conclusion,” he tells Luis. “You are...obviously unsound. [...] What is this continuing inability you have to evaluate this situation rationally?”⁵⁵ In response, Luis grabs Bateman’s coat and Bateman threatens him, “I am going to slit your fucking throat.”⁵⁶

Here Ellis depicts transgressive violence as a primal disposition underneath the masculine veneer, a reaction against the disruption of the pathologizing and normalizing discourses that maintain conventional masculinity. But while Bateman exercises homophobic violence in other parts of the text—he stabs and shoots a homosexual man as well as the man’s dog⁵⁷—he cannot bring himself to kill Luis. His transgressions (both performed and threatened) are never able to fully asseverate those conventions of sexual difference that lend authority to his sense of gender identity, and in this way they echo hegemonic heterosexuality’s attempts to assert itself in the face of a constantly shifting spectrum of sexuality.

Published in 1964 amid the liberation campaigns on which the gay movement progressed,⁵⁸ *Last Exit to Brooklyn* illustrates the performative variability of the sexual spectrum not only by promoting transvestism and homosexuality as valid, but also by implying the presence of these sexualities within ostensibly heterosexual characters. Harry in “Strike,” for example, is a lathe operator who also acts as his factory’s union representative. A Marxist perspective might view his masculinity as a platform on which financial and institutional power is gained: his job preserves a separate-sphere ideology wherein

⁵⁴ *Bodies That Matter*, p. 125.

⁵⁵ *American Psycho*, pp. 293-4.

⁵⁶ *American Psycho*, p. 295.

⁵⁷ *American Psycho*, p. 166.

⁵⁸ Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2002), p. 74.

his wife, Mary, stays at home and is financially dependent; it also grants him a certain authority among his fellow workers, making him feel “like a patriarch.”⁵⁹ However, it soon becomes apparent that Harry’s sexuality is in a state of constant reiteration and that he himself is a subject rendered out of discourse, constructing his heterosexuality through explicit soliloquies about how “he could out fuck any woman around,” that “he never did like queers,” and that “whenever he throws a fuck into the old lady she creams all over the place.”⁶⁰

Hubert Selby Jr. destabilises this fragile identity with a physical and psychic awareness reminiscent of Lacan’s mirror stage, juxtaposing fragments of Harry’s heterosexual life against a new, transgressive sexual awakening. While his wife Mary represents the affliction of obligatory heterosexuality—Harry feels “nausea and slimy disgust”⁶¹ when she touches him—the gay bar Mary’s operates as her transgressive antithesis, a site of sexual possibility in which Harry comes to terms with his latent homosexuality. He feels “excitement at [...] being in such a weird place,”⁶² and is attracted to, not repulsed by, the secrecy and ambiguity of the homosexual and the transvestite: he stares at the bar patrons, “never certain of their sex, but enjoying watching them,” and imagines “what [is] being done with hands under the tables.”⁶³

Harry’s awareness of these sexual possibilities generates an apperceptive shift wherein he is “unaware of his body”⁶⁴ before “discovering” his penis, “knowing it was his yet not recognizing it, as if he had never seen it before.”⁶⁵ Like a child in front of the mirror, Harry recognises his masculinity (and its

⁵⁹ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 155.

⁶⁰ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 156.

⁶¹ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 121.

⁶² *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 188.

⁶³ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 188; p. 190.

⁶⁴ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 148.

⁶⁵ *Last Exit To Brooklyn*, p. 194.

phallic foundation) as an *imago*,⁶⁶ an external image by which the I is observed and constituted. That he makes this discovery after receiving oral sex from a male transvestite comes as no surprise, since the sexual act articulates the point at which he and his genitalia cease to signify male hegemony within the symbolic order. Although Harry continues to mimic masculine norms due to his social and institutional obligations, he regards his body as a site of homosexual experimentation and chooses transvestites as objects of desire. This fluctuation between homosexuality and imitated hegemonic norms reflects the experience of many homosexual men, whose “object choice subverts the masculinity of their character and social presence.”⁶⁷

Though Georgette’s transvestism in “The Queen Is Dead” is similar to Harry’s performance inasmuch as it articulates a rebellion against the pathologizing norms of hegemonic heterosexuality, it is far more overt, and refuses to be disguised under token expressions of heterosexuality. Georgette is a “hip queer” because she chooses not to “disguise or conceal [her homosexuality] with marriage or mans talk,” instead taking “pride in being a homosexual by feeling intellectually and esthetically superior to those [...] who [aren’t] gay.”⁶⁸ This self-possession, along with her contempt for traditionalist heterosexuals such as her brother, Arthur, acts as a subversive mirror to the homophobic attitudes that pervaded 1960s Brooklyn society, and confronts and destabilises the constitutive power of homophobic language. Daniel Wickberg notes that while racism and sexism have “putative neutrality” insofar as they allow the possibility that “whites

⁶⁶ See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,’ in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 75-81 (p. 76).

⁶⁷ *Masculinities*, p. 162.

⁶⁸ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 23.

and men could be victims of racism and sexism,”⁶⁹ homophobia solely marginalises homosexuals. Aware of this, Hubert Selby Jr. inverts the traditional dichotomy of homophobic language (wherein heterosexuals are normal and homosexuals are the ostracised other) by placing Georgette as a literal and figurative Queen, a symbol of homosexual empowerment amidst a tide of anti-gay sentiment. Furthering this reversal is Georgette’s use of the word “freak”—a term intended to pathologise homosexuals—to refer to heterosexual men.

The real subversive energy of “The Queen Is Dead” is seen when Harry and Vinnie, two ostensibly heterosexual men, threaten Georgette with a switchblade. “I’ll makeya a real woman without goin ta Denmark,” Harry tells her. “You dont want that big sazeech gettin in yaway Georgie boy. Let me cut it off.”⁷⁰ This hypermasculine violence is seemingly driven by the need to maintain hegemonic gender distinctions—Georgette is sexually ambiguous and must be made a “real woman”—but they *themselves* are sites of gender transgressions: both Harry and Vinnie harbour suppressed homosexual fantasies, and have sex with various male transvestites. Their desire to castrate Georgette can be read firstly as a projection of their own phallic anxieties, and secondly as Hubert Selby Jr.’s disruption of the phallus as a definitive indication of heterosexual masculinity.

By focusing on several features of gender and sexual expression such as genitalia, language, fashion, and physical stylization, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *The Wasp Factory* highlight the distinction between physical and constructed sexual difference. While the former is biological, the latter depends on a variety of assumptions about gender

⁶⁹ Daniel Wickberg, ‘Homophobia: On the Cultural History of an Idea’, *Critical Inquiry*, 27 (2000), 42-57 (p. 44).

⁷⁰ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 30.

performance and is constantly changing, despite being promoted as a permanent construct. In this way, the subversive potential of transgressive fiction is most apparent when transgressive hypermasculine performances refuse to reify hegemonic gender norms, instead becoming the very mechanism by which these norms are exposed and refuted. This exposes conventional masculinity as a cultural ideology, rather than a natural phenomenon.

Chapter 4

Unconventional Storytelling: Subversion and Exploitation in Transgressive Narratives

The previous chapter examined nuances of homosexual desire within transgressive fictions, focusing particularly on the ways in which these desires disrupt both hegemonic heterosexual ideals and their performances. Protagonists such as *The Wasp Factory*'s Frank Cauldhame or *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman strive to project an image of (hyper)masculinity while simultaneously embodying feminine or homosexual traits, and their multilayered performances directly challenge those cultural values and assumptions that codify sexuality and gender. Though the homosexual undertones within *Fight Club* and *The Wasp Factory* are subtle compared to those in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *American Psycho*, the mere suggestion of homosexuality within an ostensibly hypermasculine story-world is subversive enough—a suggestion only made possible by the actions of their characters. This prompts a twofold consideration: firstly, that differences between subversive and legitimising gender performances are essentially differences in *representation*; and secondly, that as representations within fictional texts are a product of discourse, an analysis of (hyper)masculinity within transgressive fiction will invariably involve a range of narratological questions.

One such question is why transgressive stories even *matter*—why, when so many conventional fictions are available, these repellent tales need to be told. It might as well be asked why *any* stories matter, in which case the easiest answer comes from Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* describes the satisfaction received from imitative art forms: “The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood,” he states, “and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons; and no

less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated.”¹ Stories are valuable because they appear to reflect human experience and, in doing so, allow a kind of catharsis wherein emotional and social crises are safely raised and eventually resolved. For Aristotle, the exemplar of dramatic storytelling is Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, as it navigates moral boundaries by presenting Oedipus as both guilty and not guilty: although Oedipus does in fact commit patricide and incest, he cannot be completely guilty of these crimes since he does not know that the man he has killed is his father, or that the woman he has slept with is his mother. While it may be difficult to relate to Oedipus’s moral problem on a personal level, it is nonetheless a resonant myth for human rationality in that it makes an anthropological and linguistic distinction between humans, who are capable of moral judgment, and non-humans, who cannot understand the exclusively human constructions of prohibition and taboo.

While the human/non-human binary in *Oedipus the King* addresses ontological issues relevant to its time and audience, a contemporary Foucauldian view might see Oedipus’s story as articulating the relationship between transgression and the limit. That Oedipus recognises he has committed a crime *only* when he contextualises his actions against a prohibitive cultural framework suggests that actions are not immoral in of themselves, but acquire immoral (or moral) status in respect to their place within or outside socially prescribed limits. In the case of Oedipus, who understands the taboo but not its relationship with his actions, the crime of incest cannot be applied since “incest exists only as the transgression of the taboo against it.”² Georges Bataille sees this relationship between transgression and taboo as an interdependency wherein taboos exist to be

¹ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. by S. H. Butcher, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 15.

² J. Hillis Miller, ‘Narrative’, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, pp. 66-79 (p. 72).

violated, and transgression is only possible when it acknowledges the limit set by the taboo. This creates a dissonance between the necessity of transgression and its social consequences, turning fear of a taboo into excitement: as Bataille argues, taboos “are not only there to be obeyed [...] it is always a temptation to knock down a barrier.”³ Because taboos elicit a kind of desire or anticipation that demands satiation, stories function as a platform on which transgression occurs and catharsis is attained. In light of Aristotle’s point that stories are pleasurable because of the way they imitate human existence, it is unsurprising that many stories, like *Oedipus the King*, choose to reflect the tension between taboo and transgression.

Stories represent not only the various situations and interactions that make up our existence, but also the cultural values that shape us as social beings. This makes stories effective tools for making sense of the world, since we often comprehend life events through the “logic of story, where to understand is to conceive of how one thing leads to another.”⁴ We want to know the directions our lives will take, what challenges we will face, how these challenges will be overcome, and how our own “story” ends. In this way, stories appeal to our epistemological desires by presenting a form of “truth” that, like Aesop’s fables or the Grimms’ fairy tales, makes visible the structure and rationale behind social phenomena. That stories are often ambiguous and even contradictory does not detract from their validity, since this only further mimics the imprecision and disorder that characterises our world. Whether or not stories tell the truth, they can nonetheless communicate *a* truth, which gives them immense cultural potential.

³ *Death and Sensuality*, p. 48.

⁴ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 78.

This potential is realised in the many stories that operate as political or spiritual enforcers. Biblical narratives are the origin for many deep-seated cultural mores, while stories such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* articulate fears about scientific progress and European immigration, respectively. These stories play on a desire for denouement by disguising cultural taboos as monsters and placing them in a cathartic plot sequence: the monster emerges and threatens to transgress the boundaries of society; this threat grows and causes tension; finally, the monster is defeated or expelled. As Christopher Craft suggests, this “triple rhythm”⁵ is entertaining precisely because it elicits a pleasurable combination of fear and desire in its audience, a pleasure only possible if it sees the monster eventually repudiated. Here, the monster is not just a trope or an object of fascination but also a public scapegoat, and its narratives enact what Stephen Greenblatt describes as “the enforcement of cultural boundaries through praise and blame.”⁶ While we construct and are attracted to stories, we are also subjected *through* them, and the many variations and adaptations of classic stories through history testify to the role of certain narratives as instruments of cultural construction that remain effective through repetition. Although social taboos change through time, their role in stories does not. They are the crisis within plot, the problem that must be solved if a satisfying denouement is to be achieved. We demand closure because we seek moral meaning,⁷ but our investment in “conservative” endings exposes us to cultural influences that are as subtle as they are varied.

⁵ Christopher Craft, ‘Kiss Me With Those Red Lips: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*’, *Representations*, 8 (1984), 107-133 (p. 107).

⁶ ‘Culture,’ p. 226.

⁷ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 21.

Conventional representations of gender are an excellent example of this influence: in stories, such representations exist primarily as character types and stereotypes such as the demure princess, the gallant “Prince Charming,” the damsel in distress, or the reckless hero. Of these, conventional (hyper)masculine protagonists are used to encourage an image that, while hyperbolic, stays within the limits of convention. Returning to Greenblatt’s notion of praise and blame, hypermasculine characters might be seen as a version of the “ideal man,” with the rewards gained by these characters—power and status arising from gallant acts such as rescuing the helpless maiden or defeating the monster—acting as a form of praise. Because stories reward certain performances and punish others, they are often used as a platform to enforce gender norms. Superman and his narratives, for example, typify a masculine ideal through violence, rugged physicality, moral confidence, and gentlemanly charm. The same can be seen in military or detective fictions, which characters like Jack Reacher operating as staunch and exaggerated masculine figures. In the novel *A Wanted Man*, Jack is described as “extremely tall, and extremely broad [...] his knuckles were nearly touching the ground. His neck was thick and his hands were the size of dinner plates.”⁸ Such primordial (hyper)masculinity is not only culturally desirable, but the perfect compliment to a plot structure that rewards conventionality and satisfies its readership with comforting resolutions: Superman saves Lois Lane, if not the world, and Jack Reacher unravels mysteries that “ordinary” men are presumably unable to solve.

There is satisfaction in seeing evil thwarted, which is why conventional (hyper)masculine plots are as comforting as they are entertaining. This comfort is sustained by a series of limits, beyond which plots become uncomfortable. If Jack

⁸ Lee Child, *A Wanted Man* (New York: Delacorte, 2012), p. 169.

Reacher began killing innocent bystanders, his behaviour could be considered transgressive because it violates many of those limits that regulate culturally acceptable narratives. Even ostensibly scandalous narratives such as Harlequin romances stay within the limits of convention, and by doing so are able to safely explore more “immodest” aspects of hypermasculine sexuality while simultaneously promoting gender norms and their respective rewards. While it is possible for conventional narratives to include transgressive themes and performances, they do so only if these performances lead to a satisfying denouement. Such narratives are pseudo-transgressive at best, as they portray taboo behaviours as a monstrous potential that must be repressed rather than utilising them as a platform for social critique. It follows, then, that while hypermasculinity can exist (and in fact thrives) in conventional narratives, *transgressive* hypermasculinity cannot truly exist except within plots that are equally subversive.

Given J. Hillis Miller’s point that the tendency of cultures to replicate certain plots implies a universal need for the conventions they uphold,⁹ it is worth considering the subjecting potential of these reiterated narratives—they are, perhaps, one of the most easily assimilated forms of cultural enforcement in an age where literature is inexpensive and readily available. In this way, transgressive fictions react against the pacifying comforts of middlebrow fiction and, more specifically, challenge the ways in which stories are used to enforce cultural norms. This chapter will demonstrate that the transgressive plots, characters, and narratives seen in *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Fight Club* not only ground hypermasculine performances as

⁹ See J. Hillis Miller, ‘Narrative’, p. 71.

ultimately unfulfilling, but also subvert the narrative authority required to perpetuate (hyper)masculine conventions.

All stories require a storyteller who acts as mediator: Wayne C. Booth notes that “as soon as we encounter an ‘I,’ we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience come between us and the event.”¹⁰ This means firstly that we receive not the “actual” story but a version of it—one that has been filtered through a subjective narrator or narrator-agent—and secondly, that we tend to accept this narrator’s authority before we accept whatever conventions or rewards the story promotes. This is because a story’s mimetic power is sustained by *believability*: if a narrator can convince readers that his or her (or its) narrative reflects a genuinely human experience, those readers end up trusting the narrator’s credibility and thus any social or moral lessons the story involves.

Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* subverts narrative authority from its very first page, when the narrator says by way of an exposition, “Tyler gets me a job as a waiter, after that Tyler’s pushing a gun in my mouth.”¹¹ This narrator, unlike Tyler, has no name: although readers are given the name of every other character in the story, the name of the narrator is withheld. This lack of identity comes as no surprise to those who have read the book, but notwithstanding its thematic effect, the anonymity of *Fight Club*’s protagonist creates distance between him and the reader while undermining his authority as narrator. Seemingly aware of this, the narrator attempts to force the illusion of credibility by sharing various weapon-making tips that *sound* credible, but are just as fictitious as the story itself. “To make a silencer,” he says, for example, “you just drill holes in the barrel of the

¹⁰ Wayne C. Booth, ‘Types of Narration’, in *Narratology: An Introduction*, ed. by Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 145-54 (p. 147).

¹¹ *Fight Club*, p. 11.

gun, a lot of holes. This lets the gas escape and slows the bullet to below the speed of sound.”¹²

As if to distract from the problem of narrative authority, the story begins in medias res, launching readers into the middle of the narrator’s final conflict with Tyler. The narrator’s almost immediate admission that “for a long time though, Tyler and I were best friends”¹³ suggests that readers have entered the narrative having avoided a complicated backstory. It is an admission that, on the surface, seems to lend validity to the overall narrative. But the discrepancy between *Fight Club*’s actual story (what Russian formalists call *fabula*) and the order in which the story is told (*sjuzhet*) ultimately destabilises narrative authority, for what appears to be an in medias res exposition is actually the story’s final moments, and the sequence of events that link beginning and end are really events filtered through external analepsis. This structure raises multiple issues, the most significant of which is an awareness of what is being told versus what is denied. If the narrator begins his story from a position of knowing what has *already happened*—most importantly, he has already realised that Tyler is a dissociative projection of his own mind—then the narrative that follows is already weakened, since it is based on a lie. The lie is that *Fight Club* involves only *one* narrator, as if “the unnamed narrator” exists as a separate character to Tyler Durden. In truth, the story is being told by *both* identities from the very first line, and although the narrator knows this, he does not admit it. Readers are therefore forced to consider whether it is possible (or even reasonable) to trust a narrator who has a psychological disorder, who keeps secrets, and who is connected to a

¹² *Fight Club*, p. 11.

¹³ *Fight Club*, p. 11.

subversive plot structure that, like Virginia Woolf's *The Mark On The Wall*, "exploits our expectations of narrative sequence."¹⁴

The subversion of *Fight Club*'s narration is seen in its ability to implicate readers while simultaneously making them aware of its unreliability. When sharing his "knowledge" of weapons and explosives, for example, the narrator admits, "I know this because Tyler knows this."¹⁵ While retrospectively this could be taken as a reference to the narrator's dissociative identity disorder, on the surface it illustrates both the allure and danger of narration. Tyler shares what he knows with the narrator, who in turn shares it with readers, and this transmission evokes the very function of storytelling. But Tyler, for all his masculine bravado and extensive "knowledge," cannot be trusted, which means the narrator cannot be trusted by association. Having been made accomplices in *Fight Club*'s dubious narration—readers might echo the narrator's line by saying "we know this because the narrator/Tyler knows this"—they must then consider the purpose and effect of an unreliable narrator, not to mention an unreliable story.

It is precisely *through* subversive narration that *Fight Club* performs its critical work. The narrator's assimilation of masculine traditions as a means of identification reflects society's investment in gender codes and conventions—conventions that proclaim (hyper)masculine ideals as the answer to passive consumerism and feminisation—but the subjecting power of these ideals is exposed when filtered through an unreliable mediator. This exposure emphasises the fragility of hegemonic paradigms insofar as it addresses the need for both a conventional narrative and an authoritative narrator in promoting masculine norms. Just as the narrator realises Tyler is an illusion and rejects the ideals fight

¹⁴ Bennett and Royle, 'Narrative', in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, pp. 54-62 (p. 56).

¹⁵ *Fight Club*, p. 12.

club stands for, *Fight Club*'s narrative structure draws attention to (hyper)masculinity as a mimetic performance grounded in cultural mores. It also denies readers the rewards seen in traditional narratives, as the narrator's hypermasculine journey not only brings him gradual disfigurement and financial ruin but eventually places him in the hospital, trapped among the "space monkeys" that remain indoctrinated by Tyler's rhetoric. Such an ending is only a partial resolution: although Tyler is ultimately "defeated," his legacy continues in his followers as well as in the narrator himself; furthermore, because Tyler's thwarted anti-corporate terrorist scheme fails to relieve anxieties surrounding rampant capitalism and male effeminacy, the text provides no catharsis but instead suggests the possibility of further destruction. In this way, *Fight Club*'s plot is transgressive inasmuch as it offers a cyclic pattern of unsatisfying hypermasculine violence as a "resolution."

A narrative that lacks (or denies) a proper resolution leaves its audience stranded in a liminal position between whatever personal and social tensions the story has raised, and the audience's expectation that these tensions will be alleviated. Transgressive fictions exploit this liminality in order to challenge the subjecting power of conventional plot structures, in particular those plots that seek to "resolve" problematic gender expressions back towards a hegemonic model. With this in mind, Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* plays on a desire for resolution by presenting a narrative that, while seemingly concerned with a conservative denouement, has distraction and subversion at its core. Its focus on Frank Cauldhame's struggle with hypermasculine performances and conventionally feminine "defects" produces a story filled with sexual and psychological tension: Frank displays obsessive-compulsive traits, commits violent acts of animal

cruelty, and ruminates over his lost manhood. If, as Peter Brooks argues, plot can be read as a form of desire that drives readers through a narrative,¹⁶ *The Wasp Factory*'s plot drives its readers towards the promise of a conservative resolution wherein Frank overcomes his obsessions and finds his place in society.

Such an ending never occurs, however, since the transgressive plot that comprises Frank's story is structured in such a way that it both distracts from and directly complicates any attempt at a resolution. Although Frank's discovery that he is actually female technically qualifies as a denouement insofar as it liberates him (and the reader) from the pressures of hypermasculine ideals, this revelation acts more as a plot twist than a resolution because it fails to address the *real* tension in the text, which is Eric's imminent return. Consider the opening line of the story: "I had been making the rounds of the Sacrifice Poles the day we heard my brother escaped."¹⁷ Certainly Frank's statement makes readers curious as to what the Sacrifice Poles are and why he must make his rounds, but the primary concern is *where* Eric has escaped from, and *why* he was put there in the first place. Having established Eric's return as a critical plot point, *The Wasp Factory* constantly reminds readers of it—"I'm getting closer,"¹⁸ he tells Frank in one of their many phone calls—and while this is actually a *digression* from the "main" story, the anxiety Eric produces seems to rival that produced by Frank's psychosexual issues.

Conversely, Frank's "disability"¹⁹ draws our attention away from Eric's "unfortunate experience"²⁰ of nursing an infant whose head has become infested

¹⁶ See Peter Brooks, *Reading For The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* [1984] (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 37.

¹⁷ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 13.

²⁰ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 139.

with maggots. Much like *The Wasp Factory*'s own plot, the baby's ordinary appearance disguises the corruption just underneath the surface—a corruption so extensive it cannot be remedied. Here the text challenges the tendency of conventional narratives to resolve seemingly irreparable crises via contrived plot devices, suggesting that issues such as Eric's insanity and Frank's impaired development cannot, and should not, be forcibly resolved in order to comfort readers or promote conservative ideals.

Because of this, *The Wasp Factory*'s final pages offer only a partial resolution. Chekhov's principle argues that if a gun is shown in the first act of a play it must be fired by the final act, and if the psychological concerns elicited by Eric and Frank can be analogised as a pair of Chekhovian pistols revealed in *The Wasp Factory*'s early moments, readers find that while two triggers are indeed pulled at the story's end, both guns are unloaded. There is no flash of gunfire, no catharsis to satiate a desire for resolution: Eric finally returns to destroy the Cauldhame home, which he views as a site of paternal abandonment, but is stopped; Frank later finds him "asleep on the dune above the Bunker, head in the swaying grass, curled up like a little child."²¹ Likewise, after struggling with physical disfigurement and hypermasculine rage for most of his life, Frank finds out he is actually female and that his father has been treating him with hormones for thirteen years. To this he responds with a blasé quip: "Poor Eric came home to see his brother, only to find out (Zap! Pow! Dams burst! Bombs go off! Wasps fry: ttssss!) he's got a sister."²² Thus readers are given cynical bathos in lieu of satisfaction, enlightenment, or retribution: Frank's father is not punished for his neglect; Eric's insanity and his destructive journey both culminate in a nap in the

²¹ *The Wasp Factory*, p. 181.

²² *The Wasp Factory*, p. 184.

grass; and Frank accepts his “new” sexuality despite years of deep-rooted misogyny. In essence, the narrative presents a finale that, while not prompting a transgressive recursion like the endings of *Fight Club* or *American Psycho*, makes a point of grounding hypermasculinity as an unfulfilling construct. Although Frank finally discovers the truth of his sexuality, this hardly counts as a “reward” in the conventional sense, and his fervent devotion to hegemonic masculine norms earns him—and the story’s readers—nothing but disappointment. In addition to this, *The Wasp Factory* exploits our desire for reward by repurposing what Christopher Booker calls the “overcoming the monster” plot.²³ While Eric initially stands as the shadowy, looming threat that must eventually be eliminated, readers come to understand that the real monster is not a person but an ideology: Frank’s father’s adherence to hegemonic gender codes is the true danger that must be stopped, as the destruction it brings is observed through Frank’s violence towards animals and children. Since the conventions that promote gender norms and elicit reader rewards have been subverted and refashioned into the story’s foreboding evil, there can be no reward at the end of *The Wasp Factory* except for convention’s downfall.

Before dismissing transgressive fiction’s destabilisation of conventionality as bleak and unnecessary, it is worth considering what attracts people to purportedly “mimetic” narratives. Plots that reflect social or personal phenomena can certainly be seen as mimetic, but many of them involve counter-mimetic scenarios or plot devices. In the Overcoming the Monster plot, for example, the (typically male) hero faces the monster in a battle to the death, a battle that

²³ See Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 21.

reaches its climax when the hero's "destruction seems all but inevitable."²⁴ At this moment, however, there occurs "a dramatic reversal" that sees the monster defeated and the hero triumphant. This reversal, whether the work of the hero or a *deus ex machina*, is satisfying but fantastical—at best, it can be called verisimilar since it gives the *appearance* of reality, but is hardly reflective of real life.

Last Exit to Brooklyn, however, attempts to reflect the violence and seediness of 1950s Brooklyn with as much veracity as possible, and unlike the recursive ending of *Fight Club* or quasi-resolution of *The Wasp Factory*, it offers no real "ending" at all: its first story, "Another Day Another Dollar," ends in the middle of a character's speech; "The Queen Is Dead" finishes with a series of impressionistic word fragments; "Tralala" ends in an ellipsis; and "Strike" ends with the sentence, "they sprawled at the counter and at the tables and ordered coffeeand."²⁵ This subverts not only narrative convention but also the very purpose of stories as platforms for cultural reinforcement, for although each story addresses anxieties about gang violence, drug use, homosexuality, and transvestism, these anxieties are deliberately left unresolved. By truncating the stories as well as denying a resolution, Selby Jr. fashions a text that functions not as a piece of satire or an instrument of moral regulation, but as a mirror held up to Brooklyn's social issues. It follows, then, that its stories should not (and perhaps cannot) be read in the same manner as a conventional narrative sequence, since they occur abruptly in front of the reader as if he or she has stumbled upon an altercation in the street.

To create the effect of a "Brooklyn snapshot," every short story is told by an omniscient third-person narrator who delivers character dialogue in

²⁴ *The Seven Basic Plots*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 228.

unpunctuated colloquial language. In “Strike,” for example, Harry’s coarse lower-class Brooklyn accent is apparent when he rants: “Fuck all you company bastards, all ya ball breakin pricks. [...] We/ll makeya get on yaknees and begus ta come back tawork.”²⁶ Moreover, even though each narrative is self-contained and can be read independently with no effect on the shape of the narrative overall, they contain recurring characters (such as Harry and Vinnie) and thus appear as a series of connected vignettes rather than a single narrative sequence. This further emphasises the “reality” of the narrative, and for good reason, as it is *Last Exit to Brooklyn*’s grittiness that most effectively challenges the superficiality of conventional hypermasculinity. Hypermasculine violence has only a negative effect in the text: it deepens the divide between Harry and his wife; it prompts the murder-rape of Tralala, a Brooklyn prostitute; it is the catalyst for a brutal attack on a returned serviceman; and it pervades the deeply problematic sexual encounter between Vinnie, an ostensible heterosexual, and a group of transvestites. Reading these accounts, it becomes clear that hypermasculinity is a ubiquitous and harmful ideology when stripped of its idealistic conventions. That traditional narratives set limits around (hyper)masculinity and connect its performance to a number of rewards suggests that the (hyper)masculine ideal is only satisfying when used as a trope or character type. Contrarily, hypermasculine mentalities in the real world have the potential to violate conventional limits, and in many cases underpin horrifying acts such as rape, gang violence, and homophobia.

American Psycho also throws the bathos of transgressive hypermasculinity into sharp relief while simultaneously critiquing the cultural institutions and

²⁶ *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, p. 137.

voices behind hegemonic masculine performances. Of the texts discussed, *American Psycho* is perhaps the most subversive in terms of its narration and plot structure, both of which stem from a postmodern self-awareness as well as a sardonic view of Wall Street yuppies and their consumerist self-absorption. Patrick Bateman is the linchpin of this satirical tale: both protagonist and narrator, his repulsive descent into violence and sexual transgression is the engine that drives Ellis's critique of 1980s manners and ideals. This means readers have no choice but to read *American Psycho* as a specifically *transgressive* satire rather than, say, a scathing yet conventional yuppie critique, since it is filtered through Bateman's repulsive consciousness. While readers might regard his narration as a sequence of journal entries, or thematically as a "progression" from sanity to madness, its arrangement defies a strictly linear reading and, in fact, poses a hermeneutic problem. Can the events presented be trusted if they come from a psychopathic narrator? And if so, how do readers begin to interpret a story that lacks a sequential plot?

Although *American Psycho* appears (and superficially reads) as a coherent story, its narrative "sequence" is really a series of paradigmatic variations along a syntagmatic plane. In fact, much of Bateman's violence can be condensed down to the syntagm "Bateman kills," which is then matched with a series of paradigmatic substitutions (boy at zoo; homeless man; homosexual; prostitute). These murders, while useful for building suspense and shock value, are no more interconnected or pivotal than Bateman's restaurant outings, shopping trips, or health treatments. H. Porter Abbott suggests that stories are comprised of both *constituent* events (necessary for the plot) and *supplementary* events

(unnecessary),²⁷ and in the case of *American Psycho*, no scene or dialogue is strictly constituent insofar as plot progression is concerned. Even if Patrick Bateman's transgressive behaviour *is* in fact constituent because it illustrates his psychological deterioration, this is problematised by the text's lack of resolution. Readers are left doubtful as to whether the "murders" actually happened, and if they *did* happen, Bateman is not punished for them. There is no cathartic finale wherein he, the monster, is slain, or perhaps locked away in an asylum by authority figures wearing badges or white coats. Unlike the tendency of conventional plots to promote institutional order as a reward in itself, *American Psycho* denies the comfort of order. In doing so, it portrays hypermasculinity at its most extreme—and most harmful.

If, as Hayden White posits, narrative is a "meta-code" that can be variously employed for endowing experience with meaning,²⁸ then the problem of *American Psycho*'s transgressive plot is not really a problem at all—while it certainly highlights the pervasive danger of yuppie hypermasculinity, it also challenges our expectations of narrative significance and reward by providing a multiplicity of meanings within a dubious and fragmented narrative. Like a hall of mirrors, Bateman reflects 1980s masculine ideals in a variety of distorted and deceptive ways. While his consciousness is the lens through which readers are exposed to the unhealthy social imbalance between white, hegemonic, heterosexual males and their female, lower class, homosexual, or non-white others, this "consciousness" is just another mirror that, by reflecting a range of hypermasculine discourses and commercial voices, grounds the narrative as a polyphonic masculine fantasy. As protagonist and narrator-agent, Bateman

²⁷ See H. Porter Abbott, 'Story, plot, and narration', in *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* ed. by David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 39-51 (p. 41).

²⁸ See *The Content of the Form*, p. 1.

actively contributes to this fantasy, and has measurable effect on the story's course of events.

His influence is apparent when he narrates a car chase between him and a police car, and switches from first- to third-person narration in midsentence:

I lose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab, leaning against it.²⁹

While this reads like an out-of-body experience, it is also an impressive rhetorical strategy that draws our attention to what Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle refer to as "narrative power"—the ability of stories to distract us, distort our perceptions, or subvert our expectations.³⁰ In this case, shifting focalization and narration both influence how readers perceive the events that unfold. This, in turn, affects how the story is interpreted, since it draws attention to the novel's satirical self-awareness. Bateman narrates the chase in third-person precisely because he recognises it as a *scene*, a climactic plot point in a dramatic hypermasculine narrative. Admitting multiple times that the events of his life happen as if "in a movie,"³¹ Bateman inhabits a story-world deliberately aggrandised by satirical self-reflection. Aware of himself as the central character in an unfolding drama, Bateman's narration disconnects (hyper)masculinity from the codes and conventions that seek to ground it in "reality," and, by subverting these conventions, emphasises (hyper)masculinity's performative aspect and presents it

²⁹ *American Psycho*, p. 349.

³⁰ See Bennett and Royle, 'Narrative', p. 60.

³¹ *American Psycho*, p. 3; p. 61; p. 166; p. 245; p. 288; p. 350; p. 395.

as a spectacle. Surrounded by satirically inserted action tropes such as car chases, shootouts, and explosions, Patrick Bateman stands as James Bond's antithesis: a violent, hypermasculine character whose performance violates the boundaries of convention, and earns revulsion instead of reward.

Hypermasculine characters are only as effective as the plots and narratives they inhabit. Knowing this, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, and *The Wasp Factory* exploit plot structure, narrative authority, and our desire for comforting resolutions in order to ground hypermasculinity as a mimetic and deeply problematic performance. While conventional plots promote culturally acceptable masculine traits—strength, charisma, sexual prowess, and dominance—through satisfying denouements, transgressive fictions deny the satisfaction of a princess rescued or a prize won. Rather, they connect (hyper)masculine performances to abhorrent violations that force readers to reconsider the rationality and efficacy of conventional masculine ideals. Because they distance themselves from the unrealistic scenarios and rewards characteristic of conservative fiction, transgressive texts are not escapist (although they can be mimetic). As such, they require a readership that finds satisfaction in attempting to resolve the various challenges raised by transgressive narratives. Rather than lead readers placidly through a conventional narrative wherein the monster is plainly labeled and eventually defeated, transgressive texts provide a proximity to monstrosity and social taboo made all the more stimulating by hermeneutic variability—interpretation is not easy, and it is up to the reader to construct meaning out of what appears a collection of senseless violations. Readers thus experience a kind of pleasure not only in the prose itself, but also in the wider intellectual exercise of being drawn into an ostensibly realistic but highly

unconventional story-world that challenges our assumptions and dependencies. Through texts such as *American Psycho*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Fight Club*, readers are able to confront the many boundaries that constitute and police their social existence. But in doing so, they must also acknowledge their dependence on these demarcating conventions—an acknowledgment that leaves them transgressed, even as they act as implicated transgressors.

Conclusion

When Michael Silverblatt described transgressive writing as the “*new new thing*,”¹ he was emphasising its growing popularity not only as a counter-cultural platform that explored the limits and possibilities of human sexuality, but also as a form of provocative inspiration for young emerging writers. He was by no means claiming transgressive fiction as a new phenomenon; citing the Marquis de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), Silverblatt was well aware of transgressive fiction’s long and disturbing history. Much like the “chic underground” of the progressive 1990s, the Marquis de Sade’s libertine upbringing encouraged a rejection of sexual and moral restraint, especially if those restraints stemmed from wider cultural mores. Consequently, *The 120 Days of Sodom* was hedonistic fetishism writ large, a hypersexual fantasy that focused almost entirely on physical sensation. As Silverblatt argues, it was de Sade’s imprisonment in the Bastille that inspired the novel’s extravagant and physically impossible sexual acts: “When the world is all chains and fetters, the imagination survives by [...] constructing hypothetical systems.”² These systems are in themselves a transgression, as they allow a release from the physical and sexual limits of the body.

At first, *The 120 Days of Sodom*’s imaginative focus seems contrary to the graphic realism Silverblatt attributes to transgressive fiction. However, when he posits that “the real transgressor will not feed our yearning for fantasy and distance,”³ he is not making a distinction between fantasy and reality so much as distinguishing conservative texts—those that employ cultural norms and

¹ ‘Shock Appeal’, para. 2 of 25 (original emphasis).

² ‘Shock Appeal’, para. 11 of 25.

³ ‘Shock Appeal’, para. 20 of 25.

boundaries to distance the reader from potentially disturbing material—from transgressive texts, which violate cultural limits and afford no comfort or distance. “Fantasy,” here, is synonymous with “conventionality.” Conventional fictions employ violence and sexuality only within prescribed limits, and even then, the acts themselves typically function as a means to a (normative) end. Such texts are usually concerned with the propagation of a fantastical story-world where villainy is defeated and cultural values are upheld. On the contrary, transgressive fictions repudiate cultural boundaries and allow deviant acts to occur without restraint, thereby drawing attention to the arbitrary limits that define us as social beings. By way of an example, Silverblatt compares Anne Rice to Bret Easton Ellis: Rice’s Gothic *Sleeping Beauty* series “locates transgression in the supernatural realm,” while Ellis’s *American Psycho* “doesn’t want the reader to take pleasure in its excesses. It is not an entertainment.”⁴ This is why *American Psycho* tends to elicit revulsion even though it is no more truthful than Rice’s stories, or why *The 120 Days of Sodom* remains offensive regardless of its implausibility. Both texts attempt to literalise what lies beyond the limits of human sexuality, confronting audiences with the possibility of monstrosity while renouncing the comfort of conventional stylisation.

In tracing transgressive fiction’s development from libertine excess to 1990s literary experimentation, Silverblatt points out its strange yet enduring appeal. While obviously aware of its wider popular-culture success—his article was published over twenty years after the release of Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film adaptation of Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)—Silverblatt could not have been able to foresee the attraction of films such as *Fight Club* (1999) or

⁴ ‘Shock Appeal’, para. 23 of 25.

American Psycho (2000), both of which are regarded as cult classics. Why, despite their confronting subject matter, are transgressive novels still written, adapted into movies, or collected by fans? A simple answer is that they are attractive because they elicit a dissonant yet pleasurable mixture of fear and desire very similar to the emotions raised by Gothic fictions. Both genres entertain social fears and desires in the form of the monster: Frankenstein's creation and Frank Cauldhame both reflect the unsettling consequences of patriarchal control and scientific hubris; Dracula and Patrick Bateman are physically captivating, yet bear an insatiable thirst for blood and violence (especially towards women). However, whereas Gothic fictions eventually defeat or expel the monsters they entertain, transgressive fictions allow no such comfort. For this reason, a more accurate claim might be that transgressive fictions are *fascinating* rather than appealing, firstly because they pose a distinctive hermeneutic challenge, and secondly because they attempt to violate and then redefine the limits of experience, offering a shocking but nonetheless intriguing view of what lies beyond them. By drawing attention to that which is variable, immeasurable, and unexplored, this cycle of violation and redefinition drives transgressive fiction's subversion of both cultural systems of meaning and the many forms of hegemony enabled by these systems.

Hegemonic masculinity in particular seeks to distinguish conventional from "abnormal" gender performances, a distinction that carries race and class inflections: privileged, upper-class males are more likely to invest in masculine norms that promote financial success, while working class men might value heteronormative performances that focus on physical strength. Ultimately, while hegemonic masculinity can be observed *conceptually* as an omnipresent phenomenon, in reality it is no more than a collection of arbitrary ideals and

reifying performances. Furthermore, power relationships within hegemonic masculinity promote certain kinds of masculinity not only by subordinating women, but also by subordinating effeminate or homosexual men. This suggests, firstly, that hegemonic heterosexuality requires the subjugation of a feminine (or feminised) other in order to establish and maintain its dominance, and secondly, that this dominance is fragile and constantly threatened by what Judith Butler calls a “domain of sexual possibility.” Because this possibility directly challenges “heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality,”⁵ it must be pathologised through various structures of meaning.

This thesis has outlined four of those structures—language, ritual, gender, and narrative—and has discussed their ability to enforce hegemonic masculine norms. Language, for example, is used not only to mark class or racial distinctions (one has only to think about the patronising language spoken by blackface actors in the nineteenth century or middle-class attitudes towards “lower-class” slang), but also to distinguish masculinity from femininity. At birth, a boy is typically given a “masculine” name. This act of naming initiates a process of gendering that will continue throughout his life: as a man, he may be expected to engage in louder, rougher conversation than his female counterparts; he will be exposed to a range of hypermasculine colloquialisms that aim to signify women as sexual objects; and unfortunately, he may experience (or help to perpetuate) the aggressive repudiation of homosexuality engendered by homophobic language.

Ritual is no less dichotomising, as it separates locations of traditional masculine ceremony (the locker room, sports field, or pub) from conventionally feminine spaces (the beauty salon or, as the case may be, the home) and demeans

⁵ *Bodies That Matter*, p. 125.

those who navigate between them. “Real men” do not receive manicures once a week, and “proper ladies” refrain from having Friday beers at the local pub. Even subtle (and arguably less accessible) masculine rituals, such as games of golf between business partners, serve as a form of ceremony that endorses and reconfirms a particular masculine performance as well as a particular kind of man. The capacity of rituals to stratify masculinity is also seen in the patriarchal structuring common to many religious institutions, which generates ritual boundaries between men and women (in favour of men) and imposes consequences if these boundaries are transgressed. In Catholic and Islamic traditions, for example, women are unable to hold priestly office, with the male priests themselves being ritually and spiritually separated from their unordained congregation.

Of the structures and constructs discussed, gender is perhaps the most fiercely defended due to its impact on almost every facet of social functioning. Notwithstanding the convenience of their biological underpinnings, gender norms are widely accepted because they offer rewards to those who invest in them. The nearer an individual comes to literalising the masculine ideal, the more praise he or she receives; conversely, those who deviate from gender norms are met with exclusion or, in some cases, aggression. The (hyper)masculine model pervades the physical realm of the sports field or the action blockbuster, while feminine ideals are often relegated to a more passive aesthetic, such as on magazine covers or beauty commercials. Although roles can certainly be reversed, with men performing in the aesthetic sphere and women in the physical, such reversals only highlight the prevalence of conventional gender roles. Women who enjoy stereotypically masculine activities, for instance, might be labeled “butch,” while

men who take on “feminine” jobs such as fashion designing or hairdressing can be seen as effeminate (or even homosexual).

The strict boundary between masculine and feminine performances must not only be policed, but repeatedly expressed in order to be effective. To this end, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, narratives are an excellent platform for endorsing the boundary between masculine and feminine performances. This is because stories themselves tend to be repetitive—whether adapted, borrowed, or retold—and readers enjoy this repetition since it affirms their own conventions and values. Hence, narratives can be used to either support *or* criticise the dominant culture. Conventional narratives tend to reward normative gender performances, showcasing (hyper)masculine protagonists whose acts of physical strength, sexual dominance, and violence earn various social rewards. Unconventional (and of course transgressive) narratives, on the other hand, afford no such reward for the performance of masculine norms. Where conventional representations *are* used, they are often used as a form of negative reinforcement wherein stereotypical displays of masculine bravado result in repellent violence, psychological damage, or death. In *A Clockwork Orange*, for example, the protagonist Alex performs a quasi-theatrical, promiscuous hypermasculinity through acts of gang violence and rape. This performance produces no reward, but instead leads to Alex’s betrayal, incarceration, and subjection to an experimental rehabilitation programme that, despite the psychological injury it causes, fails to “fix” Alex’s transgressive psyche.

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate the ways in which, as an intrinsically subversive platform, transgressive fictions such as *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, *American Psycho*, and *Fight Club* turn

hypermasculine performances into satirical tools that challenge social constructs such as language, ritual, gender, and narrative. By connecting masculine norms to abhorrent violence and deviant sexual acts, these texts undermine the social value of conventional masculinity and expose the fragility of its boundaries. After all, (hyper)masculinity is only effective in reifying cultural values if it is performed within prescribed limits, and thus the insertion of transgression—which is innately concerned with the violation and redefinition of the limit—prompts a reading of hypermasculinity as a potentially destructive construct. In *American Psycho*, for example, Patrick Bateman’s brand of egotistical and homicidal hypermasculinity serves as a satirical critique of 1980s consumerism as well as a reflection of the deeply troubling masculine ideals which perpetuated a divide between white, upper-class men, and their homosexual, female, and non-white others. *The Wasp Factory* exposes the flaws and dangers of patriarchal domination, showcasing Frank Cauldham as a contrived male who has been forced into a sphere of synthetic masculinity. *Fight Club* focuses on anarchic violence and physicality as a means to liberate feminised men, but Tyler Durden’s hypermasculine goal is marred by the psychological and physical damage it causes. Finally, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* paints a horrifying picture of the homophobia and toxic masculinity pervading lower-class Brooklyn in the 1960s, all while challenging this masculinity by featuring sexually frustrated, ostensibly heterosexual male characters.

This enquiry has found that while transgressive fictions perform their subversive work at the *limit* of human sexuality (as a Foucauldian reading might claim), subversion in these texts also occurs, and is arguably most effective, *within* conventional limits. It is precisely by violating recognisable

(hyper)masculine performances that transgressive texts are able to challenge their ingrained cultural value. *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Wasp Factory*, *American Psycho*, and *Fight Club* critique hypermasculinity at almost every level: they reveal masculine norms as constructed and promulgated by homophobic, sexist, and hypersexual language; they challenge the creation and repetition of masculine rituals; they expose conventional masculinity as inherently mimetic by highlighting its dependence on repetition; and their satirical self-awareness both highlights and undermines the social value of conventional masculine narratives. Although these transgressive texts can be pushed aside due to their violence, their disturbing representation of sexual acts, or their crude approach to social critique, the claims they make are not so easily deflected. Reading these texts calls for an acknowledgement of what is perhaps their most incisive argument: that despite their mélange of excessive violence, overstated gender performances, and deceptive narration, the ultimate fiction is masculinity itself.

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